

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Inclusivity under threat

Project Syndicate catches up with Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general, Indian Minister of State for External Affairs, and Indian Minister of State for Human Resource Development. Excerpts from the interview:

Since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, it has been keeping a tight lid on the pressure cooker, to borrow your metaphor. What are the most immediate risks you foresee?

The abrogation of Section 370 and Jammu and Kashmir's bifurcation into two union territories is already being mourned as a dark day for Indian democracy. As I've previously stated, it is the political equivalent of Modi's 2016 demonetisation: an idea that was poorly conceived, and implemented with little consultation with any stakeholder group. The removal of Jammu and Kashmir's special status amounted to an assault on India's democratic values, and almost two months later, the government has offered little in the way of a truthful accounting of the current condition of the state and our citizens who reside there.

India's constitution rests on the idea of an inclusive country, on the spirit of cooperative federalism and democratic practices, and on guarantees of individual and group liberties. Jammu and Kashmir has, in many ways, benefited from these ideals. Now, in a constitutional sleight of hand, it has seen them indefinitely suspended—indeed, seemingly wiped out.

As I argued in parliament, there is an immense risk that the short-term damage done by this decision will overshadow any of the hypothetical long-term gains. Consider the economy: Jammu and Kashmir has long depended on tourism. By bringing the Kashmir Valley suddenly to a standstill, upending any sense of normalcy there, India's federal government has effectively discouraged tourists from visiting. Similarly, investors shun warzones; with the state unlikely to return to a state of normalcy anytime soon, the investment that is needed to fuel development is likely to stall.

The political risks are even larger. The federal government has placed popular leaders in Jammu and Kashmir—including some of my colleagues who have represented the state in Parliament—under house arrest. It should be working with them to find an amicable solution with regard to the abrogation of Article 370. With these

democratically elected leaders' voices excluded from the discussion, I wonder who will take their place. After all, when you render democratic opponents irrelevant, you create space for undemocratic forces. With the people of Kashmir feeling deeply betrayed, individuals who have previously resorted to violence and acts of terrorism, and who had been marginalised for some time, may once again find popular acceptance.

And finally, there is the risk posed to the very federal structure of our country, which has been organised as a "union of states" since independence. The fact remains that asymmetric federal relations (such as Article 370) have always existed within this union of states. Could the government use the same—until now, unprecedented—methods they have used against Kashmir against other states tomorrow?

You suggested last month that the action in Kashmir has broader significance, because the Modi government "signalled to the world its abandonment of its previous emphasis on economic growth and foreign investment" in favour of national security and Hindu chauvinism. At this point, what would it take to reverse the Indian economy's downward slide?

The cracks caused by the present government's five and a half years of economic and fiscal ineptitude are not just showing; they are weakening the economy's foundations. Unemployment stands at a 45-year high—particularly worrying for a young population like India's. Worse, agriculture is in such distress that farmer suicides have broken all records, production has fallen, and exports have stagnated.

The average Indian is genuinely hurting, with a fast-emptying wallet, and fears what will happen if the government upholds its wanton disregard for sound economic management. And while India's finance minister recently announced a series of U-turns in her disastrous budget proposals and has slashed some key tax rates, many worry that it's too little, too late.

Whenever the current administration feels politically cornered, it resorts to a hyper-nationalistic narrative, rather than taking stronger action to clean up the mess its own ineptitude created. What the economy needs



Shashi Tharoor PHOTO: REUTERS

is a major boost, in order to overcome the consequences of demonetisation, which removed 86 percent of the country's currency from circulation overnight, and the botched implementation of the new national Goods and Services Tax.

Demand is down because people don't have money to spend, and investors aren't producing things people can afford to buy, which also undermines job creation. We need to bring in experts to overhaul existing structures. Since trickle-down growth hasn't happened, the needed change must be implemented from the ground up. We need more and better jobs, more productive investments, and less lofty rhetoric. This government has been great at selling dreams; but people will not continue buying the same empty package forever.

