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THE EDITORIAL PAGE

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FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

BEYOND BIHAR

Local factors dominate the assembly election, but outcome will have a bearing far beyond the state

AS THE campaign winds down for the first phase of the Bihar assembly polls, it is clear that local issues such as jobs are likely to influence voting behaviour in a big way. That isn't surprising, since assembly elections in recent years have become a referendum on the local government and leaders. However, the outcome in Bihar is likely to resonate beyond the state and even impact the course of national politics, especially the shape of political coalitions, for a variety of reasons.

First, Bihar is the first state to go to polls since the coronavirus pandemic struck earlier this year. The Centre-imposed lockdown saw waves of migrants from the state trudged back to their hometowns and villages from the metros. Two, Bihar marks the beginning of an election season in the first half of 2021. Though the political realities of these states are very different, the Bihar outcome will impact the way political parties strategise and build alliances. Three, the ruling coalition is under strain in Bihar, with three major groups, the JD(U), BJP and BSP, seemingly working at cross-purposes. The results will most likely have a bearing on the NDA, which has, since 2014, become overly dominated by the BJP and dependent on the charisma of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. At the Centre, the Modi government has just one non-BJP minister after one of its oldest allies, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), withdrew its nominee from the Cabinet, before quitting the alliance itself. The JD(U) is the last of the big regional parties left in the NDA, though its relationship with the BJP has been uneasy all through. For instance, the JD(U), which won 16 seats as part of the NDA in the 2019 general election, declined the offer to join the Modi government after the party was refused the ministerial berth it sought. The UP's decision to quit the NDA in Bihar over Nitish Kumar's leadership and seek votes in the name of Modi has injected a dose of distrust into the alliance. The BJP will need to repair relations with the JD(U) to dispel the notion that it doesn't value its allies—a charge that the Shiv Sena and SAD hurled at it while quitting the NDA. Fourth, the BJP, while endorsing Nitish Kumar as the coalition's chief ministerial candidate, is seeking votes in the name of Modi. Inadvertently, the party may be putting to test the prime minister's ability to mobilise votes in a state election.

A win in Bihar would be seen as evidence of Modi's enduring popularity and the BJP party machine's ability to buck incumbency. A favourable result would be a big boost for the Opposition as it strains to be heard in Parliament and outside. The Bihar outcome will have a bearing on battles elsewhere in the coming months.

TRUST IN COMPETITION

Case against Google in US flags important concerns. But any state intervention should be carefully thought through

LAST WEEK, THE US Department of Justice launched an anti-trust suit against tech major Google, accusing the company of abusing its dominant market position and indulging in anti-competitive behaviour. Eleven US states have thus far joined the justice department in its case. The DOJ's move comes after the US House of Representatives had, earlier this month, released a report on big tech companies such as Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple, accusing them of abusing their dominant positions, "setting and often dictating prices and rules for competing entities, advertising, social networking and publishing". Google's dominance in several digital verticals is not debatable. Apart from its near ubiquitous search engine, its operating system, Android, commands a lion's share of the smartphone market. Similarly, its Chrome browser is also widely used. Allegations of the tech giant abusing its dominance to help its other businesses may well have some merit. And there is, indeed, a strong case for government intervention aimed at curbing monopolies, and abuse of market power—in the US, there appears to be near bipartisan support for this move. But this case raises several contentious issues.

For one, while the case focuses on Google as it "is the gateway to the internet and a search advertising behemoth", and notes that "it has maintained its monopoly power through exclusionary practices that harm competition", it bears mentioning that these "monopolies" are not the outcome of government allocated/auctioned licenses as may be the case in telecom, for example. They are driven by network effects. As more and more people board these platforms, the more they grow in strength. This typically leads to market concentration, which has become increasingly common across verticals in the digital/tech space. So while barriers to entry in the conventional sense may not exist, it is rare to find new players entering the market and grab a sizeable market share as it is difficult for multiple networks to coexist. Thus, whether government intervention can achieve hyper-competition in the traditional sense is debatable.

But there are legitimate concerns as well. How should policy ensure that a company is not biased in favour of its own subsidiaries? Will fines act as a deterrent? Would charging access pricing, perhaps adopting the efficient component pricing rule—essentially asking Google to charge its own entities—work? Would facilitating competition in the search space imply having to break up the company? Whatever form the government intervention takes, will it address these competition concerns without making consumers worse off? Ultimately, any policy intervention should be aimed at ensuring competition, not competitors.

RENEGADE RUN

Women across age groups are taking to road races, in the process pulling down a gender barrier

INDIAN WOMEN OF all ages have laced up and hit the tarmacs with gusto. It's a marathon struggle to get started, but the numbers of female road racing competitors in India are increasing exponentially, triggering a silent revolution. Overall marathon registrations has gone up from 30,000 at the start of the century to 2 million over the last 15 years. Of these, 19 per cent—almost 3.8 lakh—are women, making it the most participatory sporting activity for female amateurs. Road races—starting from 5 km runs to county weekend races and going right up to the 42.195 km full-fledged marathon—offer financial incentives in age-group categories. And Indian women, from the Kalimpong hills to rural outskirts of Nashik, are discovering the freedom of uninhibitedly hitting the roads to express their athletic effort.

With marathons mushrooming in every big city, female road runners from Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru are steadily graduating to the longer distance mileage, some even aspiring to ultra-marathons. The battle isn't won at the finishing tape, though. Simply preparing for a road race sees women take time out for themselves from their professional and familial responsibilities and set aside a few hours focusing on their self-growth. A marathon unites the corporate executive and the homemaker. What is most heartening is that these races aren't the stomping ground of solely the teens and the young. Women deep into their 40s and 50s are kick-starting running careers for mental and physical well-being.

Women's sport is breaking its elite confines and the most inclusive of competitive events—the marathon. For the first time, the biggies—London and Boston marathons—are aiming for a 51 per cent female participation, underlined by the pandemic. While the podiums reserved for top 3, there's not one woman who doesn't walk tall (though a tad sole-sore) after completing a 42-km run. Leaving male laggaris and stragglers behind is a mere bonus.



SHYAM SARAN

IT IS STRANGE that the momentous political developments currently unfolding in Pakistan have barely registered here in India. The Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) was formed in September by the leader of the Jamaat Ulema-e-Islam, Fazal-ur-Rehman, but constituted by 11 political parties, representing virtually the country's entire political spectrum. It has brought together the two mainstream but rival political parties, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) led by Bilawal Bhutto and the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) led by the exiled Nawaz Sharif, but currently headed by his daughter Maryam. More significantly, the PDM has also given a national platform to regional parties and provincial leaders from Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, who have been targeted by the Pakistani military for demanding regional autonomy and an end to repression.

This is the first time that the Punjabi heartland was listening to voices from the periphery and connecting with its hitherto marginalised people. This is an important development in itself. The PDM has so far held three massive political rallies, in Pakistani Punjab's Gujranwala on October 18, in Karachi two days later, and in Quetta on October 25. A certain political momentum has been generated and is gathering strength and this could trigger significant changes in the nature of the Pakistani state and how it engages with the outside world, including India.

The political inclusivity that the PDM represents is both its strength and its weakness. It has politically isolated Prime Minister Imran Khan and, therefore, undermined the credibility of his powerful military backers. That he has managed to inspire such disparate parties to come together on the same platform to oppose him, speaks to his incompetence. But in demanding his ouster, the PDM's real target is the powerful military.

In his speech broadcast from London, Nawaz Sharif explicitly accused the Army Chief Qamar Javed Bajwa and the ISI chief Faiz Hameed as responsible for rigging the

Disparate parties come together to take on Pak government. Can coalition overcome its contradictions?

last elections and installing Imran Khan as prime minister. This is a frontal attack on the army and if allowed to snowball, it has the potential of eroding its overpowering influence in the country's politics. In the past, the army has been able to manipulate political parties and leaders, playing off one against the other. If the coalition holds together, this tried-and-tested playbook may not work. But while the PDM has come together to oust Imran Khan, it does not seem to have a game plan for the day after.

How do they propose to bring the military to heel? What kind of federal structure could be put in place to address the deep grievances of smaller provinces and ethnic groups? At what point would the movement consider its mission accomplished and revert to competitive politics, which is the essence of parliamentary democracy? How do the PDM leaders propose to tackle the acute economic crisis that Pakistan is facing, compounded by the pandemic? On all these and other key issues, the disparate nature of the group may preclude even a broad convergence.

The Pakistani Army may believe that given these contradictions within the PDM, it may be best to let it roll on and then dissipate. If that were indeed to happen, then the military would end up even more entrenched than it already is. It is possible that the PDM may continue to gather popular strength and support and this may be seen as an existential threat by the army. It may resort to violent repression and assume power frontally as has happened in the past. This could add to Pakistan's external isolation, particularly if a Democratic administration takes office in Washington. However, China, which has deep and longstanding relations with the Pakistani Army, will continue to provide it political shield and economic support. A weak Pakistani military or one which is forced to return to the barracks does not suit China, even though Pakistani civilian governments have also given priority to the relationship.

As a liberal democracy, India would nor-

mally welcome the emergence of the PDM and its struggle to establish a truly civilian democracy in Pakistan. A diminished political salience of the Pakistani military could only be a positive development from India's point of view. Unfortunately, the PDM leaders had harsh words to say about Prime Minister Narendra Modi and bracketed Imran Khan with him. Imran was accused of complicity in "selling out" Kashmir. Just as Pakistan has been playing in India's domestic politics, so is India on the way to performing a similar role in Pakistani politics. Not long ago, we had marvelled at the fact that in the Pakistani elections in 2013, which brought Nawaz Sharif to power, India was barely a factor in the election campaign. This new dynamic will make it difficult for the two countries to deal with each other as they would any other state based on a cold calculus of interests.

In managing India's relations with other states, one must retain the space for constant calibration and adjustment, particularly when the external environment is in constant flux as it is today. India's neighbourhood first policy must include the means to manage the relationship with Pakistan in order to ensure that it does not become an enduring constraint. If any shift in posture is precluded by domestic political compulsions, the calibration required by foreign policy imperatives becomes impossible.

Despite the fraught state of India-Pakistan relations, we should take a keen interest in the exciting political drama unfolding among "the people next door." Whichever direction the movement takes, whether it fails or succeeds, its impact will reverberate outside its borders, affecting our region and beyond. On balance, its success could open the door to a potentially positive re-engagement. And, perhaps, there is a lesson here for India's own fragmented political opposition, struggling to retain its political relevance in a BJP-dominated universe.

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SAJJAN KUMAR

UNBILITY OF scarcity and primacy of group identities shape Bihar's political context. Here, one cannot talk about development without invoking identity. In popular parlance, the perspectives on material issues emanate from the vantage point of caste and community. Thus, pitting the politics of development against the politics of identity in Bihar would be a case of both cognitive dissonance and analytical failure.

In this backdrop, the fractured electoral narratives we are witnessing in Bihar need to be filtered through the psychologies of various castes and communities. There are certain objective realities that set the background of Bihar's political contestations. One, Bihar voters have minimal expectations from their leadership. The state lacks the kind of competitive welfareism which defines the contours of southern states. Hence, the core support bases of RJD, BJP and JD(U) do not expect something transformative. Two, in a majority of the cases, the preference for material issues are a post-facto justification for *a priori* likes and dislikes of a party leader. That is, Yadavs and Muslims rallying behind the RJD, upper castes supporting BJP or a section of Paswans endorsing UP leader Chirag Paswan, are motivated not by the material issues, but a sense of prevailing affections. Three, Nitish Kumar is facing the challenge of all sections of dominant groups, ranging from upper castes to intermediary castes like Yadavs and Muslims.

