



Mr. Modi in Israel

He affirms special ties, underplays historical stress India has given to the Palestine issue

While welcoming Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Tel Aviv, his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, said his country had awaited the visit for “seventy years”. Since the birth in 1948 of Israel, whose admission to the UN India subsequently opposed, Israeli leaders had always sought full diplomatic ties. And once the Narasimha Rao government established full diplomatic ties in 1992, Israel pushed for full acknowledgement of bilateral relations on the international stage. As a result, the significance of Mr. Modi’s visit to Israel, as the first Indian Prime Minister there, was the trip itself. This was reflected in the camaraderie between the two Prime Ministers, who spent practically every waking moment together. The agreements signed during the visit, on water, agriculture, space and science and technology, are important no doubt, but not path-breaking. They simply underscore ongoing cooperation in such fields – as well as in the defence sector, India being one of the biggest buyers of Israeli military equipment. Cooperation on cybersecurity issues, discussed by officials during Mr. Modi’s visit, constitutes a breakthrough of sorts, given that Israel tends to limit cooperation in this area to a few countries. A decision was announced to upgrade ties to a strategic partnership, signalling a final step to total normalisation of relations. Perhaps this is why Mr. Modi’s address to Israelis of Indian origin in Tel Aviv, with a promise to address visa issues and improve air connectivity, had an emotional pitch different from his meetings with the diaspora elsewhere in the world.

However, the best friendships are judged not just by bilateral bonhomie, but by the ability to discuss uncomfortable issues. With Mr. Modi’s visit India has, for all purposes, de-hyphenated its ties with Israel and Palestine, something Israel has always wanted. In a clear repudiation of the Indian practice of keeping Palestinian leaders prominently in the loop, Mr. Modi made a point of not visiting the Occupied Territories. The departure was more prominent in the joint statement, that contained a short paragraph on the “Israel-Palestine” peace process, with no reference to UN resolutions, the two-state solution, or even the need to resume talks, that Mr. Modi had spoken of during the visit of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to India just a couple of months ago. It would have been more in keeping with India’s stature on the international stage, and its particular leverage with all players in West Asia especially on Palestine, had Mr. Modi made a visible attempt to extract from Israel a commitment to the peace process. India’s evolving ties with Israel no doubt are based on pragmatism and the desire to eschew hypocrisy – but Mr. Modi has infused his visit with a symbolism and substance that could well mark a point of departure in India’s moral support to the Palestinian cause. By way of comparison, U.S. President Donald Trump visited Palestine too when he went to Israel in May.

Déjà vu in Brazil

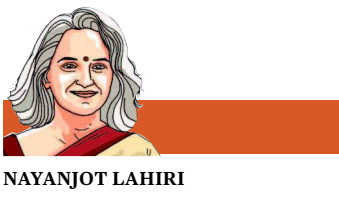
With the President caught in a scandal, the country braces for more instability

Brazil, Latin America’s largest economy, has been coasting along comfortably with record low inflation for a decade and healthy foreign direct investment to sustain the path of recovery from a recent recession. But the “Lava Jato” anti-corruption movement that rocked it three years back seems to be a long way from delivering on the promise of democratic and transparent governance. Inquiries into public fraud by politicians and captains of business have brought skeletons tumbling out of the cupboard. When Dilma Rousseff, then President, was impeached last year, it had appeared that the worst was over. But now the incumbent President, Michel Temer, has been indicted by Brazil’s top prosecutor. The script is sickeningly familiar. Ms. Rousseff was implicated over a scandal in the state-owned oil giant and its construction arm. The accusation against Mr. Temer is complicity in the authorisation of heavily subsidised public loans for a private corporation in return for political patronage. He has vehemently denied the charges, and termed the Lava Jato campaign, which he had once sympathised with, a witch hunt against political representatives.

