



OUR VIEW



Gaza: Sustainable peace should be the global aim

The agreement between Israel and Hamas to pause the war comes as a relief but enduring peace will take a two-state solution and a rational approach to clashing holy-land claims

About a month-and-a-half after the Israel-Hamas war started, there is at last hope of the bloodshed ending, even if only for a bit. Israel has agreed to pause its military action in Gaza for four days in exchange for the release in batches of 50 hostages held by Hamas. For every additional 10 released, Israel has promised to extend the pause by a day. Plus, according to Hamas, Israel will release 150 Palestinians held behind bars. That bombs and guns will fall silent if this plan succeeds is a relief not just to Gazans, who are in dire need of aid supplies, having suffered an Israeli anti-Hamas blitz that has left over 14,000 dead, by a Palestinian count, with children among them said to be four times the toll taken by Hamas' terror attack of 7 October that sparked the war. Gazans need a breather. To the rest of the world, this week's pact signals a will on both sides to talk, even if only via intermediaries. This suggests a dip in the proximate risk of a wider flare-up of this war, which should calm markets like crude oil that take cues from it. What it implies for armed hostilities once this brief truce runs out is harder to judge. Israel has reaffirmed its intent to wipe out Hamas, although it can't take US backing for granted in perpetuity, given China's opportunistic efforts to court those put off by America's stance.

No matter how the US views the geopolitical puzzle of West Asia, with its 21st century global rival looking to make gains at its expense, the peace that is eventually sought must go well beyond a return to what prevailed before 7 October. For lasting stability, the region needs a proper settlement of the Israel-Palestine dispute, a peace pact across old ruptures that the

world at large can approve of. Its pursuit, we must make explicit, would have nothing to do with the horrors committed by Hamas and everything to do with justice. An unbiased look at the region's history would place the spotlight on a 'two-state solution' as a way out. It was what the United Nations asked for. It is what New Delhi advocates, as re-affirmed by India's external affairs minister S. Jaishankar on Tuesday. For decades, it held an outline of hope for peace, only to be thwarted by rightist Israeli politics and Palestinian extremes that fed off each other. Israel will likely need new leadership for prospects of a truly free state of Palestine to brighten. Sadly, all Israel did was allow 'self-rule' on paper in Gaza and the West Bank, land marked for Palestine, while placing the former under siege and expanding into the latter with brazen disregard on frequent display for the rights of their residents.

Sure, peace is easier to advise than achieve. There are so many sticky points that only a global effort has any chance of resolving this vexed issue. An earnest attempt, though, will require us not to tiptoe around but address issues that past peace talks left for later, such as control over spots considered holy by different faiths. In this context, Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock would be in focus. It stands on a site holy to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Al Aqsa complex. While Jerusalem was to be the shared capital of both states, suspicions run rife among Palestinians of a planned takeover of that site by the Jewish state. Only a rational approach can resolve its status and it's best if no move is made without a consensus. This means we must evolve not just past the age of war, but also past the era of property discords arising from matters of faith.

RAHUL JACOB



is a Mint columnist and a former Financial Times foreign correspondent.

A school expedition to reach the Chanderkhani Pass had gone wrong. A severe snowstorm overnight had exacerbated the exhaustion of a group of boys and girls, prompting the headmaster leading the trek in Kullu to turn back. Decades on, one of the students on the trek recalls there were no lectures on perseverance or the need to toughen up. Instead, the headmaster used humour to rally their spirits. The headmaster was Shomie Das, then at The Lawrence School, Sanawar.

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are often more relevant examples for today's workforce, which requires different management styles than the command-and-control hierarchies of yesteryear. Shomie Das has the unique distinction of having been headmaster at Mayo College, The Lawrence School and The Doon School and then successfully setting up Oakridge International School when most people would have been contemplating retirement. Shukla Bose worked at the Oberoi Hotels and then headed Resort Condominiums India (RCI) before sitting at a small table in a slum in Bengaluru to enlist children to study at a small school she had started. Twenty years on, Parikrma runs four schools plus a junior college for as many as 1,800 children, often from slums and shelters. It counts graduates from National Law School of Bengaluru and Indian Institutes of Management among its alumni. Its football team is excellent.

As a book out this year, *Knowing What We Know* by Simon Winchester recounts, Parikrma sets a new standard for care of students because it includes their parents in its responsibilities. The schools provide employment for about 60 parents, who prepare the meals or drive its buses. Despite often challenging circumstances at home, the high spirits and confidence of the chil-

dren is infectious. Discussing the chapter on Parikrma in the book, the children were not over-awed that a famous non-fiction writer had profiled their school. Instead, a girl pointed out that the street dogs adopted by the school had different names from the characters in Shakespeare Winchester had referenced. Another said he had omitted to mention that Parikrma kids call their teachers "Anna" and "Akka," elder brother and sister in South India. She worried that the author had missed the love and respect students had for their teachers.

Though they have run schools decades apart with students from opposite ends of the spectrum of privilege, Das and Bose share common principles. Sukanya Das, who is working on a biography of Shomie Das and has conducted Zoom interviews with him and many of his students, observes that a commitment to social service and "an insistence on getting children out of the classroom" and exposed to extracurricular activities was central to Das'

approach. At The Doon School, Das had boys help with relief work after the Uttarkashi earthquake in 1992. Similarly, Bose has taken advantage of a donor's large land grant outside Bengaluru to recently set up a "no walls" school to rotate its students through for a few days at a time, so they can get away from the urban sprawl of Bengaluru and enjoy nature. The project called Oxygen is just getting started, yet the great Impressionist painters of the 19th century would rejoice at the exuberance of the gigantic mosaic murals the students have created at the new campus. While recounting alumni's successes, a director of entertainment on a cruise liner and former students who have returned to the school to work as child psychologists and teachers are mentioned with equal pride.