And yet your latest Project Syndicate commentary highlights the sharp discrepancy between Modi's poor record and his enduring popularity. To many Indians, you observe, he comes across as a "decisive, no-nonsense leader, willing to break with tradition and attempt bold solutions" to "intractable problems." The problem is that the tradition Modi would discard includes democracy itself. How serious is the authoritarian threat in India, and what sources of democratic resilience remain?

I believe that the behaviour of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party since returning to power represents a fundamental threat to the future of India's democracy and the freedoms that we have taken for granted since our independence from colonial rule 73 years ago.

In its second term, the BJP has introduced and adopted far-reaching legislation—such as the Right to Information (Amendment) Bill, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Bill, legislation criminalising talaq-e-biddah (the Muslim practice of "instant divorce"), the abrogation of Article 370, and the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Bill—with breathtaking speed. With no parliamentary standing committees constituted, a record number of bills have been pushed through with only minimal parliamentary scrutiny.

Far more worrying, however, is the remarkable shift in the BJP's political ambition. They have gone from whispering about changing the constitution to openly undermining it; from suggesting that some Indians rank higher than others to openly ensuring that, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, the very experience of what it means to be an Indian is different; and from asserting control over independent national institutions to openly using them as instruments of their political agenda.

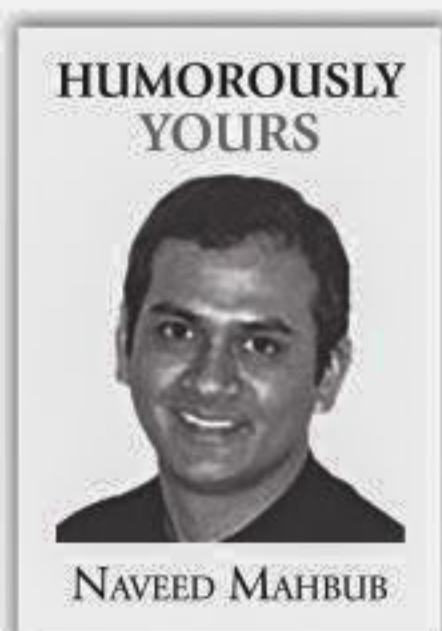
As a cautious optimist, I would argue that there are enough Indians, including young people, who are committed to resisting these recent chauvinistic trends and to ensuring that the BJP's project to remake India in its distorted image does not succeed. They will continue to fight for a national discourse that is constructive, recognises and respects our diversity of faith and conviction, and promotes inclusive politics.

Similarly, the opposition has largely been united and unanimous in their rejection of these forces, and challenged the one-size-fits-all "Hindi-Hindutva-Hindustan" agenda that the government seeks to impose on all Indians. Even if our numbers haven't allowed us to do more than raise our voices, we have rejected this agenda passionately in parliament and will continue to do everything in our power to resist the dismemberment of democratic India that the BJP seems determined to carry out.

You noted in July that India is alarmed by US President Donald Trump's direct negotiations with the Taliban. Since then, Trump tried to set up a last-minute meeting with the Taliban at Camp David, presumably to score a big win before the 2020 election. While that meeting was cancelled, it seems to confirm Trump's determination to cut his losses in Afghanistan. What, if anything, can India do to mitigate the risks posed by the return of a Taliban regime? India is the second-largest investor in Afghanistan after the US, and remains committed to playing its part in promoting the region's economic and social development, including safeguarding basic rights and access to essential amenities for the Afghan people.

