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Caution, Milords

The Places of Worship Act won SC's approval just two years ago. Why relook it?

TOI Editorials

Supreme Court's move to examine the validity of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act is unfortunate. Parliament enacted the law in 1991 to prevent conversion of religious places and maintain their "religious character" as it existed on August 15, 1947, with sole exception carved out for the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute – already in courts by then. The Act won high praise from the 2019 SC bench that awarded the disputed land in Ayodhya to Hindus, noting that it "addresses itself to the State as much as to every citizen" and that its norms "bind those who govern the affairs of the nation at every level".

This law praised by SC has been challenged by a PIL, a mechanism many judges now frown upon for their tendency to arrogate governance and bog down judiciary in matters with no constitutional or justiciable issues at stake. The petitioner has opposed the Independence Day cutoff as "arbitrary, irrational and retrospective", which prohibits Hindus and others from approaching courts to "reclaim" worship places "invaded" and "encroached" upon by "fundamentalist barbaric invaders".

Ironically, the petition is guilty of much arbitrariness and irrationality, which wasn't seized to dismiss it. India was founded as a modern, secular nation on August 15, 1947. Much of ancient and medieval history was barbaric and sacrilegous aplenty were committed. The modern Republic can't retrospectively entertain grievances lost in the mists of time. It can't be stuck in 1192, nor can it undermine its Constitution predicated upon rule of law to correct history or its many versions. Indeed, the Republic has to be future-oriented, accountable as it is to citizenry demanding fulfilment of their aspirations of development and material prosperity in the present day, rather than raking up events of a millennium ago (the latter, indeed, is a hallmark of fundamentalist thinking).

The premise of August 15, 1947, was a break with history, guaranteeing equal rights to all people and freedom from discrimination. This foundational character was present in the 1991 law. SC's Ramjanmabhoomi verdict concurs: "Parliament determined that independence from colonial rule furnishes a constitutional basis for healing the injustices of the past. ... The State, has by enacting the law, enforced a constitutional commitment and operationalised its constitutional obligations to uphold the equality of all religions and secularism which is a part of the Constitution's basic structure." Entertaining such PILs opens a Pandora's box – to avoid which, precisely, this law was enacted. The judiciary mustn't open minefields with no major constitutional issue at stake.

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Getting into gear

Quad presses ahead with practical cooperation on vaccines after leaders' summit

TOI Editorials

The first summit of Quad leaders last week saw the grouping definitively move to a concrete geopolitical fixture, with PM Modi describing it as a “force for global good” and an “important pillar of stability” in the Indo-Pacific. The Quad is shifting beyond an exclusive security dimension, exemplified by its ambitious target of producing a billion doses of anti-Covid vaccine. Under the project India will manufacture Johnson & Johnson’s single-dose Covid shot with financing from the US and Japan, while Australia will use its logistics capabilities to ship the vaccines to Southeast Asian and Pacific countries.

The vaccine project is a good test for Quad governments to enhance their coordination, giving rise to cooperative structures. While all the Quad members agree that China’s aggressive behaviour in the Indo-Pacific needs to be balanced, operationalising that principle will require several practical steps. Even now there’re multiple issues on which Quad members have different perspectives. For example, the crisis in Myanmar is viewed through different prisms in Washington and Delhi given the latter’s long relationship with the Myanmar military. Perhaps India and the US can play ‘good cop bad cop’ here to bring Myanmar back to the path of democracy.

Similarly, when Japanese PM Suga spoke to Modi before the summit about China’s unilateral attempts to change the status quo in East and South China Seas, Hong Kong and Xinjiang, New Delhi’s readout of the conversation was silent on these issues. Thus, work remains for Quad nations to align their priorities. That said, the Quad evolving as a security-plus platform has certainly irked China which has been saying that India is a “negative asset” for Brics and SCO. Fair promotion for a forum earlier dismissed as “sea foam” by Beijing.

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Holding up half the sky

A working ecosystem for women's economic freedom must have these components

Sanjay Kumar, [The writer is India Country Director of the Mittal Institute, Harvard University.]



Economic freedom isn't only about how much money women earn, it's about their freedom to choose what they want to do to earn. It's the control over her money and assets that complete the full cycle of women's economic freedom.

