

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

IN AND OUT

SAD's calibrated protest against Modi government's farm bills mirrors narrow space for manoeuvre for the regional party

THE DECISION OF Shiromani Akali Dal, a long-standing ally of the BJP in the NDA, to withdraw Harsimrat Kaur Badal from the Union Cabinet over ordinances related to agriculture reform may be a bid to reverse the decline in its support base in Punjab. The recent reforms in agriculture have been perceived by a section of farmers and traders as inimical to their interests. Protests have rocked Punjab and Haryana over measures that have the potential to radically overhaul and reset the current relations between farmers, traders, and the government. That the Akali Dal has withdrawn its minister while remaining within the NDA, however, indicates the calibrated nature of the party's response born of its limited options — the Akali Dal lost the last two assembly elections in Punjab and failed to ride the Modi wave that powered the NDA sweep in the 2019 general election.

The absence of any visible overture on the part of the BJP to persuade the SAD to reconsider its decision is also significant. Commanding a simple majority in the Lok Sabha, the BJP does not feel compelled, apparently, to reach out to resentful or rebellious allies. In fact, the Modi government has pursued its core agendas, which were deemed contentious in the past and hence kept in abeyance, with purposeful vigour since 2019, and its allies have fallen in line. To be sure, the Shiv Sena left the NDA on the matter of sharing power in Maharashtra, but other NDA members have acquiesced to every decision, even those that have been contentious or appeared to be unilateral, taken by the Modi government. This is a far cry from the NDA under Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani (1998-2014), when the BJP was not so comfortably placed in terms of numbers and when regional parties including the AIADMK, Telugu Desam, Shiv Sena, Janata Dal (United) and Trinamool Congress could, at times, compel the BJP to accede to their demands on important issues. In the UP, too, regional parties such as the DMK exerted a conspicuous influence.

Since 2014, the national polity has taken a turn as a result of which the space for regional parties at the Centre has shrunk, and centralising tendencies have been emboldened. The radical potential of regionalism and sub-nationalism seems exhausted and attempts to revise such agendas invite accusations, often with good reason, of opportunistic grandstanding. In the upcoming Bihar election, too, this is the context that will, in all probability, influence the calculations of parties such as JD(U), RJD and the LP. The Akali Dal's predicament is not unique, it mirrors a political moment where smaller regional outfits must struggle more for space, and in which the dominant national partner finds it easier to have its way.

TALK IT THROUGH

Decision on who gets vaccine first must be informed by wide deliberations that must start now

DUBITS OVER THE Oxford University-AstraZeneca vaccine that had surfaced in the first week of September, after one of the volunteers developed a nerve inflammation, have been put to rest. On September 12, the UK's Medicines and Healthcare Regulatory Agency certified it safe, after a review by an independent committee. Following the UK regulator's go-ahead, the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) has given permission to the project's Indian collaborator, the Serum Institute of India, to resume trials on the vaccine in the country. It is still not clear when this vaccine candidate — the frontrunner amongst the preventives against COVID-19 that have entered the final phase of the clinical trials — will be ready for mass use. But some of the uncertainty about the timeframe seems to be lifting. AstraZeneca has said its vaccine could be available "by the end of the year or early next year". India's Minister of Health and Family Welfare Harsh Vardhan has also said that he expects that a vaccine against the contagion will be available by early 2021. But in the Rajya Sabha, on Thursday, he added a caveat: "It would still take time to reach everyone." The minister's note of caution is important.

Scaling up production of the vaccine will take time, even after it gets regulatory approval. The WHO too reckons that "supplies of the vaccine will be limited in the short to medium term". The question then is: How should priority be allocated in administering the vaccine? This may involve balancing different, and competing, considerations. Should the health worker at the frontline of the battle against the novel coronavirus be the first to be inoculated? Or should arrangements be made to shield the elderly and those with the comorbidities? What about targeting hotspots in crowded areas to reduce the rate of transmissions? What place should the imperative of reviving the economy have in the vaccination strategy?

Medical ethicists have, for long, advocated public participation in medical research beyond clinical trials or improving research processes. A growing body of scholarship has suggested that fair medical processes require conversations between the healthcare professional and the layperson. India, unfortunately, has been an outlier to such debates — they have rarely gone beyond academic and activists' circles. But the second-worst COVID-19 infected country cannot afford to leave difficult questions around the vaccine too late. It is important that any decision on who gets the vaccine first is informed by healthy interactions among different sections of people — health experts, social scientists, economists, patients' group.

THE CRICKET STUNTS

Much delayed IPL will begin with hope and excitement as usual, but also never-before challenges

FOR MUCH OF this year, the 13th edition of the Indian Premier League seemed the unluckiest of all. As recently as last May, the tournament was shrouded in uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this backdrop, the start of this much-delayed tournament is a coup of sorts. However, the 53-day tournament would be without spectators, glamour, and celebrations that mark the annual mid-summer festival.

For players, it's an unusual challenge they are not prepared for. They will be inside a bio-secure bubble for nearly two months. Cricketers would have to deal with the lockdown-triggered rustiness and also the fear of getting infected with the virus. The hotels are equipped with amenities, but to survive without a social life and fan interaction could prove to be claustrophobic. It's cruel irony that Sharjah is one of the venues. Not long ago, the Sharjah Cup was the most romanticised cricket fixture. Sharjah has lost its festivity and glory, and this year the IPL too must sacrifice its extravaganza.

Nonetheless, a lot is riding on this IPL, a tournament that was famously called recession-free by its founder Lalit Modi. The heavily invested sponsors and broadcaster, still nursing lockdown wounds, are hoping T20 cricket, like always, will not disappoint them. They are also punting heavily on the anticipation of fans, who have been deprived of live action during the lockdown. The IPL action will be beamed to 100 countries. In India alone 550 million are expected to tune in. Fingers are crossed, the stakeholders are calculating that in case they are able to dodge the virus, a pot of gold awaits them at the end of the difficult obstacle course. They will hope that the action that unfolds in the middle will be top-class. But it would be an atypical IPL edition.



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

IN THE CASE of free speech jurisprudence in India, history repeats itself — first as tragedy and then as greater tragedy. The Sudarshan TV case, at one level, is very simple. In principle, Indian law allows prior restraint on broadcasting. This prior restraint should be used sparingly and must meet a high constitutional bar. Indian law also allows regulation for hate speech, which is different from offensive speech. Hate speech often targets and degrades a community. So, as the law is currently constituted, the issue seems to be simple: Was Sudarshan TV's programme, Bindas Bol, as clear-cut a case of hate speech as one can see? Certainly, the material available in the public domain suggests that the show is vile. The Court passed an interim restraining order and will presumably settle the matter based on a careful consideration of the content.

But whichever way this case turns out, it looks like dark days are ahead for both democracy and freedom. In some ways, cases like this one are a report of the tragedy of 1951. It has been pointed out (most recently by Tripuramand Singh, in *Sixteen Stormy Days*) that India's First Amendment, enacted by Nehru, was a betrayal of liberal values. But the underlying structure of the problem was similar.

The government feared that if it did not have the power to regulate speech, all kinds of communal and insurrectionary venom could spread through society. The defence of a fragile republic required the state to be armed with the power to regulate speech. The spectre of law and violence got the state to betray its own liberal commitments. And then began India's crooked journey on free speech. Liberals never acquired the confidence in the demos to let go of these crutches of state regulation in the name of defending the republic. The Right used such protections as it had to spread its hate and its dog whistles. And whenever it was questioned, it weaponised free speech arguments to expose liberal hypocrisy, even as it itself cracked down on dissent.

This uneasy equilibrium still allowed Indian democracy to survive so long as hate was within certain bounds. The use of state

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The issue is fundamentally political and we should not pretend that fine legal distinctions will solve the issue. The big lesson of the last two decades is that an over-reliance on legal instruments to solve fundamentally social and political problems often backfires. In the case of free speech, this is even more so. First, if you look at the larger politics, the game of the Right is to trap liberals into being the censoring party. They get more mileage and victimhood, and create more scepticism about constitutional first principles by showing that when it comes to the crunch no one believes in free speech.

power, while sometimes unjustified, was also still within the realm of what could be contested. What kept the republic together was not the consistency of principle or the majesty of law, but elements of a political culture and fragmentation of power. What makes the crisis of free speech deeper now is that both ends of the problem have intensified. The spread of hate speech and its political consequences are now infinitely greater. The preconditions of a Rwanda-like situation, where communication mediums are used to target communities, are not outside the realm of possibility. It is for this reason we still have so many restraints on speech.

On the other hand, the spectre of authoritarianism is also greater. And here is the most important lesson of regulation of speech: no matter how well intentioned, arguments of the power of the state. But now, in the current context, where to all intents and purposes most independent institutions have crumbled, empowering the state is a frightening prospect as well. In the Fifties, we arguably feared hate more than the state. But now, when we fear both hate and the state, to whom do we turn?

This background needs to be kept in mind when thinking about cases like Sudarshan TV. The issue is fundamentally political and we should not pretend that fine legal distinctions will solve the issue. The big lesson of the last two decades is that an over-reliance on legal instruments to solve fundamentally social and political problems often backfires. In the case of free speech, this is even more so. First, if you look at the larger politics, the game of the Right is to trap liberals into being the censoring party. They get more mileage and victimhood, and create more scepticism about constitutional first principles by showing that when it comes to the crunch no one believes in free speech. We make use of all the distinctions we want between different forms of speech. But the blunt truth is that the more the state regulates, the more it politicises the regulation and the ultimately legitimate dissent will be the victim.

Second, there is a whole bunch of laws and regulation already on the books, from the

Cable Broadcasters Act to the ability to sue, that should in principle place pre-restraints on the most egregious forms of speech. These have been ineffective because of institutional dysfunction. But if our institutions are truly dysfunctional, does it make sense to create another set of institutions to regulate. Or should we not draw the lesson that any regulation is only as good as the political culture that supports it? Third, it is true that the structures of democratic deliberation are deeply broken. But there is a deeper political economy here. Social media operates on a set of monetising incentives. But broadcast media has also been the creation of a particular kind of political economy. The granting of licences has always been a political affair; the pricing structures set by the TRAI have perverse consequences for quality and competition. Our current media landscape is neither a market nor a state. The more the underlying political economy of media is broken, the less likely it is that free speech will stand a chance.

This is an area that does require serious thinking: Not just post facto content regulation, but a market structure that can help provide more checks and balances, and not let bad media drive out good. But with all due respect to the Supreme Court, this is something for Parliament to think about. The Court suits setting up a regulatory framework does not inspire confidence. It is not its jurisdiction to begin with.

