



## Tackling terror

Civil society, political forces must do their best to remove fear among minorities in J&K

**T**he uptick in the number of deaths of civilians, including those of the minority community after terror attacks recently is a major setback when the number of violent incidents in the Kashmir Valley was the lowest in five years. Orchestrated allegedly by a shadowy force calling itself The Resistance Front (TRF), termed by security forces as being set up by the LeT, the killings have resulted in fear gripping the Valley's minority Hindu and Sikh communities. Notwithstanding statements from mainstream political parties and separatist organisations condemning the violence, many Kashmiri Pandit and Sikh employees abstained from work or took leave temporarily, worried about their security. This is an unfortunate outcome that calls to mind the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits due to terror attacks in the early 1990s. The reversal of this dangerous trend requires not only a reassurance of security from the Government for members of the minority communities such as the Pandits and the Sikhs but also a commitment for solidarity with the victims from the various political forces and civil society. The targeted nature of the killings by a "faceless" terror group suggests that its aim was to use the disquiet in the Valley with the recent administrative and political measures to foment communal discord and violence.

Beyond the condemnation from the polity, civil society in such situations must take the initiative to foster communal amity and to mobilise people across communities against hatred. In this regard, the recent appeals by some masjids in Srinagar requesting the public to show solidarity with the victims and to prevent the furthering of fear among Kashmiri Pandits is a welcome step indicating an intention to not let the situation deteriorate to what happened in the early 1990s. The UT administration followed up with a strong crackdown on the insurgency seeking to isolate and quell the militant network that is allegedly responsible for the attacks. While the reactions from the polity and civil society and the administrative actions by the Government are necessary, they are not sufficient to restore normalcy in the Valley. The suspension of the polity with the absence of an elected Assembly, and the stasis and alienation that had set in since the abrogation of J&K's special status, its bifurcation and designation as a Union Territory would make the job of administration even more difficult. An immediate renewal of political dialogue to address this along with the restoration of Statehood and the complete resumption of political and press freedoms will help create the environment to isolate and tackle terror in the region.

## Fast forward

Gati Shakti can cut logistics costs if it can convince all States to come on board

**W**ith the Gati Shakti National Master Plan that he launched on October 13, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has expanded on the familiar theme that India's slowing economic growth engine can find renewed momentum through major infrastructure upgrades that will cut logistics costs for industry and raise all round efficiency. Essentially a technocratic administrative initiative that promises silo-breaking integration of 16 Ministries including railways, roads and ports through information technology, satellite mapping and data tools, the programme seeks to appeal to the national imagination as an umbrella integrator of ₹11-lakh crore worth of projects under the National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP) for 2020-25. The importance given in the plan to rail-road multimodal connectivity and higher share of freight for the railways – articulated also by NITI Aayog – has evident multiple benefits. This includes reducing the cost of logistics to GDP that has prevailed at about 14% even at the time the NDA government took office, to an aspirational 8%. There is also the challenge of reducing vehicular emissions from road freight growth in order to meet climate change commitments and containing input costs due to extraordinarily high taxes on diesel. A similar fillip to efficiency in port operations can increase cargo handling capacity and cut vessel turnaround time. Evidently, States have a crucial role in all this, considering that key pieces of the plan such as port linkages and land availability for highways, railways, industrial clusters and corridors depend on political consensus and active partnership.

The observations in the Economic Survey for 2020-21 underscore the role of active Centre-State partnerships for infrastructure building. The Survey projects maximum investments towards NIP sectors such as energy, roads, urban infrastructure and railways for FY 2021 and 22, with about ₹8.5-lakh crore to be invested by either side annually, besides ₹4.5-lakh crore per year from the private sector. There is a steep gradient to cover here, as the effects of COVID-19 continue to be felt in terms of lost jobs, depressed wages and consumption, while the planners are pinning their hopes on infrastructure projects for a new deal outcome that will boost jobs and demand for goods and commodities, besides attracting major investments. Significant delays to projects can often be traced to incompatible and hostile land acquisition decisions that alienate communities or threaten to violate environmental integrity. Given the Centre's preference for Geographic Information Systems and remote sensing to identify potential industrial areas, policymakers would do well to reclaim lands already subjected to degradation and pollution, rather than alienate controversial new parcels. Convincing citizens that they stand to benefit from such grand plans through better social welfare, lower service costs and higher efficiencies, and respecting federal boundaries while dealing with the States are other imperatives.

# It is time to rise in defence of Bollywood

Everything about it embodies the 'composite culture' that is an affront to the uni-dimensional bigotry of Hindutva



SHASHI THAROOR

**T**he recent media frenzy targeting actor Shah Rukh Khan following the arrest of his 23-year-old son Aryan for alleged drug possession (though it has since been admitted that no drugs were found on his person) has led to a major campaign against the film industry ecosystem that allegedly enables "drug culture". While nothing yet has been established in a court of law, the episode is one more instalment in what appears to be a new drama series unleashed by the guardians of our public space – a war on Bollywood.