Women's economic freedom shouldn't be confined within the four walls of her family and society; she should get a supportive ecosystem which allows her to dream, plan and execute. Freedom of movement for trainings and jobs; easy access to capital and inputs for businesses and a level playing field in both employment and businesses; maternity benefits and support during pregnancy are some of the key areas that can create a supportive work environment for women.

Having a fine balance among all these is very important. In the absence of one or other supportive factor, they can be disrupted easily. Despite tremendous efforts by the government and provisioning in the budgets, it's the inefficiency of the system and social action of people that create roadblocks and imbalances. As we will be celebrating 75 years of independence next year, ensuring full economic freedom with a greater balance in the ecosystem is extremely important for utilising the full potential of half of India's population.

Many women are venturing out into unconventional careers. Some heartening developments in the country truly reveal the power of women's aspirations. Manya Singh, daughter of an autorickshaw driver, winning a Miss India runner-up crown is one such example. Anchal Gangwal, daughter of a tea seller, becoming an IAF flying pilot on her sixth attempt is another example of perseverance. Annies Kanmani Joy of Kerala fought poverty and cracked UPSC in her second attempt, to become an IAS officer last year.

There are hundreds of such examples testifying to the determination of young women to break into careers of their choice. However, there are equally disappointing stories where women are giving up due to structural and social barriers. As a nation, we have a responsibility of creating a suitable ecosystem that acts as an enabler and facilitator and not as a barrier.

Some of the areas which need immediate attention are as follows. Access to good quality education for girls and their retention in schools and colleges is fundamental. Education justice can certainly lead to economic freedom. According to a report by the National Commission on Protection of Child Rights in

2018, 39.4% girls between age 15-18 drop out of school and college, out of which 65% either get into household chores or are engaged in begging etc.

There are economic factors that lead them to leave education. Schools and colleges need to be more gender friendly. While we have built schools and colleges, many of them don't have functional female toilets. According to a CAG survey, 40% of toilets constructed by the public sector under 'Swachh Vidyalaya Abhiyan' are either non-existent or can't be used. The report further stated that the objective of providing separate toilets for boys and girls wasn't fulfilled in 27% of the schools.

The lack of separate toilets for girls is among the top barriers to girls' education. At puberty, access to a separate toilet can be the deciding factor for her continuation with education. Similarly, they need access to a water point and a place to dispose of their pads. In absence of all these, girls may miss up to five days of school every month and eventually drop out.

The other area which requires much attention is safety and security of women. According to the NCRB, India recorded 88 rape cases every day in 2019. The report further highlights that the rape vulnerability of a girl or woman has increased up to 44% in the last decade.

It's unfortunate that even available funds to enhance women's safety aren't utilised by state governments. Only about 36% of the 'Nirbhaya fund' has been utilised since it was set up in 2013. Due to increasing sexual harassment on the streets and in the workplace, women's free mobility gets obstructed, impinging on their economic activities.

Even after the serious efforts by the current government under Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojna, women entrepreneurs don't get easy access to institutional finance. Banks aren't supportive of giving moderate size loans to women entrepreneurs without collateral. In the index of women entrepreneurs, India ranked 52nd out of 57 countries surveyed in 2019.

An ORF study reveals that the low women entrepreneurship rates are part of a broader gender gap in economic participation and opportunity. The report recommends that women entrepreneurs in India need better access to finance and networks. There's a need to create branches or exclusive desks headed by women officers within banks, to serve exclusively to the needs of women entrepreneurs of all sizes.

The digital revolution has brought tremendous opportunities for women at all levels. Digital money transactions and facility to hold money digitally is extremely powerful for many women who had to keep money secretly from their husbands. However, some of the digital platforms and transactions can be risky, especially for illiterate and semi-literate women. Considering this, the government should set up a 'National Women Digital Mission'. This mission can run digital literacy programmes; assist entrepreneurs in showcasing and selling their products; ensure safe digital space for women to name a few functions.

Economic freedom for women entails overcoming all these challenges. A combination of efforts by the government, society and family members could bring dramatic results. As we celebrate the 75th year of our political freedom, it makes complete sense for each and every woman of our nation to expect and enjoy economic freedom.

