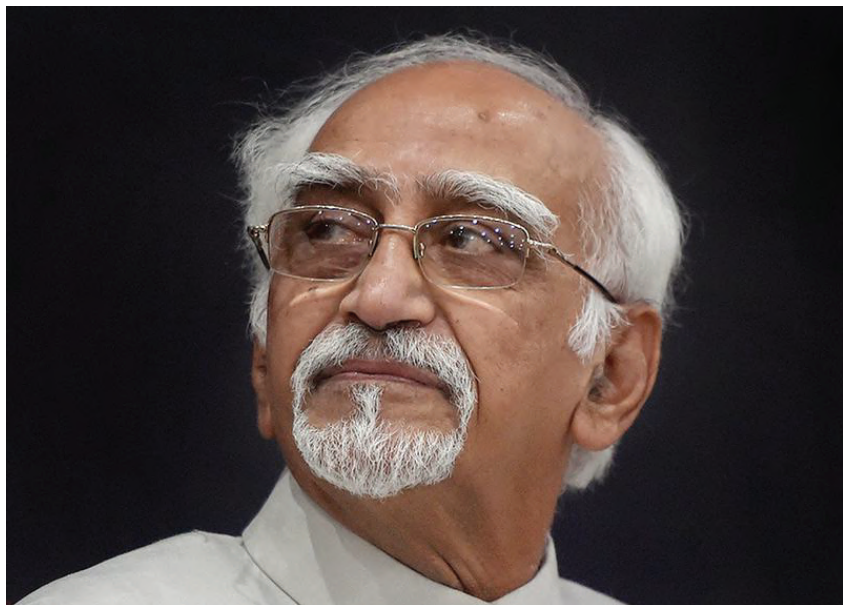




## DIPLOMACY, WITH A CHANGE IN TERMS OF REFERENCE



*Hamid Ansari was the Vice President of India (2007-2017)*

Mediation is rarely a spontaneous act; more often than not it is preceded by quiet efforts to seek a meeting point between differing viewpoints of individuals or organisations. It figures in Article 33 of the United Nations Charter among means of 'Pacific Settlement of Disputes'. but in legal terms is different from Good Offices and Arbitration.

A good instance of this was recently witnessed on the global stage. The question of motivation can be debated.

In a joint statement on March 10, 2023, by Iran, Saudi Arabia, and China (sitting at a table in the shape of an isosceles triangle), the three countries announced that an agreement has been reached between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran covering a resumption of diplomatic relations between them and a re-opening of their embassies and missions within a period not exceeding two months. The agreement affirmed their respect for the sovereignty of states, non-interference in the internal affairs of states and said the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both countries shall meet to implement this, arrange for the return of their Ambassadors, and discuss means of enhancing bilateral relations.

Iranian National Security Adviser Ali Shamkhani (who is seen in the official photograph of the ceremony) is from the Office of the Supreme Leader in Iran and lends credibility to the accord.

A commentary in an Iranian newspaper on March 11 depicted the event as 'One agreement and seven achievements'; it listed the latter as Tehran's willingness to engage in dialogue; failure of U.S.'s effort to isolate Iran; strengthening of the alliance of Islamic Countries; failure of Israeli efforts against this agreement; failure of U.S. effort to show the Iranian public that it has no choice but to agree to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with America; Beijing's successful entry in West Asian relations, and failure of dreams of 'regime change'.

### American and Israeli reactions

Later that month — and writing with a good deal of caution — a Chinese academic observed in the Global Times that 'China's diplomacy as a major power is just getting started' and may even result in some marked changes in the regional situation.

U.S. reactions, apart from unconcealed surprise, reflected the change in terms of reference in international diplomacy. Equally surprised was Israel, the other major player in the region, which saw it as a fatal blow to the effort to

build a regional coalition against Iran. One commentator said 'China brought Saudi Arabia together with Iran at a time when Israel had hoped that the United States would bring it together with Saudi Arabia'. Henry Kissinger told David Ignatius of The Washington Post that 'I see it as a substantial change in the strategic situation in the Middle East. The Saudis are now balancing their security by playing off the U.S. against China.'

