



Trouble in Bangladesh

While India voices concern on attacks, it should not appear religiously partisan

The UN, the U.S. and India have condemned incidents of majoritarian violence against Bangladesh's Hindu minority community during Durga Puja in the past few days. What is particularly worrying is that the attacks which have left at least six people dead and dozens injured, have followed, according to the Government, fake news reports shared over social media, indicating a conspiracy to instigate the violence. The mob violence appears to have begun in Comilla, in Chittagong district, where an image allegedly showing disrespect to the Koran was circulated, and resulted in several major mob attacks on Hindu temples and homes belonging to the minority community. The Narendra Modi government, which has sought to preserve good relations with Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina government, has also praised the authorities for moving quickly to take control of the situation. According to the police, more than 450 people have been arrested over the past week of violence and more than 70 cases filed in different parts of Bangladesh. Prime Minister Hasina has promised strict action and sought to reassure minorities during an address via videoconference to Hindu devotees at the Dhakeshwari national temple. In a message for New Delhi, she also said that Bangladesh's big neighbour must be sensitive to the situation, and alluding to violence against minorities in India, asked that "nothing is done there [India] that affects our country [Bangladesh]". The Indian High Commission in Dhaka, which was in touch with law and order officials at the Centre, also stepped in to meet with members of the Bangladeshi Hindu community, including representatives from the ISKCON group that was attacked. The ISKCON headquarters in West Bengal as well as BJP leaders also called on Mr. Modi to personally intervene.

Given the seriousness of the attacks and the fear that has gripped the Hindu minority in Bangladesh, the international and Indian concern is not surprising. However, New Delhi will have to act cautiously in light of all the various links between India and Bangladesh. While the Indian High Commission's act of meeting local minorities comes from a sense of compassion, it could be read as an act of interference. The impact of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act in 2019 had a widespread effect in Bangladesh, and at least 12 people were killed in protests against Mr. Modi's visit to Dhaka earlier this year. As a regional leader, India has every right to be concerned about the plight of communities in the subcontinent. However, it must ensure that its domestic drivers do not upset carefully built foreign relations. And any act that is seen as religiously partisan is bound to destabilise the otherwise close and productive relations between the two countries, which have a shared history of cooperation over much of the past 50 years.

The other Quad

India must retain strong ties with Iran as it seeks partnership with the U.S.-Israel-UAE bloc

The virtual meet of the Foreign Ministers of India, the U.S., Israel and the UAE is a strong manifestation of the changes in West Asian geopolitics. If Israel and the UAE did not even have formal diplomatic relations a year ago, their growing economic and strategic cooperation is opening up opportunities for other powers, including India. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, now in Israel, joined the quadrilateral conference after meeting his Israeli counterpart Yair Lapid, where they had agreed to launch talks for a free trade agreement. The four-nation meeting also points to India's strategic desire to adopt a regional foreign policy strategy towards West Asia, transcending its bilateralism. Over the years, India has built vibrant bilateral ties with all the countries in the grouping. It is a member of the Quad with the U.S., Australia and Japan, which have common concerns and shared interests on East Asia. Israel is one of India's top defence suppliers. The UAE is vital for India's energy security. The Gulf country, which hosts millions of Indian workers, has also shown interest to mediate between India and Pakistan.

In the past, there were three pillars to India's West Asia policy – the Sunni Gulf monarchies, Israel and Iran. Now that the gulf between the Sunni kingdoms and Israel is being narrowed, especially after the Abraham Accords, the normalisation agreements signed between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain under the tutelage of the Trump administration, India faces fewer challenges to a regionalist approach. Mr. Jaishankar has hinted that there would be more meetings among the four countries. While it is too early to speak of the strategic significance of such a grouping, there are areas where it can deepen its engagement – trade, energy ties, fighting climate change and enhancing maritime security. But India should also be mindful of the challenges in the region. The U.S. is clearly seeking to lessen its footprint here as part of its pivot to East Asia to tackle China's rise, which is redrawing West Asia's traditional equations. India should be careful not to get sucked into the many conflicts of West Asia that could intensify amid growing regional rivalries. While the Abraham Accords made it easier for India to find common ground with the Israelis and the Emiratis, the contradiction between this emerging bloc and Iran remains as intense as ever. India, which sees itself aligned with the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific, faces deepening insecurities in continental Asia after the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. And it will have to work closely with countries such as Iran to deal with the challenges emanating from a post-American Afghanistan. So the challenge before New Delhi is to retain a healthy relationship with Iran even as it seeks to build a stronger regional partnership with the U.S.-Israel-UAE bloc.