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A story for Quad

It makes clear it is neither military alliance nor anti-China coalition. Broad-based agenda makes forum more sustainable.

Editorial

In widening the forum's focus away from military security and towards the provision of public goods in the vast Indo-Pacific littoral, the first summit of the Quadrilateral Dialogue involving India, Australia, Japan and the United States has improved its own long-term political prospects. Since the first steps towards the Quad's construction in 2007, China has sought to define the regional discourse by describing the forum as the "Asian NATO" and the harbinger of a "new Cold War". The conflation of the Quad with the annual Malabar naval exercises that India conducts with the US and Japan (Australia was invited to join last year) added to the image of the Quad as a military formation and generated much unease across the Indo-Pacific.

The leaders of the four nations, meeting digitally last Friday, were wise to make it clear that the Quad is neither a military alliance nor an anti-China coalition. They also insisted that the Quad is an inclusive forum. The four leaders declared that the Quad is a "flexible group of like-minded partners dedicated to advancing a common vision and to ensuring peace and prosperity". The challenges posed by the pandemic presented a perfect setting for the Quad nations to demonstrate their commitment to the broader agenda that is in tune with the urgent requirements of the region. The decision to pool their resources — American technology, Japanese finance, Indian production capacity and Australia's logistics capability — and produce a billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine for distribution in the Indo-Pacific helps the four countries develop a new narrative for the Quad. The summit set up a working group on the vaccine partnership that will report on the progress to the four leaders when they meet in-person before the end of the year. So will the two other working groups announced by the summit — one on critical technologies and the other on climate change.

This broad-based practical agenda of the Quad also counters a second Chinese narrative on the forum. When it was not demonising the Quad as "Asian Nato", the Chinese leadership dismissed it as transient "sea-foam". The repurposing of the Quad to deal with shared challenges in the Indo-Pacific ensures the forum's political sustainability over the longer term. It has taken quite a while for the Quad to arrive at this balanced framework; but the summit has gotten it just right. As the Quad finds a new credibility, China might be unwise to continue with its dual policy of condemnation and condescension. All four capitals — Delhi, Canberra, Tokyo and Washington — have huge stakes in a productive, peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship with China that has risen to become the world's second largest economic and military power. It is up to Beijing now to rethink its current aggressive policies and seek cooperative relations with its Asian neighbours and the US. But if China continues to pursue hegemony, the Quad is bound to become an inevitable balancing force.

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Coming full spiral

With sc reconsidering ceiling for reservation,we can ask difficult about power-sharing

Satish Deshpande,[The writer teaches at Delhi University]



With the Supreme Court readying itself to raise its previously-imposed ceiling of 50 per cent as the upper limit for reservations, the spiral of history has completed a full cycle in almost exactly one hundred years. It is a spiral because we have not returned to the exact place where we were a century ago. But we are indeed rediscovering, albeit in changed circumstances, what we may have intentionally or unknowingly forgotten.

In September 1921, the so-called “Communal GO” (or Government Order) was passed in the Madras Presidency by a provincial government led by the Justice Party. The Communal GO was essentially a power-sharing agreement that had the blessings of the colonial government. It allocated government jobs and seats in public higher education institutions to different communities in specific proportions. It was designed to check the near-monopoly of Brahmins on these opportunities despite the fact that they constituted only about three per cent of the population. The GO also signalled the arrival of popular politics, and was the culmination of a successful campaign for electoral power by the so-called non-Brahmin movement spearheaded by the Justice Party. These government opportunities were to be shared among six communities: Brahmins, non-Brahmin Hindus, Mohammedans, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians and Europeans, and others.

Significantly, caste is only one factor alongside religion and race in the identification of communities. But most important here is the rationale for this policy — it is not based on any form of backwardness or disadvantage. Rather, it is an explicitly political principle of sharing the state’s resources and opportunities. The political nature of this sharing is highlighted by the fact that an “objective” — hence apolitical — criterion like proportion of population is not decisive, though it is related to the popular notion of “justice” that anchors this arrangement ideologically.