Aaron Miller, who served for long as a State Department adviser on Middle East, said the development 'demonstrates that [the] U.S.'s influence and credibility in the region has [have] diminished and a new sort of international regional alignment is taking place which has empowered and given both Russia and China newfound influence and status'.

### The background

The backdrop to the event is noteworthy. Bilateral efforts have been underway since early 2016 to ease tensions that had developed specifically between Tehran, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and generally within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in relation to Yemen and Syria. The Emir of Kuwait and the Sultan of Oman initiated steps that were responded to by Iran. Talks were also held in Baghdad and during Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to China in February. All concerned were worried about the attacks on shipping and energy facilities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates and the longer term implications of the regional conflicts that were underway. These together 'brought home the risks of being on the front line of confrontation'.

The official visit by China's President Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia in December 2022, also saw him attending the first China-Arab States Summit and the China-GCC Summit. The theme of his address was 'Building on Past Achievements and Jointly Creating a Brighter Future of China-GCC Relations'. China and the GCC, he stressed, should be partners for common security: China will continue to firmly support GCC countries in safeguarding their security, and support the efforts by countries of the region to resolve differences through dialogue and consultations and to build a gulf security architecture. China, he said, 'welcomes the participation of GCC countries in the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in a joint effort to uphold regional peace and stability'.

The speech laid stress on five priority areas: 'energy cooperation'; 'finance and investment cooperation'; 'innovation, science and technology'; 'aerospace cooperation' and 'Chinese language and cultural cooperation'. An Action Plan for 2023-2027 was agreed upon. A comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement with specific agreements and some memoranda of understanding were also signed. It said the two supported 'each other's core interests'. The Chinese side 'commended the efforts made' by the Kingdom to serve Chinese Haj and Umrah pilgrims. The statement stressed the importance of deepening joint cooperation with regard to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and on attracting Chinese expertise in Saudi megaprojects. The two sides signed 'a harmonizing plan' between the KSA's Vision 2030 and the BRI. It is reported that a China-GCC summit in Beijing is being scheduled.

### The Indian stand

India's reaction to this development has been restrained. Apart from historical linkages, the region is in India's proximate neighbourhood and within its security parameters. It is the principal source of hydrocarbon imports, and increasingly of investments. It is also an important destination for manpower exports apart from being a major trading partner including projects. The official policy has focused on bilateral relations and avoidance of involvement in bilateral and regional disputes. Given these priorities, India has consciously refrained from speculative ventures in alternate security architectures apart from supporting cooperative security and freedom of waterways and of navigation. The region should not be viewed in competition with China without the latter's economic and military capacity nor should India consider itself a surrogate for those who have been outplayed, at least for the moment, in power games for transitory affections.



## G-7 MINISTERS COMMIT TO WORK FOR CARBON-FREE ELECTRICITY BY 2035

Climate and Energy Ministers and envoys from G-7 countries on Sunday committed to work towards ensuring carbon-free electricity production by 2035 and "accelerating" the phase-out of coal. This was part of an agreement by the countries at the end of a two-day conference in Sapporo, Japan, ahead of the G-7 summit in Hiroshima this May.

A proposal to have a 2030 deadline for phasing out coal was shot down as the final text gives leeway for continued investment in gas, on the grounds that it could be a stopgap against energy shortfalls, Reuters reported.

Environment Minister Bhupendra Yadav had also participated in the summit with India being invited as a 'guest', in the context of its presidency of the G-20. At the United Nations-Conference of Parties (COP) meeting in Glasgow in 2021, India had objected to language in the agreement to "phase out" and pushed instead for a "phase down" of coal. At the COP meeting in Sharm el Sheikh last year, India pushed for a proposal to phase out all fossil fuel sources, including coal and gas. India and China are significantly dependent on coal for electricity, whereas several developed countries, including the United States, Japan, Canada and Europe, are reliant on gas reserves. The latter however did not find mention in the final text of the Sharm el Sheikh agreement.

