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THE EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

ON A LARGER STAGE

Punjab's counter to Centre's farm acts makes a political point. But state must not lose opportunity for its farmers to do better

THE THREE BILLS passed by the Punjab Assembly on Tuesday, ostensibly to undo the Centre's recently enacted farm reform laws, make a populist political point. Proof of it is the provision of "imprisonment of not less than three years and fine" for any purchase of produce at below the official minimum support price (MSP). The fine print, however, is that the MSPs in the bills, which have to receive presidential assent, relate to wheat and paddy alone. Government agencies procured almost 95 per cent of the entire wheat and 99.5 per cent of the regular non-basmati paddy that are sold in Punjab's mandis. These purchases were obviously at MSP, making claims of the Punjab government's bills protecting farmers against "harassment" by traders or corporate houses superficial. The simple fact is private players hardly source any wheat or non-basmati paddy from Punjab, given the state's high market fees and levies. The threat of jail sentence would merely increase the government's share in whatever remains of the "market" to 100 per cent.

The bills pushed through by the Amarinder Singh-led Congress government, ironically, propose no such punitive action against those buying other produce at below MSP. Maize growers in Punjab have realised rates of Rs 800-1,200 per quintal in the current marketing season, as against the MSP of Rs 1,850. Kapas (raw un-ginned cotton) is, likewise, trading at Rs 5,100-5,200 per quintal, way below its MSP of Rs 5,725. Punjab farmers have this time planned 7.43 lakh hectares (th) under these two crops and another 6.60 th under basmati paddy, which receives no MSP support even on paper. Despite the significant acreages, the Punjab government's bills have refrained from deeming sub-MSP transactions in them as an offence. Nor do they purchases attract prohibitive mandi fees, unlike for wheat and normal paddy. The reason is only because the buyers here are overwhelmingly private millers, ginners and traders. The government knows pretty well that antagonising the private trade would require it to procure these commodities, for which there is neither money nor means for effective disposal.

Farmers across India are, no doubt, restless today. Their margins are under pressure from both rising input costs and un-remunerative produce prices. But the solution does not lie in posturing or fishing in troubled waters. Instead, it has to be found in improving productivity and input use efficiency, apart from leveraging the power of agricultural markets that have suffered from excessive fragmentation and controls on movement, stocking, exports and pricing. The Centre's farm acts are directionally correct, even if they might not yield immediate results. It is for the states, irrespective of the ruling party, to realise an opportunity. Punjab did it during the Green Revolution and should enable its farmers to do even better. Let the world, not just the Food Corporation of India, be their stage.

ABOUT A HERO

Controversy on Muralitharan biopic does injustice to one of the great sports stories

THE PLAN FOR a biopic on the life and achievements of Sri Lankan cricketer Muttiah Muralitharan has received a setback following opposition from the Tamil film fraternity and politicians. Actor Vijay Sethupathi, who was to play Muralitharan in the film, has withdrawn from the project, on the advice of the cricketer, after he (Sethupathi) was targeted by a section of the industry. Critics of the film, 800, view Muralitharan as someone who "collaborated" with the Sinhala majoritarian sentiment and "betrayed" the Tamil cause. The shrill political correctness on display refutes a nuanced understanding of politics, cinema and sports — the three strands in a complex narrative of the rise of a cricketer from an ethnic and linguistic minority to the stature of a national hero against the background of a long drawn-out ethnic war.

Muralitharan is arguably one of the greatest sportspersons of Tamil origin. His success as a bowler is unique in the history of cricket. His 800 Test wickets came in the face of tremendous odds on the field and off it. His bowling action, unusual because of a deformity in his throwing arm, came under extreme scrutiny and he had to fight allegations of chucking all through his career to emerge as one of cricket's greats. Off the field, however, his loyalty — to his community and the nation-state — was always on test as his career overlapped with the war years, when people and opinion were polarised not just in Sri Lanka but also in Tamil Nadu. Muralitharan, of course, was careful to avoid conversations on politics, though some of his remarks during the last phase of the war were construed as supportive of Sinhalese triumphalism. The fact is Muralitharan belongs to the Tamil community constituted mostly of indentured labour from India that went to work in the tea plantations in Sri Lanka in the 19th century. The plantation Tamils organised differently from the Tamils of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka and were lukewarm to the militant mobilisations of outfits such as the LTTE. The complex political history of Sri Lanka Tamils apart, it is unfair to let Muralitharan's stray comments on politics cloud his achievements on the cricket field.

Muralitharan's life story has ample material for good cinema. By all means, the film must be criticised if it fails to do justice to it. But the current grandstanding in the context of the making of the film, with an eye on political gains in Tamil Nadu, cannot pretend to address in any way the real concerns of Tamils in Sri Lanka.

QUIET PLEASE

A mute button will be used to ensure candidates don't interrupt each other in US presidential debate. It won't be enough

THE TIME SINCE the pandemic struck has been a period of isolation but not of silence, at least as far as US politics is concerned. The first debate between US President Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Joe Biden held last month was, not to put too fine a point on it, not a debate at all. At one point, fed up with Trump's interruptions, jibes and taunts, Biden asked his rival to "shut up", and even called him a "clown". Trump managed to frustrate the moderator as well, who, too, was barely allowed to finish a sentence. For the final debate, to be held on Thursday, the bipartisan debate commission has decided that the producers of the debate will be given a "mute" button. On every issue, when each candidate gets two minutes to speak, his opponent will be remotely silenced.

The mute button might not work out that well. The speaker's microphone could pick up the mutterings of his opponent. Also, even if the viewing public cannot hear the interruptions, the candidates can. The larger issue is the need to silence people who are contesting for high public office — an admission that grown-ups seeking election cannot be trusted to follow the same rules that school-going teenagers in debating societies do.

Trump and his campaign have already called the mute button partisan and unfair. But the problem of a coarse public discourse will not go away, nor is it limited to the US alone. There is no technical solution to the problem of grand egos and the inability or unwillingness to listen to those who disagree. In the age of social media, when politicians have managed to replace public debate and press conferences with pulpits and Twitter accounts, there is no mute button strong enough to ensure a civil discussion.



SUJAR R CHINYOY

THE SECOND MINISTERIAL meeting of the four-nation Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in Tokyo on October 6 has been followed by a decision to include Australia in the Malabar 2020 naval exercise after a gap of 13 years. The threat posed by China to the geo-strategic and geo-economic landscape of the Indo-Pacific region ranks alongside the challenge of the pandemic in terms of disruption. The pandemic has stoked Chinese aggression, from the East and South China Sea to eastern Ladakh, but it has also provided others with opportunities to cooperate in maritime security, cyber-security, data flows, quality infrastructure and healthcare.

That the "Indo-Pacific" concept has found fresh currency should not come as a surprise. It is an inclusive and representative term that reflects the contemporary interconnectedness of trade, technology and supply chains in a wider region. By comparison, the "Asia-Pacific" represented the trans-Pacific strategic and economic impulses after World War II, and was confined to East and South-east Asia. Moreover, the Indo-Pacific is being re-defined, ironically, by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), debt-trap diplomacy, fictional territorial claims and a divide-and-rule strategy. The historical experience of Indo-Pacific strategies of the colonial age can help provide deeper insight into the malefic impact of China's neo-colonialism.

Beijing views the "Indo-Pacific" as a direct threat to the BRI, and in classical *wen qi* calculus, as an "encirclement" strategy.

During his recent visit to Malaysia, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi criticised the Quad, stating that Washington was aiming to build an "Indo-Pacific NATO" through the Quad. The very fact that China no longer describes it as "headline grabbing" and "foam on the sea" that would "soon dissipate" is proof that the Quad is acquiring traction.

One can expect China to use *wen qi* principles and *guanxi* (networks and connections) to weaken the Quad, especially in Japan and Australia. The economies of these two key Quad members remain heavily dependent on China. Japan's efforts at economic decoupling and Australia's endeavours to subject Chinese investments and influence-peddling to greater scrutiny should be lauded. In all likelihood, the new Yoshida Suga government in Japan will hold PM Abe's tough line on China, at least until the LDP election in September 2021 and the lower house elections later that year. Japan's recent enabling agreements with Vietnam and Philippines for defence exports could lead to similar arrangements with Indonesia and Thailand. Hopefully, the Scott Morrison government in Australia will continue to receive full domestic support for its increasingly robust China policy.