Fast forward to the next decade when the British government grants separate electorates to different religious and caste communities. The recognition of the Depressed Classes (roughly today’s Dalit castes and Adivasi communities) as a separate electorate threatens the legitimacy of the Indian National Congress as the party that represents “India”. Without the Dalit-Adivasi group, the Congress is left representing only “Caste Hindus”, or just about half of the Indian population. Mahatma Gandhi is determined to prevent this and announces his first-ever fast unto death in September 1932. The enormous pressure brought to bear by the Mahatma’s unilateral fast — effectively a veto — forces

Ambedkar and other Depressed Class leaders into the so-called Poona Pact: The separate electorate is given up in return for a fixed number of seats for them in the legislature. Reservation is born.

With this one-sided “pact”, Gandhi and the Congress gain the immeasurable political distance that separates a “Caste Hindu” party from a party that stands for “India”. Ambedkar and the Depressed Classes are forced to retreat from the status of a community as entitled as any other to its share in the nation, to the status of a supplicant group granted a special concession. The Poona Pact leads directly to the Government of India Act of 1935, which first creates the Schedules naming the ex-untouchable castes and Adivasi tribes, thus coining the now-ubiquitous acronym SC-ST.

Jump now to 1947, Independence, and the formation of the Constituent Assembly or the new nation’s proto-parliament. In the aftermath of Partition, ideological lines have hardened, and the Assembly is dominated by voices unwilling to recognise internal divisions within the new-born nation, which is asserted to be one. Communities identified by their comprehensive exclusion from mainstream society — for which untouchability is the overarching metaphor — are now described in the developmental language of “backwardness”. Active discrimination is translated into passive disadvantage.

This crucial shift of perspective bears fruit in the newly-minted Constitution adopted on January 26, 1950. On the one hand, the Constitution (through Articles 15, 16 and 17) appears to banish all forms of discrimination, specifically including caste discrimination. On the other hand, the same Constitution adopts the lists of Scheduled Castes and Tribes created in 1935 as the basis for reservation. This contradiction is immediately weaponised by the upper castes and the Madras High Court uses Article 15 to strike down caste-based reservation, a decision upheld later by the Supreme Court, thus provoking the insertion of a protective clause through the First Amendment to the Constitution in 1951.

The Constitution (especially after the First Amendment) cemented the ideological position of reservation as the exception to the norm of meritocracy, thereby locking the code words “reservation” and “merit” into an implacable, mutually-exclusive dichotomy. The arrival of the backward castes on the national stage in 1990 and the extension of reservation to the Other Backward Classes (OBC) disturbed this firm positioning, which was finally disrupted entirely by the reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) brought about through the 102nd Amendment to the Constitution of 2019.

Coming after the proliferation of demands for sub-quotas within existing quotas and agitations for the creation of new quotas, the Supreme Court’s most recent initiative only begins the process of accepting in principle what has anyway been true in practice. The post-EWS reservation scenario reminds us of the resource-sharing framework of the Communal GO of a century ago. The long and disabling period of nearly half-a-century since the 1950 Constitution, during which the myth of caste-as-exception and the deceptive dichotomy of reservation-versus-merit was perpetuated, is now behind us. Instead of hiding behind the false certainties of a hypocritical rhetoric, we can now begin to confront some difficult but real questions.

To what extent and in which contexts do collective identities still remain useful as the units among which national resources are to be shared? Why do some claims on resources (like reservations) invite so much indignant scrutiny while others (like bank loans that turn into Non-Performing Assets) do not? How can we learn to reexamine taken-for-granted forms of reservation-like exclusive access (personalised, kin-based recruitment to private-sector jobs, higher educational institutions behind high fee-walls)? Things may get worse before they get better, but living with hope is better than living in denial.



