

# Opinion

## We all speak a language that will go extinct

Even when we speak the same tongue, understanding and being understood can be a struggle. I would know.

Sara Goudarzi

"We can't play tennis because you don't have a net."

I was standing on a quiet, suburban street in Bristol, Conn., when Eric, the boy next door, said that to me. Two rackets in hand, I felt my face ablate. Then anger spread through my slight 10-year-old frame and my mouth erupted.

"I don't have net?" I yelled. "I don't have net?" I repeated for effect. "You don't have net. Your father doesn't have net. Your mom doesn't have net," I continued, bombarding him with what I thought were insults. I wanted to hit him where it hurt — his family — a common tactic among my people, Iranians. I just had to make my playmate understand that I had plenty of net.

Eric was dumbfounded. He confessed that indeed, he and his family had neither a tennis court nor a net, but he seemed unable to make sense of my reaction to this shortcoming.

For reasons I still don't understand, as a new arrival to the United States, armed with a limited palette of English words, I had presumed that "net" meant "manners." Eric didn't want to play with me because I lacked good manners. It was only after I stormed back into the house that my brother, who had been breathing American air for close to a decade, explained where I had gone wrong.

Language, which we use to send and receive information, ideas and emotions, is at best inadequate to begin with. Even when we speak the same

I had to give up Farsi to gain all my English.

phenomenon that isn't lost on sitcom writers.

There wasn't a lot of exciting programming on Kenyan television when my parents and I arrived in Nairobi. I was several months away from becoming a teenager, landing on my third continent in three years. If I'm not mistaken, there were only two channels that mostly operated in the evenings with very few shows I was interested in watching. "Mind Your Language" was one of those. A 1970s British sitcom, the show was set in a classroom of adults where a young Englishman taught a cast of students from countries including China, India, France, Spain, Italy and Greece.

In one of the first scenes of the first episode, a prospective student says "squeeze me," instead of "excuse me," to the woman in charge of the school. Looking at a class syllabus, he says to her, "I'm hopping to be unrolled like it says on your silly bus."

I learned in my Kenyan school that French fries were chips and eraser was rubber. This last one prompted a draw-out silence when I returned to the United States and asked for one aloud during a high school class. Because despite my speaking the same language in both my Nairobi and New Jersey high schools, I found that language is inextricably bound to culture.

I best understood this the first time told an American boyfriend I was so hot I was going to die. He responded with

genuine feeling. "No, you won't." It dawned on me then that my first language, the one whose lullabies cradled my earliest dreams, was inherently dramatic. In recent years, I broke down a phrase we often use in Farsi as a substitute for goodbye, "ghorboon be-ram," and only then realized that it literally means "I will sacrifice myself for you."

By the time I reached early adulthood, English had become my dominant language and made a sprawling home in my brain, forcing Farsi into a tiny corner, so much so it worried me at times. To lose that connection, or have it weaken, felt devastating. But as it turns out, a language doesn't just slip out of your mind. In fact, in a 2014 study, researchers found that our mother tongue creates neural patterns on our infant brains that stay with us even if we don't

use the language. Several years ago, after I fell asleep during the day — an occurrence as rare as a solar eclipse — and woke up confused, I asked my husband what time it was. "Saat chande?" I said in Farsi, a language of which he only understands a few words. He was baffled. Flustered, I repeated, "Saat chande?" In that confused moment between sleep and wakefulness, I resorted to the language that makes me feel safe, the one that has literally etched patterns in my brain.

My parents are both from an area in western Iran. People from that region of Lorestan Province speak a dialect. Some words and phrases are different from the equivalent in Farsi, at times funnier, sharper, tangier. I enjoy these words and associate them with laughter and the smell of tea, with summers at my grandmother's house.

Because I left Iran before I was 10, I forget that not all Iranians know those words. At times, I use them with Iranian friends here in New York. I've said the word "gameles" to signify a lazy or incompetent person — but I can't translate it. It's more than just lazy; it's a feeling, really, weighed by cultural context. I start laughing, because it's a funny word. But my friends look at me with inquisitive eyes, waiting for a translation of what to me is our mother tongue. But it's not. It's my mother tongue, concentric circles of English, Farsi and a Borujerdi dialect of Luri (in which I'm not even close to fluent) that center in to some unique amalgamation of all those things, the language of my family, population five. Now four. A language that will go extinct.

That's the thing with languages. Though we can give each a name, no

two people really speak the same one. But in a quest to feel understood, we hold on to what we presume is a common one like a life raft in a sea of expressions, often orphaning old words and sayings to make room for new ones. And as the old float farther out, they become as unfamiliar and foreign to us as Tehran is to me now. They are our "ghorbooni," the victims of the sacrifice, what we give up in order to be recognized, to expand. As if I had to give up Farsi to gain all this English.

But though the words might disappear, or occupy a smaller parcel of our minds, they continue to lurk in our unconscious brain, and the feelings, well, "gameles," will always make me laugh, even if I don't quite remember why.

SARA GOUDARZI is a writer and poet.



CLAUDIA TARRAN

## How to foil Trump's election night strategy

To keep the president from claiming victory again, Biden supporters who can vote in person may well have to.



Jamelle Bouie

There's no mystery about what President Trump intends to do if he holds a lead on election night in November. He's practically broadcasting it.

First, he'll claim victory. Then, having spent most of the year denouncing vote-by-mail as corrupt, fraudulent and prone to abuse, he'll demand that authorities stop counting mail-in and absentee ballots. He'll have teams of lawyers challenging counts and ballots across the country.

