

MONOPOLY IN THE DIGITAL AGE



ANYTHING
THAT
MOVES
GIRISH
SHAHANE

Recently, after years of dodging paywalls, I signed up for a *New York Times* (NYT) digital subscription. Paying \$100 per month felt less burdensome than constantly clearing memory caches and using incognito mode plus a VPN. NYT had a circulation of slightly over a million at the turn of the 21st century, when physical editions still dominated the market. At that time, other major American cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, DC, San Francisco, Houston and Dallas each boasted a local newspaper with a daily print run exceeding half a million.

These figures did not convert to digital subscriptions in the same proportion. By 2019, *The New York Times* had 27 million subscribers online. *The Washington Post* counted 17 million, and next in line was the *Los Angeles Times*, with a mere 770,000. While NYT grew its newsroom, hundreds of local papers were forced to shrink their or shut down entirely.

The internet, once considered the herald of a democratic, decentralized discourse, has become the domain of monopolies. It gives every body a voice, but most remain unheard while a few garner a disproportionate amount of traffic and an even greater portion of revenues.

A decade ago, the four largest operating systems were installed on 60% of smartphones sold, while an assortment of smaller competitors held a 40% share. By 2019, virtually every new smartphone ran either on Apple's iOS or Google's Android. A similar consolidation has taken place across industries in most nations, although it is most prominent in technology and entertainment.

India is no exception. Single-screen cinemas are being replaced by multiplex operators, and local *kiran* stores superseded by supermarket chains. The telecommunications sector has witnessed Airtel and Reliance Communications file



Aggregators like Swiggy and Zomato are known to have collected data on eating habits to create their own kitchens in direct competition with their restaurant partners.

for bankruptcy and Vodafone-Idea might be on its last legs, leaving the field to just two viable firms, Reliance Jio and Airtel. Indian e-commerce is dominated by Amazon and Flipkart, with only Reliance capable of grabbing a big slice of the market from them. Other duopolies include Uber and Ola in ride-sharing and Zomato and Swiggy in food delivery.

The rise of monopolies (I use the term broadly, to include duopolies and oligopolies) has spurred antitrust investigations by bodies like the Competition Commission of India, but few result in more than a slap on the wrist for anti-competitive behaviour. One reason is that we tend to look at monopolies through the outdated lens of pricing, the idea that firms inevitably leverage dominance to overcharge customers. There is no evidence of this happening among contemporary monopolies, a few of which, like Google and Facebook, offer their services free. In fact, the rise of tech monopolies has in many ways been a boon for consumers.

Reliance Jio's cheap data plans gave millions of Indians their first taste of video

streaming and online gaming. Amazon and Flipkart provide more choice at better prices than we could hope to find by travelling physical stores, and the ease of returning defective goods ensures customers rarely feel cheated. Uber and Ola taxi rides are priced competitively compared to conventional cabs and autorickshaws, while Zomato and Swiggy always have tempting meal discounts on offer.

There is, however, a bleaker side of our bargain with monopolies that deserves to be examined. When ride-hailing apps first came to India, they enticed drivers with lucrative promotions in order to achieve the required cab density. Later, while keeping the price of rides reasonable, they squeezed their "partners" to stanch their own losses. A number of drivers spoke to me during pre-pandemic rides complaining they had to work 12-hour shifts seven days a week just to make ends meet while also paying off vehicle loans.

Zomato and Swiggy played a similar game with restaurant owners, who initially saw aggregators as an excellent means of boosting sales without signifi-

cantly increasing costs. Eventually, the aggregators transferred more of the discounting burden to restaurants, whose regular business was suffering because of competition from those same food delivery services. As if this lose-lose situation was not bad enough, the aggregators used data they had collected on eating habits to create their own kitchens in direct competition with restaurant partners.

I can write about the conflict between Oyo and hotels, or the damage done to brick and mortar retail by e-commerce, but all of it boils down to one fact: Power and wealth are increasingly concentrated in a few hands, leaving thousands of small business and self-employed workers at the mercy of monopoly operators. There is no easy solution to the problem, and it would be hypocritical of me to pin the blame on monopolists, since I am an enthusiastic customer of so many of their products and services. I am typing these words on a MacBook Air laptop, using MS Office software purchased through Amazon.

I will deliver the finished piece via Gmail, and post the published article on my Facebook timeline. Nor can I blame individuals like Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Apple's Steve Jobs, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Reliance's Mukesh Ambani for winning a game played within widely accepted rules.

It is those rules we need to change, without throwing the baby of innovation out with the bathwater of inequality. To find new rules, we must first alter our mindset. We need to delink the fortunes of a few from those of the many, and stop treating the stock market as a proxy for the economy. The gap between the two has never been more apparent, with markets buoyant and the world mired in the worst economic contraction in decades.

Mukesh Ambani has moved steadily up the list of the world's wealthiest individuals even as millions of Indians slip into poverty caused by a months-long forced separation from their livelihoods. It is facile to blame the two causally, but I wish we had less coverage of the former and more reporting about those facing the gravest crisis of their working lives.

Girish Shahane writes on politics, history and art.

CLIMATE CHANGE TRACKER

BIBEK BHATTACHARYA

THIS WEEK: The threat of humid heat to India



Parts of India are at high risk from the rising phenomenon of extreme humid heat.

What's wet-bulb heat?

In a recent episode of the Mint Climate Change Tracker podcast, I asked climatologist Chirag Dhar from the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), Pune, about some of the effects of the climate crisis on India that he's personally concerned about. Speaking of the Indo-Gangetic plains and coastal India, he said: "The area is very humid because of the massive rivers that flow through. So you have very hot conditions there during the summer, along with very humid conditions, and this combined effect of temperature and humidity really affects human health."

A lethal combination of heat and humidity, called "wet-bulb temperature", has emerged as a major global risk, especially in South Asia. A paper published by the McKinsey Global Institute on 12 August, *Climate Risk And Response In Asia: Research Preview*, which looks at a time frame of 2030-50, says, "...large cities in parts of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan could be among the first places in the world to experience heat waves that exceed the survivability threshold." This threshold is that of a human being resting in shade over a three-day period during a wet-bulb (WB) heatwave of temperatures in excess of 34 degrees Celsius. The paper is based on climate modelling done by scientists at the US-based climate think tank Woods Hole Research Center.

A study published in *Science Advances* in May, titled *The Emergence of Heat Humidity Too Severe For Human Tolerance*, says extreme humid heat has doubled in frequency worldwide since 1979. One of these hot hot spots comprises north-west India, the Indo-Gangetic plains and eastern coastal India, where WB temperatures of over 34 degrees Celsius are already common. The McKinsey paper further says that by 2050, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan could have 500-700 million people living in regions that have a 20% probability of lethal WB heatwaves every year. Since high WB temperatures also severely limit people's ability to work, the paper estimates an up to 13% hit to the GDP of these three countries.

Follow the column with #MintClimateTracker. Scan the QR code to hear the first two seasons of the Mint Climate Change Tracker podcast.



Medium Talk

More than small talk

GANESH CHATURTHI

When did idols of the elephant-headed god become elephant-sized?

Over the years, it has become all about scale for 'mandals'—now the Maharashtra government is trying to rein them in

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From the window of his office, Balasahab Kamble points to a spot right outside. "That's where he would sit," he says. "Every year since 1935. He won't this year though."

Ganesh Chaturthi, which begins today, is less than a week away when we meet. The *mandap* outside Kamble's office is up, but the seat of the Lalbaugha Raja Ganesh idol is empty. The civic body has urged *mandals* to have one person at the *mandal* this year, courtesy the pandemic. Lalbaugha Raja, like many prominent *mandals* in the city, will not have one.

Kamble, 48, is the chairperson of the Lalbaugha Raja Sarvajank Ganeshotsav Mandal. Every year, its Ganesh Chaturthi celebrations attract hundreds of thousands of people. They wait for hours to catch a glimpse of the deity, who is sometimes taller than 30m. The scale of the festivities, however, would make the *darsan* worth the wait. Massive archways would mark the entrance, ramps and barricades directing crowds to a grand table, a 14ft Ganesh sitting on the throne. At his office, Kamble hands me a *mandal* memorial book. When they started 85 years ago, he explains, they only had clay idols, 4-6ft tall, and often had a social or political theme. The taller ones, up to 8ft, were propped up by bamboo and wood.

"And with time, more and more people started coming in," says Kamble. "But we noticed all they wanted was to touch the feet of the idol. The social messaging lay

ignored."

In 1989, the idol's look was standardized and its height increased to 14ft. Clay couldn't be used for idols that big, so gypsum (better known as Plaster of Paris, or POP) was used to construct them. "It was a break from tradition but that's what the new generation wanted," says Kamble.

A month ago, the Maharashtra government, citing environmental pollution, asked for idol sizes to be reduced to 4ft. *Mandals* across the city opposed it, though most have since fallen in line. While Lalbaugha Raja is hosting a 10-day *aravan*, or health festival, the issue of idol height remains unresolved. "Tall clay idols break, so we need POP to retain the height," says Kamble. "Just because there's no eco-friendly alternative to it, shouldn't mean we must reduce the height."

So, when did religious sentiment get linked to size? It certainly didn't start off as a list of monopolies from one courtyard. You are to bathe, clothe, feast and worship it for one-and-a-half days and then immerse it in water. "This was the way for centuries. In 1989, however, freedom fighter Bal Gangadhar Tilak pitched for public Ganesh Chaturthi celebrations. "This was the first time the idols came out of the houses, and into the streets," says Nishizhitha Sahkarandale, founder of Trava Outdoors, which organizes heritage Ganeshotsav walks in Pune. The idols were put upon a stage and, for better visibility, increased in size. "Even then, they only went up to 4ft."

Initially, Tilak started public celebrations in Pune and Mumbai. Over the years, other parts of Maharashtra followed suit. "There is a crucial difference in its evolution since," says Sahkarandale. "The older *mandals* in Pune, like Kasha Ganpati or Bhau Rangari Ganpati, only immerse the smaller replicas of their idols—up to 2ft. In Mumbai, idols of all sizes are immersed in the sea. "It's perhaps because Mumbai is a coastal city and the immersion was never a problem," she adds. But it was just as much about the bling. "Some think, *jika jasti shoo-shaa, tilka jasta maan* (the bigger the better)."



The idol of Lalbaugha Raja being taken for immersion in 2019.

POP idols have many advantages over clay. The material is stronger, dries faster and allows for much bigger idols. But it's not environment friendly. It doesn't dissolve in water. For idol manufacturers, this wasn't much of a concern. In Pen, Deodhar remembers, idol-making was emerging as a steady source of round-the-year revenue by the 1980s. As production increased, idols were being transported across Maharashtra, and beyond.

Umesh Naik, 54, chairperson of the Chinchpokhicha Chintamani Ganesh Mandal, remembers the first time they discussed increasing the idol's height. It was 1990. "We thought if the other *mandal* were doing it, we should too." The

elders weren't keen. "But *kalachi garus holi* (it was the need of the hour). People get attracted to big idols. The queues get longer," he adds just a sense of "competition", he adds quickly. "We wanted to make our name, our *mandal*'s name."

Like Lalbaugha Raja two years earlier, Naik's committee too decided to standardize the look of its Ganesh idol. The height was increased from 4ft to 15ft. A 22ft throne, inscribed with mythological figures, formed the backdrop. The colours became more vivid, the jewellery and flowers more prominent. The *mandal* also started carrying out an *aravan* and *visarjan yatra* (an arrival and immersion procession) for their idol, complete with *dhol-tasha* and *aartis* on microphones.

Private worship had become a public spectacle. And it worked. From a visitor count of 10,000-15,000 a day in the 1990s, the Chinchpokhicha Chintamani *mandal* saw 70,000-80,000 devotees a day in 2019. "Our donations increased, as did our advertisers," says Naik. Last year, the 10-day celebration netted his *mandal* ₹1.5 crore.

Today, Ganesh Chaturthi is celebrated across several states. The tallest idol is in Maharashtra but in Hyderabad, the 68ft Khairatabad Ganesh. But the unfortunate

side of the bling-celebrations too has become evident. The lakes and rivers are often clogged for weeks after large-scale immersions. In coastal areas, the sea often throws back the festival paraphernalia: mud, plastic, thermocool and broken parts of idols.

This year, for the first time, the Maharashtra government has imposed restrictions on idol height and capped the number of public events. While they have skipped the celebrations this year, Naik says a permanent restriction on height might not fly with devotees. "Everyone has certain images. You can tell from the kind of idols and tell the *mandal*. When I meet someone, people know me because of our trademark idol. That shouldn't disappear."

Deodhar, the sculptor from Pen, says it's a move in the right direction, but he can't quite say that out too loud. "I am a clay artist," he says. "So if you ask me, Ganesh idols should only be made of clay. But nearly 250,000-300,000 people from my town are employed in this industry. I am their leader too, so I have to look out for their interests as well."

It's a tough balancing act with no clear answer, he admits. "Only," he says, "environmental conservation shouldn't have a human cost."