Having ensconced itself as the core of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, Quad needs a definitive blueprint

Once a solitary voice, India's concerns about the BRI are now echoed by several countries. India took the lead in banning Chinese apps. Notably, it was India's decision that had elevated the Quad dialogue to ministerial level in 2019. Yet again, it is India which has shed its reticence and decided to welcome Australia to the Malabar 2020 exercise. India's pull-out from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations last year may have appeared self-injurious then, but subsequent developments have put into sharper relief the deleterious role of China-centric supply chains

China's actions have since led to the Resilient Supply Chain Initiative (RSCI) involving India, Japan and Australia, focused on key sectors such as semi-conductors, pharmaceuticals, automobiles and telecommunications. An ambitious China has consistently sought the expulsion of the US from its periphery. The US and others such as France and Britain are historically part of the region. The US has played a key role in the region's stability and prosperity following the Second World War. US military presence prevented Japan from re-arming itself. It cautioned China against risking military adventurism across the Taiwan Strait that would have otherwise derailed its economic ascendance, and kept the peace on the Korean Peninsula for over six decades. Ironically, China, the biggest beneficiary of the trans-Pacific trade and investment flows, does not quite see it that way.

In the South China Sea, China's preposterous claims, island-building spree and militarisation of the region have put into sharper relief the deleterious role of China-centric supply chains

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WORDLY WISE

DON'T RAISE YOUR VOICE, IMPROVE YOUR ARGUMENT.

— DESMOND TUTU

strategy to fracture ASEAN consensus. As the only major power involved in the Code of Conduct negotiations, China will probe claims in the armour of "ASEAN centrality" to exploit and shape outcomes.

The US position on the South China Sea is now fully in alignment with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) tribunal award of 2016. While it cannot restore status quo ante in the South China Sea, it does boost the morale of claimants such as the Philippines, who are routinely bullied by China.

In the Indian Ocean, China uses the cloak of anti-piracy deployments to maintain a quasi-permanent presence, with bases in Gwadar and Djibouti as beachheads for penetrating South Asia, the Gulf region and littoral Africa.

As was once the case in dealing with the *xiongnu* — barbarians — on its northern borders, China continues to employ ancient stratagems to pit one nation against another on its periphery to weaken and subjugate contending forces through guile and inducements.

The Quad, having ensconced itself as the core of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision, now needs a definitive blueprint in order to have a meaningful impact. It should have a tough security-oriented core with a softer and inclusive ecosystem that prioritises the developmental agenda. The Quad Plus format should cater to the region's economic needs, including infrastructure, connectivity and capacity-building. Without generous alternatives, many countries would continue to be drawn to China, as moths to a flame.

Looking ahead, there is scope to convene a future Quad meeting in the 2+2 format, with diplomats and civilian defence officials participating at the level of director general. Such an expanded format could gradually be elevated to the level of vice minister and minister. A joint statement by the four countries at the next meeting of the Quad would also help consolidate the gains made so far.

The writer, a former Ambassador of India, is currently director-general of the Manohar Parikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Views are personal

A QUESTION OF SURVIVAL

Why Punjab's farmers oppose the new farm laws



AJAY VIR KAKHAR

WHEN THE ESTABLISHMENT ignores the historical context and the emotional component underlying any debate, mass protests can erupt to potentially shape the future. The people of Punjab would not have wanted a confrontation with the Union government, neither would I want to put it so bluntly, but around this, agitated farmers, with a strong common purpose, are energised in a way not seen in many decades. To nullify the possible impact of the three farm acts passed in haste by the Parliament, the Punjab government was compelled to pass its own bills on Tuesday. These broadly attempt to ensure continued procurement of wheat and paddy at the minimum support price (MSP), uphold the powers of the courts in dispute settlement and empower the state to regulate trade of foodgrains.

The three farm acts were preceded by a high-level committee in 2015, headed by Shanta Kumar, which suggested measures to reorient the Food Corporation of India (FCI) operations by shifting away from the public distribution system to cash transfers. This negates the very requirement of MSP procurement. The Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices has been recommending reviewing the open-ended procurement of foodgrain, which is also reflected in the recent RBI annual report that says that the MSP is no solution to farmer's woes. Similar views were expressed by a Union cabinet minister lately. Therefore, the farmers infer that a path that makes MSP procurement redundant is inevitable and fear

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it will become applicable after the 2022 assembly elections. To grasp the farmer's resentment, I estimate the loss that may accrue to the state will be substantial.

The MSP for wheat is Rs 1,925, and for paddy Rs 1,868. But in the absence of government procurement in Bihar and other places, agitated farmers sell 20 per cent below MSP. Similarly, without assured procurement in Punjab, the losses to the state could exceed Rs 15,000 crore. This has generated so intense an outcry that even BJP allies had to go to the extent of breaking long-forged alliances for fear of becoming politically irrelevant. Though it is more likely that the open-ended procurement of wheat and paddy will end.

In other states, government procurement per farmer is capped at produce from 5 acres of land. For example, in Rajasthan, it is 25 quintals for moong and groundnut. Eventually, farmers fear that the same limits will be applied in Punjab; about 20 per cent of paddy and 25 per cent of wheat will not be procured and will sell below the MSP. This will lead to a loss of Rs 3,200 crore. Possibly, that is why central government functionaries have repeated that "MSP will continue" rather than declaring that "procurement at MSP will continue as earlier". To give them credit, their "truth" corresponds to Yudhishtira's "untruth" when he stated, "Ashwatthama is dead".

In adjoining states, central government agencies do not pay mandi fee on procurement. The new farm bills disallow imposition

of mandi fee on produce procured outside the mandi's physical boundaries. Should FCI or private traders trade outside the mandi space, the state will lose revenue of Rs 3,500 crore.

Central government agencies do not pay commission to *arhtiyas* in their price support operations for oilseeds, pulses and cotton. If this practice is extended to Punjab, three-quarters of 24,000 *arhtiyas* and their employees will lose agency and employment. The annual loss will be about Rs 1,500 crore. Further, in the event of not being paid by the purchaser, they will start charging farmers extra fee under various pretexts.

After renegeing on the promise of fixing the MSP by the C2+50 per cent formula, the government set up on the (A2+H)+50 per cent formula where the derived MSP is far less. There are rumours that to stave off a financial crisis, MSP in the future will be calculated separately for each state depending on their cost of cultivation. If true, in Punjab, the MSP for wheat and paddy will reduce to Rs 1,035 and Rs 1,094 per quintal respectively — the loss could be more than Rs 26,000 crore.

An opportunity has been lost in the lackadaisical handling of the issue. Politics now threatens to complicate the process. I doubt if future historians will recall when Punjab changed course, and how an issue of farmer livelihoods morphed into one of Punjab's survival. It is time to stop moralising.

The writer is chairman, Bharat Krishi Samaj

OCTOBER 22, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIRA VS ZIA
PRIME MINISTER Indira Gandhi accused Pakistan President Zia-ul-Haq of violating the Simla Agreement in letter and spirit. She attacked Zia on two specific counts: One was that President Zia has during the last few months sought to raise the Kashmir issue at various world forums, including the UN. The other was that he has sought to internationalise the recent riots in Moradabad. When asked what she thought of the current Pakistani mood for the normalisation of relations between the countries, Mrs Gandhi said, "Whose mood... General Zia's or the Pakistani people's?" She did not think they are the same

PM ON COMMUNALISM
THE PRIME MINISTER said the problem of communalism had to be met "politically and socially" by involving the largest number of people. She doubted if this evil could be tackled by banning communal parties. A vast majority of our people are against communalism, she said.

TRAIN COLLISION
AT LEAST 20 persons were killed and 50 others were injured when the Bombay-Punjab Mail rammed into a stationary goods train near Itarsi. The Railway Protection Force and Madhya Pradesh police officers engaged in the rescue operations

were digging out more bodies from the damaged bogies and the toll was likely to go up, official sources said. Twenty of the injured were stated to be in a critical condition and eight of them had been shifted from Itarsi to the hospital at Bhopal, 120 km away.