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Summit spirit

The Quad broadens India's interests on its geopolitical horizons further

Editorial

The virtual summit that brought together leaders of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, last week, contained both broad substance and deep symbolism. Countering any perception that the Quad is merely a “talk-shop”, the outcomes announced by U.S. President Biden and Prime Ministers Modi, Morrison and Suga include a vaccine initiative and joint working groups to cooperate on critical technology as well as climate change. The vaccine initiative comes with an ambitious deadline: a billion vaccines by the end of 2022, made in India with U.S. technology, Japanese funding and Australian distribution networks to reach as many Indo-Pacific countries as possible. The four Quad countries will ensure emissions reduction based on the Paris accord as well as cooperate on technology supply chains, 5G networks, and biotechnology. Mr. Biden, who hosted the summit, managed some powerful atmospherics, by coordinating a joint statement — and a first — called “The Spirit of the Quad”, and a joint article by the four leaders that committed to an open Indo-Pacific “free from coercion”. The leaders are expected to meet later this year, at the G-7 summit. For Mr. Biden, the early push for the Quad engagement is part of his promise that “America is back” in terms of global leadership, reaffirming regional alliances, and taking on the growing challenge from China. For similar reasons, and due to maritime tensions with China, trade and telecommunication issues, Australia and Japan are keen on taking the Quad partnership to deeper levels of cooperation. For India, the new terms of the Quad will mean more strategic support after a tense year at the LAC, as also a boost for its pharmaceutical prowess, opportunities for technology partnerships, and more avenues for regional cooperation on development projects and financing infrastructure, especially in South Asia, where China has taken the lead.

It would be a mistake, however, to portray the Quad summit as a “throwing down of the gauntlet” to China. The new U.S. government is still exploring its own relationship with China; its first engagement with Beijing’s top diplomats is in Alaska, on Thursday. For Japan and Australia, China remains the biggest trading partner, a relationship that will only grow once the 15-nation RCEP kicks in. India, given its own ties with China, sensitivities over ongoing LAC disengagement talks, and its other multilateral commitments at the BRICS and SCO groupings, also displayed caution in the Quad engagement, keeping the conversation focused on what Mr. Modi called making the Quad a “force for global good” rather than pushing plans for a militaristic coalition. In that sense, the Quad’s new “summit avatar” has given India yet another string to its bow, broadening India’s interests on its geopolitical horizons even further.

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नई शुरुआत

संपादकीय

अमेरिका में जो बाइडन के राष्ट्रपति पद संभालने के बाद चारों क्वाड नेताओं की पहली आभासी बैठक इस बात का स्पष्ट संकेत देती है कि अमेरिका, जापान, ऑस्ट्रेलिया और भारत का यह चार सदस्यीय समूह निर्णायक रूप से संकीर्ण सुरक्षा साझेदारी से आगे एक भू-राजनीतिक समूह बनने की ओर अग्रसर है। यह अन्य क्षेत्रों में सहयोग के जरिये क्षेत्र में चीन के बढ़ते वर्चस्व को चुनौती दे सकता है। यह बात विदेश मंत्रालय के एक वक्तव्य से भी स्पष्ट होती है जो शिखर बैठक से ठीक पहले सामने आया था और जिसमें 'हिंद महासागर-प्रशांत क्षेत्र को मुक्त और समावेशी' बनाए रखने और ऐसा रिश्ता विकसित करने की बात शामिल थी जिसके माध्यम से 'मजबूत आपूर्ति शृंखला, उभरती और अहम तकनीक, समुद्री सुरक्षा और जलवायु परिवर्तन' के मसलों का समाधान किया जा सके। अतीत की तरह स्वयं को संयुक्त नौसैनिक कवायद तक सीमित रखने के बजाय चारों नेताओं ने समूह की लचीली प्रकृति का लाभ उठाया। यह इसे हमारे दौर की सबसे बड़ी वैश्विक चुनौती यानी कोविड-19 महामारी से निपटने में मददगार साबित हो रही है।

