



THE INDIAN EXPRESS, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2020

## THE EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## CHINA WATCHING

Strategic targeting of Indian citizens by Chinese firm raises questions that need to be understood — before being addressed

**A**N ONGOING INVESTIGATION by *The Indian Express* has lifted the veil over a concerted attempt to track thousands of Indian citizens by a big data Chinese firm with ties to the Chinese government. According to the cross-country investigation — joint investigations were carried out by news organisations in several countries — over 10,000 Indians in the fields of politics, government, business, technology, media and civil society, have been tracked by a Shenzhen-based information technology firm, Zhenhua Data Information Technology Co. While the scale of the profiling being undertaken is staggering, the targeted approach being adopted to specifically track key personnel is equally worrying. This level of strategic targeting raises vital questions: Is the Indian government vigilant about a monitoring of its citizens that goes far beyond the traditional methods? What are the norms of cyber hygiene for its staff? What purpose is the data being put to? Does this present a security risk? What should the Indian response be?

The investigation has revealed that the Chinese firm monitors the digital footprint of its targets across social media platforms, including keeping a tab on content from news sources, papers, and forums, to build a "relational database" which tracks associations between individuals, institutions and information. What would otherwise have been considered innocuous information is being pieced together in a broader framework. Such granular profiling and targeting of individuals has the potential of being misused and exploited — data, after all, can be used for spreading disinformation or for serving particular interests at both the national and international level. This also lies at the heart of what is called "hybrid warfare", a strategy that seeks to create social discord, disrupt economic activities, undermine institutions, and discredit political leadership by engaging in targeted cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns.

With a series of recent reports exposing China's attempts to obtain sensitive information, the Indian government will have to be prepared to respond across multiple platforms. The urgency of putting in place a robust personal data protection framework in India cannot be emphasised enough. While enforcing privacy laws in foreign jurisdictions may well be impossible, at the very least, provisions for asking for explicit consent, and for examining/monitoring the flow of information to third parties, will have to be provided. Indeed, firms like Zhenhua, working in opaque authoritarian systems, will use big data to mine information in more open democratic environments and remain off the regulatory radar. More so when the abuses are meant for third-party data sharing makes matters difficult. Unlike apps that can be banned, what Zhenhua has — or can collect — cannot. These scraps of information become an invaluable asset with scale and time and given how they are harvested and who does it. This understanding should be key in framing any response and the government must carefully weigh the costs and benefits of the various options before deciding on it.

## SPEAK TO THE FARMER

In face of protests, government must clarify that ordinances, to be debated in Parliament, will not affect MSP procurement

**T**WO THINGS ARE striking about the ongoing farmer protests against the three central ordinances that seek to liberalise agricultural trade in the country. The first is the apparent reason. Farmer organisations say that the ordinances — particularly the one that allows sale and purchase of crops outside the premises of APMC (agricultural produce market committee) mandis — will sound the death knell of minimum support price (MSP)-based government procurement. This fear has no basis. The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance, which is to be approved in the current Parliament session, merely provides an additional marketing channel. Farmers, if they choose, can now sell directly to processors, retailers or exporters. They can, of course, still take their produce to mandis. Government agencies, too, can continue to procure grain from these state-regulated market yards. The ordinance only dismantles the monopoly of the APMCs.

The current protests are happening largely in Punjab and Haryana, states that have well-established systems of mandis and MSP-based wheat and paddy procurement, valued at Rs 80,000-90,000 crore annually. The benefits of it are obvious not only to their farmers, but also the powerful lobby of arbitrage (commission agents) who extend crop loans and "facilitate" procurement at the APMCs. Any threat to the existing order is bound to face resistance. One shouldn't be surprised to see the stir finding support among farmers in other states that have also built strong public grain procurement systems.

The Narendra Modi government should explicitly clarify that the ordinances, while they are being presented and debated in Parliament, will not affect MSP procurement operations. That, in any case, is not the intent behind the present legislation. These only seek to remove intra- and inter-state movement and stockholding restrictions on agricultural produce, apart from enabling farmers to enter into contracts for supplying directly to organised agri-businesses (think cooperative dairies or sugar mills that do not procure milk and cane through mandis). The Punjab wheat farmer may be happy selling in mandis to government agencies. But that shouldn't be at the expense of the Maharashtra pomegranate or orange grower, who would definitely want to explore options outside of the APMCs.

## SECULAR SOCIALIST

Raghuvansh Prasad Singh may be remembered most for MGNREGA, which he piloted as minister in UPA 1 government

**R**AGHUVANSH PRASAD SINGH, who died on Sunday, was among the last of a generation of Lohia socialists, who witnessed the rise and fall of social justice politics in north India. He was a loyal flag-bearer of Lohiaite ideology that saw the political empowerment of backward castes as an essential attribute of socialist politics in the Indian context. Born in an upper caste family, with a doctorate in Mathematics, Singh backed Lalu Prasad through thick and thin. His death came two days after he wrote a terse letter to the BJP chief, announcing his resignation from the party.

Though Singh was a legislator for many years in Bihar assembly and in the Lok Sabha, he will be remembered most as the Minister for Rural Development who implemented the MGNREGA during UPA 1. Not only did Singh pilot the Act amidst opposition from heavyweights in the Manmohan Singh Cabinet who viewed the scheme as populist and wasteful expenditure, he also oversaw its implementation. A grass roots politician, though less of a mass leader, Singh saw the necessity and potential of the MGNREGA in a country where millions live in precarious conditions. Today, the MGNREGA is universally accepted as the most effective instrument to address rural distress, the pandemic only confirming its importance.

After a sterling performance as the rural affairs minister (2004-09), Singh could have shifted sides, and found a place in the UPA2 Cabinet if he had wished. But Singh stayed with Lalu even though the BJP had become a family foe and its social justice agenda reduced to caste management and patronage. He spoke his mind to Lalu and the party, and in public, in the hope, perhaps, that he could influence a course correction. He was critical of the corruption and nepotism under Lalu, but the pole position he later assumed as the bulwark of secular politics in Bihar may have compelled him to stay with the BJP, almost till the last.



ARUN PRAKASH

IN THE SEPTEMBER 2020 edition of its annual report on China, the US Department of Defence (DoD) makes the stunning announcement that the PLA Navy (PLAN) is the largest in the world. With an overall battle-force of 350 ships and submarines, including 130 major surface combatants, PLAN has overtaken the US Navy, with its strength of 293 ships. China has never bothered to provide a rationale for its ever-increasing military muscle and a bewildered neighbourhood wonders what it portends, especially in the light of its recent adventurism in the Himalayas.

The PLA Navy has not grown overnight, and remains the clearest manifestation of the grand-strategic vision of China's political leadership. Factors that bear on its growing strength may include China's 14,500 km littoral, which is more than double India's, its objective of "reunifying" Taiwan and its irredentist maritime claims, in the South and East China Seas. An expansionist state which seeks eventual parity with the US, China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative and the Maritime Silk Route also provide the perfect camouflage for its grandiose maritime strategy.

India, on the other hand, remains a quintessential "status quo" power and has sought military force-levels adequate only to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Notwithstanding the low budgetary priority accorded to it, the Indian Navy (IN), has built itself into a modern and capable three-dimensional force, rather than being a professionally "up to NATO standards" and eagerly sought as a partner, both for exercises, and for maintaining "good order at sea."

Although technology and professional competence are the yardsticks for combat-effectiveness, numbers do matter, and with the IN at sixth or seventh in the international pecking order, there is obviously a significant disparity between the PLAN and IN. Given the growing gap between the two economies, it would be foolhardy for India to attempt an arms-race with China, but investing in maritime power would pay dividends in the long-run.

Faced with a difficult situation today, it is incumbent upon India, as a significant regional power and a democracy, to stand up to

For China, it came in the last century. In India, it is long overdue

As we watch the situation in Ladakh unfold, it becomes increasingly obvious that not only is a military resolution improbable, but a 'hot-war' may be unaffordable for both nuclear-armed countries. The answer lies in extended negotiations at the highest political and diplomatic levels. As the weaker power, India also needs to resort to 'power-balancing' and seeking like-minded friends and partners to send out a message of deterrence. India's attraction as a partner for the US, Japan or Australia, lies, not in its powerful army or professional air force, but in its navy's reach and ability to project maritime power.

its hegemonic neighbour. Regardless of economic asymmetry, China does have the military capability to inflict unacceptable pain in retaliation for any Chinese adventurism; certainly in the mountains, but also at sea.

However, as the nation cheers the army's tactical moves in Ladakh, there are misgivings about a strategic void in New Delhi. In this context, the above US DoD report deserves close examination by our "decision-making elite" as well as military leadership, because it shows that politicians — as much in a democracy like the US, as in a totalitarian state like China — accord the highest importance to national security. It bears reflection as to why India has remained an exception to this rule.

The US Congress believes that effective strategy-making defines national interests, objectives, and policies, along with the defence capabilities (and budgetary support) necessary to deter threats. The process provides a shared vision for all agencies and a common playbook to react in times of crisis. Starting with the US National Security Strategy, to be rendered by the president, US Congress demands quadrennial reviews — matching the presidential tenure — by the Departments of Defence, State, Homeland Security and the Intelligence Community.

Where China is concerned, its political leadership has, since 1995, been issuing a defence white paper (DWP) every two years. The 11 DWPs issued so far — all public documents — clearly articulate China's vital interests as well as national security aims, objectives and challenges. Topics of discussion include force-levels and defence expenditure, the PLA's progressively changing roles and re-organisation as well as its newly inducted equipment and platforms.

While the US template may be an "overkill", India has erred egregiously by its disregard for national security. No government has formulated a strategy or doctrine so far; nor has Parliament ever demanded a defence review or sought a white paper. As a direct consequence, "surprise" and "intelligence failure" have become a leitmotif in most of India's post-independence conflicts. Our defence-planning has remained ad-hoc and under-funded and every crisis evokes

confused and fumbling responses, including panic among the public.

Another important lesson that emerges from the US DoD document relates to China's "maritime awakening" in the latter part of the last century. While the PLAN owes much to visionary Admiral Liu Huaiqing, its commander during the 1980s, it could not have achieved its present status without the Communist Party providing steadfast political support. Every Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) from Deng Xiaoping onwards, has backed the phased growth of China's navy, from an inconsequential coastal-force, to a substantive blue-water navy.

The CMC leadership having astutely grasped the reality that "maritime power" is much more than just a "fighting-navy", China is, today, the world leader in ship-building and its merchant marine ranks No 1 in the world. It also fields the largest coast-guard that protects the world's biggest fishing fleet. Chinese ports rank amongst the best world-wide.

As we watch the situation in Ladakh unfold, it becomes increasingly obvious that not only is a military resolution improbable, but a "hot-war" may be unaffordable for both nuclear-armed countries. The answer lies in extended negotiations at the highest political and diplomatic levels. As the weaker power, India also needs to resort to "power-balancing" and seeking like-minded friends and partners to send out a message of deterrence. India's attraction as a partner for the US, Japan or Australia, lies, not in its powerful army or professional air force, but in its navy's reach and ability to project maritime power. In the approaching era of fiscal stringency, a sharper focus on its neglected maritime domain would garner immense benefits for India, and not just in terms of enhanced maritime security, but in going back to shipping, expanding the merchant fleet, modernising ports and mechanising fisheries would have a long-term impact on the economy, through growth of ancillary industries, skilling up, and massive generation of employment — all contributing to "Atma Nirbhara".

The writer is a retired chief of naval staff



DEVYANI ONIAL

THREE YEARS ago, sitting on Indian television's most famous couch, between one of the film industry's top producers and an actor with a clipped accent and a genteel lineage, when a young actor from a small hill district in Himachal challenged the established order, the audience cheered her on. When Kangana Ranaut appeared alongside Saif Ali Khan in *Koffee with Karan*, a show crowded with insider jokes and carry-over from the called its host Karan Johar the flag-bearer of nepotism, she stirred something in everyone who had made the journey from small towns to big cities, who had leaved to join glib conversations with their awkward accents and who had pushed at the gates of privilege and got in only to find they were still out.

She wasn't the first outsider to break into an industry controlled by powerful families. Dilip Kumar, Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan — some of Bollywood's biggest stars — had been outsiders, but while they recounted their struggle almost fondly, Ranaut showed her battle scars and resentment instead. She may have gained entry into the charmed circle but she seemed to be telling its gatekeepers that the privilege was entirely theirs. Her brassiness mirrored the rise of a new India, unafraid to speak its mind and ready to discard all gestures of political correctness as it called out its elites.

A few years later, Ranaut is mirroring the rise of another India — a nation in perpetual outrage, a hard-boiled India that has little empathy for those at the margins, shouts

## ESTABLISHMENT'S WARRIOR

Kangana Ranaut, who cast herself as Bollywood's disruptor, takes on a new role

down all dissenting voices and which has taken to the streets to demolish the establishment. In her toxic campaign against Rhea Chakraborty in the aftermath of the death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput, Ranaut has challenged the established order she once challenged. As the soap opera playing on television casts Chakraborty as the vishkanya who practised black magic, Ranaut has voluntarily taken on the role of the righteous one.

