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TRENDING

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WHY THE RISE OF TALIBAN IN AFGHANISTAN IS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD FOR PAKISTAN

BY SUSHAMEENDRA BALAJI



On September 1st, 2021, the United States completely withdrew its forces from Afghanistan paving way for the Taliban to come back to power after nearly twenty years. This is seen as a diplomatic victory for Pakistan as the previous democratically established government in Afghanistan was close to India. However, the rise of the Taliban may not be all good for Pakistan as they come with their share of threats and problems.

WHY PAKISTAN SUPPORTS TALIBAN DESPITE INTERNATIONAL CRITICISM

Firstly, a weak New Delhi in the region. A strong Indo-Afghan relationship may make Pakistan's conflict with India two frontal. This combination also poses a threat to the expensive China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in the region. Second, the hardline Islamic ideology Taliban brings with them. Pakistan's attempts to create a national identity on religious lines since its independence has not been very successful, one result of which is Bangladesh. Pakistan thinks that Taliban can do some amount of social engineering and completely integrate the tribes like Pashtuns in the country by making religious identity more important than ethnic identity.

TTP, PASHTUN NATIONALISM AND THE ROLE OF TALIBAN

Tehreek-I Taliban Pakistan, or TTP, is a militant Pashtun group which intends to overthrow the Pakistan Government using terrorism. It is infamously known for the Peshawar Army School terror attack of 2014. The Afghan Taliban denies any connection to the TTP and has assured that Afghanistan soil will not be used against Pakistan. However, they have released over two thousand TTP militants and their top commanders like Maulvi Faqir Mohammed from prisons in Kandahar and Bagram.

Pashtuns have a complicated relationship with the state of Pakistan. This community is well represented in all spheres of life in the country, yet it feels subordinate in the system which is fundamentally Punjabi. One noted Pashtun activist movement is the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). They have held demonstrations in various parts of the country accusing the Pakistani army of terrorising the Pashtun people in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. One of their slogans during a demonstration was "Ye jo Dehshat Gardi hai, iske peeche wardi hai", meaning that ones in uniform are behind terrorism. The Pakistani Taliban has openly supported the protests called by PTM.

Violent crackdown on these protestors by the Pakistani army (which is dominated by Punjabis), weakens the glue of a national identity based on religion and incites a sense of separatism.

To assume that the Pashtun identity is not very important to the Afghan Taliban may not be wise at this stage. The resistance movement, which is brewing in Panjshir, consists mainly of minorities like the Tajiks. Resistance leaders like Ahmad Shah Massoud and Amarullah Saleh are ethnic Tajiks. Effectively, it has now become Pashtun vs other tribes war in northern Afghanistan. Another interesting fact is that neither the established government nor the Taliban have accepted the international border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, also called the Durand Line. They believe in a common ideology of a Greater Afghanistan (sometimes also called Pashtunistan). This is a problem for Pakistan, because one of the four provinces of Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, is a Pashtun majority state. This unexpected resistance in Panjshir led by minorities may make Pashtun identity important to Afghan Taliban and may become a potential source of disagreement and conflict with Pakistan.

CONCLUSION

There is little evidence to suggest that the Afghan Taliban will play to the tunes of the ISI anymore, given that their mission of overthrowing the government and returning to power is now accomplished. Given how the Pakistan Taliban has been supportive to their Afghan counterparts, the latter may now want to reciprocate. The evidence to suggest this lies in the fact that the most-wanted militant by Pakistan was released as soon as Taliban captured power. Should there be a Pashtun identity crisis in Pakistan, we cannot take for granted that the Afghan Taliban shall remain silent or support Pakistan.

A REFLECTION ON THE POCSO ACT



BY NANDINI AGARWAL



INTRODUCTION

One of the most common forms of abuse faced by children in India is Sexual Abuse. 37% of the Indian population comprises children below the age of eighteen and 53% of these children are reported to have been sexually abused. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act ("POCSO Act") was implemented along with the establishment of special courts to deal with matters that fall within the ambit of the POCSO Act. Despite its intentions to prevent child sexual abuse, there are a few flaws in the legislative language as well as the implementation of the Act.