The need for more regulation for speech, the fear that it can incite, is also always a judgment on the people. When we regulate speech too much, we are not just targeting the speech. We are in effect saying: We cannot trust the people to make the right kinds of distinctions. The tragedy of our situation is that hate speech mongers think hate speech makes them popular in the eyes of the people, and the state by expression, and the unwitting complicity of the government. If the people don't want to be saved from both the power of hate and the power of the state, the law will be a feeble instrument to save them.

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JHULELAL AND PEACE

The symbiosis of religions under the singing saint in Sindh lasted three centuries



KHALED AHMED

IF YOU WANT to win the heart of a Sindh Pakistani, sing the song of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar of Sehwan Sharif. The village of Sehwan, named as Udero Lai, where he had asked his followers to build two sanctuaries in the same complex: One for his Hindu followers, a samadhi and another one for his Muslim followers, a "qabr".

This wonderful symbiosis of religions under the guardian saint singing in the Sindh language and the three centuries of the personality of the Sindh man who will not drop a reference to a Hindu god merged in the personality of the saint of Sehwan. The song has been rendered into Punjabi too and now comes the vast territory of Punjab. The singers of "Jhulelalan", like Abida Parveen, have become legends in Pakistan. Since all over the world greet each other with the words, "Jai Khehavan! Jhulelalan! Jhulelalan! Beda-Paar" (Jhulelalan will lead you towards success).

But the Sunni orthodoxy of northern Pakistan, strengthened by their participation in jihad, began to dominate Pakistan's ideology in the 1980s. Sunni madrasas, enriched by jihad, began to penetrate Sindh to "set it right", and today threaten the foundations of the pluralistic culture of Sindh, particularly by allowing forcible marriages of Hindu girls to Muslims. The mausoleum of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan Sharif was targeted again and again as Muslims and Hindus sang and danced together at the shrine. In February 2017, a "suicide" bombing at the shrine killed 88, including women and children. The attack was carried out by the Islamic State (IS), the Sunni

How did Jhulelalan become a saint of the Muslims? He is said to have appeared on the island of Khwaja Khizr near Sukkur, in Sindh, to save a Muslim woman who was covered by a Hindu king. He is said to have finally died in a village of Jahajin, later renamed as Udero Lai, where he had asked his followers to build two sanctuaries in the same complex: One for his Hindu followers, a samadhi and another one for his Muslim followers, a "qabr".

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terrorist gang born in Iraq to avenge the rise of the Shia majority there. Its presence in Pakistan together with a Qaedi of Jahajin, the way of life the Pakistani people, as shown by this attack, carried out by a local Muslim converted to violence. Not long ago the mausoleum of Data Ganj Balshah was targeted by the Islamic State, where no long ago Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims lived peacefully together and accepted the mystic saint as the guardian spirit of the city.

Another saint of Lahore, Mian Mir, belonged to the same category of pluralist faith. The Golden Temple of Amritsar was built around a main-mandir pool (Sarovar) that was completed by the fourth Sikh Guru, Guru Ram Das in 1577. Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru of Sikhism, requested Mian Mir to lay its foundation stone in 1589. Next to the grave of Mian Mir in Lahore, is the tomb of the Mughal princess Nadia Begum, the wife of Prince Dara Shikoh who tried to teach the Hindu and Muslim communities to live together in peace. Khushwant Singh once lived in Lahore and was loved by all his Muslim friends. What connected Singh to Muslims was Sikhism itself. The holy book, Adi Granth, was not a collection of punishing edicts but an anthology of mystical poems culled from Punjab and Rajput classics, from Baba Farid to Kabir and Meera. The compilation of Sikh scripture began under the faith's founder, Guru Nanak, who thought of it because of his attraction to the Sufi saint of al-khatik (People of the Book) in Islam.

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SEPTEMBER 19, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO



FLASH FLOODS IN ORISSA
FLASH FLOODS IN the Bansadhara river deluged the divisional headquarters town of Gunupur in the Koraput district of Orissa taking a toll of more than 100 lives and causing widespread damage to property. Only 10 bodies have been recovered so far — including those of the Gunupur additional commercial tax manager, his wife and daughter. About 30 per cent of the houses in the area are believed to have been washed away by the floods. The state's chief minister J B Patnaik, who has returned from Delhi, has sought the intervention of the army and the air force for relief operations. Standing crops in more than

80,000 hectares in Cuttack and Puri have been inundated.

BRO WORKERS' CASE
CIVILIANS EMPLOYED in the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) are agitating over the imposition of army rules on them. Their demand which has been echoed in Parliament and in the press is now before the judiciary. Next week, the Supreme Court's constitution bench is going to be hearing on petitions filed by several employees challenging the validity of the government order which made the Army Act and Rules applicable to them for purposes of discipline. Their contention is that

the construction wing of the BRO is a civilian outfit and cannot be bound by army rules.

IMPASSE ON TARAPUR
THE US HOUSE of Representatives has voted against the sale of nuclear fuel to India, leaving the Carter administration to fight the battle on the issue in the Senate. The vote was 288 to 98. The administration believes it has a better chance in the Senate although the Foreign Relations Committee voted 8-7 against it. Both houses must vote to bar the shipment of fuel to override the Carter Administration's decision to honour the Tarapur fuel pact.

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THE IDEAS PAGE

Lift the veil on the parampara

The guru-shishya relationship in Indian music is grounded not just in a power imbalance, but in a celebration of inequality, which makes it vulnerable to abuse, which is then romanticised



T M KRISHNA

THE SHOCKING ALLEGATIONS of sexual abuse and harassment against (late) Ramakant Gundecha and Adilshah Gundecha have shaken the Hindustani music firmament. But truth be told, many have in private acknowledged that these stories are not exceptions. So many instances like this are spoken of only in whispered tones by people fearful that the well-oiled gossip network of Hindustani music will carry their words to the powerful within this close-knit community. In 2018, when similar allegations were made about Carnatic musicians, all was quiet on the northern front. The name of one Hindustani musician cropped up, only to disappear in a jiffy, and nothing more was said.

The world of Hindustani music — though to all appearances more modern compared to its southern cousin — is actually more deeply entrenched in the patriarchal and medieval mindset that besets both systems. At the heart of this is the worshipful regard in which the guru-shishya parampara is held. Some senior Hindustani musicians literally walk around like they are avatars of some deity or the other. The pedestal on which gurus are placed by Hindustani musicians is far higher than any seat given to their counterparts in Dakshin Bharat. Equally, despite all the differences and petty politics between musicians, the "tradition" of watching each other's back is far more prevalent in the Hindustani world. In fact, Carnatic musicians always talk enviously about how Hindustani musicians come together to put up a unified front when needed.

In such a context, it has been heartening to see Hindustani musicians, old and young, come out and speak up against sexual harassment. Unsurprisingly, none of the superstars, such as Amjad Ali Khan, Hanprasad Chaurasia or Zakir Hussain, have thought it necessary to even make an obligatory comment. But what intrigues me is that many who condemn the sexual harassment simultaneously demand that the guru-shishya parampara be protected.

The question in my mind is: What are we saving?

An inquiry into this question must necessarily be dispassionate, our mind shorn of all that we shared with our country, but we all treasure about them. A system cannot be evaluated based on personal experiences. What must be determined is whether the system — its core structure, its values, its respect, and non-abuse of, students. That is, irrespective of the nature of the guru, does the system provide security and strength and empower the student emotionally and psychologically to stand on her or his own? Once this question is asked, the answer is self-evident. Like most relationships, the guru-shishya relationship is grounded in a power imbalance, but here, crucially, the inequality is celebrated. The need to be subservient, indeed submit to, the master is an implicit necessity. Let me say it as it is: The parampara is thus structurally flawed. No doubt there will be claims that I seek to destroy something ancient. But a storied past must never be a defence against criticism. I seek not to destroy but to question. It is not enough to

punish abusers; an entire overhaul of how we teach these art forms is imperative. As Kalkidasa said about poetry: "Not all poems are good because they are old. All poems are not bad because they are new. Good and wise people examine both and decide whether a poem is good or bad. Only a fool will be blindly led by what others say."

The guru-shishya structure is inherently prone to abuse — of all sorts — yet, so often, the abuse is romanticised. When students are forced to commit to hours of household chores just to receive those few moments of wisdom, it is celebrated as sacrifice and commitment and endurance — "the guru testing the student", we are told. The practice is then normalised when we say "it was all worth it". All of us practising these art forms know of the psychological manipulation and emotional trauma that prevails, and all we have said is, "This is part of the learning process. You have to go through it. I am not judging musicians of the past by today's ethical norms, but there is no reason to accept the standards of the past. The least we can do today is to admit that 'it was just wrong'. Such an acknowledgement is a step forward. Even today, students and teachers see the service of the guru as a guru dakshina. Service is a dangerous idea and often traverses many domains of abuse. It is also true that abuse increases exponentially when the student comes from an economically poor or socially marginalised community.

It is possible to have a deeply involved relationship that is not toxic. But for this to happen, we need to reimagine our structures of learning. The system must begin with respect for students, and recognition of their independence and agency as individuals. This is vital because the power structure is naturally tilted in favour of the guru. But for this to happen, we need to first "humanise" the guru. The parampara that demands obedience and unquestioning deference, only because some one is a guru, needs to be demolished. Simply put, gurus must be respected for being domain experts — nothing more. If the respect grows beyond this, it must come from a

mutually evolving relationship. A problematic area in Hindustani and Carnatic music is the informality in the learning. And this extends to the institutions that musicians build. This informality is justified on the basis that it creates a unique, unconditioned space for learning. Informality can take so many forms, sometimes resulting in episodes of incredible learning, while on other occasions, there are just demands made by the guru because he is in a position to make them. Therefore, we have to be very careful while treating this territory. Am I advocating for the institutionalisation of these art forms? No, I am not. There is a lot to learn beyond the school-university-class framework, but such an arrangement cannot be an arbitrary, uncaring, student-on-call system. I won't go into the possible redressal mechanisms because they will remain ineffective until we lift the veil on the guru-shishya parampara and see it for what it is.

