

WHEN STREET POWER TURNS ON ITSELF

The Cockroach Janta Party has recently launched a mission to carry out surprise checks on schools across India. So, teams of CJP top bosses, accompanied by their side-kicks, are randomly entering schools to expose and shame a derelict administration for not providing the amenities the children deserve. It’s a different matter that the CJP has thus far conducted its raids in BJP-run states. But we’ll come to that later.

Today, as they entered a village in Rajasthan, they were in for a shock. Villagers confronted the CJP team and stopped them from continuing with their school inspection. The confrontation escalated. The CJP team, led by one of its co-founders, Ashutosh Ranka, was allegedly attacked and had to beat a hasty retreat.

While violence in any form is unacceptable and it must be immediately condemned, there is a lesson to be drawn for the CJP and the ecosystem.

The CJP is an unelected organisation. It is not a recognised authority of the state, and its teams do not automatically have the right to enter schools, inspect them, or demand answers from people simply because they have decided to take up a cause.

Few will remember that a month ago the CJP and the attendant ecosystem were extolling the virtues of street power. In fact, Yogendra Yadav, one of the ecosystem’s leading lights, was rapturously declaring that the “future of democracy in India will be settled on the streets and not in parliament or through elections”. He was lustily referencing the CJP’s July 20 violent protest at Jantar Mantar.

India cannot be allowed to become a street-ocracy, a banana republic where acts of violence and anarchy dictate the shape of things to come. The street is certainly decisive but it is not as discerning, deliberative or as democratic as the Sansad. It can never be.

Unhealthy signs for health research

DINESH C SHARMA

THE Department of Health Research (DHR), a wing of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, has proposed a national health research policy. The department has been in existence for almost two decades, but it has woken up only now to the fact that India lacks a dedicated policy on health research.

As per the R&D data released in July, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), the flagship agency for health research in the country, receives just 3.3% of the national R&D funding, while defence and space get 32% and 15%, respectively. India’s expenditure on R&D itself is abysmally low — 0.84% of GDP compared to China’s 2.58%.

Among the obvious goals of the new health research policy is to increase the expenditure on biomedical and health R&D. The target is to increase health research investment as a share of GDP from the current 0.024% to 0.072% by 2037 and 0.15% by 2047. While it may appear to be a big jump, it is far too low compared to India’s current and projected disease burden as well as emerging health challenges. Moreover, the timelines for the proposed increase are too far away, targets are non-binding and without any budgetary support in the pipeline.

How the proposed increase will be achieved is more problematic. The policy says, “Public investment shall rise progressively, complemented by responsible private, philanthropic and non-governmental investment.” This formally opens the doors for private investment in health research.

The nature of private investment that the government wants to encourage should cause greater concern. The policy says that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) money from private companies will be allowed to be used for R&D projects in public institutions, and the DHR will formulate necessary policies to facilitate such funding. PublicHealth

The approach is different from existing public-private partnerships for drug or vaccine de-



velopment involving pharma companies and public institutions under specific projects such as the development of Covid-19 vaccines. If CSR funds are allowed from any company — be it pharma or otherwise — or a philanthropic organisation promoted by a company, it may lead to biased research or a hidden agenda like manufacturing “scientific doubt” in contentious topics like environmental health (impacts of air pollution, tobacco, alcohol), occupational health, food safety and climate change.

It is ironic that on the one hand, the government has stifled field research studies by some of the leading health NGOs and public health institutes in the name of foreign contribution regulations, and on the other hand, it is opening the doors for the industry and also foreign foundations to conduct health research. For domestic researchers, scientific collaboration with foreign researchers would still need a permit from a screening committee of the health ministry.

The whole approach seems to be to centralise and bureaucratisate health research at all levels. The policy talks of a National Health Research Agenda that will set the priorities at the

macro level and a three-tier governance architecture to implement the agenda. At the top would be the National Health Research Stewardship Committee to provide overarching strategic direction. It will be headed by the Principal Scientific Adviser and include several bureaucrats (secretaries of scientific departments) as members. At the second tier will be the DHR, acting as the central nodal implementing agency, and the third tier would be the ICMR, tasked with scientific and technical execution.

The proposed governance system undermines the role of states, ignoring the fact that public health is primarily a State subject and ‘Medical Education and Research’ is in the Concurrent list of the Constitution. By authorising the central stewardship committee to set the health research agenda, states will be reduced to mere implementers. “States and Union Territories will support alignment with local health needs and translation into programmes, service delivery and public health action,” the policy says.

The policy marks another important shift — allowing Ayurveda and other systems of med-

icine to get access to the research kitty meant for modern medicine in the guise of promoting “integrative health”. This is despite such systems having dedicated research funding from the Ayush Ministry and mechanisms operated by it.