In the cross hairs, civilians and Kashmiri harmony

As a compounded tragedy, there needs to be a range of actions as solutions – from security to justice to reconciliation



RADHA KUMAR

Over the past two weeks, more than 11 civilians and nine Army troops have been killed by militants in the Kashmir Valley. Most of the targeted civilians have been Hindus, though there have also been Muslims, and a Sikh. The Hindus killed include Kashmiri Pandits and migrant labour.

Wave of fear, insecurity

The immediate reaction to these killings has been a flight of Pandits who had returned to the Valley under the 2006 Prime Minister's programme for the return and rehabilitation of migrants, which offered jobs in the Valley to Pandit teachers. Pandit organisations say that as many as a third of the returnees have left; even those of the 800 families that stayed through the insurgency years have begun to leave. Though Kashmiri political parties and civil society, as well as Lieutenant-Governor Manoj Sinha's administration, have pleaded with them to stay, their pleas are unconvincing given the very real insecurity created by the killings.

The plight of migrant labour is equally grave. Most are attempting to leave the Valley and return to their home States. The administration has ordered that those who are not able to immediately return be sheltered in police stations and guarded camps. In other words, like refugees. Whether they will then be aided to return to their homes remains to be seen; likely they will.

These two groups are not alone in wishing to flee. A fresh wave of fear has gripped the Valley, with

most residents fearing they may be caught between the militants and the administration. Allegedly, over 700 people have been taken into detention by the police, under suspicion of supporting militancy. Meantime, according to intelligence agencies, potential militant targets include religious leaders, *panches* and the media.

It was widely anticipated that Pakistani armed groups would be emboldened to revive cross-border infiltration following the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan. Now it seems that their strategy repeats elements of the insurgency of the 1990s. As happened then, the insurgency was prefigured by attacks on Pandits who were seen by Islamist militants as an arm of India because they were Hindus, and Muslims who worked in the State administration or central Indian agencies such as Doordarshan.

Attacks and the aim

The attacks were intended to both communalise the Valley and paralyse its administration, and over time succeeded in doing so, albeit only partially. The Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's ceasefire negotiations with cross-border armed groups in 2000 were shattered by the killing of over 100 Bihar labourers, but the years of peace building that followed, from 2002-2014, restored a large degree of administration and created conditions for the return of Pandits – sadly at far too gradual a pace – and of migrant labour.

Whether cross-border and local militant groups succeed in once again communalising the Valley is debatable. Much depends on the policy the Union administration adopts in response.

There are two quite separate issues involved: one, reassuring the minorities in Kashmir as well as the wider public of the Valley; two, a rethink on counter-insurgency strategy, including its cross-border



tentacles.

Some reassurance

Hearteningly, every single opinion group in Kashmir has condemned the killings. Mosques have broadcast their criticism. Kashmiri political parties have voiced their opposition to such militancy, as have political leaders, including the Hurriyat and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq. Civil society groups have issued statements of protest. Local community leaders and neighbours have visited Pandit homes to offer aid and support. This wave at the ground level can provide a strong base for reassurance, if encouraged.

Encouragement can begin with the Lieutenant-Governor. Thus far, Mr. Sinha's administration does not appear to have consulted either the Kashmiri Pandit organisations, or the various groups that have condemned the killings, on which steps can be taken to restore a degree of confidence. This is surprising, given that these groups, added together, comprise a formidable cross-section of public opinion, and with their support, militancy can once again be socially marginalised, as it was during the peace-building years.

From available information, it appears that the bulk of the recent civilian killings have been carried out by what the Army calls 'hybrid militants', because they are locally recruited and trained, have regular jobs and are part-time militants using basic weapons such as county pistols. The implications are

that the field of militancy has grown more dispersed, with wider public support, despite counter-insurgency successes in degrading large armed groups such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohamed. In this context, any opportunity to marginalise militancy is vital.

Setback for Kashmiri Pandits

Many have begun asking whether Kashmiri Pandits will ever be able to return to the Valley, as the Narendra Modi administration had promised in August 2019. There is no doubt that the recent civilian killings have been a major setback to prospects of return. It is also the case that Kashmiri Pandit organisations have increasingly complained of administrative neglect on returns over the past year. A recurring point that is made by some of them is that the administration, while focusing on returns, needs to simultaneously pay attention to securing Pandit families that never left. Their condition has worsened as their numbers have shrunk; though less covered by the media, the same problem has begun to affect the Sikh minority too, whose numbers have shrunk over the past decade-plus.