When the state is facing the combined

WHO'S AFRAID OF NITISH KUMAR?

In Bihar, a vocal desire for change vs the silence of the Mahadalits and EBCs

There are certain objective realities that set the background of Bihar's political contestations. One, Bihar voters have minimal expectations from their leadership. The state lacks the kind of competitive welfareism which defines the contours of southern states. Hence, the core support bases of RJD, BJP and JD(U) do not expect something transformative. Two, in a majority of the cases, the preference for material issues are a post-facto justification for *a priori* likes and dislikes of a party leader.

It is not the first time that Nitish Kumar is facing a concerted challenge from groups otherwise diametrically opposed to each other. Nor is it on account of his colossal failure on the governance front alone. In 2009, Nitish Kumar attempted to empower the vulnerable groups by implementing the recommendations of the 2007 Vishwamohan Rishi Mohan Commission to identify the Mahadalits; the 2008 Udaykanti Chaudhary Commission to identify and outline provisions for the EBCs; and the D Bandopadhyay Commission on land reforms. He hoped to introduce a series of developmental measures that would improve the conditions of the sections. But these pronouncements, in the aftermath of the May 2009 Lok Sabha

elections, proved controversial. The RJD and UP, along with a section of BJP's upper caste leadership, projected them as politically motivated. This affected the voting pattern in by-polls held in September 2009, with the JD(U)-BJP winning just five of 18 seats. Expectedly, Nitish Kumar had to dilute the provisions pertaining to the EBCs and Mahadalits, while he rejected the recommendations on land reforms to appease the dominant castes.

Now, when we see caste and community-centric parties like RJD and UP, with an alleged understanding with a section of the state BJP leadership, peddling a developmental narrative, the gap between their speech and actions are colossal. For instance, Rajeshwari Yadav is as much concerned about consolidating the Yadav support base by preferring CP(ML) as he is careful about denying space to Karhiya Kumar, the young CPJ leader, partly on caste considerations. Chirag Paswan is fielding a large number of upper-caste candidates against JD(U) to cut into the incumbent's support base. In a nutshell, the dominant group-like Yadavs and a section of upper castes are enthused with the vague possibility of dislodging Nitish Kumar. What sustains Nitish Kumar is the silence of his core support base, the EBCs, Mahadalits and Kurnis and a section of women who aren't vocal. In the meantime, all we hear is the restlessness of the dominant castes.

Sajjan Kumar is a political analyst, associated with People's Pulse

OCTOBER 27, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO



ZAIL SINGH ON SHEIKH UNION HOME MINISTER Zail Singh said the Centre has no plan to topple any non-Congress (I) state government. In an exclusive interview, he said it was in the interest of the country that all states have stable governments. On recent statements of Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Sheikh Abdullah, accusing the Centre of planning to topple his government, Singh pointed out that non-Congress (I) state must understand that they cannot use authority to crush opposition. It was their duty to allow the opposition to function normally. Asked to comment on Sheikh Abdullah's statement that the Centre

is weak, Singh said the Centre was not weak but "gentle though firm and strong".

ASSAM BANDH THE ASSAM GOVERNMENT has ordered troops to be sent to render any assistance in view of the statewide bandh called by the AASU and AACSP to start a new phase of agitation against foreign nationals. According to Chief Secretary Ramesh Chandra, district authorities have been directed to provide police protection to MLAs from Tuesday in face of threat by agitators to ghetto them. Force might be used to maintain law and order if the need arose.

LAWYERS' UPROAR A PROPOSAL to switch to a new presidential form of government provoked angry scenes at a session of the All-India Conference of Lawyers in Delhi. Several members protested against a report, which had recommended the same, alleging it did not represent the views of all delegates.

MISSILE KILLS 100 OVER 100 bodies have been recovered in Dezfoul and many more are still buried under houses destroyed by an Iraqi rocket attack on the West Iranian city, its member of parliament Ahmad Zarhama said in Tehran.

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THE IDEAS PAGE

A poll-proof relationship

The 2+2 dialogue comes in the backdrop of a structural shift in great power politics and turbulence in the global economic order. Incentives to advance India-US partnership are stronger than ever before



RAJA MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

COMING AMIDST CHINA's continuing aggression on the Ladakh frontier, the 2+2 dialogue between the defence and foreign ministers of India and the United States in Delhi this week marks an important moment in bilateral relations. It also takes place amidst a profound structural shift in great power politics as well as turbulence in the international economic order intensified by the coronavirus pandemic.

The four ministers, Rajnath Singh and Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Mike Pompeo and Mark Esper, would want to reflect on and consolidate the wide-ranging progress of the strategic partnership in the last four years. They should also set the stage for the elevation of the partnership to a higher level under the next administration, whether headed by Donald Trump or Joe Biden.

The 2+2 dialogue comes just three weeks after the foreign ministers of the Quad — or the Quadrilateral Security Framework — met in Tokyo. The dialogue follows India's first-ever participation, earlier this month, in a meeting of the exclusive Five Eyes grouping that facilitates intelligence-sharing among the US, Canada, UK, Australia and New Zealand. The Five Eyes meeting in Tokyo was about addressing the tension between the imperatives of law enforcement and the encryption policies of technology companies like Apple and Facebook. A few days ago, Delhi announced the much-awaited expansion of the annual Malabar exercises with the US and Japan to include Australia.

This is not the first time we are seeing an acceleration of the engagement between Delhi and Washington. There was a similar moment in the UPA era; but Delhi's self-doubt and political timidity let the opportunity slip. Recall, for a moment, the few weeks in the spring and summer of 2005.

In March, the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice came to Delhi to explore the outlines of the historic civil nuclear initiative that would end India's prolonged atomic isolation in the world and a broader framework for security cooperation. The visits to Washington by Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee in June and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in July saw the translation of those ideas into concrete frameworks.

Delhi, however, made heavy weather of that extraordinary moment, thanks to the deep divisions within the national security establishment, the Congress leadership and the UPA coalition. In fact, the coalition broke up when the Left parties withdrew support citing opposition to the deepening strategic partnership with the US. The Congress leadership, which was desperate to avoid the rupture with the Left, was prepared to abandon the new possibilities with the US. It was Manmohan Singh's threat to resign that rescued the civil nuclear deal.

The UPA returned to power without the Left, but with little political enthusiasm for deepening ties with the US. The focus was on keeping visible distance from the US in the

name of non-alignment, strategic autonomy, and the quest for a multipolar world. The relationship survived those years, thanks to the US's perseverance.

There is one similarity and many differences when we compare the current moment in India-US relations with that during the UPA years. When Manmohan Singh got the green light from the Congress leadership to wrap up the nuclear deal, there was a rush at the end of 2008 to complete a whole range of formalities in the waning moments of the George W Bush presidency.

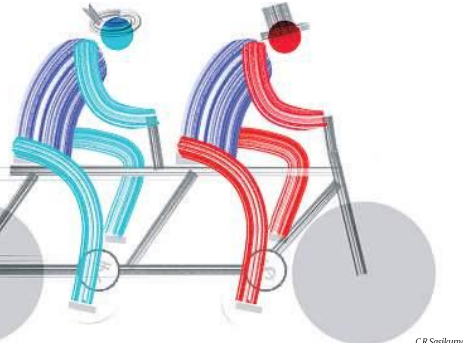
Unlike Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi does not have to deal with backseat driving from the party. Like Manmohan Singh, Modi sees the advantages of building a strong partnership and has been able to advance it at a much faster and deliberate pace than in the UPA years. The quickening diplomatic dance of the last few weeks is also a consequence of the special circumstances that confront India and the US today.

That brings to the three differences that stand out. First is the huge military crisis on the northern borders with China that is well into the sixth month. During the UPA years, Delhi avoided closer security ties with the US in deference to Beijing's sensitivities. In contrast, the Modi government has refused to cede a veto to China over its policy on security cooperation with the US — whether bilateral or in multilateral formats such as the Quad.

Second is the pandemic. The coronavirus has sharpened the US debate on the dangers of excessive economic interdependence on China. Meanwhile, Delhi has begun to reduce its commercial ties to Beijing in response to the PLA's Ladakh aggression. This has created the conditions for a new conversation between India and the US on rearranging global supply chains away from China in the so-called Quad Plus conversations that have variously drawn in Brazil, Israel, New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam.

Although Delhi and Washington continue to have many differences over bilateral trade, they both see the need for rethinking the current global economic institutions that China has bent to its own advantage.

Third is the focus on critical technologies like artificial intelligence that promise to transform most aspects of modern life — including security, political economy and social order.



C R Sasikumar

Two decades ago, Delhi and Washington focused on resolving the legacy issues surrounding the mid-20th century technologies relating to nuclear weapons and missiles.

Thanks to the civil nuclear initiative, those issues are behind us. Delhi and Washington are now focused on finding ways to collaborate on the critical technologies of the 21st century and work with their partners in setting new global rules for managing them.

Questions have been raised about the merits of holding the current round of engagement in the last weeks of the Trump Administration's current tenure. An American president is elected for a full four-year term, and he has the power to advance on a broad range of issues until the last day in office.

The real question is not about the calendar, but the extent of bipartisan political support that India enjoys. To be sure, there are many issues of contention amidst the current sharp polarisation between the Republicans and Democrats. But the US strategic partnership with India is not one of them. If Joe Biden wins the election, there will certainly be some new issues and new possibilities.

The overarching framework that has emerged across different administrations in the last two decades helps manage potential difficulties and take advantage of new opportunities. Recall, for example, that Senator Barack Obama was among the critics of the India-US nuclear deal but had no hesitation advancing its implementation when he became the president in 2009.

Modi and his advisers have dealt with the Obama-Biden team during 2014-16 and are well placed to deal with a Democratic victory. But, for now, and until the third week of January 2021, Trump's current team is in charge. Delhi needs to stay fully engaged with it.

Both Delhi and Washington have benefited much from the recent political investments in the relationship. As the regional and global order faces multiple transitions, the incentives for Delhi and Washington to sustain and advance India-US partnership are stronger than ever before and will continue into the next administration.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The final verdict is that the longer the pandemic continues, the more difficult it becomes for the government to treat it as a temporary, though immense, problem. The reality is that the pandemic is reshaping everything."

— THE GUARDIAN

Book of Unfreedom

The movement against 'Manusmriti' must be robustly feminist and unconditionally assert women's autonomy



KAVITA KRISHNAN

IN A WEBINAR on "Periyar and feminism", Thol. Thirumavalavan, president of the Viduthalaai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), quoted Periyar on the Manusmriti, to say that the "Manu Dharma" demeans women, holding them to be prostitutes by nature. In her newfound avatar as a BJP acolyte, actor Khushbu Sundar claimed Thirumavalavan's words insulted women. On cue, a case was filed against the VCK leader in Chennai.