Why writing fiction is like engaging your core

A journalist muses on the addictive process of writing fiction and waiting for readers to savour her first book of short stories

Nisha Susan

A boy and I were in the glimmer of a smile stage. It was evening and we were standing on a tiny decorative bridge on his college campus. As we turned to each other to say something, a group of students dattered past us. A law student I had never spoken to was among them. Returned and saw our glimmer of a smile. Without any ado, the one that compensated every event we were there for would be further off, he stopped in front of us and began. No hello. Just, "What is the difference between Philip Glass and Mahatma Gandhi?" I felt terror and dutched the bridge. "What is it?" I asked. "Philip Glass was a violinist. Mahatma Gandhi was a non-violent." I growled and laughed. I felt the boy shake silently next to me. The law student walked away. His job was done. So much informs the successful telling of jokes and stories. The timing. The details. The backstory. The story itself is about who is telling the joke. My friend George Mathen (better known as the

graphic novelist Appupen) and I have argued in the past about along and involved joke about Jesus, the apostles and a Chinese restaurant. We both love the joke. He thinks the punchline works only when women tell it. I have avoided eye contact and said that "cough" perhaps only works when I tell it.

I have tremendous success in delivering really sad and bad jokes. One of my favourite travel memories is of telling a joke in the Cajas National Park in Ecuador to two new acquaintances. Both fairly serious and both Tamil-speaking. My speaking Tamil is toddler-like but there I was in a natural wonder of the world, surrounded by evergreen cloud forests, and I immediately unleashed my one Tamil joke. It involves the great violinist Kunikudi Vaidyanathan (a violinist joke theme seems to be emerging here that I need to examine later). I remember the two men laughing loudly and that always makes me smile.

I feel tremendously lucky about many things in my life but mostly I feel lucky to be able to make my living from writing, the one thing I feel naturally gifted at, the one thing I practise very hard at, the one thing that I feel compelled to do. While I have never quite *Andant Mari-nar*ed strangers on decorative bridges, I understand the impulse of that law student. Sometimes, you just have to tell someone a story. Or? Or you would be okay but you would be a sort of okay.

Most of my adult life, I have made a living from just writing non-fiction. A first collection of short stories has made an appearance in the world and I am



Writing fiction is all about treasuring the openness of readers, waiting to fall in love.

hugely pleased by it (this is an essential personality trait for compulsive joke-tellers. You need to be what a friend called a 'humour ecosystem'. You make the joke and you only feel pleased. (Follow the NCERT-style dotted lines). I am pleased to have a work of art out in the world. I am pleased by the extra-luring book jacket. I am pleased to do many Zoom events in which I will work hard at sounding like I have hidden depths (I do). But mostly I am just pleased that the book is an extended version of a moment I live for. That moment in which you are rattling through your old story or bad joke or

new piece of gossip and you are watching the other person's face and wondering how it will land. And there! There it is, the understanding and the laughter resounding through the cloud forests and the high grasslands and the snowy mountains and the giant hummingbirds. Sometimes, I am not gonna lie, it doesn't land. You told it badly and you wish a giant hummingbird would eat you and spit you out. But it is that risk of becoming a giant regret that makes the process worth it.

To avoid crashing, you have to get the story right but not quite get it right in the way non-fiction works. Contempo-



The Women Who Forgot To Invent Facebook And Other Stories By Nisha Susan, Context, 232 pages, ₹399.

rary non-fiction is isambitously, experimental and often so ridiculously stylish it is easy to understand why many people only read non-fiction today. Saran Maher's 2018 book on Candel Baloch, for instance, is so brilliant it will make any self-conscious writer want to look for other work. So it isn't that journalism has not expanded its aesthetic horizons or ambitions. But that extended moment I enjoy in the process of writing fiction is different and addictive. You write it, plot it, rewrite it and edit and spellcheck and do all the boring bits that you do in every kind of writing. But at along apart of you, you are in a delicious kind of tension that you know you must not focus on. It is the mental version of trying to

engage your core while doing planks and mountain climbers. Half of you is like, where is my core, is it engaged, or am I just sucking in my tummy? And then you realise you have fallen on the mat. It's so easy you pull on yourself, much like when you first learn to swim and figure that if you think about sinking, you will end up drinking a lot of water. But if you keep swimming, you will get somewhere dry. Only a regular blend of attention and forgetfulness allows you to plough through the process of writing fiction.

The law student who just had to tell us the Philip Glass joke. I know now that two things were working there that evening. One, the compulsion to share a violinist joke and hear us laugh. Two, as he turned he had seen in the two of us that open vulnerability that our glimmer stage had put us in. We were all so willing victims.

While writing fiction, when seeing my stories reach readers all over the country this week, it isn't the freedom from fact-checking or "quote regret" that I am enjoying. What I treasure is the openness of readers standing on bridges, waiting to fall in love, waiting for pleasure, alert to glimmers.

So here is the truth. You can ignore everything I have said before in this essay. The truth is that I wrote those stories only for you.

Nisha Susan is the author of *The Women Who Forgot To Invent Facebook And Other Stories*, released this month.



Part of me wants my children to never play by any societal rules.

From the mouth of babes

MOTHER OF INVENTION

A fortnightly column by an urban mom

Children can be our greatest teachers—except when they aren't. Some basic etiquette needs to be taught for a reason

Disha Basu

When we go for long meandering walks in the town in the upstate New York where we are currently riding out the pandemic, my three-year-old loves bumping into people with dogs. She understands distancing so far from at least 6ft away, she shouts, "What's your dog's name?"

Then she introduces her self—name, age. Then she introduces her baby sister—name, age. She chats a bit, depending on the friendliness of the person with the dog and then, when she's ready, she says, "Okay bye."

She grabs her baby sister's hand and they both toddle off in search of chipmunks while the other adult and I are stuck sharing small pleasantries away to politeness and the conversation.

What wasted time, gently shaking our heads at the humidity in their when we too could have been chasing chipmunks (or the adult equivalent—scrolling through Twitter).

Later that night, before bed, my three-year-old says, "I really like Pepper. The adult with her was wearing blue shorts and a blue shirt."

"Who?" I ask.

"Pepper. The black and white dog. And the adult said Pepper likes the smell of

the rain, remember?"

I did not remember any of that because I hadn't treated it like a real interaction. I had barely registered any of it, dismissing it as yet another forced fleeting exchange of small talk that I wasn't interested in. But for my daughter, every bit of that interaction had been magical (and the moment it stopped being so, she ended it).

A few days later, when we bumped into Pepper again, my daughter and Pepper's owner shared a few more facts about themselves. My daughter jumped straight into it, asking whether or not the woman had ever flown a kite.

"All the time when I lived in San Francisco," the woman said. "Not so much recently."

"Right," my daughter nodded, as if she has any idea that San Francisco exists. She then told the woman about her own recent first experience flying a kite down near the lake and the woman told her she sometimes rides her bike down by the lake but she had a flat tyre that needed fixing, and that was it, my daughter said bye and wandered away.

I stared after her, amazed at how much information she had managed to get from this woman so quickly. I looked at the woman, so much more interested in her now, wondering why she hadn't had her flat tyre fixed given that she clearly enjoyed riding her bike enough to take it

all the way down to the lake. I wanted to ask her why she left San Francisco. I imagined an ex-husband, maybe one who doesn't even know how to ride a bike. I suddenly felt I had so much more to ask and share than my views on the weather.

Children, our greatest teachers. Except when they aren't.

Far be it for me to be eloquent about themagic and innocence of children and their banter. Some basic etiquette needs to be taught for a reason.

Like when we met Christine, another neighbour down the road out walking her friendly golden retriever. Trying to follow in my daughter's footsteps, I also engaged fully and participated in the conversation and registered that her dog, Daisy, is old and can no longer see very well.

While chatting, mosquito landed on Christine's leg. She slapped it away and said,

"There's a bug on me."

"Right," my daughter said, "I have lice in my hair."

I am sure Christine was grateful for the forced social distancing and keeping her fingers crossed that lice isn't jump as far as covid viruses can.

For better or for worse, my three-year-old is now starting to pick up social rules, she's just about realizing that you can say and do certain things only at home. In many ways, it's a shame. Even though the world will demand it of her, part of me wishes her to never play by any societal rules. But before I can be too saddened by her being forced to adapt to convention, my one-and-a-half-year-old points to Christine's non-pregnant but perhaps slightly large stomach and shouts, "Baby inside!"

Disha Basu is the author of *The Windfall* (Bloomsbury). Her new book, *Destination Wedding* (Bloomsbury), released on 28 July.

A corona kind of crazy, with a dash of jazz



Jazz musician Radha Thomas' new single captures the absurd melancholy of these times

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In March, jazz singer Radha Thomas, who has been an intrinsic part of Bengaluru's music scene since the late 1970s and fronted the jazz band UNK. The Radha Thomas Ensemble, released an album of original songs and compositions called *Bangalore Blues* with a long-time collaborator, pianist Aman Mahajan. It was an exciting time for the duo—early reviews were positive and encouraging, and Thomas and Mahajan were hoping to go places with their new music. And then, like a million plans around the world, their too died a quiet death waiting for the world to right itself.

Thomas is surprisingly upbeat, though. "The pandemic has been awful for most people and I don't know how to say this without sounding like a really terrible person but it has been a pretty amazing time for me," she says over the phone, in her breathy, throaty, perfect-for-jazz voice. "It has opened up all sorts of possibilities and opportunities and it has forced me to improvise." One of these opportunities came in the form of a collaboration with the New York-based, Japanese-origin jazz pianist Tomoko Ohno-Fanham. The song, *Corona Kind of Crazy*, "popped into" Thomas' head one morning as she was thinking about the unique situation we find ourselves in—and specifically about people who are separated from those they love.

With a strong, mournful, playful rhythm, the single, written by Thomas, captures the longing of a woman separated from her lover, whom she wishes she had been "locked down" with. She hopes they will "break a few laws" to



(top) 'The Morning After' was shot in New York before the pandemic; and Radha Thomas (left) and Tomoko Ohno-Fanham.

come visit her in the darkness of the night, capturing the absurd melancholy and desperation of these times.

The song was recorded at Thomas' home in Bengaluru's Frazer Town, in a makeshift studio put together with old furniture and discarded knick-knacks, while Fanham recorded the piano music in New York. The video, uploaded on Facebook, has a home-made feel to it, in a way that has become familiar over the past few months. Thomas is in a casual blue kurta, defying the unwritten global jazz dress code of all-black.

How did it come about? "Over the years, I have built connections with musicians all over the world—from Italy, Sweden and Germany to Brazil and Argentina and, of course, New York," says Thomas, who started her musical career with the Bengaluru band Human Bondage. She lived in New York for 20 years, holding a variety of day jobs while singing in clubs at night. During this time, she collaborated with jazz fusion guitarist Ryo Kawasaki; some of the tracks they recorded were released as a limited-edition album, *Trinkets & Things*. Returning to Bengaluru in the early 1990s, she started collaborating

with musicians like Louis Banks and Keith Peters, forming UNK. The Radha Thomas Ensemble in 2009. Their latest album, *Bangalore Blues*, features Thomas' signature style, with its distinctive sound of classical jazz layered with Hindustani ragas. One of the songs from the album, *The Morning After*, has a melodic strain from Raag Bagshree, says Thomas, who trained under Hindustani classical gurus Kumar Gandharva and Fariduddin Dagar in her early years as a musician. "Can't you hear the Indian influence in Corona as well?" she asks, eagerly. Untrained ears probably can't capture it at first go, but after a few listens, one can hear the Carnatic lilt in Thomas' voice.

"Once I had the song in my head, I played the chords on the guitar and sent it to Tomoko using this program called iRealB that musicians use, and said 'can you do something with this?' She promptly sent a few piano notes, and soon we were recording in separate parts of the world," says Thomas.

She would do it again in a heartbeat, she says. "While Aman (Mahajan) and I worked hard on our *Bangalore Blues* album, recorded at a top-notch studio, invested a lot of money into getting it right, I realized after doing this song that these spontaneous collaborations are so very meaningful," says Thomas. She has gone a corona kind of crazy, but in a good way.

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THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
HOMEOWNERS REFINANCE THEIR LOANS WHEN
INTEREST RATES GO DOWN. BUSINESSES
REFINANCE THEIR LOANS. — ELIZABETH WARREN

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

WAIT AND WATCH

New external members of MPC will have to reconcile inflation targeting mandate with weak growth impulses

THE MINUTES OF the last monetary policy committee meeting, published on Thursday, underline the quandary facing the members, with the sharp spike in retail inflation restricting the space to ease monetary policy further to support growth, despite expectations that real GDP will record its "deepest contraction in history" this year. Though the committee pledged to maintain its accommodative stance "as long as it is necessary to revive growth and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the economy", there was a marked shift in tone. In previous meetings, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the committee had attached primacy to addressing the growth concerns. But this time around, with retail inflation continuing to remain elevated and breaching the upper threshold of the inflation targeting framework, inflation dominated the discourse. While the individual members differed to some extent in their assessment of the situation, the broad message from the minutes of the meeting is one of wait and watch.