### Smearing the industry

Last year, there was an all-out assault on the character of starlet Rhea Chakraborty who, after months of media frenzy linking her to the death by suicide of her boyfriend, actor Sushant Singh Rajput, was arrested and detained for several days for allegedly buying drugs for him, claims she denied and which were never substantiated. This in turn had already led to a huge campaign against alleged drug abuse in Bollywood, with four other actresses being called in for questioning. No charges were made, but the process, as is so often the case, proved to be the punishment.

But it is not just drugs that have been used to smear the film industry. In January this year, at least 10 police complaints were filed, in more than half a dozen States across the country, against film-makers, actors and Amazon executives of a made-for-television political drama called *Tandav*, which allegedly offended Hindu sensibilities by its depiction of a character portraying Lord Shiva. Another crime thriller, *Mirzapur*, underwent similar harassment, for similar reasons; *A Suitable Boy* had cases filed against it over a kissing

scene filmed near a temple. In March this year, properties linked to film-maker Anurag Kashyap, actress Tapsee Pannu and Reliance Entertainment group CEO Shihabhashish Sarkar were raided by the Income Tax department as part of a tax evasion investigation against a company, Phantom Films, that had been dissolved in 2018.

The alarm bells have begun to go off in the minds of some in our political class. Maharashtra Minister Nawab Malik has alleged that the raids were an attempt to suppress the voices of those who speak against the central government. Jaya Bachchan – a one-time movie star herself, wife of megastar Amitabh Bachchan, and a member of the Rajya Sabha – decried a "conspiracy to defame the film industry". The latest media campaign against Aryan Khan suggests the conspiracy is still alive.

### The outside influence

As these allegations suggest, it is not really drugs that are the issue here for the powers-that-be. The alleged violation of our narcotics laws is merely a convenient cudgel to batter an industry that is disliked for other reasons. The political establishment recognises the outside influence of Bollywood entertainment on the minds and attitudes of the broad viewing – and voting – public. What those in power, who have demonstrated their intolerance of points of view other than their own for some time now, really dislike is not what Bollywood does behind closed doors, but the content of what it puts out – what one might call the political culture of Bollywood.

When I wrote my novel *Show Business* in 1990, some Indian critics were surprised that I would follow *The Great Indian Novel* with a work that dealt with the trashy world of commercial Bombay cinema. But I did so because to me, Indian films, with all their limitations and outright idiocies, represented a vital part of the hope for India's future. In a country that is still perhaps 30% illiterate, films represent the prime vehicle for the transmission of popular culture and values. Cinema offers all of us

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in India a common world to which to escape, allowing us to dream with our eyes open. And with 570 million Internet users, India also offers a remarkable market for new cinema for the OTT (over-the-top) platforms – direct to our laptops and mobile phone screens – a market Bollywood is poised to dominate.

### Plots and the message

In India, popular cinema has consistently reflected the diversity of the pluralist community that makes this cinema. The stories they tell are often silly, the plots formulaic, the characterisations superficial, the action predictable, but they are made and watched by members of every community in India. Muslim actors play Hindu heroes, South Indian heroines are chased around trees by North Indian rogues. Representatives of some communities may be stereotyped (think of the number of alcoholic Christians played by a "character actor" like Om Prakash), but good and bad are always shown as being found in every community.

I was first struck by this quality of Bollywood not long after the Bangladesh War, when the 1973 film *Zanjeer* offered a striking pointer to me of what Bollywood had come to represent in our society. In the film, Pran played Badshah Khan, a red-bearded Pathan Muslim who exemplified the values of strength, fearlessness, loyalty and courage. This was just a year after the bloody birth of Bangladesh in a war in which most of the subcontinent's Pathans were on the other side, but far from demonising the Pran figure, the film-makers chose not just to portray a strong Muslim character but to make him the most sym-

pathetic presence in the film after the hero. This would not have been possible in many other countries, but Bollywood tended to be consistently good at this sort of thing, making megahits like *Amar Akbar Anthony*, about three brothers separated in infancy who are brought up by different families – one a Christian, one a Hindu and one a Muslim. The message was clear – that Christians, Hindus and Muslims are metaphorically brothers too, seemingly different but united in their common endeavours for justice.

This kind of message is unsurprising, given who makes these films. Many have observed that Muslims enjoy a disproportionate influence in Bollywood, most apparent in the dominance of the trio of actors Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, and Aamir Khan for three decades (six of the 10 highest-grossing films ever made feature one of the Khans). Several other prominent Bollywood stars – Naseeruddin Shah, Saif Ali Khan and the late Irrfan Khan – are Muslim. None of them was invited when, in 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi conducted a famous photo-op with a couple of dozen Bollywood A-list personalities flown to New Delhi for the purpose.