It is the Manusmriti that insults women: Thirumavalavan merely quoted from it. What Khushbu and her party know, but cannot admit, is that they are outraged on behalf of the Manusmriti and not on behalf of women. That is why Khushbu claims that the Manusmriti has "not a single word that demeans women."

At public functions in India, it is common to hear people sentimentally cite the Manusmriti to say, "The deities delight in places where women are revered, but where women are not revered all rites are fruitless" (*The Laws of Manu*, 3:58, Doniger and Smith, Penguin Books, 1991). The same Manusmriti says, "It is the very nature of women to corrupt men here on earth; for that reason, circumspect men do not get careless and wanton among wanton women." The idea of women as sexual temptresses, corrupters or gateways to hell is not unique to Manu. The Christian, Islamic and Buddhist texts also warn against women, portraying them as sexually promiscuous, secretive, shy and out to entrap men.

Saying that the Manusmriti "treats women as prostitutes" is misleading. Such a description of the Manusmriti implies that the harm it causes is because it refers to women as sexually "loose" and, thus, insults women. But, in fact, the harm of the Manusmriti lies in its prescriptions of tight control of women's autonomy. Manu says, "A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in (her own) house. In childhood, a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons."

Our critique of the Manusmriti should take care to challenge rather than reinforce the notion that the worst thing one can say of a woman is that she is sexually "loose" or a "prostitute". It is important to recognise that the harm of the Manusmriti lies not in the fact that it asks us to treat women as "prostitutes", but that it asks us to treat women as daughters, wives, mothers who must be tightly controlled by fathers, husbands and sons. In fact, Manu encourages us to see this control as "reverence" and "protection" rather than as repression and oppression.

This obsessive control over women is

needed to prevent a breakdown of caste hierarchies and caste apartheid. The Manusmriti lays down the law that a woman who makes love to a man of a higher caste incurs no punishment; a woman who makes love to a man of a "lower" caste than hers must be isolated and kept in confinement. If a man from a subordinate caste makes love to a woman of the highest caste, he must be put to death.

But, some ask, does anyone really read the Manusmriti in India, let alone obey it? The facts show that the spirit of Manu's laws continue to inform and shape modern society, as well as modern politics in India. The National Family Health survey 2015-16 (NFHS-4) found that just 41 per cent of Indian women aged between 15 and 49 are allowed to go alone to the market, to the health centre, and outside the community (NFHS-4, table 15.13). Startlingly, 40 per cent of "what is classified as rape... is actually past criminalisation of consensual sexual relationships, often when it comes to inter-caste and inter-religious couples" (Rukmini S., *The many shades of rape cases in Delhi*, The Hindu, July 28, 2014).

In caste lies the key to understanding India's obsession with controlling and curbing women's autonomy — and in the Manusmriti lies the key to understanding the codes of caste and gender that are hardwired into our societies and selves. In every household where women are surveilled, their movements restricted; in every opposition to inter-caste, inter-faith marriages; in every attack on Dalits' villages after a Dalit man has married a non-Dalit woman, in the Sangh's campaign to brand love between Hindu women and Muslim men as "love jihad" — it is the Manusmriti that you see in action.

Today, Khushbu Sundar on behalf of the BJP is leading the push at attacking Thirumavalavan for his remarks on the Manusmriti, which they construe as an insult to Indian womanhood. In 2005, Khushbu herself had been at the receiving end of similar patriarchal moral outrage. She had remained silent when Manu's law was as cool as long as it was safe sex — for this, 22 cases were filed against her accusing her of "defaming Tamil womanhood and chastity". The attack on Khushbu was led by the Pattali Mahal Kanchi (PMK), a party now known for its violent campaign against marriages between Dalit men and women of intermediate castes. And at the time, Thol. Thirumavalavan and his organisation, too, had joined the fray, with Thirumavalavan saying that her remarks were "against public order". It would strengthen the movement against the Manusmriti today, if he were to acknowledge how his 2005 remarks reinforced the same Brahmin patriarchal notions of female purity and chastity that he, and we, are upholding.

One cannot be a feminist in India if you are not fighting the Manusmriti — and one cannot fight the Manusmriti without being robustly feminist, and asserting women's unconditional autonomy.

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RISHIKESH BS

Make board exams irrelevant

NEP 2020 has the answer to the question of impossibly high cut-offs

WHEN DELHI UNIVERSITY announced the first list of admission into undergraduate programmes in its 90 colleges earlier this month, the cut-offs reached 100 per cent mark in some courses offered by a few colleges. But this is neither surprising nor unexpected. According to the most recent All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE 2018-19), Delhi's gross enrolment ratio (GER) is 46.3 per cent (the national GER is 26.3 per cent). This means that almost every second youth in Delhi between the age of 18 and 23 is enrolled in a higher education programme. But the aspirations of Delhi's youth are not met by adequate high-quality Higher Education Institutions (HEIs, including universities and standalone institutions), leading to unreasonably high cut-offs. In some HEIs, for courses such as computer science or English literature, the cutoff is in the high 90s, even for aspirants from socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

What we have been seeing in Delhi for more than a decade is also seen in a few other states, where the GER is close to 50 per cent. Today, it is a handful of states, and tomorrow it will be the entire country. According to India's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030 and the National Education Policy 2020 target, we are aiming to ensure 100 per cent enrolment across our school stages, from pre-primary to the secondary stage. As we move towards this

target, there will be a further rise in applications for higher education programmes for which the NEP 2020 has set a target of 50 per cent by 2035, which would mean an additional 35 million seats to be created in HEIs across the country. If the cut-off marks are already at unreasonable levels, we can imagine the scenario with a doubling of prospective students. Unless something transformative is done, we are headed towards a rise in the number of unemployed graduates (due to poor quality education) and a generation of disenfranchised youth (due to the systemic failure in equipping them with required skill sets).

We have nearly 1,000 universities and almost 40,000 colleges spread across the country. Many of the universities affiliate more than 1,000 colleges. If such large affiliations indicate the unreasonable number of colleges that universities are trying to manage, 16.3 per cent of the colleges have an enrolment of fewer than 100 students.

NEP 2020 recommends moving into a higher education ecosystem that consists of large multi-disciplinary HEIs, offering undergraduate and graduate programmes, one in every or nearly every district, in the country. These will be multi-disciplinary universities and colleges; with the latter moving away from affiliation into a degree-granting HEI or a constituent college of the university. Each such institute will aim to have 3,000 or more

students. Currently, only 4 per cent colleges have an enrolment over 3,000. By modelling this across the higher education ecosystem, not only will access improve, but it will also make HEIs viable, with all resources in place as is seen in most parts of the developed world. With only half the number of HEIs that currently exist, we will be able to provide access to 70 million students expected in higher education once the country reaches a GER of 50 per cent. This will also allow for closing down of thousands of poor quality HEIs, which snare unsuspecting students, leading to a large number of non-entrepreneurial, unskilled and unemployable graduates.

For the problem of unreasonable cut-offs to be rooted out, the assessment reforms that NEP envisages, for both school-leaving and higher education entrance, is critical. Both of these reforms have to take place simultaneously. In the last decade, when the CBSE experimented on a progressive reform by making Class X board exams optional, very few parents allowed their wards to take that option. Until the school and higher education system are aligned to ensure a paradigm shift, students, parents and the entire country will continue to operate in this vicious cycle.

Using school-leaving marks to create cut-offs is a lazy option employed by the HEIs to reduce the number of applicants, before launching their admission process. School

percentages are not good markers of an individual's readiness to do higher education — and given the serious drawbacks of standardised assessments in our board exams, it is best to get rid of them at the earliest. Instead, the school-leaving certificates will have to be based on an array of assessments, including a student's performance across the secondary level — Classes IX to XII. They will factor in class assignments and tests, leading to the development of students' portfolios. Post that, admission to higher education is an entirely different set of activities. It may use the portfolio of school assessments as the base, but the admission process ought to assess whether the prospective student has developed the attributes for pursuing higher education.

NEP 2020 envisages assessment reform at the school level, which would make the board exams redundant, and also a common entrance for the liberal arts-based higher education system, which only assesses an applicant's preparedness to pursue a university education. We need to usher in these reforms at the earliest. If not, the country is at the risk of generating graduates in tens of millions, who will neither have the capacity to generate employment for themselves nor the capability to be employed anywhere.

The writer is associate professor, Azim Premji University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NOT A PAWN

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The China factor' (IE, October 26). Viewing the India-China equation through the prism of the US president's personality could be misleading. China has challenged the US for the world leadership and a US president is bound to deploy all the weapons available to him in thwarting China. India, by virtue of its geographical location, size, market and military strength, is an ideal weapon for the US in this contest. India needs peace for the next 20 years to achieve her national objectives and must never lose sight of it while playing the American game on China.

Bhushada, via email

REGAIN CREDIBILITY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Central's Bureau' (IE, October 24). Maharashtra is the fifth state to withdraw general consent for CBI operations within its territory, after the central agency took over a Lucknow police FIR to investigate alleged BJP manipulation by TV channels when Mumbai police was already probing the matter. CBI should work independently without any interference from the political class. This will help in maintaining its credibility and accountability and curtail crime in a neutral manner.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

NOT MEDIA

THIS REFERS TO the editorial,

IDEAS ONLINE

● DECONSTRUCTING THE DECLINE
MILIND SOHONI, NIKHIL TIKEKAR, ALAKHYA DESHMUKH

● DEEP FROM STUBBLE: WALK GUPTA AND K KRISHNAN

www.indianexpress.com

"Reporting the news" (IE, October 26). That the Mumbai Police appears deeply politicised by framing charges against Republic TV is without question. But is the media not politicised too? Channels which call for public trials, label students anti-national and equivocate on lynchings and crimes against Dalits and women have helped destroy many an institution, not least the media. They should not be arrested or prosecuted for their political statements, which often barely lift with facts. In the selective democracy that we are becoming, they are free to do so. But let's not casten journalists and cite a defence of the press in their defence.

Shantanu Ray, Meert



The shade of grey

Pakistan has little option but to complete its FATF mandated tasks in the next four months

The decision by the Paris-based watchdog, the Financial Action Task Force, last week to retain Pakistan on its greylist has clearly disappointed the Imran Khan government. His cabinet had projected confidence that the country would be taken off the greylist – monitored jurisdictions on terror financing and money laundering activities – having been cleared on 21 of the 27 mandated action points. Pakistan will now face international strictures on its markets and on its ability to procure loans until the next FATF plenary in February 2021, by which time it is expected to complete the six pending issues. A bigger problem for Islamabad was that Turkey was the only other country in the 39-member FATF to push for Pakistan to be let off, by making a suggestion that the last six points be cleared by an ‘on-site’ visit by an FATF team. The proposal was dropped when even other traditional backers of Pakistan such as China, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia did not support it. Clearly, Pakistan has little option but to complete its tasks in the next four months, which include: more action against UNSC-banned terrorists and terror groups, action against charitable organisations (Non-Profits) linked to these banned entities, tracing fugitive terrorists and pursuing convictions against them, revising the list of banned entities under the Anti-Terrorism Act to reflect all those banned by the UNSC, and cracking down on other channels of terror financing through narcotics and smuggling.