The minutes also reveal the committee members' discomfort with the inflation data at two levels. First, the manner in which inflation was estimated by the National Statistics Office (NSO) for the months of April and May — a period when the imposition of the national lockdown made data collection difficult. Some members have recorded their "strong reservations" in accepting these figures, and have recommended observing these readings as a break in the data series. Second, the continuing uncertainty over the impact of the COVID shock on inflation, and its trajectory going forward. Retail inflation, as measured by the consumer price index, inched up to 6.93 per cent in July, from 6.23 per cent in June. But, as a committee member noted, "there are different inflation/deflation pressures that need to be watched carefully." If inflation does indeed trend lower in the second half of the year, on the lines of the RBI/MPC's expectations, then it could open up space for further easing. However, if it continues to remain elevated, then it restricts the policy choices available to the committee, despite it being driven largely by supply-side shocks. "If inflation persists above the upper tolerance band for one more quarter, monetary policy will be constrained by mandate to undertake remedial action," noted a member, signalling a distinctly hawkish stance.

The August monetary policy meeting was the last meeting for the three external members of the MPC before they complete their four-year term ending in September. Three new external members will take their place in the next policy meeting scheduled in October. Given the uncertain inflation outlook, the urgent task before the next MPC will be how to reconcile its inflation targeting mandate with the continuing weak growth impulses.

PARTNERSHIP TEST

Science should be in the driving seat in all collaborative efforts for a vaccine for COVID-19

THE MINISTRY OF External Affairs has clarified the country's position on collaborative efforts to develop a vaccine against COVID-19 — the call on partnerships between Indian vaccine manufacturers and foreign scientific agencies will be taken by the expert group set up for the purpose, it has said. This comes at a time when the picture of a potential joint venture between Indian companies and some foreign agencies — especially Russia's Gamaleya Research Institute that is slated to "shortly" begin mass trials of the Sputnik-COVID-19 vaccine — is hazy. The foreign ministry has said that any such venture will be contingent on an evaluation by the "National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for COVID-19". This sends the right message — that due processes will be followed and science, not geopolitics or ideological considerations, will be the prime mover in the country's choice of collaborators.

Three vaccine candidates — developed by the US-based pharma major Moderna, Oxford University and AstraZeneca and China's Sinopharm — have entered the final stage of clinical trials which will determine if these preventives are safe for mass use. These trials could take four to six months. But even as the jury is out on critical matters related to safety and efficacy, several countries, including the US, Germany, Britain and France, have entered into pre-purchase agreements with vaccine manufacturers. There are fears that such advance agreements will make the vaccines inaccessible to everyone apart from people in the First World. In fact, just about 10 years ago, the US and several European countries used their purchasing power to crowd out Third World countries from the initial supplies of the H1N1 vaccine. There are indications that Delhi is alive to the perils of vaccine nationalism. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar reportedly discussed vaccine co-operation last week with his German counterpart, Heiko Maas. Bangladesh has indicated its readiness to participate in the clinical trials of a vaccine developed in India.

India caters to 60 per cent of the world's vaccine demand. The Serum Institute of India, one of the partners of the Oxford-AstraZeneca project, is the world's largest vaccine manufacturer. The country should leverage its manufacturing capacities to secure more co-laborations — given the country's demographics, India is very likely to need more than one vaccine. The foreign ministry has said that it will play the role of a facilitator in this endeavour. It's up to the country's scientific agencies to ensure that science is in the driving seat of such collaborative

IN PRAISE OF CHITTHIS

Kamala Harris told a story in her acceptance speech — and introduced a new word to the American campaign

ON THURSDAY, TAMILS were toasting "chitthis", following Kamala Devi Harris's shoutout for her aunt after she accepted the Democratic Party's nomination for US vice-president. Chitthis, a Tamil term for mother's younger sister, trended on social media as millions scrambled to figure out this new term in the US presidential campaign. Harris has two aunts, one of them lives in Canada and was on stage when she announced her decision to run for White House in January 2019.

For the Indian American community, especially the large Tamil diaspora, this would be a seminal moment of connect with American politics. So far big achievers in professions such as healthcare, IT and academia, and in the hospital sector, the diaspora has been largely invisible in public life. In her speech on Thursday, Harris referred to her mother Shyamala Gopalan, who raised her two daughters as a single parent. "That 25-year-old Indian woman — all of five feet tall — who gave birth to me at Kaiser Hospital in Oakland, California," Harris said, had "instilled in my sister, Naga, and in me, the values that would chart the course of our lives. She raised us to be proud, strong black women. And she raised us to know and be proud of our Indian heritage."

Back in her ancestral village in Tamil Nadu, posters, boardings and arches have celebrated the nomination. Tamils have had their share of powerful women icons, from Kannagi, the fiery heroine of Sangam epic, Silappadikaram, to beloved and benevolent Amma, the late Jayalalitha. The irony is that on the day Harris told Tamil pride by emphasising the contribution of her mom and chitthis to her rise, BJP's national secretary, H Raja and a state minister, D Jayakumar, were engaged in a war of words on whether or not the Tamil Nadu government was "naughty" enough, in the context of its disallowing Vinayaka Chaturthi festivities because of COVID-19.



SANJIB BARUAH

IN AUGUST 2014 when the then newly elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi had named Ravindra Narayan Ravi as the government's new interlocutor for the talks, a number of groups, most significantly, the NSCN-IM — the government's main negotiating partner — raised objections. The appointment was interpreted as a person "well known for his antagonistic approach to the Naga issue", said the NSCN-IM, casts doubts on the government's sincerity towards the talks. It required the intervention of the Nagaland governor of that time, P B Acharya, to clear the air on the appointment. Acharya assured critics that the newspaper articles that Ravi authored, and were the "well known for his antagonistic approach to the Naga issue", were written before the new government came into office, and that as interlocutor he will implement the prime minister's vision and take the peace process forward.

In a statement issued a few days ago, the NSCN-IM blamed Ravi for destroying the momentum of the talks. It accused him of trying to turn the clock back by refocusing the conflict as a law and order issue, and not a political dispute. In retrospect, those writings could have foretold the differences that have now hamstrung the negotiations.

Ravi, who has also been the Governor of Nagaland for the past year, was a public figure until his retirement from the Indian Police Service in 2012. A 1976 batch officer, he served in the Intelligence Bureau, where he developed expertise on Northeast Indian affairs. He wrote his now famous articles on the Naga conflict during the brief time between his retirement and his assumption of post-retirement official positions.

In the articles published in 2012 and 2013 Ravi was scathing in his criticism of the peace process and of the role of his two predecessors in the position of interlocutor: K Padmanabhaiah and R S Pandey. He called them "rent-seekers" — a term usually reserved for those seeking personal benefits from public office. By dealing with the Nagas "as if it were a homogenous collective with common aspirations," they set the Naga talks "a perverse trajectory. He wrote of leaders of acting as no more than the NSCN-IM's "marketing agents" and "selling its larger-than-life profile to Delhi".

Ravi's main grouse appears to be that the Mamohan Singh government was then negotiating with only the NSCN-IM — "quintessentially an entity of Tangkhul tribes of Manipur, having little resonance with other Naga groups notwithstanding its pan-Naga rhetoric". Drawing on his knowledge as an Intelligence Bureau official, he waxed eloquent on "the intricacies of the Naga polity" — comprising over 25 tribes, each a proud

The Naga narrative divide

Question about stakeholders in the peace process needs an answer based on in-depth mapping of conflict

owner and inheritor of a distinct culture, language, tradition and geography, espousing a distinct world view, falling within the broad rubric of the Naga nationalism. There is, however, ample evidence that many Nagas aspire to Naga unity, and they view those tribal loyalties as residues of a premodern past and an obstacle to Naga solidarity.

Narratives of Naga nationalism have long been imbued with the idea of a Naga homeland that includes contiguous areas in a number of Northeastern states, and even parts of Myanmar. The belief that the conflict cannot be resolved without addressing the issue of integrating the Naga-inhabited areas is widely shared among Nagas, though non-Nagas living in those areas do not generally share this goal.

The Indian government acknowledges the unique history of the Nagas and their mission. NSCN-IM leaders have repeated this claim with remarkable frequency over the many years of the peace process. No one can claim that the meaning of the phrase "unique history" is self-explanatory. It has the kind of ambiguity associated with diplomatic language: Formulations that conflicting parties find acceptable only because they are open to more than one interpretation. But it also embodies a commitment to pursue agreement. To work together and find a common language that all sides find acceptable, which can be achieved only by resolving the conflict.

The source of the phrase can be traced back to a joint communiqué that NSCN-IM General Secretary Thuingaleng Muivah and former Home Secretary K Padmanabhaiah signed in Amsterdam on July 11, 2002. However, it became etched in Naga public memory only after Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to the state in October of 2003. In his speech at the civic reception held in his honour in Kohima, Vajpayee said: "It is true that, of all the states in India, Nagaland has a unique history. We are sensitive to the wisdom of a historical fact."

The carefully crafted phrase serves as a reminder of the painstaking efforts of countless civil servants, and political leaders across the party divide — as well as leaders of various Naga organisations, to build bridges over contested narratives and create the conditions for negotiations to end long-standing armed conflict.

Policymakers in the 1990s appear to have concluded that the impasse in the conflict called for a shift in strategy. It was becoming more and more obvious that the NSCN-IM, the faction that declared the Shillong Accord of 1975 a sellout, and a betrayal of the Naga cause, had emerged as a serious political force precisely because it stood for Naga unity. Seen in this context, arguments that

identities centred on tribes are somehow more "real" than the Naga identity are reminiscent of colonial era intelligence reports that referred to native tribal politics in terms of their caste status: Nehru was a "Kashmiri Brahmin", Jinnah a "Khoja Muslim", Mahatma a "Mahwa Brahmin" etc. One can speculate that by signing on to the idea of Nagas having a "unique history", officials and political leaders intended to signal acknowledgement that (a) the characterisations long favoured by security bureaucrats of the Naga political struggle as a separatist insurgency or a terrorist movement that makes false claims to Naga unity, are inaccurate and (b) rejecting those epithets is a necessary condition for negotiations based on mutual respect. Those are significant achievements that should not be allowed to wither away.

In August 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, known for his keen eye for political optics, wore a Tangkhul Naga shawl to the signing ceremony of the Framework Agreement. Notwithstanding Ravi's gripe about the NSCN-IM's appeal being limited to the "Tangkhul tribes of Manipur", the "unique history" formulation — with its bow to the territorial imaginary of the Naga nation — evidently was still the guidepost anchoring Indian policy.

The ground realities could not have changed so dramatically in the past five years to justify the rejection of the unique history formulation. While the talk of returning to the jungle by NSCN-IM militants may be more bombast than a genuine threat, the risks of Nagaland and adjacent areas going back to a downward spiral of violence and counter-violence should not be underestimated.

At the same time, Ravi's diatribe against the peace process was not without some empirical basis in ground realities. There were legitimate questions to be asked about the wisdom of a policy of negotiating only with the NSCN-IM, treating it as primus inter pares among Naga factions with a veto power on key issues. That a more nuanced negotiating strategy is now emerging is a positive development. But the fundamental question about who all the stakeholders in the Naga conflict are, still needs a satisfactory answer, one that is based on an in-depth mapping of the conflict. Only then can we expect peaceful dialogue and patient negotiations to end the conflict and bring about a durable peace.

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PRASHANT BHUSHAN

I HAVE GONE through the judgment of this Hon'ble Court. I am pained that I have been held guilty of committing contempt of the Court whose majesty I have tried to uphold — not as a courier or cheerleader but as a humble guard — for over three decades, at some personal and professional cost. I am pained, not because I may be punished, but because I have been grossly misunderstood. I am shocked that the court holds me guilty of "malicious, scurrilous, calculated attack" on the institution of administration of justice. I am dismayed that the Court has arrived at this conclusion without providing any evidence of my motives to launch such an attack. I must confess that I am disappointed that the court did not find it necessary to serve me with a copy of the complaint on the basis of which the suo motu notice was issued, nor found it necessary to respond to the specific averments made by me in my reply affidavit or the many submissions of my counsel.



I DO NOT ASK FOR MERCY

Open criticism of any institution is necessary to safeguard the constitutional order

FOR THE RECORD

Indeed, public scrutiny is desirable for healthy functioning of judiciary itself. I believe that open criticism of any institution is necessary in a democracy, to safeguard the constitutional order.

I find it hard to believe that the Court finds my tweet "has the effect of destabilising the very foundation of this important pillar of Indian democracy." I can only reiterate that these two tweets represent my bonafide beliefs, the expression of which must be permissible in any democracy. Indeed, public scrutiny is desirable for healthy functioning of judiciary itself. I believe that open criticism of any institution is necessary in a democracy, to safeguard the constitutional order. We are living through that moment in our history when higher principles must trump routine obligations, when saving the constitutional order must come before personal and professional niceties, when considerations of the present must not come in the way of discharging our responsibility towards the future. To speak up would have been a dereliction of duty, especially for an officer of the court like myself.

