



A new world order

The permanent members of the UNSC must support the reform process of the UN

A special session marking 75 years of the United Nations on Tuesday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for reform of its "outdated structures", pointing out that in the absence of comprehensive changes, the world body today faces a "crisis of confidence". While the words appear harsh given the occasion, they can hardly be faulted. India has been at the forefront of demanding reform in the UN, particularly its principal organ, the Security Council, for decades, staking its claim as one of the world's largest economies and most populous countries, with a track record in promoting a rules-based international order, and contributing to peacekeeping through UN forces. The UN was born in the crisis of the World War era, and the realities of that time can hardly be compared to the present. The UNSC's permanent, veto-carrying members, chosen by virtue of being "winners" of World War II – the U.S., the U.K., France, Russia and later China – can hardly claim adequate representation of the world's leadership today. The UNSC does not include a permanent member from the African, Australian and South American continents, and the pillars of the multilateral order, such as the G-4 group of Brazil, India, Germany and Japan, have been ignored for long. Other, more representative options exist, and that has been the crux of the battle for change. Also, there is a deep polarisation within the UN's membership, so decisions are either not taken, or not needed. Frequent divisions within the UNSC P-5 end up blocking key decisions. These issues are underlined in a year where the coronavirus pandemic has brought the world to a standstill; yet, the UN, the UNSC, and WHO have failed to play an effective role in helping nations deal with the spread.

For India, what has been most frustrating is that despite the dysfunctional power balance that prevails, the UN's reform process, held through Inter Governmental Negotiations (IGN) has not made progress over decades, despite commitments. The UN has chosen to "roll over" the discussions of the IGN, which are looking at five major issues: enlarging the Security Council, categories of membership, the question of the veto that five permanent members of the UNSC wield, regional representation, and redistributing the Security Council General Assembly power balance. It is some comfort that the UN's 75th anniversary declaration passed by all member countries this week pledges to "upgrade the United Nations" with a commitment to "instill new life in the discussions on the reform of the Security Council". Those words can only be realised if the UNSC's permanent members recognise the deep peril the UN faces and support the reform process, an act that will require looking beyond their own interests for the greater good of the world and its peace-building architecture.

Prekarious houses

To prevent building collapses, governments should offer incentives for repairs

Bhiwandi, a suburban town in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, has witnessed a building collapse in the recent weeks of the monsoon, killing at least 20 people including minors, and exposing once again, the precarious condition of many dwellings in one of India's more prosperous States. Many more hapless residents and workers of a powerloom unit trapped in the aging three-storeyed building were trapped under the debris. Legal liability and responsibility for the disaster have inevitably fallen on the owner of the structure and some municipal officials, for failing to abide by pre-monsoon safety audits. The monsoon has brought such disasters unfailingly to coastal Maharashtra, including Mumbai, for years now. In July, seven people died in the commercial capital, when two chawl buildings in densely populated working class areas crashed after heavy rain. Another incident in Mahad, in the rain-drenched Raigad district, killed many in August. These traumatic calamities, similar to many others in recent years, point to a worrying trend. Coastal Maharashtra has often received a staggering quantum of monsoon rainfall, and Thane district, where Bhiwandi is located, recorded 320 cm three years ago, over the average of about 240 cm. This is an alarm signal to the government. Flimsy buildings, particularly those constructed in the 1970s, are in danger of collapse, while their owners and residents are unable to fund their maintenance. A weaker economy in the post-COVID-19 phase will render expensive repairs even less feasible.

Ending the tragic episodes of building collapses will require Maharashtra to raise the bar for municipal services, beginning with safety audits. It is true that Mumbai's municipal government has been identifying and classifying buildings based on hazard levels for some time now, and last year found 499 to be in a dangerous state. This programme must now include suburban local bodies such as the Bhiwandi Nizampur City Municipal Corporation, which lack the capacity and resources to carry out a comprehensive check. On the other hand, building owners must be incentivised to carry out safety repairs, with support from the Centre and the State, making such certified expenditure tax-deductible. Mumbai's municipal engineers have, in the past, complained of political interference in the enforcement of safety norms, but as Mondya's accident makes clear, safety depends on quality. A more profound question is whether purely market-led approaches to housing can support Mumbai's ambitions for growth, when its poorly-housed workers might be better served by a hybrid solution that includes decent, affordable social accommodation. The immediate priority for Maharashtra is to understand the scale of the problem, identify the weakest structures and launch a plan to prevent disasters.

E-learning in India, a case of bad education

In poorly performing educational systems as in the country, online learning may not usher in a revolution



ROHIT DHANKAR

Equality of opportunity to all is one of the basic principles of our Constitution. From an educational point of view, John Dewey, American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, strongly argued that "[I]n environment in which some are limited will always in reaction create conditions that prevent the full development even of those who fancy they enjoy complete freedom for unhindered growth." Another point he makes equally strongly is that for good education, one must lead the child's current interests and abilities organically to logically organised human knowledge. This second point is an indicator of the quality of education.

The key issues

Our education system was never very efficient even in the best of times. The COVID-19 pandemic has rendered it extremely biased and faulty. The main thrust of providing learning opportunities while schools are shut is online teaching. There are several sets of guidelines and plans issued by the government, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) for this purpose. The internet is teeming with learning schemes, teaching videos, sites and portals for learning opportunities. The content of all government sites and schemes is primarily the NCERT-issued Alternative Academic Calendar (<https://bit.ly/3kEfcN2>), videos of teaching digital editions of textbooks, and links to other such material.

There are three pertinent issues in this whole effort of online education and schemes that need serious consideration. One, an exacerbation of inequality; two, the pedagogical issues leading to quality education; and three, an unwarranted thrust on online education, post-COVID-19.

Exacerbation of inequality

It is worth repeating a truism that calamities, be they natural or man-made, affect the underprivileged the hardest; COVID-19 is no exception. The plight of millions of migrant labourers, many of whom walked thousands of kilometres right in the beginning of the lockdown, proved the point adequately. A similar but less noticed deprivation is being visited to children of the same people, which may push the next generation in a direction of even greater comparative disadvantage.

In our society there is no large movement that may generate any hope of an improved situation in terms of equality and social justice. Therefore, any positive change that might come about will be a cumulative result of the development of capabilities and grit in individuals. The COVID-19 shutdown has affected this opportunity for the poor even harder than their counterparts from well-to-do sections of society. The government began plans for students with no online access only by the end of August. The plans themselves were the usual glib talk always served to the poor. These plans assume semi-literate or illiterate parents teaching children, community involvement, mobile pools, and so on. Anyone with an internet connection can immediately note these to be imaginary. As a result, whatever online or digital education is available is for students with only online access. Thus, digital India may become even more unequal and divided than it already is.

Even if one takes it as an emergency measure that 'something better than nothing' and also accept 'for some is better than no one' despite it being against the principle of equal opportunity, the



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quality of online teaching/learning leaves much to be desired. The NCERT declares in its Learning Enhancement Guidelines (<https://bit.ly/3lWdWD>), or LEG that 60-70% students, teachers and parents consider learning satisfactory. However, its survey asks a single question on the feeling of students using the criteria of 'joyful to burdensome'. The happiness or otherwise of the student while learning is, of course, important, but it says nothing about the quantum and depth of learning.

Listening to lectures on the mobile phone, copying from the board where the teacher is writing, frequent disconnections and/or having blurred video/audio can hardly and organically connect the child's present understanding with the logically organised bodies of human knowledge.

No focus on concepts

If one sees videos of teaching mathematics, science, history, and the English language, one can hardly avoid noticing problems with them. In the science and mathematics videos, in particular, there are many misconceptions and ambiguities. The emphasis is more on 'tricks' to remember for success in an examination than laying the stress on conceptual understanding.

The government of Delhi also uses videos by the Khan Academy ("a nonprofit with a mission to provide a free, world-class education for anyone, anywhere"). Many teachers, educators, have questioned the quality of teaching and have pointed out inadequate or plainly wrong concepts, particularly in mathematics. To quote an

article in *The Washington Post*, "Khan Academy: The revolution that isn't" (July 23, 2012 - <https://wapo.st/3mJ4dV>): "teachers... are concerned that the guy who's delivered over 170 million lessons to students around the world... considers the precise explanation of mathematical concepts to be mere 'nitpicking'."

The secondary students are in a better position still because of their relative independence in learning and possible self-discipline. The beginners in the lower primary can get nothing at all from this mode of teaching. An example of assumptions in the NCERT's planning in LEG can be instructive; it is glibly pronounced that "for a child in grade I, the learning outcome – associates words with pictures – can be easily taught with the use of resources available from or at home such as newspapers, food packets, things at home, TV programmes, nature, etc. All that will be needed is guidance to the parents." Well, if it were all that simple, then why are our children not learning to read and write? Education does not happen in chance encounters with print. As Michael Joseph Oakeshott who also wrote on education would say, it requires well-connected, regular efforts that are incrementally building to help the child focus his attention and to provoke him to distinguish and to discriminate, and develop a habit of staying on task. And this requires help from someone who knows the child as well as understands the objective of education. Food packets and newspapers in the hands of even 'guided' semi-literate parents will be good enough to present a plan on paper, but will be completely useless for the child's learning.

The thrust, post-COVID-19 IT has been presented as a harbinger of a revolution in education for more than three decades now. However, all reliable studies seem to indicate that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the classroom helps in already

well functioning systems, and either has no benefits or negative impact in poorly performing systems. That does not indicate much hope from IT in our education system.

The NCERT's LEG states that "COVID-19 has created a situation which demands transformation in school education... the transaction mechanisms in school education may go through a drastic change. Therefore, even if the pandemic will get over, its traces will be there and school education needs to remodel itself..." It recommends that "alternative modes of education for the whole academic session including Internet-based, radio, podcast, community radio, IVRS, TV DTH channels, etc." should be developed. This transformation of schools in the current and school education needs to remodel itself in the country. Of course, IT can be used in a balanced manner where it can help; but it should not be seen as a silver bullet to remedy all ills in the education system.

Institutional environment

The importance of an institutional environment cannot be overemphasised when one thinks of online teaching. Even when the institutions function sub-optimally, students themselves create an environment that supports their growth morally, socially and intellectually in conversations and interactions with their peers. The online mode of teaching completely forecloses this opportunity.

In conclusion, our democracy and public education system have, as usual, left the neediest in the lurch and are providing bad education to those who matter.

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Making the language of the law comprehensible

The demand for greater availability of laws and public records in the 22 languages in the Schedule VIII is not a big ask



PRASHANT REDDY T.

The recent litigation over the language in which the Draft Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 2020 should be published has brought much needed attention to the issue of official languages used by the central government in its functioning. The trigger for this debate has been litigation by citizens, who protested against the publication of the draft EIA notification in only English and Hindi, on the grounds that such a policy excludes a large number of Indians who do not speak Hindi or English from participating in the public consultation process.

While two High Courts have asked the government to publish the notification in all 22 languages mentioned in Schedule VIII to the Constitution, the central government is pushing back against this order, arguing that it is not required by the law to publish these notifications in the 22 languages mentioned in Schedule VIII.

One of the other reasons offered by the central government to resist the translation of the notification into 22 languages is that meaning of the words being obfuscated and often even lost, thereby leading

to greater legal uncertainty. It is incredible for the government of the world's largest democracy to make such a claim because there exists a central law called the Authoritative Texts (Central Laws) Act, 1973 (<https://bit.ly/3JWKK4P>), which creates a legal mechanism to recognise authoritative translations of all central laws into languages mentioned in the Schedule VIII to the Constitution of India. This law extends to rules and delegated legislation issued under central laws. The Legislative Department of the Law Ministry hosts these translations on its website.

Separate from the question of accuracy of translations is the larger policy question regarding the languages used by the central government for communicating with the public. The Official Languages Act, 1963 (<https://bit.ly/3m1WmUd>) requires the publication of the law in only English and Hindi. As a result, the central government, de facto, ends up excluding non-English and non-Hindi speaking citizens from the law-making process only because of their linguistic identity.

Language politics

Surprisingly, this issue is yet to garner the political attention it deserves despite the fact that since Independence, language has been one of the main markers of political identity in India. The reorganisation of Indian States on linguistic lines in 1956 took place because of the agitations that followed the death of Potti Sreeramulu in 1952



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after his 56-day long fast demanding the creation of a State for the Telugu-speaking people of the Madras Presidency. Ever since, language has played a key role in shaping Indian politics. The rise and success of several regional political parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the Telugu Desam Party and the Shiv Sena have been associated with linguistic pride, which sometimes can boil into language chauvinism against other linguistic minorities. Language, therefore, is a powerful marker of political identity in India.

Despite the importance of language to Indian politics, the key political parties which are their existence to their politics around language appear to be weak and inadequate in convincing Parliament or the central government in ensuring that all 22 languages recognised in the Schedule VIII to the Constitution are used by all institutions of the central government while communicating or interfacing with the public.

At the very least, an inclusive language policy must be integral to the law-making and enforcement process. This should include mandatorily publishing all parliamentary debates and associated re-

ports such as reports of parliamentary committees, the entire record of the *Gazette of India*, all legislation and delegated legislation of the central government in all 22 languages that are incorporated in the Schedule VIII. Similarly, central government offices such as the passport office, dealing with citizens across the country should give citizens the option to engage with the government in a language of their choosing. So far, only the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) which runs the Aadhaar digital identity programme has an inclusive language policy allowing citizens to get identity cards in languages other than English and Hindi.