CASE REPORTING

There are many inconsistencies in the data provided by the NCRB. The state of West Bengal has identical data for 2 years, the number of cases for child marriage was as low as single digits for multiple years and there are zeros throughout the data, for example, West Bengal had zero rape cases in the years 2014 and 2018. All these issues are rather problematic as it does not provide us with a clear picture of what is happening, and it also shows that cases are either not being filed or accepted in the grassroots levels hence making it difficult to bring about change.

MALE REPRESENTATION

There is no space in the law for boys to be victims of sexual abuse. In cases where the adolescents have had consensual intercourse, it is often observed that the girl is considered to be a victim and the boy is considered to be the perpetrator. Although the POCSO Act is supposed to be gender-neutral, cases of sexual abuse towards boys are rarely reported. Studies show that more boys are sexually abused compared to girls. However, the social conditioning that boys are safe from such abuse, reduces the protection that they receive along with the ability to approach people with their trauma because the sexual abuse of male children is considered to be a myth-making it easier for the perpetrators to get away with it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The first recommendation would be the introduction of a Romeo-Juliet clause under which consensual sex between adolescents below the age of 18 with an age gap of a certain number of years is permitted. Such a clause would reduce the number of consensual cases that come within a reasonable age difference between the children. The Supreme Court of India has identified the gap in the law for cases of consensual intercourse between minors who are old enough to feel physical attraction or infatuation.

The second recommendation would be to teach the children and their parents about what constitutes sexual abuse along with what the POCSO Act stands for. This can help increase the number of cases filed and therefore reduce the atrocities and also prevent minors from running away to get married as they would be aware of the legal consequences. An increase in the sensitization of the police force as well as parents when it comes to these issues, along with providing them the tools to apply the appropriate sections of the Act, is necessary to make an impact on child sexual offenses. This Act will not be of any use unless the citizens of the country know how or when to implement it.

CONCLUSION

Despite being one of the most important statutes for the protection of children, there are some flaws in the implementation of the POCSO act. These flaws can be fixed and one of the best ways to bring change is to push for the education of adults and children alike about these provisions. Some provisions can be changed to be inclusive of consensual cases and to filter out those of disgruntled parents who disapprove of the relationship between the adolescents. Law is meant to be transformative, hence changing the POCSO act to fit the needs of the children in this society is crucial.

FROM FLOODS TO WILDFIRES – ARE WE AT TIPPING POINT?



BY SHREYA RAMCHANDRAN



The recent floods across Europe took the world by shock, as two months' worth of rainfall came pouring down on the countries in a span of a few days, resulting in the loss of life, property, and infrastructure, massive power outages and forced evacuations. In a statement to BBC news, Annemarie Mueller, a 65-year-old resident of Mayen, Germany said "Nobody was expecting this - where did all this rain come from? It's crazy. It made such a loud noise and given how fast it came down we thought it would break the door down." In the aftermath of the disaster, Annemarie Mueller was not the only one left in confusion over this sudden event. In an attempt to unearth reasons behind this sudden event, 39 scientists put together a study in the World Weather Attribution to understand the possible role that climate change and rising temperatures played in causing this sudden burst of rainfall and flooding. The scientists found that the amount of rainfall that falls within a day increased by 3 to 19% as a result of climate change. Further, rising temperatures also increased the likelihood of such events from 2 to 9 times more likely, as warmer atmospheres can hold more water at a time, leading to bursts of torrential rainfall and severe flooding. Thus, global warming and climate change has been seen as the major cause for the European floods.

WHAT DOES OUR FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

In order to assess the science related to climate change, as well as measure the impacts caused by it, a UN body called The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in 1988. They recently published a report titled "Climate Change 2021: the Physical Science Basis." The report stated that the world is already 1.2 degrees celsius warmer than the pre-industrial levels. The global warming level of warning is 1.5 degrees celsius, and is characterized by increasing heat waves, longer warm seasons and shorter cold seasons.