### Possible 'appeasement'

In today's charged political atmosphere, generated by the ascendancy of political figures associated with Hindutva, the photo-op suggested that the "A" in "A-list" seems increasingly to stand for "appeasement" of the authorities. Many Bollywood celebrities embarrassed themselves by participating in a Government-run social media campaign to denounce global celebrities like Rihanna and Greta Thunberg for their support to our agitating farmers, earning themselves the sobriquet "#Sellebrities".

The real problem is that the Sangh Parivar dislikes diversity, and the film world embodies the very idea of India's diversity in the way in which it is organised, staffed, and financed – and in the stories it tells. Everything about

Bollywood embodies the "composite culture" whose very existence is an affront to the uni-dimensional bigotry of Hindutva. And as India's entertainment has opened itself to more and more global influence, India's "mainstream" cinema has increasingly shown a capacity for tackling serious themes – caste discrimination, rural injustice, sanitation, women's rights, menstruation, female sexuality, interreligious marriage, homosexuality and even global Islamophobia have featured in recent films.

### A chilling effect

This worries those who prefer Bollywood to continue to limit itself to formulaic entertainment, the proverbial "bread and circuses" necessary to distract the general public from governmental failures. The plot is thickening. New Internet guidelines, whose application and operations are yet to be tested, have already prompted Amazon Prime Video to suspend plans for a second season of the popular rural political series *Paatal Lok*. Other releases are reported to have been postponed indefinitely. Even the prospect of official disapproval has already had a chilling effect.

Bollywood, which makes over 2,000 films a year, has long been India's calling card to the world of entertainment. Our films and TV shows have the capacity of going global on the small screen the way Korean cinema has but Chinese has not – because censorship and intimidation stifles one set of film-makers and not the other. The remarkable creative talents available in India could make the country a global leader for such worldwide offerings. But to do that we must allow our film-makers creative freedom, stop harassing them and cease encouraging media persecution. It is time to rise up in defence of Bollywood.

*Shashi Tharoor is a third-term Member of Parliament representing Thiruvananthapuram and an award-winning author of 22 books, including most recently, 'The Battle of Belonging'*

# Vigilance, vaccination and endemic COVID-19

Continued reduced transmission is an opportunity to progressively relax restrictions, but under vaccination, mask use



T. JACOB JOHN & M.S. SESHADRI

**O**n June 27, 2021, the daily reported COVID-19 cases (seven-day rolling average) had fallen below 50,000, and have remained so for 15 consecutive weeks (Worldometer - Corona-India). That heralded the end of the second wave of India's epidemic and marked its transition to 'endemic' state. It fell below 40,000 on September 9, and below 30,000 on September 24. The trend continues.

### Population and infection

Endemic denotes steady weekly numbers without major fluctuations. Fifteen weeks of this trend spells consistency. Kerala, Sikkim, Mizoram and Meghalaya are outliers/exceptions to the national endemic state – they have not yet transitioned to endemic phase (covid19india.org) but their daily case-trends show they will soon catch up and become endemic. Country-level endemicity indicates that the vast majority of the population is already infected and immune, but how large is the majority?

The fourth ICMR sero-survey (June/July 2021) showed 67.6% had antibodies by end July – that is roughly 950 million. The reported cumulative COVID-19 cases by end-July were 30,410,577 (3.2% of 950 million). So, actual infections were -30 times the reported number. From August 1 to October 7 – 2,219,097 additional cases were reported, representing, by extrapolation, 70 million infections, tak-

ing the total to 1,020 million, the susceptible population therefore is 1,400 - 1,020 = 380 million. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) found, in the second sero-survey, that detected antibody prevalence underestimates true immunity prevalence, detecting only -70% of those who were RT-PCR positive earlier, therefore the susceptible pool may be much smaller.

Endemic transmission will be sustained by new infections in previously uninfected remnants plus new additions to population by annual birth cohorts of 25 million (less mortality) and by re-infections in those previously infected.

The second wave of the pandemic was driven by the Delta variant, with a basic reproduction number (Ro) of 6-8. The epidemiology formula (1-1/Ro) is used to calculate the herd immunity threshold (HIT) necessary to end the epidemic, which is -87.5%, in our estimations. Applying the principle of triangulation this observation corroborates the fact of epidemic-endemic transition.