It must also be put on record that all we celebrate about the guru-shishya parampara — the intimate learning, sharing that goes beyond the syllabus — is far from unique to Indian traditions. Or indeed even to music. In every sphere of activity, there have been and there are students and teachers who share a bond that goes beyond what the university demands of them. And there are stories of great gurus and famous shishyas across disciplines and geographies. Learning is not time-bound or tied up in official seals. The little things that the teacher says during a walk or over a cup of tea could make a world of difference. The problem with our concretised version is that this promise of magic is used as an excuse to normalise inequality. In other fields, teachers and students have drifted apart, even vehemently disagreeing with one another, each finding their own areas of influence. But the guru-shishya parampara of Indian "classical" music and dance, rarely can a shishya stand up against her or his guru and hope to survive another day. Therein lies the story.

The writer is a musician and author

A reformer by conviction

PM Modi has connected the reform agenda to the common man



SAMBIT PATRA

India has had no dearth of skilled politicians — some good at public administration and some good at public welfare. However, what India has truly missed is having a leader at the helm who is a genuine reformer by conviction. We've had politicians who've displayed foreign degrees and also articulated a great vision. But when it came to genuinely implementing reforms which make a difference in the lives of people, most politicians have not been able to pass the test. This applies to most of our past prime ministers too. PV Narasimha Rao oversaw one of the most reform-oriented governments in India, but these reforms truly carried out with conviction or borne out of compulsion? Things are not always black and white, but what is clear are the missed opportunities during the UPA's rule from 2004-14. An economist became the prime minister but sadly the country saw no new reforms implemented. Was this omission by choice or compulsion? Perhaps only Manmohan Singh can answer this.

The last few years under Narendra Modi have seen the most reform activity ever under any government of India. It was not without reason that Barack Obama called Modi "India's reformer in chief". After 10 years of reforms inertia, India saw a slew of reforms because Modi is not a reformer by compul-

sion but by conviction. For decades, reforms used to be the sole prerogative of economists and pink papers, as if the common man had nothing to do with them. Modi has changed this system and brought reforms to the centre of public discourse. He has demonstrated to the people how reforms transform their lives. Reforms carried out by PM Modi have brought about a positive change in the lives of crores of Indians. His interventions are not limited to earning plaudits from arm-chair experts but intended to bring real-world change.

Just look at the momentous reforms undertaken in the field of agriculture. India has had dozens of farmer leaders but none took steps to empower farmers. A doctor or an engineer or a lawyer would sell his services to anyone in any part of the country, but a farmer could not sell his produce to anyone except the mandi in his town. This led to a vicious cycle of low remuneration and low technology adoption for the farmers as a result of these prohibitive rules. In one fell swoop, reforms by the Modi Government have ensured that farmers can sell their produce to anyone outside their mandis. This will empower them to sell where they get a better price and also grow what gets him a better price. Now he will also be able to enter into an agreement to grow

and sell specifically to a private player. This will not only bring more stability to his income but will also improve the adoption of modern techniques and technology.

Politicians are often blamed for not being able to envisage the second and third-order effects. However, Modi's legacy contains reforms which have positive externalities. The IBC has empowered lenders to get back their money while liberating entrepreneurs from the stigma of failed enterprises and enabling them to make a fresh start. RERA is not only removing the information asymmetry and securing buyers' money but also accelerating project completion. The entry of private enterprises in India's space sector will make it a win-win proposition for both the sector and the common man.

One constant feature of PM Modi's governance has been how he is making different sectors more competitive by involving market forces. Today, commercial mining is a reality. FD has been permitted or increased in insurance, real estate, defence, etc. GST would have remained a dream had PM Modi not shown the courage to implement it and spend his political capital on this important reform. To the critics of GST implementation, I would like to ask, should we have waited for another decade for a 100 per

cent perfect GST? Sometimes it is better to implement with an open mind rather than not implement at all.

Political scientists and experts often don't realise a Modi wave till it sweeps the entire opposition off its feet in the results. This is because the Modi wave is not an election phenomenon. The Modi wave has been constructed bit by bit over five years, as people get the direct benefits of good governance and reforms, which they could not see for 70 years. When a poor household gets a gas connection, toilet, house or direct benefit in its bank account, it is because of a reformed process of governance. When a middle-class household gets an income tax refund in weeks or gets cheaper medicines or saves time in daily travel due to a metro, it is because of a reformed process of governance. When an entrepreneur gets faster clearances and one of the world's lowest corporate tax rates, it is because of a reformed process of governance.

Irrespective of what the political pundits or arm-chair economists feel, 130 crore Indians have seen the impact of Narendra Modi's reforms in their lives and are giving their stamp of approval through their vote.

The writer is national spokesperson, BJP

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The country is facing a second wave of coronavirus because the government is losing track of the outbreak spread. Testing capacity is being outpaced by an exponentially growing epidemic."

— THE GUARDIAN

Chargesheets & fairy tales

When the police produce voluminous chargesheets, a judge should be suspicious. Because much is at stake



COLIN GONSALVES

CASES OF POLITICAL activists who commit no overt act, fire no gun, throw no bomb and whose only weapon is their fierce oratory and belief in the transition from capitalism to socialism, must be separated from terrorist cases. There are undoubtedly many cases of terrorism, but they are easy to identify by the prominence of an overt act and the immediate devastation caused. In the political cases of the Delhi riots kind where young persons are being thrown into COVID-infested jails, one would need super magnifying glasses to identify the overt act, weaponry used and the devastation caused. In such cases, the normal language of a chargesheet under UAPA is replaced by storytelling, innuendo, presumption, extrapolation, stretching of the narrative and downright lying.

Criminal law judges of the post-independence period had a finely-tuned understanding and instincts of criminal law jurisprudence. The most important attribute that a criminal law expert possessed was a fundamental distrust of the police, the desire to question, the intention to look at documents closely, the sceptical scrutiny of statements made and an intense commitment not to allow the general gush of the police replace clear-cut admissible evidence against the accused. As the recently declared *Watali* judgment of the Supreme Court would show, all this has disintegrated into telling a fine fairy tale and covering that absence of a core with 17,000 pages (as in the *Delhi riots* case) of pure drivel in order to deter a judge from looking at the evidence at the stage of bail. The inevitable result would be that these modern-day second national movement heroes would not sit in jail and perhaps die there while their trials ran for a decade.

Had the police tried these tricks on the earlier generation of criminal court judges such as, for example, Vrihan Bose, I can imagine the judge leaning back in his chair looking down scornfully at the masses of paper constituting the chargesheet and asking the investigation officer to produce one sheet of paper, just one from the 17,000 pages which would show him unambiguously that the accused had committed a heinous offence. The moment the police do drama of producing super voluminous chargesheets, a criminal judge should know that there is hardly anything going on.

The decline began in the Supreme Court over a decade ago when a particular judge who had a background in inquisitorial law had assigned criminal matters for his years. He incorporated civil

procedure and civil law principles into criminal jurisprudence, undermining the latter's purity so that we can now have judgments like the *Watali* case, delivered recently in the Supreme Court, laying down the preposterous proposition that while denying bail, the court may rely on evidence that is not admissible under the Evidence Act during the trial.

The story I am going to tell you is a true story of an alleged Maoist. It alleged that he made a confession to a police officer to the effect that he was a member of the Maoist party and was responsible for terrorist offences. This statement was made to a police officer and so was inadmissible in evidence, unlike a confession made to the magistrate which is admissible. On this sole piece of evidence, the police involved him in 16 criminal cases in Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh even though in 12 of those cases his name did not appear in the FIRs. In the remaining cases, there was no overt act attributed to him. All that was said was that he was a member of the Central Committee of the party and the brains behind the terrorist offences. He was arrested in 2009. Four chargesheets were filed. All were dropped. His trial proceeded on the fifth chargesheet, and he was acquitted in 2016 of all terrorist charges. By then, in his 70s, he had spent seven years in jail battling a prostate infection, irritable bowel syndrome, ophthalmic problems, heart problems, high blood pressure, arthritis, slip disc and spondylitis.

The Andhra Pradesh High Court granted bail and trenchantly dealt with the objection of the public prosecutor to the grant of bail when she said that 20 cases were pending against the accused: "It is not as if any of the petitioners participated in those offences at the field level. They were included in the case on the basis of certain broad resolutions passed at a meeting of Maoist party. It is nobody's case that the petitioner hatched any plan. This is a bail case for grant bail. The Supreme Court dismissed the state appeal."

Similarly, the Delhi trial court acquitted the accused in the following manner: "...no evidence relied upon by the prosecution has been found to be admissible... the testimonies of the prosecution witnesses suffer from infirmities... the recoveries have not been proved... the confession made by the accused (to a police officer) cannot be read in evidence. The material relied upon by the prosecution is not reliable and admissible." Similarly, the Patna District Court acquitted the accused, "no recovery was effected... prosecution failed to prove that the accused was a member of a militant group... there was no evidence to show accused had any link with terrorist activities or had any link with any enemy country."

By the time he was acquitted in all the cases, he had spent a decade of the most productive period of his life in jail.

The writer is a senior advocate, Supreme Court, and founder, *Confessions Made by the Rights Law Network*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EXPANDING MARRIAGE THIS REFERS TO the editorial 'Out and equal' (IE, September 18). The issue of legal recognition of marital alliance between two consenting adults irrespective of their gender and sexual orientation has a strong case in its favour and hence deserves wider deliberation both in policy-making circles as well as at the societal level. The existing laws governing marriages between a heterosexual couple have evolved over many years and they have inbuilt safeguards to protect the interests of the traditionally weaker gender. A similar traditional definition cannot be imposed on homosexual couples. A separate gender-neutral marriage law incorporating neutral subjects like the rights and duties of an individual partner needs to be given due consideration.

Sudip Kumar Dey, Kolkata

IDEAS ONLINE

HOW AMU WAS FOUNDED: SADAF AFREEN AND MUKUND SHARMA

WHEN INDIA CHALLENGED THE UN CHARTER: MILOON KOTHARI

www.indianexpress.com

how the Supreme Court decides this ticklish issue.

G Choudhury, Pune

INDIE MEDIA

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'If you want guidelines, regulate digital media first, Genie tells SC' (IE, September 18). The parallel media on digital platforms has been able to initiate a culture of public discourse and citizen journalism. The internet has provided a stage for independent journalists, unhesitant to take up pressing issues as they are driven by a different commercial model. While broadcast news (IE, September 18) and "journalist freedom" and "responsible journalism", digital media has appealed to the public which wants to question and reason rather than outrage and gossip.