The participants on Sunday also agreed to accelerating solar and wind energy investments to produce 1,000 gigawatt (GW) by 2030 from solar power and 150 GW of wind power from off-shore platforms. This, they said, would be in line with recent reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that repeat the need to ensure that global temperatures not increase by more than 1.5 degrees Celsius of pre-industrial levels by the end of the century. "We reaffirm that fossil fuel subsidies are inconsistent with the goals of the Paris Agreement. Phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies is a key component of delivering on... the Paris Agreement. We reaffirm our commitment to the elimination of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies by 2025," the text of the final agreement noted. "We highlight that we ended new direct government support for unabated international thermal coal power generation by the end of 2021 and public support for the international unabated fossil fuel energy sector in 2022, except in limited circumstances clearly defined by each country consistent with a 1.5 degrees Celsius warming limit and the goals of the Paris Agreement. We will each provide an update on our approach to implementation by the end of 2023."

### 'Need assistance'

Mr. Yadav, in his remarks on Saturday, had said that developing



The participants on Sunday also agreed to accelerating solar and wind energy investments to produce 1,000 GW by 2030. REUTERS

*On final day of conference in Sapporo, proposal to have a deadline for phasing out coal gets shot down as final text gives leeway for investment in gas as a stopgap arrangement; participants also agree to speed up clean energy investments*

countries too needed finance, technology and assistance from developed countries for transitioning away from fossil fuels. Reaching targets on carbon neutrality and increased ambition "will not fly" unless they were made keeping principles of equity and climate justice at their centre, he added.

Madhura Joshi, senior associate, E3G, a climate change think-tank, said: "I hoped for stronger and bolder action from the G-7. They need to step up their climate commitments and demonstrate them in practice. However, despite mixed messages, they have emphasised the role of clean energy in strengthening energy security and pledged to phase out unabated fossil fuels."

## 61 DEAD AFTER CLASHES BETWEEN SUDAN ARMY AND RIVALS ENTER SECOND DAY



*Battle of Generals: Smoke billows above residential buildings in Khartoum on Sunday as fighting continued in Sudan. AFP*

*More than 670 injured in the battle born out of a power struggle between the commander of the armed forces and the head of the Rapid Support Forces; both groups had agreed to a three-hour humanitarian pause in fighting on Sunday*

The Sudanese military and a powerful paramilitary group battled for control of the chaos-stricken nation for a second day on Sunday, signalling they were unwilling to end hostilities despite mounting diplomatic pressure to cease fire.

Heavy fighting involving armoured vehicles, truck-mounted machine guns and war-planes raged on Sunday in the capital of Khartoum, the adjoining city of Omdurman and in flashpoints across the country. The rival forces are believed to have tens of thousands of fighters each in the capital alone. At least five civilians were killed and 78 wounded on Sunday, bringing the two-day toll to 61 dead and more than 670 wounded, said the Sudan Doctors' Syndicate. The group said it believes there were dozens of additional deaths among the rival forces.

The clashes are part of a power struggle between Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan, the commander of the armed forces, and Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, the head of the Rapid Support Forces group. The two Generals are former allies who jointly orchestrated an October 2021 military coup that derailed Sudan's short-lived transition to democracy.

### Growing tensions

In recent months, internationally backed negotiations revived hopes for such a transition, but growing tensions between Gen. Burhan and Gen. Dagalo eventually delayed a deal with political parties.

Volker Perthes, the UN envoy for Sudan, announced that both Gen. Burhan and Gen. Dagalo agreed to a three-hour humanitarian pause in fighting on Sunday.

An hour after the pause was meant to have started in the late



afternoon, regular exchanges of guns and heavy weapons firing could still be heard in parts of central Khartoum, even intensifying in some areas. The clashes come as most Sudanese are preparing to celebrate the major holiday that marks the end of the holy month of Ramzan, when Muslims traditionally fast from sunrise to sunset.

On Sunday, the World Food Programme said it temporarily suspended operations in Sudan after three agency employees were killed in clashes the previous day and an aircraft used by the WFP was damaged.

## LULA MOOTS JOINT TALKS WITH CHINA, UAE ON RUSSIA WAR



*Whirlwind visit: Lula, left, with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan during an official reception in Abu Dhabi. AFP*

Brazil's President on Sunday said he discussed joint mediation for Russia's war in Ukraine with China and the United Arab Emirates, accusing the U.S. and Europe of prolonging the conflict.