From a social perspective, fostering and promoting a strong Afghan civil society is key to ensuring that the Taliban does not gain traction. As far as India is concerned, the Afghan people have given us a lot of love. Not only do we have historical and cultural connections; there are plenty of contemporary ties that bind us, including cricket, Bollywood, and Indian television. India welcomes Afghan refugees and is committed to providing various benefits—such as military training, administrative guidance, cricket facilities, and healthcare—for Afghans in India. These efforts have strengthened mutual feelings of brotherhood between the two countries. At the same time, to complement our goodwill and to protect against the dangers posed by the Taliban regime, India ought to support Afghanistan's economy. Its investments there already amount to over USD 2 billion. We have helped to build Afghanistan's largest hospital for women and children, erect schools, construct the Afghan-India Friendship Dam (formerly known as the Salma Dam), carve the Delaram-Zaranj Highway across the country's southwest (to open trade routes to the West), ensure uninterrupted electricity in Kabul, and build the new parliament. As a country with no "boots on the ground" in Afghanistan, but one which has won many hearts there, India must hope that development cooperation can serve as the key to neutralising the dangers posed by a possible return of the Taliban to power.

The 'i' Word



HUMOROUSLY YOURS NAVEED MAHBUB

AS Houthi drones strike Aramco oil refineries in Saudi Arabia, the world holds its breath. For the Houthis (reminds me of the nineties band, Hootie and the "Blow" Fish) are backed by Iran which in turn may lead to Operation Desert Stormy Daniels. But if president Donald Trump has done anything wise, it is the firing of the hawkish John Bolton, the anti-Michael Bolton of love themes, as any acting successor of the former would act with prudence. Besides, the commander-in-chief is busy pillow talking with his counterpart in Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, prompting the latter, a former comedian, to wonder whether it is the former, or the latter, who is the actual formal comedian to the letter. Kim Jong Un may be the Rocket Man, but President Trump is disposing himself to be the Pocket Man of yet another foreign government from the same vicinity as Russia.

The whistle has been blown. President Trump is now among the ranks of the 'i' words that grab headlines, one way or the other—iPad, iPhone, iRag, iRan to now the latest—iPresident, aka, the "impeachable" president.

This is bad news for the record low unemployment enjoyed by comedians since January 2017. In fact, even I, a Muslim comedian, recited a silent prayer for the president's White House rizik (livelihood) as the Mueller Report came out. For President Trump is the cure for depression, with billions being entertained with his daily tweets. Even his ridiculing the 16-year-old Greta Thunberg,