He also seems to be counting on having the advantage of mail slowdowns, engineered by the recently installed Postmaster General Louis DeJoy.

Fewer pickups and deliveries could mean more late-arriving ballots and a better shot at dismissing votes before they're even opened, especially if the campaign has successfully sued to block states from extending deadlines. We might even see a Brooks Brothers riot or two, where well-heeled Republi-

can operatives stage angry and volatile protests against ballot counts and

If Trump is leading on election night, in other words, there's a good chance he'll try to disrupt and delegitimize the counting process. That way, if Joe Biden pulls ahead in the days (or weeks) after voting ends — if we experience a "blue shift" like the one in 2018, in which the Democratic majority in the House grew as votes came in — the president will have given himself grounds to reject the outcome as "fake news."

The only way to prevent this scenario, or at least, rob it of the oxygen it needs to burn, is to deliver an election night lead to Biden. This means voting in person. No, not everyone will be able to do that. But if you plan to vote against Trump and can take appropriate precautions, then some kind of hand delivery — going to the polls or bringing your mail-in ballot to a "drop box" — will be the best way to protect your vote from the president's concerted attempt to undermine the election for his benefit.

Trump is the underdog in this year's race for president. He trails by 8.2 percentage points in the FiveThirtyEight average; by 6.9 percentage points in the RealClearPolitics average and by 9 percentage points in the 270toWin average. He's given up on expanding his coalition or winning a majority of voters (if he ever cared in the first place). And he's botched the coronavirus pandemic, leaving the United States with an ever-

climbing six-figure death toll and a severe economic downturn. Trump is desperate to hold on to power, but he probably can't win a fair fight. His solution, then, is to do everything in his power to hinder the opposition and either win an Electoral College majority or claim victory before all the votes have been counted.

A key element of Trump's strategy is to undermine the Postal Service's ability to deliver and collect mail. The president's postmaster general has removed experienced officials, implemented cuts and raised postage rates for ballots mailed to voters, increasing the cost if states want the post office to prioritize election mail. And Politico reports that Trump's aides and advisers in the White House have been searching for ways to curb mail-in voting through executive action, "from directing the Postal Service to not deliver certain ballots to stopping local officials from counting them after Election Day."

If vote-by-mail is the safest option in a pandemic, then the point of the White House's effort is to create a dilemma for voters who place a premium on safety. Do they mail a ballot and run the risk of a discarded vote, or do they go to the polls and run the risk of infection and illness? Consider the partisan split as well. Fifty-four percent of Biden supporters prefer mail-in voting, according to a July poll from ABC News and The Washington Post, while only 17 percent of Trump supporters say the same.

If in-person voters are disproportionately pro-Trump, and mail-in voters are disproportionately pro-Biden, then you have the ingredients for an election night standoff, where the president claims victory before all the votes have been counted and tries to secure his "win" by keeping mail-in ballots off the table.

There are reforms that could keep the president from taking this tack. To account for postal delays, states can pledge to count ballots postmarked on or before Nov. 3, so that they're included in the total even if they arrive late. To speed up the process, states could permit election officials to verify and count mail-in ballots even before Election Day. They could also decline to release results until all polls close and all votes are in. News organizations, similarly, could set expectations for viewers and bring as much transparency as possible to vote counts and other forms of election analysis.

Nonetheless, there is a chance that the president takes this path regardless of state officials and the media. And there's every reason to think that some portion of the Republican Party will back him. The Trump campaign and the Republican National Committee are already challenging mail-in voting laws and suing to keep states like Nevada and Pennsylvania from enlarging their scope. It is easy to imagine a replay of Florida 2000, except on a national scale. The best defense for the president's

political opponents is, if possible, to vote in person. For some, this will mean going to the polls in November, in the middle of flu season, when the spread of Covid-19 may worsen. In most states, however, there are multiple ways to cast or hand in a ballot. Every state offers some form of early or absentee voting, and 33 states allow absentee voting without an excuse. Trump supports absentee voting — it's how his older supporters in Florida vote — and his opponents should take advantage of the fact that those systems won't be under the same kind of attack.

Earlier this year, a group of more than 100 people — Republicans, Democrats, senior political operatives and members of the media — gathered to role play the November election, using predetermined rules and procedures. "In each scenario other than a Biden landslide," writes Nils Gilman of the Berggruen Institute, who helped organize the exercise, "we ended up with a constitutional crisis that lasted until the inauguration, featuring violence in the streets and a severely disrupted administrative transition."

There you have it. To head off the worst outcomes, Trump must go down in a decisive defeat. He's on that path already. The task for his opponents is to sustain that momentum and work to make his defeat as obvious as possible, as early as possible. The pandemic makes that a risk, but it's a risk many of us may have to take.

## OPINION

## The New York Times

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Vote counts change.  
Do not panic.

## EDITORIAL OBSERVER

Jesse Wegman

Imagine a parallel universe in which the sitting U.S. president cares about holding a free and democratic election in the midst of a pandemic. Imagine that his administration is staffed with competent, incorruptible officials who devote every waking hour to stopping the virus, saving lives, rebuilding the economy and preserving democracy. Imagine that the Postal Service hires tens of thousands of extra workers to process the surge of mail-in ballots.

We don't live anywhere near that universe. But even if we did, we'd still have to worry about the "blue shift." It's a harmless-sounding term, but it describes a very real phenomenon that could trigger major disputes in vote counts across the country after Election Day, lead to weeks of litigation and, most ominously, give President Trump an excuse to challenge the legitimacy of the vote if he loses.