Translations as legal right

In many of the cases outlined above, especially with regard to legislative enactments, it is reasonable to argue that citizens are not bound by laws that are not made available to them in their local language. The Supreme Court of India in the past (*Harla v. State of Rajasthan*, 1951) has ruled that citizens are not bound by laws which have not been published and publicised. The Court stated in pertinent part: "Natural justice requires that before a law can become operative it must be promulgated or published. It must be broadcast in some recognisable way so that all men may know what it is; or, at the very least, there must be some special rule or regulation or customary channel

by or through which such knowledge can be acquired with the exercise of due and reasonable diligence."

It does not take much to extend this reasoning to argue that Indians are not bound by central laws unless Parliament makes its laws available in languages understood by all Indians.

In the European Union

The demand for greater availability of laws and public records of the central government in the 22 languages in the Schedule VIII is not a big ask. In other multi-linguistic jurisdictions such as the European Union (EU), all EU-level official documents are made available in all 24 official languages of member States (<https://bit.ly/33SK4XP>) because the EU has a policy in place to respect the linguistic diversity of its member nations. This policy allows all EU nationals to communicate with EU institutions in any of the 24 official languages and these institutions are required to respond in the same language.

It is appalling that the Government of India does not have a similar policy in place. It is not too late to put in place such a policy but this is unlikely to happen unless political parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam make it a national issue like they did in 1965 when the Official Languages Act was amended to make Hindi the sole official language of the central government.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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In the Rajya Sabha Whatever be the reasons given, the unruly manner in which some members behaved in the Rajya Sabha reportedly behaved in the House left much to be desired (Page 1, "8 Opposition MPs suspended from RS for 'unruly behaviour'," September 22). We have seen similar incidents in Parliament in the past. Unless order is maintained in the House, valuable debating and discussion time on important bills would be lost. With the whole country, especially the younger generation, watching these proceedings

live on television, such reckless incidents within the temple of our great democracy could set a bad example ahead. Sometimes it becomes necessary for the Speaker or the Deputy Speaker to initiate strict action against some members who blatantly flout the rules of the House, in the interests of the debating decorum and in ensuring normal proceedings. Parliament runs on the taxpayer's hard earned money and every minute wasted is unacceptable.

A. MOHAN, Chennai

■ A lack of sanctity in the law-making process and politics was evident during the debate on the Bill of the two agriculture Bills in the Rajya Sabha and the fallout. There are two important factors in the law-making process. In the first, it is essential to scrutinise the subject. And, importantly, in the second, the debate must be an extensive debate on the floor of Parliament. There is no doubt that the culture of a deliberative and consultative process of law making has to be restored.

VENUG. G., Kalluvolukudi, Kottam, Kerala

On the frontline

Between 1961 and 1963, I was one of the early recruits by the Government of India to the Roads Organisation as a Class I officer (engineering) and posted to No.10 BRTF (Border Roads Task Force) on the Hindustan Tibet road, from Tipti (Kinnur district, Himachal Pradesh) to Shipkila at the Tibet border. The road was built by N.S. Kumar, a task master. A major was in command at one of the sites. After a few months he met with an accident due to a rock fall and sustained severe head injuries. He was evacuated to a military hospital and did

not return. I was asked to take over the unit, soon after, in October 1962, when the Chinese invaded India at many points. In our sector, called the 'sugar sector' (a translation of 'Chini' from Hindi), we waited for orders from above. The terrain was a very difficult one and the Indian Army was poorly equipped with World War II vintage tanks and a few old jeeps which broke down frequently. Some Army personnel who had rushed in from Travancore, Mysore and Rajasthan had yet to be acclimatised. I had the opportunity of providing them our new Nissan

vehicles to transport them across the border where they were to work tirelessly to get the mission completed. The roads under construction were dangerous – just 10 feet wide, no parapet wall, and with steep curves and gradients on the sides. One wrong move would have sent a vehicle plunging hundreds of feet below into the Sutlej river. It is a pity that the political class did little to improve the situation at the border from 1962 to 1975.

K. SUNDARARAJAN, Chennai

Recovery from COVID-19 can be a struggle

It is becoming evident that cardiovascular, neurological and psychological effects are real post-COVID



LANCELOT PINTO & NIKITA MEHRA

"When will I feel normal again?" This is a question every clinician gets asked daily. In most instances, historical narratives, research studies, guidelines and personal experiences equip us to provide an informed answer. Most research on COVID-19, however, has so far focused on reducing deaths, shortening hospital stays, and arresting the spread of the disease. With the cohort of COVID survivors getting larger, we are now cognisant of the fact that a significant proportion of patients who survive the illness suffer from sequelae that may not be short-lived. Support groups have mushroomed online of thousands of individuals reporting persistent symptoms of illness after recovering from the illness. A recent study from Italy reported that at an average of two months post-hospitalisation, only 12.6% individuals were free of any symptoms. The most common symptom reported in over half of all patients was fatigue. Unexpectedly, a significant proportion of individuals with 'mild' illness are also reporting long-standing symptoms.

Effects of COVID-19 SARS-CoV-2 belongs to a family of single-stranded RNA viruses called coronaviruses. Viruses in this family have been known for their far-reaching effects, affecting the respiratory, neurological, cardiovascular (heart and blood vessels), hepatic (liver), and enteric (gut) systems. The focus of the present pandemic has been on the respiratory effects of the virus, which have been the most common manifestation and cause of morbidity and mortality. As many as 87% of all individuals with symptomatic disease have been reported to demonstrate abnormalities on a CT scan of the chest. In addition to the viral infection and the immune response to it, the use of oxygen and being in a ventilator can also cause injury to the lungs. Corticosteroids, the only drugs with a proven mortality benefit in COVID-19, have the potential to



REUTERS

help reduce lung injury. However, their prolonged use can have ill-effects affecting multiple systems in the body. In the study mentioned above, 43% individuals reported shortness of breath two months after discharge.

The involvement of the cardiovascular system has been a prominent feature of this pandemic, as reflected both by clinical and autopsy studies. Individuals have gone to hospital with inflammation of the muscle fibres of the heart, limiting the functioning of the heart and mimicking heart attacks, and clots in the blood vessels of the lungs, brain and veins. These have been attributed to the direct effects of the virus (the heart muscle has an abundance of the same receptors that the virus binds to in the lungs, the ACE2 receptors) as well as abnormalities in the clotting pathways secondary to a dysfunctional and exuberant immune response to the virus. A fifth of all hospitalised patients have blood markers that reflect dying heart muscle cells. A subset of individuals report persistent palpitations and have an elevated resting heart rate, chest pain and exercise intolerance months after the illness. Structural damage to the heart and damage to the nerve transmission that regulates the functioning of the heart and the tone of blood vessels have been hypothesised to cause these effects.

The myelin sheath is a layer that covers nerves, facilitating transmission of signals along nerve fibres. Loss of this sheath, seen in demyelinating illnesses such as multiple sclerosis, is associated with severe fatigue and loss of muscle strength. Coronavirus have been postulated to cause demyelinating disease through the direct effect on oligodendrocytes (cells in the nervous system), and through immune mechanisms in which similarities between the virus and myelin lead to T-cells attacking the body's own myelin. The loss of smell that has been reported in COVID-19 is possibly a result of the virus entering the brain through the olfactory bulb, and the presence of the virus has been demonstrated in the fluid surrounding the brain. The persistence of fatigue, 'brain fog', short-term memory loss, loss of smell and taste, and headaches are all being reported for months following the illness. These are possibly sequelae of the virus invading the nervous system. SARS-CoV-2 may have the potential for resulting in a cohort of individuals with progressive neurological disease, and long-haulers with such symptoms need to be followed up closely.

Survivors of SARS infection reported post-traumatic stress disorder, and a range of mental illnesses including increased suicidality in the months' post-infection. In the three years following the SARS epidemic, 50% survivors reported a psychiatric disorder at some point. A study published in *Sleep Medicine* revealed very high rates of clinically significant insomnia (20%), acute stress (15.8%), anxiety (18.5%), and depression (24.5%). The isolation from family and friends during the period of hospitalisation, stigma associated with the disease, and anxiety because of lockdowns are all likely to contribute to mental illness after being infected. Especially in those admitted with the illness, it would be naive to assume that a discharge from the hospital would lead to a return to normalcy. Whether the effects of the virus on the brain are responsible for the psychiatric

long-term effects, or these are a consequence of the milieu in which we live, is unknown, but needs close monitoring.

What can be done?

So, what do we tell patients who ask us the question? What we know is that other viral illnesses have been known to cause a post-viral fatigue syndrome too. Persistent viral fragments leading to a constant immune response have been thought to play a role. What makes COVID-19 relatively unique though is that these symptoms are being reported in individuals who have had a mild illness and are often young and had been healthy prior to the illness. What is reassuring is that our experience with other viral illnesses suggests that most individuals return to a normal life, and only a small fraction have symptoms which persist. For long-haulers, the limited experience that present survivors offer is that rest helps; trying to push through the pain can be counter-productive, especially if one attempts vigorous exercise too soon. A recent guideline published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* has warned against exercising during the illness (might increase viral replication within the heart, causing long-term damage, and can also cause sudden cardiac death), and has suggested a detailed assessment before return to sport in individuals with symptoms. Close monitoring is key, as is the control of co-morbidities, nutritional deficiencies and illnesses such as endocrine disorders. A graded rehabilitation which includes building physical endurance and addressing mental health issues is crucial to a holistic recovery.

Empathy is key, and research is needed to codify the illness and prevent the stigma that such individuals report having to face from their peers. It is becoming evident that post-COVID effects are real. We owe it to our patients to help them understand it better, and study ways in which we can alter its course.

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Uniting to combat COVID-19

The South Asian region could leverage its existing institutional framework under the umbrella of SAARC



SYED MUNIR KHASRU

With the pandemic showing no signs of abating, growth prospects for the world's fastest-growing region, South Asia, appear grim. In April, the World Bank predicted that growth in the region would be 1.8%-2.8% this year.

Governments in South Asian countries have responded in varying degrees to counter the health and economic crises. India resumed its economic activities on a limited scale following a strict lockdown imposed in late March and lasting through April. Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka did the same after an extended lockdown. Bhutan and the Maldives have managed to largely contain community transmission and avoid prolonged lockdowns due to a higher testing rate. This is consistent with the hypothesis that countries that have conducted more tests have been more successful in containing the pandemic. According to Worldometer, in South Asia, the Maldives has the highest number of tests per million population followed by Bhutan. Countries facing a surge in cases, such as India, could have flattened the curve by increasing the number of tests.

Low mortality

India has the second largest number of COVID-19 cases in the world (over 55 lakh) after the U.S. Bangladesh has around 3.5 lakh cases. Surprisingly, unlike other regions, South Asian countries are experiencing a lower mortality rate despite having a higher infection rate. Many have suggested that this could be due to the region's tropical climate, protection offered by a tuberculosis vaccine (BCG), exposure to malaria, and a weaker strain of the virus. However, epidemiological studies and the World Health Organization's reviews have been sceptical about the hypotheses which leave out one plausible explanation—the concern over data reliability. Many have suggested that in a region that houses one-fourth of the global population and one-third of the global poor, many COVID-19 deaths might have gone unnoticed, unreported or even under-reported.

While India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives have unveiled stimulus packages, the rest are yet to announce any concrete support for their low income and lower-middle income population still suffering from the economic fallout of the crisis. In late March, India announced a \$22.5 billion relief

package to ensure food security and cash transfers to save the livelihoods of an estimated 800 million people living in poverty. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) slashed the repo and reverse repo rate to create liquidity for businesses. In early April, Bangladesh announced a stimulus package worth \$8 billion in addition to an earlier \$595 million incentive package for export-oriented industries. In late March, Pakistan unveiled a comprehensive fiscal stimulus package of \$6.76 billion. Its central bank also slashed the interest rate. In late April, the Maldives government mobilised a \$161.8 million emergency fund. It also announced a short-term financing facility for the tourism industry. Sri Lanka signed an agreement with the RBI for a currency swap worth \$400 million to support domestic financial stability. In late February, the Afghan government allocated about \$25 million to fight COVID-19. In addition, a \$10.4 million grant was approved by the World Bank in April to Afghanistan.

Although countries like India and Bangladesh announced financial and material stimulus packages, distribution concerns remain unaddressed. For instance, the Open Market Sale in Bangladesh appears ineffective as there is no physical distancing and, in some instances, there is political tampering and poor governance. In India, the announcement of the lockdown gave citizens less than four hours to prepare. Hoarding of supplies caused a shortage in the market. The lockdown disrupted supply chains. It was a similar situation in Nepal and Pakistan.

A coordinated response mechanism Since this crisis is likely to result in prolonged economic setbacks in South Asia, leaders of the region need to look beyond narrow geopolitical rivalry and come together to work towards a well-coordinated response mechanism. A SAARC COVID-19 fund was created following the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call to South Asian leaders, but governments are yet to decide on its modus operandi. The region could leverage its existing institutional framework under the umbrella of SAARC to effectively respond to the crisis. For instance, SAARC Food Banks could be activated to tackle the imminent regional food crisis, and the SAARC Finance Forum can be activated to formulate a regional economic policy response. If leaders of the region can't rise to the occasion even when faced with a common problem that is claiming lives, putting millions out of jobs and crippling economies, when will they?