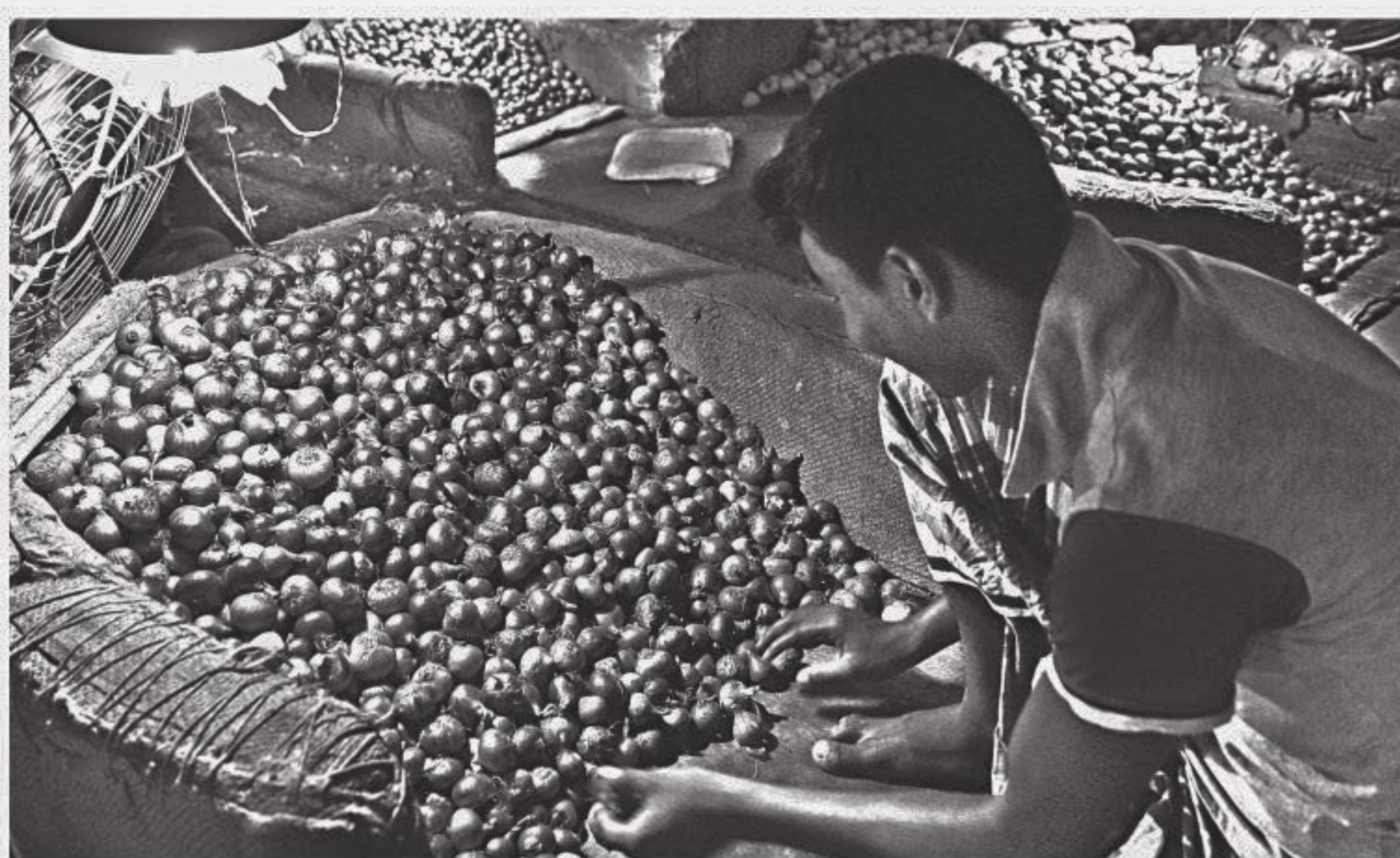
while greeted with wrath on social media, has put myself, the comedian, on his defensive, rationalising (a tough word to use with Mr Trump) the exchanges between the two as being those of equals. After all, both are 16, one chronologically and the other... It is only natural that there be high school jealousy. The 16-year-old man has been craving and claiming the Nobel Prize, while the 16-year-old girl has already won the Right Livelihood Award, known as the Alternative Nobel Prize, which the 16-year-old man will surely snub as Alternative Facts.

Many adults have opined that Greta should go back to her books instead of galivanting the world on the issue of climate change. Sure, as long as WE the adults do what we SHOULD be doing to ensure there IS a world left for her to house universities. And 16-year-old man, that includes Trump University too.

Alas, nothing has changed, nothing will change. Air Force One will never do a fly past over the melting glaciers. Status quo...

But perhaps there HAS been a fly past of

His (the consumer's) eyes well up in tears at the mere sight of onions, well before even peeling the first layer off. He is now faced with the choice of buying half a kg of onion or an iPhone 11.



Six Million Dollar Man? PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

a squadron of Houthi drones in Indian and Bangladeshi airspace, dropping munitions on onion fields. How else do you explain skyrocketing prices of onion as had happened with that of oil after the Aramco attacks?

The hike in prices in Bangladesh have been attributed to India putting a halt on its export of onions to Bangladesh. Can't blame them. They need to retain for themselves first. At least 500 tons are needed for making delicious shorshey ilish (hilsa in mustard) with the 500 tons of hilsa that Bangladesh is sending to India as a goodwill gesture on the occasion of Durga Puja. And the gastronomical us will never have the heart to wage a Trumpian trade war by halting exports of shorshey.