This is bound to give rise to “validation science”, wherein traditional remedies like cow urine could be subjected to modern research so that they could be “scientifically validated.” This is already happening through projects funded by other research agencies like the Department of Science and Technology. Health

India is not only a geographically and culturally diverse country but also has myriad health needs as well as disparities in access to health systems. Health indicators and challenges of Kerala, for example, are completely different from those of Bihar or Odisha. Instead of making states implement a “top-down” agenda, states should be guided and helped to build and develop their own health research infrastructure based on their priorities and needs.

Health research is not just about testing new technologies or developing new vaccines and drugs. Its outcomes are supposed to guide health policies and budgets. Much of it is about ways to improve the functioning of health systems and healthcare delivery to achieve better outcomes. Health research is a continuous and dynamic process, closely linked with social and economic factors. For instance, health problems of many marginalised groups and communities like urban poor and tribal people are often understudied. A large number of medical colleges have been opened in recent years. They need to be oriented to conduct research on health topics in their respective regions.

The idea of developing a dedicated health research policy addresses a long-felt need. However, the direction the policy is seeking to take — a centralised approach to developing a research agenda, giving the private sector a prominent role and integration of traditional medicine in the modern health research agenda — is rather unhealthy.

‘ISLAMIC NATO’ COULD ALSO INFLUENCE INDIA-US TIES

Rahul Shivshankar

The Mecca Pact is set to expand. Bangladesh wants to join. If it does, this nascent Sunni NATO could, in a very real sense, straddle India on either side.

The Mecca Pact’s core clause states that an armed attack on any one member is considered an attack on all three. The declaration has inevitably drawn comparisons with NATO’s Article 5, although the pact is nowhere near NATO in terms of institutional or military coherence. But its strategic implications for Delhi could nevertheless be consequential.

India isn’t on good terms with Istanbul. There is stress with Dhaka. There is open hostility with Islamabad. The Saudis are friends. But Sunni Pakistan also provides the Sunni Saudis with strategic depth against their arch-enemy, Shia Iran.

Geography has always been Pakistan’s great asset. But in a



crisis, it might not be Pakistan’s strategic value alone that tips the balance or spurs Riyadh to come down on Islamabad’s side. It could, in part, boil down to the tug of Sunni solidarity.

We saw a version of this during India’s Operation Sindoor

in May 2025, when Turkey was widely reported to have backed Pakistan. Ankara’s support reportedly included military drones, technical assistance and personnel. Whatever the precise extent of that support, the episode demonstrated something Delhi can-

not afford to ignore: strategic interests can intersect with religious and political solidarities in ways that complicate India’s calculations.

Now put Bangladesh into the picture.

With Dhaka potentially joining the Mecca Pact, India

could find itself facing a grouping that stretches from Pakistan on its western flank to Bangladesh on its eastern flank, with Turkey and Saudi Arabia bringing considerably greater diplomatic, economic and strategic weight to the arrangement. That does not mean an Islamic NATO is about to emerge overnight. Nor does it mean all four capitals will suddenly act as one. States pursue interests, and those interests will often diverge. And there is another, less apparent consequence: an emerging Islamic NATO could make Delhi more beholden to Washington. America is the one external power with meaningful leverage across Riyadh, Istanbul, Dhaka and Islamabad.

If the Mecca Pact crystallises into a more coherent security grouping, that could give Washington another lever over India’s strategic environment, potentially narrowing Delhi’s bargaining power with Washington.

Delhi can’t afford to lose Dhaka connect

JYOTIMALHOTRA

BANGLADESH’S new President, the once Left-leaning Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, was all of 23 years old back in March 1971, at home in Thakurgaon in northern East Pakistan, when he heard that Pakistani military officers had unleashed Operation Searchlight all over the country and were massacring unarmed Bangladeshi nationalists, intellectuals and politicians. Two days later, on March 27, Alamgir and friends heard Major Ziaur Rahman, a serving Major in the Pakistan Army, give the rousing call for an independent Bangladesh over radio, on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, from his hideout in Chattogram (then Chittagong) — a message that was picked up by BBC and Radio Australia and relayed across the world. GeographicReference

“Joy Bangla!” said Major Zia as he ended his speech, unleashing for the first time a cry that would transform into a freedom chant in

the coming weeks and months — admired by celebrities as diverse as Indira Gandhi and George Harrison, and equally disliked by Yahya Khan and Henry Kissinger — rallying the entire nation to join hands with India and forge the Mukti Bahini, which would lead by the end of the year to the India-Pakistan war and the liberation of Bangladesh.