The course of the investigation against Mr. Temer is as yet uncertain. But his position appears far less precarious than that of his predecessor. The requisite vote in the lower House of Congress to authorise a criminal trial may not materialise eventually, as most members are themselves facing investigations. Representatives from his centre-right Brazilian Democratic Movement Party and Ms. Rousseff’s Workers’ Party have called for the resignation of Mr. Temer. But indications are that few have the appetite to precipitate the situation further. Moreover, upon Ms. Rousseff’s downfall, Mr. Temer, who was Vice-President then, had been catapulted to the country’s highest office. With the next presidential election scheduled for 2018, the search for a successor may not be easy. This continuing turmoil puts at risk assurances of reforms to Brazil’s labour laws and generous pension system. The controversial raising of the retirement age was seen as a major push to overhaul what was one of the world’s most envied social security programmes. Arguably, the Brazilian Left leaned too much towards an unsustainable populist agenda in the heady years of the commodities boom. But its counterparts on the Right appear ill-equipped to position themselves as a realistic alternative despite attempts to attract overseas investment. Like other nations in the region, Brazil badly needs a strong centre that is not tempted to tilt at the windmills of populism. That is the best chance of ensuring accountability to the people and engagement with the rest of the world.

Making of a monumental crisis

Parliament must resist a proposed amendment that compromises the 100-m no-construction zone



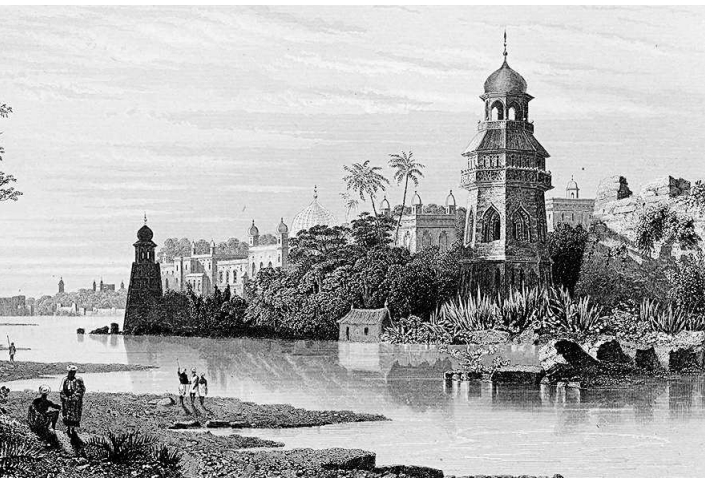
NAYANJOT LAHIRI

India’s monumental heritage is on the brink of a shameful shift. The Central government is poised to introduce an amendment to the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958, in Parliament, which would remove the security net that exists around our nationally protected monuments.

Endangered structures

Why is this security net necessary, and why is its proposed infringement shameful? Our protected monuments, from the Taj Mahal to the monuments of Mamallapuram, have a designated prohibited area – at least a 100-m radius – to protect them, where no new construction is allowed. It is similar to the zoning around tiger reserves where the core area is set apart for the animals to live in, and where human disturbance is not permitted. Just as this is done to prevent human-animal conflict, zoning around monuments is necessary to prevent monuments from defacement and to prevent the present from displacing the past by mar- rying historical landscapes. Monu- ments, it needs to be remembered, are endangered structures and vul- nerable to human interference. If tigers have disappeared across large parts of the habitats they oc- cupied even till the early part of the last century, so have several of In- dia’s protected monuments. As it is, there are a mere 3,650 monu- ments which are nationally pro- tected in a country where the records with the government show some

5,00,000 unprotected and en- dangered monuments. The track record of the govern- ment in maintaining our nationally protected monuments, to put it most charitably, is an indifferent one. There are encroachments by government agencies and indi- viduals. The 2013 report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) noted that of the 1,655 monu- ments whose records were scrutin- ised and which were physically in- spected, 546 of them were en- croached. This may well be be- cause of a lack of basic manpower in the form of monument attend- ants. In 2010, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) stated on re- cord that its staff strength did not permit the deployment of even a single person on a regular full-time basis at more than 2,500 of its monuments. This meant that more than two-thirds of India’s monu- ments that the Central government is supposed to protect were poorly guarded. At the same time, the CAG pointed to connivance by ASI officials as well. As the files of the ASI reveal, there are also numer- ous instances where politicians have proactively protected those who have illegally occupied the prohibited zone around monuments. The only protection for our de- fenceless heritage has come from courts of law because there are legal provisions which, at least on paper, prevent the encroachment of the prohibited zone around monuments. The idea itself, that a security net ought to be created around heritage buildings, can be traced to Jawaharlal Nehru. As Prime Minister, he complained to the Union Minister of Education in 1955 that India’s old and historical places were getting spoilt by new buildings being put up around them. In order to prevent intru- sions, Nehru suggested that the