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Needless Booker brouhaha

The obsession with the Booker Prize is in tandem with India's fixation for foreign awards

KUNAL RAY

Like every year, the Booker Prize shortlist has garnered a lot of attention in India. We also have an Indian-born author on the shortlist. Regardless, Booker Prize announcements are awaited with keen interest primarily by a minority community in the country largely comprising English language publishers, booksellers, critics, academics and readers. The Booker Prize-winning work is then translated into multiple Indian languages which is a pure economic decision rather than an artistic choice.

A kind of neo-colonialism

The obsession with the Booker is in tandem with our fixation for foreign awards and nominations. A kind of neo-colonialism or an imperialism of the mind is established when books and authors are considered important only vis-à-vis their mentions in the foreign press and nominations for 'prestigious' foreign awards. Many authors from the erstwhile Commonwealth clamour to write for the foreign press and gain entry into the exclusive club of a privileged few. If you win it, even better. There is very little attempt to discuss the winning title for its own merit. The awards create blinders. A slavish attitude is perpetuated through awards and longlists that refuse to read or recognise literature beyond honours or quotable quotes.

Least it be forgotten it should perhaps be said that awards are always a reflection of a handful or a jury comprising certain individuals and their likes and dislikes. That is the case with all jury awards. This lack of criticality around the award is farcical. Also, how has the Booker really helped the reading or writing sphere in this country? It has encouraged a class of writers who write to win awards. Their writing, however, has to qualify for the pre-determined categories as to how the East or the rest of the world is imagined by the West. That debate is still not dated. Gender, colour, caste, conflict have been re-

duced to writerly templates and plot points to tick off the list of essentials a work of fiction from this part of the world must contain.

The Booker Prize or any big award too to speak has done precious little to improve the Indian readership rather than creating momentary interest in the work or the author. There are some who attain permanent celebrity status based on the laurels of the award. This award-obsessed culture is a trap to jettison conversation about reading and writing and further draw us in the cult of the celebrity, a permanent fetish. We refuse to look beyond the individual. His or her writing becomes secondary and gradually of marginal interest.

Books in India

There are several awards in various Indian languages which regularly honour and recognise literary talent. Those awards barely find a mention in the mainstream media. We have to wait for translations to bridge that gap. While translations from Indian languages into English have peaked over the years, only a certain kind of writing is chosen or curated; writing that mainstream, metropolitan India might want to read from the provinces.

This is a major limitation that we have to find ways to address. While we look away from our own, we constantly strive to understand the foreign, the different. There is a lot of glib talk about the role of literature in expanding the horizon but it shouldn't be done at the cost of ignoring local knowledge systems and writing cultures. We often talk about building bridges through literature.

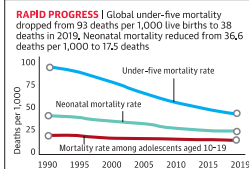
While that is surely welcome, we should not hold our imagination hostage to foreign awards and juries which do precious little to improve our lives as readers and thinkers especially in a country known for its widely varied and constantly evolving literary cultures beyond the English speaking and writing sphere.

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DATA POINT

Lower child mortality



GEOGRAPHICAL DISPARITIES REMAIN

More than 80% of under-five deaths occurred in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia in 2019. The map shows the under-five mortality rates in 2019. The darker the shade, the higher the mortality. In India, under-five mortality stood at 34.3 deaths per 1,000 live births. Nigeria has the highest under-five mortality rate (117 deaths per 1,000 live births).

Country	Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)
Nigeria	117
India	34.3

COVID-19 threat | There is evidence across the world that the pandemic has disrupted several essential services such as access to healthcare and immunisation. A recent paper published in *The Lancet* estimates that the number of under-five child deaths will increase by 2.5 lakh-11.5 lakh in 118 low-income and middle-income countries if disruptions (reduction of workforce, reduction of services, etc.) continue for six months.

Source: World Bank Data Blogs, "Early estimates of the indirect effects of COVID-19 on children's health and development," Timothy Robertson et al, The Lancet

The Hindu

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 23, 1970

10,000 dead in Jordan fighting

The United Arab Republic Minister for Information, Mr. Mohamed Heikal, said to-day (Cairo, September 22) that 10,000 people had died in the fighting in Jordan between King Hussein's troops and the Palestinian guerrillas. He told a press conference that the situation in Amman was "extremely dangerous". Palestinian guerrillas to-day reported losing 6,000 dead. For tens of thousands wounded in the past five days of savage fighting in Jordan, but vowed to fight King Hussein's tanks and troops until they won. Before the fighting commenced last Thursday, guerrilla numbers were believed to be between 20,000 and 30,000 full-time commandos with as many again of part-time militia. The Jordanian forces numbered around 55,000. Their losses have not been stated but could be heavy, particularly in the weekend tank battles in North Jordan with a Syrian-based armour force. Amman airport was still closed to air traffic, but one Red Cross relief plane was able to get through last night with drugs and medicine.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 23, 1920

The Brussels Conference

(From an editorial)

The international conference, to be held under the auspices of the League of Nations to consider and devise means for the rehabilitation of international credit, is to meet at Brussels shortly. On its decisions will largely depend the economic future of the world and it is to be hoped that the Conference, bearing this point in mind, will approach the problems faced before it in that spirit of good will, tolerance and large-heartedness which alone will enable to rehabilitate the economic position of the shattered countries, enemy or allied, where now nothing but gloom and chaos obtain in matters industrial and financial. The problem, of course, is not easy of solution; were it easy, no international conference under such high auspices would have been necessary to solve it. The present economic chaos has resulted in something like a deplorable economic deadlock. On the one hand, industrial nations, whether belligerent or neutral, are just now experiencing a trade slump on a very large scale. It would appear that the decline in business has grown to such proportions that the mills have had to work short hours and that unemployment on a considerable scale, labour unrest and business failures.

TIME TO CHANGE

Covid-19 pandemic is a big wake-up call for us

India's situation is not unique; the same ills can be seen across the globe. It is a larger pandemic waiting to explode. Let's take the coronavirus crisis as nature's warning to set our development model right.

OPINION

ARVIND SAXENA



"The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis"

— Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), Italian national epic poet

Why are we always surprised when confronted with a crisis? Why is the default reaction one of finding an excuse or blaming someone else? Despite being one of the oldest civilisations, how is it that not one of us is able to foresee the outcome of our actions? Have we been sleepwalking, or have we been dragged by the aspirational goal of creature comforts? Where are our brilliant men and women of science, technology, literature, economics, statistics, history, culture and strategic studies? The coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns which brought us face-to-face with the plight of migrant workers shocked many of us. So why were we shocked? Had we not seen the blank eyes or heard the silent cries of the teeming

mass of men and women who crowded our cities, lived in shanties and hovels, having unclean water and food? They worked long hours in unhygienic and inhuman conditions. Penury and disease were a part of their lives. Their families in the villages depended on their meagre earnings, and they dared not raise their voice against the exploitation, because there were millions of others waiting to replace them. Did we actually believe that it was fine to hire a man or a woman for less than Rs 10,000 per month, without any obligation for his social security, health, shelter, education or development needs? It needed countless of these unfortunate citizens to get on roads and rails and in railway trains for at least some of us to be jolted out of our reverie.

Why are we expressing shock on learning that Chinese agencies were creating a massive database of over 10,000 Indian individuals and organisations, even while we were happily lapping up their free services of social media, games, and online shopping and payment platforms? Why are we surprised that social media is being weaponised to create discord and weaken nations. Why could someone not tell us that we were not evolving digitally, that we were leaving our doors ajar for the enemy to get into the house?

Why is it that when China and Pakistan, or even Nepal,

Sri Lanka or Bangladesh, make aggressive or unpleasant moves, we get shocked and react with panic -- be it our military, diplomatic and now even economic moves? Why is it so difficult to understand that adversaries will work on our internal fault lines and look for weaknesses in the polity, economy and strategic preparedness; that emerging powers will do everything to increase their spheres of influence and safeguard their strategic interests, including their trade interests? Why needle the beast without doing a thorough war-gaming of our moves? Why are we shocked when the adversary uses its levers in Kashmir and Ladakh, or now in Nagaland?

How and when did all this come to pass? When did we stop realising that in addition to capital and raw material, no enterprise can function without labour? When did we internalise the false narrative that promoters, investors and shareholders have an inherent claim over the profits and that the rights of labour can be disregarded? When did we forget that natural and human resources are not to be exploited but to be held in trust by the promoters? When did we start accepting that since semi-skilled and unskilled labour was being provided by contractors, they were not our responsibility? Why even talk about investing in skill development, nurturing holistic human development and building partnership with workers? Why not discredit the trade unions themselves! How come we also forgot that by suppressing wages we were destroying the market for our own goods and services, and that the model was eventually bound to destroy the economy?



Migrant labourers walking back to their native states during the Covid-19 lockdown.

The coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns which brought us face-to-face with the plight of migrant workers shocked many of us. So why were we shocked? Had we not seen the blank eyes or heard the silent cries of the teeming mass of men and women who crowded our cities, lived in shanties and hovels, having unclean water and food? They worked long hours in unhygienic and inhuman conditions. Penury and disease were a part of their lives. Their families in the villages depended on their meagre earnings, and they dared not raise their voice against the exploitation, because there were millions of others waiting to replace them.

We forgot that taxation is not a 'redistribution of wealth', it is just compensation and 'reimbursement' for society's contribution to the creation of wealth. Instead of accepting that higher taxation is necessary for improving socio-economic indicators of health, education, housing, etc, we raised indirect taxes to fifty percent of our collection, thereby placing a disproportionate

burden on the poor. The top one percent justified this preferential treatment by claiming to be extraordinarily intelligent and hard working vis-à-vis the poor who were stupid and lazy. This is an utterly false narrative. Something terrible has been going on in the last 35 to 40 years. Our public policy, instead of focusing on poverty and deprivation, inequality and disparity in literacy, mor-

tality and nutrition, etc, has been creating conditions for the concentration of wealth into the hands of a few, while eroding the rightful claims of the masses.

I am not an economist but over the last couple of decades I could see that the model has failed. Many of us had seen the growing pain behind the blank eyes and heard the screams behind the ominous silence of our

toiling masses as well as the mounting number of the unemployed. We could hear the stifled cries of hunger and deprivation of these masses which were unable to raise their voice due to apathy, despair, fatalism, hopelessness and fear. The jobless are repressing their ennu, dejection, frustration and even anger. They were supposed to be our human capital, our population dividend!

India's situation is not unique; the same ills can be seen across the globe. It is a larger pandemic waiting to explode. Let's take the coronavirus crisis as nature's warning to set our development model right. Remember how visionary leaders faced the 1888 blizzard in New York to build the underground infrastructure of power and transit, the 1832 cholera outbreak in London to create a public health engineering framework, and the 1871 great fire in Chicago to pave the way for skyscrapers. The time to change is now. India should wake up.

The writer is an Indian civil servant and a former Chairman of the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC). The views expressed are personal.

This is the first of a five-part series that will appear over a period of time.

PERSPECTIVE

FARM BILLS

WILL PM MODI BE ABLE TO DEFLECT FARMERS' ANGER?

The politics regarding the three Ordinances have taken over Parliament's Monsoon Session. As it is the session was a truncated one, to be held during the pandemic. And it was not without risk with 25 MPs and 56 of the staff testing positive. There were elaborate arrangements made, especially keeping social distancing in mind. MPs marked attendance via an app, RT-PCR tests were conducted within the complex and so on. But was the risk worth it?

For, in the end, it was back to the old-fashioned way of doing politics, as opposition MPs rushed to the well claiming that the government had tried to bulldoze a voice vote through on the three controversial Ordinances that were brought about by the government soon after the marathon lockdown ended. This was a sad end to a fiery debate on the subject that saw some well-argued arguments on

both sides, not to mention high drama that flagged it all off with the resignation of a Cabinet minister at the start of the session. Why did Harsimrat Kaur Badal wait till the Ordinance reached Parliament before resigning, and did not do so at the time the Ordinances were passed, on 5 June 2020? Why did the Opposition wait as long before taking up the issue? Well the answer lies in the simple fact that it was only after the farmers hit the streets that the political parties realised the ramifications of this move and decided to join the cause with a very influential vote-bank.

But first, a look at what these pro-farmer legislations are all about. The most controversial was Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance (now a Bill), which allows farmers to sell produce outside the markets notified under the various state agricultural

produce market laws (state APMC Acts). The second one, the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services legislation overrides all state APMC laws with reference to the sale and purchase of farm products, bringing uniformity into contractual farming rules (and state APMC Acts) across India. While the third seeks to bring changes into the list of essential items whose prices are regulated by the government.

While the government claims that these are for the betterment of the farmers, it is clear that the targeted beneficiaries disagree. They see these changes as a move to please big firms, to do away with the MSP and pronounce a death knell on the farmers' with small holdings (that comprises about 86 percent of the farming population). Seeing the farmers hit the streets the government clarified --



Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

with the PM himself issuing a statement -- that this was a move aimed to reform the lives of farmers and that MSP would not be done away with but it was too late because the distrust had already set in. The Akali Dal, which is the BJP's oldest ally, played it smart, realising that this was a move that was going to boomerang on

its vote-bank. Don't forget that the SAD is largely a rural-based party while it was the BJP that dominated the urban Punjab voter. It has been a combination that worked, even during demonetisation. And so naturally the SAD is not keen to sever ties. Which is probably why during his intervention in Parliament

ka saamna karna" (sacrifice and taking on injustice). He pointed out that today the farmers feel that a "zulf" is being instigated against them and so the Akali Dal was standing by them.