ABADAN BATTLE
AS DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS intensified, the battle for Abadan and Khorramshahr appeared to gather momentum at the northern rim of the Gulf. A Baghdad radio broadcast claimed Abadan's approaches were being "hit with repeated tank assaults to wear them down and then narrow its defence"



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THE IDEAS PAGE

The fault is not in our stars

We would like to believe that Bollywood is a filthy place because we are really not sure how clean we are. And this dichotomy has turned to hate



JERRY PINTO

COULD IT BE that we are in the middle of a caste war and we have not been able to see it? There has been enough evidence of the contempt we hold for the performing arts. When I was a young freelance writer, I asked the editor of a broadsheet whether I could review Hindi cinema for him. He asked, "Do you like Bollywood?" I said, "I love it". At the back of my head was the ghostly voice of John Ruskin, admonishing us that he who loves detective fiction should review detective fiction, etc. He sighed and shook his head, "My readers want someone who despises Bollywood". I must have looked askance for he said, "They may love (it) but they want to believe they despise it".

Being middle class is to be caught between what you love and what you despise. Being middle class is to be unsure of whether what you love is worthy of you. I should know. I am middle class. I know what ambivalence is. I know how terrible it is to be caught in a moment where everyone around you assumes you have an appreciation for the kitsch of an art form, when your tears are real and your heart pounds for the cheesiest of speeches. You so want to be Kalidasa and Balasaraswathi; you so are Mannohan Desai and Helen. You so despise yourself.

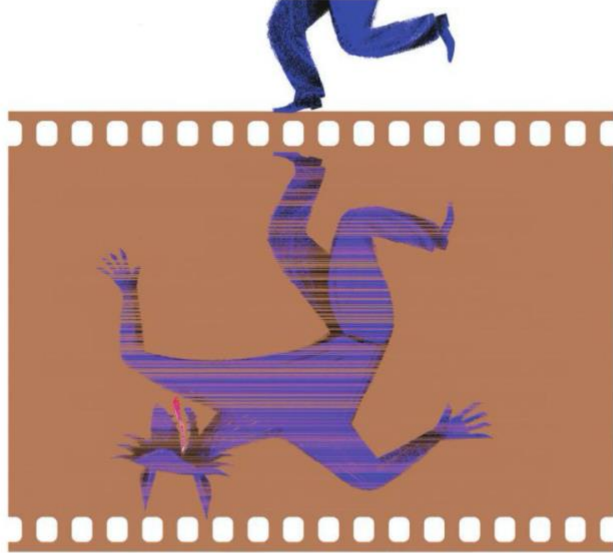
And this despising is turned on to the object of love. Caste politics allows you to clothe that hatred by requiring you to hate bhoomds, even as they are sexualised. Why do you think Devdas works so well for the middle class that more than a dozen cinematic versions of it have been made across the country across the decades since it was written? Was there ever a man who despised himself as much as Devdas and then turned his pain into violence and rejection?

Thus, we would like to believe that Bollywood is a filthy place because we are really not sure how clean we are. A nation obsessed with purity and pollution, which has one of the filthiest public spheres, must spend a huge amount of psychic energy managing this dichotomy. What can we do with this fatigue? We can turn it into hate. If hatred were an Olympic sport, we would be the undisputed champions.

So is Bollywood the necropolis of our desires? Probably.

But no more filthy than any other place where the stakes are high.

Is it nepotistic? No more than any other family-owned company. No more than you are, dear reader, for you are piling up what-ever you can so that your children will benefit. And no one thinks it is bad. Nepotism sneaks up on you. Consider the son of a poet from Allahabad who is refused a job in All India Radio even though his voice is now considered his signature. He is an outsider. But his son? How inside is his son? Do you fault his father for picking up the phone and calling in his dues for his son? Would you



C.R. Sankar

not do the same?

Does everybody do drugs? No more than those in most offices across the country. I grew up in a time when there was a clear-cut divide in the student community, or so I imagined. There were the *chavris* (as they were known) and there were the rest of us. The rest of us fitted on to the bell curve, and we could be handled. We were no threat to the status quo. The *chavris* were the difficulty. Everyone feared them and hated them and tried to pretend that they sympathised. But we were warned: Dreams will drown when sugar is brown. Meanwhile, Dad worked at a tobacco company and Mom made everything with white sugar.

So here is what I suspect.

The Hindi film industry is only a reflection of the society around it. It is corrupt because as a nation are we really not so to go out and earn a living on their own; they always start as VPs and end up as the creepies who ruined the company. But it is glamorous and it demands, commands our adoration. We hate the struggle but it has our dreams. We love the stars but only because we see in them a pale imitation of our ourselves. And when they fall, we love them maliciously all the more in the time when they are summoned by the authorities. So not us.

In the 1980s, the common housefly was

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about the only entertainment you could get on television news. Safely ensconced in government funding, the newscasters wore their saris and their khadi kurtas and read out scripts. When a fly troubled a newscaster and she actually waved a hand at it, it was news. In no way did we ever think of the television as a source of information. It was a status symbol; for entertainment, we went to the movies and considered each other's lives.

Perhaps, the grim delight with which newspapers are reporting on the con-tempt between Bollywood and the television channels is only an extension of that caste war, our hatred and fear of the bhoomds, our contempt for ourselves that we can love them so much. (Some television anchors are now stars.)

I stopped watching television news many years ago. I disconnected from most social media after a few years of flirtation. I have never missed any of them. I rely on the newspapers and on the dispassionate look of words that have been edited and which seek balance and objectivity, even if these are mythical possibilities rather than actually achievable targets.

I pray myself on being post-social media. Perhaps, I am not the person to be writing this piece.

Pinto is a Mumbai-based writer and novelist

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The US faces huge challenges in creating an anti-China united front. India, Japan and Australia even have differences with the US in defining and describing the Quad mechanism."

—GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

The answer is fraternity

The term's inclusion in the Preamble is of historic importance — and contemporary relevance



RAJMOKHAN GANDHI

TWO MONTHS AGO, Harsh Mander wrote in *The India Forum* of the significance of the word "fraternity" in our Constitution's Preamble. Reading the article nudged me to explore the story behind that word's inclusion.

Scholars have long noted a few milestones in the history of India's constitution-making. A major one was the 1931 "Fundamental Rights" resolution of the Indian National Congress. Meeting in Karachi under the presidency of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Congress resolved that "any [future] constitution should include fundamental rights of the people such as freedom of association and combination, freedom of speech and press, freedom of conscience and the free profession and practice of religion".

Furthermore, the resolution added, such a constitution should prohibit discrimination against persons on any "religion, caste or creed in regard to public employment, office of power, and the exercise of any trade or calling" and should rule out any "civil bar on account of sex".

It should assure "equal rights to all citizens of access to and use of public roads, public wells and all other places of public resort". Also, the state was required, under the proposed constitution, to observe "religious neutrality".

There is evidence that close collaboration between Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru produced the text of this consequential resolution, which Gandhi moved in Karachi in 1931. But had the approval also of Patel and of everyone else who counted.

Subhas Chandra Bose, for example, played an active part at the Karachi session. Also present was Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan and, we must assume, Abul Kalam Azad. Definitely present, too, in Karachi were the passionate spirits of Bhagat Singh, Sukdev and Rajguru, who had been hanged a few days earlier in Lahore.

The "constitution" resolution, as this Karachi resolution may also be called, was thus adopted during a landmark moment in our journey towards independence.

And our milestones on the journey to the Constitution was Ambedkar's powerful 1936 text, *Annihilation of Caste*, where he wrote: "What is your ideal society if you do not want caste, is a question that is bound to be asked of you. If you ask me, my ideal would be a society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity. And why not?"

In history's light, it is thus Ambedkar who injects "fraternity" into India's constitutional conversation.

Seven months before Independence, in

January 1947, the Constituent Assembly passed its "Objectives Resolution", which had been discussed from November 1946. This resolution declared: "All people of India shall be guaranteed and secured social, economic and political justice, equality of status and opportunities and equality before law; and fundamental freedoms — of speech, expression, belief, faith, worship, vocation, association and movement, etc." While these words bear a clear resemblance to the Preamble to come, they do not include the word "fraternity".

Two weeks after Independence, on August 29, 1947, the Constituent Assembly appointed a Drafting Committee, with Ambedkar, the Law Minister in free India's first cabinet, as chairman. A Draft Constitution prepared by this Drafting Committee was the basis for the Constituent Assembly's deliberations on the Constitution.

The volumes entitled *The Framing of India's Constitution: Select Documents*, edited by B. Shiva Rao and available online, contain much information about the Drafting Committee's work. Page 484 of Volume III of this series shows the word "fraternity" in the draft preamble for the first time, while providing minutes of the Drafting Committee's meeting of February 6, 1948.

This date suggests that the inclusion of "fraternity" may have been connected to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, which had occurred a week earlier.