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who was wrapping up an official visit to China and the UAE after returning for a third term in office, said the two countries and others should join a "political G-20" to try to end the war. The veteran leftist also remarked that the war was caused "by decisions made by two countries".

"President Putin doesn't take any initiatives to stop the war. (President Volodymyr) Zelensky from Ukraine doesn't take any initiatives to stop the war," Mr. Lula, speaking through an official translator, told reporters in Abu Dhabi.

**'That's enough'**

"Europe and the U.S. continue to give their way of contribution to continue the war. So they have to sit around the table and say, 'That's enough'." He also lashed out at the dollar's dominance in global trade, calling for a new currency for transactions between the BRICS countries — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

The 77-year-old said he spoke to UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and Chinese President Xi Jinping, about forming a group of countries to mediate, styled after the G-20 group of advanced economies.

## ON DEMOCRATISING TIGER CONSERVATION

"It is like a big safari park," a Russian scientist working on Siberian tigers whispered conspiratorially to us after his first visit to the Ranthambore National Park in 1996. From his point of view, the Russian far-east was "real" wilderness. To him, all our National Parks and Tiger Reserves were little more than glorified zoos or safari parks. But is this necessarily the reality of conservation in a country with 1.4 billion people? A country that still boasts of having a remarkable conservation history, with robust populations of large carnivores such as tigers and leopards, the only populations of the Asiatic lion and greater one-horned rhinoceros, and the largest population of Asian elephants.

Much of the success of wildlife conservation in India has been attributed to the Wild Life (Protection) Act (WLPA), enacted 50 years ago by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to arrest the alarming decline of wildlife across the country. But as we celebrate 50 years of the Act, and of the marquee Project Tiger that helped bring back our national animal from the brink of extinction, we also need to reflect on what needs to change with respect to conservation practices in India, so that we can preserve these wins and plan ahead for challenges in the next 50 years.

### "Conservation amnesia"

The tiger number released, on April 11, 2023, by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is the minimum estimate based on the tigers photographed during the survey. The final numbers will come in the next few months; authorities have indicated a 6% annual growth rate, so the expected number would be approximately 25-30% above the previous 2018-2019 estimate of 2,967 tigers. Fifty years ago, India's alarming revelation that tiger numbers had dropped below 3,000 shocked the world. India reacted by banning hunting and drafting one of the world's strongest legal frameworks to protect its natural heritage. Fifty years later, more or less the same number is now met with celebration.

In science, this syndrome of shifting baselines is known as "conservation amnesia". By mentioning only the figure of 1,400+ estimated in 2006, wildlife managers are able to celebrate the doubling of the tiger population. However, if one looks at the long 50 years of tiger conservation under Project Tiger, we will see that while we have held onto the population, the numbers do not reflect a great success despite political support, funds, and a strong legal framework.

Then again, just numbers do not paint the full picture. Many scientists, while not impressed by the figures, were happy that Project Tiger was able to hold on to tiger populations in most of the geographical regions where they existed at its inception. However, in the 2023 preliminary report, for the first time,



*Need to do more: An Indian tiger and its young cubs in Ranthambore national park in Rajasthan, India in 2018. File Photo*

*Many scientists were happy that Project Tiger at fifty years was able to hold on to tiger populations in most of the geographical regions where they existed at its inception. However, in the 2023 preliminary report, for the first time, we find that this hold is slipping away*

we find that this hold is slipping away. We are now losing tigers from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, the Eastern ghats and from the Northeastern forests. With it, we lose genetic diversity unique to these geographical regions, dashing hopes of maintaining long-term population viability and natural recovery. A tool that is increasingly being used to thwart this reduction is to reintroduce tigers from central Indian forests, where the populations are thriving, as was done for the Panna and Sariska Tiger Reserves. However, if this is done too often, re-introduction will homogenise tiger genetic structure across the country. This needs to be looked at more seriously, and future reintroductions need to be planned in a way that can maintain as much genetic diversity as possible.