नया एजेंडा सीधे तौर पर 'टीका राष्ट्रवाद' से जुड़ा है जिसमें तमाम अमीर देश सबसे पहले अपनी आबादी के लिए टीका सुरक्षित करने के लिए व्यग्र नजर आ रहे हैं। बहरहाल क्वाड की योजना के अनुसार अमेरिका और जापान भारत की टीका उत्पादन क्षमता में वित्त पोषण करेंगे और ऑस्ट्रेलिया दक्षिण-पूर्वी एशिया और प्रशांत क्षेत्र के दूरदराज इलाकों में टीके की आपूर्ति मजबूत करने में मदद करेगा। यूएस डेवलपमेंट फाइनेंस कॉर्पोरेशन हैदराबाद की बायोलॉजिकल ई लिमिटेड के साथ मिलकर जॉनसन एंड जॉनसन की एक खुराक लगने वाले टीके की एक अरब खुराक तैयार करेगा। 'द स्पिरिट ऑफ क्वाड' शीर्षक वाली इस पहल के पहले संयुक्त वक्तव्य में स्पष्ट संकेत किया गया है कि कई विषयों पर करीबी सहयोग संभव होगा। तीन नए कार्य समूह भी तैयार किए गए हैं। एक का संबंध टीके के क्रियान्वयन से है जबकि अन्य दो जलवायु परिवर्तन और अहम उभरती तकनीक से संबंधित हैं। क्वाड नेताओं की इससे पहले हुई बैठकों में प्रायः हर सदस्य देश का अलग वक्तव्य होता था। ये तमाम बातें बड़ी कुशलता से चीन के उस वक्तव्य को खारिज करती हैं जिसमें उसने कहा था कि क्वाड 'हिंद-प्रशांत क्षेत्र के नाटो' से अधिक कुछ नहीं है।

यह स्पष्ट है कि अमेरिका के तत्कालीन राष्ट्रपति डॉनल्ड ट्रंप के बराक ओबामा के नेतृत्व में तैयार प्रशांत पार साझेदारी से बाहर होने के चार साल बाद अमेरिका का नया डेमोक्रेटिक प्रशासन क्वाड को एशिया-प्रशांत क्षेत्र में अहम ढंग से देख रहा है। अप्रैल में बाइडन की मुलाकात जापान के प्रधानमंत्री से हो सकती है। सन 2017 में ट्रंप प्रशासन ने क्वाड को

क्वाड-2 के नाम से नए सिरे से शुरू किया। इससे पहले छह साल यह समूह अपेक्षाकृत निष्क्रिय रहा क्योंकि चीन की आपत्ति के बाद ऑस्ट्रेलिया ने इससे दूरी बना ली थी।

ट्रंप प्रशासन की पहल चीन के साथ व्यापारिक जंग का हिस्सा थी और इसकी पहली बैठक उनके पद संभालने के एक वर्ष 10 माह बाद हुई। इसके बाद चार सदस्यीय मलाबार नौसैनिक अभ्यास बंगाल की खाड़ी में और गत वर्ष नवंबर में अरब सागर में हुआ। बाइडन प्रशासन ने पद संभालने के दो माह के भीतर क्वाड को आगे बढ़ाने का निर्णय लिया है और यह दर्शाता है कि वह क्षेत्र में चीन के भू-राजनीतिक खतरे को लेकर कितना चिंतित है। जैसा कि प्रधानमंत्री नरेंद्र मोदी ने अपने स्वागत उद्बोधन में कहा, 'क्वाड का सफल विकास हुआ है। अब यह क्षेत्र में स्थिरता का अहम आधार होगा।' यहां भारत के पास भी अवसर है कि वह हिमालय या हिंद महासागर में चीन की सुरक्षा संबंधी धमकियों का नपातुला प्रत्युत्तर दे सके।