Such a conclusion is strengthened by a letter that Ambedkar, writing as the Drafting Committee's chairman, addressed on February 12, 1948, to Bhabu Rajendra Prasad, president of the Constituent Assembly. In this letter, Ambedkar said:

"The [Drafting] Committee has added a clause about fraternity in the preamble, although it does not occur in the Objectives Resolution. The committee felt that the need for fraternal concord and goodwill in India was never greater than now and that this particular aim of the new Constitution should be emphasised by special mention in the preamble." (p. 510 of *The Framing of India's Constitution: Select Documents*, Vol. III, edited by B. Shiva Rao [Digital Library of India Item 2015-278539].)

If available, any record of discussions within the Drafting Committee that led to the inclusion of "fraternity" in the eventual Preamble might throw additional light on the influence that Gandhi may have contributed posthumously to it.

Nearly two years later, in his famous speech of November 25, 1949, to the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar would say: "Without fraternity, equality and liberty will be no deeper than coats of paint."

As Mander has pointed out, the Hindi for fraternity, *bhandhna*, sounds more inclusive than male-centred "fraternity". In any case, what the world's present condition needs, namely bonding between humans, may be more important than the alphabet letters that make up "fraternity".

The writer teaches at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

No software for justice

Virtual courts cannot fully replace a process that demands direct human interaction



JAYA JAITLEY

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on personnel, public grievances, law and justice, in its recent report, recommended holding virtual courts even after the pandemic ends. The chair said, "after a right to live panel strongly pitched for virtual courts... digital justice is cheaper and faster besides addressing locational and economic handicaps; ensures safety of vulnerable witnesses providing testimony; expedites processes and procedures and are an improvement over traditional courts as they are most affordable, citizen-friendly and offer greater access to justice". Meanwhile, there is a large group of lawyers of the Delhi High Court clamouring for more physical hearings and a smaller group of them objecting, citing health concerns.

While the government popularly believes digitisation is the answer to all the problems of governance, and these are often excitedly referred to as "game changers", issues related to digital technology solutions need careful analysis and an overhauling of both laws and existing systems before they are introduced. While I am neither a lawyer nor a digital expert, I have attended court hearings more than 180 times since the 1980s on cases related to trespass, defamation, right to live panel of artists and against administrative injustices. Over almost two decades, 150 of these were related to a CBI case emerging out of the Tehelka.com allegations. Of these, the last 12 were video hearings on final arguments, verdict, sentencing and appeal, which took place during this pandemic. One per-

sonally experienced the benefits and flaws of the virtual system.

"Justice delayed is justice denied" is a notoriously abused maxim in our court system consisting there are 31 district cases pending in the lower courts (83 lakh pending for over 10 years), 44 lakh in the high courts (32 lakh pending for over 10 years), and 60,000 cases pending in the Supreme Court (the figures are as of 2019). Prisons are over capacity by 114 per cent, of which two-thirds are undertrials, who have had no justice at all. The massive injustice already done to them is unforgivable.

It is hoped that virtual courts will reduce the pendency of cases by reducing the time taken on small financial issues like insurance, traffic claims and *challans* that clog the system. But major policy changes always have unintended consequences, so careful thought is required on what types of cases and what parts of the judicial process are amenable to going online. It should also be a matter of choice if participants on either side want to use the virtual route. Certain cases of tax, insurance and some corporate matters could move to the online dispute resolution processes through negotiation, arbitration and conciliation. Reducing pendency through virtual courts will reduce travel costs, although lawyers are unlikely to reduce their fees. When government agencies file cases or appeals, they ignore these costs as they come out of the public exchequer. Very often, the police and other criminal investigation agencies take weeks to deliver

witnesses. Judges hesitate to compel them. Repeated adjournments are sought, not just by the accused, but by prosecuting agencies who are nonchalant. Examination of the causes of pendency should, therefore, extend far wider afield.

Essentially, technologies alone do not improve the system, people do. Adoption of new and evolving technologies requires careful preparation to ensure that "justice delivery services" created by software engineers is matched by local court systems and the level of training given to those who handle them in India's courts. Currently, judges have had to speak from headline phones or without video, and lawyers have been compelled to argue cases from inside their cars if the network in their homes is faulty. There are audio failures, and lack of connectivity in rural areas. Unless connectivity is established, it cannot be presumed and compelled. Rushing into new protocols without understanding uses and applications will disempower the poor even further, especially undertrials who cannot afford lawyers.

In India, we are already applying digital services to industry, businesses, agriculture, defence, governance, education and health. Today, court rulings have been applied not only to human beings but to animals, rivers and even gods. Therefore, any case involving decisions affecting the life and liberty of persons must remain in the realm of physical courts. Forceful interventions, and of often repeated strokes of a point is required

in a courtroom. Lawyers need to interrupt when they feel the arguments of their counterparts are factually inaccurate — we are, after all, according to Amartya Sen, "argumentative Indians" — but this cannot happen unless the "host" of the video court hearing unmutes you. Facial expressions such as fear, guilt, regret, sadness, anger, which can affect a case, are constricted and almost frozen into a small space. Faces are often out of proportion and distorted. Nuanced arguments that are most important in law sometimes need perseverance to get across, as is the ability to display evidence creatively (recall of Simpson's famous glove), or the room for presenting many crucial options to create reasonable doubt. Appealing for compassion for the elderly and the disabled, and pleas for leniency of punishment for senior citizens with co-morbidities in COVID-19 times are easily ignored by judges, when the accused is only a small square on a screen and not a frail human being standing before them in flesh and blood.

Seminal and crucial matters that need direct human interaction should never be replaced by virtual courts. The dispensation of justice is a human endeavour made up of laws, ethics, morality, wisdom and compassion. The absence of any one of these five ingredients, short-changed by restrictive virtual situations, would render the exercise of justice only partially satisfactory or even downright unjust.

The writer is former minister, Samant Pratap

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SHAMEFUL WORDS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "The Sexist Playbook" (IE, October 21). It is highly disheartening that politicians, bureaucrats and people in other exalted positions do not think twice before uttering sexist remarks. This sends out the message that women are still the most vulnerable to such public abuses. This is not a new phenomenon — many political leaders have said demeaning things about women in their profession. Kamal Nath's words are a disgrace and it is time that we cease to tolerate such language in public life.

Ayushi Singh, Gurgaon

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "The sexist playbook" (IE, October 21). Unfortunately, former Madhya Pradesh CM Kamal Nath's words are a disgrace and it is time that we cease to tolerate such language in public life. What is shocking is that it has come from a former CM and not some local leader. What a shame that this comes from a party that is led by a woman.

Bal Govind, Noida

DOUBLE STANDARD

THIS REFERS TO the report, "Twist in TRP case: UP Police file own FIR; case with CBI" (IE, October 21). Republic TV claimed before the court that Mumbai police is harassing the channel for no reason by lodging an FIR against them in the matter of fudged TRPs. But the Uttar Pradesh police thought otherwise and filed an FIR against unknown persons on the same matter. And unlike Maharashtra, the UP government considered the TRP case to be so important that it quickly requested the Centre for a CBI investigation. Let us

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hope this situation does not go down the same road as the Sushant Singh Rajput case.

L.R. Murrnu, Delhi

COLD NEIGHBOURS

THIS REFERS TO the article, "The good neighbour" (IE, October 20). Pakistan can never reconcile itself to the fact that Bangladesh, which was once its East Pakistan, will outdo it in many vital sectors. Ideally, it should have made amends to this new country for inflicting untold atrocities on its people during its liberation war in 1971. Similarly, our present rulers have not complimented Bangladesh openly for making impressive strides in the economic sector. Otherwise, it would have been our dependable ally in the region in gratitude for our unparalleled support to its liberation war. Our government's sectarian agenda seems to be coming in the way.

Tarun Singh, Mohali



A crucial season

Public health messaging must convince people that festivals can be celebrated safely

Faced with a potential reversal of gains that India has made in slowing the spread of COVID-19, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has appealed against weakening the fight during the annual season of festivals. Over the past six months, numerous individual events have enabled the infection to explode and spread. These have ranged from the opening of wholesale markets and political gatherings to big funerals; many were infected when places of worship were allowed to be thronged. Mr. Modi's appeal, which comes during the Navratri celebrations, and ahead of Dussehra, Deepavali and other festivals, is to be welcomed, although the opportunity to caution the public was not grasped early enough. Also, in spite of the call to "mask up" on October 8, as part of a communication campaign he launched, its visibility has remained low. Moreover, virus estimations remain a mosaic of data, without a standardised system for testing, tracing and isolation across States. Only broad-brush statistics are available, even as the economy has reopened. The Union Health Ministry's data point to a rising trend in daily cases in Bihar, Delhi, Maharashtra, Manipur, and West Bengal, while Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, with their high levels of incidence earlier, have started showing a decline in test positivity rates, a more reliable metric than absolute cases. Kerala has experienced a wave blamed on lax behaviour during Onam.