My tweets were nothing but a small attempt to discharge what I considered to be my highest duty at this juncture in the history of our republic. I did not tweet in a fit of absent-mindedness. It would be insincere and contemptuous on my part to offer an apology for the tweets that expressed what was and continues to be my bonafide belief. Therefore, I can only humbly paraphrase what the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, had said in his trial: I do not ask for mercy (I do not appeal to magnanimity). I am here, therefore, to cheerfully submit to any penalty that can lawfully be inflicted upon me for what the Court has determined to be an offence, and what appears to me to be the highest duty of a citizen.

Bhushan is an advocate at the Supreme Court of India. This is his statement to the Court on August 20 after his conviction for contempt.

AUGUST 22, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO

UP VIOLENCE AGAIN
ALAMABAD WAS ROCKED today by fresh violence, which left five dead, leading to deployment of the army and re-imposition of curfew for an indefinite period. Violence erupted suddenly and simultaneously around 2 pm when for the first time, curfew was relaxed. When the District Magistrate S A T Rizvi was rushing to Nakhla Kona on receipt of a report of an attack on a police party, a bomb was hurled at his car. The bomb exploded near the front wheel but the District Magistrate escaped unhurt. The person who lobbed the bomb was arrested. A violent mob attacked a police party at Nakhla Kona and a PNC jawan was critically injured by gunshots.

MANIPUR CM'S OFFER
MANIPUR CHIEF MINISTER K K Dorendra Singh may take the initiative again to break the stalemate in the talks between the Central and the Assam agitation leaders. Dorendra Singh who had a second round of meeting with Shyam Sundar Mahapatra, AICC (I) General Secretary today said if the Central leaders desired, he would make earnest efforts again to resume talks.

NEW BONUS RULE
AN ORDINANCE was promulgated stipulating a minimum of 8.33 per cent and a maximum of 20 per cent bonus. It allows employers and employees to enter into

agreements for payment of bonus in lieu of productivity, and not profits.

PAK PROTESTS
POLICE USED RIFLE butts, batons and tear gas to break up an anti-government march by hundreds of lawyers in Karachi today. The lawyers led to the safety of the city's court compound as the police waded in, scattering banners demanding democracy. At least a dozen people were arrested and several injured. It was the second biggest demonstration by lawyers in three months against President Zia-ul-Haq's military rule and against his refusal to hold a general election.

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THE IDEAS PAGE

Mandal moment, 30 years on

Rise of Hindutva politics and contradictions within OBC spectrum have exhausted the silent political revolution. Unfulfilled promise of job quotas may lead to a revival



CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT

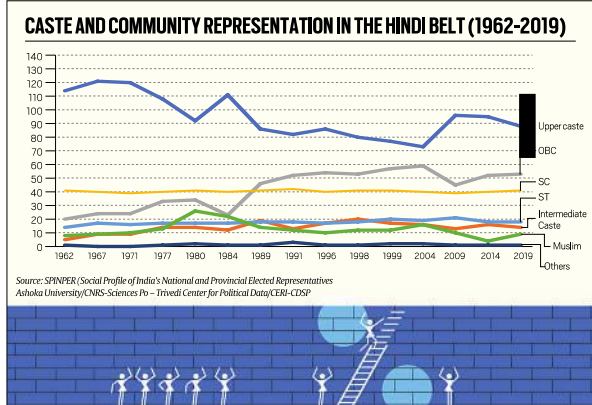
THIRTY YEARS AGO, the then prime minister, P. V. Singh implemented the Mandal Commission report, initiating what I have called a "silent revolution". It triggered a socio-political process that resulted in some social emancipation and the rise to political power of plebeians at the expense of the upper and dominant castes.

The Mandal moment was primarily political, even if what was at stake was the extension of positive discrimination through a 27 per cent quota for the OBCs in the civil service. The upper castes instantly mobilised to prevent a reform that would curb their public sector job opportunities, which was valuable prior to the economic liberalisation of 1991. Their resistance aroused indignation among the lower castes and resulted in a consolidation of OBC groups. Many OBCs stopped voting for upper-caste notables and preferred to elect representatives from their own social milieu to Parliament.

In the Hindi belt, the percentage of OBCs nearly doubled from 11 per cent in 1984 to more than 20 per cent in the 1990s, whereas the proportion of upper-caste MPs dropped from 47 per cent in 1984 to below 40 in the 1990s. By 2004, upper-caste presence in the Lok Sabha had fallen to 33 per cent, while 25 per cent of MPs were OBCs. This turnaround was thanks initially to the Janata Dal, and later, to its regional offshoots, including the Samajwadi Party in UP and the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar.

Though the Janata Dal disintegrated in the early 1990s, it did not affect the dynamics of democratisation the party had set in motion. First, all parties, including the Congress, were forced to field several OBC candidates who realised that they could not rely on old clientelist mechanisms to get upper-caste notables elected. The OBCs constituted over half of the population and the new "OBC vote" could not be ignored. Second, new public policies designed for the OBCs were implemented not only by the parties representing them, but also by the Congress. When it returned to power in 2004, the Congress set a quota of 27 per cent for OBCs in public services. This decision, known as Mandal II, once again provoked the ire of the upper castes. So what's left of the "Mandal moment" — politically and socially, now?

This "silent revolution" brought on a counter-revolution, a revenge of the elite whose vanguard has been the BJP. The BJP's Hindu nationalism had the advantage of transcending caste identities in the name of Hindu unity and its fight against the threat from Islam. This backlash culminated in 2014, when the Hindutva version of national-populism gained traction with some OBCs because of the alchemy achieved by Narendra Modi — for the first time, the leader of the BJP was a pure product of the RSS who belonged to an OBC caste. As Modi presented himself as a self-made man, a former chaiwallah, and did not defend positive discrimination, he was the perfect antidote to Mandal for the middle-class



cent, on a par with its representation in the 1980s, whereas the share of OBC MPs dropped to 20 per cent, according to the database SPINPER (Social Profile of India's National and Provincial Elected Representatives) built by Ashoka University and CNRS-Sciences Po.

Modi did not attract OBC voters only based on his plebeian background and Hindutva. He also subverted caste politics in the name of development and class. He presented himself as the defender of the "new middle-class" that had emerged in the Hindi Belt. The rise of OBCs who had benefited from the Mandal quotas and economic growth. Young OBCs were migrating from the village due to the attraction of jobs. Even if such jobs were unstable and badly paid, they usually enabled these former rural inhabitants to improve their living conditions. Modi's new middle-class discourse was class-based but had no affinity with socialism. On the contrary, instead of asking for more equality and redistribution, it made merit the number one criterion of social justice, a repertoire that had become gradually hegemonic after the 1991 reform but which the UPA government balanced with some socio-democratic policies (including Mandal II). If Modi sealed the fate of quota politics, the "Mandal moment" was over many years earlier. OBC politics has been a victim of the success of OBC policies in two ways. A saturation point was reached when the Centre and states introduced the 27 per cent OBC quota and the judiciary refused to allow the total amount of reservation to go beyond 49 per cent. Parties representing the OBCs could no more say, "vote for me, you'll get more reservations."

Second, some jatis within the OBC spectrum benefited more from the reservations than others. The Yadavs are a case in point. We can infer from the Indian Human Development Survey that they have cornered more reservations than others. In UP, 14.5 per cent of the Yadavs occupied a salaried job in 2011-12 (the last round of the survey), against 5.8 per cent for the Kurmis, 5.7 per cent for the Telis, 6.7 per cent for the Kushwahas, 3.5 per cent for the Lodhis.

The "Yadav" section of UP and Bihar, during the rule of the SP and BJP respectively, has dis-

such an extent that they started not to vote along with the Yadavs. In Bihar, Kurmis followed Nitish Kumar and created a separate party as early as 1984. In UP, the BJP was shrewd enough to nominate candidates from non-Yadav jatis in order to consolidate a non-Yadav OBC vote by capitalising on the resentment of these castes vis-à-vis the Yadavs. This strategy was obvious in the 2019 elections when poor OBCs voted more for the BJP than for the BSP-SP alliance despite the elitist image of the former — 59 per cent of the "poor" OBCs supported the BJP against 33.5 per cent who turned to the BSP-SP alliance.

The reason why the "rich" and "middle" class OBCs voted more for the BSP-SP alliance than the "poor" OBCs becomes clear the moment the jatis are factored in: The SP remains a Yadav party to a large extent and Yadavs tend to be richer than Gadarias, Kishwahas, Telis and Lodhis, who resent Yadav domination and the way the latter has cornered a large proportion of the reservations. The unity problem affecting the OBCs is similar to the one confronting the Dalits in UP — the non-Yadav SCs resent the socio-economic rise of the Yadavs and distance themselves from the BSP, which is seen as a Yadav party. Many of the non-Yadav SCs voted for the BJP. This push factor, however, is reinforced, in the case of the lower OBCs as well as the lower SCs, by a pull factor: By supporting the Hindutva forces, these jatis also try to sanitise themselves and be accepted by the Hindu "high tradition".

So, is it "game over" for Mandal politics? Not necessarily, given the fact that if quotas have been granted to OBCs they are not fulfilled. In 2015, OBCs represented only 12 per cent of Class A employees in the central government services, 12.5 per cent of Class B and 16 per cent of Class C workers — which meant 19 per cent of the total workforce, almost 10 percentage points less than what they had been promised in 1980. It is a deficit OBCs may have seen fighting for.

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London, and non-resident scholar at the

Pakistan and the peace deal

It needs to grasp that pragmatism, strategic realities lie behind Arab-Israeli detente



KHALED AHMED

THE COMMON MAN in Pakistan is jolted by the "peace deal" between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that will "lead to a full normalisation of diplomatic relations" between the two. Israel has agreed to suspend applying sovereignty to areas of the West Bank that it was prepared to annex, but that doesn't console the conspiracy-soaked mind of the common man in Pakistan. Most of the more "pragmatic" Arab neighbours of Israel have behaved differently towards Israel and they didn't care that Pakistan continued to be so completely anti-Israel.

Most Pakistanis also don't know the facts behind the current political map of the Middle East and ignore the details of how the Arab states are threatened more by their fellow-Arab states than Israel. After the sectarian wars in the Gulf and Iraq-Syria neighbourhood, this should have dawned on Pakistan but it didn't. Pakistan is greatly perturbed by the introverted interest in its "global retreat", where Pax Americana can be given over to someone else, is being felt in the Gulf region too. But before leaving, President Donald Trump wants to immediately annex territories supposed to belong to the State of Palestine under the "two-states" pact that was recognised by the UN. Eight months later, that annexation was postponed.

less by Israel than by Iran, which seems to be encircling them by backing and financing the sectarian wars in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. There is nothing that Pakistan — a recipient of the US aid — can do about it. Saudi Arabia and the UAE together with "aid-recipients" Egypt and Jordan are "unequal" war against Turkey in Libya.

Rulers in the Gulf are more scared today of fellow-Arab states like Qatar than of Israel. They are no longer controlled by the presence of the United States in the Gulf region as a guarantor of their peace. Headquartered in Iraq, America's Central Command looks the other way as Qatar joins Turkey to support and fund the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which had ruined the Arab Spring (2010-2012) by coming to power through elections and subsequently threatening the "kingdoms".

to uproot any of the settlements in the West Bank that have provoked Palestinian outrage and alienated much of the world".

The "two nations" required by the United Nations to live in separate states will live together in "united" Jerusalem; and security will be solely the responsibility of Israel, which means Palestinians will not have an army of their own. Israel will "regularise" the illegal settlements — one-third of West Bank — built on land belonging to the Palestinian people. And Trump promised to provide \$50 billion in international investment to build the new Palestinian entity and open an embassy in its new state.

This should have outraged the Islamic World but it didn't. The UAE, Oman and Bahrain were present when Trump announced the "peace plan", standing together with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu who was not even elected but acted merely as a caretaker PM. The plan was to be "negotiated" in four years but has been hastened by the prospect of Trump's defeat in the coming polls in November. The plan was to allow Israel to immediately annex territories supposed to belong to the State of Palestine under the "two-states" pact that was recognised by the UN. Eight months later, that annexation was postponed.

Pakistan has been in two minds about recognising Israel, especially after India revived its almost dead relationship in 1992 and proceeded to trade with it in the high-tech sector without creating any negative reaction among Pakistan's Arab friends. Under President Pervez Musharraf, recognition of Israel was seriously considered as the Indian Embassy in Tel Aviv issued "some 30,000 visas for Israeli travellers". Pakistan's foreign minister was "facilitated" by Turkey to discuss the possibilities of a Pak-Israel normalisation of relations with an Israeli envoy, but the move came to naught because of Pakistan's textbook brainwash against Israel.

Then Turkey slid under the control of the Islamists under Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, who now threatens the UAE for having opened up to Israel, not knowing that one reason behind the recognition was the threat he posed to the UAE. Erdogan doesn't care how he would look threatening the Arabs while Turkey continues to recognise Israel. He may be realising that his revival of the Ottoman Empire that controlled Western Asia and Northern Africa between the 14th and early 20th centuries threatens the Arabs once again.