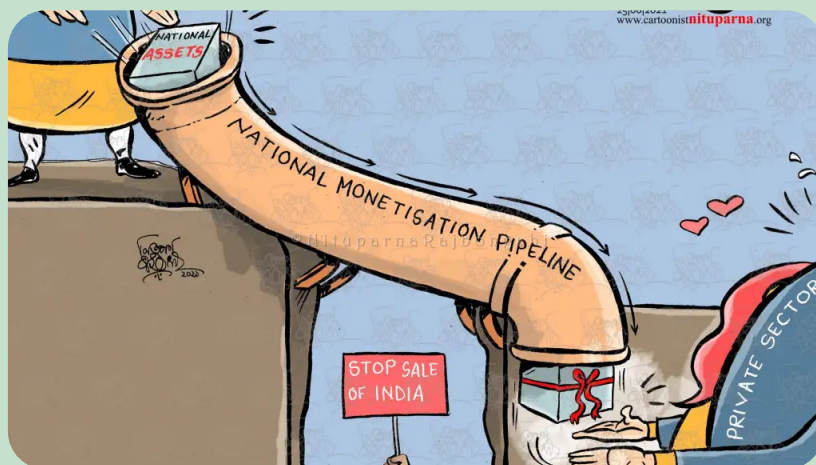
The floods experienced in Europe, is just one of the many extreme events that is likely to follow with climate change and global warming. Global ocean levels have risen about 20cm since the pre-industrial times, and the rate of increase has nearly tripled in the last decade. Further rise in sea levels is due to reduction in the area covered by sea ice, which in the Arctic has shrunk by about 40% since 1979. Apart from contributing to frequent flooding and soil erosion, affecting agriculture and infrastructure, it will also affect the homes of wildlife species, possibly leading to extinction. Climate change has resulted in an increase in the amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) present in the atmosphere, which has risen by 25% since 1958, and by about 40% since the Industrial Revolution. Oceans, which are important absorbers of CO₂, are also affected by climate change as increased water temperatures and higher CO₂ concentrations result in higher acidic levels of oceans. Forest fires caused by deforestation activities and the heating up and drying out of the rainforests caused by rising temperatures, have resulted in loss of trees and plantations, the other important absorbers of CO₂. In the first seven months of 2020, more than 13,000sq km (5,019sq miles) of the Brazilian Amazon was burned.

CONCLUSION

The recent flooding, followed by the reports published, is hopefully a wake-up call about the gravity of the situation we face. As Boris Johnson, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom mentioned, "We know what must be done to limit global warming—consign coal to history and shift to clean energy sources, protect nature and provide climate finance for countries on the frontline." We just need to start taking the right action, and commit to aggressively fighting climate change.

SITHARAMAN'S AMBITION: NATIONAL MONETISATION PIPELINE

BY HEMANG SHARMA SHARMA



On Monday, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman launched the Rs 6 lakh crore National Monetisation Pipeline. Under this, for the next four years, the government plans to lease out public brownfield infrastructure (Like Railways, Power, roads, etc) to private groups with aims to raise more capital and augment and maintain the existing infrastructure.

PLAN AMIDST THE COVID CRISIS

Since the second lockdown has been lifted, the NMP plan could aid in the economy's revival. Due to the lockdowns, private investments in the market fell by huge margins. By monetising brownfield, de-risked assets, the government is providing the private sector with low-risk investment opportunities. As most of the public assets have inelastic demand among consumers (like Railways), it acts as an incentive for private players to purchase the lease, as it would equip them with access to a huge consumer base. This would stimulate investment in infrastructure in the economy. It provides us with an opportunity for an annual increase of this figure by 2 to 3%. Though it might not appear huge, it can boost economic growth to double digits in the corresponding periods according to NITI Aayog's estimates.

OTHER BENEFITS

The plan helps in increasing the efficiency of the assets underutilized by the public sector. Previously, the government had no incentive to augment the infrastructure and improve its efficiency. However, once they are leased into the open market, there will be competition among private players to acquire the lease. And as they can only hold onto it for only four years, it would drive them to improve the efficiency, before the contract expires. In addition to this, the most important point that the finance minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, raised is regarding the monetisation of "rights" not "ownership". It means that at the end of the contract, the assets would be handed back to the government. This suggests that even after leasing assets into the open market, the lease would still be in the government's hands for it to monitor and intervene when (ideally before) the private player starts exploiting their consumers.

CHALLENGES

Any private firm will be only willing to enter the contract if they see a net profit over their investments. By making contracts too strict, the government will be increasing the opportunity cost for private firms. If the opportunity cost exceeds the potential benefits, it can discourage private players from purchasing the lease. If this situation arises, the pipeline will end up as a failed project. Hence while making the contract attractive enough for private investors, there is a high possibility that the government might have to make trade-offs with consumer welfare. This trade-off will result in inflation. With an increased level of investments and spending in the economy, the inflation rate is bound to increase. This will reflect in the leased-out assets as the price of their consumption will increase. Since some of these assets come under the basic necessity bracket (trains for transportation) if prices rise by even a small margin, it could have adverse effects, especially on the poor/working class.