For those in New Delhi watching the outcome of the FATF decision, there are some broader dividends to consider from this process. To begin with, the fact that the FATF has retained Pakistan on the greylist for the third time this year, but not automatically downgraded it to the blacklist (with Iran and North Korea) when its deadline for action ended in September 2019, has ensured the pressure has continued to make Pakistan accountable on terror. The Khan government has been forced to make a real legislative push to bring Pakistani anti-terror laws in line with international standards, while, at least for the interim, also ensuring sufficient pressure on groups such as the LeT and the Jem that target India, to refrain from public comments and publicly raising funds. Meanwhile, Pakistan’s support to the U.S.-led Afghan process and talks with the Taliban are crucial to the peace process, and the FATF process has made Islamabad more amenable to helping Afghanistan. It remains to be seen if the actions it takes will permanently change Pakistan’s course in supporting and sheltering cross-border terror groups. India’s eventual goal is not just in stopping attacks by these groups, but for Pakistan to fully dismantle the infrastructure of terror in the understanding that it is in Pakistan’s own interests to do so. It is hoped that the prolonged FATF process will enable this realisation in Islamabad.

Clearing the air

Trump’s criticism may be gratuitous, but India’s air quality needs urgent attention

President Donald Trump’s scathing description of India’s air as ‘filthy’ may have come as an embarrassment for the government, but it has not provoked a fierce nationalist backlash in response to a foreign leader’s insult. Looking at the worsening pollution in northern parts of the country, triggered by stubble burning and later the Dussehra festivities, even Mr. Trump’s critics found no cause to pick up, while others readily agreed with him. The U.S. President’s remarks are, of course, gratuitous, considering that he has spent time dismantling many environmental regulations, including those relating to pollution and emissions from coal plants and automobiles, his criticism of India and China is also incongruent as they have pledged to implement the Paris Agreement while Mr. Trump has pulled the U.S. out of the pact. Unfortunately, mere resolve cannot raise India’s stature. Sensors of the Central and State Pollution Control Boards and other private stations across the north currently show PM_{2.5} or fine particulate matter levels, in the very unhealthy or even hazardous band. There is mounting concern about the health impacts, but the Centre has so far attempted to brazen it out by denying any confirmed link between bad air quality and a shorter lifespan. Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar last year said no Indian study on such a correlation was available. That view has been challenged, and WHO expressed worry about the situation. There is the added dimension of COVID-19 infection today, with the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health contending that a microprogramme rise in PM_{2.5} is associated with an 8% increase in the death rate due to the novel coronavirus, based on long-term exposure data in the U.S.

India is seeking to address its chronic air quality crisis partly by raising emission standards and fuels. The country adopted the BS-VI fuel standard earlier this year, potentially lowering vehicular pollution, although the national air quality standard for annual average PM_{2.5} is 40 mcg per cubic metre, which is four times the WHO limit. It took the COVID lockdown to let people experience clean air once again, with the conspicuous absence of vehicles. The unlock phase has reversed the ephemeral experience, as the burning of vehicular fuels has reverted to pre-lockdown levels, with no significant transition to green mobility, such as bicycle use, in urban centres. Continued burning of crop stubble in Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh shows that the central sector scheme providing remedies in the form of farm mechanisation and management alternatives needs fresh impetus. No more time can be lost in addressing the crisis of foul air, as the country prepares to hasten with development in a post-COVID-19 era.

The President who called a spade a spade

K.R. Narayanan was creative in upholding institutional obligations of an office and preserving the republic’s equilibrium



HARISH KHARE

This October 27, K.R. Narayanan would have been 100 years old. But no one would perform any rites of remembrance. Another day and another time, Narayanan would have been showcased as a prime success story of an India that made one and all ‘meritorious’ Indians believe that they could find a place under the constitutional sun. A man from an ordinary, humble background could get inducted into the elite Indian Foreign Service – all that counted was his calibre and competence. He had no grandfather or a clan to speak up for him.

Example of an inclusive India
And that K.R. Narayanan would hear the call of public office, get elected to the Lok Sabha, become the Vice-President of India and preside over the Rajya Sabha, and, then, go on to occupy the Rashtrapati Bhavan, told the tale of a Nehruvian India where all that mattered was the requisite temperament and character. India that take pride that it was an open system, a democratic arrangement, and a society committed to an egalitarian social order – and was comfortable with excellence and accomplishment.

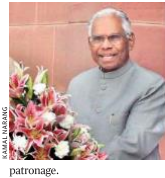
In the process, K.R. Narayanan became a prime example of an inclusive India. He had the distinction of being the first Dalit President of India. His elevation to the Rashtrapati Bhavan had more than

a token significance; and, even though the new, aggressive Ambekarites may not think much of him, his election as President did announce the arrival of a new social assertion. It needs to be kept in mind that he was the presidential choice of the United Front coalition, a political dispensation that sincerely believed that if India had to progress and become a great nation, then it must be a country for all Indians, from all strata, unimpeded with competitive parochialism.

In his long innings of public service, K.R. Narayanan conducted himself as a modern man, well-tutored in scientific temper; he became an Indian public figure when as Vice-President, he shook hands with an HIV-infected person, whereas the self-proclaimed charismatic saviours were shying away making the gesture. He was up to the world’s chancelleries because of his immense faith in the nobility of the great democratic experiment under way in the country he represented. However, it was as the President that K.R. Narayanan repaid his debt to the republic. Circumstances demanded that he creatively explored the potential of the office, and he tried to be a responsible custodian of the Constitution.

Reining in Governors

In the process, he became the protector of constitutional morality, the most cherished republican virtue. Most gratifyingly, he twice used his position to rein in errant Governors, even though they had the ruling establishment’s



patronage.

First, it was Romesh Bhandari at the Lucknow Raj Bhavan, who fell afoul of President Narayanan’s sense of constitutional fairness. Within months of taking over as the President, Narayanan stood up to the United Front political bosses and would not go along with the L.K. Gajral cabinet’s preference to invoke Article 356 to get rid of the Bahujan Singh Government in Uttar Pradesh. In his memoirs, *Matters of Discretion: An Autobiography*, Gajral himself notes that the President firmly reminded him of the *Bommai* judgment and the Sarkaria Commission recommendations.

The second time President Narayanan ticked off a Governor’s conduct was in July 2001 when the Tamil Nadu Governor, K. Ramakrishnaiah, dismissed the Chief Minister Jayalalitha. It was President Narayanan who suggested to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to demand a report from Tamil Nadu Governor

M. Fathima Beevi. A presidential rebuke was implicit in the Kashtrapati Bhavan suggestion; soon, the Governor was recalled.

In both these instances, the Governors had allowed the Raj Bhavan to be used to give respectability to shabby political calculations. Not on his presidential watch, insisted Narayanan.

Speaking his mind

The Indian Constitution does not envisage the President of India to be a power centre, leave alone set himself up as a rival power centre (to the Prime Minister). Yet, there is always considerable wiggle room for a President to have his presence felt.

After his 1999 Lok Sabha victory, the BJP crowd thought that it had earned a licence to make amendments to the Constitution. There was even a commission to review the ‘working’ of the Constitution.

K.R. Narayanan used the prestige and the pulpit of his office to warn the nation of inherent danger to the Constitution from small minds, strutting around with an over-inflated sense of self importance.

And, a few months later, K.R. Narayanan again made his presence felt during U.S. President Bill Clinton’s visit to India. At the Rashtrapati Bhavan banquet for the visiting American, President Narayanan horrified the ministerial posse by reminding everyone

of non-alignment as an instrument of Indian foreign policy in pursuit of autonomy and independence. That was the time when the Vajpayee government was doing all it could to cosy up to the Americans. The ruling coterie was not amused; it thought the President had gone off the reservation. Yet, it was a battle that the ruling politicians lost in the face of a resolute presidential rectitude.

President Narayanan, also, had a sense of political moment. In 1999, when A.B. Vajpayee lost the vote of confidence by a solitary vote, and, when an alternative government had to be formed, he tried to nudge the non-BJP forces to suggest the possibility of the West Bengal Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, becoming a prime ministerial choice. The upper caste Congress leaders, led by M.L. Fotedar and Pranab Mukherjee, were dead set against the idea of a ‘communist’ becoming prime minister. Had President Narayanan’s hint been taken up, there would have been no second term for A.B. Vajpayee, and there would have been no ‘Gujarat, 2002’ and no Narendra Modi.

As the President, Narayanan was nobody’s man. A President need not be anybody’s man or woman. The Constitution thrives on a dynamic interlocking institutional balance. Narayanan’s duty was to perform, for his *dharma* ends up in furthering the health of the entire Republic. Narayanan demonstrated how it was possible to be brilliantly creative in upholding the institutional obligations of an office – and, preserve the republic’s equilibrium.

Harish Khare is a senior journalist based in Delhi

Contesting neighbours, revised geopolitical playbooks

The engagement by India and China in the West Asia region is a good example of their metamorphosing approaches



KABIR TANEJA

The year 2020 has been a watershed moment for relations between India and China following the most serious clashes between the two countries in the Galwan region of Ladakh since the 1962 war; relations between New Delhi and Beijing are at new lows. These events have had a cascading effect on the very thought process of foreign policy, not just for New Delhi with regard to its neighbourhood but also Beijing’s understanding of its own threat perceptions as well.

What dictates alignment now
Strategic autonomy is today a term since 2014 with the coming of the Narendra Modi government. As the powerful and oil-rich Gulf states looked for investment alternatives away from the West to deepen their own strategic depth, persuaded by Mr. Modi’s centralised decision-making style, India doubled down on its relations with the likes of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, giving up open economic and political preference to the larger Gulf region. While engagements with Israel moved steadily forward, Iran

ing in West Asia, and the ethos of equitable engagement with the three poles of power in Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel, without stepping into the entanglements of the region’s multi-layered conflicts and political fissures. These were the commonalities in thinking that at one point, against the odds, were made to construct an ‘importers’ OPEC’ in order to put forward the interests of major oil importers, mostly developing Asian economies, against the present cartel. However, the year 2020 and the tectonic geopolitical shifts it has brought in its wake, from deteriorating U.S.-China ties, to the COVID-19 pandemic that started in China, followed by the Ladakh crisis, is forcing a drastic change in the geopolitical playbooks of the two Asian giants, and, by association, global security architectures as well.

Pre-dating 2020, India’s outreach to West Asia sharpened since 2014 with the coming of the Narendra Modi government. As the powerful and oil-rich Gulf states looked for investment alternatives away from the West to deepen their own strategic depth, persuaded by Mr. Modi’s centralised decision-making style, India doubled down on its relations with the likes of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, giving up open economic and political preference to the larger Gulf region. While engagements with Israel moved steadily forward, Iran



lagged behind, bogged down by U.S. sanctions, which in turn significantly slowed the pace of India-Iran engagements.

Advantage Beijing

Meanwhile, China’s overtures have been steadily more adventurous as it realises two major shifts have taken place in West Asia. First, Beijing has tried to capitalise around the thinking in the Gulf that the American security safety net is not absolute, and they need to invest more in others. China, being second only to the U.S. in both economic and military terms today, is the obvious engagement. The fact that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) obtained Chinese Wing Loong drones in 2016 – a copy of U.S.’s infamous armed MQ-9 ‘Reaper’ drone that Washington refused to sell – offers a good example of the Gulf’s resolve of attaining military capabilities from wherever possible. Second, the Gulf economies such as Saudi Ara-

bia, even though attempting a hard shift away from their addiction to the petro dollar, will still need growing markets to sell oil in the coming decade as they reform their economic systems. The obvious two markets here are China and India.