Ironically, there should have been no one better than her to understand the vilification of Chakraborty. In the very public unraveling of her relationship with Hritik Roshan, an ex had accused her of black magic, too. But instead of recognising the strands that connect the web of misogyny, she has spun yet another. Just last week, labelling actress Sonam Kapoor as "mafia bimbo" on Twitter, she admonished Kapoor for comparing her struggle "to a small-time druggie who was living off a vulnerable and broken self-made superstar". We shouldn't have been surprised, though — she has, in the recent past, dismissed fellow actresses as B-Grade and needy outsiders.

In politics, she has often shown her admiration for PM Narendra Modi, the man whose journey from grassroots politics to the country's top job and whose takedown of flag-bearer of the BJP has often been likened to hers in the film industry. As she lashes out against what she calls the "drug mafia of Bollywood" and throws her weight behind the BJP, she has taken on the worst instincts and vocab-

ulary of majoritarianism, calling the BMC taluk a "mafia zone" and to the streets to compare Mumbai with Pok. The outsider has now truly mastered the language of othering, a dog whistle perhaps, for an eventual political rise.

In this new brittle role, one in which you could accuse her of over acting, it's easy to forget the young girl who, with a mop of wayward curls, once went to a shopping mall, had made such a splash. We noted for her when she took on the role of a troubled alcoholic in her first film *Gangster* (2006) and followed her on a whirlwind solo honeymoon in *Queen* (2013). In her, we found a woman who spoke up about her vulnerabilities and her exploitation. As in life, so in films, she made unconventional choices, notching up many firsts and three national awards along the way. In an industry where the top billing still goes to men, she was one of the few actresses who could carry a movie on her own. Her success gave her a voice but she has used it increasingly only to bully and berate others and to amplify her real and perceived hurts.

As she bats for the Modi government in Maharashtra, the transformation of the Bollywood's most powerful disruptor to the establishment's most ferocious warrior is complete. Ranaut could have become the flag-bearer of a new India, but she has chosen a pity she has chosen, instead, to become the symbol of a million meaningless mutinies.

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## SEPTEMBER 15, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO

**V P SINGH'S OFFER**  
THE CHIEF MINISTER OF Uttar Pradesh, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, has sought the permission of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to resign from office, having owned full moral responsibility for the violence in Moradabad, Aligarh and other UP towns and its recurrence early this week. The chief minister, who has only recently completed two months in office, has requested the prime minister to accede to his request to resign which "arises out of both personal conviction and political propriety". Political circles in Lucknow have been agog with rumours about the imminent resignation of the chief minister, more so as he has

not been attending office or to office work because of being "indisposed".

**KAUNDA'S STATEMENT**  
THE PRESIDENT OF Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda, hoped that a political solution to the Afghan and Kampuchean issues, would be found with the intensification of efforts by non-aligned countries. Speaking to journalists after two days of intensive talks on wide-ranging issues with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in New Delhi, Kaunda said that "behind the door" efforts were being made to resolve the Afghan and Kampuchean issues. Like other countries, Zambia had been holding discussions with the Soviet

Union to find a political solution to the crisis.

**INDIRA ON CHINA**  
PRIME MINISTER INDIRA GANDHI has stressed the need for further improvement in bilateral relations between India and China. In a message of greetings to Chinese Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang on his assumption of office Mrs Gandhi said: "Both our governments are committed to improving bilateral relations. This is in the interest of our two peoples. It is important for peace and stability in Asia and the world. I am confident that even greater efforts will be made by our two governments to further this objective."

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## THE IDEAS PAGE

## Two theatres of peacemaking

India's framework of non-involvement is unlikely to survive the present wave of structural change in Afghanistan and Arabia. Current peace efforts demand a significant rethink of positions



BY C RAJA MOHAN

AS THE THREAT of conflict on India's China frontier looms large and tensions with Pakistan simmer on our western borders, hopes for peace and reconciliation have risen in Afghanistan and the Middle East. The first direct talks between Kabul and the Taliban insurgents began last week at Doha, in Qatar. Today, the leaders of UAE will sign a formal peace agreement with Israel at the White House. Bahrain, the second Gulf country to announce the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel in the last few weeks, will join the ceremony.

Skeptics caution against raising hopes too high. The chances of failure in Afghanistan are real. And the momentum behind the normalisation of ties between Israel and the Gulf kingdoms, may not necessarily lead to broader peace in the Middle East. Cynics say the US initiatives in Afghanistan and Arabia are driven by President Donald Trump's quest for diplomatic victories weeks before the election. To be fair though, President Trump has been eager, through the last four years, to redeem his pledge in the 2016 presidential elections to put an end to America's "endless wars" in the greater Middle East.

Talks between Kabul and the Taliban to generate an early ceasefire and a new framework for political reconciliation are part of the agreement between the US and the Taliban signed earlier this year, under which the US has pledged to withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban has promised not to attack the US and its allies.

The Middle East has always been far more intimately tied to US domestic politics. Supporters hail Trump as the first US president in decades not to drag America into a new war in the Middle East. Joe Biden, his Democratic rival, is unlikely to oppose Trump's deal-making in Afghanistan and the Middle East. But he will certainly find ways to diminish the president's success.

It does not really matter if the motivations of Trump's policy are wise or not. His actions create new facts on the ground and have political consequences for other states. The developments in Afghanistan and the Middle East will have implications for a large number of actors, including India. Five broad trends emerge from the current peace efforts in Afghanistan and the Middle East. All of them demand a significant rethink of Indian positions.

First is the strategic nature of the two sets of developments. Given the difficulty of reconciling the competing interests in Afghanistan and the Middle East, both the peace processes remain quite vulnerable. But the unfolding dynamic will alter the geopolitical landscape in both places. Whether peace breaks out in Afghanistan or not, the Taliban is here to stay.

The Afghan peace process is rooted in the recognition that the Taliban could not be defeated on the battlefield and must be accepted as a legitimate political force. UAE and Bahrain join Egypt and Jordan in having formal relationships with Israel, rather than being in a state of non-recognition. The fact that the Arab states and Israel are no longer the dominant ones in the region.



RAJESH M PARIKH

IN SEPTEMBER 1962, Jawaharlal Nehru was asked by a reporter about minor Chinese incursions into Indian territory during a stopover from London after attending the 12th Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference. He responded that he had instructed his army to throw out the Chinese. The ill-prepared and sparsely distributed Army tried to do just that but in a few days, the Chinese had believably advanced into our territory within reach of New Delhi. Then, mysteriously, they retreated for reasons that are not unequivocally clear 58 years later. The prevalent theory is that the Chinese were not interested in our barren land. They just wanted to chastise a globe-trotting Prime Minister who had been making arrogant and somewhat exaggerated statements about India's capabilities. Besides, they may have needed a distraction from monumental domestic economic and political crises.

Time for self-disclosure. I am a neuro-psychiatrist, not a political analyst. Far smarter and more accomplished individuals are influential positions in New Delhi. I do, however, plead guilty to off-duty indulgence in human behaviour and as my family and friends would testify, am occasionally right. Nine months ago, I began to co-author a book on the coronavirus before a single case had come to India and predicted then that the US and India



CR Sisil Kumar

Second is Arabia's enduring importance for the Subcontinent's geopolitics. India's strategic community tends to take too narrow a view of the Arabian salience; the focus is mostly on ensuring oil supplies, promoting manpower exports, and limiting the region's impact on India's Pakistan problem. But there is more to the Gulf.

Consider, for example, the fact that the Afghan peace talks are taking place in Qatar, a tiny Gulf Kingdom. It might be worth recalling that the Gulf Arabs played a key role in the 1980s defeating the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The UAE and Saudi Arabia were the only countries to recognise the Taliban government in the late 1990s. This time around, they appear to have taken a backseat. But they will not forever cede the lead in Afghanistan to their Gulf rival, Qatar.

Delhi will need to pay more attention to the unfolding realignments in the Middle East, especially between the Arabs and non-Arab states like Iran, Turkey and Israel. The current peace deals mark a historic change in the structure of those relations. They are about a reconciliation between a critical security power and its regional rivals.

Third is the paradox of American power. Trump's moves in Afghanistan and the Middle East are widely seen as part of the inevitable decline of US power. But the reality remains that the US is the one forcing change in both the theatres. There were a whole lot of attempts over the last decade from Russia, China, Europe and the region for a peace settlement in Afghanistan and the Middle East. The US political and diplomatic weight that facilitated the formal dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban, in the Middle East, it is the US that has led the efforts for a reconciliation between Israel and Gulf Arabs.

Fourth, as the US steps back from the region, at least for now, the resulting strategic vacuum is likely to be filled by other powers. Russia and China are quite active in both the Middle East and Afghanistan. China has tradi-

tionally avoided being drawn into the region's political conflicts. But in recent years, it has stepped forward. If tentatively, China's future role in Afghanistan, in partnership with Pakistan, could be quite significant and will be of some concern for India.

India's framework of non-involvement, however, is unlikely to survive the present wave of structural change in Afghanistan and Arabia. As the old order begins to crumble in the greater Middle East, the question is no longer whether India should join the geopolitical jousting there; but when, how and in partnership with whom.

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## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Mr Modi's short-sightedness will cost India dear. The country's second Covid wave may strike harder than the first."

—THE GUARDIAN

## Missing in NEP: Rural youth

The policy ignores the crisis in education among the marginalised majority in rural India



A R VASAVI

IN ITS ORIENTATION and strategies, the National Education policy 2020 (NEP) is a layered document that recommends significant structural changes to the education system, dips into the constructed imaginaries of a past glorious India that can be retrieved via education, co-opts some progressive ideas for elementary education, overall acts as a guiding star for the aspirations of the urban middle-classes. But either deliberately or by the limited understanding of the committee members, the NEP overlooks the complexity of contemporary rural India, which is marked by a sharp deceleration of its economy, extant forms of distress, and pauperisation of a majority of its citizens.

Although the NEP claims to "bridge gaps in access, participation and learning outcomes", it overlooks the fact that poor quality education marks and mars the lives of rural citizens. Neglecting to engage with any idea of fostering equality of educational opportunity with equality in quality education, the NEP fails to address the growing school differentiation in which government schools are now primarily attended by children of disadvantaged castes and Adivasi groups, while a mushrooming of private schools caters to the aspirations of the more advantaged castes and classes. That such school differentiation defies the idea of education as a leveller and the possibility of schooling acting as a shared experience that forges social coherence is an issue that the NEP committee seems to be oblivious of.

Growing privatisation of education along with no assurance of quality is placing a huge burden on citizens and the report takes the cognisance of such trends. The fact that rural candidates are finding it increasingly difficult to gain entry into professional education and the lack of fit between the curriculum and the job market means that several lakhs of them find themselves both "unemployable" and unemployed. These are issues that find no mention in the report.

Overlooking the general adverse integration of the rural into the larger macro-economy and into poor quality mass higher education, the report calls for the "establishment of large, multi-discipline universities and colleges" and places emphasis on online and distance learning (ODL), without paying attention to the fact that correspondence courses and distance education degrees have become a source of revenue generation for universities and institutions

and are run without guarantees of quality. The report fails to take into account the impact of poor-quality higher education on rural youth who, in many ways, are manifesting signs of alienation from their roots, are disaffected and amenable to being recruited into violent anti-social activities.

Recent reports of increasing suicides among youth are another indicator of the deep distress that they are experiencing. The NEP calls for higher education institutions to promote and support the teaching of "lok vidya" and it highlights the importance of yoga, AYUSH, and Sanskrit, which can be taught along with Artificial Intelligence, machine learning and digital learning, so that youth can be prepared for a global economy. In this narrow perspective, there is no scope for considering the establishment of smaller regional learning centres in which the youth can be taught a range of revamped older knowledge systems along with newer skills and knowledge.

The possibility of forging and promoting environmental studies for local ecological restoration and conservation, agro-ecologies that can draw on the varied sophisticated regional agricultural knowledge and practices, reviving local health and healing traditions from the vast repertoire of medical knowledge, or recognising vernacular architectural traditions and skills, and a range of artisan and craftsmanship to use local resources and thereby generate both employment and revive regional economies finds no mention at all in the NEP.

Such measures can create a pool of skilled and employable youth who may mean the difference between rural youth rather than become part of the tide of migrant labour who insecure and precarious lives were all too evident during the lockdown return migration. The NEP draws on its neoliberal economic ideas and moots the possibility of establishing "Special Economic Zones" in disadvantaged areas and in "spirational districts". But the report provides no details as to how such SEZs will function and who will be the beneficiaries of such institutions. Will such institutions be based on the models of IITs, entrance exam coaching industry or will it be like the way in which Chalkalake, a pastoral region 120 km from Bengaluru, was carved out by displacing local pastoralists and herders, and establishing a "Science City" that combines a solar energy field, a nuclear processing site, and a campus for undergraduates of the Indian Institute of Science?