The "blue shift" is real. Take it seriously.

It refers to the tendency of votes counted after Election Day — mostly absentee and provisional ballots — to skew in favor of the Democratic presidential candidate. This has happened in each of the past four elections, according to Edward Foley, an election law scholar at Moritz College of Law at the Ohio State University. Mr. Foley coined the term after the 2012 election, when he was trying to predict which closely contested states might become the focus of legal challenges by one or the other political party.

There were no cliffhangers that year, but Mr. Foley was intrigued by the risk, so he dug deeper into the numbers. Studying vote counts in presidential elections from 1960 through 2012, he found a clear and persistent shift toward the Democrat in later-counted, or "overtime," votes beginning in 2004. The magnitude of the shift varied by state, but it was consistent enough to make him worry about what could happen if, say, a tipping-point state were to have a large enough shift to change the outcome of the entire election.

What concerns him isn't voting fraud, but rather how a changing vote total that tends to move in one direction can be misunderstood by an anxious public and exploited by politicians eager to preserve any advantage. "It may start to look as if, when an election goes into extra innings, one of the two teams is given extra al-bats," Mr. Foley and Charles Stewart, a political scientist at M.I.T., wrote in a paper published this year.

This fear became reality in the 2018 midterms, when Martha McSally, the Republican candidate for one of Arizona's Senate seats, saw her election night lead over her Democratic opponent, Kyrsten Sinema, evaporate as later-counted votes were added to the tally. Mr. Trump took note. "Electoral corruption — Call for a new election? We must protect our Democracy!" he wrote in a tweet.

The president, who never lets an opportunity for discord go to waste, also elbowed his way into the count in Florida, where leads for the Republican candidates for governor and senator were shrinking as more votes came

in. Six days after the election Mr. Trump tweeted, without evidence, that "large numbers of new ballots showed up out of nowhere, and many ballots are missing or forged. An honest vote count is no longer possible — ballots massively infected. Must go with Election Night!"

This demand has recently returned to the president's Twitter feed. "Must know Election results on the night of the Election, not days, months, or even years later!" he tweeted last month.

In effect, Mr. Trump, clearly worried about the blue shift, has invented a new standard: The only valid vote total is the first one. Anything that subsequently alters it is suspicious, if not outright fraud. Count the days until this charge takes on a racialized tone, with insinuations of chaos and subterfuge — "urban" voting precincts, mysterious boxes of ballots suddenly discovered in inner-city warehouses and so on.

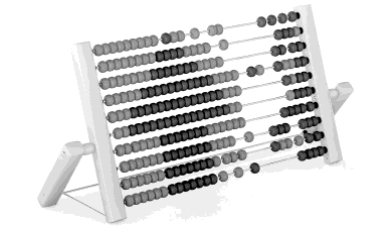
In fact, Mr. Foley explains, the blue shift is the result of a combination of innocuous factors, including the well-intentioned reforms in the wake of the 2000 election debate that made it easier for voters to register and to cast a provisional ballot in case of any issues with their registration. Democrats have benefited more from those reforms, he says, because voter-registration problems tend to be more common among people who lean Democratic, like college students and urban and lower-income voters.

In their paper, Mr. Foley and Mr. Stewart found that the bluer the state, the greater the shift. On the surface, that might suggest that there's nothing to worry about: If the blue shift is most pronounced where Democrats are already likely to win, then it won't affect the outcome. But Mr. Foley says the risk of a blue shift in a swing state is greater this year. He's focused on Pennsylvania, which Mr. Trump narrowly won by 44,000 votes in 2016, but where the Democratic candidate netted more than 20,000 votes between the initial reported total on election night and the final certified count in each of the past four presidential elections.

It must be repeated: Voting fraud of any kind is rare to nonexistent. If anything, later-counted votes are examined more closely than votes cast in person. One simple way to counter disingenuous charges of fraud would be to do what a federal judge in Wisconsin ordered in April — embargo election night returns until all absentee ballots are counted. There, at least, this strategy worked. Six days passed before results were announced, no one claimed fraud, and the world kept turning. The media have a special responsibility in this environment, Mr. Foley argues. The cultural expectation that voting results are instant, and final, on election night is a relatively recent development. Especially in a time of pandemic, major media outlets will do Americans a great service by practicing patience.

The pandemic and the crisis in the Postal Service will play central roles in this year's vote. Together they are likely to make the blue shift bigger than usual. President Trump and his allies will, undoubtedly, exploit those changing numbers to claim fraud. If there's any danger of fraud, however, it's not coming from the voters.

**JESSE WEGMAN** is a member of the editorial board, where he has written about the Supreme Court and national legal affairs since 2013.



PABLO BRON

## A cure for the dog days of summer

Margaret Renkl

**NASHVILLE** August and February are the two months I like least. August because it's hot and dry and the wildflowers are mostly spent. February because it's cold and gray and by February I have lived too long without wildflowers. Thanks to climate change, February doesn't get all that cold anymore, though it's still gray. February will always be gray in Middle Tennessee.

And August will always be hot. Sweltering hot. Heat-rising-in-shimmering-waves-above-the-pavement hot. Drink straight-from-the-hose hot. February is starting-to-look-pretty-good hot.

They're called the dog days, but not for the reasons you think. Yes, dogs do spend August lying around in the shady dirt, panting. Dogs can't sweat where they have fur, and they can't take off their fur coats, either. It

would make sense for dog days to be a reference to the way dogs turn into limp puddles of lassitude during August. Alas, no. Dog days refers to Sirius, the Dog Star, which in late July rises in the sky just before the sun does. The ancients believed the Dog Star ushered in a time of drought and madness, a time when people are apt to start wars or riots.