Sharp contrasts

However, Beijing’s recent plays in the region have not been subtle. A report in September shore light on a \$400 billion, 25-year understanding between Iran and China, with Beijing taking advantage of U.S. President Donald Trump’s abandonment of the Iran nuclear deal. Scholars such as Scott J. Hart have pontificated that China is no longer happy with a passive role in West Asia, and through concepts such as “negative peace” and “peace through development”, in concert with tools such as the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing is now ready to offer an alternative model for “investment and influence”. Over the past month, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during an in-person meet with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif suggested the development of a “new forum” to address the region’s tensions – an alternative to the West-led ecosystems that have prevailed for decades. It remains to be seen, however, how China balances itself between the poles of power while backing one so aggressively.

From India’s perspective, as it maintains its trapeze-wire balancing act of diplomacy in West Asia, the overt outreach to the Gulf and the ensuing announcements of multi-billion-dollar investments on Indian shores by entities from Saudi Arabia and the UAE is only New Delhi’s recognition of the economic realities of the region. Despite entanglements in the Yemen war and general tensions between the Gulf states and Iran, the likes of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and so on have maintained relatively strong and stable economic progression. Israel’s recent peace accords with the UAE and Bahrain add much further weight towards a more stable Gulf region – the caveats withstanding that the operationalisation of the accords is smooth and long-lasting.

The theory of interests superseding ideology in foreign policy is fast unravelling practically, both from the perspectives of India and China. While in the recent past, the Indo-Pacific, with the development of the Quad, has taken centre stage, other geographies such as West Asia, have also started to showcase boldness. The rise of New Delhi and Beijing’s metamorphosing approaches towards the international arena.

Kabir Taneja is Fellow, Strategies Studies Programme and Head, West Asia Initiative, Observer Research Foundation. The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Quota Bill

The question of 7.5% horizontal reservation for students in Tamil Nadu who have studied in government schools has unfortunately come in for unjustifiable criticism. These students are not exposed to the same conditions as those who study in private schools. The social and economic backwardness of such students cannot bear comparison to those who can afford to join private schools which are run on different lines. Further, the Governor, who acts on the aid and advice of the State Cabinet, has a limited role to play. According to Article 200 of the Constitution, he has to sign the Bill as soon as possible after its presentation. If not, he has to return the Bill requesting reconsideration, and in case the Bill is passed again, he has to give assent. When such is the peremptory language of Article 200, it is surprising the Governor is

seeking time of four weeks to make a decision (Tamil Nadu, “Need 3 to 4 weeks to decide on 7.5% quota Bill”, says Governor”, October 23). The Governor, instead of playing a constitutional role, is playing a controversial role, unimindful of the responsibilities of the government. To claim that the benefit of 7.5% reservation should be equally available to those from private schools is diluting the constitutional purpose of reservation for the socially and educationally backward and is encouraging the mindset that seems to be the agenda of the Centre. There are political overtones to this issue, which ultimately has to be decided on the basis of constitutional priorities and guarantees in education for students studying in government schools.

N.G.R. PRASAD, Chennai

Metrics of happiness

Happiness for a plurality of people cannot be gauged by narrow metrics (Editorial page, “Metrics of world happiness and the Muslims of India”, October 24, 2020). Rather than beneficiaries, Indian Muslims are losers/victims under Indian democracy and have been marginalised in terms of the sharing of political power and delivery of justice. Consolidation of the majority community under the dominant political party itself would lead to the entrenchment of the majority religion. Thus, the governance of India could also exclude the minorities. There are many examples of riots against the Muslims that demonstrate their painful conditions. Their dignity, self-respect and pride are fading. The rise of majoritarian hatred is unfortunate. The government is that happiness for the marginalised and the

powerless in India is still elusive. A. RAJAM, Bangalore

Raining woes

The illegal occupation of lakes, especially or partially, in the historical city of Hyderabad is a key reason why it faces misery and destruction in extreme weather events (Ground Zero” page, “The revenge of the lakes in Hyderabad”, October 24). State governments, past and present, have failed to book cases against the real estate sharks. In the name of layout regularisation schemes, governments have instead collected lakhs of rupees from innocent buyers of land. No action has been taken against the actual culprits. This farce has been allowed to continue with periodical extension of the validity of these schemes. There has to be preparation and implementation of a

scientific master plan to end this urban anomaly. M.S. NAGAVENI RAO, Hyderabad

Biopic ‘800’

Especially, the biopic, 800, on Sri Lanka’s cricketer Muttiah Muralitharan, has been jettisoned by actor Vijay Sethupathi, who was to play a lead role (Editorial page, “A compelling life story, lost in the fog of illogic”, October 23). The biopic about the film just because it is about the feats of a cricketer from the island nation is stifling creativity. This does not mean that the genocide in that country is correct. Sport, films and music can help bridge many divides between nations. S. RAMAKRISHNAIAH, Chennai

The pressure of ‘crowd endorsement’ on the freedom to think and act cannot be wished away. Even the

Governor was not spared when he attempted to clear the cobwebs in the administrative set-up in many universities. Certain political parties come out of the closet, which exist only on letter pads, appear to be forming this chorus to intimidate artists.

T.M. RAGHUNATHAN, Srirangam, Tamil Nadu

■ The attempt to portray the biographer as a hill country Tamil” would be to whitewash the cries of Tamil mothers seeking answers and justice for their lost sons who vanished in the genocide. It is also pertinent to note that the condition of hill country Tamils, whether in Sri Lanka or India, has not improved at all. A narrative of appropriating the interests of one group to pit it against another related group would be indicative of the dishonesty. KAVIN CHANDR, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu



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The many lessons from COVID-19

What we have done so far, and what all remains to be done



Soumya Swaminathan

The global pandemic is marching on. As I had said at the JRD Tata Oration, hosted by the Population Foundation of India on its 50th anniversary, of the lessons I have learned over the last nine or 10 months, the most important one is the significance of investing in public health and primary healthcare. Countries that invested in primary healthcare over the past decade or two are reaping the benefits now. Another lesson is the positive role of science and scientists. The global collaboration between scientists to take forward advances in knowledge so that science is continuously informing our response to the pandemic has been encouraging.

Gendered impact
In India, the pandemic has had a differential impact on women. Despite gaps, India had seen progress in maternal mortality. There have been significant gains in infant mortality, institutional births and replacement level fertility. However, there is still a high unmet need for family planning and improved access is required to contraceptive services and safe abortions. A recent modelling study showed that because of the reduction in coverage of essential services, the prevalence of wasting in children could increase by 10% to 50%. There could also be 60% more maternal deaths because interventions like the administration of uterotonics and antibiotics, and clean birth environments, are no longer available.

COVID-19 has also disrupted the education system. It has also adversely affected access to nutritious food as a huge number of children depend on school meals.

Another worrying development is the surge in domestic violence. In India, a third of women report that they had previously experienced domestic violence, but less than 1% sought help from the police. Governments can include response to violence against women in the package of essential services.

Many women have lost their work and livelihoods. More women than



men work in the informal economy. Therefore their income fell by over 60% during the first month of the pandemic. In India, the number of women and girls living in extreme poverty is expected to increase from 87 million to 100 million.

For more than a year, the World Health Organisation (WHO) emphasised the importance of gender analysis and gender-responsive public health policies. One of the major issues is the lack of availability of data that is disaggregated by sex and age. We also do not have data on violence against women and children. We have urged WHO Member States to collect data, report and analyse it.

We need to have a national digital health blueprint and a road map. We want to move towards electronic and portable health records. It is important to think about not only data governance principles, but also new ways of collecting, using and sharing data, enabling local, contextualised decision-making.

We also need to think about working with the private sector, which is already playing a very big role in technology. But we need to think about technologies that are considered public health goods. At the Aravind Eye Hospital in Pondicherry, for example, they did an experiment with shared medical appointments. This seemed to result in better health

coverage of health services. The effective coverage index is a useful measure of the quality of health services – it looks at the provision and efficacy of services in terms of health outcomes. This metric suggests that 3.1 billion people worldwide would still not be covered if we continue to do what we're doing. The index enables us to move away from just measuring process towards measuring outcomes. Many countries do not have the data systems to be able to accurately measure both mortality and the incidence of certain diseases. India needs to invest more in its vital registration system.

What can we do better?

Many countries have moved to digital technology, especially using platforms to provide telemedicine, for example, to overcome the problem that people could not meet physically. Platforms like ECHO have been used in many States to train health-care workers and the government's e-Sanjeevani platform is enabling telemedicine appointments.

We now have a national digital health blueprint and a road map. We want to move towards electronic and portable health records. It is important to think about not only data governance principles, but also new ways of collecting, using and sharing data, enabling local, contextualised decision-making.

We also need to think about working with the private sector, which is already playing a very big role in technology. But we need to think about technologies that are considered public health goods. At the Aravind Eye Hospital in Pondicherry, for example, they did an experiment with shared medical appointments. This seemed to result in better health

outcomes as well as higher productivity, apart from reducing costs and saving a lot of time for doctors.

We need to further integrate social protection systems, food systems and health systems in order to really have an impact on nutrition. India has done much to ensure these services, but it needs to expand these to protect its most vulnerable population groups. We must ensure that the pandemic does not further increase food insecurity.

False or misleading information leads to harmful behaviours, and mistrust in governments and the public health response. In the last eight months we have done an incredible amount of work with many tech companies. But infodemic management is not straightforward; it is linked to people's beliefs and behaviour. Therefore, we've set up a behavioural insights group to provide advice on behaviour change.

We often think about health as purely as delivery of services to take care of the sick. The risk factors and the social and environmental determinants of health, such as the quality of water and air impact our health. But investments here are much more difficult as they lie outside the health sector. It is a question of all arms of the government looking at the impact of their policies on health.

Empowering our frontline health workers will yield rich dividends. We need to invest in them to ensure that they have the tools they need, receive regular training and mentoring, and are well paid.

We need to invest in strong institutional mechanisms and capacities in our regulatory bodies, research centres and public health institutions. We have seen so much fear, stigma and discrimination circulated on social media. This must be countered by health literacy.

India is on the path to investing in Universal Health Coverage. Financial resources are very important for this, but we also need investment in human resources and to engage and empower communities. A health system cannot only be about the supply side. It has to keep in mind how to involve citizens and the people it is trying to serve and have them involved in developing the services that we are bringing to them.

Soumya Swaminathan is Chief Scientist at WHO

The magic of mythmaking

If we meekly allow advertisements to be withdrawn, we will foreclose for good the possibility of our cultural reinvention



Vaishna Roy

Social historian Daniel Boorstin, writing in the 1960s, called advertising "the most characteristic and remunerative form of American literature". Writing around the same time, Marshall McLuhan ranked advertising among the 20th century's greatest art forms. As it has played out, neither man was exaggerating. The 'persuasion industry' is well entrenched today, and it is hardly surprising that the 45-second commercial created by jewellery brand Tanishq should have taken up so much mindscape these past few weeks.