IMPLICATIONS ON FUTURE

As of today, both the benefits and the challenges seem to weigh equally, making a conclusive statement premature. If the plan succeeds in increasing investment at the cost of consumer welfare, then the whole plan will be a failure. However, this doesn't imply that the challenges to the MNP cannot be dealt with. If the government faces inflation above their expectation, they can resort to contractionary monetary policies (like increasing interest rates) to bring it down. If the inflation is maintained within the set bracket, then the NMP can improve the living standards of the consumers in the nation as they will be able to enjoy a better quality of public infrastructure and services. Hence, after keeping all factors under consideration, the best we can do now is to trust our finance ministry to stick by their words.

GRAVES OF THE FACELESS MANUAL SCAVENGING AND THE OUTCASTE

BY BEHIND THE SCENES NGO



“Turn in any direction you like; caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster.”

– B.R. Ambedkar

According to the Indian Express, since 2017, one person has died every five days while cleaning sewers across the country, 62% higher than the previous year. 'Manual Scavenging' is defined as manually cleaning, carrying or disposing of human excreta in an open drain or sewer. A term mainly used in India; it is a strictly hereditary, caste-based form of forced labour that continues to exist despite being legally banned in 1993. It is the worst form of untouchability still highly prevalent in India. Shockingly, the number of manual scavengers has increased to about 1.5 million, 99% of them being Dalits ('lowest' caste) and 95% of them women. Thus, an additional heavy oppressive layer of patriarchy gets added to the existing casteist one, and makes them faceless 'pests' for the authorities. The hierarchy, even within the Dalit families, forces women to take up this job since it offers the lowest wages and is considered 'appropriate' for women.

Even after the recent Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 that prohibited employment of any person for manual scavenging and related hazardous activities without protective equipment, little has changed on ground. Even as our Constitution prohibits discrimination on any grounds, dignity of labour is a far-off ideal. Poonam Valmiki, a manual scavenger from UP stated that she earned 10 rupees a month for the tedious task that isn't enough to get her even a single bar of soap to wash her hands. Further, the public washrooms built under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan are only used by men. Thus, these poor women are not only unable to use the toilets due to safety concerns, but are expected to clean them as well.

The data around manual scavenging and its intersection with caste and gender-based discrimination is almost negligible. This is an easy way to stall improvement or change, for the working class. From the limited statistics available, it is clearly evident that Uttar Pradesh constitutes more than half of the manual scavengers working in the country and consequently, the highest number of deaths. This is due to the lack of agency Dalits and women have in the implementation of law and proper compensation as a source of remedy. Thus, in the process, they are dehumanized.

Almost every country on Earth, be it developing or developed, has found a way to ensure the dignity of labour by executing alternatives to manual scavenging. Swachh Bharat Abhiyan seems to have failed due to its ignorance of socio-economic dynamics among Indians. Despite a vast growing market of startups and businesses along with technological advancements becoming an everyday global phenomenon, there is an acute lack of focus on reimagining sewage treatment and sanitation. It is evident that when the state works for the well-being of its citizens, it leads to better functioning of the whole system in place, with equality and respect as central ideals. Hence, researchers, politicians, engineers and business-owners, i.e. people in power, need to diligently work on automated systems, redesigning septic tanks, jetting systems, robust sewage treatment plants, better waste disposal and a progressive mindset to fundamentally eradicate manual scavenging. But the entire system would collapse if the 'lower-caste' women and men who would lose work as a consequence of this change are made regular employees and provided with resources and monetary compensation. The prevalent view that a certain community is 'naturally' bound to work for the privileged needs to change.

Finally, through this article, I would like to point out that it is not enough to advocate for the dignity of labour. We must also think about why only some sections of society are forced to become labourers by birth or by circumstances of politics. They are not the voiceless, but those whose voices have been snatched away. Therefore, we must think about why some are considered an 'outcast, undeserving dirty menace' while the others advocate on their graves.





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