### An umbrella that shades too much

The tiger was considered an "umbrella species". Saving the tiger meant saving the entire ecosystem. Tigers in India occur in a wide range of habitat types, from the evergreen forests of the Western Ghats to the Terai grasslands of the Himalayan foothills; from the tropical dry forests of Rajasthan to the mangroves of the Sundarbans. Given the inherent differences in such habitat types, it is inevitable that not all of them will support similar densities of tigers. Habitats that boast the highest tiger numbers are typically those with a high prey abundance. Therefore, the idea was to save species across all ecosystems using the tiger as an 'umbrella'. But in the absence of proper scientific oversight, the

focus stayed on boosting tiger numbers rather than their habitat and concomitant species. The most common interventions were to manipulate ecosystems so that they could support high densities of the tiger's principal prey species. In most cases, this involved improving habitat for the cheetal, a mixed feeder that thrives in the 'ecotone' (a transition area between two biological communities) between forests and grasslands. It also required provisioning water. This has resulted in the "cheetalification" of tiger reserves. For example, in the Kanha Tiger Reserve, the explosion in the cheetal population resulted in the habitat becoming unsuitable for the endangered hard ground barasingha, which depends on tall grass. Managers then had to create enclosures free of cheetal so that the barasingha could reproduce and their numbers recover.

In other parks, the excessive provisioning of water during the dry season led to reduced natural, climate driven variations in populations of wildlife. This is likely to have unknown and unintended consequences for these habitats in the long-term.

#### On decentralising conservation

Conservation in India depends entirely on a network of Protected Areas (PAs). This is an exclusive conservation model and suffers from a "sarkaar" complex. This is ironic because the innate tolerance of Indians for wildlife is generally credited with the success of conservation. However, ordinary Indians, especially those who live closest to wildlife, and who often pay the price for it, have very little say in conservation.

The WLPA is a restrictive law. It describes in great detail what you can't do. However, the law and associated policies have done very little to enable conservation. That is, there is no policy framework and incentive for

ordinary citizens to aid in conservation — be it for tigers or for any other species. As a result, conservation has not reached beyond these PAs. In other countries, natural lands are owned or managed by individuals, communities, farmers, ranchers, corporates, charities, and the government. Each one of them is incentivised to conserve these lands according to their interests. As a result, several conservation models operate simultaneously. But in India, all natural habitats are managed by one agency and therefore the approach to conservation is singular, and exclusive.

We need to have frameworks that allow local communities, citizens, scientists, non-governmental organisations, and businesses to participate meaningfully in conservation. For example, large tracts of forest land are "Reserved Forests" under the jurisdiction of the "territorial" wing of State Forest Departments. Such areas can be co-managed with an inclusive approach which also provides economic benefits for local communities. Indeed, in many landscapes, degraded agricultural lands adjoining these forest areas can be restored to enhance connectivity between PAs, and further afield forest patches can act as "stepping stone" reserves for tigers and other large mammal movements in our increasingly human-modified environment.

We are now in the fifth four-year cycle of tiger-population monitoring. Yet we lack a vision document that examines these figures critically and provides a way forward for the next 20 years. We are in a race against time to prevent further fragmentation and degradation of existing natural habitats. Only by extending the reach of conservation beyond our present PA system and empowering local communities and ordinary citizens to meaningfully participate in conservation can we hope to achieve an actual doubling of tigers and other embattled wildlife.

## MURDER OF LAW, ORDER

#### *There must be an independent inquiry into the Atiq Ahmed case*

In life and in death, former lawmaker Atiq Ahmed typified the collapse of the rule of law in Uttar Pradesh. The visuals of both him and his brother Khalid Azim being shot dead in cold blood, on Saturday, while they were handcuffed and in police custody, show the abject lawlessness that prevails in the State. Early in March, Ahmed had approached the Supreme Court of India expressing fear that he might be "killed in a fake encounter on one pretext or the other by the U.P. Police". The Court refused to entertain his plea. His son, Asad Ahmad, was killed in an alleged encounter with a U.P. police team on Thursday in Jhansi. Father and son were both accused in the sensational daylight murder of a political rival in February. Ahmed, the former leader of the Samajwadi Party and Apna Dal opened his history sheet at the age of 17 and had more than 100 criminal cases at the time of his murder at the age of 60. Far from facing the force of law, he reigned supreme as a don-cum-politician through various regimes in U.P. since the 1990s. Even when he went to jail, his empire of crime did not collapse. He was shifted to a prison in Gujarat in 2019, and on his return to U.P., was facing fresh charges of murder which ended with his own killing in the most chilling manner.