Saundarya Jain, via email



Market failure

New deal for agriculture needs good regulated markets ahead of private competition

The ambitious initiative of the Narendra Modi government to bring about far-reaching reform in agriculture has run into severe weather, mainly over fears that the free market philosophy at its core could spell the end of MSPs for produce that has so far been centrally procured by the government. An allied party's Minister, Harsimrat Kaur Badha (Akal Dal) has resigned in protest, and there is a strong pushback from farmers against three Bills that seek to replace ordinances issued in June, on key aspects of the farm economy – trade in agricultural commodities, price assurance, farm services including contracts, and stock limits for essential commodities. The opposition to the Bills, particularly on trade, flows from the position, articulated by Punjab, that agriculture, produce and markets are State subjects, and there should be no tinkering with the MSP and Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMC), that form the backbone of existing trading arrangements. Several States have already liberalised agricultural marketing, amending their APMC Acts, and some have allowed regulated private commerce including direct marketing. Yet, provisions in the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020, providing for unfettered commerce in designated trade areas outside APMC jurisdictions without levy of any fee, and more generally, empowering the Centre to issue orders to States in furtherance of the law's objectives, have alarmed States. A challenge has been mounted by Rajasthan, declaring central warehouses as procurement centres under its APMC Act, and therefore required to pay a market fee to the State.

Mr. Modi has characterised the arguments as mis-leading, promising that the MSP system will continue. This is welcome, but the new dispensation cannot bring cheer to small farmers, who form the majority and whose access levels to markets under the APMC system are at the rate of one for an area of 434.48 sq. km on average – well below the recommendation of the National Commission on Farmers (NCF), at one market for 80 sq. km. There is evidence also that more liberalisation does not lead to private investment in new markets. When Bihar removed the APMC system, markets suffered loss of fee revenue, with no significant private investments in the sector. If the Centre's intent is to strengthen competition, it should massively fund the expansion of the APMC market system, removing trade cartels, and providing farmers good roads, logistics of scale and real time information. Rather than opt for heavy centralisation, the emphasis should be on empowering farmers through State Farmers Commissions recommended by the NCF, to bring about a speedy government response to issues. Without strong institutional arrangements, laissez-faire policy may harm lakhs of unorganised small farmers, who have been remarkably productive and shored up the economy even during a pandemic.

Continuity in change

India is hoping that under PM Suga, Japan will not steer away from the course set by Abe

Less than a month after his sudden announcement that he would step down due to health reasons, Japan's long serving Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, 65, has passed on the baton to his long-term associate, Yoshihide Suga, 71. Mr. Suga promises continuity rather than change as he takes the reins. His choice is itself an indicator of that continuity: he has been Chief Cabinet Secretary since 2012, as well as the top spokesman and a key implementer of Mr. Abe's policies. An elected MP since 1996, Mr. Suga was Minister of State for Internal Affairs and Communications during Mr. Abe's previous tenure in 2006-07. In his press conference after winning the leadership of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party this week, Mr. Suga said his goal is to continue with Mr. Abe's policies and complete his goals, particularly the tasks of reviving the economy and controlling the COVID-19 pandemic. He has also retained Mr. Abe's key cabinet choices which include the Finance, Foreign and Environment Ministers. Despite his best intentions to stay the course, he has taken charge at a crucial moment in a rapidly changing world and will need to steer through the outcome of the U.S. elections in November, China's growing aggressiveness, and a worldwide economic downturn. A main challenge will be to ensure the success of the Tokyo Olympics, now rescheduled for July 2021 due to the pandemic.

For India, Mr. Abe's exit is a loss, given his game-changing moves on India-Japan ties, which included upgrading the relationship to a Special Strategic and Global Partnership, instituting the annual Prime Ministerial summits from 2006, spearheading both versions of the Quadrilateral with the U.S. and Australia, and personally moving the India-Japan civil nuclear partnership through the Diet (parliament), Japan's first with a non-NPT country. One of his last meetings as Prime Minister was a telephonic summit with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, announcing the signing of the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, a significant step in defence cooperation. His close personal relationship with Mr. Modi, both seen as "strongmen" leaders, built on his earlier partnership with former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, with whom he shared his famous "three arrows" economic strategy called 'Abenomics'. Mr. Suga would be well aware of the big shoes he must fill and the importance of the relationship with India for Japan. It is significant that one of the new government's first engagements is likely to be the Foreign Minister-level meeting of the Quad countries in Tokyo next month, which will also give New Delhi insight into how much has changed and how much will stay the same in Japan's view of the world with the change at the helm.



RAKESH SOOD

Last week, on September 12, the much awaited intra-Afghan talks between the Taliban and the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation opened in Doha, Qatar. 19 years after the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. that stunned the world and marked the beginning of the U.S. war in Afghanistan against al Qaeda and the Taliban, its local sponsors. The initiation of intra-Afghan talks was a key element in the U.S.-Taliban peace deal signed in Doha on February 29 between the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, and the Taliban deputy leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Originally planned to begin on March 10, the process had to overcome many hurdles along the way providing a small glimpse of the difficult road that lies ahead.

Dynamics of negotiations

The Trump administration soon realised that its 2017 policy of breaking the military stalemate by a small increase in U.S. troops was not working and reverted to seeking a managed exit. As the former Defence Secretary James Mattis put it, "The U.S. doesn't lose wars, it loses interest." Political optics demanded a relabelling of the withdrawal.

Direct negotiations with the Taliban began two years ago with Ambassador Khalilzad's appointment as Special Envoy. Actually, it became a three-way negotiation. The Doha track was with the Taliban, a second track was with Islamabad/Rawalpindi to cajole the Pakistan Army to lean on the Taliban to get them to the negotiating table, and the third was with Kabul

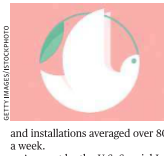
to ensure that the Afghan government would accept the Doha outcome.

Originally Ambassador Khalilzad had spelt out four objectives: an end to violence by declaring a ceasefire; an intra-Afghan dialogue for a lasting peace; the Taliban cutting ties with terrorist organisations such as al Qaeda, and U.S. troop withdrawal. Within months, the Taliban had whittled these down to just the last one with some palliatives regarding the third. Instead of an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled reconciliation, it had become a U.S.-led and Taliban-controlled process with nobody but the U.S. Command (CENTCOM) in the U.S. Timelines were fixed for the U.S. drawdown by mid-June (followed by complete withdrawal by April 2021) and for removal of Taliban from the UN Security Council sanctions list by end-May. The Taliban have released 1,000 members of Afghan security forces and the Afghan government has freed over 5,000 Taliban from their custody. This process took longer than originally foreseen but has now been completed. The two elements that remained open ended in the U.S.-Taliban deal are the ceasefire declaration and the intra-Afghan talks.

The Taliban factor

By end-June, the U.S. had reduced its troop presence to 8,600 as promised and in early September, General Command (CENTCOM) commander Gen Kenneth McKenzie indicated that by November, the numbers would be down to 4,500. Despite two brief day truces in May and August for Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, the levels of violence showed no respite.

Speaking of the Doha on the opening session, Dr. Abdullah Hamid, Chairman of the High Council regretted that more than 12,000 Afghans had been killed and another 15,000 injured since end-February. The number of attacks on government security forces



and installations averaged over 80 a week.

A report by the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) issued in July covering the second quarter of 2020 (<https://bit.ly/3hqlvpa>) assessed that "The Taliban is calibrating its use of violence to harass and undermine the ANSP (Afghan National Defense and Security Forces) and (the Afghan government), but remain at a level it perceives is within the bounds of the agreement, probably to encourage a U.S. troop withdrawal and set favorable conditions for a post-withdrawal Afghanistan." The report expressed scepticism about whether the Taliban had cut ties with al Qaeda and stated that "the Islamic State-Khorasan maintains the ability to conduct mass casualty attacks". A UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team report concerning the Islamic State and al Qaeda (also issued in July) concluded that "Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent continues to operate under the Taliban umbrella in Nimroz, Helmand and Kandahar provinces" with reportedly 400-600 fighters in the country (<https://bit.ly/3h3ljoNO>).

Challenges ahead

Perhaps nothing reflects the challenges facing the intra-Afghan negotiations more starkly than the title of the U.S.-Taliban Doha deal (<https://bit.ly/3h3l2kLa>) – "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan Between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America". This awkward phrase

is repeated more than a dozen times in the Agreement. The leader of the Haqqani Network, Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is also the second-in-command of the Taliban happens to be on the U.S. wanted list with a reward of \$10 million for information leading to his capture or death. All this is difficult to reconcile with the notion that the U.S. considers the Taliban a partner in counter-terrorism operations against the IS and other terrorist groups.

In an op-ed in *The Washington Post* on August 14 (<https://wapo.st/3mAFVZH>), Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani wrote that "the Afghan people want peace" and that is why the government "made the decision to take another risk for peace". Calling on the Taliban to sit across from Afghan representatives to arrive at a political resolution, he added that "we acknowledge the Taliban as part of our reality" and urged that "the Taliban must, in turn, acknowledge the changed reality of today's Afghanistan".

The current reality is that 74% of Afghan population is below 30 and has lived, for most part, in a conservative but open society. However, the Taliban continue to maintain the Kabul administration as an imported western structure for continued American occupation. Senior members of the Afghan government continue to be targeted including Vice President Amrullah Saleh who narrowly escaped an assassination on his motorcade on September 9, even as 10 innocent Afghans lost their lives.

Evolving Indian stand

Addressing the opening session of the Doha meeting, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar reiterated that the peace process must be "Afghan led, Afghan owned and Afghan controlled" but Indian policy has evolved from its earlier hands-off approach to the Taliban. Speaking to Indian media a few months ago on separate occasions, both Ambassador Khalilzad

and Russian Special Envoy to Afghanistan Ambassador Zalmir Khabul bluntly pointed out that if India had concerns regarding anti-India activities of terrorist groups, it must engage directly with the Taliban. In other words, if India wanted to be invited to the party, it must be prepared to get up and dance.

Major powers, finite interest

The reality is major powers have limited interests. For the U.S., the peace talks provided U.S. President Donald Trump an exit opportunity weeks before his re-election bid. The European Union has made it clear that its financial contribution will depend on security environment and the human rights record. China can always lean on Pakistan to preserve its security and connectivity interests. For Russia, blocking the drug supply and keeping its southern periphery secure from extremist influences is key. That is why no major power is taking ownership for the reconciliation talks, but merely content with being facilitators.

