



## A lost cause

Despite severe losses, the Maoists refuse to acknowledge the futility of their cause

With the deaths of 26 rebels in a police operation in Gadchiroli on Saturday, the proscribed Communist Party of India (Maoist) has faced yet another setback in its “protracted armed struggle” against the Indian state. Gadchiroli, a largely forested and tribal-dominated district, is among Maharashtra’s poorest and the Maoists have sought to expand their presence extending from neighbouring Chhattisgarh. There have been major encounters in the district, with recent ones involving the deaths of 40 Maoists in two separate operations in April 2018 and a landmine blast claiming 15 police personnel and a driver in May 2019. Gadchiroli remains one of the few districts “severely affected” by left-wing extremism. Despite suffering significant losses to its leadership either in military operations or due to physical infirmities and a shrinking of the areas of influence, the Maoists have refused to withdraw from their pursuit of armed struggle. In cycles of violence, they have managed their own strikes against security forces, but such attacks have not provided them any heft in expanding their presence or increasing their support base. The conflict has fallen into a pattern – violence begets violence as insurgents and the security forces continually lose combatants, but equally disturbing, this also affects the poor tribal people whose lives are caught in a prolonged crossfire.

The Maoists’ inability, not just to expand but also to entrench themselves, is to some extent to the credit of the Indian state apparatus, both its security establishment and its work, through development schemes, in weaning away support for the Maoists among the poorest and marginalised sections, especially in remote areas. At the same time, this is also a reflection of the incongruence of the Indian Maoists’ programme which bases itself on replicating the Chinese Revolution of the previous century, and its quixotic pursuit of armed struggle as the means to achieve its aims. Neither are the conditions in India remotely closer to that of China in the 1920s, nor are the peasantry – whose support the Maoists deem as crucial to their project – enamoured of the Maoist programme or its reliance on guerilla struggle. The Maoists’ refusal to acknowledge the diverse industrial base in the country, their rejection of liberal democratic instruments in the Indian state and the faith of the poor in the robust electoral system have blinded them to pursue a futile cause. Yet, despite the futility, the Maoists retain the capability to strike in isolated skirmishes. Maharashtra must not rest on its success in militarily diminishing the Maoist threat in Gadchiroli. It must act continually in winning over the support of tribals in the region and retaining their faith in the liberal democratic institutions of the state.

## History lessons

China is preparing for a major long-term shift in its politics under Xi

Following a meeting of its Central Committee last week, China’s Communist Party passed what it called a “Resolution on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century”. Ostensibly about the past, it still holds enormous significance for China’s future. This is only the third such resolution on history passed by the party in its 100-year history. The previous two resolutions, passed by Mao Zedong in 1945 and Deng Xiaoping in 1981, marked important inflection points in China’s politics, and established them as the dominant leaders of their respective generations. The full text of the latest resolution has not been made public, but a 5,000 word communiqué issued after the closure of the four-day plenum gives a flavour. It heaps praise on the contributions of Mao, Deng and current leader Xi Jinping. It differs in one key aspect from the previous resolution of 1981, which acknowledged Mao’s mistakes that led to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), by describing the history of the party as one without flaws. “Looking back on the party’s endeavours over the past century,” it surmises, “we can see why we were successful in the past and how we can continue to succeed in the future.”

Explaining why the party saw the need for a new historical resolution, the communiqué said the party wanted to “strengthen our consciousness of the need to maintain political integrity, think in big-picture terms, follow the leadership core, and keep in alignment with the central party leadership”. The latest communiqué implicitly criticised the collective leadership model that Deng bequeathed his successors and enabled three peaceful transfers of power, praising Mr. Xi’s “core” leadership for having “solved many tough problems... never resolved and accomplished many things that were wanted but never got done”. It also called for “resolutely upholding Xi Jinping’s core position on the Central Committee and in the Party... and upholding the Central Committee’s authority... to ensure that all Party members act in unison”. The significance of the 1945 and 1981 resolutions lay not in their reflections on the past but in how they would change the exercise of power, bringing dramatic consequences for China’s future. The first established Mao’s ideology as the party’s guiding ideology. By doing so, it made it heresy to question Mao and paved the way for the creation of his disastrous personality cult. In 1981, Deng too established his dominance, but used his power to bring an end to rule by ideology, instead turning the party’s attention to development and bringing China to its era of reform and opening up. Now, 40 years after Deng, as China’s current leader looks to write his place in the party’s history, the past might be held in reverence, but it will not be allowed to dictate the contours of the future when the country prepares to take yet another political turn.