Although the report claims that the purpose of education is to achieve "full human potential, develop an equitable and just society and promote national development", it fails to cater to the needs of rural India's marginalised majority, who in so many ways are rendered into being subjects rather than citizens.

The writer, a social anthropologist, is based in Karnataka

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## RIGHTS UNDERMINED

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "The dog whistle" (IE, September 14). The Delhi Police naming personalities like Sitaram Yechury, Yogendra Yadav, Jayant Ghosh and Apoorwanand, who protested against CAA-NRC, and connecting them with Delhi riots looks bizarre. Any peaceful public protest is always against the government. In an electoral democracy, these protests make governments perform or engage in a course correction. Those who don't they bite the dust in the next election and a new government is elected. Branding such protests as crime of defamation and an act to destabilise the government, and attempt to connect them with events like riots, which needs fair and independent probe, reflects an undermining of democratic rights and the rule of law.

LR Murmu, Delhi

## BLAME GAME

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Who stoked the embers?" (IE, September 14). The Delhi violence earlier this year was a classic case of abuse of power. Busy finding out who started it, we have ignored its cause — fear. When the state circulates an ideology to other people within the country, the apparatuses like the police no longer serve citizens, but only the state, thus maintaining hegemony. We saw exactly this in Delhi. To say that the protesters were misled is a brazen infantilisation of those who came out on the streets and demand equality — their political and moral right. Misleading, instead, is the rhetoric against the Muslim community that has been around for quite some time, and that

has enjoyed impunity. The hate-speaking ramp has built a poisonous discourse and ordinary people have been manipulated to forget about their lost jobs and bleak future.

Fatima Ghazali, Pune

## HIGH STAKES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Road from Doha" (IE, September 14). The representation of India at the Intra-Afghan Peace Talks in Doha is testimony to the fact that it has formally shed all her inhibitions to openly share the stage with the Taliban in the larger interest of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned national reconciliation. The ministerial statement has highlighted India's expectations from the outcome of this negotiated right. Misleading, instead, is the rhetoric against the Muslim community that has been around for quite some time, and that

Sudip Kumar Dey, Kolkata

## Two countries and a virus

Chinese have brilliantly outmanoeuvred virus. For us, worst of pandemic is yet to come

would have the largest number of cases in the world. That the world's most powerful and richest country, with the best medical facilities and by far the greatest number of Nobel Laureates would succumb to a tiny virus, seemed an absurd and risky prediction. Nonetheless, we took our chances. A couple of months later when our national tally of coronavirus cases stood at 84 and it was believed that in a few days we would win the war against the virus, we predicted the opposite. We cautioned that we would have the largest number of cases in the world. While that prediction has not come true, we have as often been in the past few months, that we are wrong. Meanwhile, over 25 other predictions we made about the virus have come true. This newspaper has recently ran an analysis about how the war against the virus was as good as lost. We pray that the virus will withdraw as mysteriously as it came.

Fourth, as the US steps back from the region, at least for now, the resulting strategic vacuum is likely to be filled by other powers. Russia and China are quite active in both the Middle East and Afghanistan. China has tradi-

tionally avoided being drawn into the region's political conflicts. But in recent years, it has stepped forward. If tentatively, China's future role in Afghanistan, in partnership with Pakistan, could be quite significant and will be of some concern for India.

India's framework of non-involvement, however, is unlikely to survive the present wave of structural change in Afghanistan and Arabia. As the old order begins to crumble in the greater Middle East, the question is no longer whether India should join the geopolitical jousting there; but when, how and in partnership with whom.

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MUMBAI  
TUESDAY  
SEPTEMBER 15, 2020

Hindustan Times

MY INDIA

09

# Chinese envoy hails 5-pt plan

But blames New Delhi for illegally trespassing the Line of Actual Control and altering the status quo in border areas

**Rезаul H Laskar**  
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**NEW DELHI:** Chinese envoy Sun Weidong on Monday said the five-point road map agreed to by India and China to address tensions on the disputed border provides "political impetus" to efforts to ease the situation, even as he blamed New Delhi for trespassing the Line of Actual Control and altering the status quo.

Sun made the remarks in a lengthy statement issued on Monday, the Chinese embassy three days after the two sides finalised the five-point road map during a meeting of external affairs minister S Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yon in the margins of a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting in Moscow on Thursday.

Despite the road map, sharp divergences remained between the two sides, with experts pointing out that the joint statement issued after the Jaishankar-Wang meeting made no mention of the restoration of status quo on the LAC as it existed in April.

Sun said the road map, which includes following consensus between the top leaders, easing tensions, maintaining peace and tranquillity in border areas, continuing diplomatic communications, and expediting work on new confidence-building measures – "is an important step towards the right direction, and will provide political impetus to ease the border situation and promote the bilateral relations."

He added, "I hope and believe that as long as the two sides earnestly implement the consensus reached by the two foreign ministers to the fronting troops and adhere to the correct method of dialogue and negotiation, the two sides will find a way to overcome the current difficulties."

The Chinese envoy contended that "public opinion in India"

**IAF's Sukhoi Su-30 jet flies over Ladakh on Monday.**

The Indian side has blamed the five-point road map, and was the view that "both sides have demonstrated political will to resolve the border situation".

However, Sun referred to statements by relevant Indian ministries that Indian troops "pre-empted" Chinese military activity on the south bank of Pangong Lake, and contended this "obviously revealed that there are illegal trespassing the LAC and status quo change in the border areas."

He noted that sections of the Indian media had quoted government sources to disprove that the "Indian Army fired shots on the LAC as it existed in April."

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## INDIAN, CHINESE TOP MILITARY COMMANDERS LIKELY TO MEET THIS WEEK

**HT Correspondent**  
letters@hindustantimes.com

**NEW DELHI:** Top Indian and Chinese military commanders are likely to meet along the contested Line of Actual Control (LAC) this week to reduce military tensions in eastern Ladakh where the situation remains tense after a series of recent maneuvers by the two armies in the Pangong Tso area, people familiar with the developments said on Monday.

Corps commander-ranked officers have so far met five times but failed to break the deadlock.

This will be their first meeting after the Indian Army swiftly moved and occupied key heights to prevent the People's Liberation Army (PLA) from grabbing Indian territory on the southern bank of Pangong Tso in a stealthy midnight move on August 29.

The Chinese envoy said the PLA engaged in such maneuvers during August 29-30 to change the status quo on the south bank of Pangong Lake and Indian troops responded with "appropriate defensive measures".

The Indian Army has accused the PLA of firing in the air when Chinese troops were prevented from closing in on an Indian forward position on September 7.

The Chinese envoy said the "way ahead for [a] solution is very clear" – he pointed to the agreement reached by the two foreign ministers that as the situation eases, the two sides should expedite work on new confidence-building measures.

Sun said the top leadership of the two countries had reached a series of consensus, including the basic judgement that China and India are partners rather than rivals. "Therefore, we need peace instead of confrontation; we need to pursue win-win cooperation instead of zero-sum game; we need trust rather than suspicion; we need to move our relationship forward rather than backward," he said.

There was no immediate response to the Chinese envoy's remarks from Indian officials.

## Khalilzad to meet Jaishankar, discuss Afghan peace process

**Shishir Gupta**  
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**NEW DELHI:** US special envoy for Afghanistan reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad will hold talks with external affairs minister S Jaishankar on Tuesday on the intra-Afghan negotiations underway in Doha against the backdrop of calls for an immediate ceasefire in the war-torn country.

According to diplomats in Doha and New Delhi, Khalilzad will share details of the latest developments in the Afghan peace process. He is also expected to express his appreciation for India's role in the Afghan reconstruction process.

Khalilzad's visit to New Delhi follows a trip on Monday to Islamabad, where he held talks with the top civilian and military leadership.

The intra-Afghan negotiations were inaugurated in Doha on Sunday, six months later than the Taliban's return to power on a prisoner swap agreed in February and the continuing Taliban offensive and attacks on high value targets in Kabul.

Jaishankar laid down India's expectations from the peace process in his address during



**Zalmay Khalilzad**

Sunday's inaugural ceremony. New Delhi expects that Afghan soil will never be used for any "anti-India activities", and supports an "immediate, comprehensive ceasefire" since the rising levels of violence cannot be allowed to continue, he said.

Khalilzad had been expected to impress on the Iranian Khan government the need to pressure the Taliban to reduce violence in Afghanistan. The talks between representatives from India, Pakistan, Russia, Germany, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, Norway and the UK. The event was attended by representatives from India, Pakistan, Russia, Germany, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, Norway and the UK.

The delegation led by joint secretary (Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran) JP Singh of the external affairs ministry and including Deepak Mittal, Indian envoy to Qatar and a Pakistani Afghan expert.

Singh also met Abdullah

At the opening ceremony on Sunday, the Afghan government and its allies, including the US, called for a ceasefire. Abdullah, the head of the peace process for the Afghan government, said the Taliban could offer a ceasefire in exchange for the release of more jailed fighters. But there was no mention of a truce by the Taliban.

Ahmad Nader Naderi, a member of the government's negotiating team, tweeted on Sunday: "The first meeting between the contact groups of the two negotiation teams took place today in this meeting code of conduct between the two sides, schedules of upcoming meetings and relevant issues were discussed and progress [was] made."

Apart from the US, Afghanistan, the Taliban and Qatar, which is hosting the talks, Surinamese, Norway and the UK. The event was attended by representatives from India, Pakistan, Russia, Germany, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, Norway and the UK. The delegation led by joint secretary (Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran) JP Singh of the external affairs ministry and including Deepak Mittal, Indian envoy to Qatar and a Pakistani Afghan expert.

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Abdullah in Doha over the week-end to discuss the peace process. During the meeting, Abdullah thanked India for its continued support. Pakistan has persistently opposed any role for India in Afghanistan but the US, its allies and the Afghan government have been deeply appreciative of New Delhi's assistance to the reconstruction effort in the war-war-torn nation.

The Afghan government's 21-member negotiating team is led by Masoom Stanekzai, a former intelligence chief. The Taliban side is led by Abdul Hakim, the terror group's chief justice and a close aide of the its upcoming emir, the late Taliban leader Hafizullah Ahmadzad.

US secretary of state Mike Pompeo, who was in Doha, said the negotiations would be difficult. "We will undoubtedly encounter many challenges in seizing this opportunity to secure peace," Khalilzad told Afghanistan's Tolo News channel there some people in Afghanistan who prefer the current volatile situation to peace with the Taliban, while some are attempting to keep the Taliban engaged in war so that it could pay the price.

## 'Khalid against CAA but not involved in Delhi riots'

**HT Correspondent**  
letters@hindustantimes.com

**NEW DELHI:** A Delhi court on Monday sent former Jawahar Nehru University (JNU) student Umar Khalid to 10 days in police custody a day after his arrest protesters while "letting off the air" the national capital's north-east district.

Khalid's counsel Trideep Pals told the court that his client was not in Delhi between February 23 and 26, when the riots took place; that he was opposed to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, or CAA, and not ashamed of his stand; and that the police were yet to produce evidence that Khalid had incited the protests.

The court accepted the police's demand application on the grounds that the 35-year-old has been "unusually vocal" in a huge volume of technical data, and that he should be sent to custody so that an effective investigation can be carried out.

Several activists and civil society members have opposed Khalid's arrest on allegedly flimsy grounds, and have demanded to know why the police have taken no action against Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Kapil Mishra, who was seen giving an inflammatory speech in north-east Delhi a day before the violence broke out on February 24.

They also asked why other BJP leaders were not booked for

speeches delivered during the run up to the Delhi elections just weeks before the riots.

Nine retired IPS officers on Monday wrote to Delhi's police commissioner, SN Srivastava, saying they were "pained" at police implicating anti-CAA protesters while "letting off the air" the national capital's north-east district.

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## Government imposes ban on export of onions

**NEW DELHI:** The Union government on Monday banned onion exports on September 15, 2020, after a bad crop crimped output. In December 2019, prices soared to ₹80 per kg, up from ₹32 in April. The government had lifted the ban on March 15, 2020, on retail prices of onions rose to ₹40 a kg from ₹30 a kg in several cities.

According to trade data, the country exported 15,000 metric tons of fresh onions and 15,000 metric tons of dried onions in 2019-20. Between April and July 2020, exports of onions to neighbouring Bangladesh soared 157.7%. Since the ban is a contract base ingredient of most Indian dishes and widely consumed, consumers are quite sensitive to a rise in onion prices, relative to many other commodities. The country's consumer price index rose in August rose 6.69%, slightly lower than 6.73% recorded in the previous month, according to government data released on Monday. According to the consumer price index data, food inflation in August fell marginally to 0.95%. Yet, overall food & beverages inflation rose 157.7%.

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**WESTERN RAILWAY**  
CORROSION TENDIT No. COMAL/CQSC-2020-PCT-1 DTD. 20/09/2020

In connection to the above Tender Notification for Leasing of Space in Parcel Car Excess Train from KEB-CPB-68, the following amendments may be made.