The writer is consulting editor, Newsweek Pakistan

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Parliament needs to quickly rediscover its spine too. Much tougher economic conditions in the autumn should concentrate minds." — THE GUARDIAN

When helping hurts

Increasing age of marriage will be exercise of carceral power by state which will disproportionately affect Dalit, Adivasi women



SHALINI NAIR

IF PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi's emphasis in his Independence Day speech on raising the legal age of marriage for women to 21 years is any indicator of the path the task force set up for this purpose is likely to tread, it needs to reconsider the disproportionate impact such legislation would have on marginalised rural communities.

There is enough evidence available with the government that makes a strong case for tackling early marriage by extending the right to free and compulsory education up to the age of 18 years. Before looking at those reports, it is important to understand why raising the minimum age of marriage, a seemingly progressive step, will end up criminalising and exacerbating the existing vulnerabilities of Dalit and Adivasi communities in rural India, instead of empowering its women.

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) data 2015-16 points to certain trends in early marriages: That rural women are likely to marry earlier than their urban counterparts; that the higher up a woman is on the wealth quintile, the later she marries. Most importantly, it establishes a direct causal link between education levels and delayed age of marriage, with the former impacting the latter, not the other way around. Women with 12 years or more of schooling are most likely to marry later.

While these in itself should be sufficient to make a case for education, a look at the disaggregated data speaks to the need to address the gendered and caste-based disparities instead of blanket laws with no consideration for the social justice of the poor.

According to the wealth quintile data, the poorest households are concentrated in rural India. The lowest quintile, which is most likely to marry off their girls early out of socio-economic necessities, have 45 per cent of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) and 25.9 per cent Scheduled Caste (SC) households, accounting for only 1 per cent of the general "Others" category.

The NFHS-4 data on women aged 15-49 by number of years of schooling completed shows that 42 per cent ST women and 33 per cent SC women have received no schooling. Merely 10 per cent ST and 15 per cent SC women have completed 12-plus years of education as compared to 30 per cent women among the Others (general category) and 21 per cent among Other Backward Classes. Only 8 per cent rural girls who drop out in the age group 6 to 17 years cite marriage as the reason, fifth in the order after loss of interest in studies, prohibitive cost of education, burden of household work, and schools located far away.

While a task force for maternal and child mortality & health outcomes is a welcome move, its stated intent to examine raising

the legal age of marriage strikes a discordant note with past official reports. In September 2018, the National Human Rights Commission showed how higher education levels lead to a lower likelihood of women being married early and strongly recommended that the Right to Education Act, 2009, be amended to make it applicable up to the age of 18 years. Presently, children in the age group of 14-18 are outside the purview of RTE act and most likely to drop out. This stress on access and quality of education was backed by a report of the apex child right's body, National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, and the NGO Young Lives, which also showed how between 2005-06 and 2015-16, child marriage in 15-19 age group for girls has decreased from 26.5 per cent to 11.9 per cent.

Marriages in India are governed by various personal laws which set varying minimum ages for girls as also the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006, where it is 18 years for girls and 21 for boys. Under PCMA, any man, above the age of 18 who marries a woman under 18 years, as well as the parents of minors who abet the act can be imprisoned for up to two years. This is compounded by the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, that increased the age of consent, from 16 years to 18 years.

Several studies have shown how this has criminalised self-arranged adolescent marriages as parents often misuse it to punish couples marrying without their approval, especially in cases of inter-caste marriages. The above-18 boys in such cases are liable to even face a life term. PCMA also requires healthcare providers to mandatorily report to the police any cases of under-18-year-olds who are found to be sexually active with those older.

Increasing the legal age of marriage to 21 years will add to these existing hurdles for young women's access to reproductive and sexual healthcare. All these put SC-ST households, who have the least recourse to legal and other safeguards, at a greater risk.

Noting the law's patriarchal underpinnings, the 18th Law Commission report (2008) asked for uniformity in the age of marriage at 18 years for both men and women and lowering the age of consent to 16 years, a recommendation also of the Justice Verma Commission.

Instead of moving in this direction, increasing the age of marriage becomes a mere exercise of carceral power by a state which, while outlawing consensual marriages, continues to look the other way when it comes to mob-entailed trafficking of child brides from SC-ST households. Efforts to address child marriage in India should be in consonance with the socio-economic realities that demand investment in education, welfare, and opportunities for women. The median age at first marriage for both men and women in India has registered a significant decadal improvement with more people now marrying later than ever before. Any attempt to leapfrog through quick-fix and ill-conceived punitive measures will only considerably reverse these gains.

The writer is a Gender Studies PhD scholar at the University of Sussex, UK

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ELITE CONCERNS

THIS REFERS TO the article, "In pandemic, take a break" (IE, August 21). A substantial, like most other benefits, is a prerogative of the elite. India is unique, in that, 70 per cent of its population still resides in rural areas where the pandemic has hit hard, forcing migrant workers to "take a break", and their families to starve. Due to successive lockdowns, cities too have witnessed an unprecedented unemployment crisis. The uncertainties have led to a surge in mental health issues, domestic violence and suicide rates. Astrol in the park, or a world tour would make a good "break" if one doesn't have to worry about the next meal. A public servant would not know that.

Fatima Ghazali, Putrajaya

DOING WELL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Fighting COVID-19: India's fight against COVID-19" (IE, August 21). In light of the COVID-19, India, despite its burgeoning numbers, high population density and poor health infrastructure, has been quite successful. The on-going unlock phases are witnessing sudden spurts here and there, but ramping up of tests and local administrations' responses have kept things in check.

Vijai Pant, Hemsapur

POLL PROBLEMS

THIS REFERS TO the article "The corona election" (IE, August 21). The Election Commission of India (ECI) is expected to take a call on the schedule of the upcoming bi-cameral assembly elections. It has to have a factor in the nationwide pandemic situation in general and Bihar's

IDEAS ONLINE

HER RIGHTS CLEARLY SO:
ANITA TAGORE

SECULARISM STILL THRIVING:
ANOO SADANANDAN

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unique dilemma in particular. Bihar is the state with the highest population density, and its existing health infrastructure might not be able to manage any sudden upsurge in COVID cases. The ECI, under Article 324, should take a call on either postponing the elections or conduct the polls over multiple phases spread over months.

Sudip Kumar Dey, Kolkata

HOLISTIC RELIEF

THIS REFERS TO the article, "The new social contract" (IE, August 21). The author indicated the slight improvement of our unemployment rate, which is expected. But the poor are still in a situation where both their lives and livelihoods are at risk. Policymakers must adopt the holistic approach for relief, integrating both rural and urban India.

Tapomoy Ghosh, Kirta



Last lap

Biden and Harris have to show they can lift the U.S. out of the virus-induced crisis

Former U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden has become the Democratic Party's official nominee for the 2020 presidential election after a glitzy four-day extravaganza at the Democratic National Convention. Alongside his running mate Kamala Harris, he will seek to oust incumbent Donald Trump from the White House. If he does so, an array of remedial policy actions will be required from an early stage to lift the U.S. up from the economic destruction caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, he will need to urgently attend to a series of controversies and setbacks, some with international repercussions, that the Trump administration has become enmeshed in. Does Mr. Biden possess the political heft, personal charisma, and party mandate to do so? The party answered with a resounding 'yes' to all three questions at the Convention, which featured eloquent speeches by former Presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton and First Ladies Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton, as well as party heavyweights including Bernie Sanders, Nancy Pelosi, and Elizabeth Warren. While a few younger Democratic leaders were featured too, the Convention left little doubt that the old guard was still running the show, even if it was seeking to woo the next generation of voters within the framework of an altered political reality.

At the heart of that reality stands Mr. Trump, wobbling as he scores lower than Mr. Biden in the opinion polls, mostly for his bungling response to the pandemic, yet relentlessly throwing punches on mail-in voting and appealing to the 'silent majority' that Mr. Biden, if elected, would 'hike taxes on Americans by \$4 trillion, eviscerate the Second Amendment, expand sanctuary cities, and end fossil fuels'. To effectively counter these arguments, and avoid another debacle of the sort that Ms. Clinton faced in 2016, Mr. Biden and Ms. Harris need show only one thing — that they can save the U.S. economy and repair the country's standing with the rest of the world, especially by reclaiming a pivotal role in the multilateral governance of global public health, climate change and trade. Whether the Democrats, basking in the self-congratulatory afterglow of the Convention and reaffirming their commitment to liberal values, play their hand carefully through this endgame scenario, or whether the Trump vision of an inward-looking U.S. still carries the day, remains to be seen. What is clear is that the electoral outcome will be both a referendum expressing how much a broadly inclusive paradigm of the American Dream still resonates with the people, and a signal of the degree of openness that it will tolerate toward the peoples of other nations. Mr. Biden will have to bring his A-game to this final lap.

Repeal and reform

Sri Lanka should not undo democratic gains or roll back devolution in the Constitution

A two-thirds majority in the legislature is indeed a mandate for constitutional change, but the winner ought to decide whether the proposed change would bring about reform or impairment; whether it would strengthen democratic institutions or weaken them. In his first address to the newly elected Parliament, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has predictably declared his intention to repeal the landmark 19th Amendment to the Constitution, and, thereafter, to work towards a new Constitution. The party he belongs to, the SLPP, has just garnered a historic two-thirds majority along with a majority in the parliamentary polls — unprecedented in an election based on proportional representation. Few would doubt that the party led by the President's elder brother and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa has the requisite mandate to overhaul the constitutional and electoral system. The abolition of the 19th Amendment was indeed the party's major poll plank. However, does it necessarily mean that the gains of the 19th Amendment should be thrown out lock, stock and barrel? The legislation that introduced it was also based on a popular mandate for change in the 2015 presidential election, and received more than the required two-thirds support in the previous Parliament. It not only curbed the executive President's vast powers, by restoring a two-term limit, and making it difficult for the legislature to protect the independence of oversight institutions. It would be a travesty of democratic principles if the independence of institutions such as the Election Commission is now curbed in the name of undoing the 19th Amendment. After all, it is now recognised that the largely peaceful and orderly polling was only because of the EC's autonomy. If not for nothing else, but as an acknowledgement of the free election that enabled it to get a massive mandate, the ruling party should seek to prove its detractors wrong by preserving the democratic gains of the amendment. Further, the path to rewrite the Constitution under the rubric of a 'one country, one law' principle should not be at odds with the urgent need for a new inclusive Constitution that would put the country on the path of equality and reconciliation. The President's address was also notable for the absence of any reference to ethnic minorities. For long, Sri Lankan leaders have maintained that they can give little by way of constitutional concessions to the minorities without the consent of the majority Sinhalese. Given the dependence of the Rajapaksa on the majority, it is possible to look at the President's remarks on the proposed Constitution in the portentous sense of moving away from the concept of devolution. While the abolition of the executive presidency appears no more realistic, it will be retrograde if the idea of sharing more power with the provinces is abandoned altogether.

Differential impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown

The resultant distress in India has exacerbated pre-existing structures of disadvantage based on social identity



ASHWINI DESHPANDE & RAJESH RAMCHANDRAN

In his book, *The Great Leveler*, Walter Scheidel, the Austrian economic historian, argues that throughout human history, there have been four types of catastrophic events that have led to greater economic equality: pandemic, war, revolution and state collapse. Currently, the world is going through one of them: a massive COVID-19 pandemic. In Scheidel's analysis, the decline in inequality is a result of excess mortality that raises the price of labour. While the validity of Scheidel's argument for the current pandemic can only be assessed after it is over, the pandemic has been described as a leveler more loosely, both because the disease can strike anyone, and also because the resultant lockdowns have led to widespread job losses and economic hardships across the range of the income and occupational distribution.

The marginalised at risk
Focusing on the looser description of the pandemic as a leveler, preliminary data and early indirect evidence from several parts of the world indicate that the incidence of the disease is not class-neutral: poorer and economically vulnera-

ble populations are more likely to contract the virus as well as to die from it. To the extent, economic class and social identity (e.g. race, ethnicity or caste) overlap, this suggests that socially marginalised groups would be at higher risk of mortality due to COVID-19.

The risks extend beyond mortality as the economic consequences of the current pandemic are likely to be most concentrated among the low wage earners, and less educated workers, segments of the labour force where racial and ethnic minorities are over-represented. Early evidence from the United Kingdom and the United States reveals that racial and ethnic minorities are indeed the ones most likely at the risk of unemployment.

What does the evidence from India reveal? Disaggregated data on COVID-19 incidence and mortality are not available for India. Thus, we cannot comment on whether certain caste groups are more vulnerable to the virus than others.

The Indian shutdown
A key element of the pandemic control strategy everywhere has been to shut down economic and social activity, and to impose social distancing with varying degrees of strictness. India's lockdown, imposed in the last week of March 2020, was among the most stringent. The first month of the severe lockdown, April 2020, witnessed a sharp rise in unemployment. Was this sudden unemploy-



GETTY IMAGES/REUTERS

ment caste-neutral, despite the fact that it was caste-blind?