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क्वाड का संदेश

संपादकीय

वीडियो कांफ्रेंसिंग के जरिए शुक्रवार को हुआ क्वाड देशों का पहला शिखर सम्मेलन अंतरराष्ट्रीय राजनीति में मील का एक पत्थर माना जाना चाहिए। क्वाड समूह के सदस्य देशों- भारत, अमेरिका, ऑस्ट्रेलिया और जापान ने इस शिखर सम्मेलन के जरिए एशियाई क्षेत्र और प्रशांत व हिंद महासागर में शक्ति संतुलन स्थापित करने की जो कवायद शुरू की है, वह चीन के लिए साफ संदेश है कि अब उसे अपने विस्तारवादी कदमों से बाज आना होगा। शिखर सम्मेलन में चीन को लेकर अमेरिका और जापान का जो रुख रहा, उससे भी यह साफ हो जाता है कि आने वाले दिनों में चीन की चुनौतियां बढ़ सकती हैं। शिखर सम्मेलन में सदस्य राष्ट्रों ने जिस तरह से प्राथमिकताओं को निर्धारित किया है, उससे भविष्य में दुनिया के आधे हिस्से में क्वाड की निर्णायक भूमिका भी रेखांकित होती है। इसीलिए कूटनीति के विशेषज्ञों ने क्वाड की तुलना 1957 में पेरिस में हुई नाटो की पहली बैठक से करने में कोई संकोच नहीं किया। जाहिर है, क्वाड को एक नई वैश्विक व्यवस्था के रूप में देखा जा रहा है। सम्मेलन के बाद चारों नेताओं की ओर से जारी साझा बयान में पहली बात यही है कि क्वाड समूह हिंद प्रशांत क्षेत्र को मुक्त, सभी के लिए खुला और समान अवसरों वाला, लोकतांत्रिक मूल्यों पर आधारित और बिना किसी के दबदबे वाला क्षेत्र बनाने की कोशिश करेगा। चीन यही नहीं होने देना चाहता।

क्वाड की औपचारिक नींव वर्ष 2007 में जापान की पहल पर पड़ी थी। इसकी स्थापना के मूल में चिंता चीन को लेकर ही थी। हालांकि करीब एक दशक तक इस संगठन ने कोई सक्रियता नहीं दिखाई, लेकिन 2017 में इसे सक्रिय रूप दिया गया और 2019 में क्वाड देशों के विदेश मंत्रियों की बैठक में यह साफ हो गया था कि क्वाड चीन के खिलाफ एक बड़ा रणनीतिक मोर्चा है। हकीकत यह है कि क्वाड के सभी सदस्य देशों का चीन के साथ टकराव है। अमेरिका और चीन के

बीच व्यापार युद्ध अभी भी खत्म नहीं हुआ है। कोरोना महामारी फैलाने का ठीकरा भी अमेरिका ने चीन फोड़ा है, जिससे वह बौखलाया हुआ है। भारत के साथ चीन का सीमा विवाद पहले है और पिछले एक साल में दोनों देशों के बीच बेहद तनाव रहा। जापान और चीन के बीच दशकों से विवाद है और हाल में जापानी द्वीप और उसके समुद्री इलाके में चीन की गतिविधियां बढ़ने से तनाव और बढ़ गया है। ऑस्ट्रेलिया से भी चीन चिढ़ा हुआ है। सभी देश चीन की विस्तारवादी नीतियों को लेकर चिंतित हैं। ऐसे में क्वाड जैसे बड़े मोर्चे की अहमियत बढ़ जाती है।

क्वाड देशों ने कोरोना और जलवायु संकट की चुनौतियों से निपटने के लिए विशेषज्ञों के अलग-अलग समूह बनाने पर सहमति जताई है। भारत, जापान, अमेरिका और ऑस्ट्रेलिया भौगोलिक रूप से भले दूर हों, लेकिन महत्वपूर्ण मोर्चों पर एक दूसरे के साथ खड़े हो कर यह संदेश दे रहे हैं कि वे किसी भी तरह की वैश्विक चुनौती का मिल कर सामना करने को तैयार हैं। इसमें कोई संदेह नहीं कि आने वाले वक्त में दक्षिण चीन सागर युद्ध का नया अखाड़ा बन सकता है। यहां चीन ने अपने सैनिक अड्डे बना रखे हैं। अमेरिका और उसके सहयोगी देशों के सैन्य बेड़े भी यहां मौजूद हैं। जरूरत पड़ने पर वियतनाम, दक्षिण कोरिया, न्यूजीलैंड जैसे देश भी क्वाड का साथ देने में नहीं हिचकेंगे। हालांकि चीन की शक्ति को भी कम करके नहीं आंका जा सकता। रूस, पाकिस्तान, ईरान, उत्तर कोरिया जैसे देश उसके खेमे में हैं। वह सुरक्षा का स्थायी सदस्य है। ऐसे में वैश्विक राजनीति की नई बिसात पर कौन कैसी चाल चलता है और कितनी शांति रह पाती है, इसकी भविष्यवाणी आसान नहीं है।