According to the U.P. police, 183 alleged criminals have been gunned down in encounters in the last six years. More than 10,900 police encounters have taken place since March 2017. Due process is central to any rule of law, and once that is allowed to be short-circuited, the result is chaos. The U.P. police and administration have stretched the limits of its legitimate power by the dubious and discriminatory application of law and processes. The demolition of properties of people suspected of crime or participating in political protest has become routine. It appears that this practice is popular among the supporters of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, and that makes this trend not merely lawlessness but also a social pathology. Several political parties have sought accountability in the double murder that took place under the watch of the U.P. police. The State has announced a three-member commission headed by a former High Court judge to inquire into the lapses. Considering the serious charges that the State government and its police face of discrimination based on religion and caste, and scant regard for due process, an inquiry of a demonstrably independent nature is required.

## NOT A WHISTLE-BLOWER

#### *The 2023 Pentagon leaks have fuelled insecurity between the U.S. and its allies*

U.S. federal authorities have arrested Jack Teixeira, 21, a member of the Air National Guard, in the case of classified information of the Pentagon that was leaked on social media in recent months, which analysts say has exposed sensitive data regarding the war efforts in Ukraine, potentially undermining Kyiv's plans to push back the Russian invasion. The top-secret files that were first leaked on social media websites Discord and 4chan in March this year also caused a flutter for the Joe Biden administration when it revealed confidential and unflattering information about U.S. allies, including South Korea, Israel, and other nations of West Asia and Africa, and assessments of China's developing cyber-attack capabilities. Potentially most damaging, though, were the leaker's posts, which, reports said, genuinely contained classified information of the U.S. military, on Ukraine's air defences being compromised owing to a shortage of missiles in February. Also possibly undermining the tactical plans and the element of surprise for Ukrainian forces were files that spoke of the embattled country's long-planned spring counter offensive to beat back Russian forces starting on April 30 with 12 Ukrainian brigades. While no explicit propagandistic post of the leaker has been revealed yet, it is obvious that the dots join to paint a clear picture of Mr. Teixeira's intention to discredit the war effort of Ukraine and its western allies and show up the Biden administration in a bad light

amongst its global partners.

One thing is clear: Mr. Teixeira is no whistle-blower and, certainly, comparisons to Chelsea Manning or Edward Snowden would be misplaced. The latest leak of U.S. federal government information lacks the moral clarity and ethical underpinning of the WikiLeaks files and the NSA global surveillance exposé that Ms. Manning and Mr. Snowden respectively shared with the world in a bid to highlight the excesses of the U.S. government and spur conversations on human rights, foreign policy and privacy in the digital age. Whistle-blowing in the latter contexts led to introspection, policy dialogue and reforms to bring about greater transparency in U.S. government actions, within limits. The 2023 Pentagon leaks have, contrarily, achieved nothing of this sort but fuelled insecurity between the U.S. and other global powers, and potentially hobbled the war strategies of the Ukrainian armed forces in their bid to fight off Russian troops attacking their country. Mr. Teixeira has, appropriately, been charged for the leaks under the U.S. Espionage Act. The critical next step for the Biden White House is now to examine how and why he got top security clearance to handle classified information, and take steps to further secure and limit the distribution of sensitive information whose release could seriously undermine U.S. national security interests.



# THE PAST CANNOT BE UNDONE THROUGH A RECHRISTENING

We are living in the Dark Age of Islamophobia. Full stop. Naked, ugly, disconcerting. A sad testimony to the moral squalor of our times. Events across the world compelled the United Nations, in 2022, to declare March 15 as International Day to Combat Islamophobia, to take "concrete action in the face of rising hatred, discrimination, and violence against Muslims".

The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, affirmed that the move is "a call for action to stamp out anti-Muslim hatred". India, with arguably the second largest Muslim population, opposed the move, saying "It is important that the United Nations remains above such religious matters which may seek to divide us rather than bring us together on one platform of peace and harmony and treat the World as One Family". In reality, India, more than many countries, is in the throes of Islamophobia.