As the situation deteriorated in April 1971 in Thakurgaon — named for a Chakraborty family with large lands, with a twin town called Thakurganj only 55 km away, across the border in Kishanganj district of Bihar — Alamgir and his family crossed the Nagar river into India’s West Dinajpur district, part of a swelling flood of refugees. There, in Islampur, a cycle repair shop man called Dilip allowed the family of seven to sleep in a room behind an almira. Jyoti Basu’s West Bengal and Karpoori Thakur’s Bihar offered clothes to the refugees and “training” to able-bodied men in youth camps. Weeks later, Indira Gandhi’s gov-

ernment got properly involved and Alamgir, amongst others, received “training” in earnest in Dehradun.

More than 55 years later, if the Dhaka elite is to be believed, senior Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader and now President Alamgir has advised Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, son of the selfsame Major Zia whose cry of “Joy Bangla” electrified the world — and gave its name to many things, including the contagious fevers then sweeping India as a result of the hundreds of refugee camps set up across the Bengal-Bihar-Tripura-Assam borderlands — that he should travel to Delhi to meet Prime Minister Modi, notwithstanding the Sheikh Hasina brouhaha. TravelGuides & Travelogues

Alamgir is believed to have pointed out that one woman, Sheikh Hasina, even if she was Bangabandhu’s daughter with whom India continued to have the closest ties, cannot hold the India-Bangladesh relationship hostage. That the 1971 War of Liberation

remained an umbilical cord between the people of both countries, not just between leaders.

For the time being, though, Tarique’s proposed August 23-25 visit has been postponed, as both sides sort out the nitty-gritty. But the significance of PM Modi’s conciliatory message, in the wake of Bangladesh hardening its stance last week and making Tarique’s visit to India conditional on the extradition of Hasina, has not been lost on Dhaka. It needed the PM to make that overture — come, we will give you an “honourable reception”, he said in a message to Tarique, keenly aware that Sheikh Hasina’s August 5 press conference had seriously upset him.

Modi understood quickly that only he could save the situation. That Bangabandhu’s daughter, a VVIP who could do no wrong because her father had helped India break up Pakistan, could not be allowed to hijack the relationship. That the world had changed. That Bangladesh was again swimming in a dangerous sea, surrounded by

sharks with names like China and Pakistan. That Tarique’s first visit as PM had been to Beijing and Kuala Lumpur, not Delhi. That the Bangladeshis, after all these decades, were being wooed by the military establishment in Rawalpindi — that Dhaka was crawling, once again, with ISI spies.

Certainly, the PM knows that India’s eastern flank needs protecting — that it remains not just the gateway to South-East Asia, but is key to security in India’s eight North-East states; Bangladesh shares common borders with five Indian states; last time there was a BNP government in power, 2001-2006, when Tarique’s mother Khaleda Zia was PM, a huge arms haul in Chittagong was seized just in time.

There’s also the realisation that India’s neighbourhood is in a bit of a churn. Pakistan remains in deep freeze, despite pleas by senior RSS leaders like Mohan Bhagwat and Dattatreya Hosabale to repair ties. Nepal’s PM has finally met the Indian ambas-

sador, but continues to mutter threateningly about China. Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives are quiet, but China’s shadow looms large. Certainly, India cannot afford to lose Bangladesh. It must find ways to revamp the old connect.

The one big difference between 1971 and 2026, of course, is that India’s hugely improved tie with the US has meant that India works much more closely today with the Americans in all parts of its neighbourhood, not just in Bangladesh — back in 1971, the US and Pakistan were a cinch. The rest of the story doesn’t need retelling. GeographicReference

Perhaps, PM Modi should take a leaf out of how big powers like the US and China play the game, both hedging and reaching out to smaller powers at the same time. India’s unique civilisational strength, meanwhile, demands that it punch much above its economic weight, especially in its neighbourhood, where ties are weighted down by language, religion, culture and ethnicity, im-

parting a continuum to the ends of India.

That’s why PM Modi has done well by absorbing Tarique Rahman’s Sheikh Hasina tantrum, and for the time being, putting it on the backburner — where it will be definitely resolved soon, a probable quid pro quo being that when she returns home to Bangladesh in December, which she has publicly promised to do, no harm will be allowed to come to her person and that of her family — and foregrounding the all-important tie between Delhi and Dhaka.

That’s why the sky must be the limit between India and all her neighbours, from the Karakoram to Cox’s Bazar — India First, yes, on the part of the neighbours, but also Neighbourhood First, on the part of India, signifying both an open wallet and an open heart. Certainly, a neighbourhood as diverse as this one is no child’s play. Restoring trust will take time. With the ‘Arthashastra’ by his side, the PM has taken the first move with Bangladesh.