# Striding back into the Afghan theatre

Though challenging, it would be a mistake to consider that there is no space for India to operate in Afghanistan



VIVEK KATJU

Amidst the multiple messages that New Delhi wished to send out by convening ‘The Third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan’ on November 10 – a National Security Adviser (NSA)-level meet – one stands out: that despite the current absence of an on-ground presence in the country, India continues to matter in Afghan affairs. To ensure that this thought was acknowledged by the Indian political and strategic classes as well as the region, Indian officials, in their background briefings, emphasised that India’s invitation was accepted by countries that have significant stakes in Afghanistan – Russia, Iran and all the five Central Asian Republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). They correctly downplayed Pakistan’s outright refusal to join the meeting and China’s lame excuse for its absence. Indeed, in the context of the present state of Sino-Indian ties and Pakistan’s obsession of keeping India away from Afghanistan, neither country’s decision was surprising.

### Similar concerns

There is little doubt that the initiative succeeded in demonstrating that many regional countries accept that India has legitimate concerns relating to Afghanistan. The Delhi Declaration that emerged from the deliberations of the National Security Advisers/Secretaries of the National Security Councils of the participating states shows that all these countries share similar concerns which are also widely held in the international

community. The Delhi Declaration demanded that Afghan soil is not used to spread terrorism or extremist ideologies. It called for a control on the production of Afghan opium. It reflected the widely held view that the Taliban have to conform to acceptable standards of behaviour on gender issues and minority rights. The Declaration also called for the formation of “an open and truly inclusive government” that was “representative of the will of the Afghan people” and had the participation of “all sections of society” in its “administrative and political structure”. This is a laudable objective, but is it realistic? The hard fact is that the Taliban achieved a military victory and unlike in the 1990s now control all of Afghanistan. Is any neighbour of Afghanistan willing to nurture a long-lasting insurgency to effectively pressure the Taliban?

### Hurdles, an outreach

All the participants of the Delhi Dialogue except India have open contacts with the Taliban even if some of them consider the Taliban to be a negative political force. It is, therefore, likely that despite this clarion collective call for an inclusive government, these states will ultimately individually settle for a Taliban government that will show a degree of responsiveness on gender issues and minority rights, including of ethnic minorities. Even more they will look for how the Taliban are addressing their individual concerns on specific terrorist groups that target them. The Russian press statement after the Delhi Declaration itself reveals that each country will act not on the basis of common positions in this document but in keeping with its interests.

It is here that Indian policymakers are still struggling to accept the consequences and realities of the great change that took place in Af-



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ghanistan on August 15, when Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani fled from Kabul and the Taliban rolled in. This far-reaching development eroded the very basis of India’s Afghan policy. It required an immediate re-assessment of the regional situation and nimble, quick and comprehensive action with salience given to strategic considerations. It needed a ruthlessly cold ‘all of political and strategic classes’ approach unaffected by political considerations of any nature. Almost three months later this is still not discernible. And, the Delhi meeting, while serving a small diplomatic purpose, will not contribute to addressing the vast challenges that India now faces in its entire western neighbourhood, especially Afghanistan.

### Pakistan link

Pakistan has avoided its mistake of the 1990s, of giving formal diplomatic recognition to the Taliban. It is however acting in a manner with the group’s government, which it helped put together, as it would have with a ‘recognised’ administration. It is no coincidence that the day the Delhi Dialogue was convened, the acting Afghan Foreign Minister, Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi, reached Islamabad leading a high-level delegation. In India’s absence in Kabul, Pakistan has a free hand. As it is with its deep and abiding relations with the Taliban it has a unique and enduring advantage. But should that mean that India ignores Afghanis-

tan altogether and confines itself to only covert contacts with the Taliban? There has been no repeat of a Doha-like meeting between the Indian Ambassador and senior Taliban officials.

### A place for India

India will have to play a multi-faceted diplomatic game to safeguard and promote its interests in Afghanistan and the region. It cannot join the game unless it re-establishes a presence in Kabul. All-important regional players and Russia have kept their missions open in Kabul. New Delhi must note that the Taliban spokesperson, taking note of the Dialogue said that India was an important regional country with which it desired good diplomatic relations.

India has to proceed with caution but without inhibitions. That can only be through an understanding of Afghan traditions and culture which has been under strain but which has not disappeared altogether. At no stage in Afghan history has any ruler or group not chafed at foreign dependence howsoever necessary it may have been. They have always looked to alternatives. Taliban signals on India to Pakistan should be taken in this context.

Besides, the Taliban are not immune from regional and tribal cleavages. This is not to underrate the difficulties in India’s path in Afghanistan but it would be a profound mistake to consider that there is no space for India to operate in Afghanistan; the Taliban public statements are themselves indicating that it does; Muttaqi has publicly said that India-Afghan trade via Wagah should be allowed by Pakistan.