Here in the dog days of the pandemic summer, fear and fury are now deeply embedded in my psyche. I am furious at the "leaders" who have failed to contain this virus, and I am fearful for the safety of everyone I love.

Next week, my 61-year-old husband will return to teaching teenagers, a population not known for successful social distancing, and our youngest son will head back to college, where he will join a population that is neither good at social distancing nor supervised by anyone who is. Our middle son now holds a job as an essential worker, a job that requires him to travel, often by air, for at least part of every week. Our

oldest son and daughter-in-law, plus their houseguest, are sick with Covid-19 at this very moment — a mild case, knock wood, but you know how a mother worries.

I try to remind myself that I am not alone in these creeping fears. Everyone I know is trembling, worried, anxious.

**It's hot, Donald Trump is still president, the pandemic is still raging, and did I mention that it's hot?**

Now in the pandemic's sixth month, we've felt like this for so long it's begun to seem like the way it has always been and the way it always will be. I know that's not true with my conscious mind, but my

3 a.m. mind is louder than my conscious mind, and these days it's 3 a.m. all the time. My own cure for a darkness that never lightens is to head outdoors. Expect for calls of nature, my little mutt dog prefers not to join me in this heat.



BECCA FROTLANDER

She appears to believe that the dog days of summer are meant to be the dog days of air-conditioning. No matter. There is more to see without her.

August is spider season, a time when the tiny orb-weavers that spent all summer hanging from predators have grown large enough to spin a web. At dawn, the silken threads are beaded with drops of water, as showy as any diamond in the pollen-strewn patch, the milkweed pods are on the verge of bursting, sending white feathered seeds waiting on the wind like snow, and the pokeweed berries, too, are beginning to ripen, turning dark purple against magenta stems. All manner of songbirds flutter beneath each dangling cluster, harvesting berries on the wing. From a distance it looks as though the whole plant is on the verge of levitation.

My cone-flowers have lost almost all their petals by now, and the goldfinches have picked the cones free of seeds, but the black-eyed Susans are still in full golden glory. The asters and goldenrods are just getting started, and the milkweeds are almost as tall as I am, brightly colored and showy enough for a butterfly to see from high in the air. I've been worried about the butterflies this year. I planted a whole new bed of nectar and host plants to fill the sunny space left where we lost a maple tree last spring, but until last week the butterflies themselves were almost entirely absent.

It was because of my neighbors' pesticides? The 10-day warm spell last winter? The cool, wet spring? I don't know why, but for weeks the only butterfly I saw all summer was a lone eastern tiger swallowtail. Where were the fritillaries and the sulfurs and the little hairstreaks? Where were the question marks and the cabbage whites and the common buckeyes? Where oh where were the monarchs?

Finally, a painted lady arrived, followed by a clouded sulfur. A gulf fritillary showed up the same day as a monarch — they got into a swirling orange tussle over ownership rights to the zinnias before moving to separate parts of the flower bed. I'm hoping the monarch will stay around long enough to lay eggs on the milkweed, and the gulf fritillary will lay her eggs on the passionflower. I planted those flowers just for them.

One day it was all skippers — several silver-spotted skippers and a gorgeous fiery skipper — and the next it was all swallowtails. I love the swallowtails almost as much as I love the monarchs. But I have imperfect vision and struggle to tell a dark-morphed eastern tiger swallowtail from a black swallowtail from a speckled swallowtail, especially on the wing. Last weekend, as I was squinting to get a closer look, I was startled to see at least a dozen tiny yellow-and-black-striped caterpillars on the parsley plant. I had let go to sleep in case a black swallowtail needed it for a nursery. And, look, here were the baby swallowtails themselves!

At that is how, deep in the summer of our national terror, I learned to love August. Because the heat and humidity of the dog days dispelled the 3 a.m. darkness and brought the butterflies back to me at last.

**MARGARET RENKL** covers flora, fauna, politics and culture in the *American South*. She is the author of the book "Little Migration: A Natural History of Love and Loss."

## Don't make college kids the virus police

Karen Levy  
Lauren Kilgour

Hundreds of American colleges and universities have opted to begin the fall semester at least partly in person, allowing some or all of their students onto campus to live and study. These schools are going to great lengths to impress upon students that their behavior determines whether campuses can stay open or whether they will have to head back to their parents' homes by October. In many cases, schools are requiring students to sign "social contracts" in which they promise not to party, have overnight dorm guests, walk across campus without masks or otherwise conduct themselves as college students normally do — and often attaching strict penalties if students violate the rules.

In addition to agreeing to conduct themselves according to these rules, students are also being asked to police one another for violating them. College campuses have long monitored their students' behavior to enforce various expectations, from attending class to completing assigned readings to sticking around at football games. In the age of Covid-19, these forms of monitoring are intensifying — and students are being tasked with becoming surveillers themselves.

New York University, for example, implores students to "politely urge" the noncompliant to wear masks and social distance — and if they don't listen, to report the fellow students to higher-ups. Tulane University urges students to "hold your friends and peers accountable" for having parties. The University of Nebraska at Omaha asks students to commit to "discouraging large in-person group gatherings" to help fight the virus.