Other parties too such as the TMC, the AAP and the Congress have taken up cudgels against this move, while the AIADMK and the YSRCP have supported the government. However, it was the demand that the bills be sent to a standing committee (read delay) that had the government overruling this with a voice vote, and therein began the ruckus that saw the expulsion of eight MPs from the Rajya Sabha.

Why didn't the government agree to the standing committee, especially after seeing the farmers protest all over the neighbouring Haryana, Punjab and other states? There are many reasons but the obvious one is that there are no rollbacks in Modi's playbook. Whether

it was demonetisation or the unwieldy GST, it is clear that once he has made up his mind (right or wrong) he doesn't need popular approval. He has the numbers to push the decision through and this is what he does. And to give him credit, he also manages it to sell the same decision to the public when it comes to the crunch -- voting time. For, don't forget after demonetisation and GST everyone thought he had lost the BJP's critical vote-bank, the rural poor, traders, small shopkeepers and banias. But in the end, he ensured that first the party won the critical state of UP in 2017 and then the rest of the country in 2019.

So before we write off the farmers' vote away from the BJP let's wait and watch the one man who knows how to take a controversy and repack it as an election-winning move. Watch this space.

PIYU SANGH

ANALYSIS

UN Security Council on protecting people with disabilities in humanitarian emergencies and armed conflicts

The children with any kind of disability also face problems in attending schools, unlike other children present there. For example, in the case of armed groups' attack on various communities in the Central African Republic in the year 2013 to be particular, it was documented that at least 96 of the disabled people were unable to escape when these attacks were made on their houses.

OPINION

ANUSHKA

The UN Security Council passed a resolution on 20th June, 2019 to provide protection to people suffering from any disability during armed conflicts and to ensure that they have proper access to humanitarian assistance. This was the first time the Security Council had dedicated an entire resolution to the people with disabilities who face various challenges in armed conflicts. Having said that the major goal was to provide them with a voice in decisions regarding humanitarian actions. It was an important action for the group which was often forgotten during humanitarian emergencies.

Along with the impact of this particular resolution depended on how well it was executed in reality but it again reinforced and uplifted the idea that there is

an absolute responsibility to protect all innocent civilians during armed conflicts, the UN agrees with the fact that the effect of conflict on people with disabilities is considerably higher and they have to be protected from the impact of war. This move was welcomed by everyone which was followed by extensive advocacy from the disability groups as well. If we refer to the statistics given by the World Health Organization, it clearly points out that 15% of the World's Population is disabled with some or the other form of disability. Amongst all these approximately 97 million have been forcibly displaced as a result of armed conflict and persecution. In times of armed conflicts or situations of humanitarian emergencies there are some problematic issues that people with dis-

abilities face which includes difficulty in getting access to basic humanitarian needs such as food, medical assistance and sanitation, often issues like abandonment from the family also arises. The children with any kind of disability also face problems in attending schools unlike other children present there. For example in the case of the Armed Groups Attack on various communities in the Central African Republic in the year 2013 to be particular it was documented that at least 96 of the disabled people were unable to escape when these attacks were made on their houses; they were left abandoned and 11 of them were killed. Having said that we again come to the conclusion that this resolution basically emphasized on the organization need for the states to end impunity against the criminal acts committed on the innocent civilians especially the one's who were disabled, to make sure that every civilian has an equal access to justice and all the available remedies as in Yemen, South Sudan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Greece people with disabilities have expressed their concern over difficulties

they face in navigating the uneven terrain to get access to basic necessities like food and medical supplies. The Resolution recognizes the Security Council's serious concern regarding the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on persons with disabilities and proposes actions to address the barriers faced by the world's largest minority group. The resolution passed by the Security Council addresses many of the challenges that have been talked about above which includes preventing violence and abuse against all civilians including people with disabilities. Additionally the resolution passed also called for the member states to ensure meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in the organization that represent them in decisions related to humanitarian actions, conflict prevention, reconstruction and peace building. The said resolution also urges its member states to comply with the said obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities where the Article 11 of the same convention states that "In ac-

cordance with their obligations under international law including International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law, all necessary measures are required to be taken to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situation of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters". The resolution passed was a unanimous decision but some permanent members of the security council expressed their concern regarding creating new legal obligations under international law and exceeding the scope of the mandate of the council. Gennady V. Kuzmin of the Russian Federation stated that Russia "shares humanitarian principles and tasks to alleviate the plight of persons with disabilities in conflict" but "firmly upholds our position that all social groups should be equally protected during armed conflict as stipulated by the international law. Specific needs of any category of population should not come at the cost of and with prejudice to another category." The council, Kuz-

min explained, "it should not invent any new international legal concepts that are allegedly aimed to fill 'gaps' in the protection regime established by the Geneva Conventions" and not "get too preoccupied with devising new categories of individuals who should need specific protection under the international humanitarian law." Having said that, even Yao Shaojun of the People's Republic of China cleared his stand that the issues related to the people with disabilities "should be dealt with in full observance of all Council resolutions on the protection of civilians" and that "the countries concerned must shoulder the primary responsibility of assisting such persons, with the United Nations and others playing a complementary role". Now if we go through the Article 25 of the UN Charter, it obligates the states to "accept and carry out" decisions taken by the Security Council but there is no clear understanding as to what type of language indicates that a provision in a security council is of a obligatory nature. If we carefully analyze the provision that was explained in context to the 1971 Namibia Advisory Opinion by the International

Court of Justice it says that when a resolution is passed by the Security Council, before jumping down to the conclusion whether it has any binding effect or not, it's language should be carefully looked into. Taking into account the provision of Article 25 the question whether they have been in fact exercised is to be determined in each case, having regard to the terms of the resolution to be interpreted, the discussions leading to it, the Charter provisions invoked and, in general, all circumstances that might assist in determining the legal consequences of the resolution of the Security Council. Well, as explained by John Bellinger, the former legal advisor of the United States Department of States there are three factors to indicate whether a resolution of the Security Council has a binding effect, these are:- Findings which state that there is a threat to International Peace and Security. Statement which declares that the Security Council is acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Use of the verb "decides" in any operative paragraphs has a binding effect.

Nonetheless this resolution did not fall under either of these categories. However Resolution 2475 could inform how the Security Council drafts future resolutions authorizing peace-keeping operations, which often fall under Chapter VII authority. Lastly it is to be said that the resolution passed by the Security Council is also the result of the extensive efforts that the civil societies and organizations representing disabled people had put in for a very long period of time. Nijzen Mustafa, a Syrian activist who suffers from cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair for her assistance had put forth her journey as a refugee who fled from Syria to Germany, she indeed was the first woman with a disability to brief the Security Council. No matter how remote the goals of this resolution might sound, it is an extremely important and celebrated step and a landmark resolution for people with disabilities taken by the UN Security Council. It is a clear political commitment towards mainstreaming disability across all UN pillars, including peace and security.

ANALYSIS

A jailbird's right: Understanding India's legal paradigm apropos of rights of the captured midst Covid-19

The Model Prison Manual, 2016 scrutinises the guidelines for governing the administration of prisoners; these guidelines are framed to maintain the conformity in rules and norms for the prisoners throughout the country.

OPINION

ABHISHEK TRIPATHI

Amidst this Pandemic COVID-19, the situation is so catastrophic and chaotic that WHO has declared this undetectable pandemic as public health emergency of International concern.

In the absence of any vaccine or medical treatment the only way to restrict the escalation of this disease is to follow and obey the social distancing norms. But proper implementation of social distancing norms is not plain sailing for any country.

In the light of status quo among all these chaos and complications, one of the section which is worst effected and neglected are the Prisoners.

CONDITION OF PRISONERS AND PRISONS

For Indian prisoners in the absence of proper demographic database of prisoners, slow operation and

functioning of judiciary, poor infrastructure and over-crowding at prisons and due to various other reasons this unprecedented pandemic acted as a flawless tempest or ticking bomb. Therefore it's imperative to scrutinize the rights available as social distancing seems completely missing in prisons. From the year 2008-2018, Indian prisons had an occupancy rate of 117%, which means there are 17% more prisoners than the capacity of prisons. As per the report of National Crime Record Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs (Prison Statistic 2008) the capacity of prisons to hold the inmates is 3,96,223

while the number prisoners who are locked inside the prisons are 4,66,804 in number which means that there are 70,581 more prisoners than the designated capacity.

JUDICIAL OUTLOOK The first thing is to consider whether Right to proper healthcare facilities is part of Fundamental rights or not. In the judgement of *Paschim Bangal Khet Mazdoor Samity & Others v. State of West Bengal & Others*, Supreme Court of India clearly stated that right to proper healthcare facilities which is an important part of Fundamental Rights is applicable to prisoners in the similar way as it's applicable on an ordinary citizen.

In the judgement of *Charles Sobhraj v. The Superintendent, Central Jail, Tebar, New Delhi*, The Supreme Court of India clearly mentioned that all the fundamental rights which are available for an ordinary citizen is available

India also has obligation towards rights of the prisoners as per the international laws and convention. In the 75th Session, 2038th meeting of United Nations Human Rights Committee concluding observations were adopted by considering the Report of Moldova, adhered on 18th and 19th July 2002.

for a prisoner in the same way with slight diminution because the latter is in prison. It was also explicitly mentioned that the prisoners should be provided with proper healthcare facilities and failure to do the same would be considered to be violation of fundamental rights and involve legal remedy.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK Apart from the Judicial Outlook, there are various other legal provisions available for the prisoners which include *The Prison Act, 1894* and *Model Prison Manual, 2016*.

Section 4 of The Prison Act, 1894 includes the provisions for sanitary and hygienic accommodation of prisoners inside the pris-

ons. Section 7 of the act has the provisions for safe and proper custody of all the prisoners who are excess in number and are kept in temporary prisons. This section specifically has provisions to avoid overcrowding in the prisons during the outbreak of any epidemic or during other times as well.

The Model Prison Manual, 2016 scrutinises the guidelines for governing the administration of prisoners; these guidelines are framed to maintain the conformity in rules and norms for the prisoners throughout the country. The Manual also has proper framework and guideline for the prisoners during the time of outbreak of any epidemic or infectious disease. It have vari-

ous provisions like creation of isolated and segregated sheds, treatment of infected barracks and clothes etc. Chapter V includes guidelines for Management of prisons in custody, Chapter VI have provisions for the proper maintenance of all the prisoners, Chapter VII have guidelines for medical and healthcare facilities and many other important rules and guidelines for the proper management of prisoners.

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

India also have obligation towards Rights of the prisoners as per the International laws and Convention. In the 75th Session, 2038th meeting of United Nations Human Rights Committee concluding observations were adopted by considering the Report of Moldova, adhered on 18th and 19th July, 2002. It specifically mentions that if there is violation of right to proper healthcare facilities during any pandemic and if state fails to take care of their prisoners during the outbreak of some contagious disease then, it would be considered as violation of Right to life mentioned in

Article 6 and Right to Liberty mentioned in Article 9 of ICCPR, 1996 (International Convention on Civil and Political Rights). India is one of those countries who have signed as well as ratified the ICCPR. Therefore India has a legal obligation to take preventive measure to stop the spread and escalation of COVID-19 in prisons.

STEPS TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT

Government of India has also taken measures to protect prisoner's right amidst this pandemic. *A suo moto cognizance has been taken by Supreme Court of India* for protecting the rights of prisoners considering the over-crowded condition of prisons. Supreme Court had directed the government of all the States and Union Territories to grant Parole to the prisoners who charged for minor offences. Apart from it Segregation cell and Isolation wards are being created at many places inside the prisons, also to avoid overcrowding Interim Bail is also been provided to the undertrials in many states including Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh etc.

In many states the government has also but various restrictions on the visitors and relatives who come to meet prisoners.

States like Kerala conducted awareness drives regarding COVID 19, Social Distancing, preventive measures etc. These drives helped prisoners to know about the disease so they can adopt preventive measures against the spread of this disease.

CONCLUSION

This Deadly pandemic COVID-19 make us realize the loopholes in the implementation of laws and the catastrophic conditions of not only the prisoners but also the prisoners. The problem is not just limited to lack of proper legal framework but also in the proper implementation of existing laws and conventions. Thus there is an urgent need of better legal framework, thoroughgoing surveillance and proper implementation of existing laws and policies for the prisoners, so that the ongoing situation can be healed and made better and we are well prepared for such pandemics in future.



