

Save academic freedom

The state should immediately release Hriday Mondal

WE stand in solidarity with schoolteacher Hriday Chandra Mondal who has been arrested and jailed on charges of “hurting religious sentiments.” Mondal, who taught mathematics and science at a school in Munshiganj before being unceremoniously relieved of his duty, is a victim of unreason, intolerance, and perhaps of his own religious identity in a society deeply polarised along ideological lines. The chain of events following the release of his secretly recorded class lecture was orchestrated as a statement move from the increasingly emboldened far-right camp. The writing on the wall is, “Don’t argue, don’t reason, don’t cross the lines,” except the lines are not clear. And that the opposite of these is exactly what thinkers and reformers are supposed to do.

What was Mondal’s fault? He attempted a conversation with his students about the difference between religion and science. The merit of his arguments is immaterial here. But he was within his rights as a teacher to try and inspire students to think rationally and dispassionately. You don’t punish someone for that. You allow them to continue the conversation and hope that students will be able to form their own opinion, leading to Enlightenment. But for this very desirable attempt, he was subjected to the ignominy of a demonstration by his own students (along with others). He was suspended, sued, arrested and denied bail twice. Like he was some criminal or a threat to our society.

Teachers, legal experts and rights defenders who have since stood by him have expressed their concern about the whole episode, questioning the recording of the conversation, its circulation on social media, his arrest and the denial of bail. They strongly reacted to how the case was staged, with the plaintiff later denying having anything to do with the incident and blaming the headmaster for making him file the case. They also questioned why the case was allowed to proceed, rather than binned in the first instance. They also expressed their concern that a culture of intolerance coupled with hyper-religiosity has been plaguing not just our academic institutions, but the entire society, and far from countering this toxic climate, the administration is rather encouraging it for its own benefits.

We’re deeply alarmed by this state of affairs. Academic freedom is crucial for the development of any society, especially one that desires to have a knowledge-based economy. If teachers are sabotaged like this and discouraged from inspiring their students to think critically, creation of new knowledge won’t be the only casualty—the whole society will suffer as a result. We urge the government to immediately release Hriday Chandra Mondal, restore him in his position and ensure that he and his family are subjected to no further harassment.

Pakistan SC spoils Imran’s game

Supremacy of the constitution is established

IMRAN Khan, Pakistan’s embattled prime minister, knew he would lose the no-confidence vote in parliament, and so he decided to avoid it and go for fresh polls instead. But now the verdict by the Supreme Court of Pakistan—that his move to block the no-confidence vote on April 3 and then to advise the president to dissolve parliament was unconstitutional—unravels his game plan and puts his future and that of his party into serious jeopardy.

His sudden “discovery” of a plot by the US to uproot him and finding the opposition to be an integral part of it have puzzled the observers of Pakistan’s politics. It appears that he wanted to exploit the anti-Western sentiment, which is widely prevalent in Pakistan, to his advantage. But he could not deceive the courts that saw the play for what it really was: an attempt to avoid the legal and democratic process laid down in Pakistan’s constitution. The Supreme Court’s verdict is crucial, as it sends out the message that politicians, regardless of their ranks, cannot just run the country based on personal whims and political opportunism.

Khan rose to power nearly four years ago amid great expectations from all. He was young, fresh, charismatic and represented a shift from the rotten politics of power oscillating between the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) and the Muslim League, whose leaders had long lost public trust for their corruption and cronyism. But very soon he lost his shine and became highly autocratic in his dealings with the opposition and his own party leaders. In policy formulations, he often would not consult his cabinet, close aides and political allies. He must now, in all likelihood—and due to his own Machiavellian manoeuvres—join the long line of Pakistani prime ministers before him who could not complete their respective terms in office.

It is not clear what is likely to follow. Opposition will most probably win the no-confidence vote and form a government till the next election, which is due next year. Imran Khan will, of course, not allow them rule peacefully and raise hell in the streets of Pakistan, for which he still has enough support base. Let no one underestimate his capacity to turn things in his favour through an upset election. Whatever happens, the coming days and months are not likely to be tranquil in Pakistan, and that’s when the country is facing its most serious economic crisis in decades.