Health messaging on the dangers of another wave of infections can be effective if it is not drowned by repeated emphasis of massive recoveries. States, anxious to present a picture of near-normality to boost economic activity, highlight recoveries over risk, and people are lowering their guard. Mr. Modi has suggested that the fight must not weaken until there is a vaccine, and experts and WHO want countries to learn to live with an endemic virus. In India, the reality is that even as of October 21, the official death toll in a day stood at 717, a not so inconsequential number, and there were 7.4 lakh active cases. The emphasis, therefore, has to be on preparing for the new normal, adopting acknowledged defences such as masking, distancing norms and hand hygiene. In parallel, the Centre should launch policy reform to transform a predominantly commercialised health system into one providing universal coverage. COVID-19 has meant double jeopardy – a loss of income on the one hand and a steep rise in health insurance premiums on the other, after insurers were asked to provide cover for more conditions. Under such circumstances, the cheapest protection against disease and financial loss is prevention, now and into the future. The Centre says it has a communication strategy centred around the theme of safety until March next year. Its efficacy will be tested immediately, by the festival season.

Return of the socialists

Following his win in Bolivia, Arce should learn from the successes and mistakes of Morales

Preliminary results of Sunday's Presidential election in Bolivia point to an emphatic victory for the former President Evo Morales's Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party almost a year after he was ousted by protesters and the military. While the official results will not be announced for days, exit polls and independent counts give his hand-picked candidate, Luis Arce 55% of the popular vote against his main rival Carlos Mesa's 28.5%. Mr. Mesa, who was President between 2003 and 2005, has conceded the election. This is indeed a major victory for Mr. Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous leader, as it is for Mr. Arce. Mr. Morales left the country, first for Mexico and then for Argentina, after the Generals asked him to stand down in November 2019. Since then, Jeanine Añez, a right-wing conservative Senator, has been the acting President, rolling back many of Mr. Morales's policies and going after his supporters. But MAS mobilised its supporters and fought back. Mr. Arce promised voters that if elected, he would carry forward the pro-poor socialist legacy of Mr. Morales, while MAS portrayed Mr. Mesa as a representative of the pre-Morales elites, whose rapid privatisation and pro-market policies had triggered frequent mass protests. The results demonstrate that the voters chose the equity-oriented socialist stability, which MAS offered, over the free-market conservatism of its rivals.

The new leader could learn from the achievements and mistakes of Mr. Morales, credited with turning around South America's poorest country economically. Under his government, Bolivia saw a drop in extreme poverty, from 33% of the population in 2006 to 15% in 2018. He also stepped up public investments, opened more schools and health clinics, built roads and nationalised the oil and gas industry, all while ensuring that the economy continued to expand. These policies helped MAS build a strong connect with the poor, a base which continued to back the party despite last year's political turbulence. At the same time, his push to stay in power beyond the term limits set by the Constitution helped the Opposition organise itself. He got the ban lifted by a constitutional court after his bid failed in a referendum. This raised questions about the legitimacy of his candidacy in the October 2019 election, which he won but was accused of fraud, leading to protests and his ouster. Mr. Arce's biggest challenge would be to continue Mr. Morales's welfare policies, while keeping the battered economy on track. Moreover, the anti-socialist and mostly white opposition is now more powerful, after ousting Mr. Morales and having run the interim government for a year with the U.S.'s support. Mr. Arce can keep the galvanised opposition at bay only by continuing MAS's socio-economic "revolution" to expand its support base in a divided country.

Potholes on the digital payment superhighway

The National Payments Corporation of India must be supported and there has to be a rational structure of pricing



R.B. BARMAR

Digital payments have found strong ground, especially in India, increasingly relegating all other modes of payments to the background. It is through a faster system of simultaneous debits and credits that the money value is transferred from one account to the other across banks. It embraces all kinds of operators (including direct benefit transfer by the government) across the country and even internationally, subject to regulatory forbearance. With such versatility and ease of settling financial transactions, the growth of digital payments is going to be phenomenal, supported by banks and FinTech, or financial technology, companies.

Steered by the RBI

There is a long and interesting history behind the evolution of digital payments in India, piloted by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and succinctly captured in the "Payment Systems in India", published in 1998 (<https://bit.ly/3jmfZ77>). A major thrust toward large value payments was effected through the Real Time Gross Settlement System, or RTGS, launched by the RBI in March 2004. The large value payments on stock trading, government bond trading and other customer payments were covered under the RTGS, providing finality of settlement, thereby reducing huge risks such as the Harshad Mehta scam; besides this, it substantially reduced the time taken for settlements. The RBI introduced National Electronic Funds Transfer, or NEFT (<https://bit.ly/3kGtAEa>), and bulk debits and credits in support of retail payments around the same time. Now, NEFT is available round the clock and RTGS will follow from December 2020 – only a few countries have achieved this.

Such historical changes brought about by the RBI triggered major changes in the corporate and capital market transactions as well. Today, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), the market regulator, is contemplating a T+1 settlement (T is for transaction date) because the underlying consideration of the sale proceeds of the shares get exchanged very fast under the payments system. This is expected to attract more international capital into the Indian market, in turn broadening and deepening the financial market.

The setting up of such an umbrella organisation to build a super highway for digital payments has a strong appeal which was well-appreciated by Dr. Y.V. Reddy, the then RBI Governor, taking a number of policy decisions to spread digital payments and protect consumer interest. However, there were many within and outside the RBI, including in the Indian Banks' Association, who had apprehensions about the success of such a model for the NPCI.

An umbrella system

The sterling contribution of this robust payment system, especially retail payments, was seeded and reinforced with the setting up of the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) by 10 lead banks at the instance of the RBI in 2009. The idea for this umbrella retail payments institution emerged in the vision document on payments system, 2005-08 released by RBI in 2005. Very few people know about the unwritten history of the background under which this umbrella organisation was modelled. In 2004, a four-member team including this writer visited the Riksbank, the central bank of Sweden, on a study tour. This included a visit to the Bangkräktcentral (BGC AB), a not-for-profit organisation owned by eight Swedish banks for providing retail payment and related services. The model appeared as an attractive proposition as payments is basically a public good. Thus the idea of the NPCI as a not-for-profit company has a link from the BGC.



The setting up of such an umbrella organisation to build a super highway for digital payments has a strong appeal which was well-appreciated by Dr. Y.V. Reddy, the then RBI Governor, taking a number of policy decisions to spread digital payments and protect consumer interest. However, there were many within and outside the RBI, including in the Indian Banks' Association, who had apprehensions about the success of such a model for the NPCI.

Indicators of success

With digital payment being a public good like currency notes, it was necessary that the corporation was fully supported by the RBI and the government as an extended arm of the sovereign. It was also necessary to contain expectations on profits, avoiding gyrations of the stock market along with direct or indirect control by powerful private interests which had the potential to dilute the public good character of the outfit. The NPCI's success against deeply entrenched formidable international players, supported by innovative technology, viz. Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and Immediate Payment Service (IMPS), is well recognised by central banks in many other countries. The Bank for International Settlements' endorsement of the NPCI model in 2019 is a major accolade. If the NPCI has gained such a rare distinction in just 10 years of its successful and path breaking journey, we should be

proud to preserve this precious jewel.

There is a demand from some quarters that the NPCI should be converted into a for-profit company to withstand competition. The shareholders of the NPCI can have windfall gains too. But this will be a retrograde step with huge potential for loss of consumer surplus along with other strategic implications. Instead, like the RBI providing free use of the RTGS and other products, the strategy should be to assist the NPCI financially, either by the RBI or the government, to provide retail payment services at reduced price (in certain priority areas). This may also help support expansion of the payment system network and infrastructure in rural and semi-urban areas in partnership with FinTech companies and banks.