Para in Tender Document	Page No.	Condition in Tender Document	To be read as / Changed Condition
Para 1 (M)	Page No. 6 of 6	"Para 1. The tenderer (s) shall submit a copy of 'Certificate' (as enclosed as Annexure-E) stating that all submitted documents along with bid are true and correct. Standard format of 'Certificate' to be submitted by the bidder is available on REFS website. Non-submission of the above Certificate by the bidder(s) shall result in summary rejection of his/her/their bid(s)."	"Para 1. The tenderer (s) shall submit a copy of 'Certificate' (as enclosed as Annexure-E) stating that all submitted documents along with bid are true and correct. Standard format of 'Certificate' to be submitted by the bidder is available on REFS website. Non-submission of the above Certificate by the bidder(s) shall result in summary rejection of his/her/their bid(s)."
Annexure E	Page 33 of 34 of Tender Document	Annexure E: Format of certificate to be submitted by the tenderer to sign the Tender Document.	Annexure E: Format of certificate to be submitted by the tenderer to sign the Tender Document.

All other terms & conditions of the above tenders shall remain unchanged.

For further information, please contact on (022) 25596349 / 25596308 / 25596348. Fax : (022)2550 5185 between 1000 and 1600 hrs on all working days.

**BHABHA ATOMIC RESEARCH CENTRE**  
Nuclear Recycle Group  
Waste Management Division, Mumbai – 400 085

**NOTICE INVITING TENDERS**

Online item rate tender are invited through e-tendering mode by Chief Superintendent, Waste Management Division, Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, Trombay, Mumbai-400 085, on behalf of president of India in two bid format from eligible contractors for the following works :

Sl. No.	Name of Work	Estimate Cost	Completion Period
1	Proposal for decontamination plant protective works and Dhruva cut at Decontamination Centre, WMD, BARC, Trombay, Mumbai – 400 085	Rs. 12.28 Crores	12 months

Estimated Cost: Rs. 12.28 Crores  
EMD: Rs. 38, 992/-  
Tender Processing Fee: Rs. 1130/-

The  
**Hindu Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

## In Delhi, a grave mistake

Investigate the riots impartially.  
Don't engage in political vendetta

The Delhi riots in February 2020 marked one of the darkest chapters in the Capital's political history. It reflected frayed social tensions between Hindus and Muslims. It came in the wake of a deeply polarised political climate—the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA). It happened in the backdrop of the Delhi elections, where there was violent rhetoric—especially by functionaries of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It was a deep embarrassment to India internationally with the riots taking place during United States President Donald Trump's visit. And it reflected gross State failure, where for over 48 hours—before there was a *de facto* reshuffle in Delhi Police and national security adviser Ajit Doval walked the streets of northeast Delhi—the Delhi Police was unable to quell the violence.

The Delhi riots saw violence from both sides, and in that aspect, it was different from the 1984 violence—which systematically targeted the Sikhs. But there is a lesson from 36 years ago. There has never been any meaningful justice in the 1984 violence, with perpetrators, often with political sanction, having got away. That, then, bred a culture of impunity—which enabled subsequent riots and pogroms. There has to be justice not just because it is the right of victims and for closure, but also to send a message that violence and promoting enmity between communities is unacceptable, and irrespective of political affiliations, there will be punishment.

Instead of conducting an impartial investigation into the riots, the Delhi Police, however, has spun an elaborate theory—it rests on how those who were critics of the government in general and CAA in particular, including respected political leaders, civil society voices, students, instigated the riots. But the police has been unable to show direct evidence connecting their speeches with the subsequent violence. Instead, this theory appears to be the framework being used to intimidate critics of the government, even as the role of those who may be aligned with the ruling party is carefully sidestepped. The Delhi Police had a special job—identify the perpetrators of the violence, irrespective of their religion and political affiliation, review its own performance during the riots, and build a case. Instead, it has fallen for a legally dubious, ethically questionable, politically vindictive approach which will not help deliver justice. This may allow the real perpetrators—on both sides—to get away.

## A climate lesson from California

The wildfires which have been raging in Oregon, California and Washington in the United States (US) since mid-August, have burned millions of acres of lands, killed more than 30 people and destroyed thousands of homes. With the US elections due in November, the wildfires have also become a key political issue. Last week, Democratic presidential challenger Joe Biden warned that "climate change poses an imminent, existential threat to our way of life" and accused President Donald Trump, a climate sceptic, of denying "that reality".

Mr Biden's statement linking the wildfires with the climate crisis has wide support. California governor Gavin Newsom said this is a "climate emergency". Scientists have blamed the peak heatwave and dry winds for fanning the fires, and have warned that such "compound disasters" (when more than one extreme event takes place at the same time, across geographies) are a result of the climate crisis. The US is not the only country that has seen such wildfires. An inquiry has found Australia's 2019-20 bushfires were likely made worse by the climate crisis, warning that such devastating wildfires are likely to happen again. While India has not seen such large-scale fires, forest fires (mainly grasslands) are not uncommon. But unfortunately, the forest department's firefighting capabilities are rudimentary. It doesn't have modern equipment, adequate number of vehicles and enough field staff, which can bolster its rapid response system. In an era of the climate crisis and human encroachment into forest areas, it's time to learn from the crises of the US and Australia and bolster its firefighting infrastructure.

## Transforming public administration

A new set of reforms seeks to improve the quality of bureaucracy and the nature of State-citizen interface

Every government since 1947, irrespective of political affiliation, has expressed frustration at the inefficiency of India's vast bureaucracy and the maze of red-tape. Hundreds of committees have provided recommendations but the basic structure of public administration has remained unaltered. Therefore, it is no small matter that the government has embarked on an ambitious effort in recent weeks to reform the administration from its roots. A careful observer would have noticed that some of its key elements have already been introduced.

Just weeks before he passed away in 1964, Prime Minister (PM) Jawaharlal Nehru had commented that his greatest regret had been his failure to change an essentially colonial administration. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi expressed similar sentiments in Parliament in 1966. "What India needs today is a revolution in the administrative system without which no enduring change could be brought about in any field".

The first Administrative Reform Commission was set up in 1966 under Morarji Desai but it became a victim

of bureaucratic sloth. Its report of 20 volumes and 537 recommendations would be placed in Parliament in 1977. Desai had become PM by then, but he was unable to implement the recommendations.

The reforms of 1991 freed many parts of the economy from direct government control. But the functioning of the bureaucracy went through few changes. Thereafter, a second Administrative Reform Commission was set up in 2005 under Veerappa Moily. In the preface of a report tabled in 2008, Moily wrote of the bureaucracy. "It believes that its authority and legitimacy is derived not from the mandate of the people but from an immutable corpus of rules that it has prescribed for itself, without any correspondence to the needs and aspirations of the people".

This brief historical background is important in order to appreciate what is now being attempted. PM Narendra Modi's government has been experimenting with reforms such as lateral entry and digitisation since 2014. However, the new effort has a totally different level of ambition.

Here are measures introduced in the last six weeks: One, a national platform for recruitment. Almost all discussion around government recruitment tends to focus on that of the higher bureaucracy through Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) examinations. However, this

thin layer of gazetted officers accounts for a tiny fraction of the civil service. The rest of the recruitment is done through a bewildering network of agencies and examinations. The lack of transparency not only makes it difficult for candidates but has led frequently to allegations of manipulation. The government, therefore, has announced the establishment of a National Recruitment Agency that will conduct a Common Eligibility Test across the country. For now, it will be a standardised first-level filter that will enable candidates to take things forward for final selection. The scores will be shared, so state governments, public sector and even private sector can use them as they deem fit.

Two, compulsory retirement to remove the unfit. The health of any organisation is dependent on systematically weeding out deadwood. Unfortunately, entry into the Indian civil service is seen as a ticket to guaranteed employment till retirement. Interestingly, service rules have long included provisions that allow for civil servants to be compulsorily retired after he/she has completed 30 years of service and crossed the age of 50 (or 55 even if less than 30 years in service). This can be done under the Fundamental Rule-56(1) and Rule-48 of CCS (Pension) Rules. Around 320 senior officers have already been retired through this route since 2014, but the government reissued the guidelines

on August 28 along with supporting Supreme Court judgments. It also provided basic criteria and procedures for using these provisions to remove officials "whose integrity is doubtful" or "found to be ineffective". Three, rationalisation of autonomous bodies. The central government alone has hundreds of autonomous bodies—think-tanks, industry bodies, advisory boards and so on. These entities have a role in the delivery of public services but, inevitably, there is also a large amount of duplication and redundancy. It is rare that a government body, once established, will be wound up. For the first time, the central government is carrying out a comprehensive initiative to review the functioning of these institutions. In August, the ministry of textiles alone abolished the All India Handicrafts Board, Cotton Advisory Board, Jute Advisory Board, and the All India Handloom Board. Their duties have been transferred to other existing bodies for better delivery. Other ministries are also carrying out similar exercises.



Sanjeev Sanyal

Sanjeev Sanyal is principal economic adviser, Government of India

The views expressed are personal

## How to reduce food, job insecurity in rural areas

After the Covid-19 outbreak, 66% of the households fell short of cash for food. About 40% reduced their food intake. Only 7% of the returned migrants are engaged in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). These are the findings of a survey of about 17,000 households in 80 districts (169 blocks) in 11 states, carried out by a coalition of six civil society organisations, called Rapid Rural Community Response to Covid-19. This shows that the State has to play a major role in reviving and rebuilding the economy.

First, only half received the full entitlement of free rations three times—42% received this either once or twice; 8% got nothing at all. This situation is stark in backward states such as Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand. Second, 66% reported that they were short of cash for food, and 53% for medicines. This shows the urgent need to revive public systems of service delivery in health and nutrition. Third, 40% of the households surveyed reported that they had reduced food intake—the proportion is higher in Bihar (53%) and Jharkhand (48%).

The cumulative impact of this economic insecurity is resulting in widespread mental health issues. Three-quarters (73%) of households expressed fear and anxiety about the future, in the case of Dalits, this was 77%. Three-fifths of households (63%) are worried about sustaining and supporting to the family. More than one-third (36%) have disturbed sleeping patterns and 33% are without social interactions.

The fiscal stimulus provided so far is only a fraction of what was announced. Some specific recommendations that emerge from analysing the survey results are the following. One, launch a massive programme to rehabilitate returnee migrants. A significant proportion of the migrant workers were women (18%) and children (26%), and the rest (56%) were male migrants. Almost one-third of the rural households surveyed had one or more migrant workers (5,257 out of 17,032). Four-fifths of these households (83%) reported that migrants had returned to villages. Surprisingly, only 7% of the returned migrants are currently engaged in MGNREGS work, 28%

are working as casual labour, and two-fifths of the households have no gainful work. When will they go back to their destination states?

The survey showed that 15% of migrants have gone back to cities, 58% were hoping to return by November, and 42% were unsure when they would go back. There is now evidence of the urban economy contracting. The government may not have any option other than to launch a massive programme of village entrepreneurship for returnee migrants. Second, allocate an additional ₹50,000 crore for MGNREGS. A little less than one-third of the households (31%) engaged in MGNREGS over the last two months, which is a record, even as low participation is reported from Bihar (11%) and Jharkhand (15%). Households were engaged for 10 days a month on an average in the previous two months, with a variation of three to 14 days per month, of which two, which too is good news. But 40% of households had not received full payment. There is going to be a huge surge in demand. Almost three-fourths of households (71%) need 15-plus days of MGNREGS work per month, from now on, in the next three months. As the demand for MGNREGS work is going to peak after the third session (October onwards), there is a case for increased allocation to be made for the scheme.

Third, extend the free ration scheme for six more months. The current effectiveness of the scheme is low, but it can be improved. Our survey results showed that in comparison to the Public Distribution System, the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) is far less effective. For example, 63% women had Jan Dhan Yojana accounts, out of which only 45% got ₹1,500 to ₹500 three times. Four, revive and strengthen public systems of service delivery such as the Integrated Child Development Services and the midday meal programme along with pension schemes.

Five, the Reserve Bank of India should give a directive to banks to extend a top-up loan of ₹10,000 crore to self-help groups (SHGs), for they have once again emerged as a major support for rural households. Nearly one-fourth of households (22%) were seeking loans through SHGs or Joint Liability Groups. Given the high repayment track record of SHGs, they should be a preferred option over individuals seeking loans from banks.

According to the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, there are 10 million SHGs, half of whom are linked to banks—five million SHGs with an outstanding of ₹87,000 crore as on March 31, 2019.

If a top-up loan of ₹20,000 per SHG at an average of ₹2,000 per member, is extended to all these SHGs, it could go a long way in initiating livelihood activities at the SHG level.

It is only if such steps are undertaken on a war-footing can Prime Minister Narendra Modi hope to win the *vishwas* (trust) of people in rural India.

Adya Arora, co-moderator, RCR Coalition and director, Buddha Fellowship Program, SRJIAN

Pratyaya Jagannath, research coordinator, RCR Coalition, and managing director, RPS India Private Limited

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Reforms include a national recruitment agency, compulsory retirement, rationalisation of autonomous bodies, and a taxpayers charter

HP PHOTO

On August 28 along with supporting Supreme Court judgments. It also provided basic criteria and procedures for using these provisions to remove officials "whose integrity is doubtful" or "found to be ineffective".