Other schools are recruiting students as "health ambassadors" to "utilize peer-to-peer influence" and training them in bystander intervention techniques. Many schools are setting up tip lines where students can anonymously report those who fail to wear masks or social-distance, or asking students to use hotlines that were originally created to report issues like harassment and other misconduct. And if students eventually test positive for the virus — say, after attending an illicit social gathering — contact tracing protocols may require them to report others who broke the rules.

In many ways, it makes sense that universities are relying on students to be the eyes and ears of public health management. Students are much more likely than a dean or provost to know about what's really going on in the dorms and frat houses. And providing a safe way for students to get feedback about unsafe conditions can certainly be a good thing, since it is unreasonable to expect all students to come forward publicly.

But there's a risk that these peer reporting systems may not be effective in controlling the spread of Covid-19 on campus because they put students in

very tough positions. Of course, many students understand the high stakes of a coronavirus outbreak and have a desire to help keep their communities safe. Some students may feel a sense of civic duty to participate in policing their classmates' behavior. But others may be loath to report on their friends, especially when doing so could result in harsh penalties. And students risk being socially ostracized if they are branded with the stigma of being a "narc" by their peers. Students may find themselves weighing the complex burdens of playing a role in preserving public health against the potential personal costs of reporting.

We've seen this play out time and time again on college campuses, when students' refusal to snitch on one another has impeded investigations of hazing practices and sexual violence. And we've already seen similar dynamics unfold in the current pandemic — local officials have had to resort to subpoenas to get reluctant individuals to comply with contact tracing, and people have been targeted with threats and harassment for "snitching" to officials about noncompliant business practices. In many cases, university messaging encourages students to de-escalate and educate in their interactions with noncompliant

peers — but tensions are high, and even adults don't always handle these conflicts well. Another risk is that peer reporting systems may have unintended consequences — especially when people use them for other purposes. Consider the VOICE hotline run early in the Trump administration, ostensibly for the reporting of information about crimes committed by individuals with "a nexus to immigration."

People who called VOICE were motivated by a wide variety of family, neighborhood and business disputes. One caller reported a family member who would not let her see her granddaughter. Another reported his wife, who he said was falsely accusing him of domestic violence in order to obtain legal residency. Still others targeted spouses who had committed adultery or abused their children. Another reported an employee of her ballroom dance studio, who was allegedly trying to lure away customers to her own competing studio.

People report on one another (truthfully or falsely) for a number of personal reasons, including competition, revenge, leverage and everyday aggravations. There's every reason to assume that these motivations will bubble up in the college context, too. Students have their own loyalties, grudges, rocky roommate relationships and fraternal

Some commentators have already questioned whether the N.C.A.A.'s Covid-19 tip line — to be used to report on schools endangering the health of their student athletes — may be *ex-levy*. **Page 11**



## Right by birth

SC decision on coparcenary rights of women is in line with the aim of ending discrimination

The latest decision of the Supreme Court on the right of Hindu daughters to ancestral property corrects an obvious anomaly in the interpretation of a crucial 2005 amendment to the Hindu Succession Act, 1956. The verdict settles the question whether the coparcenary right of daughters comes into effect only if the father through whom they claim that right was alive on the day the amendment came into force. The apex court has now categorically ruled that the daughters' right flows from their birth and not by any other factor such as the existence of their fathers. In other words, it has rejected the common misinterpretation that only daughters of coparceners who were alive on that day could get an equal share in property. The court has rightly recognised that the amendment conferred equal status as a coparcener on daughters in Hindu families governed by Mitakshara law, and this right accrued by birth. The change came into effect from September 9, 2005, but with a provision that partitions or testamentary disposition that had taken place prior to December 20, 2004 – the date on which the amendment Bill was introduced in the Rajya Sabha – will remain valid and unaltered by the change. This led to the interpretation that the daughters' coparcenary rights, being prospective, would not come into effect unless both the coparcener father and his daughter were alive on September 9, 2005. This position was crystallised in a 2015 judgment of the Supreme Court in *Prakash and Others vs. Phulavati*. This judgment now stands overruled.

The court's reasoning is unexceptionable. First, it locates the origin of the coparcenary right in one's birth. Second, it finds that there is no necessity for a predecessor coparcener to be alive for one to acquire that status, as what is relevant is birth within the degrees of succession to which it extends. In that sense, the legislation, even though it comes into effect on a prescribed date, is retroactive in its application as it is linked to birth, an antecedent event. It also underscores that the legislation makes it clear that the daughter's rights are the same "as that of a son," and "as if she had been a son at the time of birth". The coparcenary status given to daughters has been a subject of reform in many States, particularly in south India, long before the UPA regime brought in the amendment for the whole country. Kerala had introduced legislation in 1975, Andhra Pradesh in 1986, Tamil Nadu in 1989 and Maharashtra and Karnataka in 1994. The legislative aim was that a flagrant discrimination between sons and daughters in entitlement to an equal share in coparcenary property, that is property inherited from one's father, grandfather or great-grandfather, should be done away with. It is indeed welcome that the apex court has sought to give full effect to this intent by setting at rest doubts arising from varying interpretations.