A report issued last month by the Heart of Asia Society, a Kabul-based think tank observes that "the prospect for peace in Afghanistan depends on regional consensus to support the peace process as much as it depends on actual progress in the intra-Afghan talks". India's vision of a sovereign, united, stable, plural and democratic Afghanistan is one that is shared by a large constituency in Afghanistan, cutting across ethnic and provincial lines. A more active engagement will enable India to work with like-minded forces in the region to ensure that the vacuum created by the U.S. withdrawal does not lead to an unravelling of the gains registered during the last two decades.

Rakesh Sood is a former Ambassador to Afghanistan and currently Disistinguished Visiting Observer Research Foundation

On the GST issue, the Centre holds the baton

A large borrowing programme is inevitable; data and economic uncertainties show that States cannot handle the matter

made by July 2020. The transfers due since April 2020 have been withheld.

In the last GST Council meeting held on August 27, the Centre gave the States two options. First, they could borrow ₹97,000 crore (the shortfall in the GST revenue compensation) from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) under a special window at a low rate of interest. Second, borrow ₹23.5-lakh crore (the total compensation shortfall) from the market with the RBI facilitating it. The burden of repayment would be borne by the future collections from the compensation cess. It was proposed that this cess which was to end in June 2022 could be extended to facilitate the repayment of the debt.

Clearly, the Centre is renegeing on its promise to the States. The Centre is promising to pay the States on their own – cooperative federalism is a casualty.

Revenue will fall by much more than 20%. Corporate sector profits will fall sharply. Some sectors such as fast-moving consumer goods, or FMCG, and e-commerce will do well. But companies in sectors such as airlines, hotels and consumer durables will show losses and, therefore, pay little tax. Thus, corporation tax collection will fall sharply – much more than 20% compared to the budget estimate. Similarly, income tax collection will fall since a large number of workers have lost employment and/or have faced salary cuts. Ma-



are they arrived at when the Ministry of Finance is refusing to give a figure for growth in 2020-21?

Budgetary calculations
The Union Budget presented on February 1, 2020 assumed a nominal growth of 10%. But, given that the economy is still at around 60% of last year's level, very optimistically it is likely to contract for the year 2020-21 by at least 10%. So, the Centre's budgetary calculations will be off by at least 20%.

What is the guarantee that the cess would continue beyond 2022? If the statutory provision of 14% increase is being given up, then how sacrosanct will something that is not even a part of the GST Act be? Adverse economic circumstances may continue given the great uncertainty about the duration of the downturn.

Given the uncertainty, how accurate are the estimates of ₹97,000 crore and ₹23.5-lakh crore offered to the States? How



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ny private firms are also likely to incur losses. So, income tax collection will also be short by much more than 20%. The direct tax/GDP per cent may be expected to fall from 5.5% last year to less than 4% this fiscal.

If GDP falls by 10% over last year, instead of being ₹224-lakh crore, it will be about ₹184-lakh crore. Using the lower tax/GDP ratio, direct tax revenue will be short by ₹5-lakh crore compared to the budgeted amount. This is an optimistic guess. The State's share of all taxes collected by the Centre is 42%, so they will lose ₹2-lakh crore.

Greater shortfall
GST collection will also be short by much more than 20%. The production of luxury and sin goods has been severely impacted and they pay the high rate of tax – 18%, 28% and cess on top. The essential production which is affected less by lockdown either pays 0%, 5% or 12%. Due to a drastic fall in imports, the Integrated Goods and Services Tax (IGST) and customs duties will also decline. The extra tax collected on petroleum products will help counter the decline to an extent.

Consequently, the indirect tax/GDP ratio can be expected to fall from 10.5% to 8% resulting in a drop of ₹7 lakh crore. About 60% of this loss will be from GST and half of that would be the loss of States. About half of the remaining

part (₹2.8-lakh crore) will also be a loss of States.

The States' GST shortfall would be about ₹21-lakh crore. On top of this, they will lose 42% of the shortfall from the Centre's collection – so another ₹88,000 crore. The GST collection figures are gross; input credit remains to be paid back. So, the shortfall is likely to be greater than implied by the April to August figures.

Thus, at an optimistic guess, if the economy declines by only 10%, the total tax collection will be down by about ₹12-lakh crore in 2020-21. The States will lose ₹6.4 lakh crore. The States GST revenue will be short, by ₹3-lakh crore which should be compensated by the Centre. Subtracting from this the expected collection of ₹65,000 crore from cess we get the figure of ₹23.5-lakh crore.

Even if the States take the loan of ₹23.5-lakh crore they would have an uncovered deficit of ₹4-lakh crore. Further, as many predictions are that the economy will be down by much more than 10% in the calculations above, the revenue shortfall is likely to be far greater. This blocks the dire position of the Centre (and the States) and the inevitability of a large borrowing programme. Only the Centre is in a position to do such massive borrowing.

Arun Kumar is Malcolm Adiseshiah Chair Professor, Institute of Social Sciences, and the author of "Ground Scorching Tax"

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

Advice to India

I am much troubled by the strong negative reaction in the article, "Reject this inequitable climate proposal" (Editorial page, September 18). The UN Secretary-General is absolutely right in what he has said. The temperature now is expected to increase probably near 4°C by the end of this century unless we stop burning coal and releasing much of the greenhouse gases now. Isn't the unprecedented forest burning across Siberia, western U.S., Brazil, Australia, multiple cyclones/typhoons from warming oceans, melting of polar ice and ocean rise much faster than expected,

migrating wildlife and humans and vast biodiversity loss, enough to make us sweat at night for our children?

What is the only 'action' is adaptation to climate change as in agriculture, coastal zones, transport, and so many other sectors. We cannot wait for different country expectations and arguments. India must today start plans for 'carbon neutrality' within a few years as many other countries are doing. Yes, this is extremely difficult and disruptive for India. But our children will judge us by this more than anything else.

CLARENCE MALONEY, maloney@india.net

It would be inappropriate to bludgey reject the proposals made by the UN Secretary-General, especially with India being a part of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is our responsibility too to minimise emissions and there must be a concerted effort to shift to renewable energy solutions.

MAHIMA VERMA, MahimaV@india.net

Animal welfare

Indians, who observe a culture of veneration of nature, are straying from the path of compassion for voiceless creatures (Op-ed page, "For the welfare of animals", September 18).

ANAND ARAYAMUDHAN, anand@india.net

nature, but have no qualms about abusing the very same creature in flesh and blood. It is not uncommon to see people chasing away street dogs or their benevolent feeders citing strange reasons. The same Constitution that guarantees personal liberty and other rights also holds us individually accountable to show compassion towards animals. We, Indians, have consistently shown that we can be tamed only if laws and punishments are made more stringent. People should come together for voiceless creatures (Op-ed page, "For the welfare of animals", September 18).

ANAND ARAYAMUDHAN, anand@india.net

We worship animals in some form or other but do otherwise. The killing and ill-treatment of stray dogs is on the rise. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in pets being abandoned by their owners. There is no national law regulating animal foster care and pet rescue. The conditions in foster care homes are terrible as most run on a shoestring budget.

TANUSRI KHANDELWAL, tanusri@india.net

On NEET
Politics and education must never mix. While some politicians in Tamil Nadu have reiterated that they will see to it that the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test

is extricated if there is a change in government after the Assembly election, most of us are not sure how this is going to work. Leaders of a national party, on the contrary, have vociferously defended NEET on the ground that it ought to be viewed as a test in consonance with the Supreme Court's order and is the gateway to higher education. May I request the Union Education Minister to send exhaustive outlines to all State Education Ministers and ensure that all students have no apprehensions on NEET whatsoever in future.

MANI NATARAJAN, maninatarajan@india.net



To read more letters online, scan the QR code

In addition to the core frontline workers, others like private hospital staff, retired, volunteer, local urban bodies, contract, daily wage and all others personnel associated with dealing directly and indirectly with the pandemic also were covered under the health insurance. This incentive was surely going to add into the morale of the COVID fighting warriors at health institutions, hospitals etc. This insurance cover was over and above any other insurance cover that a beneficiary was availing of, with no age limit, no individual enrolment and other formalities being added facilities provided.

Although the Government intentions are very clear to provide the best Medicare at district, subdistrict, and rural levels, but it is only possible if all working parameters are looked in advance and a proper plan is executed. To implement good health care to the grassroots level it is suggested that during this pandemic period good emergency centers and hospitals should have been built at district and if possible, at subdistrict standards where under one roof all the facilities could be provided. Loading the tehsil and districts with Ventilators without any further thought will prove futile and mere wastage of money and exchequer.

There was a time in the last 10

Henceforth it is suggested to the Government to make a comprehensive and detailed plan to fight out the pandemic COVID 19 in a big way, and in a systematic manner when we are enough funds and equipment at our disposal. It should also be ensured the supplies of Ventilators even at the district and sub-district level may not catch dust and become unusable in course of time.

(The author is Ex-Head of Intensive Care Unit & Department of Anaesthesia Government Medical College Jamnna.)

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Frankes's linguistic research led him into the study of oral literature of Ladakh. Folksongs and proverbs as we are aware, are an important source of any local language. The Kesar Saga, Francke believed broadened his vocabulary as it is known in different versions across Tibet and Mongolia and also gives an insight of the local religious belief systems. The researches

The China's quest for water originating in the karkoram - Himalayan region has resulted in Chinese acquiring Aksai Chin in Ladakh by force and Sakahagay valley in Gilgit - Hunza by an illegal treaty with Pakistan. This far sighted Chinese planning has resulted in a windfall gain for them today. The only CATCH in the pack is India's right to the 1948% of the unexploited 19.48% of river waters of 03 rivers flowing through the state of Jammu and Kashmir. India has not exploited any of the waters of the Indus cascade and partially exploited Chenab and Jhelum. Government of India is sitting on very potent weapon whose deterrent capacity is enormous. It could curtail the enormous consumer surplus (even out of 19.48% of Local India's share) being enjoyed by Pakistan in

Crux of the story is that Money alone will not be able to win you war but harnessing of natural resources shall play a pivotal role in creating a new warfare platform to counter the world.