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government “lay down that within a certain area no building should be put up without permission”. An example of his proactive approach in creating such protective barriers is the enclosure encircling the tomb of Abdur Rahim Khan-i- Khana in Nizamuddin. This was built after Nehru had visited the site and suggested that the adja- cent grounds be converted into a garden because, as he put it, he did not want the colony of Nizamuddin East to extend into the area around the tomb. This idea eventually found its way into the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Rules of 1959 which unambiguously, for the first time, noted a prohibited and a regu- lated zone around protected sites and monuments. Because of these rules, the High Court of Delhi in 2009 struck down all permissions that had been illeg- ally granted by the ASI through an Expert Advisory Committee. As a consequence of this judgment, in 2010, the Government of India set up a committee which recommen- ded a new bill to Parliament. It is now known as the Ancient Monu- ments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment and

Validation) Act. Unanimously passed in March 2010, this legisla- tion brought the prohibited and regulated zones around monu- ments within the ambit of the Act itself. As a consequence of this statute, the National Monuments Authority was set up. It is shocking that even after these years, a major task of this authority remains to be done, that of preparing heritage bye-laws for nationally protected monu- ments. If India’s rulers cared at all for our monuments, by now not only would the bye-laws pertaining to the 3,650 national monuments have been prepared, they would also have been tabled in Parlia- ment as was required by law. In- stead of expediting the preparation of those bye-laws, the government has sought to dilute the 100 m pro- hibited area around nationally pro- tected monuments. The proposed amendment aims to allow the Central government to construct within that area all kinds of struc- tures. Incidentally, the Cabinet note shows that the Ministry of Cul- ture, instead of protecting monu- ments, is now acting a clearing house for the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways. The

amendment is necessary, the Cab- inet note states, because, among other things, an elevated road needs to be built in front of Akbar’s tomb in Agra! The Ministry of Cul- ture needs to be reminded that it is the nodal agency for protecting our monuments, not endangering them. Otherwise, it is better for the government to abolish this min- istry since cultural protection is far from what it seems to be doing.

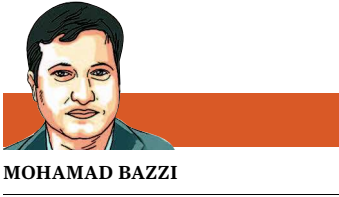
One people, two norms

What makes this amendment shameful is that our Ministers live in the Lutyens Bungalow Zone in New Delhi where overhead metro lines have not been permitted be- cause, quite rightly, they would have permanently marred the aes- thetics of the area. Hundreds of crores of rupees have been spent to ensure that there are no ugly rail- way corridors across that area. Yet, the ruling class has no compunc- tion in pushing for a legislation which would allow overhead con- traptions in the vicinity of our na- tional monuments. Does the gov- ernment believe that the aesthetics around government bungalows matter but not around monu- ments? Or is it possible that they believe that monuments do not matter and only highways do? India’s monuments form an irre- placeable archive of our civilisa- tional heritage. Our pride in our heritage has always been surplus while caring for that heritage suf- fers a huge deficit. Surely, India’s archaeological heritage, as diverse and priceless as our natural heri- tage, seventy years after Independ- ence, deserves better than what has fallen to its lot.