## Historic ratification

The universal ratification of a labour standard is cause for celebration and reflection

The welcome decision by the Kingdom of Tonga to outlaw the worst forms of child labour is the first time in the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s 101-year history that a labour standard has been universally ratified. Convention 182, which was adopted in the 1999 annual international labour conference, prohibits the sexual exploitation of children, trafficking, deployment in armed conflict and other conditions that compromise their overall well-being. The Convention complements the ILO's efforts under the 1973 Minimum Age Convention to prevent the employment of children below a lower age threshold. Under the influence of both these ILO standards, millions of young boys and girls have been rescued from hazardous conditions of work. Consequently, these resulted in significant increases in enrolments in primary education. The landmark ratification, however, does not detract from the enormity of the challenge that remains. An estimated 152 million are trapped in child labour and 72 million of them are engaged in hazardous work. If anything, current efforts would have to be stepped up significantly to achieve the ambitious goal of total abolition of the scourge of child labour by 2025. But the COVID-19 pandemic is threatening a reversal of recent gains, with widespread job losses, deterioration in conditions of work, decline in household incomes and temporary school closures.

The historic first universal ratification of a global labour standard may be an occasion for celebration; it is nonetheless a moment for sober reflection. The two instruments on child labour are among the eight core ILO Conventions regarded as embodying the spirit of the 1998 declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work. Instruments relating to the freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining and the elimination of discrimination in employment and occupation are among the others. These conventions provide the necessary framework to counteract the predominance of informality in the conditions of work and ought to be a priority for governments. Though belated, India has signalled its legal commitment to the elimination of child labour with its 2017 ratification of Convention 182 and the instrument prescribing the minimum age of work for children. As the world prepares to designate 2021 as the year to abolish child labour, governments must seize the moment to instill hope in the future generations.

# Schools without freedom

If they had some autonomy, many village schools would have found local conditions now good enough to allow children to study



KRISHNA KUMAR

If a house needs repairs, and the repairs are delayed for a long time, the house develops a force to haunt its inhabitants during adversity. This analogy applies to the state of children's education. Decisions pertaining to it are dependent on structures designed to overlook local factors. These structures were forged to ensure total compliance, no matter how vast the system became and how diverse remained the demands served by it. Decentralisation was routinely favoured, but it did not touch the core aspects of education as a system.

Craving for a modest amount of autonomy unites principals and teachers from across the sharply divided segments of our vast network of schools. For those serving in government-run schools, there is no provision in the rule book for freedom on any count that matters. Since British days, the bureaucracy views school functionaries with the deepest suspicion, both in their capacities and integrity. No matter how senior you are, your job is to silently follow the orders and circulars issued by the directorate and the examination board.

In private schools, you notice additional players who keep principals and teachers under a fat thumb. For school owners and managers, the professional knowledge and experience of the principal and the teachers count for little. Management committees and

parents generally support the regimented approach of directorates and Boards. Endorsement of school-based capacity-building has been in fashion, but the reality has taken the opposite direction. All major processes that affect life at school have stayed firmly under centralised exercise of authority, and exam boards have tightened their grip further.

**COVID-19 chaos**  
Now arrives the novel coronavirus pandemic. The virus has spread across the country, but its impact in different regions is uneven. The metro cities have been affected far more than the rural areas, but it is now reported to be spreading in many district towns. No specific data are publicly available on villages. India has over six lakh villages. No single picture can cover their diverse geography and economics. Health standards and facilities differ, and so does the impact of COVID-19. Why the virus has not affected the rural hinterland as much as it has affected cities is far from clear. Many experts think that the uneven spread is merely a matter of poor reporting from villages. They smile if you tell them that many Panchayats are actively guarding their territories. It is not surprising that the awareness and resilience demonstrated by many villages is largely ignored in the media. It is an example of the general bias that pervades urban perception in all spheres of life.

No separate consideration of village needs seems possible in the current crisis. That is why all schemes and programmes, which have stayed closed since the last week of March. Cooked mid-day meals served to children at school have been replaced in many States by the distribution of grain and mo-



REUTERS

ney to their children. If village schools had some autonomy, many would have found local conditions good enough to allow children to come for their meals and spend some time studying. Decisions regarding the daily time span and class size might have been taken to focus on in order to improve quality. A new coinage is 'learning loss' which supposedly occurred in April and May due to the lockdown. Online teaching was mooted to compensate for this loss. Smartphones and laptops are new, but the idea that children's basic educational needs are literacy and numeracy is certainly quite obsolete. Child psychology has generated sufficient evidence to say that in its formative stages the human mind needs opportunities to observe natural phenomena, represent it in different forms and analyse it. Village schools are in a far better position to do so than city schools.

### Learning outdoors

Not all learning has to occur in the classroom. Ideologues of minimalism are arguing that foundational literacy and numeracy are what we need to focus on in order to improve quality. A new coinage is 'learning loss' which supposedly occurred in April and May due to the lockdown. Online teaching was mooted to compensate for this loss. Smartphones and laptops are new, but the idea that children's basic educational needs are literacy and numeracy is certainly quite obsolete. Child psychology has generated sufficient evidence to say that in its formative stages the human mind needs opportunities to observe natural phenomena, represent it in different forms and analyse it. Village schools are in a far better position to do so than city schools.

The monsoon creates great opportunities for noticing, recording and examining nature. Egrets and other large birds tread at leisurely paces in wet paddy fields, looking

for food. They are a joy to watch and sketch in their different postures. Ants come out of their subterranean houses when the rainwater floods them. Butterflies migrate in this season. These are just examples; there are a hundred things to observe in plants and trees.

Village teachers can bring great energy into their pedagogy by encouraging children to spend time outdoors for assigned observation. If some children have acquired a smartphone to receive online instruction, they can visually record what they notice. Observation and reflection are good for promoting numeracy and literacy too. In fact, mathematics is learnt best when you are excited about something and find it worth counting. The same is true of writing and reading.