(The views expressed by the authors are their personal)

The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from THE FRIEND OF INDIA - Founded 1818

Onion diplomacy

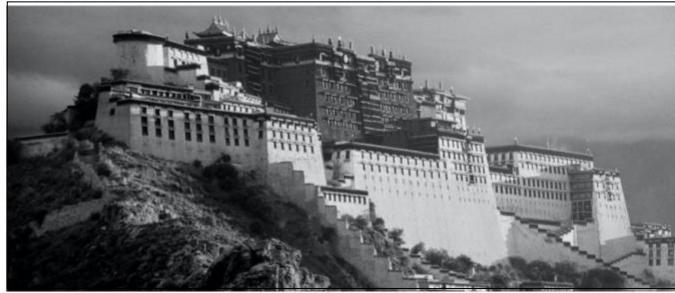
Much like the waters of the Teesta, another essential commodity has soured relations between India and Bangladesh at a critical juncture - when the equation between the two South Asian neighbours appeared to be on the upswing. The Bangladesh foreign ministry has on Thursday conveyed what it calls its "deep concern" through a note verbale that has been advanced to the Indian High Commission in Dhaka. Most importantly, the government helmed by Begum Hasina has taken exception to the fact that Bangladesh had not been informed in advance before the ban on the export of onions was imposed. Arguably, India has its economic compulsions; but whether or not the terms of trade have been violated remains open to question. The Bangladesh foreign minister, AK Abdul Momen, has said that there was an understanding between the two countries that information would be conveyed in advance when the issue concerns an export-import ban. "It would have been better had Bangladesh been informed about the abrupt decision beforehand." It is imperative, therefore, for India to explain its position and the demand-supply constraints that have impinged on the domestic onion trade. The monthly requirement of onions in Bangladesh is about 2 lakh tonnes. The country has a stock of around 5.6 lakh tonnes and import of 1,000 tonnes is in the process. Faced with India's ban on onion export, Dhaka has approached Turkey to compensate for the onion shortage. The Government of India's "abrupt decision" runs counter to the "understanding" between the two countries in 2019 and 2020. A clarification by Delhi is essential after Hasina has many friends in the neighborhood. Dhaka's note verbale has mentioned that Bangladesh had requested India to inform its government "ahead of time" in case of any development that necessitates such a restriction. Has India been caught on the wrong foot? Bangladesh has referred to the commerce secretary-level meeting between the two countries in January this year, and the "VIP visit" to India in October last year. Indeed, Prime Minister Hasina has regretted India's ban on onion exports. "I wish you had informed us before suddenly putting a halt in the export of onions. I had to tell my cook that I have no other option but to have my food without onions. I would request India to inform us beforehand while taking such a decision. After all, we are neighbours." While West Bengal has its compulsions for not releasing the Teesta water, so too perhaps does the Union government for not exporting onions to its eastern neighbour. The latest friction needs to be resolved not the least because it is an essential commodity, one that is integral to the cuisine and food habits of the people of Bangladesh. The export ban has already affected the price of the commodity in India. The issue calls for deeper reflection on the part of the Ministries of External Affairs and Food and Supplies.

Cricket and Virus

When a Test series is thrown into bewildering uncertainty as the would-be visitors disagree with the prospective hosts on among other things, the decision of a one-day period, cricket, or its southern Asian variety, can quite clearly be seen to head into a time it doesn't quite understand fully. Before Covid-19, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh would have got all formalities out of the way simply and briefly over the telephone, handing the match schedule in Sri Lanka and Dhaka for the customary, if brief, notice the day after. If in today's vastly altered circumstances, Bangladesh carpenter about "historically" difficult coronavirus protocols, listing a 14-day period of isolation when their players wouldn't even be allowed out of their hotel rooms in Sri Lanka and the absence of local net bowlers, the going seems really hard for the global Test championship which the International Cricket Council started with high hopes quite a while ago. Dhaka would have been game for a week's isolation but a fortnight was rather too long in its view. Bangladesh also resent Sri Lanka's refusal to let in their youth squad as part of the contingent from Dhaka and cite the regulatory rules other, recent series have been bound by, stressing how extremely stringent the island nation's requirements are. The lamentations culminate in a complaint about the different perceptions in the two countries' ways of looking at the same thing, triggering a question about where cricket's conventions reach their finality, if any, and concern about public health, if at all. In rather trying times. Going by reports from Colombo, the restrictive protocols are mandated by Sri Lanka's government, which is only doing its job if it's trying to shield its people from the pandemic. India did play a match against Bangladesh amid a public health emergency in pollution-besmirched New Delhi but that mightn't have been a benchmark others would aspire to. Well might there be those who could be inclined appreciatively to consider the Sri Lankan approach to the matter, going by the indication that it has got its priorities right. If they are scared of the virus and trying their best not to lose a lot of human lives to it, they can't really be faulted for that. If the way they are going about it is at odds with cricket's commercial requirements, it's the game that will have to come to terms with it. Bangladesh, in contrast, want it both ways on their own terms, which seems to suggest that in their perceptions of the matter, Covid-19 must know its own limits when it states at cricket across the field. The problem is that the point of view, putting it euphemistically, is somewhat unrealistic. Any desperation springing from a keen desire for getting going again will risk a lot, regardless of how the dispute plays out in the next too distant future. It could also set the Test championship back by a mile and a half, but that will only be a sub-plot compared with the dangerous possibilities in the bigger context.

India, China, Tibet

Nehru saw China as a partner to create a new post-colonial world, and his aspirations for a global role linked to a big power neglected India's national and security priorities at great cost. This should be an enduring lesson for our present and future governments



Given the current tensions between India and China, Claude Arpi's recently completed four-volume *India-Tibet Relations 1947-62* is germane and significant. It uses primary and secondary sources, though New Delhi has inexplicably not released the records of 1961-2 and those of the Political Officer in Sikkim, who had oversight of Tibet, have disappeared. At independence, India had a mission in Lhasa and three trade agencies in Gartok, Gyantse and Yatung, the last two with military escorts, and control of post, telephone, telegraph, some rest houses and Minsar near Kailas, all to be progressively abandoned.

Arpi unveils the remorseless Tibetan marginalisation under Chinese expansionist claims, abetted by Prime Minister Nehru and Ambassador Panikkar in China, distracted by ambitions of playing a global role along with China. Whether before or after Mao Zedong, China never accepted Tibetan autonomy under China's suzerainty, a status proposed by the British raj. In 1950, when Panikkar intentionally or otherwise changed China's suzerainty to sovereignty over Tibet, the de was cast. Nehru was fearful of being called a neo-colonial stooge while Indian diplomats, echoing Nehru, claimed to see a western hand in sponsoring friction between China and India. Nehru was anxious to repudiate India's colonial legacy in Tibet, but not the borders which were created by the Raj's quest for security based on natural geographic features.

The Tibetans were also guilty: greed and infighting weakened their resolve. Timid and bewildered, they were hesitant to uphold the 1914 Simla Convention as a proof of autonomy, or India as Britain's successor state. When the Dalai Lama was a minor, his Regents and advisers misruled and misguided the people; monks felt leaderless while the rich and some clergy cooperated with the Chinese, and only the poor people opposed. Many Indian leaders felt Tibet needed to be modernised and the lama hierarchy eliminated. Nehru was not alarmed at China as a northern neighbour and felt that a 'small dose of socialism' was overdue. Sardar Patel, Morarji Desai and Radhakrishnan were sceptical of China's intentions, but were brushed aside by Nehru's circle of Panikkar and

Defence Minister Krishna Menon. In 1950 India published maps showing Ladakh and the central sectors as undefined, but not the McMahon Line. When Tibet tried to assert some independence with a list of 'lost territories' including Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling and other areas mainly south of the McMahon Line, these claims were later adopted by the Chinese. In 1951 China imposed a 17-point agreement on Tibet, which stated that China entered Tibet to eliminate imperialist aggression and return it to China's big family. Nehru said:

"We had nothing to do with it and we have not been consulted at any stage... either by the Tibetans or the Chinese." In September 1951, the Chinese army entered Lhasa. Tibet appealed to the United Nations, Britain and India asked for deferment, and the issue has remained dormant ever since. The 1954 Indo-China agreement on Tibet ended Tibet's autonomy and in 1959, the Chinese General reported almost 99 per cent of Tibetans did not want Chinese rule though many were leading a hard life under the (previous) feudal system.

In 1958 the first border negotiation took place, the second two years later, when India asked China to indicate 'precisely where according to them the international border lies.' The only response was that the Chinese repudiated both the 'colonial' version and the watershed principle, which remains their position till today. Zhou pertinently added, 'historically, no treaty or agreement on the boundary has ever been concluded between the China and India governments.'

In 1960 Zhou used the term 'Line of Actual Control' for the first time and hinted at a package deal - Aksai Chin for the McMahon Line. India chose to restate its maximalist position rather than negotiate, convinced that China would never attack; Krishna Menon declared 'neither this nor any other government could make compromises regarding sovereignty and territory.' Arpi observes that 'these crucial

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

How democracy deteriorates during pandemic

The famous motto of the US state of New Hampshire is 'Live Free or Die.' The phrase is adopted from a toast by New Hampshire's famed Gen. John Stark of the American Revolutionary War, who wrote in 1809, 'Live free or die: Death is not the worst of evils.' That means that losing freedom is worse than death. It also resonates with what Patrick Henry said in 1775, 'Give me liberty or give me death!' Those phrases especially appeal to the American mind because independence is what America stands for. America is not alone in this. The phrase also echoes the popular motto of the French Revolution in 1789, 'Vive libre ou Mourir' or 'Live free or die.' In the United Kingdom, poet William Wordsworth wrote in the 19th century, 'We must be free or die.' In such countries, where people fought for freedom and cherish liberal democracy, individual freedom is absolutely the most important thing. It is especially so in the United States where the spirit of independence and civil disobedience persists in the American mind.

In many advanced, democratic countries, people believe that the government has no right to oppress the people's freedom under any circumstances. Thus, they would not be obedient to the government's impositions or measures that bind their God-given

freedom. Therefore, the more advanced a country is, the more difficult it is to deal with a pandemic such as COVID-19 because it cannot regulate people at will. Ironically, therefore, authoritarian or totalitarian countries can contain a pandemic more effectively because they can easily suppress people's freedom.

In democratic countries, people would not tolerate the government's attempts to limit their freedom guaranteed by a constitution, even in a pandemic situation. In such countries that value and respect individual freedom, the government does not and cannot restrict the freedom of religion, speech, or assembly under the excuse of public safety or national security. In fact, public safety or national security has always been a typical excuse for dictators to control the people.

Furthermore, medical records are strictly confidential in advanced countries. Thus, you cannot find out who the COVID-19 patients are in your town or apartment complex. Otherwise, it will be a violation of the doctor-patient confidentiality. Of course, it is not using your right to privacy if you do not know it when your neighbor is a coronavirus patient. Nevertheless, you should respect and protect the human rights of a patient. However, not all countries are the same. In Korea, for example, medical records are not so confidential and people can easily identify COVID-19 patients, shun them and even condemn them as if they were criminals. If you happen to be in a hot spot where there is a large gathering, you will be under the government's surveillance immediately. The authorities will closely monitor your movements and instruct you what to do, using your right to privacy. Moreover, law enforcement officers can stop you on the street and take you to a COVID-19 test site by force.