On merchant discount rate

In Budget 2020-21, the government prescribed zero Merchant Discount Rate (MDR), the rate merchants pay to scheme providers, for RuPay and UPI, both NPCI products, to popularise digital payments benefiting both customers and merchants. There is justification in this prescription by the government because depositors implicitly pay around 3% to banks as net interest margin, being the difference between saving and risk free bond rate, for enjoying credit in payments services traditionally. When banks enjoy such a huge amount of current account savings account (CASA) deposits, in return, is it not incumbent on them to provide such payment services, costing only a small fraction of such a gain?

For reasons unknown, the government left out other providers of digital payment products from this MDR prescription, which is unjustified and had adverse effects. Taking advantage of this di-

chotomy, many issuing banks switched to mainly Visa and Master cards for monetary gains. As suppliers were induced by such supplier banks, it created a kind of indirect market segmentation and cartel formation, though there is hardly any quality difference in payment products. It may be noted that even the European Central Bank imposed a ceiling on MDR for all, protecting consumer interest. It is hoped that the government will take corrective action in the next Budget to ensure a level playing field and to relieve the NPCI from such policy-induced market imperfection.

Settle the pricing

The ideal pricing for digital payments products should be based on an analysis of producer surplus, consumer surplus (i.e. gain or loss of utility due to pricing) and social welfare for which we need cost-volume-price data. A factor which needs to be reckoned is the float funds digital payments allow (cash withdrawal is a drain on the banking system, which is a source of sizeable income for banks. The RBI will do well to study and arrive at a rational structure of pricing including MDR possibly also penalty on default by customer), given that the digital payment system is like a national superhighway, for which the government has a crucial role to play in protecting consumers against exploitation. This can run into a huge amount when digital payments become all pervasive.

It is not the intention to deny a fair amount of return to service providers including FinTech companies. But should this be at the cost of huge loss of consumer surplus? Ideally, it should be a case of win-win for all.

R.B. Barmar is Former Executive Director, Reserve Bank of India

In West Asia, it's a bleak future amid America fading

President Trump's policy has not factored in the geopolitical consequences of the U.S.'s declining influence in the area



STANLEY JOHNY

When the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed normalisation agreements with Israel in September, under the mediation of the United States, American President Donald Trump hailed it as a "new dawn in the Middle East". The so-called "Abraham Accords", which saw the first normalisation between Israel and Arab countries in 26 years, was a rare diplomatic victory for Mr. Trump. It was rare because most of the President's other big foreign policy bets have been disastrous or inconclusive. The U.S.-Taliban deal is largely seen as American capitulation to the Afghan insurgents, the outreach to North Korea failed to produce any result; the maximum pressure campaign on Iran seems to have backfired; the promise to fetch "the deal of the century" between the Israelis and the Palestinians was a non-starter; and the trade war with China failed to produce any structural shift in the way China does business while tensions between the two countries rocketed. Amid this policy chaos, Mr. Trump at least got something in the "Abraham Accords" to present as a breakthrough. But does it bring peace to West Asia, as Mr. Trump has claimed?

It was evident during the Barack Obama years that the U.S. had overstretched itself in West Asia and North Africa, a region America has deeply engaged with since President Dwight D. Eisenhower's time. The U.S. had been stuck in an unwinnable war in Iraq. In Syria, it was checkmated by the Russians. Its intervention in Libya turned out to be disastrous, and continued to be despite defiant threats and sanctions. Israel was uncontrollable. The Arab allies were upset. Mr. Obama realised the need for continuing rethinking of the U.S. presence in the region and pivoting to East Asia where China was steadily on the rise. But the U.S. has both allies and rivals in the region. It cannot just pack up and exit.

Mr. Obama, in his second term, adopted a realistic approach to address this problem. He made peace with Iran, accepted the Russian lead role in Syria, let Libya turn into a failed state, and let Syria sink into ruin. But, to balance these, he overlooked Israel's deepening occupation of Palestine and cooperated with the Saudi attack on Yemen. The plan was to let the regional players establish what he called a "cold peace" among themselves.

When Mr. Trump came to office, he wanted to undo Mr. Obama's policy legacy. He demolished the Iran deal, brought Israel back to the centre of America's policy towards the region and prompted the Arab and Jewish allies of the U.S. to join hands. The plan, as it emerges, was to remake the regional dynamics in favour of America's allies and push rivals

to a corner. Mr. Trump succeeded in bringing the Gulf Arab states and Israel together, but he failed to escape the historical reality which Mr. Obama faced – America's dwindling influence in shaping the present and future of West Asia. A policy in which the historical reality is not factored in may not produce the desired outcome.

The case of Iran

Take, for example, the case of Iran. The acrimony towards Iran was one of the defining factors of Mr. Trump's West Asia policy. While pulling the U.S. out of the nuclear deal unilaterally and reimposing sanctions on Iran, Mr. Trump thought the Iranians would flinch once again so that he could extract more concessions from them and cut their regional wings. But the perils of that policy were the predictability of the policy-maker's objectives, and the Iranians were determined to defy him at any cost. Iran responded with multiple cuts on the U.S. and allied interests in the region – from targeting Saudi oil facilities and cargo ships in the Strait of Hormuz to launching rocket at-

tacks at American troops in Iraq. Mr. Trump's response was the typical American-style response of the govt. to respond to provocations in position to shape the geopolitical outcome in West Asia. He had Qassem Soleimani, one of the top Iranian Generals, killed and declared that the U.S. had re-established deterrence vis-à-vis Iran. But the use of force did not reflect the ground realities. Less than a year after the assassination of Soleimani, the U.S. faced with continuing rocket attacks by Iran-backed Shia rebels in Iraq, is contemplating shutting down the American Embassy in Baghdad, besides the withdrawing most troops from Iraq. Where is the deterrence?

Open embrace of Israel

While in the case of Iran, misplaced adventurism sabotaged even the available policy options, the Trump administration's open embrace of Israel – the decision to move the American Embassy to Jerusalem, recognition of Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights and the go-head to its annexation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank – sharpened the geopolitical contradictions in the region, instead of bringing peace. The normalisation agreements between Sunni Arab countries and Israel, partly driven by their shared concern of an aggressive Iran in a West Asia sans America, could strengthen the pro-American pillar in the region, but the withdrawal of Arab powers from the Palestinian question would not finish off the Palestinian question. It would rather leave a vacuum in regional politics which non-Arab Muslim

countries would seek to fill. This offers new avenues to Turkey, which under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is seeking to re-establish its influence in the region, and Iran, which uses the Palestinian cause to drive public opinion in the Muslim world across the Shia-Sunni divide. In other words, Mr. Trump brought together Gulf Arabs and the Jews, who had had backroom contacts for years, on a public platform. But he also opened the way for the agitated Persians and the ambitious Turks to enhance their weight in the troubled regional politics.

Historically, the withdrawal of empires had seen new conflicts arising in their peripheries. In 1911, Italy invaded the Turkish province of Libya, triggering a dangerous competition with the Ottomans in their decline years. A year later, four Balkan states formed the Balkan League to take on the Ottomans in Europe. The collapse of the British empire led to ethnic, religious, geopolitical wounds open across the former colonies. Some of the conflicts in the Caucasus, including the ongoing fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, have their roots in the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Given these examples, it is worth asking if the U.S. is prepared to face the geopolitical consequences of the decline of its influence in West Asia. If the four years of the Trump presidency shows any indication, it is not. The new beginning Mr. Trump promised in the region could very well be that of a more troublesome future.

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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.

Words of caution

India is now in "Unlock" mode, and people seem to be assuming that things are back to normal (Page 1, "Virus still around, PM cautions nation", October 20). Unfortunately, no one seems to care to take the Prime Minister's appeal seriously, which might have to wait until 2022 to get a vaccine. Indians do need to be cautious.

N. NAGARAJAN, NAGARAJAN

cadets) or volunteers are stationed at all hours to make sure people follow protocols. Let us not forget what WHO chief scientist Dr. Soumya Swaminathan said recently: "There will be a lot of guidance coming out, but I think an average person, a healthy young person, might have to wait until 2022 to get a vaccine." Indians do need to be cautious.

■ The Prime Minister is right in asking us to be cautious as there seems to be a sense of complacency creeping in being violated by almost every political party in election rallies. Is not the

win as they make purchases during the festival season ahead are examples we must be aware of. A lack of safe behaviour during Kerala's Onam festivities is an indicator of what might happen, reversing all the good work done. The Prime Minister and all other ministers must not need to be mild in their counselling.