Three, rationalisation of autonomous bodies. The central government alone has hundreds of autonomous bodies—think-tanks, industry bodies, advisory boards and so on. These entities have a role in the delivery of public services but, inevitably, there is also a large amount of duplication and redundancy. It is rare that a government body, once established, will be wound up. For the first time, the central government is carrying out a comprehensive initiative to review the functioning of these institutions. In August, the ministry of textiles alone abolished the All India Handicrafts Board, Cotton Advisory Board, Jute Advisory Board, and the All India Handloom Board. Their duties have been transferred to other existing bodies for better delivery. Other ministries are also carrying out similar exercises.

Four, taxpayers charter and faceless assessment. An important aspect of administrative reform is to improve the interface with the citizen. The tax department is an obvious place to start. In August, the PM announced a taxpayers Charter that clearly lays out 14 rights for the taxpayer.

The announcement of the Charter accompanied a shift to a system of faceless assessment where cases are to be assigned by an automated system. Together, it is hoped that the measures will significantly reduce persistent complaints of harassment and rent-seeking.

The overall direction of the reform effort should be clear—to improve the inflow/outflow of personnel, rationalise processes, weed out redundant bodies and upgrade the interface with the citizen. The momentum is only going to accelerate.

Sanjeev Sanyal is principal economic adviser, Government of India

The views expressed are personal

{ KAPIL SIBAL } CONGRESS LEADER

Every citizen of our country stands behind our soldiers. We salute them. Behind the PM's policies and actions? I doubt it



Kapil Sibal

## India doesn't have clear social distancing rules. Citizens must chip in

Compliance with social distancing guidelines is expected to decrease the spread, morbidity, and mortality related to any contagious disease. Social distancing, according to the ministry of health and family welfare (MoHFW), is a "behavioural infection prevention and control intervention implemented to avoid/decrease contact between those who are susceptible to a disease-causing pathogen and those who are not, so as to stop or slow down the rate and extent of disease transmission in a community". As per the official guidelines issued on August 29, based on the directive related to social distancing, individuals must maintain a distance of six feet in public spaces.

While social distancing is a widely-used term, Dr Maria Van Kerkhove of the World Health Organization has promoted the term physical distancing over social distancing. According to her, physical distancing is "keeping the physical distance from people so that we can prevent the virus from transferring to one another". A close examination of all the unlock guidelines show that the need to maintain six feet distance in public spaces, while being an extremely important directive, is directing people to maintain a physical distancing rather than social distancing.

On May 10, when the total number of cases in the United Kingdom (UK) was 212,183, Prime Minister Boris Johnson outlined a conditional plan to reopen society. Accordingly, the public was allowed to enjoy parks and public spaces, and take unlimited outdoor exercise provided they were done only with members of the same household. People when the doubling rate in the UK is 129 days, social distancing guidelines, among other things, suggest the following for people living in England: A maximum of six people can meet outdoors and indoors from multiple households; a household of more than six can gather in public or private, but not join members outside the household.

While the physical distancing guidelines related to public spaces are well understood by people in India, adherence to the guidelines is another question. The guidelines on

large public gatherings and congregations are clear—they are prohibited, as was observed during the Ganesh Chaturthi and Moharram festivals.

But, with the easing of restrictions and phased reopening, what social distancing rules are people to follow related to their movement to other households for, presumably, avoidable social interactions?

One can argue that all are expected to wear masks and practise social distancing, but the definition of social distancing is six feet distance. A recent research study finds that silent transmission of Covid-19 during the pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic stages was estimated to be responsible for more than half of the overall transmission. Pre-symptomatic Covid-19 patients can transmit the infection, unaware they're carrying the virus, by leaving their infected droplets on surfaces. Further, a team of researchers from Princeton University and the

University of Montpellier, while calculating infection probability during casual conversations in a social setting (across the table over lunch or parties) found that in a poorly-ventilated space, the infection risk of speaking with a superspreader, without a mask, even for less than one minute, is high even with a three-metre separation. A caveat: This paper is yet to be peer-reviewed.

So, in the absence of detailed-and-clear social distancing guidelines, can we not make our own citizen-formulated ones? Learning from other nations, can we not, for instance, say we will physically meet members from another household only for essential purposes, like care-giving, and forsake physical interaction for all other avoidable purposes? Access to technology has ensured we don't get disconnected from our families and loved ones during the lockdown. Maybe our lives, for a few months more, will be dependent on mediated-technology. But aren't we capable of these small sacrifices? For the numbers to come down, all of us must do our bit.

Kapil Sibal is an associate professor, Area Chair-Marketing, FORE School of Management, New Delhi



## OUR VIEW



## The policy conundrum that stagflation poses

*RBI has seen inflation hover above its tolerance limit for three successive months now. Even if it's able to quell its imported component, India may not be able to escape difficult choices*

When India went into lockdown back in March, inflation was not even a blip on our anxiety radar. Today, we must worry about "stagflation", a term that signifies the odd rise of prices amid economic stagnancy. Retail inflation had broken above the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) tolerance limit of 6% in June, and rose to just above 6.73% in July, but it has taken August's figure of 6.69%, out on Monday, to confirm its persistence. As before, a closer look at the data shows buoyant food prices as a significant contributor to inflation, with protein-rich items getting especially dearer. Such a price uptrend, however, cannot be analysed on an item-by-item basis without taking monetary conditions into account. Inflation, after all, is a sign of excessive money vying for too few goods and services. This complicates any policy that pumps more of it into the economy.

Efforts to pin overall inflation down to its causes are not easy. An obvious culprit would be the covid clamps that snapped off supplies. While these have mostly been eased, not all supply chains have been fully restored, so this squeeze could have outweighed a slump in demand after the pandemic took hold. Food items have been under specific watch. Here, while bounteous monsoon rains have brightened prospects of a bumper harvest this year, the output of protein-rich staples may still fall short. Also, a slow resumption of transport and other points of friction could get in the way. Note that wholesale price inflation turned positive in August for the first time since March, a reflection of a recovery in the pricing power of producers. Apart from supply constraints,

though, there is also the effect of RBI's liquidity easing to consider. As a stimulatory measure, the supply of money has been upped ever since covid struck the economy, and our productive capacity may have failed to keep pace. Yet another suspect has been "imported inflation", which RBI spoke of recently. With global oil prices low and other imports weak, the central bank was probably referring to the inflation brought about by an influx of dollars from abroad. Till a few weeks ago, RBI was buying the US currency to keep the rupee stable, an exercise that pumps extra Indian currency into circulation, which then needs to be mopped up—or sterilized—through bond sales. If not, there would be excess cash around. Large inflows make sterilization difficult, for RBI's bond supplies tend to push up market interest rates, which goes against its easy-money policy. In a reversal of stance, RBI appears to have decided not to intervene much in the foreign exchange market so that it gets a grip on internal price stability—a major part of its mandate.

So long as inflation stays above 6%, RBI would be wary of easing money any further. But if rate cuts might stoke prices, so could a fiscal stimulus by the Centre. With our economy in dire need of state spending, this puts our policy matrix in a fix. The government must take some hard decisions now. It could hope that RBI's swerve to control the rupee's internal rather than external value—with India largely open to capital flows, it cannot do both—bears quick results. This seems unlikely. Or it could go ahead with a fiscal splurge, as required, and hope for a revival that does not send prices soaring too high. Neither option is free of risk. But such are the hard times we've fallen upon.

## MY VIEW | BARE TALK

## India needs a new strategy for an era of a weakening US dollar

*Our forex management needs revision in response to the US Fed's new monetary policy framework*



Y. ANANTHA NAGESWARAN  
is a member of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister

The speech by the chairperson of the US Federal Reserve on 27 August, while inaugurating the virtual monetary policy symposium held annually at Jackson Hole, marks a radical shift, or, rather, confirms one that has been taking place unofficially, if not quite stealthily, for the last 12 years. Jerome Powell said that the Fed would target average inflation and that policy decisions would be informed by an assessment of the shortfall from an undefined maximum employment level. This means that interest rates will stay lower for much longer. This is a 180-degree turn from the policy of Paul Volcker in the 1980s that saw real US interest rates spike. That sent the US dollar soaring in the 1980s and cemented its dominance of the post-Bretton Woods world. Therefore, it is logical that this new framework would see the opposite effect on the dollar in the months and years ahead. We should be prepared for prolonged dollar weakness. This has profound implications for India's foreign exchange (forex) reserve management and currency strategy.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will need to keep buying dollars to prevent the rupee from appreciating and to avoid recognizing losses on its purchase of dollars in the last two years. It might end up being a case of the tiger chasing its tail. It might become the equivalent

of retail investors averaging down. That would erode the evaluation reserves. Forex market intervention would allow domestic credit to flow to zombie assets or stock market speculation, or both. Together with non-existent returns on foreign currency assets, holding forex reserves might become an exorbitant burden rather than a sign of strength, as in the past.

To evolve a national consensus on a new forex strategy for India, RBI can do a full-scale comprehensive analysis of the following angles. It can publish a discussion paper, invite comments and then finalize a new strategy.

One: Central bank capital adequacy, because whether RBI intervenes or not, its revaluation losses will rise if the dollar goes into a free fall. In fact, with intervention, RBI will be accumulating more of a depreciating asset.

Two: Trade impact, particularly on India's oil import bill and exports. Note that export growth is more a function of demand (i.e., income growth in target markets) than of prices, which are influenced by the exchange rate. The most recent evidence from India is the performance of Indian exports in the period between 2002 and 2008 and again in 2010 and 2011. Exports surged despite rupee strength. A global growth boom was the more critical factor for India's export performance.

Three: India's balance sheet situation; the International Investment Position (IIP) is just a statement of foreign currency assets and liabilities. A strong currency could be used to improve the external debt situation by paying down debt. Alternatively, the country can examine refinancing costly foreign currency loans at lower rates, or pursue a combination of the two.

Sustained strength in the Indian rupee will be an unusual experience. The last time it happened was soon after the new millennium, when the "India has arrived" story gained traction. India took on too many external liabilities for too little productive payoff. It did not

end well. In fact, it is not over yet. We should not repeat those follies. A strong currency strength would run counter to Atmanirbhar Bharat, as it makes imports attractive. So, the government and RBI must act in concert.

The competitiveness of Indian manufacturing must be enhanced through other means. Subsidizing retail and agricultural consumption of electricity at the expense of industrial users must be re-examined. Land-use conversion from agriculture to non-agriculture must be eased, simplified and made less costly in terms of both time and money. Regulatory and compliance burdens must be systematically eased by a time-bound plan, with transparent monitoring and reporting to the public. States must come on board and the Centre should kick-start the process by calling a summit with chief ministers.

Despite the recent re-classification of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), the new thresholds do not go far enough in incentivizing their growth. They remain growth-unfriendly and need to be revisited. Payments to MSMEs for goods sold and services rendered must happen automatically. Both the government and private sector buyers are guilty. Goods and services tax invoices and the government's e-procurement must be automatically linked to the Trade Receivables System. It is technically feasible, and should be mandated with severe penalties for non-compliance.

If these changes happen, then India can have the best of both worlds: a strong currency and firm economic fundamentals, with the former reflecting a strong economy. However, business-as-usual, with RBI resisting a rising rupee, will succeed not in weakening the currency, but hurt the economy in multiple ways.

Covid's fallout is upending familiar behaviour patterns and policy responses. The sooner we recognize them, the stronger we'll emerge. I am not sure if there is any other option.

*These are the author's personal views*

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

The era of the U.S. dollar's "exorbitant privilege" as the world's primary reserve currency is coming to an end.

STEPHEN ROACH

## MY VIEW | THE IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR

## The best way to vaccinate most Indians in the least time

SHRUTI RAJAGOPALAN



is a senior research fellow with the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, US

As covid cases rise with increasing economic activity, the only way forward for India is to formulate a sensible acquisition and pricing policy for a coronavirus vaccine, when it becomes available. The goal is simple: a policy that ensures the fastest delivery of a vaccine for the largest number of people. The only way to achieve it is to rely on and work with the private sector to acquire and allocate the vaccine across India, and shun price and quantity controls. The country needs dual acquisition and pricing strategies. First, vaccines for the poor should be paid for by the government at cost; and second, a free market for the vaccine should operate for those who can afford it. The private testing market was crippled by slow approvals and court-mandated pricing. This must not happen with a vaccine.

The good news first. Unlike other illnesses, where the chance of vaccine development, production and availability for the poor is low, the pandemic has created a very large market for the vaccine, and the incentives

of vaccine developers are well-aligned with society at large. Second, Indian manufacturers, frontrunners at mass producing vaccines, have struck deals with most vaccine developers and global pharmaceutical companies. This places India in a unique position to get early access to a vaccine—one it must not squander.