Expressing concern for the “deteriorating socio-economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan” the Delhi Declaration called for “urgent humanitarian assistance” to the Afghan people. It al-

so did well to emphasise that humanitarian assistance should be provided in an “unimpeded, direct and assured manner to Afghanistan”. This is directly relevant for India wishes to send 50,000 tonnes of wheat for the Afghan people overland via Pakistan. Obviously, the Taliban have welcomed the Indian offer and asked Pakistan to agree. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan told Muttaqi that he will “favourably” consider the Taliban’s request. At this stage, India should be bold and enhance its offer to one million metric tonnes of wheat; that is what it pledged in 2002 at the Tokyo Afghanistan conference. It should also publicly declare, if needed, that it would hand the wheat over to the World Food Programme at the Wagah border. If Pakistan obstructs the additional offer, let it explain its negativity to the Afghan people.

### On China

It is not only Pakistan that India will need to confront in Afghanistan but also China. The Chinese have always maintained contacts with the Taliban and their strategic and economic interests have and will continue to make them adopt pragmatic policies. Indian economic interests also demand its presence in Afghanistan. There is no time to lose for this purpose. A heavy and long-term price will have to be paid otherwise. In all this process India must remain grounded in reality but that seems absent in some Indian analysts who believe that it is a Eurasian power too. That should be the objective. But is it so today when it does not have connectivity to the region and is reluctant to play the Afghan game where it matters – the mountains and valleys of the Hindukush?

Vivek Katju is a retired member of the Indian Foreign Service

# Learning from the best in India’s COVID-19 fight

Innovative interventions have helped communities across the country change the course of the pandemic response



PURNIMA MENON & MADHUKAR PAI

A few months ago, as the country reeled under the impact of the second wave of COVID-19, officials deep inside Madhya Pradesh’s tribal districts had to contend with an additional crisis: vaccinating a people firmly resistant to any coronavirus vaccines.

### A transformation

It was April 15, 2021, and less than 10% of the eligible population had been vaccinated in Jhabua, the district in Madhya Pradesh, per government figures, with one of the highest percentages of Scheduled Tribes population in India (<https://bit.ly/3Cez2Lk>). It was then that district officials decided to leverage tradition in their efforts to convey the message of timely vaccination. They started by organising *khatla baihaks* (*khat* means “woven bed,” and *baihak* means “meeting”), or community meetings, to dispel vaccine myths.

By July, Jhabua saw a five-fold increase in vaccination uptake, with approximately 40% of eligible people in the district having received at least one dose. In fact, as members from the department of Women and Child Development handed out turmeric-smeared rice to rural houses as a traditional means of welcoming people to vaccination programmes across the district, vaccination drives across the district saw a discernible uptick.

An easy interpretation of this in-

tervention might make it seem that Jhabua district is an outlier in the larger narrative of COVID-19 containment strategies. However, the data has made us see that, quite simply, it is not. Like Jhabua, there are multiple districts and regions where individuals and groups, from both government and civil society, have stepped in to ensure that impact of COVID-19 was mitigated in any and every way possible – even if that meant the use of rice or *khatla baihaks*. But just as it is easy for such stories to dissolve in the predominant din of the news cycle, it is also easy to see why our journey over the last several months began.

### Space for initiatives

In April and May 2021, when the nation was going through the peak of a crippling second wave, a small group of us – that soon grew to over 500 people – came together to form India COVID SOS. We realised that there existed a wide spectrum of people who had made it their mission to help society steer to safer shores in this pandemic: medical professionals who, despite the volume of patients, were managing COVID-19 in an evidence-informed, pragmatic way; teams vaccinating entire villages once overwhelmed by hesitancy; workers ensuring even the remotest areas had adequate oxygen supply, etc. These efforts needed to be foregrounded, and a space was essential to document learnings from such successful initiatives.

Subsequently, together with Exemplars in Global Health, our research led to the development of case studies from India; now publicly available, these case studies highlight interventions and innovations that drove meaningful outcomes in the pandemic response



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across India.

We confirmed that the story of Jhabua was not one of exception. As our case studies show, there are other commendable endeavours as well. For instance, in February 2021, when India’s vaccination drive was initiated, health-care workers in Janefal, a rural hamlet with just over 500 residents in Maharashtra’s Aurangabad district had a difficult time convincing people to get vaccinated. Some had heard stories from neighbouring villages about people dying after vaccination. Others believed that people who were vaccinated had to amputate their arms.