We are no strangers to religious controversy nor has fanaticism been the preserve of any one community. From the exile of M.F. Husain to the blacklisting of Taslima Nasreen to regular book burnings and film bans, the fanatics excel at outrage. But this time they outdid themselves. The ad that was trolled showed a Muslim mother-in-law celebrating her Hindu daughter-in-law's pregnancy with Hindu rituals. In other words, they were defended not by intolerance but by tolerance.

A tenuous argument

Besides the usual commentariat on either side of the debate, a third stream emerged asking if brands need ideology. This argument, as advertising took upon itself the role of shaping the aspirations and desires of entire societies, its function expanded vastly beyond the mere selling of products to selling a way of life. The streaming images – beautiful woman, muscular man, uniformed chauffeur – point not just to a car but to mindsets and life choices that can make that car come true. That's why Roland Barthes called advertising the supreme mythmaker of our age and ads the closest modern approximation to ancient myths. When Nike uses Serena Williams to relate the story of women in sports, it isn't just selling sports shoes, it is selling the myth of women's empowerment – the social condition that lets women play sports and buy sports shoes.

By 'selling' at this subliminal level, advertising insinuates itself into everyday customs and practices, and becomes popular culture. It defines social constructs, such as 'modernity' or 'success' – 'modern' men load washing machines; 'successful' women use food delivery apps. And via these definitions, advertising is able to construct new social mores – where men aren't ridiculed for washing clothes, nor women for not cook-

ing. The motive might be commercial, but that advertising is constantly moulding and reflecting society is indubitable.

Creating desirable myths

Less than 3% of marriages in India are inter-religious, and this figure is unlikely to change dramatically anytime soon. A majority of Indians will continue to marry within their own religion and community, just as a majority of women will continue doing the household chores. But by depicting an inter-religious marriage, advertising created a certain desirable myth – not of a society where such marriage is a norm but one that accepts it when it happens. When online portal 'Myntra' featured a lesbian couple in its 2015 ad, it essentially conjured up a society that accepts a non-heterosexual relationship. By placing them within conventional tropes of shopping, clothes and parents, it erased the taboos and ostracism such couples face in real life. It allowed them social sanction.

As society gets more secularised and modernised, we begin to seek our moral markers from places other than religion. Cultural studies scholar Judith Williamson said, "Advertising has a function which I believe in many ways replaces that traditionally fulfilled by art and religion – it creates meaning." This meaning-making is not optional but intrinsic to advertising. The Amul girl doesn't just innocently sell butter – she sells an image of the nation, reflected through sporting triumphs, national tragedies, election results or, increasingly, even Rafale plane deals. As we consume, we subconsciously also seek such reflections that let us reimagine ourselves and the world we inhabit through the lens of the ad.

Whether the Tanishq commercial or the Surf Excel ad last year that showed a Hindu girl protecting a Muslim boy from being splashed with Holi colours on his way to namaz, both propose a myth of harmonious co-existence – of the kind an *Amur Akbar Anthony* created – which could well be self-fulfilling in the long run. (Just as men who load washing machines are no longer unicorns.) These myths reflect not just who we are but who we want to be. The trolls shut down these stories not because they are real but because they could become real. It might no longer be possible to eradicate trolls in this hyper-malevolent era, but we need to cling at least to our myths. If we refuse to let them be destroyed and the dream factories shut down, we will foreclose for good the possibility of our cultural reinvention. And that will signal our final bankruptcy of imagination. Yet, it's more clear than ever now that imagination, after all, is also a nation.

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Women at the heart of recovery

India has an opportunity to build climate resilience and address gender equality issues

SHIKHO NODA & ATUL BAGAI

India's fight against COVID-19 is at a critical juncture. Against the backdrop of recent economic reforms by the government, and significant stimulus packages, recovery measures are poised to lift millions from this unprecedented economic and health crisis and tackle widening inequalities. The recovery is offering India two golden opportunities: one, to build climate resilience for the most vulnerable by ensuring that stimulus measures are green; and two, to meaningfully address long-standing gender equality issues.

The pandemic has exacted a heavy toll. Fragile health systems and frontline health workers are overburdened and lives and livelihoods impacted. The poor, migrants, informal workers, sexual minorities, people with disabilities and women all face a greater burden than most. Beyond this, the causes and effects of climate change – stressed agriculture, food insecurity, unplanned urban growth, thinning forest covers, rising temperatures and shrinking water resources – have also hit vulnerable groups disproportionately.

Vulnerable group

Women in particular have their work cut out for them. Greater demands of unpaid care work during the pandemic and rising rates of reported violence are a stark reminder of the work that remains to be done. According to the India Voluntary National Review 2020, female labour force participation rate for 15-59 age group is showing a declining trend and stands at 25.3%. This is one of the lowest rates in the world.

Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund estimates that equal participation of women in the workforce will increase India's GDP by 27%. The Indian government has invested nearly \$22.5 billion in COVID-19 recovery. Strengthening social protection using targeted and appropriate fiscal and policy measures is a good start. Aligning these recovery packages with India's commitments on climate change by investing in green jobs will improve lives and make our planet healthier. These green investments ought to be re-

flected across agriculture, urban planning, energy and the health sectors and in climate-resilient civil works, including under MGNREGA.

Women, particularly those from indigenous and marginalised communities, play a significant yet unsung role in various sectors. Comprising more than 50% of the agricultural labour force, and nearly 14% of all entrepreneurs, women's relationship with the environment and the informal economy can be a useful lever of action to transform the lives and livelihoods of their families and communities.

Equipping women with skills

Disha, a UNDP initiative supported by the IKEA Foundation, has reached one million women and girls with skills and livelihood opportunities. This initiative has shown the benefits of investing in local jobs for women and vulnerable communities. These investments energise local economies, reduce carbon emissions, enhance climate resilience and disrupt social norms and behaviours that restrict women's participation in the workforce. Another example comes from an initiative by the Self-Employed Women's Association and the Electronics Sector Skills Council of India, and supported by the UN Environment Programme. By training young rural women to develop a cadre of 15,000 solar technicians for the maintenance of solar pumps in remote locations, the initiative will not only introduce clean energy options but also reduce production costs. Accelerating the transition to renewable energy will lower carbon footprints and can help provide sustainable livelihoods to poor women.

Creating the right financial incentives, fostering sustainable private partnerships and enabling women entrepreneurs to access markets, training and mentoring will be critical in scaling up these approaches. The Asian Development Bank projects that India's GDP growth rate will rebound to 8% in 2021-22. Putting women at the heart of this recovery will make it faster, just and inclusive.

Shikho Noda is UNDP Resident Representative in India, and Atul Bagai, UN Environment Country Office, India



DATA POINT

Rural-urban divide in Bihar polls

In the upcoming Bihar Assembly elections, the NDA has chosen to field candidates from the BJP in more than 80% of the urban seats. In contrast, in rural areas, the JD(U) has the upper hand. The BJP's strong show in the urban seats in the recent polls, where the JD(U) is relatively weaker, may have influenced such a seat-sharing pact. In contrast, both the RJD and the Congress have maintained similar vote shares across the rural-urban divide in the recent polls. And so, for the 2020 polls, the RJD's and the Congress' candidates are equally spread across all the areas. By Vignesh Radhakrishnan and Nareesh Singaravelu

Seat type*	BJP		JD(U)	
	2015 (%)	2019 (%)	2015 (%)	2019 (%)
Urban	45.2%	60.4%	37.7%	58.4%
Semi urban	37.8%	56.3%	40.3%	53.9%
Semi rural	35.3%	57.6%	42.2%	51.1%
Rural	36.4%	54.5%	39.7%	50.9%

2. No clear divide | There is no significant rural-urban skew for the parties in the 2015 Assembly election. In 2015, when the alliance won (JD(U) was part of it in 2015), support was drawn equally from all the areas. When they lost in 2019, support was withdrawn equally from all areas. The tables listed vote shares across rural-urban areas

Seat type	RJD		Congress	
	2015 (%)	2019 (%)	2015 (%)	2019 (%)
Urban	43.9%	36.1%	36.8%	31.5%
Semi urban	47.6%	31.7%	46.7%	38.5%
Semi rural	43.5%	33.0%	36.5%	34.6%
Rural	42.3%	32.5%	40.4%	31.6%

*Total seats: 243 Urban; 21 seats; semi urban: 42; semi rural: 81; rural: 99

3. Seat-sharing | The rural-urban divide in the NDA's seat-sharing deal is evident. The BJP is contesting in 84% of the urban seats and the JD(U) in 14.3%. In contrast, the choice of seats in the 'grand alliance' exhibits no clear divide. The tables list the vote shares contested out of the total urban/rural seats

Seat type	BJP		JD(U)	
	2015 (%)	2019 (%)	2015 (%)	2019 (%)
Urban	81.0%	14.3%	50.0%	42.9%
Semi urban	50.0%	42.9%	39.5%	55.6%
Semi rural	54.3%	32.4%	40.4%	49.5%
Rural	61.6%	27.3%		

Grand alliance
The rural-urban divide was segregated based on night lights data from the SHRIK database which is used as a proxy for electrification or economic activity, which in turn differentiates a rural area from an urban area. The data for the 2019 elections is calculated based on leads secured in the Assembly segments

The Hindia

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO OCTOBER 27, 1970

Sobers tenders apology

West Indies cricket captain G. S. Sobers has apologised to West Indian cricket administrators for an embarrassment caused by playing cricket in the white-minority ruled, Rhodesia. Sobers said last night [October 25, Bridgetown (Barbados)] he accepted the invitation to play in a single-wicket competition in Rhodesia because he had been assured there was no racial discrimination in that country. He added, however, that he had not been made aware of the deep feelings of West Indian people on the issues involved. Sobers' apology was contained in a letter to Mr. Noel Pierce, President of the West Indies Cricket Board of Control. Sobers said that since his visit to Rhodesia last month, when he was greeted by Premier Ian Smith, he had learnt of the feeling of the West Indian people and the wider international issues involved. He added: "I therefore wish to convey to you and the members of the Board my sincere regrets for any embarrassment which my action may have caused and to assure you of my unqualified dedication whenever I may be called upon to represent my country – the West Indies – and my people."

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO OCTOBER 27, 1920

The Victoria Institute

A proposal was made at the time of the Women's Work Exhibition which was held in Madras in the cold weather of 1919, that efforts should be made to establish a permanent organisation for the sale of women's work in the city. The matter had been under discussion since, and as a result the Committee of the Victoria Technical Institute, of which H.E. Lady Willington is the President has offered to attach to the Institute a small Women's Sub-Committee (which later H.E. Excellency is the President) and to give it accommodation for showing women's work on the Institute premises. It is proposed that this Sub-Committee should try to encourage the sale of lace, embroidery and other work and should help the workers with information as to the classes of work for which there is a demand and keep patterns that can be copied and stocks of materials, which would be bought wholesale and issued to workers in small quantities at the wholesale rate. The Sub-Committee proposes to work on the same line as the Victoria Institute, i.e. either to buy the work done for resale or to take it on commission sale.

OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | BARE TALK



The worsening gender skew of our workforce

A long downtrend observed in the proportion of job-holders among Indian women should worry us. But simply raising the minimum age of female marriage won't solve the problem

When India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared a \$5-trillion economy by 2024 as a national goal soon after his re-election last year, he could not have foreseen the covid-19 pandemic. That the viral outbreak has exacted a heavy toll and thwarted our chance of achieving that ambitious target is undeniable. But what is less talked about is the opportunity cost we bear from having too low a proportion of women at work. It was never high to begin with, but our female labour force participation rate—or the proportion of women aged 15 and above who are either seeking or working at paid jobs—appears to have declined sharply over the past decade-and-a-half. According to World Bank data, that rate hovered above 30% after India's economy opened up in 1991 and then peaked at 31.8% in 2005, before slipping to 20.3% this year—among the lowest in the world. While why this has happened remains a matter of debate, its implied loss was quantified by a McKinsey Global Institute report in 2018, which said that India would gain \$770 billion in output by 2025 if women had the same opportunities to work as men.

The poor participation of women in the country's workforce defies economic logic, and much of it could perhaps be explained by socio-cultural attitudes that prevail among families that are not given to modern ways of thought. India is still largely a poor country where women go out to work out of financial necessity, and rising family incomes often result in their dropping out. In this narrative, Indian households being better off would explain the decline. Though there has been the

odd report of a trend reversal in recent years and months, attributable to a broad crunch in job availability since 2017 and worsened by our covid crisis, there is no getting away from the need to intervene in favour of raising female participation in the economy. Tax incentives do exist for women employed in formal salaried roles, but what we need is an attitudinal shift among our multitudes—especially men. It is the hold of patriarchy on society that keeps women homebound and denies them space to exercise their agency on the issue of securing pay cheques of their own. Given the country's high levels of gender violence, safety concerns also tilt decisions against venturing out.

As our government weighs a proposal to raise the age after which women can legally marry from 18 to 21, it is tempting to view such a move as a spur for greater female work participation through extended education and an associated delay in child-bearing. Yet, even the current age law is weakly followed. At least one study suggests that every fourth Indian woman was wedded by 18. According to Unicef, with over 100 million females who got married before turning 15, India has more children in wedlock than any other nation. So, while longer educational exposure afforded by an upward age revision could help the cause, we also need an effective social campaign that directly addresses hold-backs. Without a shift in India's observable preference for male offspring, for example, raising women's minimum age of marriage might perversely also raise the perceived "burden" of a girl child among some families, pushing them to either opt for pre-natal sex selection or flout India's marital age bar. Social reforms and better law enforcement have far bigger roles to play.

It's Beijing that will eventually rescue the world from China

The regime's overreach has exposed a web of deceit and corruption that it tries to ensnare others in



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The Zhengzhou Information Science and Technology Institute, judging by the number of publications in which it is cited, is one of the world's leading centres of computer science and communications engineering. Its scientists have published over 900 papers in major science journals, at times in collaboration with American researchers. "Except that it isn't. The name is a cover for a university that trains China's military hackers and signals intelligence officers—the People's Liberation Army Information Engineering University—based in Zhengzhou. Many such priceless pieces of information make *The Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is Reshaping the World*, written by Clive Hamilton and Mark A. Killberg, an invaluable read.

In India, a study that comes close to resembling the efforts undertaken in that book has been done by Ananth Krishnan. Following the Money, China's Growing Stake in India-China Relations, published by the Brookings Institution India Center in March 2020, is useful. His book, *India's China Challenge*, is on my reading list. He wrote, unsurprisingly, that Chinese companies had escaped the kind of scrutiny in India that their investments attracted in the West. That needs rectification, either "separation between the Chinese state and private

business is blurry". Well, that qualifies as the understatement of the century, especially in the light of a recent Chinese government decision to embed party officials in all decisions made by a so-called "private sector" entity.

A speech by Ye Qing, vice-chairman of the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, on 17 September (translation available at They'reComingforthePrivateSector.blogspot.in/2020/09/17-September-2020-TheyreComingforthePrivateSector.html) reminds us of what Professor Aaron Friedberg wrote: "In today's China, there is no such thing as a truly independent think tank, foundation, university, or company" (*An Answer to Aggression*, *Foreign Affairs* Sept/Oct 2020). That suggests a path for redemption for the rest of us, and for Chinatoo.

The pathology of global hegemony and dominance always reveals two underlying malaises: hubris and insecurity. They seal the fate of empires and hegemony. But for China's clashes with India in Ladakh this summer, India would not have woken up to the China challenge to the extent it has.

The Hidden Hand suggests that Canada has been ensnared in China's web, as has Sweden. Zhang Bin, a Chinese billionaire and Communist Party official, donated C\$50,000 to Montreal University for a statue of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's father, Pierre. For good measure, he threw in C\$200,000 for the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation. But, the remark of the Chinese ambassador to Canada on the safety of 300,000 Canadians in Hong Kong has undone years of work in capturing mind, body and wallet.

The book reveals that Sweden's Beijing ambassador Anna Lindstedt was alleged to have added attempts to silence Angela Merkel in January 2018. Angela's father, Gert Minha, a Swedish citizen, was working as a bookseller in Hong Kong in 2015 when he was kidnapped by Chinese authorities in Thailand. Sweden has closed down Confucius Institutes and banned Huawei from its

5G network. Similar is the story with Britain, which the authors contend had passed a point of no return because of the CCP's influence network among British elites. Yet, a UK Parliamentary Committee has concluded that Huawei colluded with the Chinese state.

The Trump administration's stellar efforts to get the rest of the world to cast off the China spell have clearly paid dividends. However, Trump would not have succeeded without China's active "cooperation". He may also have to thank the Bush and Obama administrations, of course. Goldman Sachs

In 2006, Henry Paulson, chief executive officer of Goldman Sachs, became treasury secretary under George W. Bush. He visited China about 70 times during his tenure. Citing Paul Blustein, the book notes that "had he responded more forcefully to Beijing's currency manipulation, tight control of state-owned enterprises, mistreatment of US enterprises in China, and program of technology theft, then the conditions that led to the trade war might not have arisen". Try too hard and it backfires.

History reminds us that the best antidotes for excess and overreach are excess and overreach. That lesson has eluded many, including China. It is no surprise that it has deluged Twitter and Facebook. Therein lies the hope.

Finally, America has paid the price for its hubris that it has more closely engaged China, the more it would embrace American values, ignoring the possibility that China could ensnare its elites in a web of corruption. Zhang, a Manchurian mandarin, wrote after availing to America in 1868 that the love of God was less than the love of profit there (John Pomfret: "What America Didn't Anticipate About China", *The Atlantic*). In summary, *The Hidden Hand* is a tale of not only American but also the Western love of profit bestowed by China.

There is no room for doubt left over what is at stake for America and the rest of the world on 3 November.

These are the author's personal views.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

No country can ever truly flourish if it stifles the potential of its women and deprives itself of the contributions of half of its citizens.

MICHELLE OBAMA

MY VIEW | THE IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR

The economics of India's high prevalence of child brides

SHRUTI RAJAGOPALAN



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The government is considering raising the minimum legal age of marriage for women from 18 to 21 to reduce the prevalence of child brides (below 18) in India. This, of course, well intentioned. If only the problem were so simple that it could be solved with the stroke of a pen.

The benefits of later marriage for women are well established. It is associated with higher nutrition levels for women and their children, lower maternal mortality, improved educational outcomes and greater financial independence.

The problem is particularly dire in India. According to Unicef, 650 million women alive today were married before they turned 18. India is home to 223 million or one in three of these child brides. Just under half that number, 102 million were married before they turned 15. Uttar Pradesh has the largest number of child brides, at 36 million, followed by Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The problem, however, is not the law. Even though there is a

minimum age for marriage for men, India doesn't have the same extent of this problem with child grooms. Only 4% of Indian boys/men were married before age 18. And 20% were married before the minimum legal age of 21 compared to the 27% of girls/women married before the age of 18. Raising the legal age of marriage displays a lack of understanding of the reasons for the low age of marriage for women in India, which have little to do with the law.

The real issue is that various long-persistent cultural factors have created a market for child brides in India. Society imposes a very high cost of raising girls on parents, especially in poor Indian families, which, attempt to reduce those costs by marrying daughters off at a young age. If they prefer to invest in sons. In their 2017 paper, Peter Leeson and Paola Suarez explain the supply and demand for child brides in India. The real problem, they explain, begins with a very high son-preference. South Asian countries exhibit the highest levels of son preference in the world, though there is much variation within India. A consequence of high son-preference is that in trying to produce sons, couples sometimes produce daughters. To afford the sons they want, some of these couples dispose of their unwanted daughters.

India has one of the highest levels of female foeticide, where female foetuses are aborted through sex selection technology. This is banned in India, of course, but still prevalent. India's sex ratio at birth is 899 girls to 1,000 boys. Female foeticide is the most direct step taken by families. For most people, female foeticide or infanticide is very undesirable and emotionally costly.

So, couples trying to have a son over multiple attempts may end up with more than their preferred number of daughters. If the family is rich and has the ability to raise multiple girls in order to produce a boy, their problem disappears. However, for poorer families, one solution to marry these daughters off prematurely, thereby ensuring a supply of child, even prepubescent, brides.

However, there is also demand for child brides. Between female foeticide skewing the sex ratio at birth and son-preferencing couples investing fewer resources in the care of daughters than sons, more males survive to traditional marriage age than females in

India. To find brides in the face of this sex ratio imbalance is a struggle.

We know families in states like Haryana "import" and "buy" brides from poorer states. But another consequence is that in high-endogamous sections of Indian society, where families prefer to find brides within their own caste group, marriage-aged men must look for younger female cohorts within their community.

In some groups, that means adult-age men are even matched with prepubescent girls, creating demand for prepubescent brides. Only relatively impoverished son-preferencing parents dispose of their unwanted daughters to afford the sons they seek.

Leeson and Suarez also point out that this affects the "quality" of potential grooms. When potential grooms are of variable quality, men whose inferior prospects or socio-economic status prevents them from competing successfully for the limited number of traditional-marriage-age brides may end up looking for child brides.

While it doesn't solve the problem, policymakers seem to be increasing the age of marriage. But these laws have unintended consequences. Raising the cost of disposing unwanted daughters through marriage, and punishing families for violating the rule, could push families to adopt a more male preference towards sex selection and female foeticide, or trafficking and other ways of disposing unwanted daughters. In their 2017 paper, Paola Suarez finds that raising the female marriage age in such countries with high son preference and high poverty may have the unintended consequence of increasing the prevalence of female infanticide and sex-selective abortion.

To increase marriage age, not just de jure but de facto, requires India to evolve economically and culturally. Some of this has happened. As Indians have become more prosperous, and as extreme poverty levels have declined, we see a decline in child brides. In 1970, almost 75% women were married before they turned 18, which has now decreased to 27%. Economic growth will save Indian girls from child marriage. Combined with educational and cultural awareness against a sex preference, which no doubt will take longer, economic success is the only lasting solution.

| MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

India should use this economic crisis to implement Reforms 3.0

We must be bold about our aspirations and use this chance to push ahead with tough reforms that could revive our economy



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The covid-19 pandemic has, by default, left India with a "good crisis". India's economic goose was being cooked on "slow boil" from late 2016 onwards, with demonetization, shoddy implementation of the goods and services tax, the Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services crisis, and anaemic investment spending against a backdrop of a dysfunctional public banking system. The government correctly imposed a strict lockdown in late March that was well complied with, but appears to have lost both the public-health and economic plots since then. Today, India finds itself with the worst large-country economic performance of all.