Transitioning back to ‘normal’ learning



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

WHEN a private university organised a flash mob and another one a concert to welcome back its students to campus post Covid shutdown, we looked at the safety protocol prepared for our campus in pity. Our peers did not want to miss out on a branding opportunity. However, is it normal to announce the return to normalcy with such a great gathering? Or is it a sign of complacency that belies the strict measures we took earlier? Certainly, the Covid vaccine as well as the flattening of the infection curve has given us some comfort in restoring the semblance of normal life. The rise of the XE variant in the UK and the extended lockdown in Shanghai tell us of a different reality that is far from normal, though.

The word “normal” is deceptively simple; once you probe into the concept, its meaning starts to disintegrate. The word insists on conforming to certain norms that have been socially agreed upon or endorsed by an established agency. It is normal to breathe without a mask, but because of the Covid-19 health rules, we have agreed to make mask-wearing normal. In this case, normal has a functional aspect. The group endorsement comes when the majority agrees to a norm. The meaning of normal, thus, becomes statistical.

After nearly two years of closures, we have returned to campus. For many students, this is the first time they are in a physical classroom, and find it difficult to adjust. This term, when most of the students fared poorly in their first quiz in my class, I tried to find out the reasons. The answer came as a shock. They have got used to class recordings, which they could repeatedly play to follow a lecture. Some said they were finding it difficult to read my lips with my mask on. Then there is the issue of retention. They have forgotten most of the things they did in the previous terms. The instant projects and assignments, done digitally, have earned them grades, but little learning. In the online classrooms, the teachers created a virtual sense of community with customised accessibility for students. Even at an administrative level, we asked our colleagues to modify their course delivery and rethink student assessments. We were



▲ The transition back to how life used to be on campus after two years of Covid shutdown is proving to be difficult—more for some than others.

PHOTO: SARAH ANJUM BARI

concerned about the way the students would have to adjust to the functional normality of online teaching. We were compassionate in accommodating requests based on “unstable internet services” or “casualty in the family.” Are these “additional perks” (i.e. auto-promotion and curtailed syllabus being the height) going to be the aspirational normal for our returning students?

lip service on blended learning as the new normal. Does it mean that our universities will be allowed to retain some of the online teaching practices? Will our teachers be comfortable recording their lectures or creating videos for their students to learn on their own time, without coming to campus? Can the teachers be allowed to use online assessment tools and discussion forums? Can the institutions pursue collaboration with national and international institutions to foster a greater sense of academic community? Can we have the lectures of renowned educators curated by the UGC or the education board for licensed distribution among their member institutions? Sadly, the policymakers divest their energy in protecting the financial and political interests of academic institutions. Mega constructions attract mega attention, making the vice-chancellors susceptible to vice. In the process, we often fail to ignore the basics: teaching and learning.

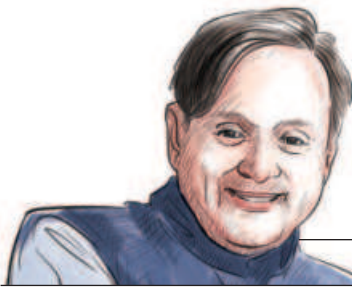
As a teacher, I can see some of the things that we have lost or compromised on in the last two years. Handwriting and spelling, for instance. Students no longer have the luxury of typing with the aid of a spell-checker. The output, therefore, is horrendous. These exemplify the new challenges in the post-Covid era. Our topmost priority should be determining what our students have learnt during the pandemic. Then, we need to decide whether we need to modify courses to ensure that they can successfully ease into or complete their postsecondary degrees. An analysis of the data found in the admission tests can be used to identify the gaps in their knowledge. We need to have a clear picture of the impact of the light content of “Covid-19 curriculum” and the additional support services offered in the last two years.

The immediate challenge for us is to get students back to pre-Covid “functional normal” standards. We need to have a proper policy in place to help our students learn or re-learn. We need to guide them in recalibrating their learning strategies by, for instance, memorising facts or formulas, which are normal at their level. The nature of anxieties and fear, too, has changed. Institutions need additional psychosocial services to cater to the new anxieties of our students to navigate through this transition process.

Above all, we need to learn to collaborate and share our experiences, so that we can prepare for these challenges together. There should be more intra- and inter-institutional dialogues, so that we are better prepared to welcome our students back to campuses, both physically and emotionally.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

What is India doing in Ukraine?