THE INDIAN EXPRESS, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2020

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

THE CUSTODIAN

Deputy Chairman of Rajya Sabha, as is his wont, is gentle and graceful. His chair calls on him to be firm and fair as well

DEPUTY CHAIRMAN of the Rajya Sabha Harivansh Singh is known to be mild-mannered man. In his letter to the Chairman of Rajya Sabha Venkiah Naidu, in which he put on record his decision to observe a one-day fast because of the unruly scenes in the Upper House on Sunday, he invoked the values of Gandhi, JP, Ram Manohar Lohia and Kopper Thakur. Tuesday morning he showed up with homemade tea for the eight Opposition MPs suspended for the Sunday fracas, who were protesting their punishment by sitting overnight on dharna in the Parliament premises. The peace, or tea, offering, applauded by the Prime Minister, was indeed a graceful gesture. And yet, the question worth going away: Why did Harivansh babu not display this generosity of spirit inside the House on Sunday? On that day, the sequence of events may have been very different if the Deputy Chairperson had showed even more adherence to procedure — if he had allowed a division of votes when the voice vote was challenged. After all, the rule book says that in such a situation, "votes shall be taken by operating the automatic vote recorder or by members going into the lobbies". A division of votes may be demanded when there is no consensus, and even when the outcome is predictable — for parties and members to put on record their position on a bill. But not only did the Deputy Chairperson deny a division of votes on two controversial bills, on which an important BJP ally had just withdrawn a minister, he also refused the Opposition's demand for the same to send to a select committee on the grounds of disorder in the House — even as, amid the same disorder, he helped pushed them through.

The job of the presiding officer is to run the House, not just to ensure that the government's business is done. Any response to unruly behaviour must be consistent with the democratic spirit, and not seen to be influenced by the stand of the party he belongs to or is supported by. Sunday's events in Rajya Sabha, and the suspension of eight MPs, is especially disquieting when the Parliament session is truncated, Question Hour is suspended, and Zero Hour is abbreviated in the name of the pandemic. At a time when the Opposition, already in a shrinking corner in the House, is being denied its right to have its say, and when the government is using Parliament to have its way, the Deputy Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha has a special responsibility to look beyond the Treasury Benches and accommodate other voices and views. After all, in the absence of the Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha, the Deputy Chairperson is the custodian of its dignity and prestige, and of the rights and privileges of its members — all its members.

Sunday's events in Rajya Sabha and their aftermath are also troubling because at their centre are pieces of legislation whose reformist intent is being undermined by the manner in which they have been passed. The only way out of this mess is the institutional one. The rules of the democracy game must be upheld, not the majority's right of way.

WHAT LABOUR NEEDS

Especially at a time of acute economic distress, concerns of workers must be placed at centre of labour law changes

ON TUESDAY, THE Lok Sabha passed new versions of three labour codes, namely, the Industrial Relations Code Bill 2020, the Code on Social Security Bill 2020, and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code Bill 2020. Amending stringent and archaic labour laws has long been on the policy agenda. Yet, there hasn't been much movement on this issue because of the manner in which the debate has been framed — labour reformers, by and large, trying to get firms the power to hire and fire workers, without having to seek the government's permission. While there is indeed a strong argument for more flexible labour markets, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the lack of basic safety nets for large sections of the labour force, and given the widespread distrust due to their unplanned and forced exit from cities, the first steps should be aimed at addressing distress and restoring the trust of the workforce, and creating some sort of social security architecture.

To be fair, firms need to be provided flexibility in order to deal with the vicissitudes of business cycles. However, doing away with standing orders for firms with less than 300 workers, which will essentially cover most firms, is tantamount to watering down the basic rights of workers in most organisations, affecting their bargaining power. The other initiatives in the bills which include widening the ambit of social security by including inter-state migrant workers and gig economy workers are steps in the right direction. As is ensuring direct fixed-term contracts, maintaining a database of migrant workers, and an adequately funded social security fund. However, questions are likely to be raised over the design and coverage of such schemes, and how portability of benefits will be ensured. Further, given the temporary nature of workers in the gig economy, how will this framework work?

There can be no argument against the need to amend the existing labour laws in India. However, considering the extent of economic distress in the country, concerns of labour must be placed at the centre of such policy initiatives. At a time of acute precarity, instead of moving in a direction of a reasonably flexible labour market with a degree of social security, the government should not be seen to be taking steps in the opposite direction.

THE PANDEMMYS

First major COVID-era award show was glitzy and glamorous — and also touchingly personal

OLDT JEWELLERY, designer pajamas, presenters in custom hazmat suits hanging outside the residences of nominees with the trophy, and a strong WiFi connection — that's all that it took for the 22nd Primetime Emmy Awards, or the Pandemmys, as host Jimmy Kimmel called it, to set the tone for this unusual year's award season. With no physical audience, the first major COVID-era award show recognises the best in US primetime TV, was an at-home edition held over Zoom, that honed in on what was important — entertainment and reward — with a sidekick of the political and personal thrown in.

From the time the lights came on at the empty Staples Centre, from where Kimmel hosted the three-hour programme, the event highlighted all the things that make entertainment an integral part of lives. There was glamour and glitz — 24-year-old Zendaya, best actress in the drama series category, and only the second black woman to have won it, served up two costume changes — but also the comfort of licking off one's high heels and watching a show in comfortable pajamas like nominees Jameela Jamil and Samer Wileh. There was nostalgia, courtesy a reunion of the women from *Friends*, and reminders of all the things that make this such a critical political juncture in American lives: A hat tip to the Black Lives Matter movement with the Breonna Taylor T-shirts worn by winners Uzo Aduba and Regina King and Mark Ruffalo's urgent appeal to Americans to vote in November.

Freedom from a formal space also made the award touchingly personal. Aduba, who won in the outstanding supporting actress category for her role in *Mrs. America*, called out to her mother in the next room to announce her win. Stephen Colbert turned to his dog for a hug when he lost out to John Oliver in the outstanding variety talk show category and writer Cord Jefferson, who shared an Emmy with Damon Lindelof for *Watchmen*, thanked his therapist in his acceptance speech — a reminder that in this traumatic year wins and losses are only as good as the relationships and bonds that have held people together.



AMARINDER SINGH

ONE DOESN'T REALLY know where to begin talking about the three disastrous farm bills, which the central government is touting as a watershed moment for India's agriculture sector but which are blatantly crafted to fill the pockets of capitalist cronies of the BJP at the cost of the poor farmers.

Frankly, everything about these three agriculture bills that the BJP-led NDA government has virtually railroaded through Parliament is wrong. From the way the original ordinances were introduced in the midst of the pandemic, to the manner in which they have been forced through Parliament now, nothing explains the mad rush with which the government of India has pushed the bills through. They never bothered to consult any of the major stakeholders before bringing the ordinances — they did not talk to the farmers' representatives, they did not talk to my government which represents the most important state in India's food security chain, even though agriculture is constitutionally mandated to be a state subject, and they did not bother to hear out the Opposition in Parliament.

The only reason for these sly, undemocratic, and anti-federal actions of the part of the central government, as far I can see, is that these bills hide more than they reveal. They give the poor small and marginal farmers of India (constituting over 85 per cent of India's farmers) no assurance of protection of their interests, their livelihoods, and their future. They make no mention whatsoever of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) regime, which is the lifeline of these poor farmers and their key to survival, as also the survival of the nation's agriculture sector.

They add the ordinances have simplified the names of the existing Acts. If that is meant to make the farmers happy, then I can only lament the total lack of understanding of their concerns, which is clearly reflected in the farm bills too. Frankly, the farmers have always only understood one nomenclature as far as their produce goes, and that is MSP. Where is MSP in these ordinances/bills? Actually nowhere. In all those realms and realms of power, the central

Farm bills, silent on MSP, hide more than they reveal, will throw small farmers to big sharks

The Centre has claimed that these new laws will free the farmers from the monopolistic clutches of the intermediaries (arhtiyas). There are two points I would like to make here. First, did they even once ask the farmers if they wanted to be freed from these arhtiyas, whom BJP's own leader, late Sushma Swaraj, had once described as the most trusted and biggest support system for farmers? And second, how will such legislation prevent the farmers from falling into the clutches of the monopolistic big corporates, who have progressively been taking over one sector after another under the benign eye of the BJP leadership?

government did not deem it fit to even once come out with a categorical assurance that the MSP will not be tinkered with, as we in the Congress did in our manifesto. If only the policymakers in the government of India had stated in black and white that the MSP will be applicable to the private players too, and that farmers will get an assured MSP not just on wheat and rice but all other crops so that they are encouraged to diversify (a critical need of the hour), the farming community might have reacted a little more kindly to these ill-conceived and devastating new farm laws.

Instead, what these laws will do is to throw the small farmers to the big sharks, where market forces will control the pricing, procurement and marketing mechanism, and these helpless farmers will be left running from one retailer/trader to another to sell their little produce season after season, with no bargaining power to demand or get the price they deserve. The financial security for which they are currently dependent on the existing marketing system will become a thing of the past, and the promise of a bright future will disappear just as the one on doubling of their farm incomes by 2022 will fade into the recesses of their distant memory.

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The bills are totally silent on these counts, just as they are on MSP. The verbal assurances being made by BJP leaders do not count as their track record in fulfilling promises is abysmal. Apparently, even their own ally, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), does not believe

in these verbal statements, or so they claim (though the Akalis' double-speak on this issue has totally exposed their lack of sincerity for the farmers). As for Sushma's remarks, the BJP is justifying its shameful deviation from its earlier stated stand on the grounds that farmers now have Jan Dhan and bank accounts. As if these are enough to help them out in an emergency!

Naturally, the farmers of Punjab are angry and upset with the BJP and its allies, including SAD, and have no confidence in their verbal assurances. The well-established system in which Punjab's farmers have operated all these decades has worked beautifully, with the state government addressing their concerns as and when required. Just recently, my government made necessary amendments in the Punjab APMC Act to provide for setting up of regulated mandis even in the private sector for specific produce, thus ensuring that the private markets do not overweigh the existing, tried and tested procurement and marketing processes. We realised that the private sector mandis could not be given a free run of the farm sector, as that would spell the death knell for the small and marginal farmers. In turn ruining India's agriculture and its food security, which is what the government of India will end up doing with its ill-conceived legislation.

But does the power hungry and greedy BJP-led government care? Evidently, it does not, neither for the farmers, who are out on the roads, nor for the views of the elected representatives in Parliament or of the states who will be the worst affected by these arbitrary and ill-intentioned changes. And it definitely does not care about Punjab, the small but brave state whose contribution to the nation's security, through its food godowns and at the borders, is exemplary. I have warned the central government repeatedly that if there is farmer unrest in any one of the states, it will try to take advantage of the same to foment further trouble in my state, which will do no good to the country's security either. But, quite clearly, they simply do not care.

The writer is Chief Minister of Punjab

NO COUNTRY FOR APPEASEMENT

Tavleen Singh fails to provide examples of institutional discrimination in Modi regime



SHEHZAD POONAWALLA

ASAN Indian Muslim. I strongly disagree with Tavleen Singh's article "No country for Muslims" (E-September 23), where she argues that Muslims have second-class status under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Singh starts by saying, "Everyone charged or arrested so far (by Delhi police in the Delhi riots case) is Muslim". This is factually incorrect. In *Sahil Parvez v Anur* vs Government of NCT of Delhi in July, the Delhi High Court said that the Delhi Police had charged-sheeted 538 Hindus and 513 Muslims in riot cases until then. Media reports have pointed that charge-sheets filed by the Delhi police reveal how a WhatsApp group called "Tattar Hindu Ghar" was started to plan attacks and "intoxicated" Jaishri Ram to identify and kill nine Muslims. This demolishes Singh's claims that the Delhi police was trying to "bunk" a conspiratorial narrative against one community.

Singh claims that ever since PM Modi won his second term, he has "followed an agenda that has the singular purpose of showing Indian Muslims that they are inferior citizens in 'New India'". She fails to provide tangible examples of institutional discrimination by the Modi government. Do Muslims not get access to cylinders under Ujjwala, bank accounts under Jan Dhan or income support under PM Kisan? To substantiate her rhetoric, Singh talks about Tabrez Ansari's lynching but much like her ecosystem, she erases from the discourse lynchings of non-Muslims — the Palghar lynching, the brutal killing of Kamlesh Tewari or Ankit Saxena, killed merely because he was a Hindu in love with a Muslim, and

many other lynchings of non-Muslims.

But surely, Singh can tell us if lynchings, comparable within a decade (which also happened before 2014) can be remotely compared to the deadliest anti-Muslim mass lynchings, the 1969 Ahmedabad riots, 1983 (by Delhi police in the Delhi riots case), 1987 Meerut riots, 1987 Meerut riots, 1992 Mumbai riots? Was PM Modi responsible for them? Sadly, no one ever wrote about how there was "no country for Muslims" under such secular regimes.

On CAA, I wonder if Singh would accuse Gandhi, Nehru and Manmohan Singh alongside Modi for being the architect of what she labels "the most discriminatory law in our history as a modern nation". Manmohan Singh in his 2003 Rajya Sabha speech advocated for a "most liberal" approach to grant citizenship to minorities from neighbouring countries. His government continued with changes in the Citizenship Amendment Rules originally brought in by the NDA that allowed granting citizenship to minority Hindus who came to India during the 1965 and 1971 wars. Today's CAA covers a larger section of non-Muslim minorities, not just Hindus from Pakistan.

Ironically, even as Singh sees the CAA being "weaponised" by Modi against Muslims, Kapil Sibal confessed that the Act will not take away anybody's citizenship during a Rajya Sabha discussion in March. So, was fear being weaponised by some for vote-bank politics? She then shifts the goalpost and is upset by the characterisation of Shaheen Bagh as some sort of "den of jihadi traitors". But if that was really how the Modi govern-

ment viewed it, why would Home Minister Amit Shah be open to having a discussion with them on the CAA within three days of them seeking his appointment formally?