I suppose onions are also needed to serve the tapings of Zee Bangla serials—as the remnants of the monsoon thunderstorms provide the sound effects during the announcement of the true father of the expectant mother, the inevitable and ensuing barrage of tears are powered by the un-exported onions.

Besides, who is to say that the perception across the border is not that of us actually being self-sufficient in onions? After all, Bangladesh Television does air programmes on bumper crops and BTV is now aired in India where viewers are tuning in to it en masse by way of an exodus out of Zee, Sony, Colours and NDTV.

All said and done, it is their onion. It is

their decision. It is theirs to keep.

What gives then? Cut down on onion consumption? Over our [onion] fed bodies! Whether we have the precious commodity or not, we need the staple from jhaalmuri to daalpuri to fuel our daily calories.

The outcome? First, the consumer. His eyes well up in tears at the mere sight of onions, well before even peeling the first layer off. He is now faced with the choice of buying half a kg of onion or an iPhone 11. Needless to say, even the diehard techie is avoiding Motalib Plaza like post-raid casinos and making a beeline for onion plaza.

And then the onion trader. He is the bionic Six Million Dollar Man—better, stronger, richer. He is destined to be cast as the villain in the first Masud Rama episode.

And finally, the hoarding places. Maybe the yet to be discovered casinos will yield sacks full of onions, unless they have already been hoondied off, thus kicking off a phenomenon called onion laundering.

Despite the situational imbalance, the onion, for us, bears the "i" word—indispensable. We have thus swallowed our pride to import onions from Myanmar so that we can swallow the dopiaji (or even ek piaji or half piaji) that we cannot live without. Yangon, thank you for feeding us onions in return for us (happily and selflessly) feeding over a million of your citizens while you continue feeding the world layers (like those of onions) of bull.

Aung San Suu Kyi Ma'am, thanks to the lopsided arbitrage, you can now claim the Nobel Prize for Economics.

Naveed Mahbub is a former engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA, the former CEO of IBM & Nokia Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ATN Bangla's The Naveed Mahbub Show and the founder of Naveed's Comedy Club. E-mail: Naveed@NaveedMahbub.com

QUOTABLE Quote

ROBERT FROST (1874-1963) AMERICAN POET

In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: it goes on.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Game for the gentry
- 5 Course unit
- 11 Stratford's river
- 12 Whole
- 13 Track event
- 14 Get even for
- 15 Caribou's kin
- 16 It may be furrowed
- 17 Heavy wood
- 19 Depressed
- 22 Ham's device
- 24 Diver's gear
- 26 Pressing need
- 27 Clickable picture
- 28 Family fights
- 30 Did yard work
- 31 Dietary no-no
- 32 Western resort

lake

- 34 Ring of light
- 35 Twice uno
- 38 Take back
- 41 Disco dancing
- 42 Immediately
- 43 Mystique
- 44 Be nomadic
- 45 Flight part

DOWN

- 1 Whittle down
- 2 Track shape
- 3 Like strikers, sometimes
- 4 Low digit
- 5 Get smart
- 6 Ambassador's agents
- 7 Worry
- 8 Furfural item
- 9 Assn.

- 10 Social page word
- 16 Scary shout
- 18 Tie up
- 19 Got a break
- 20 Bassoon's kin
- 21 Prop for Her-mione
- 22 Musical phrase
- 23 Open space
- 25 "See ya!"
- 29 Posture
- 30 Pi follower
- 33 Modify
- 34 Ranch worker
- 36 Fairy tale monster
- 37 Bath need
- 38 Unrefined
- 39 LAX guess
- 40 SWindle
- 41 Road sign word

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C L I P A L A N S
R E C A P R A T I O
E V E N I N G W E A R
S I S R I O A C E
T E A B A G I S I S
S W A T H D E N T
R E T R O
S T A G W A L E S
T O T E V A N S U E S
I R T S A G G N U
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