GOVARDHANA MUNEEDU, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

■ It is amusing to have words of advice from the highest level when every single COVID-19 safety protocol is being violated by almost every political party in election rallies. Is not the

the most powerful message in a simple language.

ANAND KRISHNAN, Bengaluru

IPL teams

One does not understand why some readers of the daily are shocked by CSK's poor performance in IPL 2020. After all, cricket is also a game like any other. Why are they lamenting the

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

An OpEd page article titled "Towards fewer deaths in Tamil Nadu" (October 21, 2020) needs to be amended as below to focus on the new deaths per lakh population. The sentence that read, "It is not that the government is unaware or has not done anything, but it must set a goal so that the number of deaths per lakh is reduced further" should be recast to say: "It is not that... the number of new deaths per lakh is reduced further."

The sentence, "The State must attempt to reduce it to about 6 per lakh or 7 per lakh, below the national average" should say: "The State must attempt to reduce new deaths going forward."

The sentence, "The day a common man... effective control of deaths per lakh of the population" should say: "The day a common man... control of the mortality rate."

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performance of one team when the Sunrisers or Rajasthan Royals are in the same boat too? A. BALAGANAGURAN, Vijayachi, Tamil Nadu

WEDNESDAY OPINION

DANA MILBANK WASHINGTON SKETCH

The case against Trump, in 600 ALL-CAPS WORDS

When President Trump was in the hospital battling covid-19 two weeks ago, he devoted one morning to making the case for his reelection in a series of 16 all-caps tweets, such as: LAW & ORDER. VOTE! HIGHEST TAX CUT EVER, AND ANOTHER ONE COMING. VOTE!

FIGHT THE CORRUPT FAKE NEWS MEDIA. VOTE! SPACE FORCE. VOTE!

It was mostly nonsense, of course, but it had an appealing, playground-style brevity — a terse, staccato cadence closing argument of sorts for Trump.

Now, less than two weeks from Election Day, Americans are voting in almost every state. At least 35 million have already cast their ballots. What better time to borrow Trump's literary device and deploy it against him? Here goes: LIVING 220,000 AMERICANS DIED FROM COVID-19 — WORST IN WORLD. VOTE!

LOSING 3.9 MILLION JOBS IN FOUR YEARS — WORST IN RECORDED HISTORY. VOTE! KNOWING PANDEMIC WAS "DEADLY STUFF" ON FEB. 7 BUT OPTING TO "PLAY IT DOWN" AND MISLEADING AMERICANS. VOTE!

PROPOSING REPEAL AS A COVID-CURE, MOCKING MASK-WEARING, HOSTING WHITE HOUSE SUPER-SPRINKLER EVENT AND SUGGESTING ANTHONY FAUCI IS AN "IDIOT." VOTE!

ADDING \$7 TRILLION TO FEDERAL DEBT, MAKING IT LARGER THAN U.S. ECONOMY FOR FIRST TIME IN 70 YEARS. VOTE!

BALLOONING CURRENT BUDGET DEFICIT TO ALL-TIME RECORD \$81 TRILLION. VOTE!

ENDING HEALTH CARE FOR MILLIONS AND SETTING TO ELIMINATE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT, INCLUDING PREEXISTING-CONDITION PROTECTIONS. VOTE! VIOLENTLY DISPERSING PEACEFUL CIVIL RIGHTS PROTESTERS OUTSIDE WHITE HOUSE FOR A BIBLE-WILLING PHOTOS AND SLOGANS. VOTE!

PROPOSING TO POSTPONE THE ELECTION, TRYING TO DISCREDIT MAIL-IN VOTING AS FRAUDULENT AND REFUSING TO COMMIT TO PEACEFUL TRANSFER OF POWER. VOTE!

DEFENDING DEADLY VIOLENCE BY WHITE SUPREMACIST SUPPORTERS AND WIELDING A MILITIA PLOT TO KIDNAP MICHIGAN GOVERNOR. VOTE!

SHEDDING "VERY FINE PEOPLE" AMONG VIOLENT NEO-NAZIS IN CHARLOTTESVILLE. VOTE!

VALIDATING A CONSPIRACY THEORY ABOUT PEDOPHILIA RING CONTROLLING U.S. GOVERNMENT. VOTE!

CALLING SWATHS OF AFRICA AND CARIBBEAN "HOLE COUNTRIES" AND TRYING TO BAN ENTRY FROM MUSLIM-MAJORITY NATIONS. VOTE!

TAKING MIGRANT CHILDREN FROM PARENTS AND LOCKING THEM IN CAGES. VOTE!

FAILING "IN LOVE" WITH NORTH KOREAN DICTATOR KIM JONG UN. VOTE!

SIDING WITH VLADIMIR PUTIN OVER U.S. INTELLIGENCE ON ELECTION INTERFERENCE. VOTE!

GETTING IMPEACHED FOR WITHHOLDING MILITARY AID FROM A VULNERABLY ALLY TO EXORT CAMPAIGN HELD. VOTE!

EXCUSING SAUDI PRINCE'S DISMEMBERMENT OF U.S.-BASED JOURNALIST AND ADOPTING JOSEPH STALIN'S "ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE" PHRASE FOR AMERICAN MEDIA. VOTE!

APPEASING THE TALIBAN AND ABANDONING KURDISH ALLIES IN SYRIA. VOTE!

PRaising "VERY GOOD FRIEND" KLINGBERG FOR HANDLING OF CORONAVIRUS AND TRANSPARENCY VOTE!

SHOVING A PRIME MINISTER AND PUBLICLY DISPARAGING LEADERS OF FRANCE, GERMANY, BRITAIN AND EVEN DENMARK BECAUSE GREEN AND WASN'T FOR SALE. VOTE!

WHITTING "LOSERS" AND "SUCKERS" WHO DIED FOR OUR COUNTRY, POSTHUMOUSLY INSULTING JOHN MCMURRAY, SKIPPING MEMORIALS FOR THE FALLEN AND DEFENDING TOP GENERALS AS

WAR PROFITEERS. VOTE!

ADMITTING TO PAYING OFF A PORN ACTRESS FOR SILENCE ABOUT AN AFFAIR, OFFERING KIND WORDS FOR CHARGED CHILD-SEX TRAFFICKER, AND TALKING ABOUT WOMEN AS "BLEEDING."

"DUP" AND "MOMMY" VOTE! ENRICHING HIMSELF AND HIS FAMILY BY FORCING TAXPAYERS AND TRYING TO FORCE FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS TO SPEND MILLIONS AT HIS PROPERTIES. VOTE!

PAYING ONLY \$750 IN FEDERAL INCOME TAXES IN 2015 AND IN 2017 AND PERSONALLY OWING \$400 MILLION TO UNKNOWN CREDITORS. VOTE!

HAVING HIS FORMER CAMPAIGN CHAIRMAN, PERSONAL LAWYER, NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER, CHIEF STRATEGIST AND AT LEAST SIX OTHERS GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES OR DROP CHARGES AGAINST FRIENDS AND TO HARASS CRITICS. VOTE!

BEING PROTECTED BY POLITICAL APPOINTEES AFTER SPECIAL COUNSEL FINDS EVIDENCE OF OBSTRUCTION OF JUSTICE. VOTE!

USING THE PRESIDENCY TO MAKE MORE THAN 90,000 FALSE OR DUBIOUS STATEMENTS, TO INSULT PEOPLE BY THE HUNDREDS AND TO DEATH INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ON CLIMATE, TRADE, HEALTH AND SECURITY. VOTE!

IMPEDING THE LOWEST GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN IN HISTORY, THEN DECLARING FAKE EMERGENCY TO SPEND MONEY WITHOUT CONGRESSIONAL APPROVAL. VOTE!

SUFFERING TURNOVER OF 90 PERCENT AMONG CABINET AND TOP WHITE HOUSE STAFF, AND NOW ON OUTRAGE CHIEF OF STAFF, WHITE PRESS SECRETARY, SIXTH COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR, AND FOURTH NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER. VOTE!

FIGHTING IN COURTS TO DISCOURAGE MINORITIES FROM VOTING AND PARTICIPATING IN THE CENSUS AND DISSEMINATING HIS GRANDDAUGHTER'S DEATH BY ATTACKING HER GRANDAUGHTER AND RUINING A REPLACEMENT BEFORE JONER. VOTE!