To build trust and confidence, village heads and other front line workers set an example by getting vaccinated first. They had their photos taken while getting the vaccine, and later, to address apprehensions, spent time painting gram panchayat buildings. A task force was also set up. It comprised health workers, police officers and village council leaders who discovered villagers had an unprecedented fear of hospitals and were terrified doctors would kill them and rob them of their kidneys if they went in for treatment. With the nearest vaccination centre being eight kilometres away, the task force overcame both challenges by conducting a vaccination camp in the village, taking the vaccines to the people. They also did this on

April 27, Hanuman Jayanti – an auspicious day for the locals. It was an insightful and clever way to leverage the occasion for the right cause.

### In Tamil Nadu and Bihar

In Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, the district administration in collaboration with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) addressed vaccine hesitancy effectively, too. The NGOs enlisted the help of community members to write songs in tribal languages to share the benefits of getting vaccinated. The district administration also recorded statements from village leaders in their own languages, regarding the vaccine’s effectiveness, and broadcast those messages throughout the district’s different villages. This helped villagers engender trust, and soon, vaccination rates there went up, too.

In East Champaran, Bihar, district officials remarkably achieved 95% COVID-19 vaccination of adults in the Bankatwa block in just two days using what has been dubbed the “Bankatwa Way”. Bankatwa block historically had low routine immunisation coverage of just 64.3% due to challenges of difficult terrain, poor health infrastructure and vaccine hesitancy in the community, among others. To tackle this, the district adopted a mission mode approach. This was a concentrated effort of all government departments in collaboration with World Health Organization, civil society organisations, local elected leaders, and religious leaders to mobilise all eligible people in the district for COVID-19 vaccination. In just 48 hours, over 55,000 of the block’s 62,000 registered inhabitants were vaccinated by setting up vaccination sites in each of the area’s 102 villages and hamlets. The effort had a knock-on

### Work in progress

Like these stories, there are many such novel, inspirational efforts that can be found in the case studies we have helped to collate (<https://bit.ly/2VJ6VpG> and <https://bit.ly/3c8VECj>). Our idea has always been to capture a broad canvas of learnings that could inform policy at the highest level, through critical vignettes showing what is working best (or not). But we are just getting started. It is essential that we keep working toward expanding the scope of our case studies, making them a reservoir of accurate information and inspiration. If we can effectively share and disseminate learnings and highlight the best interventions from across different domestic geographies, we can take a step towards being better equipped to tackle health crises in the future.

(India COVID SOS is an international non-profit volunteer group of scientists, clinicians, engineers, policy-makers, community organisers, and industrial partners. Exemplars in Global Health brings together researchers, funders, and collaborators around the globe with the mission of identifying countries that are positive outliers in global health. Their analyses of best practices strive to be a template that can be potentially replicated by others at a country/regional level.)

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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.

### Internal security

The ambush of an Assam Rifles officer, his family and his staff is shocking. The incident leads to questions being asked and one only hopes that intelligence gathering is improved. That the naxals are on the backfoot is evident and there could be a possibility of surrenders. However, this should be a moment for sober thought. Violence in any form is not a solution and there must be other ways to make the naxals see

reason. Internal security is in need of out-of-the-box thinking (Page 1, November 14).

BALASUBRAMANIAM PAVANI, Secunderabad

### Afghan ties

It is sad to see India being relegated to near marginal player status in the unfolding situation in Afghanistan, despite its long historical ties with that country. The Ministry of External Affairs would appear to have failed in

anticipating the quick developments that followed the Joe Biden administration’s decision to recall forces from Afghanistan. One does not know whether India was kept in the loop by the Americans, but the end result is that the Pakistanis are in the driver’s seat all over again. This despite the considerable resources we have poured into that country to rebuild its economy and infrastructure. One is

tempted to conclude that there is a need for a rethink in our policy-making.

M.P. MURALIDHARAN, Bengaluru

### Air pollution control

The judicial suggestion of a two-day lockdown in Delhi (November 14) as a result of rising air pollution may not be a durable panacea. This move is bound to hit the livelihood of daily wagers. In the past, progressive steps have been taken such as CNG fuelled public

transport and peripheral highways for heavy traffic, thus restricting their entry into national capital, but a burgeoning population has offset these gains. The root cause is lop-sided development. If Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities are given earnest priority, it could mitigate pollution levels.

DEEPAK SINGHAL, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

### This year’s ‘Lit For Life’

The two-day prestigious event, ‘Lit for Life 2021’,

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was a treasure trove as far as avid readers of *The Hindu* like me are concerned. It was a treat to listen to some of the best minds with insights into language, history, politics and even the science of viruses. The annual programme is definitely a welcome outreach readership engagement event. G. RAMASUBRAMANYAM, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh