



The second chair

Convention of electing the Deputy Speaker from the Opposition should be upheld

More than a year after the 17th Lok Sabha was constituted, the constitutionally mandated post of Deputy Speaker is lying vacant. This unusual situation is in the spotlight as the monsoon session of Parliament begins on Monday and the Rajya Sabha is scheduled to elect a Deputy Chairman. The vacancy of Deputy Speaker appears to be less of a lapse, and more a calculated delay by the ruling BJP. On September 9, the Congress leader in the Lok Sabha, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, wrote to Speaker Om Birla to initiate the process, by election or consensus. Mr. Chowdhury also recalled the convention of offering the post to the Opposition. Mr. Birla has been non-committal in his public comments on the issue, and the BJP has remained silent. Soon after the 2019 general election, the government had made some effort to fill the position. It had approached the YSR Congress, which reportedly turned it down since it would have been difficult to align their protest against the government for not according special status to Andhra Pradesh with occupying the post. While the Congress has been forceful in raising the issue, other Opposition parties have been less enthusiastic. In the Rajya Sabha, the JD(U)'s Harivansh, who has been re-elected to the House, is seeking re-election as Deputy Chairman as the ruling combine's candidate. He had defeated Congress leader B.K. Hariprasad — 125-105 votes — in elections in August 2018.

The ruling combine, despite not having a simple majority, has managed to win crucial votes several times over in the past in the Upper House. This time around, BJP leaders have claimed the support of 140 members for Mr. Harivansh. The BJP's Manoj Jha, an erstwhile member in the Opposition, is the joint candidate of 12 parties for the post. There was confusion within the Opposition ranks on whether this contest was worth it. Several of their senior members are likely to skip the session, considering the risk of COVID-19 infection. The BSP, which has remained a reluctant Opposition party, is unlikely to be different this time. The BJP has taken its overwhelming parliamentary majority as a justification for disregarding not only the Opposition but also parliamentary conventions. Its refusal to engage the Opposition in electing a Deputy Speaker is further eroding the common ground that India requires to deal with the multitude of its current challenges. The BJP's pre-eminence has also devastated the Opposition which is struggling to muster a coherent and united response. Election by consensus of an Opposition MP as Deputy Speaker of Lok Sabha will be a course correction. The government should be magnanimous and the Opposition creative in dealing with this issue.

Long haul ahead

Demand-supportive fiscal policies alone can end the lockdown-induced slowdown

Factory output continued to contract in July, albeit marginally slower than in June, reflecting the depressed economic conditions as the pandemic rages on. Quick estimates for the IIP show output across the three sectoral components of the index — mining, manufacturing and electricity — all shrank, dragging the overall index to a 10.4% year-on-year contraction. While this is slower than June's 15.8% shrinkage, a closer look reveals that the rebound in momentum witnessed in the fiscal first quarter's last month — when the economy reopened and the contraction narrowed sharply from May's 33.9% fall — has dissipated appreciably. The most telltale sign of this flattening is the more than halved pace of growth in the solitary use-based industrial activity of the IIP's six product groups, in which output had turned positive in June. Growth in consumer non-durables — it includes essential household consumables — slid back to 6.7% from the preceding month's 14.3%, betraying the abiding weakness in private consumption spending. The other five groups posted double-digit contractions, with consumer durables and capital goods shrinking 23.6% and 22.8%, respectively. If the trend in durables attests to the RBI's evaluation last month that "private consumption has lost its discretionary elements across the board", the capital goods data point to a dismal picture on the investment front. With demand-starved companies operating their factories well below capacity, there is little indication that the protracted six-quarter slump in this key sector, which encompasses the plants and machinery that manufacturers order when expanding or starting new ventures, is anywhere close to reversing momentum.

Electricity generation, however, provides some relief, with the contraction narrowing to 2.5% in July from June's 10%. A deeper look at the 23 subcategories of manufacturing shows that only tobacco products and pharmaceuticals posted expansions in July, with the latter benefiting from the increased global demand for medicines, including generic drugs, in the wake of the pandemic. The manufacture of pharmaceuticals, medicinal chemical and botanical products climbed 22% in July, making it the solitary product to post an expansion of 1.8% over April-July. Textiles and garments manufacturing, employment intensive segments shrunk to 14.8% and 28.7%, respectively. To be sure, the IIP data come with a lag of six weeks and a few more recent indicators give room for some guarded hope. For one, the latest IHS Markit India Manufacturing PMI survey-based outlook signals that the sector likely posted some expansion for the first time in six months in August. And auto makers reported growth in shipments of passenger vehicles to dealers last month in anticipation of festive season demand. Still, to help sustain any incipient revival, the Centre will need to enact demand-supportive fiscal policies or risk seeing the slowdown prolong.



D.S. HOODA

The ongoing crisis in eastern Ladakh has raised many issues on the range and trajectory of India-China relations. Among these is the future relevance of various agreements that were signed between the two countries to maintain peace and tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that serves as a de facto border.

Agreements over the years

Some experts argue that the genesis of the current problem lies in the first agreement signed between India and China in 1993. They say India should not have accepted the term "LAC" in this agreement as there was no clarity as to where this line lay on the ground, and this ambiguity has forced India to adopt a policy of appeasement on the LAC. The absence of a delineated LAC is undoubtedly problematic, but it would also be appropriate to put the various agreements in a historical context, and dispassionately analyse their impact and their future relevance.

After the 1962 war, the India-China border was loosely controlled by both sides, with a fairly sparse deployment of troops. That did not mean that border claims were diluted by either side, as witnessed in the bloody clash at Nathu La in 1967. The China Study Group, established in 1976, gave clarity to India's claims by laying down the patrolling points and guiding the scope of military activity along the LAC.

A significant change in border management occurred when the Chinese occupation of a post in the Sumdorong Chu Valley in 1986.

The massive response by the Indian Army sparked realisation on both sides that the boundary issue needed to be brought to the fore, and pending a settlement, some mechanism must be evolved to keep peace along the LAC.

I was posted as a young Major in the China desk of the Military Operations Directorate when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi made the breakthrough visit to Beijing in 1988. After his visit, we had started working on a number of drafts on confidence-building measures along the LAC. Many of these recommendations were incorporated in the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, signed in 1993.

The 1993 agreement formalised the LAC concept. However, understanding that there were differing perceptions, it called for creating a group of diplomats and military experts to work out a settlement of the boundary issue, and as part of confidence-building measures, restricted military exercises and air activity close to the LAC. An essential part of the agreement was a reduction in "military forces along the line of actual control in conformity with the requirements of the principle of mutual and equal security to ceilings to be mutually agreed".

This was followed by the 1996 Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas (https://bit.ly/2GXXsQd).

It called for reducing or limiting military forces to minimum levels and limiting the deployment of major armaments such as tanks, artillery



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guns, and missiles to mutually agreed levels. A 2005 protocol (https://bit.ly/3hy3Hje), or the Protocol between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Modalities for the Implementation of Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, added more confidence-building measures outlining the procedure to be adopted when soldiers of the two sides came to a face-to-face situation while patrolling areas where there was a differing perception of the LAC. The protocol also agreed to expand the mechanism of border meeting points and exchanges between the two militaries. Interestingly, there was no mention of a reduction in military forces.

Unimplemented aspects

Did these agreements serve a useful purpose? Undoubtedly, they resulted in an extended period of calm along the LAC and ensured that not a shot was fired. However, two unimplemented aspects of the agreements, combined with a shift in military posture by both sides, has led to an erosion of confidence-building measures between the two armies in the past few years.

First, the differences in the alignment of the LAC could not be resolved. Attempts were made, but they failed. The two sides have also engaged in the Central sector, but there were apparent irreconcilable differences

over the Western sector, and the process stalled in 2002. Second, the agreement on reducing military forces along the LAC to the minimum was neither seriously discussed nor implemented.

In the late 1980s, when rapprochement between the two countries was being considered, the Indian Army looked towards Pakistan as the major threat. However, even at that time, papers produced by my superiors in the Military Operations Directorate stated that in about 15 years, India's primary adversary would be China. By the mid-2000s, the northern borders came into increasing focus of the military and the government.

In 2006, a decision was taken to build 73 strategic roads along the LAC. In 2010, two new divisions were raised to strengthen deployment in Arunachal Pradesh, and additional formations were deployed in Ladakh. In 2013, the Indian government sanctioned the raising of a Mountain Strike Corps for the Northern border. As infrastructure improved on the Indian side and larger forces were available for patrolling the LAC, face-offs with Chinese patrols increased. In many cases, the Chinese soldiers complained that they were being prevented from going up to areas which they had traditionally patrolled, but India was defending its perception of the LAC more robustly.

There is also a mistaken notion that the LAC is some fuzzy and unclear line. India's perception of the LAC is clearly marked on its military maps, and while the soldiers understand that there are areas of differing perception, there is no ambiguity about the line that they are tasked to defend. Some media reports point out that the Indian Army had not been patrolling in the Depsang area after the 2013 intrusion by the Chinese. I will only briefly state that this is not true.

As face-offs between the two armies became more frequent, protocols weakened. The first mani-

estation of this came in the Depsang intrusion in 2013, and the attempted intrusion at Chumar in 2014. In between Depsang and Chumar, both countries signed the Border Defence Cooperation Agreement, or the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Border Defence Cooperation (https://bit.ly/3C5yBaB), but it had little impact on the ground.

After Doklam

Even after Chumar, although protocols had weakened, they were still holding, and held out till the Doklam incident of 2017. It was after Doklam that we saw greater aggression by both sides. On August 15, 2017, videos were flashed all over the media of Indian and Chinese soldiers at Pangong Tso involved in stone-throwing. Today, the brutality of deaths along the LAC, the complete loss of trust, and disregard for the LAC by China have left all agreements in tatters.

Can we go back to a situation where both sides revert to respecting the past agreements? I think it is no longer possible because the fundamentals of the agreements — resolution of the differing perceptions of the LAC and reduction of military forces — which have been ignored over the years stand unimpaired. There seem to be irreconcilable differences over these fundamentals.

This reality is reflected in the five-point consensus arrived at in the recent meeting between the two Foreign Ministers. The two sides have agreed to "conclude new Confidence Building Measures to maintain and enhance peace and tranquillity in the border areas". This is a good step forward, although we should no longer be talking about peace and tranquillity along the LAC, but conflict prevention.

Dr. Gen. D.S. Hooda (ret.) is a former Northern Army Commander

Coronavirus fears and preconception advice

With widespread community transmission, women in particular face a risk; a health advisory is essential



M.S. SESHADRI & T. JACOB JOHN

In our preoccupation with managing the COVID-19 pandemic, we should not lose sight of special issues that may pose problems for women in the reproductive age group. The special issues are of two kinds: one that relates to medical management of pregnancy and newborn care. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) have provided guidelines to address this issue.

The second relates to the advisability of deliberately delaying pregnancy until the epidemic wanes and the disease becomes endemic. All available guidelines are silent on this issue. Is there a need for exercising a choice of timing of pregnancy? What should be wise policy for the Government of India, or for that matter any government, the ICMR and WHO on this matter?

Need for protocols, follow-up
The SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19 has a special predilection for the cells that form the inner lining of blood vessels. Therefore, organs that have a large number of blood vessels are particularly at risk. The placenta, a unique organ in pregnancy — the source of nourishment to the growing foetus — is highly vascular.

It has been clearly demonstrated that in mothers infected close to the time of delivery, the virus can infect the placenta. A small percentage of newborn babies

(1.4%) of such mothers have neonatal infection acquired from the mother. While most newborn babies do not develop clinical disease, rare neurologic problems have been described in them. In this context, it is pertinent that in Indian maternity hospitals, routine reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) testing of pregnant mothers admitted for delivery reveal that about 8-10% of mothers are indeed infected by SARS-CoV-2. The ICMR along with the professional bodies concerned should ensure that the treating teams are aware of the potential for trans-placental transmission of the virus and establish protocols for careful periodic follow-up of the newborn of infected mothers.

If the virus can infect the placenta in term pregnancy, can it not affect the placenta in the first three months (first trimester) of pregnancy? The important question that comes to mind, therefore, is whether infection of the mother during the first trimester pregnancy, the crucial period for the development of organ systems in the foetus, can cause congenital abnormalities. In the first trimester of pregnancy, many infections such as those caused by rubella and Zika virus cause severe congenital abnormalities in the foetus. Recognition of this fact led to a WHO-approved government policy of routine rubella vaccination as part of the immunisation schedule of children.

Issue of contraception

In the context of COVID-19, it is too early to say whether viral infection during the first trimester will cause congenital abnormalities but the potential for such an occurrence is real. If it is a global abnormality it would be known by

now, but if subtle, by the time the effects on the foetus are recognised, it may be too late. Therefore, there is a need to anticipate this eventuality and be prepared for it. In the epidemic context, it is wiser to be cautious and advise effective contraception to postpone pregnancies till the probability of maternal viral infection is minimal.

Cutting infection threat
What are the advantages in adopting such a policy? If women use contraception, they will not need antenatal clinic visits which, during epidemic times, pose a risk of contracting infection in the clinic. Antenatal women constitute a large proportion of subjects who need to visit hospitals regularly and considerable proportions of health-care workers at the primary and secondary levels are occupied with their care. If this demand is less because women in reproductive age group practise contraception, there will be less pressure on the health-care system which is already struggling under the burden of this epidemic. These health-care workers can be deployed for the much-needed care of COVID-19 patients, non-COVID illness and, more importantly, the ensuing COVID-19 vaccination programme, a mammoth task in India.

The lower birth rate till the epi-

demias waves will ensure that there will be fewer children in the post-epidemic phase for economically distressed families to care for and curtail disease transmission through children.

Every day about 748,000 babies are born in India. Since the outcome is unsuccessful in about half the pregnancies (embryo/foetal loss), the daily new pregnancies in India would be more than 15,00,000. With the widespread community transmission in India now, a large number of women who conceive are likely to be exposed to the virus.

A proportion of those exposed will get infected and nearly 80% of those infected will be asymptomatic or have only trivial transient symptoms. They may not come to medical attention unless a family contact has RT-PCR positive symptomatic disease. At present, in city maternity hospitals, RT-PCR positive women in the first trimester are about 10% of all infected pregnant women and likely to increase rapidly as the epidemic in India approaches its peak. Infected women should have a more intensive follow-up during their ante-natal period to identify and document any fetal abnormality. Analysis of these results will be vital to state clearly whether any abnormality is attributable to the viral infection.

The risk of exposure of the developing foetus is not just in those who come to hospital but also in all those asymptomatic or minimally symptomatic pregnant women with the viral infection. It is important, therefore, to advise all women in the reproductive age group to practise effective contraception over the next several months in order to prevent coronavirus infection during pregnancy and its potential impact on the

foetus. The ICMR and the professional bodies concerned will do well to formulate policy on this distressing issue in a coordinated and public. Women who happen to conceive in spite of the advice may have to cocoon (reverse quarantine) themselves at least for the next trimester of pregnancy in order to avoid infection.

On vaccination

It is predicted that this virus will not go away but will stay on as an endemic problem after the fury of the epidemic is over. When this occurs and when an effective and safe vaccine is available, women in the reproductive age group who have not already acquired the infection and those who do not have circulating IgG antibody to indicate that they may have had asymptomatic infection, will have to be considered for priority vaccination prior to conception.

Finally, while this problem will be huge in countries with a high birth rate such as India and China, it will also be a public health problem in countries with a low birth rate, where governments are concerned about "population wealth". The ICMR and governments globally would do well to assess the situation, review all available scientific evidence and formulate and circulate an appropriate health advisory. India has the challenge and opportunity of adopting this policy and voicing its opinion in WHO.

M.S. Seshadri is former Professor and HOD, Clinical Endocrinology and Department, CMC Hospital, Vellore, and is currently Medical Director, Thirumalai Mission Hospital, Ranipet, Tamil Nadu. T. Jacob John is former Professor and HOD, Clinical Virology Department, CMC Hospital, Vellore and former President, Indian Academy of Pediatrics

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.

Victims of slander

The Supreme Court Judge, Justice N.V. Ramana, is right in his concern (Inside pages, "Judges are becoming victims of gossip", September 13). Such malicious acts will definitely tell upon the morale of judges and also on the entire judiciary. Unfortunately, many political parties and anti-social elements use social platforms to further their

agendas and fan hatred. It is an irony that the language, gestures, threats, and insinuations used by these forces have nothing "social" about them. As a corollary, our democratic and secular fabric will, in the long run, be affected by this. Imposing a blanket ban on these social media arms may not be the only solution. But before holding big events such as the general election, a ban may

become necessary.

M. SANKARAKRISHNAN, Hyderabad

I can only recollect the Editorial page article (https://bit.ly/32aqQ8b) in *The Hindu*, titled Judicial appointments & disappointments (August 18, 2020), by eminent jurist, Justice V.R. Krishna Murthy. It is a piece most appropriate. D.A. ABUL, Chennai

Media's role

The media must be held accountable for the kind of narratives. Debate and discussion, especially on television, appear to be based on mere gossip and speculation. Even in the midst of a pandemic, journalists seem to be breaking norms as if ITRP is the prime goal. The delivery of justice is the duty of the state and the judiciary and a media trial

is most unfair. The fourth estate is supposed to deliver facts in an unbiased manner and leave it to the audience to interpret it in whichever way it wants. The media should take care to follow the "norms of journalistic conduct" given its power and influence. But with great power also comes great responsibility. SUDHAKARACHANDRAN, Chennai

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:
An article titled "A counter-condition of Eurasian powers" ("Profiles" page, Sept. 13, 2020) erroneously gave the year of admission of India and Pakistan into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as 2005. It should have been 2007.
The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-24848297/28576300; E-mail: readers.editor@thehindu.co.in

Exploiting the Chinese exit

In the absence of Chinese tech, the primary Indian IT objective must shift to providing for Indians



SIDDHARTH PAI

The current India-China border stand-off has expanded watchful Indian eyes into cyberspace; but the Chinese put up blinding shields on their own Internet territory more than a decade ago. The Chinese government began erecting censorship barriers (what I like to call the Great Internet Wall of China) and banned several popular Western websites and applications years ago.

In January 2010, Google announced that in response to a hacking attack from within China on its servers, it was no longer willing to censor searches in China and would pull out of the country completely. Meanwhile, in the intervening years since Google and others were forced out, the Chinese Internet market exploded, and has grown to over 900 million users, most of them on mobile (paradoxically via Google's Android) from just over 300 million in early 2010. This is according to the China Internet Network Information Center, a branch of the country's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology.

China's lead in hindsight, China's censors look like super long-range economic planners and technology strategists. The Great Internet Wall did not filter and screen Western content so much as it insulated Chinese entrepreneurs from Big Tech in Silicon Valley. The Chinese web market was left with substantial appetites for Internet-based social, commerce, and lifestyle services which Big Tech could not fulfil. Home-grown firms such as WeChat and Alibaba had a field day building apps that were at first faithful reproductions of Silicon Valley, but soon morphed into distinctly Chinese applications tailored solely to the home market.

Baidu has replaced Google in China. Youku Tudou is YouTube, and Xiaohongshu is a version of Instagram from which users can shop for goods directly. WeChat began as a



simple messaging app, but is now many things for the Chinese (social media, news, messaging, payments, and digital commerce).

As far back as 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama released a strategic plan which addressed many issues, but the most striking part of this report is that it appeared the Chinese had learnt their lesson from failing to make themselves an IT outsourcing services superpower like India had.

According to the 2016 White House report, the Chinese have leaptfrogged even the U.S. in AI research, especially in the components of "neural networks" and "deep learning". In this case, the intellectual property being produced actually belongs to China and is not a faithful duplicate of someone else's product or technology. This has far-reaching implications. Current affairs show us that the U.S. is likely to follow India's lead by banning Chinese apps and technology companies.

With the rise of Jio, and the response from its competitors, the widening reach of Internet connection across the country will provide hundreds of millions of non-urban Indians with fluid access to the Internet. India now has the lowest Internet data costs in the world. In its attempt to dominate the rest of the world, the Chinese Internet industry desperately needs India's freshly minted 500-plus million netizens to continue to act as a training ground for the AI algorithms they put together. China's Internet ecosystem is entirely self-created, self-run, and self-to be banned apps such as TikTok and PUBG worldwide – adding to the user base of 900-plus million Chinese netizens whose data they already have exclusive access to.

The decision to ban such apps in India is not only a geopolitical move but also a strategic trade maneuver that can have significant economic impact. Banning these Chinese websites and applications to the Indian public effectively allows our home-grown IT talent to focus on the newly arrived Internet user. Big tech firms from Silicon Valley and China in both hardware and software have been in a tussle over the Indian consumer, but India's focus remains on exporting IT services while paying little attention to servicing our own nation's tech market.

Most alarmingly, while we have spent the last two decades exporting the bulk of our technology services to developed countries in the West, the vacuum created as the Indian Internet grew has been filled by American Big Tech and by the Chinese. After the removal of more than 18 Chinese apps, Indian techies have started trying to fill the holes with copycat replacement websites and applications. But faithful copies are not enough for us to make full use of China's exit.

The primary Indian IT objective must shift from servicing others to providing for ourselves. In the absence of Chinese tech, Indian entrepreneurs should not simply look to replace what the exiting firms have so far been providing. They should focus instead on providing services and products of high quality that will be used by everyday Indians across the country. The aim of providing netizens with the same services across diverse markets is overarching – regional barriers created by language exist within our own nation. These provide an accretion of excellent smaller markets, with opportunities for specialised Internet services

created for a local community, by the community itself.

The fundamental focus of the new digital products that plan to emerge in the growing market should be to provide for hyper-regional necessities and preferences. With this in mind, there are several commercial opportunities available. For example, apps and services that provide specific market prices, local train and bus routes, allow for non-traditional banking and lending, education, health, online sales, classified advertising, and so on.

It's hyper-local, hyper-regional Accessibility is also crucial. With the rise in migrant work and labour all over the country, a news or banking app with, say, an Odia interface should work everywhere that Odia-speaking people migrate to. However, national accessibility on its own will not make an app a game changer. Indians are savvy enough to know what a world class app is.

If we create hyper-local and hyper-regional services of high quality and great accessibility that are also portable across our linguistic diversity, we are far more likely to succeed in creating one of the strongest Internet markets in the world, rather than creating copycat apps or apps that only cater to English speakers.

Technology companies all over the world have focused their efforts on the 15% of the world's population with deep pockets while largely ignoring the other six billion denizens of the world's population. Some sympathetic noises about 'emerging' markets are made, but the waters remain largely untended.

If we go forward with the aim of servicing our own, India's experiences as a modernising power are of great use to the bulk of the world's population, which lives in penury when compared to its western counterparts. We can export our "India stack" to other countries in the "south", such as those in Africa and Latin America. We have successfully done this before with our outstanding railway technology. There is no reason we cannot pull off the same achievement with our home-grown Internet power.

Siddharth Pai is founder of *Silicon Capital*, a venture capital firm focused on Indian Deep Tech and Science

FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

Those subversive lines

Cartoonists have been a critical voice throughout contemporary history



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

Like every other professional, I too learn from best practices. I have learnt a lot from the work of Michael Geller, a former ombudsman at *The Washington Post* and at the Public Broadcasting Service, in handling various complaints from readers. He once said, "An ombudsman should not be the person to take a punch, if necessary, not just deliver one, and there is also an independent voice to counter the daily claims of 'fake news' and to defend, when appropriate, against the sea of unfair and inaccurate criticism."

Complaints about two cartoons

I was reminded of Geller's wise counsel when I received two complaints within a span of 20 minutes about cartoons published in *The Hindu* over the past week. The first complaint was from Dr. P. Rajagopalan from Mysore, Chennai. He wrote: "I am shocked and outraged beyond belief by two cartoons – one involving the Prime Minister dooming democracy to death and the other showing the NSA (National Security Adviser) as an attack dog rounding up innocents, criminals, activists and journalists with [the] Home Minister (like a Nazi) holding the leash, which were published in the September 7th and 8th issues, respectively, of your newspaper." He went on to suggest that the cartoons should have been aimed only at former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay Gandhi and not at the present Prime Minister or the Home Minister.

Vijay S. Raghavan, a regular writer from Navi Mumbai, wrote: "I wish to take objections to two cartoons by Surendra in *The Hindu* in the last few days. In one cartoon, Mr. Modi is shown cutting off the hook line from which a rope is hanging down and held tightly at the other end by a lady illustrated as Democracy. However hard the lady pulls, including *The Hindu*, tries to show the Modi government as anti-democratic and dictatorial, [what is seen] by the public is the other way round." The cartoon in question was drawn by Satwik Gade and not by Surendra. Mr. Raghavan also took exception to the cartoon that criticised the way the NSA is being used to silence dissent. He wrote: "Just because some official steps were taken to

control law and order, it does not mean that Mr. Modi is acting against democratic norms."

Talking truth to power

Readers must remember that the excesses of one era do not justify the excesses of another. Cartoonists have been a critical voice throughout contemporary history. For instance, Abu Abraham drew some really subversive cartoons, including one that showed the President of India busy signing documents from his bathtub during the Emergency, which were later compiled as an anthology titled *The Games of Emergency*. When C.G. Shukla, the Information and Broadcasting Minister during the Emergency, justified censorship and said "it was needed to stop the spread of rumour", Abraham famously retorted: "But why stop the spread of rumour?" It is true that, in the words of another Information and Broadcasting Minister, Lal Krishna Advani, some journalists were "told to bend, but they chose to crawl" during the Emergency. The question before us is clear: do we want Abu Abrahams or those who choose to crawl when asked to bend?

C. Rammanohar Reddy, a senior journalist and a former news ombudsman, has a very positive take on Mr. Surendra's cartoons. On Mr. Surendra's cartoon on the media trial of actor Rhea Chakraborty, Mr. Reddy tweeted: "A picture tells 10,000 words not a 1,000 words. Shame on Indian Journalism... sendrarcartoon" a biting comment."

It is important that we not only understand the role of a cartoonist in our democratic space but also internalise it. In his excellent exposition on cartoons and cartoonists, Jonathan Moreno del Rio said: "Cartoonists are more than mere journalists who explore news and current affairs through their illustrations. They are not a source of information for the public; instead they are participants in public debate and engaged in commenting rather than reporting." Taking a historical look at political cartoons, Harry Katz, former Chief Curator of Prints and Photographs at the Library of Congress, said: "In an age when reality is defined by sound bites and spin doctors, pandering pundits, and partisan politics, political cartoonists must remain relevant and above the fray, taking truth to power in all its forms and clarifying with insight, intelligence and accuracy the complex issues and events shaping our daily lives."

I think Mr. Surendra's cartoons live up to Mr. Katz's prescription.

readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

Reducing India's cancer burden

We need to focus on risk reduction, early detection, and programme and policy solutions



BALRAM BHARGAVA & PRASHANT MATHUR

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) National Centre for Disease Informatics and Research (NCDIR) National Cancer Registry Programme Report of August 2020 has estimated that the number of cancer cases in India in 2020 is 13.9 lakh. India has seen a steady rise in cancer cases over many decades. A 2017 report showed that India's cancer burden increased 2.6 times between 1990 to 2016, and deaths due to cancers doubled during the time.

Almost two-thirds of these cancer cases are at late stages. In men, the most common cancers are of the lung, oral cavity, stomach and oesophagus, while in women, breast, cervix, ovary and gall bladder cancers are the most common. Tobacco use (in all forms) is a major avoidable risk factor for the development of cancer in 25% of cancer cases. Other important risk factors include alcohol use, inappropriate diet, low physical activity, obesity, and pollution.

Cancer causes loss of lives and also has a tremendous socioeconomic impact. Reducing cancer is a prerequisite for addressing social and economic inequity, stimulating economic growth and accelerating sustainable development. But merely investing in cancer treatment is not an economically viable option. We need to focus on three key aspects: risk reduction, early detection and programme and policy solutions.

Community empowerment

Cancer occurrence is a complex interplay of host and environmental determinants, which makes it difficult to predict it at an individual level. But it is estimated that nearly 50%-60% of cancer cases can be avoided by tackling the modifiable risk factors effectively. Community empowerment through a multisectoral approach that brings together government, private practitioners and civil society to increase health literacy and promote certain behaviour can go a long way in reducing potential risk factors. Improved awareness can also prevent stigma associated to the disease. We need to ensure that health systems are strengthened so

that there is greater access to screening and vaccination, early detection, and timely, affordable treatment.

The importance of data

Population health approaches are also relevant for large-scale impact. Programme and policy-level solutions need to be driven by data. The information collected through the National Cancer Registry Programme has been used effectively over the years to advocate for better access to screening, early detection, referral, treatment and palliative care services. It has also helped shape cancer research in the country, which is of crucial importance to guide our efforts on cancer prevention and control. Making cancer a notifiable disease could be one of the ways to help drive this research further by providing greater access to accurate, relevant data that can drive policy decisions.

India is committed to achieving a one-third reduction in cancer-related deaths by 2030 as part of the Sustainable Development Goals, and it has made considerable progress. India has improved in some areas, such as personal hygiene, which are distant drivers of cancer. Government programmes such as Ayushman Bharat, Swasthya Bharat, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Poshan Abhiyan and Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janashakti Pariyojana and initiatives such as FSSAI's new labelling and display regulations and drug price control can encourage inter-sectoral and multi-sectoral action. Other initiatives such as the National Health Policy, the National Tobacco Control Programme, and the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke are also paving the way for progress.

Our approach should not simply focus on diagnostics, treatment modalities and vaccines, but emphasise inclusivity in thinking and action for equitable solutions that can greatly reduce the impact of cancer across all socioeconomic levels in the country.

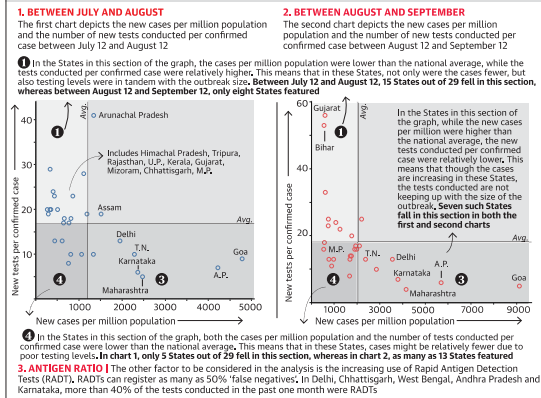
Dr. Balram Bhargava is Director General, National Centre for Disease Informatics and Research, and Dr. Prashant Mathur is Director, ICMR-NCDIR, Bengaluru



DATA POINT

Falling behind

With the number of new COVID-19 cases increasing at a quick pace in India, more States have found it tough to keep up their testing levels in tandem with their outbreak sizes in September, compared to August. Of the 29 States/UTs analysed, the tests conducted per confirmed case were lower than the national average in 12 States in August, whereas in September, 20 States featured in the list. By **Sumanant Sen and Vignesh Radhakrishnan**



FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 14, 1970

Karunanidhi's reply

Mr. M. Karunanidhi, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister said here today (Madras, September 13) that States could hope to solve their many problems only by getting greater autonomy. In his concluding remarks at the two-day State autonomy conference, sponsored by the D.M.K., Mr. Karunanidhi said that his party was trying to divert people's attention from the burning problems facing the State by holding a conference of this type. He said the Congress (O) was doing propaganda that the conference had been convened to hide the D.M.K.'s inability to solve the unemployment problem or check the rise in prices of essential articles. The aim of the conference was to show how they were unable to solve these problems because of concentration of power at the Centre. The Chief Minister asked the D.M.K. volunteers to tour villages and enlist the support of the people to their demand for greater powers for States. He hailed the meeting as a great success in view of participation of leaders from different parts of the country. He requested these leaders to take steps in their respective States to get the backing of the people. No longer could any one say that this demand was made only by the D.M.K.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

SEPT. 14, 1920

Land revenue and administration

(From an editorial)

The report on the settlement of Land Revenue in the Madras Presidency for 1918-1919 is as arid a record as any similar annual issued by a department of Government. On account of a tradition which has been long established, the annual reports of Governmental operations continue to be presented in a form which repels every one except the unwary statistician. With a little more care chronicles of facts and figures might be made to evoke greater attention so that they would serve to educate the average citizen as to the ways and means of Government. Apart from the uninteresting and unhelpful under reference comes out so late after the respective period has passed that it would merit a comment but for its proving another proverbial characteristic of departmental documents. Going into the body of the report, we find that the total area under crops during the year under report showed a considerable decrease from the normal. The Board of Revenue attributes the fall to the season, which was generally unfavourable from an agricultural point of view.

8



THE INDIAN EXPRESS, MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2020

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

THE DOG WHISTLE

Names of Opposition politicians, civil society members, in riot chargesheet criminalises protest, corrodes democracy

THE DELHI POLICE says that neither CPM general secretary Sitaram Yechury nor Swaraj Abhiyan leader Yogendra Yadav, neither economist Jayati Chosh nor Delhi University professor Apoorwanand, or documentary film-maker Rahul Roy, are named as accused or co-conspirators in a supplementary chargesheet filed in connection with its probe into the February riots in Northeast Delhi. The Delhi Police is right — and wrong. It is true that the two political leaders, two professors and one filmmaker have only been mentioned in disclosure statements, legally inadmissible in court, of three students, facing serious charges for their alleged role in the fanning of the violence. But what is also true, and reprehensible, is the Delhi Police's dog whistle. This is part of a chargesheet filed in the case of the murder of an 18-year-old, a chargesheet that has glaring discrepancies still to be addressed. So what was the justification of including these names other than the police's — and its political masters' — crude attempt at victimising those who expressed their opposition to a discriminatory law by linking them to the violence? The unvarnished message is this: All those who protested against the Citizenship Amendment Act, which, for the first time, makes religion a criterion and excludes Muslims from the list of minorities that are promised fast-tracked citizenship, can be hounded and harassed by a police force with a political view. A police that is now trampling over vital distinctions in a democracy, and equating the protester with the rioter. One that is acting — and being seen to act — as a force that will not stop at weaponising laws to criminalise the dissenter.

The investigation of the Delhi Police into the violence in Northeast has started with a conclusion — that a conspiracy was afoot to defame and destabilise the elected government, and that it included and involved those who were protesting at the time against Muslim exclusion and relegation in the CAA and proposed nation-wide NRC. It matters little, in this narrative, what the facts are — the victims of the violence were those whom it seeks to cast in the role of perpetrators, the burnt was borne by the Muslims. It matters little, too, whether the police is eventually able to find the evidence — it won't, against individuals with as impeccable and distinguished credentials in public life as Yechury or Yadav. But in the meantime, it can unleash the due process as punishment. And send out a chilling signal, not just to Muslims, but to all those who speak for a more inclusive India, that they can speak freely, and criticise the government openly, at their own peril.

The Delhi riots case is fast becoming a pivotal test for the Delhi Police. It needs to shine the light on the complexities within. Last week, as this newspaper reported, the Delhi Police Crime Branch questioned a policeman posted with the Delhi Armed Police while investigating the death of 24-year-old Faizan, after he, along with two other men, was allegedly made to sing the national anthem and Vande Mataram by a group of policemen. But this is only a small first step. It must remember that at stake is its endangered credibility as a professional force in a country where — and here is a distinction that will not and cannot be obliterated — there is rule of law, not merely rule by law.

ROAD FROM DOHA

Uncertainties ahead are unfortunately easier to foresee than any outcome that can herald real peace in Afghanistan

THERE WAS NO shortage of irony when the Taliban and the Afghan delegation took their place at the table for the "intra-Afghan talks" in a palatial setting in Doha, Qatar on September 12. It was a coincidence that the talks began a day after the 19th anniversary of 9/11, the day of the attack on the Twin Towers in New York that shook the world, and ended Taliban rule in Afghanistan as the US angrily declared a UN Security Council-backed "war on terror". The US is now hurrying to end that war with a forced marriage between two incompatibles — a Western-style presidential Islamic democracy backed by the international community, and medieval fundamentalist Islamic militants — in time for President Donald Trump to take home most American troops in Afghanistan just before the presidential elections. After two decades, the Taliban see themselves as having won this war. The Taliban delegation at the talks calls itself the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the name of its 1996-2001 government. It does not recognise the Afghan government, whose negotiators are referred to as the Islamic Republic delegation. In any case, the Taliban delegation seems more government-like than the government's, whose composition reflects the pulls and pressures on President Ashraf Ghani. The government delegation has said it wants a ceasefire first, but the Taliban would hardly want to surrender their most powerful card at the get-go. Just in the first week of September, Taliban fighters were busy making forays into territory that is not under their control, for instance in the Panjshir province in the north. With all these elements swirling in the mix, the uncertainties ahead are unfortunately easier to foresee than any outcome that can herald real peace.

India, which has a long relationship with Afghanistan and its people, has been an onlooker in the process. The reason is that Pakistan, its ally, its ability to deliver the Taliban to the talks table, was more valuable to the US than any peace in Afghanistan. India, with its suspicion of the Taliban as a proxy of the Pakistan Army and ISI, could offer. India has so far said it will not engage with the Taliban until they enter the political mainstream. But with his virtual participation in the opening ceremony of the talks, and his remarks reiterating Delhi's backing for an "Afghan-owned, Afghan-led" settlement, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar has sought to signal that India remains an important regional player. But at the moment Delhi has little choice but to wait and watch, see how far the process goes, and how it might reshape the region.

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



HARSH MANDER

TWO DRAMATICALLY CONTRASTING narratives have been floated about what, during the third week of February in north-east Delhi, ignited the fires of the largest outbreak of Hindu-Muslim violence in Delhi since Partition.

The version of the Delhi Police — and of the Union home ministry which controls it — is elaborated in its affidavit to the Delhi High Court, responding to a petition by this writer seeking action against those whose hate speeches had incited violence. The police allege that the episodes of violence were "not instigated in a spur of moment (sic)... but were carefully engineered by mischievous elements... who, in pursuit of their motivated agendas, instilled a false fear and panic in the minds of a section of society and provoked instigated them to take law and order in their hands and resort to violence". The protesters, according to the Delhi Police, sought to "execute a secessionist movement in the country by propagating an armed rebellion" in which "the anti-government feelings of the Muslims will be used at an appropriate time to destabilise the government".

There are many intervenor strands in this official version. The first relates to the nature of the protests against the trial of the Citizenship Amendment Act, the National Register of Citizens and the National Population Register. The police take a political view that objections mounted by protesters were not only unfounded but also mischievous, aimed at fomenting fear and panic among Indian Muslims. They suggest that Muslims were misled by leaders of the movement who deliberately misinterpreted the benign changes in the citizenship regime as targeting Indian Muslims. They regard the movement to be a conspiracy against the Union government and the nation. They do not accept that the movement was decentralised, leaderless, spontaneous and mostly peaceful. They claim that it is recurring language of peace, non-violence and constitutionalism was a facade for a sinister secessionist plan to stoke communal violence, especially when President Donald Trump was visiting India, to discredit the Narendra Modi government and the nation before world public opinion, and ultimately to mount an armed rebellion to overthrow the elected government. And they affirm that the Delhi police acted with restraint, fairness and firmness.

Nearly seven months after Delhi violence, a continuing attempt to target dissenting voices

Asazi had become a defining rallying call of the anti-CAA protests. This was the azadi, or freedom, promised in the constitution — liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship. Those young people who organised the protests, bearing portraits of Gandhi in one hand and Ambedkar in the other, are today being summoned and interrogated by the police, and jailed without bail as rioters, conspirators and secessionists. While rejecting her bail plea, a judge of the Delhi High Court reprimanded one young activist. "When you choose to play with embers", he admonished her, "you cannot blame the wind".

This narrative is repeated, sometimes using identical language, in charge-sheets filed by the Delhi Police; also in statements of the BJP leadership; and in reports and books of several individuals and groups sympathetic to the BJP-RSS, and of the National Human Rights Commission. There are also selective leaks of statements before the police (which are inadmissible as evidence) to sympathetic sections of the media, claiming that respected intellectuals like Professor Apoorwanand and younger activists like Umar Khalid incited and organised Muslim women to riot.

Only one official report tells an entirely different story. This is of the Delhi Minorities Commission (DMC). It may not be a coincidence that the Delhi Police filed a sedition charge against the chairperson of the DMC based on some of his tweets. The DMC agrees with the Delhi Police that the communal violence was the result of a conspiracy. It also traces the origins of the violence to a chronology dating back two months, when protests against the CAA-NRC started in Jama Millia Islamia. But it sees an entirely different conspiracy, one which was "seemingly planned and directed to teach a lesson to a certain community (read Muslims) which dared to protest against a discriminatory law". The DMC report dubs the CAA as discriminatory, and asserts the right and acknowledges the agency of Muslims to protest, affirming that they were not merely misled into protesting by false representations of the law. It underlines that most protests were peaceful. It holds guilty for the violence leaders of the BJP who created a climate of hate through their speeches during the Delhi elections, including by the Union Home Minister, and "the incendiary threats and ultimatums of one Kapil Mishra".

The report also censures the Delhi Police both for "supporting the rioters, hitting people and damaging properties and CCTV cameras", and for attempts to "shield the planners, instigators, leaders and perpetrators of the violence and turn the victims into culprits". Through their charge-sheets against the Muslim accused, the police have "changed the entire narrative... to one of violence on both sides rather than a pogrom that was in fact carried out". The government's own data reveals that 77 per cent of the civilians killed were Muslim, 85-95 per cent of the properties damaged

WORDLY WISE

IF YOU WANT A VISION OF THE FUTURE, IMAGINE A BOOT STAMPING ON A HUMAN FACE — FOREVER.

— GEORGE ORWELL

Who stoked the embers?

was Muslim, and only Muslim shrines were desecrated. The police does not explain that if indeed the violence was pre-planned by those opposed to the CAA (read Muslims), why was the "spontaneous" violence by those supporting the law and opposed to the sit-ins (read Hindus) so much more deadly?

The Muslim victim-survivors of the February carnage are convinced that they were punished for protesting the new citizenship regime which discriminates against them because of their religious identity. Many testify that when rioters, and sometimes the police, assaulted them, they taunted them often with these words: Here, take your azadi.

Asazi had become a defining rallying call of the anti-CAA protests. This was the azadi, or freedom, promised in the constitution — liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship. Those young people who organised the protests, bearing portraits of Gandhi in one hand and Ambedkar in the other, are today being summoned and interrogated by the police, and jailed without bail as rioters, conspirators and secessionists.

While rejecting her bail plea, a judge of the Delhi High Court reprimanded one young activist. "When you choose to play with embers", he admonished her, "you cannot blame the wind".

As threats of arrest and incarceration on charges of sedition and armed rebellion shooed young dissenting voices, who will ask: "What lit these embers? Who stoked the wind?"

Today, it may appear that the calls for azadi are silenced. There is no reverential mass reading of the preamble of the Constitution, no waving of the national flag as an icon of equal citizenship, no claiming of the national anthem as a hymn of protest.

Young people and working-class Muslim women fought for the defence of what was finest in our freedom struggle, in defence of the pledges of our Constitution. Many of us followed in their footsteps. I am convinced that the government, even by criminalising our peaceful protests, will not succeed in quelling dissent. It will never silence our voices, nor weaken our resolve, to build India into a country which is kind, equal and just.

Mander is a human rights worker and writer



VALSON THAMPY

SWAMI AGNIVESH (1939-2020) spent the last two months of his life in hospital. During this period, we talked to each other almost daily on phone. Never once did he mention the health crisis he was battling. Every word he said was about what needed to be done. He lived and died a quintessential activist.

Our paths crossed a quarter-century ago, accidentally, as it then seemed. Today, it seems willed by destiny. A coincidence, wrote Arthur Koestler, is "two events held together by an unseen hand". That unseen hand never departed from our association. What struck me first was his rippling vitality, his infectious enthusiasm, his quixotic optimism. He had no patience with the academia, which he had quit at the age of 27. "Your tribe," he told me, "wastes time on things that are not under their control, for instance in the Panjshir province in the north. With all these elements swirling in the mix, the uncertainties ahead are unfortunately easier to foresee than any outcome that can herald real peace."

His heart was with the poor. I was not surprised, therefore, that he was labelled a communist — a sort of saviour-for-all Trojan horse in religion. Swami had a knack for turning a slap on the face into a pat on the back. He wore this slur with alacrity. He quoted the South American bishop, Helder Camara, in this connection: "When I give food to the poor they call me a saint; when I ask why they are poor, they call me a Communist." He was called a Marxist too, a Christian, a Muslim and the like. There was some truth in all of these, for he loved everyone, including the Maoists.

MAN OF SPIRITUALITY & REASON

Swami Agnivesh believed that a theocratic state was dangerous

He disapproved their ways, but he regarded them as fellow human beings. That went for Christians, Muslims and Hindus as well.

Arguably, the most unorthodox thing about him was his instinct for politics. His detractors held that his religion was a camouflage. But, to him, politics was to spiritual concerns what technology was to science. It secured effectiveness. He should have learned from the life of Gandhi that mixing spirituality and politics — especially standing on spiritual ideals in the practice of politics — is the riskiest thing to do. Like Gandhi, he paid for it, at the age end of his life.

What is the legacy that this great soul leaves us? From Agnivesh I learned that life is worth nothing if one's freedom is compromised for any purpose. Mahatma Dayanand and his role-model, Swami identified a heroic commitment to truth as the backbone of his spiritual personality. He used to quote Jesus' words, "The truth will set you free." The flip-side was that he wouldn't fit into any system. He was hated even by a section of the Arya Samaj. But millions loved him.

The most crucial thing for him was the idea of God. He believed that misconceiving God was the root cause of religious decay. To him, all religions were equally corrupt in this respect. He concluded that freedom from religious dogma was the only way for practising religion. To him, love for fellow human beings — especially the downtrodden —

was the hallmark of love for God. This made him equate godliness with social spirituality. He was a votary of secular democracy. He fought to the bitter end the communalisation of the state, which he deemed a crime against history. He was proud of his Vedic vision but believed that a theocratic state was ominous for what it portended. He believed that secularism in India would succeed only on a firm spiritual footing. Spirituality, unlike religion, is guided by reason. Reason is universal, integrative. Faith is divisive.

He was keen to initiate an objective, rational debate on religion. We had been planning to bring out a publication. As he got admitted to the hospital, he reminded me of its urgency. He took an active part in the progress of this work from his hospital bed to a surprising extent. He read each chapter and offered comments. I feel gratified that the first draft of the manuscript could be completed before Swami's health took an irreversible turn. I left it to him to title the book. "Let's call it," he said, "Children of Eternal Spirit, United". So it stands.

I feel grateful and privileged to have shared a life lived so fully, richly, vitally. Shakespeare's words ring in my mind as I think of this great soul: "Here was a man indeed; when comes such another?"

Thampy was principal of St Stephen's College, Delhi

SEPTEMBER 14, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO

UP'S FRAGILE PEACE

THE ARMY AND Border Security Force units posted in the riot affected areas of Aligarh, Allahabad and Moradabad have been given orders to shoot at sight persons indulging in arson and violence. An official spokesperson of the Home Ministry said that these units have been asked to take up positions at strategic points in these three cities to ensure that there is no breach of peace by anti-social elements. The spokesperson said in view of the recurring cases of violence in these areas. In Aligarh peace was disturbed when there was exchange fire and bricks were hurled in Bulki locality of the Shanti Gate Police station.

PESSIMISM ON ASSAM

THE ALL ASSAM Gana Sangram Parishad, one of the sponsors of the agitation on the foreign nationals' issue in Assam made it clear that there was no reason to be over-enthusiastic about the ensuing talks between the Centre and the agitation leaders. The government while extending invitation to the AAGSP has carefully omitted any mention about the question of withdrawal of repressive action against the employees participating in the agitation. "Biraj Sharma, convenor of the AAGSP said. He asserted that the talks should be on honourable terms without any chance of prejudice to any section of the agitators. The All Assam Students Union has announced its decision to attend the talks. The AAGSP has, however, deferred its decision on the matter till September 15.

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KARAN SINGH QUITS

KARAN SINGH, CONGRESS Lok Sabha MP, announced his decision to quit the party and said that he would sit in the House as an independent. He said that there was the need for at least a few persons in public life to stand back for a while from the din and controversy of party politics to take a broader view of national politics. But he also said that the performance of the new government "belied the high expectation that had flown from the massive mandate".



THE INDIAN EXPRESS, MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2020

THE IDEAS PAGE

Nurturing India

For 'POSHAN Maah' to contribute towards a malnutrition-free country, government will need a multi-dimensional approach. The challenge has become bigger with the outbreak of COVID-19



Home Minister Amit Shah have launched a campaign declaring the month of September as 'POSHAN Maah 2020'. By inviting citizens to send nutritional recipes, the campaign aims to create awareness about the POSHAN Abhiyan through community mobilisation. But how far it can help solve India's massive malnutrition problem remains an open question.

Here we delve deeper into the issue of malnutrition, especially amongst children below the age of five years. We also present some research evidence on its key determinants, and based on that evidence, outline what policy measures could help India overcome this problem of malnutrition by 2030. Incidentally, ending all forms of malnutrition by 2030 is also the target of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-2) of Zero Hunger.

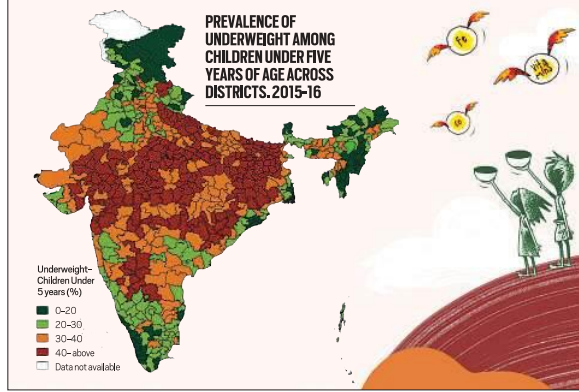
Globally, there were 673 million undernourished people of which 189.2 million (28 per cent) were in India in 2017-19, as per the combined report of FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO (FAO, et al. 2020) on "The state of Food Security and Nutrition in the World". Additionally, India accounts for 28 per cent (40.3 million) of the world's stunted children (low height-for-age) under five years of age, and 43 per cent (20.1 million) of the world's wasted children (low weight-for-height) in 2019.

As a proportion of India's own population, around 14 per cent were undernourished during 2017-19. In China and Brazil, the prevalence of under-nourishment in their respective total population was less than 2.5 per cent.

In India, the problem has been more severe amongst children below the age of five years. As per the National Family Health Survey (NFHS, 2015-16), the proportion of underweight and stunted children was as high as 35.8 per cent and 38.4 per cent respectively. In several districts of Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and even Gujarat, the proportion of underweight children was more than 40 per cent (see map).

The National Nutrition Mission (NNM), also known as the POSHAN Abhiyan, aims to reduce stunting, underweight and low birth weight each by 2 per cent per annum by 2022. However, the Global Burden of Disease Study 1990-2017 has estimated that if the current trend continues, India cannot achieve these targets under NNM by 2022.

We have done deeper research using unit-level data of NFHS (2015-16) with a sample of 2,19,796 children under five years of age on the determinants of malnutrition. We find that the mothers' education, particularly higher education, has the strongest inverse association with under-nutrition. Women's education has a multiplier effect not only on household food security but also on the child's



Despite India's considerable improvement in female literacy, only 13.7 per cent of women have received higher education (NFHS, 2015-16). This is way below several countries at comparable income levels. Therefore, programmes that promote women's higher education such as liberal scholarships for women need to be accorded a much higher priority. Lack of basic facilities in school infrastructure such as separate toilets for girls, as well as the distance between the school and home, are major factors for higher dropout rates among girls. State governments need to promote schooling via the provision of separate sanitation facilities for girls in schools. Initiatives like the distribution of bicycles to girls in secondary and high schools could help reduce the dropout rates among girls.

The second key determinant of child under-nutrition is the wealth index, which subsumes access to sanitation facilities and safe drinking water. WASH initiatives, that is, safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, are critical for improving child nutritional outcomes. In this context, it was commendable that the Prime Minister launched the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan in October 2014 to eliminate open defecation and bring about behavioural changes in hygiene and sanitation practices. In five years of the Abhiyan, as per government records, rural sanitation coverage has gone from 38.7 per cent in 2014 to 100 per cent in 2019, while the sanitation coverage in urban cities has gone up to 99 per cent by September 2020. This remarkable achievement of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, subject to third-party evaluations, is expected to have a multiplier effect on nutritional outcomes. However, behavioural change towards personal hygiene still needs to be promoted at the grassroots level.

The third factor is leveraging agricultural policies and programmes to be more "nutrition-sensitive" and reinforcing diet diversifica-

We have done deeper research using unit-level data of NFHS (2015-16) (with a sample of 2,19,796 children under five years of age) on the determinants of malnutrition. We find that the mothers' education, particularly higher education, has the strongest inverse association with under-nutrition. Women's education has a multiplier effect not only on household food security but also on the child's feeding practice and

safety nets in India are based in favour of staples (rice and wheat). They need to provide a more diversified food basket, including coarse grains, millets, pulses and bio-fortified staples to improve the nutritional status of pre-school children and women of reproductive age. Bio-fortification is very cost-effective in improving the diet of households and the nutritional status of children. The Harvest Plus programme of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) has implemented it successfully in many countries around the world. The Harvest-Plus programme of CGIAR can work with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) to grow new varieties of nutrient-rich staple food crops such as iron and zinc bio-fortified pearl millet, zinc-bio fortified rice and wheat; iron bio-fortified beans in India.

Lastly, the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding and the introduction of complementary foods and a diversified diet after the first six months is essential to meet the nutritional needs of infants and ensure appropriate growth and cognitive development of children. Access and utilisation of prenatal and postnatal health care services also play a significant role in curbing undernutrition among children. Anganwadi workers and community participation can bring significant improvements in child-caring practices and antenatal care for mother and children through comprehensive awareness programmes.

For 'POSHAN Maah' to contribute towards the holistic nourishment of children and a malnutrition free India by 2030, the government needs to address the multi-dimensional determinants of malnutrition on an urgent basis. The challenge has become bigger with the outbreak of COVID-19. Can India meet this challenge? Only time will tell.

Galati is Infosys Chair Professor for Agriculture and Jose is

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"What justification, we ask, is there for use of lethal force against fishermen who may have, accidentally or otherwise, strayed only 50 yards into the (Indian) border, that too in a river with strong currents, where the demarcations are harder to delineate?"

— DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

Diminishing Parliament

Cancelling Question Hour erodes constitutional mandate of parliamentary oversight over executive action



P. RAJEEV

THE DECISION to go without "Question Hour" during the Monsoon Session of Parliament, beginning September 14, has evoked serious concerns about the democratic functioning of the institution. Question Hour is not only an opportunity for the members to raise questions, but it is a parliamentary device primarily meant for exercising legislative control over executive actions. It is also a device to criticise government policies and programmes, ventilate public grievances, expose the government's lapses, extract promises from ministers, and thereby, ensure accountability and transparency in governance.

The annals of history of parliamentary proceedings and functioning in India remind us of the strength and scope of Question Hour as an effective armour to raise the concerns of the people. A classic illustration of this role can be gleaned from this exchange in the Lok Sabha in November 1957.

Ran. Subhas. Singh (Congress): "Whether LIC had purchased large blocks of shares from different companies owned by Mundhra?"

Deputy Minister of Finance: "Towards the end of June 1957, the corporation had invested Rs 1,26,86,100 in concerns in which Shri HD Mundhra is said to have an interest."

Supplementary question by Feroze Gandhi (Congress): "May I know whether it is a fact that a few months ago shares were purchased at the higher price than the market of those very shares on that particular day?"

T. Krishnamachari (Union Minister for Finance): "I have been told that no such thing has happened."

These words soon came to haunt the minister himself and cost him his job in Jawaharlal Nehru's Cabinet. Dissatisfied with the minister's reply, Feroze Gandhi initiated a half-an-hour discussion on the subject. This single instance points out the poignant relevance of the half-an-hour discussion and the contributing character of Question Hour in the proceedings.

In the discussion, Feroze Gandhi unfolded the story of murky deals involving LIC. The government was forced to appoint a commission of enquiry headed by Justice M C Chagla. Feroze Gandhi promptly offered to be a witness and was the first to testify. Justice Chagla upheld Feroze Gandhi's contentions and said that the finance minister should take moral responsibility for what had happened. Krishnamachari resigned. This incident shows the strength and scope of the Question Hour.

The Narendra Modi government is in

dire need to avoid these type of situations. The time has come to grill this government on different issues such as its failure in handling the pandemic, the unprecedented decline in GDP and its impact on the economy, the New Education Policy, tensions at the border, rising unemployment, the miseries of migrant labour and so forth. The government is duty bound to respond to these questions in Parliament. By doing away with the Question Hour, the Modi government has opted for a face-saving measure.

The right to question the executive has been exercised by members of the House from the colonial period. The first Legislative Council in British India under the Charter Act, 1853, showed some degree of independence by giving members the power to ask questions to the executive. Later, the Indian Council Act of 1861 allowed members to elicit information by means of questions. However, it was the Indian Council Act, 1892, which formulated the rules for asking questions including short notice questions. The next stage of the development of procedures related to questions came up with the framing of rules under the Indian Council Act, 1909, which incorporated provisions for asking supplementary questions by members. The Montague-Chelmsford reforms brought forth a significant change in 1919 by incorporating a rule that the first hour of every meeting was earmarked for questions. Parliament has continued this tradition. In 1921, there was another change. The question on which a member desired to have an oral answer, was distinguished by having an asterisk, a star. This marked the beginning of starred questions.

These are democratic rights members of Parliament have enjoyed even under the colonial rule. The sad part is that this right is being denied to the elected representatives of Independent India, by the present government. This, however, is not an isolated action in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. For instance, the government passed important bills in the first session of the 17th Lok Sabha before the formation of department-related standing committees. Even the Constitution Amendment Bill on 86K was introduced without circulating copies to the members. Several important bills were passed in Finance Bills to avoid scrutiny by the Rajya Sabha. Standing committees are an extension of Parliament. Any person has the right to present his/her opinion to a Bill during the process of consideration.

The government's actions erode the constitutional mandate of parliamentary oversight over executive actions as envisaged under Article 75 (3) of the Indian Constitution. Moreover, such actions prevent the members of Parliament from carrying out their constitutional obligations of questioning, debating, discussing and scrutinising government policies and actions. It needs to be understood that these actions are a planned covert attempt by the government to diminish the role of Parliament and turn itself into an "Executive Parliament".

The writer, a former Rajya Sabha MP, is a senior CPM leader



M. A. SUMANTHIRAN

Spectres of a violent past

Return of executive presidency threatens to undermine Sri Lanka's pact with minorities

THE BASIC STRUCTURE Doctrine as developed by the Indian Supreme Court has not found favour in Sri Lanka constitutional law. However, the Sri Lankan Constitution (2nd Republican Constitution of 1978) provides a clear procedure on how the provisions of the Constitution can be changed. The Constitution essentially recognises two categories of articles/provisions — those which can be amended by a two-thirds majority of members of Parliament and those which can only be amended by the people at a referendum in addition to being approved by a two-thirds majority in Parliament. The latter are often referred to as "entrenched provisions of the Constitution".

These entrenched provisions often gain increased importance when a constitutional amendment is proposed. This is because the interpretation provided by the Supreme Court on the scope and meaning of these entrenched provisions, determines the fate of a constitutional amendment. In the 42 years the Constitution has been in operation, not a single constitutional amendment or act of Parliament, for which the Supreme Court has mandated a referendum, has been submitted to the people for approval. Instead, governments have preferred to shelve the proposed amendment or law or make changes to the draft law to bring it in compliance with the Supreme Court's determination.

The Supreme Court has also, through interpretation, given meaning and substance to these entrenched provisions. One such entrenched provision, which has lately been the subject of the most amount of litigation, is Article 3 of the Constitution which recognises that sovereignty is vested in the people of Sri Lanka and that this inalienable sovereignty includes the powers of government, fundamental rights and the franchise.

The Court has, in fact, extended the scope of Article 3 by stating that changes made to Article 4 (which is not an entrenched provision and which enumerates as to how the sovereignty of the people will be exercised) should have an adverse impact on the sovereignty of the people, would also require to be approved by a referendum. In a recent decision, the Court held that the franchise in Article 3, also included the citizen's ability to vote at Provincial Council elections. Therefore, whilst enacting the 13th Amendment to the Constitution did not require a referendum, abolishing the said amendment or preventing elections to Provincial Councils will require a referendum as it would impact the franchise of the people.

There is no doubt that the 20th Amendment to the Constitution Bill will also be subject to litigation on the issue as to whether any provision of the Bill has to be passed at a referendum. The Bill envisages a nullification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which was supported by more than 210 of the 225 Members of Parliament (MPs). The 19th Amendment Bill proposes the re-introduction of complete presidential immunity, which would prevent the Supreme Court even considering whether the

President's act amounts to a violation of the Constitution. This will allow the President to do as he pleases and will make the President unanswerable to any other arm of government.

This rebalancing of the government's powers in favour of the President would do no impact the sovereignty of the people. Whatever that was said or not said in the government's election manifesto, these changes would have to be approved by the people at a referendum in order to gain political legitimacy and in order to comply with constitutional requirements.

But the importance of the changes proposed by the Bill go beyond that question and strikes at the heart of the evolution of Sri Lankan democracy. The changes proposed by the Twentieth Amendment, if implemented, will return the office of the President back to its original position in the 1978 Constitution. The United National Party (UNP) government that enacted this Constitution did so with no consultation with other political parties in Parliament, especially political parties which represented minority communities. This powerful executive President, who could completely control Parliament, make appointments to Superior Courts and key positions in law enforcement with absolute impunity, was thus foisted upon the peoples of Sri Lanka.

When the Constitution was enacted in 1978, all of those in Opposition (the ideological and political predecessors of those in government today) opposed the move and criti-

cised the Executive President for what it was, a constitutional dictatorship. The Opposition's predictions were repeatedly affirmed in the way the power of the Executive Presidency was used. Instead of heightened development, the country was set back several decades due to conflict, violence, abuse of power and corruption. Instead of the free and equal society envisaged in the preamble of the Constitution, we got a more divided and unequal society. These outcomes were the result of the Executive Presidency. The mandate to abolish the Executive Presidency was born out of this historical context, so powerful was this call that every holder of that office between 1984 and 2019, won the election expressly promising to abolish the Executive Presidency.

The Tamil people opposed the Executive Presidency both for its centralisation of power and also for its corrupting influence on democracy. It has been our lived experience that when democracy is undermined, it is the minorities who are adversely impacted and victimised the first and the most. The privilege the majority community enjoys shields them from these excesses for a short while, before it is unleashed on them as well.

Thus, the Twentieth Amendment represents a clear danger to Sri Lanka's fragile constitutional democracy. It has the potential to renege the violence of the past.

The writer is President's Counsel Member of Parliament for Jaffna and spokesman for Tamil National Alliance

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PEOPLE'S VOICE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Democracy in question' (IE, September 11). The idea of quashing Question Hour and Zero Hour is worrying. Amid the pandemic, everything has come to a halt, including Parliament. Now, when a session is to be held, the most important part — questions being raised over the government's administration and problems arising in the country — is completely sidelined. MPs have the right and authority to raise a question and to clear their doubts by discussions with other members. The members represent the public directly and indirectly so the questions raised by them are more or less questions of the public. When the exams can be held and schools can be reopened, these sessions can also be held by taking precautions.

Arun Singh, Agra

LOOK WITHIN

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The shadow play in court' (IE, September 10). It is true that BJP leaders had fought against the violation of the right to freedom of speech and expression, the right to life and the judiciary's independence. It is not only due to COVID that the Centre is accusing the BJP of using its massive electoral mandate to undermine the democratic institutions and constitutional norms for renege its sectarian agenda. Like the Congress, this BJP is also playing ball with the judiciary for its selfish political motives. Both parties are a cut from the same cloth in some

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steps. They, therefore, need to look within.

Tarsem Singh, Malipur

PAY UP

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Net Centre vs States' (IE, September 11). States are within their right to seek their share of GST money from the Centre. Moreover, it is not only due to COVID that the Centre's coffers are severely depleted. Dues were pending for even before the COVID period. The Centre will have to share money rather than demand it behind the 'act of God'. Giving states the option of borrowing from the RBI is not the most pragmatic move.

Bal Govind, Noida

How to Lead. Frans van Houten, chief executive officer of Philips

Transforming an electronics group

The Dutch business leader is breaking up a venerable conglomerate to focus on health technology, writes Michael Pooler

One of Frans van Houten's earliest memories of Philips is an electronic calculator shown to him as a child in the 1960s by his father, who worked in the Dutch company's research laboratories.

"He always came home with the most fantastic prototypes," recalls Mr van Houten, now 60. "He also came home with stories around innovations that didn't work. And that was also fascinating – how do you make inventiveness work?" he adds.

The answer to that question had eluded Philips for far too long by the time the scientist's son became its chief executive in 2011. Established in 1891 as a manufacturer of incandescent light-bulbs, the company was a pioneer in consumer technology. It introduced the rotary electric shaver, the cassette tape and, with Sony, the compact disc. But a heritage of innovation did not prevent rot setting in, as Asian rivals like Samsung and LG Electronics raced ahead.

Despite selling a number of subsidiaries from the 1990s onwards, Philips – now valued at €37bn – still looked over-stretched a decade ago, producing everything from televisions and food blenders to car lamps and hospital scanners. For many investors, the electronics conglomerate's performance was a perennial disappointment.

To save the business he cherished from a drawn-out decline, Mr van Houten would go about breaking it up. "I have a lot of love for the company," he says via a video call from the group's Amsterdam headquarters. "It's an icon in the Netherlands. For me, bringing it back to relevance was the justification to take whatever tough decision we had to."

There was a strong personal connection for Mr van Houten, who shares a birthplace with Philips – the city of



Frans van Houten is seizing on the rising demand for 'tele-health'

Eindhoven. His older brother followed in their father's footsteps to become the company's head of research.

Previous restructurings had laid the groundwork. Now Philips was to exit commoditised goods like TVs and stereos and find its focus. For Mr van Houten, this was based on the "conviction that we had to shift to higher-value, where we could do innovation" – an endeavour that could only succeed in an area of "unmet needs".

Today the group specialises in healthcare technology, a field ripe for growth given the trends of digitalisation and ageing populations. With a century of expertise in medical X-ray devices, its products include ultrasound machines, defibrillators and electric toothbrushes, as well as "tele-health" platforms that have gained traction during the Covid-19 crisis. Among the biggest challenges was to convince cynics, internal and external, of the rationale for the break-up.

Mr van Houten recalls telling people: "We are going to transform healthcare.

We are going to put all our cards on winning in that space and be the leader. And we cannot get there if we keep on betting on too many different horses that are going in different directions."

The overhaul foreshadowed similar moves by titans of industry, from General Electric in the US to Siemens of Germany, which are splitting themselves up. After starting his career with Philips in marketing and sales, Mr van Houten rose to head up its semiconductor division, NXP, and followed the business when it was sold to private equity in 2006.

This provided valuable lessons in the practicalities of a spin-off, life outside a blue-chip and how to reinvigorate a corporate mission. "We had to get away from this paternalistic culture. 'I'm part of the company, the company will shield [us]', that was in the way of performance," he says.

He would taste the harsher side of buyouts, departing NXP just two years later. But his restructuring skills were honed during a period as a consultant,

advising on the split of ING, the Dutch financial services group, into separate banking and insurance arms.

At the helm of Philips, Mr van Houten moved to divest its loss-making TV division and later its home entertainment unit (though the name lives on through brand licensing).

The first year involved three profit warnings and a net loss of €1.3bn. But Mr van Houten says the hardest task was to "get a grip on the leadership structure".

An incident at a conference of senior managers during this period perhaps explains why Mr van Houten describes his management style as "intense". Noticing a few attendees were missing, he found them about to depart for the airport. Mr van Houten recalls

confronting them: "You booked the wrong plane, because my meeting is not over yet. Are you committed to your travel schedule – or are you committed to being part of the leadership team of Philips?" He adds: "You can tell me my insights are wrong, but you need to be committed to the dialogue."

A critical element of Mr van Houten's plan for all layers of management to work towards the same purpose was replacing a small board of management with a bigger executive committee of 11, including divisional heads and "younger people from the field".

"I changed the operating model from a holding [company], where every unit could follow their own ideas and management, philosophy and culture, to an operating company where we all pull on the same side of the rope. That is how you gain strength. And that is how your customers will see you as a company that has one voice."

Yet the most symbolic break with the past was the divorce of Philips' lighting division. This required engaging with

'We cannot get there if we keep on betting on many horses going in different directions'

trade unions, politicians, company pensioners and even the monarchy. (Philips' official name includes the honorific title "Royal".) The choice of a stock market flotation in 2016 instead of a sale helped, he says, since it demonstrated belief in the new standalone entity. (It later sold a majority stake in its separate LED components business.)

Philips' performance has vindicated his approach. Though smaller today, with a workforce of 83,000 and revenue of €19.5bn in 2019, its adjusted earnings before interest, tax and amortisation margin increased from 5 per cent in 2011 to 15 per cent last year. The share price, long weighed down by a "conglomerate discount", is now 75 per cent higher.

But there have been bumps. The discovery of problems in quality control processes by US authorities led to the temporary suspension of some manufacturing before being resolved.

Investors still want to see it achieve profitability similar to peers in health tech. As the sector attracts Silicon Valley investors, Philips has made a

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strategy of acquisitions and is spending almost €300m more on research and development annually than in 2011.

The next step is the planned disposal of its domestic appliances division that sells coffee machines and food preparation equipment.

How does Mr van Houten answer critics who lament the shrinking of a behemoth? "The best proof is the brand is stronger, the value of the company is stronger and we are growing."

As evidence, he points to Philips' response to coronavirus. The group invested €100m to scale up production of medical equipment, quadrupling its output of ventilators.

"Normally it would have taken a year or longer," says Mr van Houten.

"Because we are all acting as an operating company, that helps a lot, because then all your functions work in sync."

The problem with efficiency and how to build courage

FT journalists recommend the best business reads

'When More Is Not Better: Overcoming America's Obsession with Economic Efficiency', by Roger Martin

Before the pandemic, the underlying blight of the US economy was the stagnant prosperity of ordinary Americans. This important new book blames a dangerous obsession with efficiency, long the mantra and target of

of chief executives and finance directors worldwide and a foundation of modern capitalism. Martin, a former dean of the Rotman School of

Management, traces the efficiency obsession back to its roots in the work of economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo, but analyses the 20th century's influential management thinkers such as time-and-motion obsessive Frederick Winslow Taylor.

"Pursuit of efficiency is definitively not a bad thing," Martin writes. But we have treated the economy as a machine that can be fine-tuned to perfection. Instead, he contends, it is "a complex adaptive system... that will almost certainly frustrate any attempts to engineer it for perfection". There is plenty of hard academic theory here, but it is outweighed by the practical business implications of Martin's analysis, based on cautionary tales from Lehman Brothers to Kraft, the food group, where "lean" budget management has been pushed to extremes.

If anything, the consequences of coronavirus have made this book's prescriptions more pressing, though

Martin does not tackle the current crisis directly. Solutions to the endemic efficiency problem include recognising that "slack is not the enemy". That is a bitter lesson that health systems, companies and individuals learnt only when their lack of economic resilience was tested by sudden lockdown.

'The Power of Being Divisive: Understanding Negative Social Evaluations', by Thomas J Roulet

This is the kind of book that sits between management and sociology, written by Thomas Roulet, a specialist in both areas who is a senior lecturer at Judge Business School in Cambridge. It is dedicated to the still-emerging area of negative social evaluations – which can be internet fuelled, via lousy reviews on TripAdvisor or Twitter pile-ons meant to stigmatise people; or simply via a terrible performance review at work. Roulet admits his personal interest in this after having been given a poor review by a student in his first teaching job.

The book outlines how negative social evaluation works, how it can actually be beneficial for companies and individuals. Roulet is cautious – this is tricky territory. "Yes, in some situations it might be beneficial. In others it might not. One key moderating mechanism is the way we process negative evaluations – as an individual, as a group, as an organisation or as an entire field."

From a corporate point of view, negative or polarising evaluations among customers can be bonding within a company and among some of its customers. Taking the example of Chick-fil-A, an American fast-food chain, Roulet points out that its explicitly anti-LGBT statements and funding for groups opposed to LGBT

rights caused a backlash and calls for boycotts, but the negativity actually "helped the firm gather even stronger supporters" among those who agreed with its stance.

This is a fascinating study of the social-media fuelled and fast-changing landscape of public opinion, and the possible ways in which that might be beneficial: change and self-awareness, whether that's on a personal or corporate level, can emerge from corporate criticism. Very public views

aired on social media are also here to stay, so we all need to learn to navigate negativity in a more holistic and coherent way. "We are addicted," as Roulet points out, "and evaluate everything."

'The Grit Factor', by Shannon Huffman Polson

The author was one of the first women to fly the Apache attack helicopter in the US army. She led two flight platoons and served on three continents before she left to join the corporate world – including Microsoft.

Drawing on her experience both inside and outside the cockpit, she believes when a leader encounters fear, they have to "fly straight through it". Such situations require quick and effective adaptability with little support, which requires what Huffman Polson refers to as grit.

She is quick to point out that this is not something we are necessarily born with and can be built up, like a muscle. And while she highlights the backlash against grit, and that

we should focus on changing the system that "demands exceptional tenacity of its minority members", the truth is that a sustained effort to change workplace culture itself requires grit.

The book draws together both Huffman Polson's experience and that of other high ranking women in the US military. Their insights form an easy-to-follow structure that allows any current or aspiring female leader to understand what really drives them and build confidence and resilience.

Each chapter has step by step exercises to practice and develop the principles of grit, whether it be how to reframe a problem and change thinking patterns, or make time for active listening.

The heroics of Huffman Polson and her fellow military women are inspiring, but the point is that everyone can learn to face the impossible.

By Andrew Hill, Isabel Berwick and Janina Canby

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WORK & CAREERS

Remote staff must build a new corporate culture



Andrew Hill
On management

"If you like it, you love it" is how Carlos Brito, AB InBev's chief executive since 2005, describes the global brewer's strong internal culture. The company's hard-driving ethos comes from the top. "Everyone has a belief they could be Brito," one alumnus of the group's management training programme told me once.

AB InBev's ambitious trainees may soon have to adjust their aim. A process to replace their leader – possibly with an outsider – is under way. These changes come as coronavirus is putting extraordinary new pressure on corporate cultures everywhere.

Since the pandemic started to lock down economies and shut down workplaces, strong existing ties between colleagues have sustained teams. If you recognise everyone on the video call from the in-person meetings you used to have, it is easier to strike up a virtual rapport.

But the hybrid future of work will challenge organisations to find different ways to induct and introduce newcomers, possibly including Mr Brito's successor. Keeping even long-serving staff aligned with the corporate mission will become harder, the longer they spend away from the workplace. Anthropologist James Suzman,

author of a chunky new history of work, told me during a fascinating discussion at the recent FT Weekend Festival, that over decades, the office became "what the village used to be during the agricultural era". But lockdown began to "cut away at the social function of the office [and] it ceased to be a binding force".

As social animals, though, humans have an endless capacity to adapt. That is already obvious in efforts to share or show off corporate culture online.

McKinsey staff members, tapping a time-honoured tradition of the company song, organised a surprisingly moving (for me, at least) online rendition of Cyndi Lauper's "True Colors". Remote-working engineers at Stripe, the payments software business, brainstormed solutions to a simulated lunar crash as a bonding exercise.

As a wave of recruits arrives for the first day at the online office, human resources departments are blanket-bombing them with welcome videos from senior staff and invitations to "buddy" virtually with colleagues.

According to a recent article in Personnel Today, one company even sends its new arrivals breakfast on their first day.

What is true for offline corporate culture initiatives is true online, too. If

you are not part of the "cult-like culture" that management thinkers Jim Collins and Jerry Porras once identified as typical of organisations that were "built to last", you will be cynical about singings and group bonding. If you are aligned with the culture, your enthusiasm may grow – to Mr Brito's "if you like it, you love it" point.

Culture used to go rotten or rogue at the fringes of large organisations. The East India Company's paramilitary "regional executives" in India in the 18th century often pursued their own strategies, for good and (mainly) ill, without the London headquarters finding out until weeks later.

But it is hard now for any web-enabled team member to be truly remote. That gives companies another way to guide culture. But remote working has also loosened physical links between employee and employer, and given staff licence to make new connections or revive weak ties.

Individuals now "have the time and inclination to reach out beyond their established relationships", says Laura Empson, author of *Leading Professionals*, about how to run professional services firms, even if, like a shaken kaleidoscope, "we don't yet know what shape the fragments will form".

The hybrid future of work will challenge companies to find different ways to induct newcomers

She was moved when her academic peers spontaneously shared their collective wisdom about online teaching, to help her and other management professors handle the abrupt shift away from the classroom when Covid-19 hit in March. This outburst of collegiality was cheerily at odds with the commercial logic of competition between universities, she told the recent British Academy of Management Conference.

With offices off limits, "people have begun to find community again in other, completely different new ways," Mr Suzman points out.

Organisations that were always good at shaping the way their employees work and behave – McKinsey, AB InBev, and others – will probably find that the shift to hybrid work helps them to reinforce their strong cultures. The corollary is that companies with weak cultures, which have so far merely "muddled through" the crisis, in Empson's phrase, could fall apart.

And all companies are likely to discover, that often it will be the staff who set the norms of the new working culture, rather than the chief executive.

andrew.hill@ft.com

Office life

Is it time to cut back our working hours?



The pandemic has revealed the economic and wellbeing benefits of a four-day week, writes Emma Jacobs

Banks Benitez had great plans for his staff for 2020: a four-day week on full pay. Then the pandemic struck. The lockdown and economic downturn caused the chief executive and co-founder of Uncharted, a Denver-based accelerator helping start-ups aiming to solve social and community problems, to doubt whether the four-day plan would work. The question became, is this the best time to do it? Or is it the worst time to do it? We had lost some funding and revenue and things were tight. We had to lay off a few people in early April.

It seemed logical to encourage workers to put in more rather than fewer hours. Yet after a few weeks of remote working, Mr Benitez saw employees were overloaded from video calls and juggling work with home schooling. "We decided [it] was not the worst time but actually the best time [to go to four days]." So in June, to boost productivity, he cut his 15 employees' working week.

Re-evaluation

Coronavirus has disrupted working life across the world. Many white-collar workers discovered they did not have to go to the office every day to continue to do their jobs. Yet it was not just where work was done that changed but also when, prompting some businesses to re-evaluate conventional nine-to-five (if you were lucky), five-day working patterns. Those who have had to work around childcare or other caring responsibilities have demonstrated that as long as the work is done, it may not matter when it takes place.

A study of 3.1m remote workers in North America, Europe and the Middle East during the pandemic by the US National Bureau of Economic Research found that employees' working days increased, and they attended more – although shorter – meetings. The report concludes, however, that it was "unclear if this increase in average workday span represents a benefit or drawback to employee wellbeing". The data did not show whether workers were choosing to work around their family, or if the increased hours were "overwork due to the lack of clear delineation between the office and home".

There were also gender differences in the way working time was protected. According to research by the UK's Institute for Fiscal Studies, during lockdown mothers' work was more likely to be interrupted. "Mothers combine paid work with other activities (almost always childcare) in 47 per cent of their work hours, compared with 30 per cent of fathers' work hours", the IFS found.

Gemma Dale, a human resources consultant, says that when it comes

Banks Benitez, co-founder of Uncharted, cut his employees' working week to four days. Below, Heejung Chung, reader in sociology and social policy at the University of Kent

© iStockphoto

to debates about work in the Covid era and beyond, there has been too much focus on where work is done, rather than on the hours worked.

"People are using this [period] as an opportunity of reflection. It is showing up in the desire to live differently," she says. Executives have reappraised the necessity of commuting and business travel, for example. Though she acknowledges it is impossible to generalise about how reflective workers could be, "people's experiences have been very different from being burnt out to basking banana bread", she says.

For those adults who did enjoy aspects of the restrictions to their lifestyle imposed by Covid-19, the Office for National Statistics found that many liked the slower pace. Almost nine in 10 (86 per cent) of adults who reported that they were enjoying spending more quality time with the people they live with wanted to continue doing so after the pandemic was over.

Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, author of *Slower*, which lays out the case for boosting productivity through a shorter working week, says that working from home has also made employees think about how much time had been spent on "supporting activities" such as commuting and personal grooming.

As offices open up, organisations may need to stagger start times. This could allow them to take in employees' scheduling preferences, including the times of day they are most productive, as well as helping to avoid overcrowding at work and on public transport. The key is consultation and predictability – a lack of control over hours can harm wellbeing.

Against the backdrop of widespread job losses, employees will hardly feel able to dictate their working conditions. And shorter working hours on full pay will not be front of mind for employers struggling to keep their companies afloat. Heejung Chung, reader in sociology and social policy at the UK's University of Kent, says: "What you will

probably see more in companies is [they] get people to go on four-day weeks to contracts to save costs. What happens to others all the time is the work doesn't decrease, just the pay".

Many – particularly those on lower incomes – who have had their pay cut will want more hours rather than fewer.

Campaigners for shorter working weeks argue that the four-day week could be a way of redistributing work. A recent proposal by Automomy, a UK think-tank focused on the future of work, made a case for a shorter working time subsidy scheme to prevent lay-offs, reallocate hours and retain jobs as the German Kurzarbeit scheme does.

Will Stronge, Automomy's director of research, recognises that most businesses' priority is survival. Nonetheless, he says, this downturn is different to previous ones. "The financial crisis [of

Many white-collar workers have discovered they do not have to go to the office every day

2008 resulted in] job losses. It didn't disrupt the way people were working. At the same time, there's been a swell of new policy and thinking around the future of work, around automation and welfare".

In May, New Zealand's prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, raised the prospect of four-day weeks to boost leisure and travel industries.

Whatever the rationale, reducing hours needs careful planning. In May, Uncharted's staff were given a month's notice to prepare to reduce their working week by clarifying goals and streamlining work. "It was really figuring out what we say 'no' to," says Mr Benitez. All employees were asked to be available on Mondays to Thursdays between 10am and 3pm for four days and collaboration but otherwise they could arrange their

time themselves. While Fridays are the company-wide day off, Mr Benitez wants to ensure flexibility, for example, a parent working five short days to fit with school hours.

Benefits

After monitoring progress through an independent evaluation, he is convinced of the benefits of the four-day week. On average, the working week reduced 23 per cent from 45 hours. Some employees were concerned that by making every hour count, there was less room for fun, although that could also be a result of remote working during a pandemic.

Plans for a four-day week had already been under way before the pandemic at 3D Inno, a software company based in Donegal, Ireland. But Paul McHugh, founder and chief executive, says the crisis has sharpened his resolve to cut hours as a way of attracting new talent in a competitive local market. When the working week was cut, he saw "greater happiness among employees. Some of them talk about having a day to themselves when kids go back to school. They are more refreshed and engaged."

For David Cann, managing director of Target Publishing, it was coronavirus-induced financial difficulties that pushed him to make difficult decisions. "To get us through this we needed to take a 20 per cent pay cut to ride the wave. I didn't feel quite comfortable. For people on a lower wage it felt like a big ask." So he cut hours too, giving everyone Fridays off. "The team started to work well together. We produced the same amount of magazines."

The same his 20-strong workforce is not working compressed hours but rather it is more efficient – remote working had shown Mr Cann that meetings could be streamlined. "It's early days but it feels right. What that's achieved is thinking you shouldn't be scared of change. Covid makes you think differently – I probably wouldn't have done this unless I was forced on us."

Work Tribes

'If I allow a breach, even in a limited way, it will be anarchy'

ANDREW HILL AND EMMA JACOBS



To Thrustees and Thrustees: While access to The Thrust is still restricted to mission-critical staff and deep-cleaning teams, we are happy to introduce our new remote-working concept, Thrustubia. Please study the attached map to find your nearest Thrustide mini-hub. Your Thrust card will grant you access and allow use of free WiFi and a free coffee or tea (please bring your own milk).

Robert, the involuntary gig worker: Good morning, Joel. What a relief to see a familiar face who isn't a family member at last! I didn't realise Thrust had moved you to their new outpost. Isn't this a Travelodge normally?

Joel, the overzealous security guard: Morning, sir. Sorry – I'm under strict orders not to engage in informal banter until I have verified your credentials. Thank you. Let me check your card. Drop your mask a little so I can see your full face. Strip BACK! You were in danger of intruding on a two-metre perimeter for a moment there, sir. So let's see: Mr "Rockbottom"?

Robert: It's pronounced Robo-tham, actually. The "ck" in Rockbottom is silent. Easy mistake to make. But call me Robert. You remember me, don't you? I was a regular visitor to WorkHouse? And I'd like to sign in my two friends. Another great advantage of moving out to live with my parents – apart from not having to pay rent, obviously – has been reconnecting with mates from school, so I thought, seeing as how you know me...

Joel: One moment, sir. Spread your legs. A little wider. Just a routine frisking. Can't be too careful. Thrustides are all very well, but security at these remote-working outposts is shabby. Frankly, anybody can wander in.

Robert: It's a hotel lobby, isn't it? That's the point? Joel: You may say that, Mr Rockbottom, but I know from my 2016 tour of duty on the frontline at Ikea that you can hide a number of offensive weapons behind a throw cushion and any plastic flower arrangements could conceal a bug. We also in a 5G zone, and you don't have to do much digging on the internet to realise that increases the Covid risk and the possibility of Chinese cyberespionage. It's one reason I upped the alert level here from Burgundy to Sangria.

Robert: If you say so. Now can I sign in my friends? Joel: Do you live together? Is one of your friends a partner? Sorry for my intrusive questions but I need to get the precise relationship right to ensure we don't breach the rules. Its protocol, you see. Your sexuality is of no interest to me love is love, after all.

Robert: Partner? Not These are my old school mates. We don't live together. I live with my mum and dad. Not permanently, of course – just until I get back on my feet.

Joel: Sorry, sir – I can't allow more than two households to mingle. I've got firm orders and I allowed any breach, even if a specific and limited one, the next step would be anarchy.

Robert: Really? But those tables are full. Those people can't all be living together. Can't you let us in? We're just going to have a complimentary coffee and a catch-up.

Joel: Those are business meetings, sir.

Robert: Well, I haven't brought it up with my old nuckers yet but I was actually hoping to discuss the possibility they might put some mutually beneficial work my way. You can guess what it's been like for the freelance micro-advisory spaz during lockdown, and it's hard to network online when your backdrop is your sisters Sylvanians and an old Beano poster.

Joel: Which is it? Business or pleasure.

Robert: Can't it be both? Joel: Not according to the rules.

Robert: Business then.

Joel: Welcome, gentlemen.

Robert: Guys, where are you going?

Opinion

Sweden's Covid-19 experiment holds a warning

EUROPE
Wolfgang Münchau

Only a fool would draw strong conclusions from sketchy data. The biggest fools this year were those who prematurely declared the spike in Swedish infections from April until June as evidence that the Swedish decision not to lock down their economy was wrong. I recall many armchair epidemiologists hyperventilating about Sweden's obstinate refusal to follow the rest of the world.

Over the summer, Sweden took other steps to control the virus, including local lockdowns, and cases started to rise again in other parts of Europe. Now, Sweden's new infection statistics look better than most of the EU. But we shouldn't draw any conclusions yet. It was wrong two months ago to condemn

the Swedish strategy based on that data, and it would be equally wrong to draw the opposite conclusion now.

It took many years for epidemiologists and biostatisticians to understand the infection rate and progression of the 2003 SARS outbreak. It will not be different this time.

Experts are at risk of error when they go beyond their narrow field of expertise – and particularly when they venture into the world of statistics. In some cases, they get the maths wrong. But often they fail to see subtleties.

Years ago, when I was researching the asset bubble that later gave rise to the 2008 financial crisis, I studied value at risk data for banks. These statistics are the way bankers measure their risk exposure on a day-to-day basis. Back then, senior bank executives treated VAR like football scores, looking for winners and losers.

I found that the tiniest shifts in a measurement parameter had massive implications on the final result. The obvious conclusion is that you cannot reduce something as complex as a bank's risk exposure to a single number.

Today's equivalent fallacy is the idea that you can compare the infection rate of one country with that of another and draw policy conclusions in real time.

It is a more profitable use of time to look behind the data. In Sweden, it is now clear that a major reason for the spike in infection rates in the early stages of the crisis was the effort to protect care homes, protecting the elderly by comparison with Copenhagen, even though the two operated under different lockdown regimes.

I don't know why regional gaps were so strong, and my interlocutors in Sweden do not either. If you want to make grand pronouncements about Swedish lockdown policies and infection rates, you should probably make an effort to understand this first.

Policy in times of Covid-19 amounts to decision-making under extreme uncertainty. The latest Swedish numbers do not prove or disprove anything. But before policymakers order something as extreme as another lockdown, they should have had incontrovertible statistical evidence, not just a bunch of numbers that feed their confirmation bias.

As long as statistical doubt persists, we certainly do not want to do this twice.

A lockdown is an extreme policy measure and its consequences will not become apparent for some time. I have no doubt that it will end up increasing inequality. Unemployment and corporate insolvencies will rise once the support measures are withdrawn. Although stock market indices have fallen and

recovered, these are just averages. Behind them stand huge shifts of capital from old to new sectors. If people continue to work from home, this will boost residential and rural areas at the expense of city centres and shift resources from commercial to residential property.

I consider the lockdown reflex as currently the biggest threat to western capitalist democracies. The data at this point do not tell us what we need to know, but they inject useful uncertainty into the consensus that a lockdown is the only way to respond to a global pandemic.

To put it another way, next time we had better make sure that the data justify such actions beyond reasonable doubt and put policies in place to deal with the consequences. We did not do that the first time.

It is my hope that Sweden's experiment will eventually provide us with enough data to make a valid cross-country comparison. Until then, we should keep watching closely.

munchau@euromintelligence.com

Fifty years of shareholder value have swollen monopoly power

Michelle Meagher

Fifty years ago yesterday, Milton Friedman published the article that would guarantee his lasting influence. "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits" became the canonical statement on shareholder value, with Friedman giving conflicted chief executives a simple guiding principle: when in doubt, maximise profits.

Friedman's argument was considered outrageous in 1970, and is again being criticised today. The influential US Business Roundtable group of executives publicly rejected the primacy of shareholder value last year and many companies and investors tout their focus on stakeholders and sustainability.

Yet we remain captured by Friedman's legacy. Business may talk the talk of corporate responsibility, but it is walking a different walk. Working as a competition lawyer in the City of London, I saw first hand as executives competed to dominate markets and push share prices ever higher. Competition law is meant to check corporate power, yet markets are growing more concentrated under regulatory noses. Stanford University economist Mordecai Kurz calculated in 2015 that 82 per cent of stock market value came from the tech sector's "monopoly wealth". It may be more now: a tech-friendly pandemic has seen prices soar.

For users, choice is often an illusion. Take dating apps: you might choose OKCupid, Tinder or Hinge but all three are owned by Match.com. Google and Facebook have built an online advertising duopoly. A handful of companies

We cannot leave Friedman's doctrine behind until there is a European movement to rebuild competition

control global agribusiness. Amazon now part-owns Deliveroo. Paralysedderegulated markets have become monopolies. Concentrated markets are often linked to growing inequality, disempowerment of workers, hollowing out of communities and environmental harm – all problems that stakeholder capitalists say they are trying to fix. Monopolised industries tend to operate by their own, self-referential logic, with the interests of incumbents automatically equated to those of the industry. When regulators do catch up to the titans, the fines levied can be hardly absorbable: a case of doing business. Whether it is DuPont's \$671m payout for poisoning the water in West Virginia or Facebook's \$58m settlement for the Cambridge Analytica scandal, investors barely blink. Consumers have little place to turn.

Companies that are guided by an ethical duty must contend with competitors that believe that monopoly will trump morality. Companies such as Amazon and Uber swallowed year after year of losses as they bankrupted rivals and built market share. Once entrenched, these systemically important companies will not budge.

Remember that Friedman added a caveat to his "profits first" edict. Business should maximise earnings "so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud". Yet the historic emphasis on shareholder value has led some companies to seek monopoly power by controlling the rules of the game, and even through deception and fraud. That distorts the very idea of competition.

Gigantic corporations have their own gravitational pull, morphing into economic black holes. Stakeholder capitalism will not be able to resist the drag. We must dispense economic concentration, democratisate corporate power and dissolve monopolies that are able to distort markets and society. Voluntary efforts by business will not be enough. Competition law and corporate law must be used to their full potential.

America gave us both Friedman and Silicon Valley, fostering the perception that this is a US problem. But we are all at the mercy of global as well as home-grown monopolies. We need a European movement to rebuild competition, to protect our democracy and the hope of a resilient future. Only then will we leave Friedman's doctrine behind.

The writer is co-founder of the Inclusive Competition Forum and author of "Competition is Killing Us"

The next subprime crisis could be in food

BUSINESS
Rana Foroohar

Of all the most problems caused by Covid-19, three of the most visible have been food insecurity, the demise of small businesses and asset market volatility.

All of those things might be poised to get worse, thanks to an unexpected but important financial shift. Big banks, including ANZ, Amn, ING and BNP Paribas, are either pulling out of commodity trade financing or scaling it back. This will leave a funding hole for some farmers, agricultural producers and distributors, as well as grocery chains and other small and medium-sized companies that represent crucial parts of the global food supply chain.

The problem is like a gigantic iceberg under the surface of financial markets, one that we can't yet see but are nonetheless headed for, according to Michael Greenberger, a professor at the University of Maryland's Carey School of Law and former director of trading and markets at the US Commodity Futures Trading Commission.

He is worried that if second and third-tier agricultural companies – who depend on such financing for things like shipping or manufacturing but also to

hedge prices in a volatile industry – cannot get funding or are forced to pay higher rates to shadow lenders, we could see a food price surge. We might also see greater corporate concentration and increased market risk, he notes, possibly within the next couple of months.

"Every commercial producer has to hedge risk by buying futures contracts," says Prof Greenberger, who points out that growing cycles take months, during which time prices can fluctuate wildly in order to do that, they may need short-term trade financing.

If banks are willing to lend only to the largest and most established players, for example the big global commodities traders such as Vitol Group, Trafigura and Mercatoria, or American agricultural giants including Cargill, ADM or Bunge, then small and mid-sized producers will be forced to go to shadow banks, a practice that is already common. That, along with the lack of transparency that comes with having no single clearinghouse for such deals, makes it nearly impossible for lenders to tell if, for example, a borrower may have pledged the same collateral more than once.

Already, there are signs of the looming risks. Last spring, a series of commodity trading scandals in Singapore – including the blow-up of Hin Leong Trading after its founder hid \$800m in losses – highlighted not only garden variety fraud, but the fact that opacity, leverage and volatility in the commodities sector make it a particularly risky area for large banks to do business.

Given the pressure that banks are

already under, with higher capital requirements from international regulations compounded by new funding pressures from the pandemic, it's no wonder that many of them have simply decided to pull out, or just do business with the biggest brand name clients that have the biggest balance sheets.

This exacerbates an existing trend that is gaining steam post-Covid-19: the biggest companies are getting even bigger. This was true in agriculture, as in so many other sectors, long before the pandemic hit. But Covid-19 has starkly exposed the vulnerabilities of monopoly power in food, creating supply gluts in some areas and shortages and higher prices in others. A handful of large companies have controlled areas such as meat packing and grain production, often

If trade financing is out of reach for small and mid-sized farmers, everyone may suffer

doing business with only one type of distributor – a restaurant, for example, not a grocery store. The result was certainly an economically "efficient" system, but one that turned out to be quite fragile as well.

Prof Greenberger and some other experts believe that the shifts of big banks away from trade finance could expose more such fragility. "The first order of worry is being able to get a futures contract – will small producers have to pay a lot more for one? Then, if the contract goes against you, can you make your margin payment?"

If some of them can't, it is easy to imagine another disruption in supply chains creating more chaos and food insecurity later this year. That could possibly provoke market volatility if enough highly leveraged agricultural companies went out of business at once.

Not only would the demise of smaller farmers have a knock-on effect on other businesses, including packaging, manufacturing and transport, but their debt – particularly if packaged into risky securitised products – could become a

broader market risk. At the very least, given higher lending costs for a large chunk of producers, higher food prices would seem a foregone conclusion. That won't be happy news for the legions of unemployed consumers struggling to make ends meet.

This underscores a key point – the ramifications of commodity price disruptions are very often not just economic. They become political, too. Social unrest and even revolutions often start when the prices of food and fuel spike. Bread riots were one of the catalysts for the Arab uprising of 2011. In the US, the oil price spike that began the same year led to senate hearings about whether the problems of the 2008 financial crisis, including risky trading on the part of big banks, had yet been solved.

Big banks have thrived despite the restrictions put on them over the past decade. Big Agriculture and commodities traders will probably do the same now. Others may not be so lucky.

rana.foroohar@ft.com

India and China are edging towards a serious conflict

Devesh Kapur

There is now a real risk of military conflict between India and China. While the world remains preoccupied with the Covid-19 pandemic, and the US is distracted by domestic politics, India and China are involved in an unprecedented military build-up along their long disputed border.

In June, for the first time since 1967, there were serious clashes between the two armies in the Himalayan Galwan Valley. Since then, both sides have steadily increased their forces in the area, bringing in tanks, artillery and missile systems to back up tens of thousands of troops. This is no longer a localised build-up on the western border. There are credible reports of advances further east along the borders with the Indian states of Uttarakhand, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh.

In the mountainous terrain, motorised and armoured units largely move along the valley floors – more difficult now due to the summer snow melt. Yet as it becomes colder and the waters ebb, these routes will become more passable and China's phenomenal construction capability makes the possibility of a greater escalation more likely.

Meetings between the Chinese and Indian defence ministers and their foreign ministers over the past weeks offer some hope of finding a diplomatic solution. But the possibility of a decisive breakthrough is slim. Neither country is budging from the claim the other side is making by altering the status quo on the border and violating longstanding on how to manage the dispute.