We examine shifts in employment and unemployment rates using data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE)'s Consumer Pyramids Household Survey (CPHS) database. It is a longitudinal data set covering 174,405 households (roughly 10,900 households per week, and 43,600 per month). Each household is followed three times per year. We use unit-level data from six waves of CPHS: Wave 14 (May-August 2018), Wave 15 (September-December 2018), Wave 16 (January-April 2019), Wave 17 (May-August 2019), Wave 18 (September-December 2019), and Wave 19 (January-April 2020).

We find that the proportion of employed upper castes dropped from 39% to 32% between December 2019 and April 2020, a fall of seven percentage points. The corresponding fall for Scheduled Castes (SCs) was from 44% to 24%, i.e. a fall of 20 percentage points, almost three times as large. For intermediate castes, Other Backward Classes and Scheduled Tribes (STs) the fall was from 42% to 34%, 40% to 26% and 48% to 33%. Thus, the fall in employment

for SCs and STs was far greater in magnitude than that for upper castes.

Education as factor

The global evidence suggests that job losses associated with COVID-19 are much more concentrated among individuals with low levels of education and those with vulnerable jobs with no tenure or security. We find that individuals with more secure jobs, i.e. not daily wagers, and those with more than 12 years of education, were much less likely to be unemployed in April 2020 than those with less than 12 years of education and with daily wage jobs, relative to their pre-pandemic employment status. Thus, education did turn out to be a protective factor in the first wave of immediate post-lockdown job losses.

Our earlier work reveals that caste gaps at higher levels of education have either remained static or widened over the last three decades.

The current pandemic is further likely to exacerbate these educational differences. Data from another nationally representative survey, the India Human Development Survey for 2011-12 (IHDS-1) show that 51% of SC households have adult women who have zero years of education, i.e. are illiterate, and 27% have an illiterate adult male member. These proportions are in stark contrast to Upper Caste (UC) households, where the corresponding proportions are 11% and 24%, respectively. Thus, in the face of current

school closures, parents of SC children would be much less equipped to assist their children with any form of home learning, compared to parents of UC children. This would be the case both because of educational differences among parents as well as due to other significant differences in material conditions living.

Issue of technology

There are many dimensions that reveal continued disparity between caste groups, which would affect the ability of Dalit and Adivasi families to access online education. For example, the proportion of households with access to the Internet is 20% and 10% for UC and SC households, respectively. Only 49% of SCs have bank savings as compared to 62% of UC households. Thus, differential access to information technology, as well as disparities in the ability to invest in technology would be critical in shaping access to online education, if the pandemic forces schools to close for a substantial period of time.

Early impacts of the pandemic-induced lockdown indicate that the resultant economic distress is exacerbating pre-existing structures of disadvantage based on social identity, and investments in education and health that close gaps between social groups would be essential to build resilience in the face of future shocks.

Ashwini Deshpande teaches at Ashoka University. Rajesh Ramchandran is at the University of Heidelberg

Moving resolutely toward the post-pandemic future

Even as many countries are stumbling, India has seized control of its destiny, is recovering, and making bold plans



JAYANT SINHA

A moment comes, but rarely in history, when a nation seizes control of its destiny; when a new Atmanirbhar era begins and when the people of a nation move forward with confidence. It is fitting that this moment has come during the global novel coronavirus pandemic. Even as the world is reeling from the impact of the pandemic, India is recovering with fresh energy and making bold plans for the future.

The pandemic began spreading around the world just a few months ago. Yet, it has plunged the global economy into its deepest economic contraction since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Trillions of dollars of economic output have been wiped out; most countries will take years to return to pre-coronavirus levels, and billions of people are confronting a shrunken future.

Calibrated measures
India has avoided this fate. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has undertaken a series of decisive, calibrated actions which include implementing a rapid lockdown to save lives; providing abundant relief to protect livelihoods; and, simultaneously positioning the economy for strong revival through the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' policy package.

On March 24, 2020, Mr. Modi announced a historic nation-wide lockdown that was eventually lifted on June 1. The national lockdown dramatically dampened the disease's exponential growth rate and gave the country time to prepare. Without a lockdown, the cases of coronavirus would today be several times higher than now. More importantly, coronavirus fa-

talities would have been even higher since the case fatality rate has declined dramatically in the past few months.

Lockdown was essential
A terrible human tragedy was swiftly and decisively averted. During the lockdown, the nation got ready to face the pandemic. Every citizen learned the value of masks and mask wearing, social distancing, and hand washing. Hospital beds, intensive care units, ventilators, oxygen cylinders, personal protective equipment kits, and N95 masks were procured in vast quantities and supplied to every district. COVID-19 care and quarantine centres were established in every block. Testing capacity increased from thousands per day to almost a million per day. Testing centres are now able in 80-90% of all districts. Extraordinary medical advances have also happened in the past few months: several drugs have proven to be efficacious, treatment protocols are now widely available, and many vaccine candidates are now in the final stages of testing. The national lockdown has thus saved lakhs of lives.

Along with lives, livelihoods have also been saved through bold action after the lockdown. A package was announced, the Prime Minister announced the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana — a massive relief package for the needy. Through this programme, almost 80 crore fellow citizens are being provided rations through the Public Distribution System. This has saved them money and put cash in their pockets. Over 20 crore Jan Dhan women account holders have received ₹30,654 crore directly into their bank accounts. Around 2.3 crore construction workers have got ₹4,313 crore, while 2.8 crore beneficiaries in the National Social Assistance Programme have received ₹2,815 crore.

The rural economy, which supports 60-70% of India's population and accounts for 46% of GDP, is



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surging. The excellent *rabi* harvest has resulted in over ₹75,000 crore in farmer payments by the government. Almost 10 crore farmers have received ₹40,000 crore as income support through the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi. Over 4 crore households are benefiting from the expanded Mahatma Gandhi Employment Guarantee Act scheme. Thus the rural economy has received over ₹2 lakh crore of cash directly into beneficiary accounts just from the Central government. State governments, have run their own relief programmes as well. These massive cash payments have driven rural recovery, with new cars, motorcycles, and tractor purchases at or above pre-pandemic levels now.

RBI and policy actions

Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and large corporates have also been provided subvention. State governments have announced the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana — a massive relief package for the needy. Through this programme, almost 80 crore fellow citizens are being provided rations through the Public Distribution System. This has saved them money and put cash in their pockets. Over 20 crore Jan Dhan women account holders have received ₹30,654 crore directly into their bank accounts. Around 2.3 crore construction workers have got ₹4,313 crore, while 2.8 crore beneficiaries in the National Social Assistance Programme have received ₹2,815 crore.

The rural economy, which supports 60-70% of India's population and accounts for 46% of GDP, is

operations to bring down the yield curve. As a result of all these policy actions, credit markets have stabilised, credit is available, and spreads have come down to normal levels.

With the loan moratorium coming to an end on August 31, the RBI has now announced a one-time restructuring scheme to provide relief to stressed sectors. Borrowers will be able to restructure their loans to match their cash flows, thereby protecting their business decisions. The net result of these relief actions has been to prevent widespread business failures and job losses, which would have resulted in permanent damage to the Indian economy.

Key reforms

After these relief measures were rolled out, the government introduced the Atmanirbhar Bharat revival package. Following the adage that a crisis is a terrible thing to witness, the Prime Minister has launched bold policy reforms in agriculture, defence production, electronics manufacturing, coal mining, and the public sector. These reforms position India for the future and generate confidence among business people and investors.

The agriculture sector has seen the most transformational changes. Unfortunately, the architects of industrial policy transformation in India have chosen to not commend the agricultural policy transformation of 2020. Through a series of ordinances, price controls have largely been removed in agriculture, farmers can now sell their crops to anyone anywhere, and contract farming has been allowed. Kisan credit cards are being provided to all fishermen, dairy farmers, and other agriculturists. An additional ₹1 lakh crore has been earmarked to build rural infrastructure such as storage depots, refrigerated warehouses, and other post-harvest facilities. Animal husbandry has been sanctioned another ₹15,000 crore. Defence production is being in-

digitised with 101 items meant on for domestic production. This will likely generate over ₹4 lakh crore of revenues for domestic defence producers in the next few years. Defence foreign direct investment of 74% is now allowed through the automatic route. Similarly, the government has completely opened up coal mining to the private sector to ensure that imported coal worth over ₹1 lakh crore is replaced with domestic coal. Finally, in yet another historic decision, the government has declared that there will be full disinvestment in all public sector enterprises in non-strategic sectors. Production of electronic goods for electronics manufacturing are likely to result in lakhs of crores of smartphone production in India for domestic use and exports. Current projections are that India will soon be among the top smartphone manufacturers globally. In sum, these game-changing reforms have prompted domestic and foreign investors to start pouring in billions of dollars of investments into our economy.

There is confidence

During these uncertain times, India remains a safe haven. The rupee has strengthened against the dollar, the world's reserve currency. Opinion surveys consistently show that Prime Minister Modi is the most popular elected leader in the world; in fact, tracking polls show that his popularity has actually gone up during the pandemic demonstrating that the Indian people approve of his handling of the coronavirus crisis. Confidence in the government has also increased. Many countries are stumbling through the pandemic. Meanwhile, India has seized control of its destiny and is marching resolutely toward the post-pandemic future.

Jayant Sinha is the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Finance in Parliament and a Lok Sabha MP from Hazaribagh, Jharkhand. The views expressed are personal

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.

Character of justice

In a remarkable observation made last December in Jodhpur, the esteemed Chief Justice of India said, "... justice must never ever take the form of revenge. I believe justice loses its character of justice if it becomes revenge." These redemptive words need to be reflected on in today's litigious atmosphere.

GOPALAKRISHNA GANDHI, Chennai

fourth year running holds out a lesson for administrators in the other big cities (inside pages, August 20). In one's success lies in political and administrative will, the cooperation of municipal authorities, NGOs, private companies and citizens. What started as a 'bin-less city model' was 'on less city model' was facilitated by door-to-door garbage collection through the 'GPs enabled garbage vans' tracked from a command centre. Segregation of waste at source was the first step followed by the processing of recyclable

and non-recyclable waste. Other steps were road cleaning every night, dustbins on wheels to stop littering, and a system of punishment and rewards.

VISHAL DABAS, New Delhi

Wekels, differences

Watching three daughters wivel in agony, experiencing intense pain for two to three days every month makes me aware of how much women suffer during their menstrual period, not only physically but also emotionally. While I am happy that a visible

beginning has been made by one corporate firm to help women, I do not see any reason why Ms. Barkha Datta, in her system of objection to this. I do not understand why she is trying to compound an otherwise simple and straightforward issue by using rhetoric laced with phrases such as 'biological determinism' and 'biological essentialism' which many women do not even care to understand. For them, all that matters is some quiet and quietude on the day(s) of 'torment' (OpEd page, August 21,

'Parley' "Should women be entitled to menstrual leave?")

KRISHNAKANTH POTTELA, Hyderabad

Court and apology

I fail to understand why the Supreme Court is firm like a rock in insisting that lawyer and activist Prashant Bhushan apologise for the two tweets which he maintains were not done to denigrate the judicial system and dent its supremacy in any aspect. All discerning people agree that Mr. Bhushan has not crossed the Lakshman

To read more letters online, visit the Q&A column

REKHA, the hackneyed phrase. He has done right, at the correct juncture.

MANU NARAYANAN, Chennai

The Dhoni era

All eminent sportsmen have to retire at some point of time, but Dhoni as a batsman, wicket keeper and captain was in a special league. It is sad that he quit Test cricket a little too prematurely but it speaks for his selfless attitude.

THIRUVA. KANAKA T.S., Thiruvananthapuram

A people living off borrowed money

As Sri Lanka struggles with outstanding foreign debt, rural households across the country have been living off borrowings after exhausting their savings. **Meera Srinivasan** reports on how those already struggling with severe economic hardships are now grappling with a pandemic-induced crisis

After seven jobs in the last three years in and around Colombo, Simran Enric is now back home in Sri Lanka's hill country. He escaped the pandemic that struck the capital, but his last job at a grocery store didn't.

"I am ready to take up any job. It doesn't matter which city, what work or how much they pay," says the 19-year-old. He began working after dropping out of school before his Ordinary Level examination. His parents' stagnant wages, from tea production on an estate in Maskeliya in the central Nuwara Eliya district, was not enough for three square meals for their family of five, including Enric's two schooling sisters. His Colombo income, they hoped, would support household finances. It barely did, but the family couldn't afford to lose any additional source of income, however meagre, as they tried to cope. Over a period of time, Enric's small savings proved valuable. And then the deadly virus arrived.

In Sri Lanka, though, the novel coronavirus didn't seem all that deadly, going by the official data. While COVID-19 case numbers in the region and in powerful western countries increased rapidly, Sri Lanka stood out, drawing high praise, including from the World Health Organization, for containing the virus. To date, Sri Lanka has reported 11 deaths and fewer than 5,000 cases, of which only 127 are active.

After a stringent lockdown for two months and the efforts of the country's efficient public health sector, aided by the military, Sri Lanka felt relatively fit to hold the twice-postponed parliamentary elections on August 5. Over 16 million of the country's 21 million-strong population could vote in the elections, held with elaborate health guidelines mandated by the Election Commission. The turnout was 78%.