The next step would be vaccine delivery across India. The government is already working with pharmaceutical companies like Serum Institute of India. Ideally, it must acquire about 500 million doses in the first year and ensure delivery to the poor. Here, the government must resist India's past impulses of nationalizing private firms, or imposing price and quantity controls, or strong-arming manufacturers on pricing. Instead, the government must pay for vaccine doses at cost, the only way to ensure India doesn't destroy its own long-term private vaccine production capacity. Currently, Indian vaccine companies can produce at a scale that brings costs down to ₹150-225 per dose; 500 million doses would cost the government just over ₹10 billion to acquire at cost. In comparison, India spent almost a quarter of that on the Statue of Unity, and the 2014-19 NDA government spent half of that on publicity and advertising.

Paying ₹10 billion to acquire vaccines for half a billion Indians is a steal. The economic loss because of 2020-21's first quarter contraction was ₹8.45 trillion. So a small and sensible investment by the government will be worth every rupee in terms of economic activity and helping the poorest Indians who have suffered acutely in this crisis. There are many delivery strategies—reimbursing the poor for getting vaccinated, reimbursing private vendors for each patient and quantities right with the government—setting up a government-provisioned free vaccination drive, etc. But getting the pricing and quantities right with the private sector is crucial, and paying private firms for doses will not only pay for itself and more, but also help develop India as a pharmaceutical hub.

Simultaneously, the government should allow a completely free market for vaccines that it doesn't reimburse or acquire. Even if doses are priced well above cost, courts and governments should not worry about the

rich getting the vaccine first in the market. Unlike other essential vaccines, covid provides a huge positive externality, and also protects the unvaccinated.

When individuals get vaccinated against a disease, it reduces (or eliminates) their chances of getting it. Plus, it also reduces the chances of others getting the disease, as the recipient is less likely to transmit it. So, the social value of a single dose of vaccine is higher than the private value of that dose. Therefore, even after paying a lot for vaccination, absorb only a part of the benefit. In standard neoclassical economics, this calls for a subsidy of some sort, since social benefits exceeding private benefits would imply the vaccine could be underconsumed. Aside from helping the poor, this is an economic reason for the government to reimburse the poor for getting vaccinated.

Counter-intuitively, the same logic also requires us to ensure a free market even if the rich get the vaccine first. Any vaccinated person, rich or poor, will inadvertently pro-

tect others. If the rich get vaccinated first by buying it at a market price, their actions will have two effects. They are more likely to venture out and spend, helping the economy. While doing so, they are less likely to transmit the disease. They are also less likely to burden the medical system. So the self-serving behaviour of wealthy Indians will benefit others. And high prices will also incentivize greater supply of vaccines swiftly to locations where they are most in demand. The rich, civil society and vaccine producers could consider special pricing strategies—for every person buying well above cost, firms will give one free to the poor.

Let's restate the goal—the fastest delivery for the largest number. The moment a vaccine becomes available, goals will start shifting. There may be the usual outrage over pricing, profits and distributive concerns. India must resist the temptation to give into the outrage of sociologists, lawyers, judges, doctors, social workers, politicians and journalists, who all have important roles to perform in the pandemic but could both up vaccine delivery because of a misunderstanding of market processes and the price mechanism. Given that a vaccine is well on its way, its acquisition and allocation should be based on an economic way of thinking.

**We need both a government subsidy and a free market for vaccines to fight the covid pandemic**

| MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

## We must renew our commitment to enhancing India's forest cover

California's wildfires remind us that climate change is real and the quest to increase our green cover needs a fresh impetus



**NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN**  
is a member of the Advisory Council of the Centre for Wildlife Studies

This past week, pictures of the San Francisco sky with an orange glow appeared like a surreal Instagram post from God. The unprecedented breath of these wildfires over three western states of the US, combined with their intensity, scale, speed and duration, have greatly complicated the ability to bring them under control. The 300,000-acre August Complex fire is the largest ever recorded blaze in California.

Firefighters refer to a "fire triangle" of elements that are crucial for the creation of a wildfire—fuel, oxygen and heat. Aided by strong winds, a small spark caused by human error or lightning can ignite thousands of acres of tinder-dry forest in a short time. While natural fires have regenerative properties, large-scale and anthropogenic fires have a devastating environmental impact. Beyond the direct impact on life and property, wildfires can have long-term effects on the quality of rivers and lakes, and most particularly on stormwater runoff channels. Paradoxically, ash-dry soil with organic matter that hasn't rotted becomes hydrophobic and prevents the absorption of water. Deforestation releases carbon dioxide into the air and greatly impacts biodiversity. Biodiversity loss is suspected to play a role in the spread of emerging infectious diseases like covid-19.

Fires, wild or deliberate, are the fastest way to deforest land. Forests provide many benefits, like regulating water flows, sequestering carbon and nurturing biodiversity. Populations living on the periphery of forests often see an advantage in cultivating the land or using it for pasture, resulting in high rates of deforestation. In 2019, the world lost a football field of rainforest every six seconds. We lost nearly 11.9 million hectares (one hectare is 0.01 sq km) of tree cover in 2019, about 3.8 million of it from mature, humid tropical primary forests. That is about 1.8 gigatonnes of released carbon dioxide, or the annual emission equivalent of 100 million cars (the world's total number of cars is estimated at 1 billion). Brazil, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Indonesia have lost the most tropical primary forest cover in recent years. Beyond the tropics, the massive wildfires during the latest Australian summer resulted in the worst tree loss ever recorded in Australia, along with the loss of hundreds of millions of animals.

India has about 31 million hectares, or 1% of its area, under forest cover. Over the past 20 years, India has lost 328,000 hectares of humid primary forest. The top 5 regions that contributed to this forest loss are all in the North-East, with Assam and Mizoram leading the list. Deforestation and destruction of wetlands are among the leading causes of annual floods in heavily urbanized areas in Kerala and the cities of Mumbai and Chennai.

Despite the grim aggregate statistics, some



countries like Colombia and Costa Rica have been able to slow forest loss. While on the one hand contributing to forest loss, China, the US, Ethiopia, and India have also planted billions of trees over the last decade. The Billion Tree Campaign inspired by Kenyan Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai has morphed into a Trillion Tree Campaign. Environmentalists estimate that planting a trillion trees can annul the deleterious effect of a decade of anthropogenic emissions.

The alarming loss of forest cover has led to a global attempt to find solutions. One promising proposal is to compensate marginalized populations on the periphery of forests and incentivize them not to flatten forests. This "cash for conservation" or payment for ecosystem services (PES) was pioneered in Costa Rica, and has been successfully used in Mexico. PES systems are complicated to design and implement because they have to be very specific to micro-climatic conditions as well as to the practices of local populations. The world's longest running PES programme is the US Conservation Reserve Program, which pays out about \$1.8 billion a year under nearly 800,000 contracts with farmers to refrain from cultivating environmentally sensitive land. The contract requires these farmers to plant resource-conserving covers to

manage soil-erosion, improve water quality, and enhance biodiversity. China's Grain-for-Green scheme is even more ambitious and hands out nearly \$4 billion a year to retire sloping plots (greater than 25 degrees) that are prone to soil erosion by giving out grain and cash. One of the programme's goals is to reduce the annual silt deposits in the Yangtze and Huang He rivers by 2.6 million tonnes. Rewilding land tracts through outright purchase both within and outside protected areas is another effective way to obtain benefits.

Even as the world tries to give up fossil fuels, reduce material consumption, move more from home and urban vegetarian afforestation, rewilding and PES programmes can add significant strength to the fight against climate change. The wildfires in California serve as a timely reminder that climate change is here and is not some hypothesis. India would do well to set up an ambitious goal of first retaining and then increasing its forest cover. The work done in the 1970s to protect large areas needs a new impetus from a prime minister who self-confessedly loves nature.

P.S. "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference," wrote the poet Robert Frost in *The Road Not Taken*.

### MINT CURATOR



The 62-year-old python laid seven eggs without the help of a male

#### A snake that defied age and biology to lay eggs

The oldest snake in captivity has left experts puzzled by laying eggs without the help of a male. The 62-year-old ball python produced seven eggs at Saint Louis Zoo in Missouri despite having not been around a mate for at least two decades. The birth was all the more unusual because the python is not only believed to be the oldest living snake, but also the species typically stops laying eggs before they reach their sixties. "She'd definitely be the oldest snake we know of in history" to lay eggs. Mark Wanner, the manager of herpetology at the zoo, said. It is unusual but not rare, however, for pythons to reproduce asexually, Wanner said, and snakes sometimes store sperm for delayed fertilisation. The genetic sampling will show whether the eggs were reproduced sexually or asexually, called facultative parthenogenesis.

*The Independent*

#### Facial expressions can give away your ethnicity

While leafing through some old research papers, Hillary Effenbein noticed something strange about the photographs in one famous study. The research from the late 1980s had asked volunteers if they were able to identify emotions in the faces of Japanese and Caucasian people... A team at the University of Glasgow has now trained a computer to recognise and then generate more than 60 different non-verbal accents on a simulated face. Subtle, almost imperceptible differences in the way a nose wrinkles and a lip is raised were often all that differentiated them. But when East Asians were shown these artificial "East Asian" expressions, they recognised them much more easily than "Western" ones. "It's harder than it sounds," says Rachael Jack, whose lab conducted the research.

*BBC*

#### A tiny island that has brought countries to war

Kastellorizo, lying in the crystal clear waters of the eastern Mediterranean, is an idyllic, bijou beauty. Fishing boats bob in its calm harbour and colourful houses give way to olive tree-flecked hills. The petite 12 sq km gem is the "remote treasure of the Aegean," says a website. But trouble is brewing in the sun-splashed seas that surround Kastellorizo and two European nations, officially allies, are bearing for battle, *news.com.au* reported. Already ships from Greece and Turkey have collided. One expert has said the pair are once again on the "brink of war," yet this time there seems to be little appetite to slam on the brakes. It's a conflict that has now sucked in France, Libya, Egypt, Israel, the US and more nations besides. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has demanded Greece enter talks, or else.

*The New Zealand Herald*

#### The quest to neutralize China's rare-earths edge

If you have a phone, a camera or an electric car, chances are that each of these devices is wholly dependent on key minerals that, at the moment, are processed only in China. Now, as supply lines shrink, geopolitical tensions rise and the world's dependence on these minerals for everyday use surges, policymakers are coming to terms with a gaping hole in the world's development of rare earths that threatens to hit militaries as much as it does consumers. Australia, which has historically focused on more common, highly profitable exports such as iron ore, is sitting on a graphite reserve in South Australia of 200 million tonnes. "You are touching my nerves," says Professor Susan Loe, the director of Australia's graphene research hub, which collaborates between five Australian universities.

*The Sydney Morning Herald*

#### The city that overturned its ban on saggy pants

After 13 years, a South Florida city has overturned a ban on "saggy pants"—bottoms that reveal the wearer's underwear. The Opa-Jocka City Commission voted on Wednesday on a 4-1 vote to repeal both the original 2007 legislation and a 2013 ordinance that said women, not just men, could receive civil citations for wearing pants that exposed their undergarments. The *Miami Herald* reports that the vote was a first reading of the repeal, meaning it will need to be approved again at a subsequent commission meeting before it is official. But the item was co-sponsored by four of the five commissioners. Around the city, signs still warn folks of the ordinance. They showing an image of two young men wearing pants below their waists and featuring the words: "No ifs, ands or butts... It's the city law"

*AP*

### THEIR VIEW

## A coalition that could help secure our Afghan interests

HARSH V. PANT AND VINAY KAURA



are, respectively, director of studies at Observer Research Foundation, and assistant professor at Sardar Patel University of Police, Security and Criminal Justice.

The recent visit of India's external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, to Iran could not have come at a more opportune moment, days before the 19th anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks on the US. Two high-level visits from India to Iran, the other being that of defence minister Rajnath Singh two days before Jaishankar's, points to New Delhi's commitment to strengthen its bilateral relations with Tehran at an uncertain moment in regional geopolitics.

Jaishankar's participation in the opening ceremony of crucial intra-Afghan talks via a video link also underscores the reality that the Taliban are close to being formally integrated into the Afghan governing apparatus in the wake of America's drawdown of troops from Afghanistan. India and Iran may have differing views on the US presence there, but are both aware of the challenges once the Taliban gain authority and the current regime in Kabul weakens as a result. Iran is known to have tactically engaged a few Taliban factions, but it cannot do any

business with those espousing hardcore anti-Shia beliefs. Jihadist groups, which are not charitable towards Tehran, include the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Sunni terror groups such as the Haqqani Network that are supported by Pakistan's security establishment. This dynamic is what makes Iran an indispensable partner for India as the US gradually winds down its troop presence in Afghanistan.

At a time when Iran's economy is in dire straits due to low oil prices and severe economic sanctions, its leadership should afford an Afghanistan at war with itself and its neighbours. New Delhi and Tehran remain keen on coordinating their policies to sustain President Ashraf Ghani's regime. Ghani's recent public declaration that peace does not require a political deal on power sharing, implying that he has no intention of stepping down in favour of an interim government, was an attempt to reassure many Afghans uneasy with the frightening possibility of Taliban dominance. It was also a signal to India that all is not lost.