Nayanjot Lahiri’s most recently published book is ‘Monuments Matter: India’s Archaeological Heritage Since Independence’. She is a professor of history at Ashoka University

Postscript to the proxy war

Tensions threaten to spiral between the U.S. and Iran ahead of the coming battle for southern Syria



MOHAMAD BAZZI

On June 18, a U.S. warplane shot down a Syrian regime jet after it bombed American-backed rebels in northern Syria – the first time the U.S. has downed a Syrian warplane since the start of the country’s civil war in 2011. Two days later, the Pentagon announced it had shot down an Iranian-made drone in the country’s south-east, where American personnel have been training anti-Islamic State fighters, and where a complex geopolitical battle is unfolding. Since President Donald Trump took office, the U.S. military has struck the Syrian regime or its allies at least five times. Even if the Pentagon may not want to directly engage Syrian forces, or their Rus- sian and Iranian-backed allies, there’s a danger of accidental es- calation, especially as various forces continue to converge on eastern and southern Syria to re- claim strategic territory from the Islamic State (IS). Mr. Trump’s willingness to use military force against Syrian Pres- ident Bashar al-Assad and his chief supporters risks sparking a widen- ing confrontation, while distract- ing from what Mr. Trump insists is his top priority: defeating the IS in

both Iraq and Syria. As a presiden- tial candidate, Mr. Trump cam- paignd on a pledge to avoid direct U.S. involvement in the Syrian conflict. Today, he has become a major player in a regional proxy war that could determine West Asia’s dy- namics for decades. The Syrian conflict has expan- ded into a war that involves re- gional and world powers – includ- ing the U.S., Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar – whose interests sometimes overlap, but at other times lead to multiple con- frontations and uncomfortable al- liances. Under the Obama adminis- tration, U.S. policy in Syria was focused on containing the IS, largely ignoring Mr. Assad, and keeping American allies from fight- ing each other. The Iran factor The dangers are particularly acute when it comes to Iran, which made dramatic battlefield moves of its own last month when it launched several missiles from inside Iran against IS targets in eastern Syria. Officially, Iran’s Revolutionary Guards said the volley of missiles fired at Deir al-Zour province was a response to a pair of attacks by IS militants in Tehran on June 7, the first time that the terrorist group had struck inside Iran. After shooting down the Syrian jet, the Pentagon insisted it would protect the Syrian rebels it has been training and arming for more than a year to launch the assault on the IS in Raqqa, capital of its self- proclaimed caliphate. “The coali-



tion does not seek to fight Syrian regime, Russian, or pro-regime forces partnered with them, but will not hesitate to defend coalition or partner forces from any threat,” the U.S. statement said. And fore- most among those threats, in the eyes of the Trump administration, is Iran. While Mr. Trump has changed his mind on a number of foreign policy questions since tak- ing office, he has been consistent in his belief that Iran poses the greatest threat to U.S. interests in West Asia. Nowhere is Iran projecting its re- gional power more extensively than Syria. Since the war started, Tehran has sent billions of dollars in aid and thousands of troops and Shiite volunteers to support Mr. As- sad’s men. Over the past two years, Russia and Iran, along with Hezbol- lah and several Iraqi Shiite militias, helped the Syrian President con- solidate control and regain terri- tory he lost to Syrian rebels and for- eign jihadists. In December, with intensive Russian airstrikes and Ir- anian ground support, his forces

recaptured the rebel-held sections of Aleppo, Syria’s largest city. It was Mr. Assad’s biggest victory since the war began. The next prize for the Syria government and its al- lies is the eastern province of Deir al-Zour, home to the country’s modest oilfields. This desert ex- pance includes several border crossings between Syria, Iraq and Jordan – and the strategic highway connecting Damascus and Bagh- dad. In recent weeks, Syrian troops, along with Hezbollah and other Shiite militias, have been moving to consolidate control over the area and to connect with Iranian-backed militias that are fighting to dislodge the IS from the Iraqi side of the border. The Trump administration is worried that with these gains, Iran and its allies will carve out a “Shiite crescent” extending from Iran, through Iraq and Syria, and into Lebanon, where Hezbollah is the most powerful political and mili- tary force. Such a prospect looms large not only for the U.S. adminis- tration, but also its allies in the Arab world, especially Saudi Arabia. Since taking office, Mr. Trump and his top advisers have shifted their rhetoric to reflect more expli- cit support for Saudi Arabia and its Sunni Arab allies, and, in turn, a harsher view of Iran. The shift was cemented during Mr. Trump’s visit in May to the kingdom, which he chose as the first stop on his maiden overseas trip as President. Like his Saudi hosts, Mr. Trump