As was widely predicted, the ruling Rajapaksa brothers' young party won comfortably, securing a rare two-thirds majority in Sri Lanka's semi-proportional representation system. With carefully cultivated political capital from projecting their war-victor image for a decade now, and aided by the former president's abysmal failures, the Rajapaksas have consolidated their grip on the country like few have. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his older brother Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa sit in the country's two most powerful offices. They have no imminent threat to their political might. But their government faces an unprecedented economic challenge.

Fragile economy
Reeling under the shock of last year's ghastly Easter terror bombings, Sri Lanka's economy contracted by 1.6% in the first quarter of 2020, even before the pandemic's local and global spread was clear. The World Bank has projected a rather grim picture, warning it could contract up to 3%.

Of the country's mounting external debt - equivalent to 42.6% of the GDP in 2019, according to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka - nearly \$3 billion is due for repayment this year. This includes a non-negotiable \$1 billion sovereign bond maturing in October, besides bilateral and multilateral loans.

Aware of the daunting task ahead, the Rajapaksa administration wasted no time in requesting lenders for a debt freeze. On his visit to New Delhi in February, his first trip abroad after assuming premiership of the then-caretaker government, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa sought a debt moratorium that is still being negotiated.

With the pandemic that hit Sri Lanka in March amplifying the economic crisis manifold, the country's looming debt crunch gave the government the jitters. The government went for new loans to service past borrowings, including over \$5 billion from China and \$960 million from India. In March, Sri Lanka signed an agreement with China for another \$500 million loan after an "urgent request" from Colombo, to deal with the pandemic's harsh economic blow.

Along the margins

While the government struggles to cope with the fiscal crisis, the people, especially those on the margins, suffer. Enric stayed in Colombo for almost eight weeks during "curfew time" with a partial salary, lodging and food, until he lost his job. "There was no chance of finding a new job," he says. He returned home and the family was back to relying entirely on his parents' wages.

"No work today; there aren't enough tea leaves on the bushes after last week's heavy rains," says his mother S. Bagyalakshmi, who recently pawned the only piece of jewellery she had kept for her daughters. "Work has been irregular these days."

Increasingly, many employers across estates are asking workers to stay at home once every few days, so they don't have to pay the monthly incentive tied to a minimum number of days'



"Sri Lankans know well that for a promise to translate to policy and more crucially, action, the government's political might alone will not do." Supporters await the arrival of Gotabaya Rajapaksa at the inauguration of Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna's election campaign, in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, on July 3. (Below) Line rooms in Maskeliya. Tens of thousands of Malayah Tamil youth, employed in hotels and shops, in Colombo and other cities, have now returned jobless to the hill country. **©STYPMAGS**



mandatory work, according to labourers. Citing the pandemic, Sri Lanka's major plantation companies have virtually stalled talks with the government on a basic wage hike from the current LKR 700 to LKR 1,000 that workers have been demanding for over three years. Not that the companies were any more willing to pay the rate in 2019, when tea exporters reported a record high revenue of over \$1.3 billion.

The estate workers were persistent enough to push their demand to poll manifests, but not powerful enough to realise it. In January this year, two months into office, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa assured them of a wage hike by March 1, following up on his campaign slogan. Six months later, workers have resigned to yet another broken promise.

For those like Bagyalakshmi, pawning her hard-earned piece of jewellery was the only option to survive. As far as her family's poverty goes, it was not introduced by the pandemic, but was gravely aggravated by it.

The nearly 1.5 lakh estate labourers among Sri Lanka's million-strong Malayah (hill country) Tamils, whom British planters brought down from south India to clear forested mountainous land, plant and pluck coffee and later tea, have been historically neglected. Earnings of precious foreign exchange, they remain on the country's geographic, social and economic margins, their labour invisible and voice rarely heard.

Bagyalakshmi's home, a colonial-era "line room" with a living area barely 8X8 feet, is located on the edge of a winding, unmotorable road inside an estate. It is a silent witness to the violent colonial past her ancestors endured, as well as the exploitation that carried over the years after independence, making the lives of successive generations vulnerable and their livelihoods, precarious.

But it is not just estate workers facing the brunt. Like Enric, tens of thousands

of Malayah Tamil youth, employed in hotels and shops, often as cleaners or assistants, in Colombo and other cities, have now returned jobless to the hill country. "There is a sudden increase in three-wheeler drivers in Maskeliya. That is because many of us had to come back from Colombo after the COVID-19 outbreak as there was no other option of making a living there," says Murugaiya Vignewar, 28, who lost his mason job in Colombo. "I took a loan and bought this three-wheeler, but it is not easy to find hires." He relies on his sister's in the estate engaging his autorickshaw for an urgent visit to Maskeliya town, paying LKR 1,500 (or two days' gross wages) for the round trip, as estate roads are not serviced by public transport.

Elders in the community note that it is over the last two decades that Malayah Tamil youth from the estates ventured out looking for jobs, escaping the estates where their parents toil all day braving blood-sucking leeches and stingy wages. But they couldn't escape hardship.

Precarious jobs abroad

While some migrated to the capital and big towns in the prosperous Western province, others found jobs as domestic and construction workers in West Asian countries. Sri Lanka's hill country, along with high-migration districts such as Kurunegala in the North Western Province and Batticaloa in the Eastern Province, supplies a steady flow of cheap labour abroad. Of the over 2 lakh workers who migrated from Sri Lanka in 2018, more than half were unskilled workers and housemaids, official data says. But the raging virus made their lives and jobs overseas even more perilous than at home.

As many as 47 Sri Lankan migrant workers have succumbed to COVID-19 in West Asian countries, according to Mangala Randeniya, spokesman of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment. This is more than four times the number of deaths reported in Sri Lanka. The migrant workers' funerals were held where they were last employed, as their families in Sri Lanka grieved from thousands of miles away.



Some 40,000 workers, who are out of work in West Asia, are trying to return home. Wary of importing more carriers of the virus, after dozens who returned in special flights tested positive on arrival, the Sri Lankan government is staggering their repatriation in phases. Others wait, with savings for food dwindling, insecure accommodation, the constant fear of infection, and no clarity on their date of return or prospects in Sri Lanka thereafter.

"Two of my nieces and a nephew are working abroad. We still don't know when they can return, we are really worried," says Bagyalakshmi. This is the prevalent anxiety among migrant workers' families.

For over 10 years now, Somasundaram Mallika has been raising her older sister's three children, in addition to two of her own, in Badulla district, in the neighbouring Uva Province. "My sister is the only breadwinner in her family after her husband passed away. She had no choice but to leave the country for work. Thankfully she still has her job, but with this virus we don't know when we will see her next," says Mallika.

Her sister Somasundaram Yogam did many jobs abroad before her current one as a housemaid in Saudi Arabia. Speaking to *The Hindu* over telephone, she says: "I don't go out anywhere because of the COVID risk. I hear many housemaids like me have lost their jobs. I am very lucky to still have mine."

Despite a secure job and a reasonable salary, many workers find it very hard to be away from their families. Unlike Yogam, many don't have reliable relatives to care for their children. "I miss them very much, but what do you do when you have to work?" she says.

Yogam would seem better off compared to hundreds of Sri Lankan garment workers in Jordan who were sacked after the pandemic. Around 200 of them returned last week, but another 500 are stuck there, according to Abiramy Sivagananathan, Sri Lanka coordinator for the Asia Floor Wage Alliance, engaged in international campaigns for collective bargaining in the global garment industry. "The factories first reduced the meals they are mandated to provide from three to two, and then

stealthily obtained signatures from the workers in documents saying they were resigning, to be exempted from paying social security," she says.

Moreover, skilled expat workers have been returning to Sri Lanka with less difficulty, even from high-risk countries such as the U.S. and the U.K. "It's not just the employers abroad who manipulate and exploit migrant workers, our own government discriminates against low-skilled workers by making their return very hard," Sivagananathan observes.

Desperate measures

Labourers like Bagyalakshmi or Yogam, or those back from Jordan might make an occasional news headline in Sri Lanka, but they almost never figure in policy talk on the national economy. Those discussions begin and end with the outcome of their labour - be it tea and rubber or garments that together make up about 65% of exports; or migrant remittances that are the main source of Sri Lanka's foreign exchange. In 2019, inward remittances added up to \$6.7 billion.

With all key foreign exchange earners - tourism, exports and remittances - of the country badly hit, Sri Lanka is facing its biggest foreign exchange crisis in history, by the government's own admission.

The Central Bank and the government have taken several urgent measures. In March, authorities restricted import of non-essential goods and soon relaxed foreign exchange regulations, inviting deposits in foreign currency. The government curtailed outward remittances.

Meanwhile, the Central Bank recently obtained a \$400 million currency swap from the Reserve Bank of India to boost its reserves, while President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has requested Prime Minister Narendra Modi for an additional \$1.1 billion currency swap. Sri Lanka has also sought emergency financial support from the International Monetary Fund, under its Rapid Credit Facility. The request is under assessment.

Faced with a tumbling currency - about LKR 167 (roughly 74) to an American dollar - fast-depleting foreign exchange reserves and a daunting repayment schedule this year, Sri Lanka has no time to lose while fixing its battered economy.

But the task is far from easy. The government can't open up the country for tourists without increasing the risk of a spike in new cases. It can't strengthen exports until other countries, or at least Sri Lanka's key markets, are ready to buy what it has to sell.

Evidently, the newly installed Rajapaksa government is under enormous pressure - not only to keep Sri Lanka's unblemished debt servicing record, but also to create local demand in order to keep the economy ticking until international markets brighten.

Sri Lanka's rural economy, sustained largely by agriculture and fisheries, has been crying for attention for years - evi-

denced in the recurring farmer and fisher protests around cost of inputs, profiteering by intermediaries, and unstable incomes.

Also, it is not just the country that is growing more and more indebted. Many of its poor citizens too are mired in stifling debt. While the national spotlight is on the outstanding foreign debt, rural women across the country, including in the civil war-affected north and east, have been living off borrowed money, often microfinance loans that agents push at their doorsteps.

Trapped in servicing the exorbitant interest rates - even more than 200% in some cases - of multiple loans, some have tragically taken their own lives, just as Jaffna-based Sureshwaran Marriarathu did earlier this month. The fast-growing concern about predatory microfinance loans, especially among women, evoked a poll promise from Gotabaya Rajapaksa ahead of last year's presidential elections for relief from microfinance loans. The indebted women await action before more lives are lost.

Where are the jobs?

Most policymakers in Sri Lanka agree that in order to tackle prevalent household indebtedness or generate greater local demand, the government must necessarily create jobs. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has recently resumed a programme to provide jobs to 50,000 unemployed graduates and 1 lakh low-income earners. But there are several thousand more, unable to complete school and desperately looking for jobs, others like the hill country youth who are now out of work, or the migrant workers who are back in the country with uncertain futures. They will need different kinds of jobs.

"In the hill country, for instance, they could set up industries that do value addition. Why must those factories be based in Colombo when all the tea is produced here," asks Fr. Isaac Daniel Dixon, pastor at a Maskeliya church attended mostly by estate workers. His congregation includes many youth who lost their jobs in Colombo and returned recently. "Some end up as labourers in the same estates as their parents, doing the job their parents hoped they never would."

Immediately after the new government was installed this month, and ministerial portfolios allocated, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa emphasised the need to promote local industry. The thrust, aligned to the ruling party's nationalist, populist election plank, is not new to Sri Lanka. Neither are leaders' customary poll-time promises to alleviate poverty. Campaigning in the southern Hambantota district on the eve of the August 5 elections, the President pledged to build a "people-centric national economy, fully owned by the people."

Sri Lankans know well that for a promise to translate to policy and more crucially, action, the government's political might alone will not do. Therein lies the Rajapaksa brothers' next big test.

The Statesman

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Cities in spotlight

The choice of Indore in Madhya Pradesh as India's cleanest city with a population higher than 1 million for the fourth time in succession confirms that this central Indian urban agglomeration has been both serious and consistent about its standards, and has not allowed the change in dispensation in the state capital to interfere with its commitment to sanitation. That Surat, blighted by the plague not so long ago, is second on the list, too, occasions no surprise because after suffering that mortification in the early 1990s, its overseers worked hard to address core sanitation issues.

Not surprisingly, municipalities in India's largest metropolises have fared poorly in the Swachh Survekshan rankings announced this week with Hyderabad at 23 out of 47 surveyed cities with a population over 1 million, Greater Mumbai at 35, Bengaluru at 37 and Chennai at 45. West Bengal did not participate in the survey and residents of the state can only speculate if things have improved since 2018 when 19 of the 25 dirtiest cities were reported to be in the state. Empirical evidence might not be available, but anecdotal evidence suggests that Kolkata and Howrah are closer to the bottom than to the top.

Delhi's citizens have a lot to be unhappy about. While the New Delhi Municipal Council enjoys a high rank among cities with a population of between 100,000 and a million, all the other city municipalities – each with populations above a million – have fared shoddily, with South Delhi ranked at 31, North Delhi at 43 and East Delhi at 46. Even Ghaziabad and Agra have fared better, and only Patna has performed worse than East Delhi. This is a scandalous situation and suggests that there is wide disparity between the quality of civic services offered in the elite enclave of New Delhi and in other parts of the city. Certainly, those in charge of these municipal bodies have a lot to answer for, and it will not do to merely shift blame for this sorry situation to others.