China's motives are unclear. President Xi Jinping has generally pursued an assertive foreign policy and might see an opportunity to make tactical gains. But even in this context does it make sense for China to risk a war with India? China's assertiveness has put an end to all strategic ambiguity on India's part as it seeks a closer relationship with the US and embraces anti-China alli-

ances such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the US, Japan and Australia. India has also signalled its resolve to decouple economically from China, banning Chinese apps and crafting a strategy to move to other suppliers.

If Mr Xi is looking for ways to shore up his domestic credibility, then the puzzle is why the conflict is getting so little play at home. Another plausible hypothesis is that China is worried about the future

Meetings between ministers offer some hope but the chance of a decisive breakthrough is slim

of Tibet, with strengthening international support for its struggle for independence. India still hosts both the Dalai Lama and Tibet's government in exile, and China may be exerting pressure to prevent interference.

It is exactly this uncertainty that makes the situation so risky. With winter approaching, it makes little

sense for China to keep tens of thousands of troops camped on high mountains with temperatures plunging 20 to 30 degrees below zero. India has responded with its own troop escalation. A high stakes game is clearly afoot.

We can no longer count on old assurances to prevent conflict. In modern warfare, harsh winters and difficult physical terrain are much less of a barrier than they once were. If bitter weather did not deter the Red Army's devastating counter-attacks on advancing German troops in 1941, it will be even less of a hurdle if China were able and inclined to execute missile attacks.

The Galwan Valley incident has turned public opinion in India virulently anti-China. This will make disengagement difficult. There is a growing sentiment that New Delhi must be prepared to stand up to Beijing. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's image will be severely dented at home if he does not craft a strong response. This leaves Mr Xi with two options: inflict the damage and brace for consequences or withdraw to pre-june positions and lose face.

The international context also makes

the chances of a conflict more likely. It is not a coincidence that the previous major conflict between India and China, the war in 1962, occurred when the US was distracted – at that time with the Cuban missile crisis. The weeks between now and the US presidential election in November, which coincide with propitious weather for military movements on the border, will see Americans preoccupied with their own political drama and a polarised electorate.

It is no longer possible to dismiss the conflict between India and China as a skirmish. The understanding reached last week between the countries' foreign ministers points to a pause. But it does not address the underlying issues that have pushed the countries closer to serious conflict. The American historian Barbara Tuchman is often cited as observing: "War is the unfolding of miscalculations." Coming months might prove a test case for that hypothesis.

The writer is director of Asia programmes at the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. Pratap Bhanu Mehta of Ashoka University, also contributed



OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | PARALLAX VIEW



The caution that marks our corporate optimism

A Mint-Bain survey of CEOs reveals that many hope to emerge stronger from covid. But even companies that pivot well to a post-pandemic order could be let down by a weak economy

India Inc on the verge of a grand separation of trail-blazers and trailers, wedged apart by how well they pivot to a post-pandemic paradigm? Covid-19 has not merely been disruptive, it has wreaked devastation. Its fallout on businesses has been highly uneven, though, as revealed by a Mint-Bain India survey of the hopes and fears of 105 chief executives officers (CEOs) of companies across various sectors. Nearly 80% of them report a financial hit, over half have seen either layoffs or salary cuts in their organizations, over a third suffered supply-chain disruptions, nearly two-thirds worry about crunched consumer wallets, and less than half expect demand to regain its pre-covid levels by year end. Yet, sectors like infotech and consumer staples have fared much better and seem far more hopeful, while real estate, infrastructure and consumer discretionary item firms have been struck hard and remain gloomy. The most remarkable finding, however, is the proportion of CEOs who expect the economy to emerge stronger from our current crisis: as many as 47% foresee covid's impact as turning out "value accretive" 5-7 years hence. To some extent, this optimism seems based on the pandemic being taken as a prod by India Inc to rejig operations, slash costs and unlock efficiencies in adapting to post-covid business realities.

The pressure to achieve lean operations has rarely been higher. So far, payroll reductions have played a key role in cost compression, it appears, at least in the worst-hit sectors. Human resource issues, be it work-from-home (WFH) or employee engagement, head the list of immediate CEO priorities, with increased automation and faster decisions next on their chart. Their responses suggest that WFH remains an unsettled issue, with diverse views

on whether it should outlast the pandemic. But other wrenching transformations are in the air too. Most CEOs foresee structural changes within their sectors, marked by disruptive innovation and new patterns of consumer preferences. It is no surprise that the adoption of digital tools is a hot item on their agenda for the next 12 months, with revenue recovery and a return to growth a close second. Their to-do list also includes transformative cost reduction, business model adaptation, a supply-chain overhaul, and an effort to make the most of new opportunities. With their strategies redrafted, many CEOs appear confident of turning adversity into an eventual advantage.

It is plausible that we will see a divergence within India Inc over the next half decade or so. But any such forecast needs to be tempered by a big uncertainty that haunts all corporate optimism. Internal reforms and strategic revisions are necessary but not sufficient for value accretion. And CEOs seem aware that it is dicey whether commercial conditions will support their pivot, no matter how spot-on it is. In their top order of major worries, India's limited fiscal and monetary space to revive the economy ranks just above the consumer's crunched ability to buy stuff, with post-pandemic unrest not far behind. These could prove costly. And even the best laid plans of CEOs could be let down by money failing to move around the country at its pre-covid pace in another, say, 5-7 quarters. By the survey, their revival hopes are pinned chiefly on a stimulatory tripling of government infrastructure spending. Lower goods and services tax rates, wage support for small enterprises, and an income tax waiver also feature on their wish list. Hopes that ride on policy responses, however, are subject to varied risks.

Hollywood's craven surrender to blatant Chinese censorship

US filmmakers are kowtowing to Chinese audiences at the cost of others as well as artistic freedom



SANDIPAN DEB is a former editor of 'Financial Express' and founder-editor of 'Open' and 'Swarajya' magazines

A few weeks ago, PEN America published a report on Hollywood, the United States' greatest export industry with an unmatched power over minds and hearts, and its craven relationship with China. PEN is a committed organization of writers, including journalists and historians that works to defend literature against the many threats to its survival which the modern world poses. Past presidents of PEN International have included Alberto Moravia, Heinrich Böll, Arthur Miller and Mario Vargas Llosa.

The PEN report examines how China has made sure that Hollywood, to quote the country's president, Xi Jinping, tells China's story well. In October 1998, Walt Disney Co's chief executive officer Michael Eisner did an *abject mea culpa* for making *Avatar*, based on the Dalai Lama's life. "I want to apologize, and in the future we should prevent this sort of thing, which insults our friends," Jean Jacques Annaud, director of *Seven Years in Tibet*, about the last years of independent Tibet, declared that he "had never supported Tibetan independence, and... becoming friends with the Dalai Lama is out of the question."

Such is China's power that *Mission: Impossible III* was released in China with several scenes excised, including a visual where the viewer can see a clothesline hanging from a Shanghai

apartment airing tattered underwear. Chinese censors even demanded the removal of scenes about the sexuality of Freddie Mercury from the biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Marvel Studios' *Dr. Strange* changed the comic book's Tibetan master who trains the superhero to a Celtic one. The writer of the blockbuster film, C. Robert Cargill, cited Chinese censorship while defending the controversial decision. He said: "If you acknowledge that Tibet is a place and that the character is Tibetan, you risk alienating one billion people who think that that's bullshit and risk the Chinese government going. 'Hey, you know one of the biggest film-watching countries in the world? We're not going to show your movie because you decided to get political.'"

The Chinese today control American superheroes.

Most of us know about the disappearance of the Taiwanese flag in the trailer for the much-anticipated *Top Gun* sequel. In place of the Japanese flag on Tom Cruise's jacket was a red triangle against a white background, and the Taiwanese flag was replaced with a random symbol. The producers did not even wait for the Chinese to object. And Richard Gere does not get much work because he is a Tibet activist. His films are not allowed in China.

This is how it works. In 2018, China's leaders implemented a big shake-up that gave regulatory oversight over all media to the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The CPD's head, Huang Kunming, reports to Xi directly. The CPD in turn directly oversees the import and review of foreign films. It holds all the keys to access the Chinese market, with absolute powers to demand changes in a film. And the market is big. In the first quarter of 2018, China was the US's in quarterly theatrical box office intake. Chinese box office revenues, by one pre-pandemic estimate, were predicted to reach \$15.5 billion by 2023. In 2019,

the US box office total was \$11.4 billion.

Now comes the pincer grip. A number of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) operate simultaneously as regulators and as business partners for foreign studios looking to screen their films in China. For instance, the China Film Group Corporation (CFG) is a governmental body that acts as a regulator and is also the country's biggest film distributor. So you'd better kowtow.

The problem areas don't end with the obvious ones—Tibet, Xinjiang, the South China Sea. Time-travel stories are not allowed. The CCP does not want speculative alternative histories. Ghost stories, too. So *Ghostbusters* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* were banned. And, most importantly, there is a quota system. Beijing allows 34 international films every year on a revenue-sharing basis. And of course, China uses that quota judiciously to maintain message purity. Amir Khan obviously met these strict criteria with *PK* and *Dangal*. *Ashmita*, produced by Dreamworks, which was founded by Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen, all billionaires, endorsed Beijing's territorial claims to the South China Sea, showing the main characters using a map with the "nine-dash line". China's neighbours objected. Malaysia's government demanded that the studio omit the scene for Malaysian audiences. Dreamworks refused, leading to the movie being banned there. As PEN states, Dreamworks "in essence, prioritized the interests of one country's censors over another's."

There is much to learn here, while staying dedicated to the spirit of liberalism and freedom of expression. Consider the Amazon show *Pastal Lek*, where India's only reality seems to be vice casteism. Or *Indian Detective* by the Canadian-Indian comic Russell Peters, where all of Mumbai at night looks like a red-light area. This is unfortunate. But wait. We are the market. Commercial interests will win. And we won't need any censorship. We are not China.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Hollywood now regularly censors its own movies to appease the Chinese Communist Party, the world's most powerful violator of human rights.

WILLIAM BARR

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

The art of survival in a world of unknowing zombies

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, and a novelist, most recently of *Miss Laila, Armed And Dangerous*

I am writing a zombie movie. No, it is not about the sort of people who watch TV news. I am not being satirical or metaphorical. I really am writing a zombie movie. And I thought, this week, instead of commenting on whatever is going on in the world, why don't I just let you in on my zombie movie?

I must admit that I am a bit influenced by topical events, but come on, every story is influenced by reality. That much concession you have to extend to me. So, in my zombie movie, you might notice that there is the influence of corona, and the mysterious Indian stamina for totally useless issues that will never improve their lives.

The hero, of course, you. Why are you so surprised? I'm not making fun of you. It really is you. Hasn't it occurred to you that the hero in every story is always you? The aspiration of every film is that you identify with one of the main characters. If you don't, the story is either doomed or acclaimed by six scholars, which is the same as doomed.

That is the corruption at the heart of every story, and that is why every story ever told is familiar—it is all about you and your moral self-absorption.

So what happens in the zombie movie is that one day you begin to notice that everyone around you is beginning to behave in a strange manner. They appear to become obsessed with something that sounds like news but has no relevance to their lives. For example: "Rhea killed her boyfriend," or "Trump is a fascist". Even though they appear passionate about it, they can only describe it in one line. They have nothing more to say. They hold forth for hours, but in reality they just repeat that same one line. It is a bit like how most people know only a paragraph about stuff outside their domains.

This is a global zombie story, but Indian characters have a unique quality—like the rest of the world, they chant one line of news every day but in at least three languages because Indian zombies are multilingual.

You, the hero, set out to find out what has happened to the world. And you learn the startling fact that there is this virus that is transmitted from phone screens and other monitors, and even paper and all other sources of information. It gets lodged in a receiver's brain and takes over all expres-

sion. Different people are taken over by different lines, as every individual is susceptible to a particular mutation of this ancient virus. Your dad has become a right-wing zombie; your mom has become a religious zombie; your smartest friends, who appear normal in the first minutes of conversation, have become woke zombies; your aunt has become a conspiracy-theory zombie. The virus has been transmitted for centuries in this manner, but never before as so infectious.

As most fans of zombie movies know, the hero is never the zombie. Everyone else around is, or will be, but not you. You are smart, lucky and sane, just as you suspect. But where my zombie movie departs is that the zombies in my story do not know they are zombies. In fact, they think everyone else is a zombie. Thus, inside the zombie movie, everyone is a hero in a zombie movie.

Zombie friends, zombie parents and zombie cousins confide their fears in you of how everyone else is a zombie. It corroborates your belief that you are sane when ideally it should make you wonder whether you too are unaware of your transformation. You feel odd discussing "what to do about zombies" with zombies, but play along.

The hero is you and it begins when you notice that everyone around you is behaving in a strange manner

You figure out some features of the virus and its transmission—there are super transmitters who have a talent to

excrete huge viral loads to millions, and there are more modest transmitters who can only infect one person at a time. And some people are more prone to get infected than others. You like the theory that people who are intellectuals are super, who routinely consume supplements of superior knowledge, and who are generally immune to the virus, are less likely to be

infected than people who are not very smart. You figure out what to do. The infected have to be quarantined, but then no one believes they are infected. As we have seen, they think other people, who are obsessed with one-liners that sound like news, are the ones who are infected. So no zombie is going

to self-quarantine. Also, as we saw in the case of that minor pandemic, covid, every intellectual tries to flag his solution as the best solution and condemn those who disagree as "fools" or "corrupt" or "charlatans". Also, in our movie, most of the intellectuals themselves are zombies who don't know they are infected.

So you try to counter the transmission of the virus by transmitting your own cure. You do this by twitting your own big important fabulous ideas. You notice something odd. The more sense you make, the less it is transmitted. The more nonsense you state, the more it travels. Thus, you realize, the medium of transmission itself has been taken over by the virus.

Nevertheless, you valiantly fight on the social media. You find others like you who are not zombies. You fall in love. There are some lovely scenes. But after a month of knowing them, you realize that they, too, have become infected.

Eventually, you give up and quarantine yourself. You become a monk. You reject all the temptations—the wealth and pleasures that zombies offer to infect you, their opinions and books. You are lonely, but you are not a zombie. Or are you?

Inception-type ending.