AWAKENING INDIA

Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general, is an MP for Indian National Congress. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2022. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

SHASHI THAROOR

THE Ukraine war has exposed India’s strategic vulnerabilities in a tough neighbourhood as arguably nothing else could, raising fundamental questions about the country’s global position and regional security. But, paradoxically—as the slew of visits of high-profile government officials from the US, several European countries and others to Delhi towards the end of March confirms—the conflict has increased India’s strategic importance and, in the short term, widened its options.

Has Prime Minister Narendra Modi used this room for manoeuvre well? The West, even as it seeks to line up India on its side vis-à-vis Ukraine, has signalled its understanding of India’s dependence on Russia for vital defence equipment and its close diplomatic relations with the Kremlin.

China has been somewhat surprised to find itself on the same page as India regarding the war. Both countries abstained in a series of UN votes condemning the Russian invasion, and have maintained their communication channels with the Kremlin despite Western sanctions. China has been asking for restoration of “normal” bilateral relations with India, which have been in a deep freeze since violent border clashes in June 2020, which killed 20 Indian soldiers. “The world will listen when China and India speak with one voice,” Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reportedly stated on his recent visit to Delhi.

Russia, no doubt eager to thank India for “understanding” the Kremlin’s position, has offered the country economic

incentives—notably, discounted oil and gas and affordable fertiliser—to dissuade it from changing its stance.

While India’s long-standing focus on “strategic autonomy” has kept it out of formal alliances, its broad geopolitical orientation has been veering towards a special partnership with the US, notably in the Indo-Pacific.

India has also significantly increased its defence purchases from the West in recent years, and, with the US, is seeking to modernise its manufacturing base for military equipment. This process is likely to be accelerated by India’s current realisation that its dependence on Russian supplies imposes significant constraints, particularly in the event of a future border crisis with China.

Daleep Singh, the US deputy national security adviser, pointedly warned of “consequences” should India breach the Western-led sanctions on Russia, and he urged India to recognise the diminishing value of its close relationship with the Kremlin. “The more Russia becomes China’s junior partner, the more leverage China gains over Russia, the less and less favourable that is for India’s strategic posture,” he told an Indian TV channel. “Does anyone think that if China breaches the Line of Actual Control, that Russia would now come to India’s defence? I don’t.”

China has been pushing the BRICS grouping (of which it is a member, along with Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as models of non-Western collaboration that can ensure a multipolar world order. But Chinese blandishments towards India are unlikely to succeed if China’s leaders are not willing to reverse their military gains from unprovoked Himalayan incursions in the spring of 2020. India will accept nothing less than a return to the status quo ante of April 2020 as the price for normalising bilateral relations. But whether it can leverage China’s overtures to achieve results on the ground remains to be seen.

Russia, meanwhile, is aware that India’s refusal to condemn its assault on Ukraine does not imply support. India has at no stage endorsed the Russian military campaign, and its language has notably hardened as the war has dragged on. Indian statements now pointedly refer to the inviolability of borders, respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, and the inadmissibility of resorting to force to resolve political disputes, even while calling on “both sides” to pursue diplomatic negotiations.

India has also been quick to provide humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, sending 90 tonnes of relief materials. As the destruction has become more intense, its aid is likely to continue. India will gladly purchase essential supplies of fuel and fertiliser from Russia at discounted rates in rubles. But its diplomatic stance, and decreasing reliance on Russian defence equipment, mean that it is not completely in Russia’s camp.

Still, India’s calls for peace in Ukraine would have been more credible had it taken steps to bring about that outcome. Whereas countries like Turkey and Israel have been actively engaged in peace diplomacy, India has made no effort to play a mediating role, despite at one point sending four cabinet ministers to Europe to supervise the evacuation of Indian citizens from Ukraine. Even Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov suggested, during his visit in Delhi, that India could help “support” a mediation process.

India could have used the diplomatic attention it has been getting over Ukraine to carve out a role worthy of its aspirations for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Sadly, its ambitions seem to have been too modest.

India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, observed in 1946 that “India, constituted as she is, cannot play a secondary part in the world. She will either count for a great deal or not count at all.” Ukraine is a test case, and the jury remains out. Will today’s India count at all?

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