The Shaheen Bagh "movement" was a conglomeration of leaderless, disparate left-behind politics — from the erstwhile Congress to the shoulders of an emotional mobilisation where kids were brainwashed into chanting "Hitler ki maut" for the PM and "dada", who had no real clue of either the CAA or NRC (whose draft nobody has seen), were being goaded to block a public road for months in the name of saving the Constitution. The Supreme Court was hearing challenges to the CAA. The replication of mini Shaheen Baghs across India was laced with religious slogans while claiming to be a secular movement. Many protests in UP, Karnataka turned violent with the alleged involvement of radical groups like the PFI. While Singh remembers what Kapil Mishra and Anurag Thakur said, she has a hard time remembering the statements of Waris Pathan and others, which were as provocative and divisive.

If Singh believes that the abrogation of Article 370, even to instant triple talaq, CAA or peaceful construction of the Ram Mandir after a Supreme Court verdict amount to "no country for Muslims", all can say is that post PM Modi's second term, one thing is clear, India is no country for appeasement and victim card politics anymore.

The writer is a TV news anchor and political analyst

SEPTEMBER 23, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO

IRAN-IRAQ WAR

IRAQI WARPLANES RAIDED Teheran's international airport and eight other air bases and strips in the rest of Iran as three weeks of ground, sea and air hostilities "escalated into a full-scale war" between the two oil giants of the Persian Gulf, Baghdad Radio reported. Iraq had declared war on Iran, a spokesman for the Iraqi embassy in Ankara told AP. Earlier, Turkish news agency Anatolia had issued the same report but quoted no source. Iran downed six Iraqi aircraft as fierce aerial warfare ensued between the two countries, Iran President Abolhasan Bani-Sadr said on Radio Tehran.

SECURITY ORDINANCE

THE PRESIDENT HAS promulgated the national security ordinance to enable the government to detain any person to prevent him from acting against the defence or security of the country. The ordinance also enables the Centre or state governments to detain any person to prevent him/her from acting in any manner prejudicial to the security of the state or the maintenance of public order or supplies and essential services. An official release that the maximum period for detention would be 12 months, but the government could revoke or modify the detention order at any time. The re-

lease said the ordinance contained sufficient safeguards against misuse.

MANIPUR SHOOTOUT

FOUR PERSONS WERE killed, two critically wounded and seven rifles and a light machine-gun were taken away from the Special Security Bureau (SSB) headquarters at Mongsongi during an exchange of fire between the SSB group and underground insurgents, official sources said. They said about 20 insurgents raided the SSB headquarters and opened fire on personnel on duty. Two SSB personnel and one insurgent were killed instantly in the shoot-out.



THE INDIAN EXPRESS, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2020

THE IDEAS PAGE

Putting farmers first

Landmark bills will create an ecosystem to facilitate remunerative prices to farmers through competitive alternative trading channels. Opposition must not spread misinformation



HARDEEP S PURI

IN 1947, AGRICULTURE contributed 50 per cent to the national income and employed more than 70 per cent of the nation's workforce. As of 2019, agriculture contributed 16.5 per cent to the national income while the sector still employs more than 42 per cent of the workforce. The political parties that governed the nation for so long sang paean to farmer welfare while the income levels of farmers stagnated and farmers were driven towards penury, distress and suicides. They only paid lip-service to successive recommendations of panels which argued for opening up the country's agricultural markets. It is deeply unfortunate that when our prime minister has demonstrated the will to implement these long-pending transformative reforms, opposition parties are resorting to misinformation and fear-mongering to score political points.

Indian agriculture has been characterised by fragmentation due to small holding sizes, weather dependence, production uncertainties, huge wastage and market unpredictability. This makes agriculture risky and inefficient with respect to both input and output management. These challenges need to be addressed by way of realising higher productivity, cost-effective production, and efficient monetisation of the produce to increase farmers' income. The Narendra Modi government has taken various steps in this direction, for example, the implementation of the Swaminathan committee's recommendation regarding fixing MSP at least 50 per cent profits on the cost of production, increasing the agri budget by more than 11 times in the past 10 years, establishing e-NAM mandis, an Agriculture Infrastructure Fund of Rs 1 lakh crore under the Amanat Bharat Package, the scheme for the formation of 10,000 FPOs, etc.

The landmark farm bills passed on September 20 will create an ecosystem where farmers and traders enjoy the freedom of choice of sale and purchase of farming produce to facilitate remunerative prices to farmers through competitive alternative trading channels. This will promote barrier-free inter-state and intra-state trade and commerce of farming produce outside the physical premises of markets notified under state agricultural produce marketing legislation. In this way, they will facilitate farmers with more buyers for their produce at their doorstep.

The farm bills also lay the ground of a legal framework for fair and transparent farming agreements between farmers and sponsors. This framework will facilitate greater certainty in quality and price, adoption of quality and grading standards, linkage of farming agreements with insurance and credit instruments to transfer the risk of crop yield unpredictability from the farmer to the sponsor and also enable the farmer to access modern technology and services.

These recommendations have been made several times in the past, including by the Swaminathan Committee, which suggested the removal of the mandi, creation of a single market and facilitating con-



C R Sankar

tract farming.

Even the Congress manifesto in 2019 said that changes in the APMC Act will be made so that all the impediments on the export and inter-state trade of agricultural produce are removed. They had also promised to repeal the Essential Commodities Act and establish farmers' markets, where farmers can sell their produce without any controls.

The Congress manifesto for the Punjab assembly elections too had suggested that the APMC act will be upgraded so that farmers get access to inter-state and international markets; an Agriculture Production Board will be formed, which will be responsible for contract farming/land leasing, and a legislation to regulate farmers' contracts to protect farmers' interests will be enacted.

When all this is being done by the farm bills passed on September 20, the Opposition has resorted to a malicious misinformation campaign suggesting that the bills intend to remove MSP, take away the lands of our farmers and make them slaves to corporations. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The PM and agriculture minister have clarified several times that fixed MSP and government purchase at MSP will continue and that the farm bills are not related to the MSP. In fact, the MSP for paddy has gone up 2.4 times and for wheat 1.7 times in the past five years of our government. These pieces of legislation are only to protect farmers' interests. Farmers will get better prices as no taxes will be levied on the trade of agricultural produce in the trade area as defined in the bills. Also, mandis established under APMC Acts of States will continue to work and these bills don't override state APMC Acts.

In order to ensure that our farmers are not

The PM and agriculture minister have clarified several times that fixed MSP and government purchase at MSP will continue and that the farm bills are not related to the MSP. In fact, the MSP for paddy has gone up 2.4 times and for wheat 1.7 times in the past five years of our government. These pieces of legislation are only to protect farmers' interests. Farmers will get better prices as no taxes will be levied on the trade of agricultural produce in the trade area as defined in the bills. Also, mandis established under APMC Acts of States will continue to work and these bills don't override state APMC Acts.

The writer is a member of the Union Council of Ministers

A Ministry of Happiness

We need a paradigm shift and an effective mechanism to deliver the skill of happiness



SUDHA KUMARI

HAPPINESS ECONOMICS HAS finally received global recognition. It implies that economic indicators such as the gross national product, per capita income, healthcare facility, employment and wealth must be related with national happiness.

The World Happiness Report, 2020 has ranked 156 countries by happiness of their citizens based on six key variables — income, healthy life expectancy, social support, freedom, trust and generosity. Finland, despite not having the highest GDP, tops the list due to its social safety, personal freedom and a work-life balance while materially superior countries are ranked lower. The results mean that growth in happiness is not always accompanied by growth in economic prosperity.

A somewhat similar concept, "The Easterlin paradox", was observed by Richard Easterlin in post-World War II USA. This paradox showed decline in happiness at a very high level of economic growth. One reason for this paradox may be skewed distribution of income and wealth resulting in growing economic inequality accompanying economic growth. These findings give some hope that national happiness can be increased even if material prosperity is not among the highest. If people have a "safety net", they have little to worry about healthcare, education, unemployment or old-age pension. In today's bleak global scenario, both economically and health-

wise, increasing the happiness quotient becomes all the more important.

The term Gross National Happiness was coined in 1979 by Bhutan and was determined by nine domains and four pillars. In 2011, the United Nations recognised the achievement of happiness as a fundamental human goal, and decided to observe March 20 as the International Day of Happiness. Thanks to global surveys, there is now an increasing awareness of this goal. India, Canada, Brazil, the US, UK, UAE, the Philippines and Thailand have undertaken efforts to measure and increase happiness and well-being beyond GDP.

Various states in India have taken up this task in the right earnest and started happiness modelling. The Way to Happiness Foundation International conducts workshops across schools and the Delhi Police. Happiness classes are included in Delhi schools based on the triad for happiness. Gujarat University recently introduced a certificate course in "Happiness Counselling" through meditation, yoga, neurology, social activities, music, food and dance. Madhya Pradesh has set up a happiness department and organised "Happiness Camps" to teach positive outlook towards life. Andhra Pradesh has come up with a "Happiness Index" department to measure development in the state.

We need a paradigm shift together with

an effective mechanism to deliver the skill of happiness. Social and economic tensions need to be addressed for positivity, mental peace and happiness. India has made tremendous progress in economic prosperity and healthcare infrastructure. We now need to focus on social safety networks. A scheme may be framed which allows volunteers to serve old or ailing people and their service hours get deposited in a social service bank account. In return, the volunteers can claim the same number of service hours in their own old age. This can create a wonderful chain of service and make each generation assured of old-age care, thus taking some social burden off the back of the government.

Some more actions are required. While employment of women is necessary for growth in GDP, their safety and dignity is absolutely necessary for social harmony and happiness. Media, movies and market can create awareness towards this social responsibility.

For the safety of life, traffic and cleanliness, all stray animals should be removed from the roads, parks and office buildings. All such stray animals may be looked after by animal-loving people and organisations. Compassion for animals should not mean blocking traffic, roads or parks. For enduring mental peace, litigation needs to be minimised through minimum laws codified in simple language. Delivery of justice has to be

speeded up with decisions in simple language and in the minimum length possible to save the precious time of all.

We see a growth of charitable and religious trusts, flush with funds, proliferating in an unorganised manner. They all claim to be working for all the noble objectives possible under the sun. Still there are deprived people at every nook and corner. These trusts must work in tandem with the government to achieve plan objectives in areas like education, skill centres, hospitals, helping orphans/unemployed/old people, protection of women and environment. Their growth should be allowed only in the areas where it is required. This will contain their mushroom growth in an unorganised manner and will be patched up with peaceful, reconciliatory and efforts to achieve plan objectives through better utilisation of voluntary funds.

Our deeply divided society has to be made more united. We need a Ministry of Happiness with academicians, economists, psychologists and social thinkers to map the road to happiness forever. The quest of humanity for another habitable planet must be patched up with making our own planet happy and liveable.

The writer, an IRS officer, is Principal Commissioner of Income Tax, Delhi

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Members of the Pakistan Hindu Council have emphasised that having a mandir and a crematorium site in Islamabad was an 'essential' requirement which ought not to be politicised."

—THE GUARDIAN

Making sense of the virus

Dealing with COVID-19 will require continuous evidence generation. That's why sero-surveys are important



CHANDRAKANT LAHARIYA

THE WORD "PANDEMIC" has its origin in a Greek word that means, "all people". An effective pandemic response, therefore, has to focus on the entire population. The art and science of promoting, protecting and improving health of the entire population is public health. Epidemiology, another word with Greek roots, means the study of what affects the population — an integral part of public health practice. Expertise in epidemiology is especially useful to prepare and respond to disease conditions, when the causative pathogen and characteristics of the population at risk — who, what, where — are not fully understood.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, the pathogen was not well understood, and understanding evolved continuously. Those who have watched the 2011 movie, Contagion, will recall that the characters played by Kate Winslet and Marion Cotillard were the first to be dispatched to respond to the outbreak. They played the characters of epidemiologists. But in real life, experts in public health and epidemiology are not always the first to be tasked to respond.

One tool of epidemiology is the sero-prevalence survey or sero-survey. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, sero-surveys have been proposed to test the presence of antibodies against SARS-CoV-2 in the general population. These surveys have been conducted in major cities across the world in many states and cities in India. Though there are stated limitations, these surveys provide useful insights on the spread of the infection. Repeat sero-surveys have been proposed to track the changes in trends in new infections and the effect of interventions on the pandemic response.

Three sero-surveys have been completed in Delhi between June and mid-September. In Delhi's last sero-survey, the results of which were announced last week, 33 per cent of the samples tested positive. The survey shows 4 per cent additional population — around 6 per cent of the susceptible population — developed antibodies since the last survey period, nearly 30 days ago. From a baseline of nearly 45.6 lakh people with antibodies in the first round, nearly 12.6 lakh and 78 lakh new people have been infected in the next two periods of 30 days each. In rounds two and three, for every COVID-19 case officially reported, there are 22 unidentified COVID-19 cases. Most of these are likely to have been asymptomatic. A similar ratio of 1:20 has been noted in sero-surveys in other cities as well.

The repeat sero-survey findings provide important insights on the possible role of herd immunity (HI). Many experts have argued that as the susceptible population goes down and the numbers of those with immunity increase, the pandemic would be

over. However, there are two important caveats. One, the detection of antibodies in a sero-survey does not mean immunity. Second, there is no consensus on the appropriate threshold population which should have immunity, threshold herd immunity or THI, before HI comes into action.