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and irreverent humour. Going to the principal's house was routine and fun. Decades on, we exchange emails and phone calls every couple of months. He insisted I stop calling him 'Sir' a long time ago, saying it made him feel like a bank manager. On his last visit to Bengaluru, Das, now 88, was chief guest at an old boys' cricket match between Doon and Mayo. I have a photo of him listening intently to a youngster, who wasn't even born when Das was principal at Mayo, talk about his agricultural trading business. Still with lessons for us to learn. Das gently pointed out that it was a pity that alumni from the two schools were sitting separately. I made amends and had a delightful afternoon. A recent conversation with Bose was about a 30-year-old ex-student who needs a kidney replacement. Her face was clouded over with worry and the stress of planning a course of treatment and being a de facto parent to the youngster who is an orphan. Bose says a big influence has been American writer David Brooks, who in *The Road to Character* and the recently published *How to Know a Person*, lays out principles for being a better listener and a more empathetic person. In thought and deed, Das and Bose have lived by those principles to the benefit of generations of students.

We must not let an exam marks chase distort education in India

We should change and improve testing to enable real learning and make genuine assessments of it



ANURAG BEHAR
is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation.

Board examinations are among the key problems of Indian education. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 (NCF) confronts this matter head-on, starting with explicitly acknowledging current issues instead of dodging these.

Stress caused by board exams among students and their families is the first big issue. This is driven by a variety of reasons, including: exams marks being seen socially as measure of 'intrinsic worth' and believing that they have life-altering effects; the results of these examinations being used for college admissions or sometimes even for jobs later; underperformance on just one day of exams having severe effects; and commercial interests that create artificial competitive pressures so as to make money from coaching and tuition.

Second, most board examinations do not achieve their primary purpose, and worse, misguide much educational effort in schools. These exams are supposed to certify competencies attained by students at the end of grades 10 and 12. Instead, too many mostly test memorization of a huge range of facts. This fundamental misalignment gives a woefully incomplete (at best) or incorrect (at worst) picture of student learning. Third, most test instruments are poorly designed, which leads to unacceptable variations between evaluators and overall inconsistency. In brief: the validity

and reliability of too many of our board exams are poor.

Misdirected exam design ends up undermining all aspects of education, from teaching and classroom or school practices to text books, which all tend to focus on facts and memorization, rather than on real learning and achieving competencies and curricular goals.

The NCF makes significant changes in board exams to address these issues. These changes are interrelated and in conjunction with those in the overall curricular approach, related to learning standards, content, textbooks, pedagogical methods and more.

The burden of board examinations on students would be reduced through multiple actions. By making exams 'easier and lighter,' for example, which doesn't imply less rigour, but the reverse, as it requires focusing sharply on competencies rather than fact recounting. The content load across subjects would be reduced significantly.

All board exams will be offered at least twice a year, giving students the option to take an exam a second time and improve. Only the best score will be reflected in the mark-sheet. Over a period, we will move to 'on-demand' exams, meaning whenever the student is ready. This move will significantly help reduce stress, because students will neither be penalized for a particular day's performance, nor be judged forever on potentially false readings of their actual learning.

Board examinations would assess the achievement of competencies for the secondary stage, as stated in the Curriculum. These exams will provide a valid and reliable picture of student performance on those competencies. To ensure this, all aspects of test design will be worked upon, including rigorous selection of test developers and evaluators, and their appropriate training; improvement in the test development process; and a periodic review of the efficacy, validity and reliability of the redesigned exams.

Admission methods for higher education are not within the NCF's remit, but it explicitly states the issues. In terms of capacity, India is short of high-quality higher education institutions (HEIs), which makes admission at that level a process of selection through elimination. With hundreds of thousands of students chasing a minuscule number of HEI seats, competition is fierce. In board exams, all students can do as well as the others, as these are assessments of learning. But in higher-education admissions, many must lose out, given our capacity constraint.

The solution to this crisis is not within the school system. Though, even more than board exams, this situation is the cause of many serious problems among school students, including high stress and serious mental health issues (not just afflicting students but also their families); a culture of commercial coaching and tutoring; and a deep and wide trend to ignore real learning and focus on 'cracking' entrance tests for college admissions, vitiating the very purpose of school education.

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) has a comprehensive set of responses to address these challenges, including some that have been implemented, such as a Common University Entrance Test. But the core solution to the crisis lies in a substantial expansion of the number of high-quality HEIs we have. The NEP has set out a clear path towards this, though given the array of sustained actions required to turn this into reality, it will be a very long haul.

While this column has touched only upon board exams, the NCF has a comprehensive framework and detailed guidelines for examinations across grades. We must change and improve these to enable real learning and make genuine assessments of it. The NCF is fully conscious of the truth in the old wisecrack about Indian education: "*Hamare yahaan shiksha nahin, par-ekshaa tantra hai.*" We have an exam system, not an education system.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Sustainable peace requires justice and equality so that people may experience lives of dignity free of fear.

ROBYN SHORT

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

Empathetic educators offer lessons on ideal leadership

RAHUL JACOB



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We must acknowledge the impact teachers have and that leaders are not all of the same kind