But we live in a time when learning outcomes are pre-defined and their attainment needs to be clinically proved, with tests. The search for technical fixes is alien to the culture of village schools. It is not new, nor is the cult of controlling teachers and children. The hope that communications technology can improve pedagogic quality sustained interest in the radio, then in television and the Internet. I can recall some wonderful colleagues who dedicated their lives to educational technology. One was Dr. Vijaya Mulay who never tired of reminding officials that the real success of technology comes when it motivates and enables people to solve their own problems. For her, the danger of educational technology leading to centralised decision-making was as great as the attraction that it would bring life into the classrooms. The idea of cracking a general whip on our vast school population during a pandemic would have horrified

her. The daily images of hapless children peering into a tiny screen are distressing indeed. Some of the poorer States are trying with a software that will tell the teacher what to do next for improving a child's performance on a test. Ideas like that appeal to officials and others who have been led to believe that our core problem has to do with teachers.

Curiously enough, technology enthusiasts have seldom spoken about the absence of basic learning equipment in our schools. Something as small and simple as a magnifying glass is alien to our primary schools. Aren't these also a part of educational technology? Great expenditure is made on purchasing technology for schools, but it does not cover binoculars or microscopes. There is a way to make sense of this. If watching egrets in a paddy field is not worth the time it will take, why should schools have binoculars? An experience that might expand or deepen a child's interest and understanding does not count as learning whereas the ability to crack a test item does. All this fits in the larger picture, but it signifies a colossal loss of national imagination and talent. The system has failed to retain the momentum and gains that accrued to it from modern reforms because autonomy and professional competence were denied to teachers. If our schools fail to nurture a free, thoughtful mind among the young, one reason is that schools themselves have no freedom. And if pandemic compulsions guide broader decisions, teachers' bondage will get worse.

Krishna Kumar is a former Director of the National Council of Educational Research and Training

# The challenges in counting the dead

India must increase investment in innovations for improving data collection and reporting



GIRIDHARA R. BABU

Compared to other diseases, COVID-19 is highly transmissible. The long-term sequelae of infection are unravelling only now. The only goal is to prevent as many deaths as possible. The proportion of deaths due to COVID-19 (about 2%) is lower than that of SARS (about 9%) or the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (34.4%) and probably higher than that of influenza (0.1%). However, the task of counting deaths attributed to COVID-19 is full of complex challenges.

### Assessing fatalities

Globally, the disruption of health services during a pandemic results in the underestimation of any health indicator, including the assessment of fatalities. For estimating death rates, the total number of deaths are usually in the numerator; it is choosing the denominator that is the difficult aspect. The case fatality proportion uses reported deaths in the numerator and reported cases in the denominator; this helps in assessing and comparing clinical severity and effectiveness of clinical outcomes. Delayed reporting of deaths from hospitals, and incomplete and inaccurate reporting of COVID-19-related deaths will affect the numerator. It is recognised that case fatality will not reflect the deaths from COVID-19 as it varies with test rates and strategies used.

The seroprevalence surveys are useful to obtain an unbiased estimate of deaths due to COVID-19. Global evidence indicates that the IFR is less than 1% of total infections. We can estimate this only when we have realistic data on total infections in the country, obtained from repeated nationwide seroprevalence surveys. In the absence of IFR, deaths per million is an alternative estimate.

The infection fatality rate (IFR) due to COVID-19 uses the same numerator. The denominator comprises the total number of infections, derived from seroprevalence studies in the total population. IFR provides real estimates of COVID-19 death rates, including the presence of unreported infections in the denominator. However, different methodologies and methods of seroprevalence studies, demographics and healthcare resources will result in incomparable estimates across studies. As we witnessed in India, testing provision of healthcare and treatment improve progressively. This too will change both the numerator and denominator over time.

In addition, we can estimate the crude mortality rate by having the number of people in the area in the denominator. Generally expressed as deaths per million, this provides the probability that any individual in the population will die from the disease. This too is affected by incomplete and inaccurate reporting of COVID-19 deaths. Finally, all-cause excess mortality can be estimated by calculating the number of deaths above expected baseline levels, regardless of the reported cause of death, and provides an overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## Comparison of national capitals in countries with more than 1,00,000 COVID-19 cases

| Capital        | Total     | Deaths | Total population | DPM   | % of population above 65 years |
|----------------|-----------|--------|------------------|-------|--------------------------------|
| Madrid         | 74,886    | 8,451  | 6,581,949        | 1,269 | 0.2                            |
| Santiago       | 2,633,000 | 7,972  | 70,36,729        | 1133  | 0.12                           |
| Washington, DC | 12,896    | 593    | 7,05,749         | 840   | 0.16                           |
| London         | 35,792    | 6,885  | 8,91,989         | 768   | 0.19                           |
| Brasilia       | 1,27,000  | 1,815  | 25,70,160        | 706   | 0.09                           |
| Moscow         | 2,48,228  | 4,585  | 1,25,06,468      | 367   | 0.15                           |
| Delhi          | 1,44,127  | 4,098  | 1,67,87,941      | 244   | 0.06                           |
| Rome/Lazio     | 8,883     | 867    | 58,64,321        | 148   | 0.23                           |
| Riyadh         | 65,509    | 990    | 76,76,654        | 124   | 0.03                           |
| Lahora         | 26,162    | 932    | 1,07,70,487      | 87    | 0.06                           |
| Berlin         | 9,543     | 222    | 3,75,69,495      | 19    | 0.22                           |

DPM: Deaths per million. Source: Prof. Jeevan Rajbala

ma. The table shows the deaths per million in the capital cities of the nations that have more than 1,00,000 confirmed cases. The deaths per million population roughly correlates with a higher proportion of persons above 65 years. The exceptions are Peru and Brazil, which are known to take delayed action. An honorable exception is Germany, which has the best preventive and curative services compared to the rest of the countries.