From the trends emerging from Delhi's sero-surveys, even with the very optimistic assumption that everyone who has antibodies is protected, for the hypothetical values of THI of 50 per, 60 per cent or 70 per cent, at 6 per cent of the susceptible population getting infected every passing month, these thresholds can be reached by the end of January 2021, April 2021 and September 2021. This too is very optimistic considering, as we go along, the level of personal protection and public health measures are likely to be enhanced, thus increasing the time needed to reach any THI.

Epidemiology also tells us that the concept of HI is more suitable for large and well-controlled geographical areas and populations. It is not very useful for large cities with wide travel and migrant inflows and outflows. Second, the protection is temporary and location specific. For instance, a person living in Delhi may be protected as a result of HI. However, once out of the city, she or he is at risk. Many experts have also argued that the concept is relevant only in case of diseases against which an effective vaccine is available. In any case, at the national level, it will be long before THI is achieved.

Fortunately, with public health and epidemiology tools at the forefront, we are increasingly developing a better understanding of the pandemic. The components of effective response are a mix of following: All individuals continue to follow non-pharmaceutical interventions such as face masks, hand-washing and social distancing; governments scale up public health measures of testing, contact tracing, and isolation (whether at home or in facilities) and engage community members; develop a plan for vaccine deployment to make it accessible at the earliest; once it is available, and strengthen but don't get fixated only on treatment services — they provide information on every 20 detected cases. Effective public health response can reduce the need for treatment services.

Individually, none of these measures offer a complete solution — they are part of the solution. For example, a pandemic response with far greater attention on hospital beds and ventilators and insufficient focus on public health interventions would be akin to sweeping the floor when keeping the tap running and the flood flows. Similarly, even after the vaccine is available, people will need to continue using face masks, washing hands and practising social distancing and resorting to other interventions recommended as per the public health understanding then.

The right combination of these measures can be suggested by experts who rely on continuous evidence generation. That is why the COVID-19 response needs to be guided by experts with skills in epidemiology and public health — that's why sero-surveys and other public-health oriented tools must be persisted with.

The writer is an epidemiologist and public health specialist. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WILFUL BILLS

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Railroading the Bill" (IE, September 22). The BJP-led NDA government's three farm bills indicate more its policies of crony capitalism than the welfare of farmers. If the government is so sure of their usefulness for farmers, why did it not agree for a division of votes or their referring to standing committees? The government's callousness and cunning are evident from the fact that PM is congratulating the farmers for their claim to be working for all the noble objectives possible under the sun. Still there are deprived people at every nook and corner. These trusts must work in tandem with the government to achieve plan objectives in areas like education, skill centres, hospitals, helping orphans/unemployed/old people, protection of women and environment. Their growth should be allowed only in the areas where it is required. This will contain their mushroom growth in an unorganised manner and will be patched up with peaceful, reconciliatory and efforts to achieve plan objectives through better utilisation of voluntary funds.

Tarun Singh, Mohitpur

MEDIA REGULATION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "The wrong answer" (IE, September 22). New media has revolutionised the entire media space. With minimal entry barrier, this medium of mass communication is truly democratic. The inexpensive accessibility to digital media is both its strength and its weakness. It is a force multiplier, and the content published in this media depends entirely on its creator. Self-regulatory mechanisms that are not in the electronic media space will be of no effect. The digital-only content of established media houses, inde-

IDEAS ONLINE

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● KAMALA HARRIS, AN AMERICAN DAUGHTER: RAVIKALIA

● AN ACT OF JUDICIAL STATESMANSHIP: RAHUL NARAYAN

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pendent digital media platforms and individuals with significant followers must be subjected to more rational regulatory standards.

Sudip Kumar Dey, Kolkata

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "The wrong answer" (IE, September 22). The government's unease with digital media is understandable, as content on digital platforms cannot be reined in like legacy media. Among the latter, a majority are mouthpieces of the government. Even if the government is contemplating legislation to control digital media, has it got the where-withal to stand the test of so-called dubious and information?

Deepak Singhal, Chennai

VIEWS

OUR VIEW



India must fix its banks before time runs out

Viral Acharya and Raghuram Rajan have proposed wide-ranging reforms for a sector that's flashing danger signals. A retreat of the state in favour of private participation may be the key

On Tuesday, Parliament amended the banking regulations to place cooperative banks under the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) supervision. A big picture view of the role of banks in financial intermediation, however, would point to the urgency of far more sweeping reforms in this sector. The time for action is now. If it took the threat of a sovereign default for India to pull our economy back from the brink in the early 90s, it is the risk of a bank solvency crisis up ahead that calls for a sectoral shake-up in favour of market orientation today. The public cost of state-dominated banking has already turned unaffordable, and with a post-pandemic spike in bad loans on the cards, we cannot keep re-capitalizing lenders that mis-price risks and fail to make remunerative use of funds put at their disposal by depositors. Many of our banks need to change how they operate. Light on how this could be done has been thrown by two central bankers who have had a bird's eye—perhaps owl's eye—view of all that ails Indian banks. In a research paper co-authored by former RBI deputy governor Viral Acharya and former governor Raghuram Rajan, titled *Indian Banks: A Time to Reform?*, propose a slew of reform measures that could forestall the sector's ailments from acting as a "huge tax on growth". For the sake of India's progress, these deserve top-level attention.

Among their proposals is the setting up of private and national "bad banks" to relieve regular lenders of bad loans. As Acharya and Rajan envision it, private operators could acquire such assets for recovery where state involvement is not necessary, while a national bad bank could take over bad loans in ailing sectors (say, power), until demand revives. A clean-up of bank balance sheets would free up

capital for productive credit allocation. Similar efforts have fallen flat in the past, so doubts may shadow such an exercise. The duo's other major ideas on loan quality, though, should be adopted without hesitation, be it improving the risk-management systems of lenders, the creation of out-of-court mechanisms to settle debts, or the drafting of private expertise to the cause. Stressed businesses and their creditors could indeed arrive at workable resolution plans through talks, and such efforts could be aided by an online platform set up for the sale of distressed assets. If these fail, court insolvency proceedings could kick in.

Once defaults are dealt with, the challenge would be to crisis-proof our banks so that they do not slide right back into danger. The key to this is efficiency in the gathering and allotment of money, which should be done in a way that maximizes value for debtors and creditors alike (depositors included). This depends on risk-informed credit judgements. To that end, work must start right away. Acharya and Rajan propose assuring state-owned banks greater autonomy over decisions. Further, they ask for a gradual withdrawal of the state from the sector, with government ownership reduced to a minority, even as some are fully privatized. State-directed lending may have played a role in India's development, but central control has evidently left state-run banks vulnerable to pressures that result in money simply being lost. Profit-focused lending must prevail over patronage disbursements, something that private shareholders can police. Corporate houses with other businesses, though, would have to be kept out of this sector, given the conflicts of interest they would have. Widely-owned banks would be ideal. So a privatization programme could be calibrated to suit broad investor appetite. The end of state domination may be exactly what our economy needs.

We should review our approach to curbs placed on free speech

It's about time India clearly laid down what constitutes an expression of hatred or act of blasphemy



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The case against *Sudarshan TV*, which had started a programme under the title "UPSC Jhadi", could be a test case for the Supreme Court's approach to free speech. A three-judge bench headed by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud has posed questions to the channel that effectively limit free speech in the media. Just because someone calls it "hate speech", a term yet to be defined by the courts, does it automatically qualify the show for a pre-broadcast ban?

The issue seems to have got muddled by the bench's implication that it could intervene when the offended party is a community rather than an individual. One news report quotes Justice Chandrachud thus: "It was a balance between free speech and the dignity of an individual, we can tell him to go file a civil suit. But here, the balance is to be drawn between free speech and a community." One would have thought that it is the powerless individual who needs protection more than a community. This also appears to contradict a 2017 order of another bench, then headed by former Chief Justice of India Dipak Misra, of which Justice Chandrachud was a part. In that case, the *Vysya* community, which felt slandered in a book by Kanika Ilaiah Shepherd, was told by the bench that there was no case for a ban. So, even a small community got no protection from Ilaiah's free speech

rights in that case. The community involved in the *Sudarshan TV* case is around 200 million strong. A ban on airing the rest of the show's episodes, or a curtailment of the channel editor's right to air content that s/he considers fit, would mean that free speech is subject to arbitrary censorship at the hands of the government or judiciary. If offensive speech is not to be allowed, either it must be more clearly defined so that law enforcement is effective, or it must not constitute a breach of free speech rules.

Unfortunately, India's record on this matter offers little cause for comfort, with both the courts and the executive deciding cases based on who (or which group) is seeking a ban on a specific book, news item, movie or TV show. The merits of the arguments in many of these cases have not always been clear to observers.

India does not have blasphemy laws, but Article 19(2) is so wide-ranging in terms of the executive's ability to curtail free speech that it effectively imposes a sacrilege constraint whenever a community seems willing to take to the streets in protest. This could imply that communities that tend not to restrain blasphemy are at a comparative disadvantage. While some case groups have indeed staged public protests against movies or books, it is rare to see crowds creating a ruckus on the streets in response to, for example, some perceived slight to those revered by the country's majority community. Barbs that hurt religious sentiments do get hurled around in the name of free speech, and the consequences have been terrible in far too many cases, but we still do not have a well-settled way to deal with the problem.

The point is this: We can either have the law curtailing free speech on some clearly defined parameters that apply to all offences of the same nature, no matter who the target may be, or none at all (with only incitement to violence being criminalized).

It would be good if the Supreme Court used the *Sudarshan TV* case to clearly define what constitutes blasphemy or hate speech. This clarity is necessary. The judiciary often makes broad statements on upholding free speech even while clamping down on it on a case-by-case basis. Subjective variation in India's approach to free speech must end.

This may be as good a time as any to rethink Article 19(2), which restricts free speech by giving both the executive and the judiciary endless grounds for shutting up people. This article, introduced by the Nehru government almost as soon as the country had adopted its Constitution in 1950, considers the curtailment of free speech in all the following cases: "Interests of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence." Barring the first two reasons and the last one (the integrity of India, security of state, and incitement to violence), none of the other constraints sound like "reasonable restrictions".

It is worth recalling that even in British India, where free speech was not exactly a calling card for the colonial masters, leaders of the stature of Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar could make sweeping state-responsible for communities without being hauled over the coals for what they said. Both, for example, are on record as having said a few things, though in particular contexts, about some community or another that were uncomplimentary.

Crude generalizations are often made in public discourse, and this has been so for a long time. If some of the words of Gandhi and Ambedkar were to be cases that came up before a bench of the Supreme Court, it's easy to surmise that they might have been asked to excuse their statements because a community is involved.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.

DANIEL PATRICK MOYNIHAN

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

An appropriate way to go about regulating technology

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Last year, I wrote about three core considerations that I believe to be essential for good tech sector regulation. In the first place, I pointed out that regulators should identify the real regulatory objectives behind the laws they are rolling out. I then argued that in the context of technology, it is often far more effective to establish regulatory principles rather than trying to write rules that often only apply to a limited implementation of that technology. Finally, I suggested that the government should not be shy to ask for help at the first instance, calling on experts—technologists, economists, policy analysts and others specialists—to assist in the formulation of policies required to govern the sector.

For years, I've watched the country pass laws unsuited for the technologies they are supposed to govern. Given the rate at which technology evolves, in most instances, by the time the law comes into force, the technology has moved on, bringing a whole host of new issues that the already-outdated law

is incapable of addressing. Since our lawmakers don't fully seem to understand the technologies they are looking to regulate, their regulations are often designed to obfuscate rather than clarify, with the statutes filled with broad definitions that are intended to apply not just to activities within the immediate contemplation of the regulator but any others that might be applicable in the future. This is why our tech sector is hamstrung by restrictive laws and why tech companies function at the mercy of whatever interpretation regulators choose to apply on a given day.

Early last week, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) issued recommendations on the regulation of cloud services in India. It suggested adopting light-touch regulation for cloud service providers and called for the creation of an industry body that would work in close conjunction with the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) and TRAI to come up with an appropriate balance between regulation and the commercial freedom to operate.

Recommendations such as these, which encourage the establishment of self-regulatory organizations (SROs) and give them a meaningful role in the development of regulations for the sector, are welcome. In many

ways, this approach checks the boxes on all three points that I argued were essential to the effective regulation of the tech sector. Since the SRO will have an opportunity to work in conjunction with the sector regulator, it will be able to feed into the regulatory process commercial inputs that will help

develop better rounded regulatory objectives, appropriately taking into account societal and commercial imperatives.

By requiring light-touch regulation, the SRO will be forced to first evolve principles that can then be translated into use-specific regulations. Finally, the suggestion that an industry body composed of organizations operating in the sector should be involved in the formulation of regulations is indicative of the government's desire to lean on the expertise that resides in-demand data portability to the healthcare sector. It is critically important, in my view, to make sure that this powerful infrastructure is kept current and up-to-date. This calls for actively evolving technical

There are heartening signs of inputs being taken from domain experts in tech policy formulation

went down this path, the Personal Data Protection Bill had called for SROs to develop Codes of Practice that would translate the privacy principles into sector-appropriate regulations. If more regulators take this co-regulatory approach to the tech sector, I believe that our laws will be able to address the rapidly evolving domain of technology in a far more agile and responsive manner.