After staying on the sidelines for too long, India's decision to participate in intra-Afghan talks seems aimed at regaining diplomatic momentum and re-asserting India's position on an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned

and Afghan-controlled" peace process. New Delhi recognizes that Afghanistan is a treacherous terrain. As New Delhi gears up for a Taliban-heavy regime, India's role in Kabul's strategic frame must endure and outlive the Ghani regime. But a big part of the challenge is that Pakistan is no longer the sole danger.

The Chabahar port is the most tangible symbol of India-Iran-Afghanistan trilateral cooperation. It was never a low-hanging fruit, but ever since Iran and China forged a 25-year deal in 2015, the port's development in Chabahar as well, concerns have been growing in New Delhi. Tehran's diplomatic isolation has always been viewed by Beijing as a huge opportunity to penetrate Iran. Since Beijing's potential involvement in the Chabahar project has unmistakable strategic implications for New Delhi, China cannot be allowed to chip away at India's vital interests in its own neighbourhood.

While India is no doubt reviewing the challenge posed by China and calibrating its

response as a crisis along the Line of Actual Control unfolds, the prevailing regional balance of power poses a dilemma of dealing with Beijing in the wider spectrum of political, economic and security relationships. An altered scenario means it may not be possible to immediately create another version of the "Northern Alliance"

between India, Iran and Russia, but New Delhi has no intention of giving in to Chinese desire for regional preponderance. India has the wherewithal to effectively bridge gaps among their respective perceptions on what comes next in Afghanistan and how to counter Pakistan's terror-oriented policies.

Trump's hasty turn with withdrawal fails to acknowledge a simple reality of the Afghan conflict: Iran is the principal driver of every facet of it. Therefore, alliance politics and the need for a hedge against a US exit must shape New Delhi's policy discourse. The focus has to be on India, given its status as the main originator of India's most serious external troubles.

India likely envisages Moscow's role in the regional security matrix not as a disrupter, but as a balancer. Despite the alliance-like relationship between Russia and China, Moscow does share with New Delhi an instinctive preference for holding China in check. Greater coordination between India, Iran and Russia has to be cultivated.

Despite the start of intra-Afghan talks, the Afghan conflict is far from over, and a failure to reach a consensus in Qatar would only present a more complex array of challenges and threats than before. What happens in Afghanistan never stays in Afghanistan. Therefore, India must urgently mobilize a coalition for a major regional diplomatic push aimed at resolving the Afghan crisis. Besides convergence on regional security, India, Iran and Russia can develop cooperative mechanisms for commercial and economic ties with Afghanistan. This could help India moderate Chinese aggressiveness and Pakistani intransigence. If New Delhi is to realize its objectives in Afghanistan as well as Iran, it will require both fresh leverage and credibility. Neither of these will be possible without a coalition of partners.

New Delhi cannot afford to ignore its Eurasian frontiers even as it focuses on shaping new realities in the Indo-Pacific.

**New Delhi, Tehran and Moscow could coordinate their efforts on Afghanistan as the US exits**



## ECONOMY

## MODI 2.0: THE BIG GDP DEBATE

As far as the GDP drop is concerned, one needs to understand that it's a global phenomenon and India is not alone. But in our case, we at least had a bright spot with the agriculture sector, growing by a healthy 3.4% in the aforesaid quarter.



SANJU VERMA

India's GDP decline of 23.9% for the June 2020 quarter stirred a hornet's nest, with questions raised on the need for a stringent lockdown in the first place. Well, the truth of the matter is, without a strict lockdown in March this year, the damage to human capital would have been far higher. Countries which did not enforce a harsh lockdown initially have not only suffered a GDP contraction but also lost precious human lives in bigger numbers. While the media has been harping about India having the second-highest Covid cases globally, what it fails to mention is that India has amongst the lowest deaths per million, at just 56. The comparable numbers per million are 596 for the US, 613 for Brazil, 612 for the UK, and 473 for Russia.

As for the GDP drop, India is not alone. While the US reported a staggering 32.9% annualised crash in GDP growth for the June

quarter, the comparable fall was 42.9% for Singapore, a decline of 38.7% for Canada, a 12.1% fall for Eurozone, a 10.1% drop for Germany, a steep contraction of 20.4% for the UK and of course, a massive plunge of 27.8%, in the case of Japan. In India's case, we at least had a bright spot with the agriculture sector, which accounts for over 50% of the workforce, growing by a healthy 3.4% in the aforesaid quarter.

Another fact that deserves attention is the GDP data pertaining to March 2020 quarter. Much before the global pandemic struck, while India's GDP grew at only 3.1%, what has to be acknowledged is that we were the only big economy to report positive growth in the March quarter, with agriculture growing by a credible 5.9%. Other economies like the US, for example, had contracted by 4.8%, Germany by 2.2%, Eurozone by 3.8%, and China actually saw a steep GDP fall of 6.8% in the March quarter. Goldman Sachs has predicted a sharp 27.1% rise in India's GDP in the June quarter next year, with overall estimated GDP growth of a noteworthy 15.7% for FY22, while Fitch says that India's GDP growth in 2021-22 will be a good 11%.

The Opposition has been screaming hoarse about India's



Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

biggest GDP drop in 40 years but has failed to inform that, on the positive side, India's policy REPO rate at 4% is the lowest in 58 years. The coal sector was denationalised and coal mining was privatised for the first time in 2019-2020, after 47 years. Banking consolidation by merging 10 public sector banks into 4, starting April 2020, has happened for the first time in 51 years.

Is the worst over? The answer is a decisive "yes". Take the GST revenues for August, for instance, which stood at Rs 86,449 crore. Despite the lockdown, this was 88% of the GST collected in the same month, last year. Overall, 48.3 million e-way bills were generated in July, almost back to pre-Covid levels of 55.3 million bills, in January 2020. Again, the Indian Railways freight loading for August 2020, at 94.33 million

tonnes, was 3.31 million tonnes higher compared to August 2019. The Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) stood at 52 in August, up from 46 in July. PMI had fallen to a historic low of 27.4 in April but has been steadily climbing since. A sizeable Rs 1.63 lakh crore have also been sanctioned to over 42 lakh MSME units under the emergency credit line guarantee scheme (ECLGS).

More importantly, Modi nay-sayers and embarrassingly ill-informed writers like Chetan Bhagat, who raised doubts on India's ability to attract FDI, should not forget that \$20 billion are what India attracted as investments and pledges from 15 companies in just three months from April to July 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. This \$20 billion is a massive vote of confidence for India. The Taiwanese company Pegatron is the fourth Apple supplier to decide to set up a base in India, after Foxconn, Wistron and Compal Electronics pledged billions in India's journey towards becoming a global electronics hub.

News has it that Australia is facing its worst recession in 30 years. China's food shops are running out of supplies and the US might end the year with a 4.2% drop in consumption spending. In sharp contrast, India is doing a far better job in dealing with the Wuhan virus, best amplified by the fact that we constructed 3,181 km of national highways between April and August this year, versus a target of 2,771 km.

At his recent US-India Strategic Partnership Forum (USISPF) address, Prime Minister Modi said, "We are future-proofing India in every way, enabling New In-

dia to take off." Well, PM Modi's words have found resonance. For example, India's Hero Motocorp, the world's largest 2-wheeler company, that derives over 65% sales from rural areas, reported a healthy 7.6% YoY growth in overall sales, selling 5.8 lakh units in August 2020. Ditto for M&M, that derives over 50% sales from rural India. It saw a robust 28% YoY rise in overall tractor sales in July 2020. Maruti Suzuki saw a 21.3% growth in car sales in August, while Tata Motors saw a splendid 154% growth in auto sales. Indeed, since auto sales are a lead indicator, India's September quarter GDP should see a sharp bounce back.

Armed with a forex war chest of \$542 billion, the Modi government's potential move to offer production linked incentives (PLIs) to autoable manufacturers, solar panel makers, specialty steel and consumer appliance companies is a vindication of the fact that, despite Covid and associated challenges, India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has got its act together, decisively and with no room for any "ifs" or "buts" whatsoever.

*The writer is an economist, chief spokesperson for BJP Mumbai, and the bestselling author of 'Truth & Dure: The Modi Dynamic'.*

## HOTSPOT

## HOW BENGALURU LOST THE CORONA PLOT AFTER AN IMPRESSIVE START

Bengaluru has now clocked more than 1.7 lakh cases, racing ahead of Mumbai. The city is now only behind Delhi, which has registered 2.18 lakh cases as on Sunday night.

R. JAYAPRAKASH  
BENGALURU

One of the first metro cities to implement lockdown effectively even before Prime Minister Narendra Modi had declared it, Bengaluru has now clocked more than 1.7 lakh cases, racing ahead of Mumbai. The city is only behind Delhi which has registered 2.18 lakh cases as on Sunday night. Mumbai with 1,69,741 cases is in the third position, followed by Chennai with 1,47,143 cases.

The overall cases in Karnataka stand at 4,59,445 with over 9,000 new cases being reported daily 11 days in a row till 13 September. On Sunday, Karnataka became the fourth state to register more than 4.5 lakh cases of Covid-19, with a death toll of 7,265, out of which Bengaluru alone has registered 2,436 deaths.

Leading oncologist and member of the Karnataka Task Force for Covid-19, Dr Vishal Rao told *The Daily Guardian* that the numbers are alarming and this wave is worrying. "We have detected over 4.7 lakh cases and when we look at the death rate it is about 1.6 per cent. This may look very low but when we arrive at a number, it is over 7,000. The ratio of positive cases vis-à-vis the population of Karnataka is around 0.66 per cent and this is only detected from those who have volunteered and tested. There is a sizeable chunk of population which has shied away from testing. If the number of positive cases rises to 60 to 70 per cent, then the death rate conversion will be in 10 lakhs," he said.

Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister Ashwathnarayan has a different take on these rising cases when questioned on "unlock" norms which might have impacted the number of cases directly. "It is definitely worrying to see this trend but there is a positive side too. Of the 4.5 lakh odd cases, 3.5 lakh patients have recovered and only 99,203 cases are active. When we look at the Bengaluru numbers, out of 1.7 lakh cases, 1.27 lakh patients have recovered and only 41,000 cases are active. Recovery rate is over 70 per cent. One cannot blame un-



Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa inaugurates an integrated air ambulance service, which a Covid-19 patient can also avail, at Jakkur Aerodrome in Bengaluru early this month. (ANI Photo)

locking norms and we need to move on and move around Covid. The economy is in bad shape and the only solution is to change our lifestyle and protect ourselves from the deadly virus," he said.

The concept of herd immunity as far as coronavirus is concerned is far away and what is important at this juncture is taking precautions, said Dr Vishal Rao, adding, "Face masks, hand hygiene and social distancing must be in practice.

Since we have opened up the economy, we are seeing the impact of this social-economic virus which is all set to wipe out 2 per cent of the population of the world. What is necessary is protecting co-morbid people, protecting the elderly and children as this virus is targeting non-communicable diseases like diabetes, hypertension and kidney ailments apart from cardiac patients. Reverse quarantine is most important as far as

the elderly are concerned. Have as much fruit and vegetables and proteins as you can and avoid adulterated food. Smoking and drinking are also a strict no-no," he advised.

"The Oxford vaccine has failed and I think we will see an effective vaccine only around March 2021. I have been in touch with researchers working on this vaccine and only after carrying out trials on a large population I will be able to arrive at some conclusion. Meanwhile, Phase 2 of the Russian vaccine was conducted on only 76 people, whereas the ideal sample size should have been 10,000 people. The coronavirus is complex and to achieve an effective vaccine, we need to observe two groups — one which has been administered the vaccine and the other which hasn't. And only after studying the groups in a natural time course can we see the effectiveness of the vaccine, as no vaccine can be brought in as declared and hurried by research firms," Dr Rao said.



## AMID ED CASE

## CHANDA KOCHHAR'S HUSBAND TESTS COVID-19 POSITIVE, PROBE OFFICIALS QUARANTINE THEMSELVES

CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

Former ICICI Bank chairman Chanda Kochhar's husband Deepak Kochhar who was recently arrested in a money laundering case by the Enforcement Directorate has tested positive for Covid-19.

Kochhar has been admitted to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) here, the businessman's legal team confirmed to IANS over the phone. His Counsel Vijay Aggarwal who met him on Sunday in the ED office also made himself self-quarantined. Also, the ED officials who had questioned him have isolated themselves as a precaution against transmitting the deadly virus.

A Special Court earlier this month sent Kochhar to 11 days ED custody after the federal agency arrested him in a money-laundering case.

Kochhar, the husband of the high-profile former ICICI Bank CEO and MD Chanda Kochhar, is facing charges of money-laundering in the ICICI Bank-Videocon Group case.

A Special Prevention of Money Laundering Act Court had sent him to the ED custody till 19 September.

The action came nearly a year after the Central Bureau of Investigation launched a probe against Videocon Group Director Venugopal Dhoot, his companies Videocon International Electronics Ltd. and Videocon Industries Ltd. and the Kochhars.