The Kashmiri Pandit tragedy has continued for 30 years now, and like all compounded tragedies requires a range of actions, from security to justice to reconciliation. Beginning with security, which is the first requirement to enable justice and reconciliation to follow, it is a mistake to imagine that gated enclaves alone will provide it, or even that stepped up counter-insurgency operations will minimise the risk. Each measure is useful if accompanied by community support, but neither is a solution to the security dilemma by itself. True, targeted killings will only cease when insurgency does. But peace-making combined with counter-insurgency has proved more efficient in ending in-

surgency in democratic countries than counter-insurgency alone, in our own experience as well as across the world. Thus far, the Union administration has not held out any olive branches; on the contrary, its implementation of the August 2019 decisions has added one cause for resentment after another, the latest being the multiple use of Article 311(2) to dismiss government employees without an enquiry or hearing. A policy for Pandit property recovery that had not been thought through did not help either; apparently it has now been corrected.

Political science and sociology both tell us that an insecure majority is unlikely to protect vulnerable minorities; it is focused on its own survival. The arrest of over 700 people in the aftermath of the recent civilian killings has added to the majority's sense of insecurity, because it raises questions about why police intelligence has not narrowed the field of suspects as should, surely, be professionally required.

Approach to Pakistan

The Narendra Modi administration appears to have adopted a multi-pronged approach to Pakistan recently, beginning with a ceasefire and extending to an invitation to the Pakistani National Security Adviser for a regional meeting on Afghanistan, while giving the Army a free hand on cross-border infiltration. Why then is it not adopting a similarly multi-pronged approach in the Valley, where civil and human rights remain severely restricted and the administration lacks the transparency that oversight and grievance-redress commissions provided? Without overall civil and human rights, how can minority rights be protected or minority returns be encouraged?

Radha Kumar is a writer and policy analyst

No excuses please, India awaits a full caste headcount

The central government's logistical or legal justifications to not disclose caste census data do not stand scrutiny



PRASENJIT BOSE

The Narendra Modi government has finally elaborated on its reasons for not disclosing the caste data collated in the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011. The Government's affidavit filed in the Supreme Court of India last month by the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment – in response to a writ petition by the Maharashtra government – has also tried to explain away the exclusion of full caste enumeration in the forthcoming Census exercise, which is expected to resume in 2022 after the COVID-19 pandemic-induced interruption. The official arguments focus on the impracticability of full caste enumeration, suggesting that operational difficulties are simply too overwhelming.

Overstating 'mistakes', 'flaws'

As detailed in the affidavit, while the total number of castes counted in the 1931 Census was 4,147, the SECC of 2011 returned over 46 lakh caste names. Such a humongous number of castes were returned partly because Indian people use the names of their caste, sub-caste, clan, *gotra* and surnames interchangeably. Moreover, the enumerators also got confused over the spellings and classification of the castes. The question is, if the 46 lakh caste names that were returned in the SECC 2011 were the

results of "mistakes by the enumerators" or "inherent flaws in the manner of conducting census" as alleged in the official affidavit, why could not those mistakes and flaws be rectified in a decade?

The Union Cabinet had appointed an Expert Committee headed by the then NITI Aayog Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya in July 2015, charging it with the classification of caste names returned in SECC 2011. The Government's affidavit admits that no other member was appointed to the committee. Therefore, neither did the committee ever meet nor did it fulfil its mandate in six years. Who is responsible for this negligence?

The extent of errors in caste enumeration is also being exaggerated. The affidavit cites the example of Maharashtra to show that while the aggregate number of castes enlisted in the central lists of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) and the State list of Other Backward Classes (OBC) is 494, the caste names returned by the SECC 2011 for the State stood at 4.28 lakh. But the affidavit also states that "99% of the castes enumerated had [a] population of less than 100 persons". Out of the total population of 10.3 crore in the State, 8.8 crore people could be classified under 2,440 castes, each having a population of over 1,000. Therefore, the proliferation of caste names and the consequent difficulty in their classification have arisen not because of the majority, but a tiny proportion of the total population.

This is further corroborated by an action taken report on the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Rural Development



on "BPL Survey (currently Socio Economic & Caste Census, 2011)". In this report dated August 31, 2016, the Union government is quoted as categorically stating that the data errors on caste and religion in SECC 2011 accounted for 1.34 crore out of 118.64 crore people, i.e., only around 1% of the total enumerated population. How can the same government now characterise the entire findings of the caste census as "fraught with mistakes and inaccuracies"?

Complex, yet feasible

Population census in a vast and uniquely diverse country such as India cannot but be a complex exercise. Over the decades, the census machinery has moved on a learning curve, credibly enumerating complicated categories such as language and religion, which also display considerable diversity. For instance, as per Paper 1 of 2018 on the Language Census of 2011, the number of initial raw returns of mother tongues had totalled 19,569 for the entire country. Following scrutiny, editing and linguistic grouping, these raw returns were first rationalised into 1,369 mother tongues and subsequently classified on the basis of at least 10,000 or more speakers for 22 scheduled and 99 non-sche-

duled languages, i.e., 121 languages at the all-India level.