Corrigendum

In Aditi Roy Ghatak's article, "The Nowhere People" (17 September), the sentence should read, "Under the PM Kisan scheme every landowning farmer (landless are excluded) receives Rs 6,000 a year," and not as stated.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Well served at Govt. Covid hospital

SIR, I am 67 years old. On 2 September, I tested Corona positive. I had a cough for a few days and due to decreasing oxygen saturation level, I was transferred to the temporary Covid hospital of Jalpaiguri town 12 pm. I was in a health department ambulance.

I had been terrified after reading what was written in the news and videos about Covid hospitals on social media.

But my misconceptions have gone after my 10-day stay at the Covid Hospital in Jalpaiguri. I returned home after recovering from the virus on 11 September. The health department ambulance took me to the hospital. I was directed to my bed after admission. My medicines were given and explained to me. I was given a bucket, a mug, a toothbrush, toothpaste, soap and

soap case, and detergent powder. Breakfast was given the next morning - half litre of packed milk, boiled eggs, banana and bread. Non-vegetarian/vegetarian meals were served at noon and night. There were heating facilities as well as drinking water were arranged. The hospital ward and toilet were clean. Doctors, nurses and health workers were serving patients with

sincerity. Even health department officials regularly talked to patients to check if anyone had a problem. Doctors arrived on call even at the dead of night to attend to critical patients. In case of any patient, if there was adequate provision of oxygen and nebulisers. The service that I have received at Jalpaiguri government Covid Hospital totally free of cost is really commendable. I think my words are relevant in the way we fears about corona and the alleged lack of treatment at government Covid hospitals are being spread among common people on social and other media is not right. At least my experience says so. It is important to be cautious but there is no reason to panic. Com-

PEACE WITH NEPAL

SIR, This refers to your editorial "Dichotomy in Nepal" published today. India desires peace and stability in Nepal. It is welcome that an amicable and acceptable compromise has been made between two rival and competitive leaders of the communist party of Nepal. A hurtful remark of Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli about India has damaged the relations between India and Nepal. Even the contrived delineation of three disputed regions in the physical map of Nepal has soured ties.

India has not been reacted aggressively to this unilateral decision of the Nepal government. It is obvious that the people of that country have not wholeheartedly endorsed Oli's act. India has seen the instability in Nepal, but its conscience has not permitted such retaliation. It is true that both countries are culturally and religiously linked from time immemorial and it is a bond of love. Nepal nationals have prospered in India and cannot abandon this country. India therefore desires a peaceful and prosperous Nepal.

Yours, etc., Nimal Charan Swain, Bhubaneswar, 15 September.

mon people can be cured by getting free treatment and services in government hospitals without spending a fortune in private hospitals. Yours, etc., Debashis Chakraborty, Maynaguri, 17 September.

'Democracy is in peril'

DR. RAJA, general secretary of the Communist Party of India (CPI), has injected intensity and substance into the Opposition's voice on multiple issues. Reacting strongly to what he believed is the RSS-BJP agenda to convert India into a Hindu Rashtra, he has given a call to his party cadres to go all out to celebrate the coming birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi in a big way, highlighting secularism and plural democracy of the country. On the economic policy, Raja has asked his party to mobilise people on unemployment, poverty and loss of livelihood resulting from various government policies. A two-term Rajya Sabha member during 2007-2013, Raja, 71, took over his party's supreme leadership on 21 July 2019. The first graduate from his village, Chithathoor of Vellore district in Tamil Nadu, Raja has been a member of his party's national executive since 1992. In an interview with DEEPAK RAZDAN, Raja explains his party's stand on a range of burning issues. Excerpts:

Q. How is democracy in peril — the government is holding a Parliament session despite the Covid pandemic?

A. We are a Parliamentary democracy. Ambedkar was clear that India should remain a Parliamentary democracy. He was clear the Executive should be held accountable to Parliament. Parliament is the supreme institution in our democratic polity. It represents the sovereign will of the people. In a country like India, Parliament should be vibrant. If Parliament is made redundant and bypassed, and the government wants to implement its agenda at the back of Parliament, it is a threat to the institution and democracy. The BJP came to power in 2014. They have majority in Lok Sabha even today.

But the majority should not be used to push policies. There should be debate on every issue. We have seen that the BJP tried to pass certain Bills as Money Bills. It became an issue in the Rajya Sabha. There was a discussion in the Rajya Sabha how Bills could be brought as Money Bills making the House redundant, useless. The Government is taking the Ordinance route on major policies. Article 370 was abrogated. This is not an aspect of how the Government has functioned.

Even in the opening of the econ-

omy, and private participation in strategic sectors like space, atomic power, there was no discussion in Parliament. Both strategic and non-strategic sectors are being opened for private participation, including foreign investment, without proper discussion in Parliament. Ambedkar said Parliament belongs to the Opposition because it should be given an opportunity to question the government, to criticise its policies. Parliament is meant for debate, discussion, expressing dissent and differences, which is being undermined now. This poses a threat to democracy.

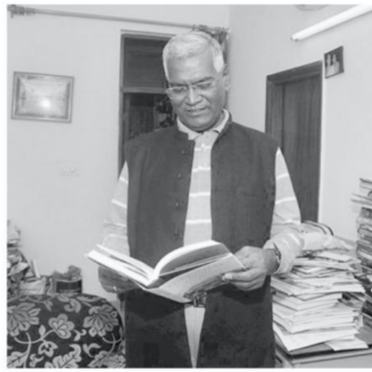
Even outside Parliament, if anybody questions the government, criticises its policies, they are dubbed as anti-national, their patriotism is questioned. This also puts democracy in peril. Then, they target intellectuals, activists and students. This is not democracy. Differences are part of democracy. The Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) is being used, even sedition charges are being slapped. The Sedition Act is a draconian law. It is being used now along with UAPA. As an MP I brought a private member's Resolution against it. My party opposed the current government is crushing dissent. That is why we say democracy is in peril.

Q. Economic slowdown has worsened due to Covid, which is a global crisis?

A. Covid-19 hit India towards the end of January 2020. Even before that, the economy was sick and was sinking. In his first tenure, Prime Minister Modi promised his government would generate two crore jobs per year. Why did he make the promise? Because there was a massive unemployment. Covid-19 added to the crisis to an extent, but the crisis was there. The economy was sinking, in fact the economy was going through recession. Covid-19 affected several countries; it is not the sole reason for the crisis. The economy was in a shambles even before Covid came.

Q. The Opposition is still not united... you wanted Opposition vs. BJP battle in Bihar?

A. The Opposition is not a homogenous body. Opposition is Opposition. It consists of several independent political parties, who have



commitment to certain common positions including secularism, democracy, social justice and such things. At the national level, to fight the RSS-BJP combine, the Hindu Rashtra agenda of the RSS, the privatisation of the Indian economy, parties come together on a common platform. We have seen this in the past and even now. But the situation varies from state to state. Tamil Nadu situation is not the same as Kerala, or Andhra Pradesh is not like West Bengal. We have to take into consideration the situation in different states. Opposition parties are also showing maturity in coming together. In Bihar last time, the unity of secular democratic parties, including the Left, was not possible at the time of the Lok Sabha elections, and we saw the disastrous results. The BJP combine captured power.

This time in the Assembly election, we see the failure of the present government, the law and order situation, and the economic backwardness which continues in Bihar. How to defeat the BJP-JD(U) is the issue, because Bihar needs an alternative polity. We have said all secular demo-

cratic parties must come together. At the political level, there is understanding, there is almost an agreement that RID, Congress, Left, all would have to fight the election together. On seat-sharing, we have said, all parties in the Grand Alliance and the Left would have to be mature and reasonable enough to accommodate each other. The primary objective is to defeat the BJP alliance. This understanding should be followed at the time of seat-sharing.

Q. Left failed to make government give economic relief to people outside the income tax net, or free foodgrains for poor?

A. We have been raising issues of migrant labour, the affected poor people, unemployment and devastation of livelihood due to Covid. The worst affected by the epidemic were Dalits and advaites. The Left raised the issue of financial support and supply of foodgrains to the poor families free of cost. We will continue to raise these issues. If the government does not yield to the Left, government will pay the price for it. They cannot take the people for granted, who will teach a fitting les-

son to the BJP and its supporters.

Q. You want to highlight Gandhi's secularism and plural democracy, but the government says it is following Gandhi in every policy?

A. This government is marked with hypocrisy and duplicity. They tried to appropriate not only Gandhi, but Ambedkar and Patel also. Whom have they left? It tries to show it works for the legacy of Ambedkar but in practice, it works against his legacy.

Q. The government has formulated a new National Education Policy, which it said was based on widest national consultation?

A. Education is on the Concurrent list, it means the states have equal rights in deciding the policy. Did they consult all state governments? Can they say all state governments have given concurrence? That itself undermines the states' rights. It is an assault on federalism. What is the content of the New Education Policy — privatisation, commercialisation, centralisation and communalisation. Language is a critical issue. Their intent is to impose Hindi and Sanskrit. It is obvious. That is why there is uproar in the country. Another thing is the way education is going to be imparted at the primary level. It will be a subtle way of implementing the Gurukul system. It means a barber's son goes to school, he should be trained as a barber, a carpenter's son should be trained as a carpenter. This policy is against social justice too.

Q. Kesavananda Bharati's death has removed a prop that the Basic Structure of the Constitution cannot be changed?

A. The case is the reference point for the Basic Structure of the Constitution. What is the Basic Structure? India is a sovereign, secular, socialist, democratic Republic. The BJP-RSS combine wants to subvert this constitution. They want to create conditions for Hindu Rashtra. Already they are doing that. Hindu Rashtra means Manusmriti, not the Constitution given to us by Dr Ambedkar and other leaders. That is why there is a strong resistance.

Q. In his last speech as President, late Pranab Mukherjee too said public discourse must be free from all formalities and Shambhaz High Court train cars could not go to office.

A. This was a clear message to the RSS and Hindutva forces. They use violence against people. Mob-lynching, who has been doing it? Here we resort to violence and don't allow any free discourse, any public debate. They spread hate and intolerance.