Following the CBI complaint, the ED launched its own probe into the money-laundering angle, and earlier this year, provisionally attached assets valued at around Rs 78 crore, including a flat in Mumbai, land, and plant and machinery of a wind power project in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, which were "owned/controlled" by the Kochhars.

The probe revealed that bank loans were refinanced and new loans aggregating to Rs 1,730 crore were sanctioned to Videocon and its group companies, and these loans later became non-performing assets (NPA) for ICICI Bank on 30 June 2017.

## 6 LEGALLY SPEAKING

THE DAILY GUARDIAN  
TUESDAY | 15 SEPTEMBER 2020  
NEW DELHI

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ENVIRONMENT LAW

## How's India tackling the disposal of Covid-19 bio-medical waste?

With India topping the list of the most recorded Covid-19 cases in a day (about 90,000), the concerns regarding the management of the bio-medical waste, produced by the hospitals, nursing homes, health centres and households, used for the purpose of self-quarantine, are exponentially increasing.

## OPINION

VARUN SINGH &  
SIDDHI KOCHAR

**D**id you recently come across any used Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) like mask, glove lying on the road? Well, if you did not, you are lucky to be residing in an area where people are aware of the proper disposal mechanism of the protective equipment. How do you dispose of your one-time use mask? Do you throw it in the common bin of your neighborhood? If yes, then are you aware of the threat it poses to the environment and the health of the people? Do you know how largely does the proper disposal of such waste contributes in limiting the spread of the ghastly virus?

With India topping the list of the most recorded COVID-19 cases in a day (near about 90,000), the concerns regarding the management of the bio-medical waste, produced by the hospitals, nursing homes, health centres and households, used for the purpose of self-quarantine, are exponentially increasing. Though the threat of contracting the virus is spine-chilling, however what appears to be more alarming is the aftereffect of the pandemic i.e. the stacking up of the waste, generated during the diagnosis, treatment and immunization of people.

Through this column, the authors aim at apprising the measures taken by the government and the judiciary to contain the spread of the ghastly virus via mediums such as used PPEs, testing equipment, solid and liquid waste.

## UNPACKING THE MEASURES

It is not an unknown fact that improper disposal of the waste certainly poses risk to the lives of sanitation workers who quite often work without being trained for handling such hazardous materials. India, since time immemorial has been struggling with the issue of poor waste management and with the coming in of the novel corona virus in the country there was a pre-emption that this issue would be taking a turn for the worst. The daily numbers certainly do suggest the same.

Government of India through Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoH&FW) anticipated the excessive amount of waste that would be generated as a consequence of all the measures which would be adopted to prevent, diagnose and treat the virus. In its bid to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, the MoH&FW released the guidelines on use of masks by public. It prescribed the manner of disposal of masks and stated that used masks

must be disinfected using ordinary bleach solution (5%) or sodium hypochlorite solution (1%) and then disposed of either by burning or deep burial. This guideline was subsequently complemented with pictorial representations in order to create awareness amongst the general public. The municipal bodies would do well to sensitize the public at large and not just make repeated and stale announcements of social distancing.

Notably, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) also took the initiative of enacting Guidelines for handling, treatment and disposal of Covid-19 waste at Healthcare Facilities, Quarantine Camps/Quarantine Homes/Home-care, Sample Collection Centres, Laboratories, SPCBs, Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) and common biomedical waste treatment and disposal facilities (CBWTFs). These guidelines are to be read with the existing Bio-medical Waste Management Rules, 2016.

It may be advisable to impose stricter implication of these guidelines under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 (the 2005 Act). As we understand, the only threat thus far of the 2005 Act has only been witnessed by migrant laborers and remotely by private companies for keeping their employees on their pay role. Its high time we impose stricter guidelines within the ambit of 2005 Act upon everyone that may have a defining role in management of COVID-19 biomedical waste. If not, we can segregate the petty yet damaging offences to steep fine if not curtailment of personal liberty under the 2005 Act.

Undertaken provides a short gist of the duties imposed upon the above-mentioned stakeholders for the systematic disposal of COVID-19 biomedical waste:

Are you taking care of a COVID-19 patient at home? Recently, when one of the authors was at the supermarket for grocery shopping, he happened to meet a friend who shared the unfortunate news of his wife being tested positive for COVID-19. During the conversation, the author was brimmed with a rather very shocking and unsettling news: the husband of the infected wife, was disposing his wife's bio-medical waste with the general household waste, without any segregation.

Do you know the repercussions of the above act? Are you aware of the risk it poses to the sanitation worker who is responsible for collecting the general waste? Do you know that any person who comes in contact with this particular sanitation worker is also at a risk of contract-



General waste generated from kitchen, packaging material for groceries, food material, waste papers, waste plastics, floor cleaning dust, etc. must be handed over to the municipal solid waste collector identified by Urban Local Bodies or as per the prevailing local method of disposing general solid waste. Likewise, the bio-medical waste contaminated with blood/body fluids of Covid-19 patients must be collected in a yellow bag and handed over to authorised waste collectors at door steps, engaged by local bodies or the waste collector engaged by CBWTF operator at the doorstep or can be deposited at designated deposition Centers established by ULBs.

ing the virus? Then, what is the correct way of disposal? Look into this section to understand your duties as a care-taker for disposal of Bio-medical waste.

It is to be noted that a COVID-19 patient's waste such as discarded masks and gloves can be disposed of as a general waste only when the same has been stored in a paper bag for a minimum of 72 hours.

General waste generated from kitchen, packaging material for groceries, food material, waste papers, waste plastics, floor cleaning dust, etc. must be handed over to the municipal solid waste collector identified by Urban Local Bodies or as per the prevailing local method of disposing general solid waste, whereas the bio-medical waste contaminated with blood/body fluids of COVID-19 patients must be collected in a yellow bag and handed over to authorized waste collectors at door steps, engaged by local bodies or the waste collector engaged by CBWTF operator at the doorstep or can be deposited at designated deposition Centers established by ULBs.

Pertinently, it must be ensured that general waste and COVID-19 bio-medical waste must not be mixed. SHOULD BE SEGREGATED CAREFULLY.

Are you an operator of an Isolation Ward? How do you dispose of the COVID-19 bio-medical waste?

If you are an operator, the you must look at this space to get well versed with the compliances required to be fulfilled by you to ensure safe handling of the bio-

medical waste. The key duty of an operator is to maintain separate color coded and labelled [COVID-19 Waste] bins (with foot operated lids) bags/containers in the wards. Red colored bags must be used for collecting gloves, face-shield, splash goggles, apron, Plastic Coverall, Hazmat suit, nitrile gloves and yellow for the collection of used mask (including Triple layer mask, N95 mask etc.), head cover/cap, shoe-cover, disposable linen gown, non-plastic or semi-plastic coverall. Additionally, the use of double layered bio-medical waste bag must be encouraged to ensure that the liquid contents of the waste do not spill out.

Most importantly, utmost care must be undertaken to ensure that the equipments such as containers/bins/trolleys are disinfected with 1% sodium hypochlorite solution daily. Proper training must be provided to waste handlers in terms of the preventive measures via videos and demonstration in local language. Training shall be provided by designated nodal officer trained by Health Departments / professional agencies in association with SPCBs of the States/UTs.

It must be ensured that separate records of waste generated from COVID-19 isolation wards are maintained and registered on the CPCB mobile application namely 'COVID19BWM'.

Do you collect samples of suspected patients or operate Collection Centers/Laboratories? If yes, then watch out the undernerved directions issued by the CPCB.

As soon as a lab/collection

center is opened, it is incumbent upon the operator to inform about the same to the SPCB. Disposal mechanism as listed above for an isolation ward operator is to be followed.

Is transmission to an operator of a Healthcare Facility, during the treatment of wastewater, possible? If yes, then what precautions can one take? As of now, there is no evidence of such a transmission taking place, however, since prevention is better than cure, safety measures as provided by CPCB must be complied with, such as operators must ensure that treated wastewater is disinfected as per prevailing standard operating procedure to inactivate corona virus. Furthermore, as much as possible, the use of treated wastewater in utilities within Healthcare Facilities may be avoided. Pertinently, proper care must be undertaken to ensure that the operators associated with the handling of the discharge from healthcare facilities practice basic hygiene precautions and wear PPE kit.

## ROLE OF REGULATORY BODIES

CBWTFs are essentially required to collect waste from COVID-19 isolation wards/Quarantine Camps/Homes/Testing Centers and report the same to the SPCBs. It is incumbent that COVID-19 waste be disposed-off immediately upon receipt at facility and the dedicated vehicle bringing the same, must be sanitized with appropriate chemical disinfectant.

Urban Local Bodies are bound to ensure proper

and careful collection and disposal of biomedical waste generated from Quarantine Camps/Quarantine Homes/Home Care for COVID-19 suspected persons. To further the abovementioned duty, the ULBs must identify CBWTFs, who would be responsible for directly collecting waste from quarantine camps. Yellow colored bags must be made available to the operators of the camps/homes, either directly or through the CBWTFs. For the protection of the workers handling the waste, PPE kits must be provided and it shall also be ensured that the aforementioned bags are disinfected. Additionally, careless handling of the waste i.e. mixing up of the COVID-19 waste with the general waste must be strictly avoided and awareness regarding segregation of waste be spread by the ULB.

The SPCBs are primarily required to maintain the records of the COVID-19 treatment wards/self-care facilities. The SPCBs also ensure that bio-medical waste is properly disposed in light of the prevailing Rules and SoPs, the same is carried out through the coordination with the CBWTFs and ULBs.

Use of deep burial pits for disposal of yellow category waste as per standards prescribed in Schedule II of Bio-medical Waste Management Rules, 2016 may be permitted in the scenario a particular State does not have CBWTFs. Additionally, the usage of HW incinerators may also be allowed if an exponentially large amount of yellow color coded waste is

generated. Most importantly, every SPCB is mandated to upload the COVID-19 biomedical waste on the COVID19BWM web-portal developed by CPCB.

The authors understand that activities undertaken by the local municipal bodies must remain free from fetters due to the usage of word good faith under Section 73 of the Disaster Management Act. But there has to be some accountability. Maybe introduction of defined and well-articulated rules under the Act regarding the disposal of bio-medical waste may be an answer to this issue.

## TACKLING EFFICIENTLY OR GRAPPLING: A REALITY CHECK

Though various guidelines have been put in place to fortify a smooth mechanism for disposal of COVID-19 biomedical waste, however the concern regarding its effective implementation is still very prominent. Recently, in a report dated 27/07/2020, submitted by the Environment and Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority to the Hon'ble Supreme Court, a very depressing picture was brought to light – manifold increase in the quantum of COVID-19 biomedical waste in Delhi (near about 14 times more generation of waste in July as compared to May). This sorry state of affair clearly leads to the conclusion that despite having the best of rules/guidelines, we as a country are lacking somewhere. What are these implementation roadblocks? How do we address them?

Pertinently, the EPCA, recommended certain best

practices which identified these roadblocks and provided a solution to demystify the same. Notably, some of these recommendations were conceded by the Supreme Court and subsequently directions were issued to ensure the compliance of the same.

The EPCA while identifying the key problem which has led to the increase in the amount of waste in the country, stated that, "While the system for collection of bio-medical waste from healthcare facilities and registered laboratories is well established, in the case of COVID-19, the biomedical waste is being generated in homes and quarantine centers. This is where the key complication arises, as urban local bodies have to track the patients on a real-time basis and then set up systems for collection of biomedical waste from individual households located in different parts of the city."

The Apex Court vide its order dated 31/07/2020, issued a mandate regarding uploading of data on the COVID19BWM APP, which provides the statistics of the biomedical waste sent to a CBWTF. This direction will essentially help the CPCB to keep a track on the treatment of the bio-medical waste. Earlier, the uploading of data was not mandatory, however, now all the civic bodies are under a mandate to be in compliance of the same.

Additionally, the Apex Court also directed the Municipal corporations to send the waste to CBWTF and not WTE, considering the fact that WTEs are not well equipped to dispose of the bio-medical waste, which requires a double incineration chamber for its proper disposal. A need for having a national bar-code portal for monitoring the biomedical waste was also highlighted. In light of the same, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests and Climate Change and CPCB were directed to design a draft model.

## WAY FORWARD

The above directions indeed hint towards a flickering light at the end of the tunnel, which is effective disposal of COVID-19 biomedical waste. Moreover, the readers must also take note of the fact that India has taken measures at par with countries like Germany, China, France in laying down guidelines for disposal of waste. The basic practices such as (i) segregation of waste – proper labeling (ii) disinfection of transport that brings the waste (iii) phased incineration, are universal. Problem here is not lack of rules on the subject but the implementation. It is time that we follow the guidelines at institutional as well as individual levels.

With the spirit in the number of Covid-19 cases, it is implied that the waste will multiply manifold in the future, however it is in our hands to reduce the piling of waste by disposing it of properly, as they say it: We are all in this, together.