While caste appears to be an even more complex category than language in the Indian context, technologies to enumerate and analyse complex big data have become easily accessible today. Yet, the affidavit cites the absence of an all-India Registry of Castes to rule out the conduct of full caste enumeration in the forthcoming census. Why could such a registry of castes and tribes not be created till date by the Union and State governments, acting together, by combining the central lists of SCs and STs and the State lists of OBCs?

The aggregate number of castes and tribes included in those lists would currently be around 5,000 at the all-India level. For any individual State, the maximum number of castes cannot be above 500. Rationalisation and classification of the numerous raw caste returns into a maximum of 500 castes at the State level or around 5,000 castes at the all-India level, is eminently feasible. Training manuals for the enumerators can also be drawn up on the basis of a single, consolidated caste list for each State.

This could have been attained by the expert committee appointed by the Union cabinet by now, but for its innate dysfunctionality. Rather than rectifying its administrative failings, the Union government is now citing it as evidence to construct a theorem of logistical impossibility.

Within the framework

The Government's affidavit also cites the absence of categorical constitutional or statutory re-

quirements to count castes other than SCs and STs in the Census. However, Articles 15(4) and 15(5) of the Indian Constitution have explicitly recognised "socially and educationally backward classes of citizens" as a category distinct from SCs and STs and enabled the State to make special provisions for their advancement. Counting the population of these Backward Classes would therefore be very much within the constitutional framework.

Yet, the official affidavit alleges that full caste enumeration may compromise the basic integrity of the Census exercise, distorting the fundamental population count itself. If enumeration of individual castes under the "SC", "ST" and "Other" categories in all censuses since 1951 have not led to such perverse outcomes, why should the additional enumeration under another "OBC" category cause such a catastrophe? Such deliberate scaremongering has no basis in the laws or the Constitution.

The logistical or legal justifications of the Union government to not disclose caste census data and refuse to conduct a full caste enumeration in the forthcoming Census do not stand scrutiny. Rather, it creates ground for suspicion whether the establishment has vested interests in concealing the real numbers and proportions of various castes in the Indian population. Such subterfuge would not be acceptable to a wide spectrum of social movements and political parties, who are demanding full caste enumeration.

Prasenjit Bose is an economist and activist based in Kolkata

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Kashmir today

A country with a great democratic set-up is now reeling under the weight of the immense pressure of restoring peace and harmony in the Kashmir Valley. India has been a safe abode for people of myriad regional, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Unfortunately, this is fading due to the gradual emergence of the fundamentalists. We cannot give up. We have to fight tooth and nail against religious fundamentalism and terror. The central government should go the

extra mile to oust militants from the Valley and prevent the massive exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits.

PRABHAKARAN VALLATH,
Vatakara, Kozhikode, Kerala

The Government had claimed that terrorism in Kashmir would end with the dilution of Article 370. Unfortunately, terror has once again raised its ugly head in Kashmir. The political leadership in Kashmir must be involved in the peace process. The Centre has so far treated them as accomplices of inimical elements. While

there are no easy solutions to the problem, the Government has to take all stakeholders into confidence.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES,
Mumbai

A defence of Bollywood

Shashi Tharoor's article on Bollywood and Hindutva (Editorial page, October 16), left a reader wondering what his message was. If at all there is a connection in the matters he has discussed, it is probably in the realm which Mr. Tharoor alone understands. There is a pure and simple case of a drug

seizure on board a luxury cruise ship which is under investigation. Some well known persons are involved and Mr. Tharoor would have been correct had he said that one should not be hasty in condemning people before knowing the truth. But he appears to have gone overboard and implied that the episode is a smear campaign against Bollywood. Bollywood is not about individuals and families. To link a drug case (at least until a clear verdict emerges) with a smear campaign is odd.

YOGANANDH T.,
Salem, Tamil Nadu

Kerala floods

God's own country is now being battered by nature's fury. Long-term measures such as monitoring the Western Ghats for deforestation and enabling reforestation and also keeping the State's river banks free of encroachments may be needed.

N.J. RAVI CHANDER,
Bengaluru

Invalid notes

The report on the plight of a blind destitute man in Krishnagiri, Tamil Nadu, who has demonetised notes worth ₹65,000 is saddening.

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Demonetisation played havoc with the lives of many, particularly the poor and the elderly who were ignorant of the implications of the sudden implementation of demonetisation. The last line, "... that the currency exchange was unlikely", sounds cold. The authorities must try and help him live in peace. There are sure to be corporate organisations, banks or the wealthy who can treat this as a CSR gesture.

ANNA MARY YVONNE,
Chennai