OCCASIONAL NOTE

The heavy rain of Sunday and the early hours of Monday morning produced the result with which Calcutta people are only too painfully familiar in the shape of flooded streets and houses. Tramways, taxi, and gharry services in the worst affected streets were interrupted and pedestrians had to wade knee-deep. Although the subject has been discussed and re-discussed until it would seem to have been almost exhausted, one can but hope that our drainage experts will not give up the problem until some means have been found, if possible, to relieve the lower-lying parts of the city from a perpetual deluge. What is the cause of the trouble? The drainage system behind it means that the water is not to be welcomed, but a flood leaving damp floors and basements behind it means that the water is as well as comfort. We know that all available means are taken by the municipal officials to run off the floodwater whenever a storm occurs. Unfortunately all the means at present available are inadequate to cope with any rainstorm which is a little heavier than usual. The obvious difficulty lies in the flat surface on which Calcutta is built, and how to overcome this difficulty by any practicable method is a problem calculated to baffle engineers.

CALCUTTA UNDER WATER

The heavy rain during Sunday night flooded all the low-lying streets of Calcutta, not only in the northern quarter, but also in the southern. Free School Street, Kyd Street, Sudder Street, and the other thoroughfares in that neighbourhood were all under water and it was with difficulty that many people were able to get to office. During the night 5 inches of rain fell, which, while not being a record, is certainly a very heavy fall for one night. People living in Shambhaz are always among the worst sufferers during monsoon rains. Yesterday was no exception. As usual, Koltollah, the length of street between the College Square and the Market and Becha Chatterjee's Street, were deep in water with the result that people accustomed to using the Shambhaz Esplanade and Shambhaz High Court train cars could not go to office.

INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE

The Hague has been unanimously agreed upon by the 'Judges' Advisory Committee of the League of Nations as the seat of the Permanent Court of International Justice, to be created under Article 14 of the Covenant. This is the first formal decision taken by the Committee, and if approved on the final reading will be one of the most important recommendations to await the final approval of the Council and Assembly of the League. It was felt that The Hague was the best place for the permanent seat of the Court, not only because of tradition as a centre of international law, but also because of the presence of the Permanent Court of Arbitral Justice, and of the facilities afforded by the Palace of Peace. The decision is regarded as marking a long step forward towards the creation of an international tribunal for the settlement of disputes between nations, either by arbitration or by law.

IMPERIAL PREFERENCE

During the debate in the House of Commons on the Finance Bill, Mr. Wedgwood Benn proposed the repeal of the Imperial Preference duties. He declared that they were trifling and that the absurd policy of Imperial preference led to economic friction adverse to the world's peace. Commander Kennworthy supported the motion. Mr. Chamberlain replying dealt with the criticism that preference did not lower prices. He said that the benefit on tea and colonial wine had undoubtedly gone to the consumer. The advantage of the sugar preference had gone to the producer but he was content whichever it went to. The object of preference was to give a practical example of Imperial unity and to promote Imperial preference, the advantage of which lay in the growing prosperity of overseas territories and the increase in their trade with the mother country.

THE HAJ PILGRIMAGE

The Bombay Government in a Press note says: At the present time there are nearly 5,000 pilgrims waiting in Bombay, and no more accommodation is available. The outbreak of cholera will necessarily delay the embarkation of pilgrims. Those who are already waiting will have first claim to accommodation on the pilgrim ships, and it is therefore unlikely that new arrivals will obtain passages on ships which can reach the Hedjaz in time for the pilgrimage. Intending pilgrims from other parts of India are therefore advised to take their own interest that it is now too late to leave their homes for pilgrimage this year.

A message from orange morning skies

QUAMRUL HAIDER

On the morning of September, the colour of the sky in the San Francisco Bay Area was burnt orange. By noon, the sky grew darker instead of lighter. The morning sky resembled the red planet Mars, while the afternoon sky gave the impression that there was a solar eclipse, but a longer one.

The orange-coloured sky confused almost everyone and everything. The Bay Lights, programmed to turn off after sunrise, remained on, their digital algorithms flummoxed by the darkness, and the circadian rhythms of the locals were hopelessly out of sync with the natural world. Postings on social media reported that people, awakened by alarm clocks, rolled over and went back to sleep after looking at the sky because they thought the clock-settings were wrong.

The colours of the sky at different times of the day are a metaphor for life in the days of climate change. They were caused by smoke from countless wildfires burning across California. The smoke, mixed with clouds and fog, stained the sky and just about everything else with an apocalyptic orange hue. Vehicles, buildings, park benches, and chairs and tables of restaurants that serve outside because of the Covid-19 pandemic were covered with ash.

Western United States, particu-

larly California, is now the epicentre of out-of-control wildfires. Despite the fact that much of the region is yet to enter what is typically the most active phase of the fire season, the fires this year are far more intense and widespread than previous years. This is not an aberration though.

In California, the fires are raging unchecked from the Sierra Nevada to San Francisco and south to Los Angeles county. So far, at least 25 people have died, dozens remain unaccounted for, and thousands are displaced. The death toll will surely climb by the time the fires are tamed. Also, more than three million acres have already burned. This is about 25 times as much as the land that burned at this point last year. Amid winds and high temperatures, Oregon and Washington are also under assault from wildfires of historic proportions.

Wildfires have created extremely hazardous atmospheric conditions throughout the Western United States as smoke from the cataclysmic blazes stretches for thousands of miles. Air quality throughout California, Portland and Los Angeles, among others, is currently some of the worst in the world. Indeed, instead of the usual benign fog, San Francisco is now blanketed in a choking layer of sooty fog and smoke, leaving people with sore throat and stinging, teary eyes. Breathing the polluted air is like smoking the strong, non-filter Gauloises cigarettes.

California, Oregon and Washington are not the only places where fires erupted in flames. Blazes devastated parts of every state of Australia earlier this year. Capping the second extraordinary fire season in a row, wildfires blazed along the Arctic Circle this summer, incinerating tundra and blanketing Siberian cities in smoke. And the Amazon is headed for another record burn.

While wildfires have the fingerprints of climate change, human acts, such as arson or tossing a burning cigarette in a forest or leaving a campfire unattended, can result in wildfires too. Among the natural causes, lightning is the major one. Lightning of varied electric voltages cause fire by directly igniting vegetation with high currents.

Although fire has always been a natural and beneficial part of a forest's ecosystem, climate change is fundamentally altering the frequency and intensity of wildfires. In fact, changes in weather pattern that create searing hot days with low humidity, drought and high winds are the biggest driver of out-of-control wildfires. Drier conditions and higher temperatures increase not only the likelihood of a wildfire to be ignited by lightning, but also affect its severity and duration. This means when a wildfire breaks out, it spreads faster and burns more areas as it moves in unpredictable ways.

Forest fires act in a synergistic manner in increasing the concentra-

tion of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. In a forest, trees and plants release water through tiny pores in their leaves called stomata. The higher the ambient temperature, the more water they release. Fires will cause this water to evaporate, including water from dead plants littering the grounds. It is well-known that water vapour is one of the major greenhouse gases.

If wildfires become more frequent or intense, carbon dioxide released by the burning woods and leaves could exacerbate the progression of climate change, leading to a kind of positive feedback loop — more warming leading to more fire, which will release more carbon dioxide, thereby causing more warming, and so on. This is of particular concern for boreal forests in North America and Eurasia, which contain large deposits of carbon-rich peat.

Since the Industrial Revolution, global temperatures rose roughly one degree Celsius. Yet, raging wildfires, severe droughts, once-in-a-thousand-year storms, devastating floods, melting of Arctic ice at an alarming rate, and lethal heatwaves are on the rise. On 17 August 2020, temperature in Death Valley, California reached 55 degrees Celsius, a potential record for the highest temperature ever reliably recorded on Earth. A derecho — a dangerous, ferocious wall of fast-moving wind that is like an inland hurricane — lashed through Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin and Michi-

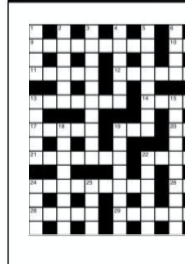
gan last month, flipping cars, downing trees, causing widespread property damage and knocking out power to more than a million.

If a one-degree rise in temperature is wreaking so much havoc, what will happen to our planet if we take the free pass of heating up the atmosphere by two degrees before the end of this century, as agreed upon by the stakeholders in the 2015 Paris Agreement?

Clearly, the links between anthropogenic climate change and extreme events like wildfires and derechos are real and dangerous. They are a frightening sign of how the cascading effects of climate change are accelerating faster than predictions of many climate change models. The situation will only get worse from here on out. Hence, today's wildfires will not be the last infernos of a hot, bone-dry summer. We should expect more disastrous and more frequent wildfires raging through forests of the world. It is, therefore, time for us and our leaders to wake up and take this stark reality. Hopefully, the forest fires and other catastrophic natural disasters will make the world leaders think rationally and prompt them to take climate change seriously.

Finally, there is an old saying about the weather: 'Red sky at night, sailors' delight. Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning.' We can now add to this saying: Orange sky in the morning, climate change smacking in the face.

The Daily Star/ANAL



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



SOLUTION FOR 12 SEPTEMBER



Across
9 Hard one to crack so ran it past expert (9)
10 See 3 Down
11 Composer showing ignorance? (5)
12 Universal ad is deceived in sacred book (9)
13 Plant a big one criminally (?)
14 Clever remark very good spread round about (7)
15 Composer showing ignorance? (5)
16 Secures freedom (5)
17 Stole pig with rock making escape (5)
18 Tori Party provides apartment in bond (5)
19 Wizard stops old man being harmed (7)
20 Was the plant tenant? (3,4)
21 Colleague in Germany happened to have short

skirts (9)
26 Mountainous region in northeast China (5)
28 See 15 Down
29 Piece in diet English helping process (9)
DOWN
1 Hour to feed young bear fish (4)
2 When in Gulf covering Vietnam is demanding (6)
3/10 Yes/in the majority in Congress? (10,5)
4 Copper in wall tortured South American native (6)
5 Kooky American avoiding press and public (2,6)
6 British boxer comes to an island (4)
7 Say Bach's instrument managed to capture

hearts (8)
8 Breeding centre built at last in French south (4)
13 Resolutely oppose woman with gun man (5)
15/28 Scene and dubious claim about an — it creates mood (10,5)
16 Runs from bad-tempered ex (5)
18 Saw Muscovite introducing himself is shameless (8)
19 Sell fellow shows animosity (5,5)
20 Where Darwin lived and died, being drunk (6)
23 Compilers two ducks causing damage (6)
24 Impact one expects to have (4)
25 Get less following curd (4)
26 Sola from girl on euphonium (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)