### On the job

India rolled out its COVID-19 vaccines on January 16, 2021, but the pace of vaccination is slow, 20% having received two doses (2.2% per month). So, the major contributor to reaching HIT was natural infection in two waves. Two recent preprints, one from Christian Medical College Hospital Vellore and the other from Israel indicate that infection-induced immunity confers greater protection than vaccination (<https://bit.ly/3DKKEMC> and <https://bit.ly/2YWCpZE>). Thus, India's immune population has good short-term protection against re-infection and disease. Indeed, the reinfection rate in India according to



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the ICMR was only 4.5% (<https://bit.ly/3pcZp10>).

India's COVID-19 control strategy, hitherto addressing epidemic COVID-19, has to be modified now for endemic COVID-19. Two important factors will dictate the modifications: Senior citizens, those with co-morbidity/cancer treatment/organ transplant, etc. and pregnant women, who had not been infected in the past or not yet vaccinated with two doses, would have risks of severe disease, need for hospitalisation, admission in an intensive care unit, and mortality. They have to be traced individually and vaccinated.

### More by re-infections

Endemic transmission will be driven more by re-infections than by first infections. A paper in *The Lancet Microbe*, October 1 (<https://bit.ly/2Y0u8qc>), reported the durability of immunity against re-infection in coronavirus infections, the profiles of antibody decline and probabilities of re-infection over time, under endemic conditions. Re-infection is likely three months to 5-1 years after peak antibody response, median 16 months. Hence, all previously infected but unvaccinated persons require at least one dose of the vaccine.

Studies have shown that those who had natural infection may need only one dose of any approved vaccine to stimulate long-

lasting immunity even against reinfection. A meticulous follow-up study of antibody levels in those who had infection is urgently needed to determine when such individuals will need a booster dose. Their immune response profile to one dose of different vaccines also needs to be documented.

Persons previously uninfected but vaccinated with two doses have to be given a booster dose of vaccine to offer protection against breakthrough re-infection. Immunology informs that the optimum time interval for a booster dose is six months to one year after the previous dose. We must monitor both the immune response levels and durability post-booster. Such data will then guide if and when any further booster(s) may be required.

Contact tracing, testing and quarantine requirements – very important during an epidemic spread – will now have to be confined to the elderly and vulnerable contacts so as to facilitate early recognition and treatment of COVID-19, rather than for everyone. Our two-dose vaccination coverage should be rapidly escalated – the current weekly rate of about 0.6% of the population given a second dose, is too slow and must be revved up – through intensive information-education-communication and by vaccination campaigns.

Vaccination should be targeted for the purposes of re-opening all schools and hubs of economic activities. The entire work force in India (organised, unorganised, self-employed, those in the travel and tourism industry) need to be targeted for vaccination; this is best done at the workplace with the help of the respective management and State health authori-

ties. Thereafter, all social, religious, cultural and recreational gatherings can be allowed.

### Childhood infection

Childhood infection with the coronavirus is mostly mild and self-limiting as children have lower density of the ACE2 receptor (the portal of cell-entry of virus) in their respiratory passages. Multi-system-inflammatory syndrome, a severe complication encountered in children, is fortunately very rare and treatable. Under these circumstances, children are best protected by fully immunising all school personnel (teachers, non-teaching staff, transport) and all eligible subjects at home, thereby creating a protective mantle.

After any vaccine gets approved for use in children, (Covaxin and ZCoV-D may be approved soon), they can be immunised – the easiest way forward would be school-based vaccination camps.

Continued endemic transmission is the opportunity to progressively relax restrictions of social contacts, but such return to normalcy must be under the umbrella of vaccination (as detailed above) and universal mask use. When endemicity is sustained over a longer time, seasonal outbreaks (minor waves) must be anticipated – but even they can be averted by vaccination. Vigilance cannot be let down until we ensure that no one remains at risk of severe COVID-19.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Reaching out

With a militant group at the helm of affairs in Afghanistan, the magnitude of the sufferings of the Afghan people are less likely to be known to the world in precise terms. However, it is easy to infer that the people of a

war-ravaged nation, unable to accept an indifferent regime emotionally, would be in dire need of assistance of all kinds. The priority should be to infuse funds into the region so that food and shelter, the pre-requisites for survival, are taken care of without

loss of time. Let all countries unite to address the humanitarian crisis instead of deliberating on issues which have no solution in the immediate future. India should send COVID-19 vaccines, as a grant first, followed by financial aid and

infrastructural assistance.

*V. SUBRAMANIAN,  
Chennai*

### Views in a democracy

Notwithstanding Prime Minister Narendra Modi's criticism of a 'selective' reading of rights issues, there is genuine concern in

the country that there is an intolerance towards differences in opinion and the right to dissent. Characterising anything that is said against the present leadership of the country as unpatriotic and anti-national is too much bear. It will only add to the

Prime Minister's grace and stature if he would take criticisms in his stride, and in the right spirit. It goes without saying that ours is a democratic country.  
*C.G. KURIAKOSE,  
Malappara, Kothamangalam, Kerala*



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