framed the problems of West Asia as due solely to Iran’s belligerence and terrorism by Islamist extremist groups, despite the kingdom’s destabilising activities across the region, including its ongoing cata- strophic war in Yemen and its re- cent blockade of Qatar. Meanwhile, Iranian officials are growing increasingly frustrated at the Trump administration’s con- stant attacks on the July 2015 agree- ment Tehran signed with the U.S. and five other world powers to limit its nuclear programme in ex- change for the lifting of interna- tional sanctions. While Washington is eager to portray its latest actions in Syria as defensive measures, Mr. Assad’s re- gime and its Iranian allies view them as an aggression, noting that the Pentagon shot down a Syrian jet in Syrian airspace. And by flexing their military reach in Syria with a missile launch, Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and other regime hard- liners risk inflaming more tension with the Trump administration – tension that could boil over in the coming war for dominance of southern Syria. There is a danger that one of the many players in this conflict could overreach and provoke a new con- frontation that spirals out of control.

Mohamad Bazzi is a journalism professor at New York University and former Middle East bureau chief at Newsday. He is writing a book on the proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Modi-Bibi bonhomie

There can be no two opinions that the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Israel is historic. The red-carpet welcome he has received at Ben Gurion Airport is also unprecedented. While all our former Prime Ministers have preferred to meet Israeli leaders only in Delhi for varied reasons, Mr. Modi has established a new normal by making a trip to Tel Aviv. One only expects that the visit results in a mutually beneficial relationship between the two countries without affecting the good ties India has nurtured all along with Palestine. The visit should also not affect India’s support for Palestine in its justified struggle to become an independent entity.

YVONNE FERNANDO, Chennai

It was indeed a very proud moment for all of us to see Mr. Modi being received at Ben Gurion Airport by his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu, an honour hitherto given only to the U.S. President and the Pope. He struck an emotional chord with Mr. Netanyahu by remembering his brother Yonathan, who had laid down his life saving a hijacked plane in Operation Entebbe exactly 41 years ago. This put a greater personal touch to his rapport with Mr. Netanyahu. He visited Yad Vashem, a memorial for the Holocaust victims, and met young Moshe, whose parents lost their lives in the 26/11 Mumbai attacks. All these send out an unequivocal message to Israel that India stands with it in times of grief. The signing of a strategic

partnership on various non-security issues, including on space cooperation, by the two countries would surely give our relationship a further push. I earnestly hope that the bonhomie created during the visit also leads to more people-to-people contacts through the promised Indian Cultural Centre in Israel and by making it easy for Israelis of Indian origin to get Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) cards.

VIPLAV JAIN, Islamabad

Sikkim stand-off

The stand-off with China at the border near the Sikkim-Bhutan junction is indicative that all is not well with the relations that we maintain with our neighbouring countries (“China accuses India of

misleading the public,” July 6). With most of them – not just Pakistan but also Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka – we seem to be having problems. Mr. Modi’s foreign policy, dominated by hugs and unannounced visits, does not seem to be working. There is no doubt that the incident with China is more in the nature of gameplay, coming subsequent to the increased proximity of India to the U.S., including New Delhi’s recent call for ‘freedom of navigation’ amid disputes in the South China Sea region. We have never been able to anticipate situations like the imbroglio with China and defuse them in advance. More often than not, it seems that we walk into a situation unaware of what’s going on. Some time back, it was reported that China is

building multiple dams on the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra and that this would reduce the water flow of the river drastically. This initially caused consternation but ultimately we had to accept this without much of a quid pro quo. Confrontation is not always the desired path in international diplomacy

and should be used as a last resort when all other methods of conflict resolution have been exhausted. Alertness and preparedness should be the hallmarks of India’s foreign policy.

S. KAMAT, Alto Santa Cruz, Goa

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: >>In the graphic that accom- panied “Trump slams China over N. Korea” (World page, July 6, 2017), the operational missiles of North Korea were erroneously shown as ‘under development’ and those being developed as ‘op- erational’. >>The net profit figure was wrongly given as ₹3,233 crore in the headline and text of a Business page story (July 6, 2017) on the rise of Citibank’s net profit for the financial year ending March 2017. The correct net profit figure is ₹3,626 crore (and not ₹3,233 crore which was last fiscal’s profit after tax).

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