We shouldn't stop there, however. Many of our recent achievements in the digital space owe their success to the proliferation of digital public infrastructure—from India's payments infrastructure that includes the universal payment interface (UPI) and the account aggregator

framework, to the National Digital Health Mission that, once implemented, will bring on-demand data portability to the healthcare sector. It is critically important, in my view, to make sure that this powerful infrastructure is kept current and up-to-date. This calls for actively evolving technical

standards for this infrastructure that can account for the pace of technology evolution as well as respond to market demand for new and more innovative digital products.

Our regulators appear singularly ill-equipped to do this. They have neither the technical expertise to develop new versions of existing frameworks, nor the organizational muscle to keep the current frameworks in good shape. Instead, what they need to do is designate appropriate technical standards organisations (TSOs) as being responsible for devising and continuously evolving standards for our public digital infrastructure. These TSOs will need to be appropriately staffed with persons of suitable technical qualification, drawn as required from our many institutions of higher learning. The standards they recommend should be submitted to the regulator for its consideration, and once approved, these could be made applicable to the relevant sector as a whole.

This will ensure that, in much the same way that SROs develop regulatory frameworks specific to a sector, our regulators get the assistance they need in formulating the technical standards that are critically important to the long-term success of the sector in question.

Data collection could help India tackle its food inflation problem

An app that uses field inputs from farmers to forecast harvest-time prices could help us contain market gluts and shortages



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The recent spike in Indian inflation is a reminder of how food prices are notoriously volatile. From weather and cultivation patterns to consumer tastes and incomes, the drivers of price fluctuations—and their interlinkages—are too vast to be captured in one framework. But an important factor behind these fluctuations are the persistent swings from oversupply to undersupply. Especially in the absence of adequate cold-storage facilities, relatively small changes in supply can have large effects on the prices of perishables.

Why are there such fluctuations in supply? And can something be done to minimize them?

Erratic weather drives a large part of supply fluctuations. However, there is another problem that is illustrated through the Cobweb model, first proposed by the agricultural economist Mordecai Ezekiel in 1938. Its main argument is that farmers have miscalculated expectations. That is, farmers base their expectations of future prices on what they see in the spot markets at the time of sowing. For example, when farmers see high prices of onions, they decide to grow more of these, thus setting the stage for overproduction. It works the other way around as well. The result is a "coordination failure".

A rational expectations junkie might ask, "Do people really have incorrect expectations?" A paper by Meleib Haile, Matthias Kalluh and Muhammed Usman in the *African Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics* suggests so. As they say, as many as half the farmers in their sample, in Ethiopia, form harvest-time price expectations based on current prices. Similar examples exist elsewhere. Price forecasts drive farmers' production decisions. The appropriate intervention, at an abstract level, is then rather obvious—provide farmers with better forecasts. But, can the government really do it? If yes, how? This piece is an attempt towards a specific proposal.

In this era of technology and smartphones, governments can develop the infrastructure to gather real-time data, even if not perfectly accurate, on the area under cultivation for a few important crops, with their expected harvesting dates. One way to do this could be to develop a smartphone app for farmers to enter this information after sowing and get modest monetary incentives for doing so. The mechanism is relatively straightforward. Since not all farmers will make sowing decisions at the same instant, if the app shows that a number of farmers are sowing, say, onions, its price is likely to be low due to oversupply. Therefore, the app could advise farmers who make sowing decisions, even if slightly late, in favour of another crop for a better price. This also insures the early movers, as the farmers who make sowing



decisions later have no incentive to grow onions if too many farmers before them have already done so. We want to emphasize that we are not suggesting a socialist-era relic of centralized production planning. Rather, price forecasts themselves will serve this purpose.

We are not the first ones to suggest the idea of providing farmers such price information. There is extensive literature in economics on this. Several studies have been done. The evidence is mixed. The key difference in our proposal is that we are advocating an intervention at the production stage, whereas most field experiments we are aware of study interventions at the final stage, i.e. around harvest time.

One may call the whole idea far-fetched on three grounds. First, can farmers actually use smartphones to provide such data to the government? Second, can farmers do so easily? And third, do we have algorithms to forecast future prices? These are valid concerns.

On the first, there is a somewhat patronizing tendency of questioning the ability of farmers to use smartphones. With cheap data, these devices have already penetrated deep into the hinterlands. Perhaps we may need to develop apps based in local languages. But, if such an app were to be developed, and if the government could provide modest monetary incentives for people to honestly report what they sowed, it is hard to see why farmers would not comply. Naysayers will ask, "What if people cheat and misreport?" This would be the

most crucial aspect of the design. Possibly, with mechanisms such as random audits and the monitoring of eventual sales, it is possible to prevent malpractices.

The ability of farmers to diversify their crops has been a longstanding challenge. But having reliable forecasts well ahead in time may just prompt them to diversify. Finally, the above two are probably questions to be studied via a field experiment.

On the last concern—the ability to provide reliable forecasts—there has been considerable progress using techniques such as machine learning. Recent advances in time series forecasting and machine learning have led to vast improvements in algorithms that forecast prices. In fact, some also have mechanisms to detect anomalies like hoarding (e.g. a paper by Lovish Madan and co-authors, published in *ACM Compass*). To be fair, we are not aware of algorithms that provide forecasts far out in the future, but they also do not have information on area under cultivation, which we believe is now feasible to obtain, as mentioned before.

Devising a system along the lines of what we have described above can play a meaningful part in reducing the price volatility of farm produce, and offering a policy option to mitigate risks beyond the traditional focus on support prices or forward markets or contract farming. It could also help governments manage the delicate balancing act between protecting the interests of food producers and consumers—a central challenge of Indian political economy.

GUEST VIEW

The economic case for Joe Biden as America's president

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Commentators have offered many reasons why American citizens should vote in November for Joe Biden, the Democratic nominee for US president. Yet the economic dimension of the election has been of little interest to pundits, and few, if any, economists speaking on the subject have bothered to highlight how the outcome bears directly on people's welfare. But the economy is the stage on which people work in the hope of gaining personal development and the satisfaction of success. It is not just about money.

The economic case for Biden begins with the economic case against President Donald Trump. Consider Trump's costly corporate tax cut. It did not deliver anything like the investment and growth he promised, and the main effect was to run up fiscal deficits in the first three years of his presidency.

Trump's disregard of fiscal prudence has set a precedent for unnecessary deficits in future administrations. Of course, the deficit incurred more recently in responding to

the pandemic was unavoidable and, under the circumstances, beneficial.

His habitual threats to American businesses have added new uncertainty to investment and trade decisions. He practises Mussolini's doctrine of corporatism; the government as puppet master pulling the strings of companies. That economic policy inhibits enterprise and innovation at a time when they are desperately needed.

Trump's misguided crusade to reduce a harmless US trade deficit has shrunk world trade, thus worsening the efficiency of resource allocation at home and abroad.

His populist rhetoric has not translated into better pay for less advantaged workers or victims of discrimination. He has sought to erase any sense of economic justice. He seems to care nothing about the appallingly low wage rates for those at the bottom or about the terrible living standards that such wages afford. And he has done nothing to support the eradication of statistical discrimination—racial, gender, and LGBT.

The weakening of Obamacare has heavily affected people with low incomes.

Trump's insistence that climate change is a hoax has put the world economy and the viability of the planet in further danger. He says that the wildfires ravaging the US west

are the result of poor "forest management".

In attacking US institutions from the Federal Bureau of Investigation to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Trump is hollowing out the governmental structure without which the country could not lead to trade wars, he has alienated US citizens. In his admiration for dictators and authoritarian leaders, he is helping to establish 21st-century fascism. And his chronic lying from the Office of the President undermines people's confidence in his government.

There are other outrages too numerous to mention. But one of the most appalling was his effort to eliminate a programme for undocumented aliens who were brought to the US as children, who, after being raised and educated in America, now face deportation. Yet another outrage is his tactic of instilling fear and reprisals and arrest. As a result, there is a growing climate of anxiety and distrust.

Today, a great many people support Biden on these grounds and others. Trump stands

in the way of the nation regaining a sense of flourishing, equity and social harmony. But it is not clear that he could be defeated on these grounds alone. Many Americans dread a government devoted to ministering to a mélange of social groups rather than to core matters of economic growth and job satisfaction.

But there is also a positive argument for supporting Biden.

First, Biden understands that in America, there is still a crushing disparity between the wages of the seriously less-advantaged and those paid to middle-income people—and payments for single mothers do not change that. Biden, having grown up in the steelmaking region of Pennsylvania, can hardly

be blind to the deprivations and pain of low-paid workers. So, if elected, we would have a president responsive to legislative initiatives for subsidies designed to pull up these workers' meagre compensation.

Biden is also attentive to the existential threat of climate change. There is a vast lit-

any of problems, such as the burning of fossil fuels causing increased levels of carbon dioxide and rising temperatures. Addressing these problems will require government intervention and international cooperation, such as that mandated by the 2015 Paris climate agreement, from which Trump withdrew the US. No one can doubt that, if elected, Biden would be eager to play a central role in the resumption of the battle against global warming.

Finally, Americans are living with the virtual stagnation of the economy since the early 1970s (interrupted for about a decade by the Information Revolution). This continuing malaise lies behind wage earners' increased frustration over their relative standing in wage distribution—a sentiment that, more than anything else, accounted for Trump's rise. There can be no question that a President Biden would want to restore the economy to its former glory.

For all these reasons, it is vitally important that (Americans) vote for the Biden-Harris ticket. Trump has gravely weakened the nation's economy, while Biden has shown over his life that he cares about people's chances of prosperity and (leading) lives that are rewarding—of achieving the American Dream.

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MINT CURATOR



Hydrogen fuel is expected to have a less-harmful impact on the climate. AIRBUS

Hydrogen-fuelled planes promise a safer planet

A aerospace giant Airbus has unveiled plans for what it hailed as the first all-electric zero-emission aircraft. It said its hydrogen-fuelled passenger planes could be in service by 2035. Airbus chief executive Guillaume Faury said the three ZEROe concept designs marked "a historic moment" for commercial aviation sector. The use of hydrogen had "the potential to significantly reduce aviation's climate impact", he added. However, analysts point out that it is not the first time that hydrogen has been touted as the saviour of modern air travel. The history of the fuel in aviation goes back to the days of airships in the early 20th Century, but the Hindenburg disaster in 1937 brought that era to an end. More recently, from 2000 to 2002, Airbus was involved in the EU-funded Cryoplane project.

BBC

Refugees allege violations of their human rights

Rohingya refugees allege they are being held against their will in jail-like conditions and subjected to rape and sexual assault on a Bangladeshi island in the Bay of the Bengal. A group of more than 300 refugees were taken to the uninhabited, silt island of Bhasan Char in April, when a boat they were travelling on was intercepted by Bangladeshi authorities. The refugees were attempting to sail from the sprawling camps of Cox's Bazar on the Bangladeshi mainland to Malaysia. Like hundreds of thousands of others, they originally fled to Bangladesh from neighbouring Myanmar, where they faced violence and ethnic cleansing. Bangladeshi authorities said the intercepted refugees were brought to the island as a temporary measure to prevent the spread of coronavirus in the Cox's Bazar camps.

The Guardian

Effects of covid make inequality watchers gasp

Americans' household wealth rebounded last quarter to a record high as the stock market quickly recovered from a pandemic-induced plunge in March. Yet the gains flowed mainly to the most affluent households even as tens of millions of people endured job losses and shrunken incomes. American households' net worth jumped nearly 7% in the April-June quarter to \$19 trillion. The full recovery of wealth even while the economy has regained only about half the jobs lost to the pandemic recession underscores what many economists see as America's widening economic inequality. Data compiled by *Opportunity Insights* show that the highest-paying one-third of jobs have almost fully recovered from the recession, while the lowest-paying one-third of jobs remain 16% below pre-pandemic levels.

AP

A well-known impaired asset that's going cheap

The Auckland Harbour Bridge is "up for sale" just days after it was damaged by a truck that toppled over in the wind. The bridge was damaged on Friday when a truck crashed in quick succession after being tipped by wind gusts of up to 127 km/h. Now an Auckland painter has had enough, deciding to jokingly put the famous bridge "up for sale". The 1,020-metre bridge has no reserve with the starting price set at just \$1. The seller says the bridge has "seen better days" and must be picked up within a week. Auckland Harbour Bridge as is where is. Definitely seen better days, still above water (at the moment)...No buy now price and buyer must pick up within one week of winning the auction." He also stated he would consider swapping the bridge for a kayak, and would welcome offers of a swap for a tunnel.

The New Zealand Herald

An app for smokers who're veterans of quitting

If you're trying to quit smoking, it could pay to acknowledge and accept your cravings rather than avoid them. And downloading a smartphone app that takes that approach could increase your odds of success, according to a study published Monday in *JAMA Internal Medicine*. "The problem is that when you try to avoid what you're feeling and what you're thinking, you paradoxically create more of what you're trying to avoid," said Jonathan Bricker, lead author of the new study and a professor in the cancer prevention program at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. That approach to behavioral change could be beneficial to the more than one in 10 Americans who smoke. One shortcoming of this tech-driven approach, however, is that it requires people trying to quit to have a smartphone.

CNN