Now is the time to both accelerate reforms and be bolder in the aspiration for change. Here is what the government should do:

Monitor the economy: The pandemic has fully demonstrated the need for transparent, fast, accurate and non-politicized data as the basis on which to make decisions. The country must initiate steps towards a non-partisan data gathering and dissemination body that could dramatically lift the quality and type of data gathered on the economy. We should begin with an independent fiscal council tasked with putting out objective data on budget revenue, expenditure and taxes. We must gather high-frequency indicators for the economy, not only for economic activity, but also for labour markets. Our labour-market data is particularly poor and contributed at least in part to the shameful reverse migration of labour during the lockdown. The currently dysfunctional National Statistical Office (NSO) should become an independent authority reporting to Parliament. An apolitical, high-quality NSO with an independent fiscal council will serve as a strong foundation to go about necessary structural reforms.

Reform labour and education: This third generation of reforms would admittedly be more difficult to do than the first two because it must deal with factor reforms and "wicked" problems. The two major foundational pillars for growth over the medium- and long-term are: 1) an industrial-strength apprentice and vocational training system in India; and 2) a quantum jump in the quality of our education. The government has made impressive strides on both counts with recent efforts to streamline legislation through four labour codes and with its National Education Policy 2020 (NEP). The consolidation of 20-hour legislations into four codes reduces both the time and cost of compliance for employers, and also aids the formalization of job contracts with employees. The code on wages modernizes provisions and rationalizes civil and criminal penalties, thereby making the system less susceptible to corruption. Building on this momentum, we must institute



reforms that allow straight-through compliance processing for all labour codes, rationalize penalties to make them more effective, and fully decentralize minimum wage setting to states. While the NEP is not fully binding on states, its thrust for foundational learning and regional language education until Class 5, its modular building of college credits, its multidisciplinary emphasis in higher education, and its vocational streaming from high-school onwards deserve to be developed fully.

Turn over agricultural practices: The government has taken a step in the right direction by deregulating farm-to-market supply chains, reducing the number of commodities under the Essential Commodities Act, and letting farmers de-fragment their biggest asset, which is land.

These reforms, if fully implemented, will dismantle the elaborate middle-man patronage structure that has evolved in various states. Much more action needs to be taken on improving the fundamental returns in farming through a new green revolution that emphasizes appropriate water-use based rotational cropping, the use of higher quality seeds, the sustainable and frugal use of fertilizers and the deployment of farm technology to improve yields and efficiency. We will need greater focus on production and the indirect implications of rural displacement of labour.

Fix the dysfunctional public banking system: Public sector banks are in desperate need of governance reform and equity capital. The government has been timid and unimaginative with solutions, and seems not to have understood that balance-sheet crises cannot be fixed incrementally. A weak banking system has gummed up a re-start on the economy. Unless we equitize, change governance and place bad assets in a "bad bank", India is likely to see a very patchy economic recovery.

Multiply infrastructure: While there has been a lot of discussion about fiscal stimulus packages, a debate on their multiplier impact on spending has been muted. The "fiscal multiplier" estimates the ratio of economic output to input. The effect of a direct-to-citizen fiscal stimulus can be estimated using the marginal propensity to consume, which will be greater for households whose livelihoods have been severely impacted by the crisis. The most effective method in the long-term for both employment and output generation is to use fiscal spending for capital infrastructure. It has knock-on multiplier effects on an entire supply chain. Also, properly conceived capital projects, once completed, inherently improve economic output.

P.S. "We cannot solve problems with the same kind of thinking we used when we created them," said Albert Einstein.

| MY VIEW | IT MATTERS

The thick alphabet soup that Google has found itself in

SIDDHARTH PAI



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On Tuesday, 20 October, the US department of justice (DOJ) under attorney general William Barr filed a suit against Google, alleging anti-competitive behaviour under section 2 of America's Sherman Antitrust Act.

Some observers point to the timing of this lawsuit, claiming that a decision to frame charges now is actually a politically-motivated move by Barr. In my view, Barr has made his politics apparent in many other fora and didn't need this lawsuit to prove his fealty to US President Donald Trump. The specifics of the DOJ's suit have been in the making for a long time. It's no surprise that Google's stock price has held up.

That said, it is important to understand the DOJ's suit. Google dominates many areas of technology and regulators have fined it billions of dollars before. A lay observer of events may think this is yet another repeat of the suits that have been filed in Europe, Australia, and even by America's 50 individual states.

But the old cases focus mainly on two facets of Google's operations. One, its Search Engine Results Pages (SERP), and the other its advertising business. The SERP case was investigated by the European Union. In 2017, the European Commission levied a record €2.42 billion fine on Google for having "abused its market dominance as a search engine by giving an illegal advantage to another Google product, its comparison-shopping service". The still-ongoing suit by America's 50 states is focused on Google's advertising business.

In response to the new federal lawsuit, Google is likely to make a case that it has reached this level of market dominance simply by building a better product than others. It will point to one of the fallouts of an earlier case the DOJ filed and won against Microsoft Inc in the 1990s. This was around Microsoft bundling its own Explorer web browser at the cost of Netscape's Navigator along with its Windows operating system, which at the time was near ubiquitous. The actual result of the lawsuit, however, didn't change the status quo much. People continued to use Explorer until a better alternative came along, in this case Google's Chrome browser.

Past fines by the European Union, Australia and other jurisdictions have hardly

touch the behemoth—it maintains a \$120 billion cash hoard and is more than prepared to take on the DOJ. Google will vigorously defend itself in the present case and has access to a battery of lawyers that its outsized cash balance can easily hire. A central tenet of its argument will be that the services that it provides users like you and me are free, and that users have benefited enormously from them. It will also claim that its market dominance is a "virtuous cycle" of ever-improving consumer experiences, and is, therefore, not a monopoly.

But this response would be a smokescreen. This time, the DOJ's focus is narrow: Google may have earned its position honestly, but it is maintaining it, in large part, by paying off distributors. For a general search engine, by far the most effective means of distribution is to be the preset default general search engine for mobile and computer search access points. Even where users can change the default, they rarely do. This

leaves the preset default general search engine with de facto exclusivity. As Google itself has recognized, this is particularly true on mobile devices, where defaults are especially sticky."

For years, Google has struck exclusionary agreements and engaged in what clear-

looks like anticompetitive conduct to lock up distribution channels and block its rivals.

Google pays billions of dollars each year to distributors, including device manufacturers such as Apple and Samsung, major US wireless carriers such as AT&T, T-Mobile, and Verizon, and browser developers such as Mozilla and Opera. This secures default status for its general search engine, and, in many cases, specifically prohibits these companies from dealing with Google's competitors. Some of these agreements also require distributors to accept a bundle of Google apps and feature them on devices in prime positions where consumers are most likely to start their internet searches.

For those of us who use Android devices, such ubiquity is normal. Some of us naively think that we have cut out Google by moving to a Mozilla or Opera browser. Well, we haven't. And if you think you have escaped Google's tight embrace by buying an Apple device, think again. Google pays Apple billions to be the off-the-shelf embedded search engine in Safari, the iPhone's web browser. To shift, one has to go deep into Safari's settings and then switch to another one like Duck-Duck-Go (which I recommend) or Microsoft's Bing. On an Android device, we would need to download Duck-Duck-Go or Bing from Google's Play Store, and then consciously avoid the big Google search bar each time we use our device.

Google's anticompetitive practices seem especially destructive because they deny rivals the scale they need to compete effectively. By using distribution agreements to lock up scale for itself and deny it to others, Google unlawfully maintains its monopolies. This is the key nuance that the DOJ suit points out and is going after Google for.

Given that America's current law does not cover the true nature of digital monopolies, Google may even win in court. But this will hopefully lead to more nuanced regulation in the future. Here's looking at you, America.

MINT CURATOR



A nest of murder hornets that can sting and spit venom has been destroyed. REUTERS

A deadly threat gets neutralized in Washington

The first nest of Asian giant hornets found in the US has successfully been destroyed by scientists. The nest, in the state of Washington, was found by putting tracker devices on the hornets and it was sucked out of a tree using a vacuum hose. The invasive species insects, known as "murder hornets", have a powerful sting and can spit venom. They target honeybees, which pollinate crops, and can destroy a colony in just a matter of hours. The nest in Washington was found when entomologists, scientists that study insects, used dental floss to tie tracking devices to three hornets. The nest of around 200 insects was then discovered in the city of Blaine close to the Canadian border. On Saturday, a crew of scientists wearing protective suits vacuumed the insects from the tree, which will now be cut down.

BBC

Survival lessons for cyclists on Bogota's streets

Andy Villalba, a tattooed and scrawny bicycle mechanic in Colombia's capital, has long been wise to the dangers of cycling in such a chaotic city. Now, amid a boom in both cycling and bike theft, he is giving workshops in road safety and self-defence. "Welcome to Bogota," said Villalba, who has lost count of the number of times he has been threatened for his bicycle. "The cycling capital of death." Cycling in Colombia is thriving. As in other cities around the world, the pandemic has prompted many commuters to forgo taxis or buses, and bike use is up 40% since last year. More than 100km of bike paths were laid in Bogota during the lockdown. But as more people step into the saddle, bicycle thieves and homicidal drivers are forcing them to fight back with self-defence classes and weapons.

The Guardian

Dinosaurs literally tried to fly once upon a time

During a blip in time in the late Jurassic, a dinosaur that weighed no more than a chinchilla flung itself from tree to tree, spread its wings and tried to soar. In theory, it sounds beautiful—an early attempt at flight before birds figured out the blueprint. In practice, it was chaotic. The dinosaur, *Yixi*, only barely managed to glide, stretching out and shimmying its skin-lap, downy-feathered wings in a valiant attempt at flying. "It was rocketing from tree to tree, desperately trying not to slam into something," said Alex Dececchi, a paleontologist at Mount Marty University in South Dakota. "It wouldn't be something pleasant". In a study published Thursday in the journal *Science*, Dececchi and other researchers analysed how *Yixi* and the dinosaur *Amblopteryx* could have flown.

The New Zealand Herald

Our war on junk food has influencers in the way

Kid influencers on YouTube are marketing junk food and sugary beverages to tens of millions of preteen kids, and tummy-aching parents are taking notice. A new study published Monday in the journal *Pediatrics*. The study demonstrates how advertisers are seeking to take advantage of new avenues to market their wares to children. "We should approach YouTube influencer videos with skepticism, even with videos that seem to be educational or kid-friendly," said senior author Marie Bragg, an assistant professor of public health nutrition with joint appointments at New York University's School of Global Public Health and Langone Medical Center. The researchers analyzed videos posted by the five most-watched kid influencers on YouTube in 2019.

CNN

An identity-preservation struggle in Armenia

Originally a religious minority from northern Iraq, Yazidis came to Armenia in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The origins of the monotheistic religion are disputed because it does not have a book and its sacred songs are passed on orally from generation to generation. In Armenia, Yazidis living in compact settlements preserved the secrets of their ageless religion, while developing their own distinct culture and history. Over 300 people came to the cemetery on that day... But this event in Armenia may be among the last. "Every year, fewer people attend these ceremonies, because they live abroad," bemoaned Yigal Temur Akmoyan. The question of how to preserve the community is complex and related to Armenia's own social and political struggles.

The Independent