To varying degrees, everyone in the picture from the Lieutenant-Governor to the Delhi Government and the Members of Parliament from the state has a role to play, but primarily the responsibilities with the municipal corporations and their performance has been uniformly abysmal. The municipal corporations are prone to blame the Delhi government for all their shortcomings. But this argument cannot wash, quite simply because the unique administrative structure of the capital is a reality that all parties must live with. For the BJP-ruled municipalities to blame the Aam Aadmi Party ruled government, and for this government in turn to blame the Union Government and the Lt-Generals does not solve the problem. For the fact is that Delhi's citizens do not really need a national survey to tell them how poorly they are served by those who administer the city's municipalities.

The laced cup

While it is uncertain if Russia's main Opposition leader Alexei Navalny will still be alive when this appears in print, what is certain is that the widespread suspicion he was poisoned – the latest to suffer this fate – will not go away. It is a chilling prospect for those who oppose the Russian President Vladimir Putin to live with the realisation that the tea they sip, or the food they ingest, may lead to death or permanent injury. Certainly, there is nothing to suggest that Mr Putin's most strident opponent, a well-built, 44-year-old, 1.88 m tall man apparently in the prime of his life, suffered from a condition that would render him comatose if he sipped a cup of tea. Two facts are not in question. First, Mr Navalny is by far the staunchest critic of the Russian President; he has been arrested many times by the regime and when he decided to contest against Mr Putin in the 2018 election, his candidature was disallowed by election authorities. Second, that those who threaten Russian disavours are often targeted with poison. Two years ago, Pyotr Verzlov, an Opposition activist slipped into coma in similarly mysterious circumstances and battled death for over a month, until doctors in Germany, where he was flown, managed to save him. Though no trace of poison was found, Mr Verzlov remains convinced he was poisoned. While German Chancellor Angela Merkel offered similar help to Mr Navalny, and an air ambulance was sent from Nuremberg to fetch him, doctors have said he cannot be moved because his condition is unstable.

Others who believe they were targeted with poison by the Russian regime include Ukraine's former President Victor Yushchenko, who was left permanently disfigured after being administered industrial dioxin, possibly in a dish of boiled crayfish. The pro-Western politician has always blamed Moscow. Lacing a cup of tea or food with poison is simple and the person administering it can quite easily cover his or her tracks. Former KGB officers are on record to confirm that use of poison by the Soviets and their successors in the Russian state is quite common.

Certainly, many in India will recall that the widow of India's second Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, had maintained her husband was poisoned whilst in Tashkent in January 1966. Many of Mr Putin's critics have been poisoned on domestic flights, the attractions of in-flight service often serving as a trap.

Opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza slipped into a weeklong coma after taking an Aeroflot flight. Journalist Anna Politkovskaya was poisoned on a flight in 2004. She survived to tell the story of the cup of tea that nearly laid her low, but not for long as she was shot dead in the elevator of her apartment. Mr Putin, a former KGB foreign intelligence officer, has much to answer for but it is unlikely he will ever be questioned.

China's compulsions

The external affairs situation is gearing itself into a remarkable opportunity for New Delhi to regain what we lost in 1962 and before. It is as if many a planet is positioning itself to assist India



The coming months are the time to tell Beijing that the occasion to settle our mutual issues and disputes is now. Those pending since India's independence and China's revolution cannot go on forever. The lingering disputes must be ended, or else sooner or later the American alliance would expand. India has been non-aligned and its rulers would prefer to continue that way. It should be a sad day if one Asian country drives another Asian nation into the arms of the West. It is for Beijing's computer to balance the cultural, economic and strategic damage of an Asian split or the blossom of Asian unity. This is the time to act.

The external affairs situation is gearing itself into a remarkable opportunity for New Delhi to regain what we lost in 1962 and before. It is as if many a planet is positioning itself to assist India. It began with Chinese ruler Xi Jinping becoming highly ambitious, apparently wanting to make his Middle Kingdom the powerful pivot of the earth. Like Napoleon Bonaparte in 1804, Xi has crowned himself Emperor for life, although the world has changed a great deal over the last two centuries. Today any number of his colleagues would resent such an elevation, and implicitly compel Xi to prove himself a great man every week.

The USA has an unusually bold President; he has an election to win in less than three months from now. President Donald Trump has been waging a cold war with Beijing for quite a while. It has become colder of late and is likely to freeze further. He demonstrated in Texas earlier this year how much he likes Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Lately, he and his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have openly supported India in the context of Chinese border intrusions, although their main concern is Taiwan, a democratic island country off the southeast coast of China. It is an independent country but Beijing claims that China, Taiwan and Hong Kong-Macau are one country with three systems.

The USA has a defence treaty with Taiwan and cannot possibly allow the island country to be grabbed by China. Nevertheless, it is a 'do or die' prestige issue for Beijing, especially in Asia. It will



therefore be interesting to see how the issue will unfold. According to President Trump, the USA is likely to jettison the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Think of it, it was an alliance to combat an invasion by the Soviet Union of Western Europe. By 1991 the Soviet Union had broken up. After that what is the rationale for NATO? Who should it defend, and against whom? In any case, this should mainly be the responsibility of Western Europe, not of the USA. If this were to happen, the US military budget would have a lot of money and troops to spare for Asia. Half the American troops stationed in Germany are already being transferred to Asia.

After World War II ended in 1945, Germany and Japan were asked by the USA and allies to become military satellites. They were forbidden from letting their forces leave the shores of their countries for any military operations. In fact, for the first five years after WW II, these countries were not to have any military at all. They were to be protected by the USA, with or without NATO. Germany remained conservative, saved money and produced its economic miracle. Japan was militarily a little more restless and began developing its navy and air force and strengthening its army, even though slowly. In these seventy years, it has quietly modernized its navy and air force, has built a helicopter-carrier and also makes modern submarines. The present Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has worked hard to amend the Constitution and the more China developed, the greater the Japanese intent to be militarily stronger, so also is the case with India over the last six years. Every action has a reaction.

Similarly, the people of Taiwan have been alerted more especially after the trouble began in Hong Kong. Until the Xi Jinping regime passed a law that anyone arrested for wrongdoing in Hong Kong could be extradited to mainland China for being tried, these smaller places were relaxed. This new Chinese law has made Hong Kongers rightly feel this is a violation of Beijing's commitment of 1997, when the British left, of 'one country two systems' whereby the mainland would not interfere in Hong Kong. Popular protest spilled over to the streets where even American flags were flown, provoking great anger in Beijing. These continual agitations have further alerted the Taiwanese and in a recent election, Tsai Ing Wen became the island nation's President. Tsai is very committed to complete independence which infuriates Beijing no end. The USA is defending Taiwan's freedom to demonstrate its seriousness; very recently a Secretary of the Trump government visited Taipei as a show of support. India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has appointed an envoy to Taiwan, following the Ladakh clashes.

More distant countries whether in Europe or South America have got resentful of China; they suspect that the Corona virus began in Wuhan and yet China did not alert them in time. The international wind is blowing against the yellow giant. The Islamic countries may not speak up but are upset at how Beijing is treating Muslims in its country, especially those living in Xinjiang, which was once an independent East Turkestan. After the Red revolution and Mao Zedong coming to power in 1950, some 28 leading politicians of this country were invited to Beijing (then Peking). The stated purpose was to meet fraternal leaders and discuss issues of mutual interest.

Since the Uyghurs had no means of travel, a special plane was sent to the capital Örümqi. Zedong came to power in 1950, the same aircraft that was taking the leaders back crashed on the way. All Uyghur leaders were killed except two communists who had not gone with the rest claiming to be unwelcome. They took over the gov-



How can we be so Indifferent with so many active Covid-19 cases?

Bangladesh's response to Covid-19 has been one of denial, delay and dereliction from the start, a trend that unfortunately continues even as the country passes the grim milestone after another. According to the latest estimates, Bangladesh is now seventh on the list of countries with the most active cases in the world, and sixteenth in terms of total cases. Among the Asian countries, in terms of total cases, India with its huge population remains well ahead of us and Pakistan is within arm's reach. In terms of active cases, only India is ahead of us. As far as statistics go, this is an extremely disconcerting development.

How should we react to this? The scientific consensus is that we should be extremely worried. Despite the inexplicably low levels of testing in the country, large numbers of people are dying or getting infected every day. But our officials continue to be in denial.

Comments by several ministers signal a strategy to use recent low numbers of cases to highlight the 'success' of the government, bizarre as it may seem, although a joint survey by IEDCR and icddr shows that the actual numbers are far greater than what we are being fed by the government. Experts say part of this could be because of 'response fatigue'. The WHO has already urged countries to undertake appropriate Covid-19 response activities to reduce the risk of response fatigue through nuanced and pragmatic steps. These warnings, unfortunately, are falling on deaf ears in Bangladesh.

Far from doing the needful, our

The Daily Star

is still waiting for updates on its earlier decision to impose zonal lockdowns where the situation is especially dire. We are also waiting for more action to uproot corruption in the health sector and establish accountability, which is vital to saving lives.

What they fail to understand is that there are no political points to score in this battle, and you can't simply will it away or hope for herd immunity to develop as people endure unimaginable sufferings.

There are no winners or losers in this battle – there are only survivors, and how well we survive depends on how sincere and pragmatic we are in our efforts to contain this virus. We urge the government to shed its dangerous optimism about the Covid-19 situation in the country and instead focus on the tasks at hand. It must reinvest in its moribund health departments and facilities to expand testing and ensure treatment for both Covid-19 and general patients. We are still waiting for updates on its earlier decision to impose zonal lockdowns where the situation is especially dire. We are also waiting for more action to uproot corruption in the health sector and establish accountability, which is vital to saving lives.

IN MEMORIAM

GAYEN DR. AMALENDU — In memory of, who passed away on this day, 1983. Fondly remembered by Dipali, Pinku, Rumu, Gullu, Chiku.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Dragon's threat

SIR, Harsha Kakar is brilliant in his article 'US poll outcome will not impact India ties' (18 August). China is now an emerging superpower that wants to dislodge the current superpower, the USA, from the top spot.

The sole superpower, in order to retain its global hegemony, is desperate to halt the emerging superpower's expansionist designs, especially in the Indo-Pacific.

But it cannot do so alone. Here lies the importance of India -

another democracy and a formidable military power that can challenge the Dragon's supremacy in Asia. Recent incidents at Galwan in Ladakh confirm that.

Actually the oldest and the largest democracies need each other for their own interests to thwart the totalitarian regime's nefarious expansionist designs and should also try to bring other democracies of the region under their umbrella.

Who wins the next US election



- Trump or Biden – does not matter. The common interest is to stop the Dragon.

Yours, etc., Aranya Sanyal, Siliguri, 19 August.

SONS OF SOIL?

SIR, Owing to slowdown of the economy, the position of unemployment in India had already been alarming before the lockdown due to Covid-19.

The scene got much worse as we moved into the lockdown period. In this piquant situation, the Madhya Pradesh government has taken an important decision that "all government jobs will be reserved for MP youth only".

Similar decision has also recently been taken by the Haryana government. Though in the quasi-federal structure of our Constitution, state governments may have the right to take such decisions, yet while abrogating Article 370 and 51 A of the Constitution on 5 August 2019, the Union government had opened the floodgates for employment in the newly carved UTs of J&K and Ladakh from across the country.

The Constitution gives everyone the right to stay anywhere in

EYE-OPENER

SIR, Dr Pratyush Chatterjee's 'Death follows senseless agony' (17 August) is an eye opener for the government's medical advisors. A body if wrapped and sealed in a transparent plastic sheet endangers no one. It can safely be handed over to the kin for performing last rites. A section of overenthusiastic, ignorant social media users recently denounced the funeral procession of an ex-municipality chairman by his followers. Government and media should have enlightened the public. Let actual scientific knowledge prevail and social mores be restored.

Yours, etc., Dr Basudeb Dutta, Santipur, 17 August.

this country and get employment accordingly. The policy of sons of soil violating the Constitution needs to be taken seriously by the Union/state governments.

Yours, etc., SK Khosla, Chandigarh, 19 August.

UNFAIR WBECDL

SIR, This is with reference to the exorbitant electricity bill levied on us by WBECDL for the month of August. This is the result of the last seven months' consumption being clubbed together and has happened to most residents of our village, which comes under the jurisdiction of Amalagra WBECDL (Garbheta) of Paschim Medinipur

district. As WBECDL has different rates for higher units of consumption, putting all seven months' consumption into a single bill results in highly unfair charge, which is unjustified. Neither the staff of WBECDL-Amalagra nor Vidut Sahayog WBECDL Mobile App complaints.

The issues raised by us, Covid-19 has ruined our life and livelihoods. At this time, these bills hit hard and below the belt.

We earnestly request the higher authority take immediate corrective measures to save us. Yours, etc., Aniban Samanta, Garbheta, Paschim Medinipur, 18 August.