It is not about a spate of lynchings anymore, from Dadri in 2015 to Delhi in 2023. Or the frequent attacks on mosques and even dargahs, hitherto considered the common place of worship for people across religions. Or even hijab politics, where pro- and anti-hijab groups are vociferously ranged against one another. It manifests itself most clearly in this urgent, almost desperate, bid to rename places built by Sultanate and Mughal rulers.

While some towns may have a direct relation to the name of the king or Sultan, in many cases the names of cities are either being changed or there is a demand that they be changed, solely because they are in Urdu. This is ironic, considering that Urdu was born in India. And till not long ago, it was not considered the language of adherents of a particular faith. A case in point is Faizabad which was built by Nawab Saadat Ali Khan in the 18th Century. It was located on a busy trade route, connecting east and central Awadh. Here, business flourished and people made a lot of profit — hence the word faiz or successful or victorious. Or, take the demand to rename Aligarh as Harigarh. Aligarh was so named after the Marathas, and not the Mughals, took over the fort here (called Sabitgarh and Muhammadgarh at various times) and renamed it after their governor, Najaf Ali Khan. It had even been called Kol. Never was it identified as Harigarh, a demand increasingly being made.

For hundreds of years, there was no issue with Allahabad or Aurangabad. Or Aligarh and Osmanabad. Or even Mughal Sarai. The common citizen still does not have a problem. Go to Allahabad which was renamed Prayagraj by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath a few years ago; people still refer to their city as Allahabad, except that the powers that be see everything through tinted glasses. It is immaterial that a city may have been built by a Sultan who saved the country from repeated assaults by the Mongols, or that a monument may have been built by a Mughal emperor who was born in undivided India, in Sindh or Gujarat, ruled from Agra or Delhi, and never set foot abroad (not even to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca). Just the name is sufficient to rouse the right-wing brigade.

## The cases of Mughalsarai and Aurangabad

In 2018, Mughalsarai was in focus. It was renamed not after the former Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, who was born there, but after the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ideologue Deendayal Upadhyaya who died there under mysterious circumstances, in 1968. The railway station was also painted in saffron shade, making it clear that the government was using the past to settle scores with the present, much like what had happened in Allahabad. The government forgot that the city Mughal emperor Akbar had founded was Ila Vas or Ila Bas or abode of god, and located adjacent to Prayag. The word Ila became Allah later during the British time — niceties lost on those driven by bigotry.

This year too the story played out again — in the keen desire to rename Aurangabad. Now, Aurangzeb, who lies buried in Aurangabad, has been a red rag for Hindutva practitioners, and many criticise him, with justification, for demolishing temples. But there are historians like Catherine B. Asher and Audrey Truschke who point out that the demolitions were almost always a political act, and there were plenty of occasions when the emperor issued firmans granting the safety and well being of Brahmins, even granting them land.

A government that is in a tearing hurry to erase any Muslim association with the city, promptly named it after Sambhaji, the eldest son of Shivaji who was at one time a Mughal mansabdar and later involved in a combat with fellow Maratha Rajaram to ascend the throne following Shivaji's death in 1680. Sambhaji was captured by the Mughals and executed in 1689 on Aurangzeb's order. The Aurangabad renaming (to Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar) is a peculiar instance where the name of the victor has been replaced with that of the loser.

## Hate and exclusion

All these attempts to tear up the pages of history books come with the potential to tear apart the warp and woof of Indian society.

Muslims in India may have treated the Mughals and Sultans with the same indifference or irreverence they reserved for, say the Mauryas, the Guptas or the Cholas. The oft-repeated expression those days was 'History is boring!' Now, it seems it is divisive. Today, they are often forced into an uncomfortable situation of having to take a position. As a Muslim, and sane citizen of this country, you may or may not endorse much of what the Sultanate or Mughal rulers did. But now they are being forced to resist a majoritarian triumphalism that is bent upon erasing every speck of Islamic influence. Clearly, the right-wing proponents are guilty of a craven subjugation to the politics of hate and exclusion. Islamophobia, anyone?

As a multi-religious society, it is important to remember that the past cannot be undone through a rechristening. It is wise to stay in the moment, appreciate who we are, and what we have achieved. Retribution does not pave the way to redemption.



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