MAKING THE WORDS "MOTHERF---," "BUT---," "ASS," "SON OF A BITCH," "HANDS OFF," "SMOKING GUN" AND "COFFEE" PART OF NATIONAL DISCOURSE. VOTE!

SARCASTICALLY THE POSTAL SERVICE FOR ELECTIONAL GAIN, ROUTINELY ACCUSING OPPONENTS OF TREASON AND USING A SHARPE TO RE-DRAG A HUNGARIAN FORECAST MAP. VOTE!

THINKING FREDERICK DOUGLASS ALIVE, FETTERED PART OF RUSSIA, BRITAIN NOT YET A NUCLEAR POWER, WINDMILLS CAUSE CANCER AND "RAKING" PREVENTS FOREST FIRES. VOTE!

There's more — much more. But let all the damage would take more than a column. It would take four years, and who would love to relive that?

Had enough? VOTE!

Twitter: @350hours

President Trump at the White House on Monday.

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Google's offices in Manhattan on Tuesday.

MEGAN MCARDLE

What would breaking up Google really accomplish?

The Justice Department isn't wrong when it asserts that Google has an effective monopoly in Internet search. Retainers vary as to exactly how dominant the company's market position is, but it's safe to say that it's north of 80 percent, rendering its competitors almost irrelevant — both to consumers and to its own business planning.

So the question to ask about the government's case isn't "Does Google have a monopoly over search?" but "Is search the market we should care about?" And then: "If so, can we undo the monopoly without making everyone worse off?"

Certainly, without government intervention, the company will probably be able to maintain its overwhelming control over the search-engine space. Less due to anti-competitive sales payments, as Justice suggests in the antitrust suit it filed on Tuesday, than to the structure of the market itself, which maximizes a competitive advantage known as "network effects."

Consider the telephone, which is the classic example of network effects. If only one person in the world owns a phone, they have a curio. If two people have telephones, there's a higher-tech version of what children do with two tin cans strung together by string. But if millions of people have telephones, they become an essential tool. That's network effects: a product that gets more valuable with each additional user.

In Google's case, network effects come into play when people scroll through the results they're served and click on a link Google sees which results people find most useful for a given search string and ranks them accordingly for future

searches. The more users, the more such information they get, and the better they can refine the answers they return. That makes it extraordinarily difficult to launch a competitor, because without as much search volume, results won't be as accurate. Microsoft has been trying to crack this chicken-and-egg problem for 11 years with Bing, and it still has less than a quarter of the market.

Yet it's not as though Google makes most of its money selling you "Internet search"; it gives that to you free, and it monetizes it by selling your eyeballs to advertisers. Google has a pretty impressive position in the online ad market, too — almost 50 percent, by some estimates. But that's not a monopoly, and its closest competitor, Facebook, is not far behind. Moreover, both are facing stiff competition for those dollars from other tech firms.

The government's complaint avoids this uncomfortable fact by defining that market extremely narrowly as the market for "search advertising." But, of course, advertisers don't care whether they're advertising on search or social media, as much as they care whether their advertising is generating more in sales than it costs them. As long as other firms can also deliver large numbers of eyeballs online, Google will be forced to compete, hard, for business.

But even if you must that, so what matters is the accuracy, power Google has over our search results, it's not clear how the government can fix this without making us all worse off.

The government's complaint suggests one easy way: forbid the side payments to other companies that make Google the default search engine on your phone or browser. Yet those of us who have

back to the old days, when you had to first type "www.google.com" to perform a search, will recall that that's exactly what people did, even if another search engine was the default. That's how Google came to control over half of all searches.

So to actually increase competition meaningfully, we'd probably have to break the company up, rather than fiddling with side deals. But doing so would mean dividing the current number of search results between two or more companies. And as a result, everyone's searches would probably become less accurate and useful than the ones we're getting now, because no one company would have enough data to refine those searches as well as Google currently does.

Moreover, such an intervention might threaten some of the other goodies such as Gmail and maps that we get from Google — or will get in the future. Money from search ads subsidizes development of those products, and naturally, they also benefit from being tied into the Google ad-sales juggernaut.

Against those risks, of course, we have to balance the costs of Google's monopoly — well, to whom?

In theory, to the businesses that might launch better search engines, but not. But if this market is indeed a natural monopoly that's just a digit-shedding exercise, development of those products, and naturally, they also benefit from being tied into the Google ad-sales juggernaut. Against those risks, of course, we have to balance the costs of Google's monopoly — well, to whom?

Twitter: @asymmetrinfo

DAVID VON DREHLE

Putin: A classic czar with a tech twist

Somewhere under the armor of a ruling criminal regime remains a great, long-suffering Russian nation. Of Russia, too things have always been true. It cannot be conquered, and it has never been well led. No nation has suffered more to repel invaders. Prince Alexander Nevsky sacrificed thousands at the blood-drenched Battle of the Ice. Alexander I burned his own cities and fields in 1812 to deny their sustenance to Napoleon's invading army. Millions of Russians were piled onto a wall of human sacrifice laid up against Hitler.

But for all this indomitable strength, the Russian people have never been strong enough to demand good government. They produce great poets, great novelists, great musicians — but seldom great leaders.

For two decades, Vladimir Putin has been running the old bells of Russian nationalism while running a low and sly rule. An old man, he has weaponized his cyber capabilities as maliciously and irresponsibly as Russia, wantonly causing unprecedented collateral damage to pursue small tactical advantages and to force fits of spite.

What does a criminal regime look like in action? According to the indictment, among the many hacks by Putin's secret squad of engineers were various acts of sabotage against the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea. Why attack the Olympics? Allegedly, Russia wanted revenge after its athletes were not allowed to compete under its national flag. But why was that? Russia had been punished for the most widespread

doping conspiracy ever discovered by international authorities in real time. They hacked the Olympics, in other words, because they caught cheating. This layering of one crime on top of another as the definition of incorrigibility, it's like the Mafia burning a store after the shopkeeper refuses to pay a protection shakedown.

But Putin doesn't stop there, the extraordinary indictment maintains. The same elite unit of the Russian army that allegedly hacked the Olympics — and, yes, the 2016 presidential election in the United States — has been on a worldwide campaign, federal prosecutors allege. Putin's outlaw engineers stand accused of shutting down electricity for hundreds of thousands of starving Christians in bleak midwinter. The hackers are charged with impeding the investigation of Russia's likely poisoning of former spy Sergei Skripal. The squad allegedly infiltrated the election of French President Emmanuel Macron.

Russia allegedly hacks governments, non-governmental organizations and private corporations; no cybercrime is too big or too small for Putin's Kremlin keyboard cowboys. They practice what is best understood as guerrilla warfare against worldwide law and order.

What impact the indictment might have is difficult to predict. Putin is unlikely (understatement alert) to arrest and turn over the charged individuals; wide-ranging international sanctions have had minimal effect on a government that is believed to have bombed hospitals in Syria on behalf of inept Bashar al-Assad. And the hackers are unlikely to fess up, given the high risk of poisoning among honest Russians.

Putin is a czar from the classic Russian mold, willing to subject his people to any hardship necessary to preserve his grip. He

believes that Western cultural and economic influence is a kind of 21st-century invasion, and he will absorb all the emotions and opposition and economic damage necessary to sap the invaders of their strength. Whatever divides the West and its allies smells like victory in his nostrils.

It doesn't help matters that the president of the United States, normally the head of the law-and-order alliance, is one of the world leaders who seems not to understand what his Russian counterpart is up to. "Russia, Russia, Russia," complains President Trump whenever the topic of Putin's cyber-commando warfare is raised. Trump meets privately with Putin. Trump chats up Putin on the phone. Trump takes Putin at his word over America's own intelligence services.

In his recent book "The New Map: Energy, Climate, and the Clash of Nations," clear-eyed economic historian Daniel Yergin explains Putin's tightrope. Despite Russia's magnificent human assets, the nation remains heavily dependent on raw commodities, especially oil and natural gas. The rise of the United States as a leading energy producer, plus the growing of Russia's major European customers, has driven fuel prices down. Putin's bad behavior is his way of remaining relevant to the world stage despite a chronically weak economy. Paradoxically, Yergin observes, "the new isolation made [Russian] companies more dependent on the state and expanded the role of the government in the national economy."

The stubborn resilience of the Russians, bred over centuries, is in a word, the tragedy of the nation. They are content to survive, to endure, when the breadth and richness of their beautiful land offers so much more.

David von Drehle @von Drehle