### Registering deaths

It is important to get baseline estimates of deaths to estimate the excess mortality. Currently, although mandatory, only about 86% of the deaths get registered, which has increased from 66.9% in 2009, indicating that 14% do not get registered in India independent of the COVID-19 crisis. The annual crude death rate in India is 0.73 per 100 persons. The deaths attributed to COVID-19 in 2020 are 0.028 per 100 persons, which varies from 0.21 in Delhi followed by Maha-

rastra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Puducherry and Karnataka. This is mostly a function of better death reporting, with three of these States having 100% death registration and two States registering more than 90% of deaths. The registration system has further challenges with a high proportion of unclassifiable deaths, long delays and irregular publication of statistics. In addition, lack of training, resources and systematic screening results in making medical ascertainment of every death far from practical in India. Once efforts are made to register every death, the government should invest in establishing the cause of death, linking the data to electronic health records and coding the data.

The deaths attributed to COVID-19 in all the South Asian countries are comparable and lower than the developed countries. We will know the actual number of deaths when all the deaths are compiled by the Civil Registration System, perhaps more than a year

from now. Once known, attributing the cause of death, although difficult, can provide delineation of causes and excess mortality due to COVID-19 in India. As per the CMR-HIM in India, the most common cause of death is cardiovascular disease-related deaths caused by cancer, diabetes, cirrhosis, etc., constitute 72.5% of deaths, while 0.75% of deaths are attributed to HIV/AIDS, injury, suicide, etc.

Deaths cannot be hidden in the case of COVID-19; sooner or later, the gap between reported and actual deaths will be a glaring media and an active civil society. Due to such efforts, at least five cities in India have reconciled the death numbers. To obtain unbiased, reliable estimates, nationally representative verbal autopsy surveys such as the Million Death Study can be helpful. In the meantime, India has to adopt a strategy of transparency in data collection and reporting, with increased investments in innovations for improving data collection and reporting.

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Giridhara R. Babu is a Professor of Epidemiology at the Indian Institute of Public Health, PHFI, Bengaluru

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Ignoring the Ghats

While an impassioned pitch for environmental protection by a politician is rare, one cannot miss the inauthenticity in Sonia Gandhi's article ("Stop the dismantling of environmental rules", August 13). She did not mention the Gadgil Committee's report on the Western Ghats. The yearly floods and landslides in Kerala are largely thanks to the previous Congress-led UDF government's decision to ignore Madhav Gadgil's recommendation to classify 64% of the Western Ghats

as Ecologically Sensitive Area zones and instead accepted the watered down recommendations of the Kasturirao Committee. V.N. KUMARANMAJAN, [Thiruvananthapuram](mailto:Thiruvananthapuram)

### Running mate

The choice of Kamala Harris as Joe Biden's running mate has electrified the hitherto lacklustre democratic campaign for the 2020 presidential race ("Kamala Harris to be Biden's running mate", August 13). Given that she is a biracial child of immigrants, Ms.

Harris truly represents the diversity of the U.S. Generally, running mates do not matter much in the campaign, but in this case, it looks like Ms. Harris has the potential to change the game for the party. ROSABAI CHANDRAMOULLI, [Kosarakudi](mailto:Kosarakudi)

### Running mate

The choice of Kamala Harris as Joe Biden's running mate has electrified the hitherto lacklustre democratic campaign for the 2020 presidential race ("Kamala Harris to be Biden's running mate", August 13). Given that she is a biracial child of immigrants, Ms.

electora is by nature quite traditional in its voting habits. The moderate voters of the suburbs and the working class white voters are likely to vote for Donald Trump. It remains to be seen whether swing states such as Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin, which Mr. Trump won in 2016, will support Mr. Biden this time. PRAKASH SWARAN, [Chennai](mailto:Chennai)

### Hindi matters

Kanishk Mohi is right in flagging the issue of the higher-ups in the CISF, but

it is high time the Dravidian parties rethink their stand on the language policy ("CISF to deploy personnel with 'working knowledge of local language' at airports", August 12). For those relocating from Tamil Nadu to northern States, not knowing Hindi puts them at a disadvantage. The powers that be need to stop looking at the language issue only through the ideological lenses; Hindi is the most useful language to know if one is travelling to north India. V.V. RAJIN, [Chennai](mailto:Chennai)

### Sexual assault

It is dismaying that a delay in hospital admission is a possible reason for the girl succumbing to her injuries ("Sexual assault victim dies in Hyderabad", August 13). Such cases need immediate medical intervention. Hospitals should not insist on paperwork when life is at stake. It is not acceptable that orphanages are not safe for girls. DEEPAKA JAIN, [Hydrabad](mailto:Hydrabad)

MORE LETTERS ONLINE: [www.thehindu.com/letters](http://www.thehindu.com/letters)



## OPINION

# Election 2020: The Year of Weird

By Karl Rowe

One of the strangest years in American politics keeps getting stranger. One example is what's happened to the quadrennial national party conventions, which have been an integral part of American politics since 1831, when the parties replaced the old system in which members of Congress selected the nominees.

Many exciting elements of the conventions long ago disappeared with the advent of primaries, the decline of party influence and the emergence of television. No more 103 ballots to select the Democratic nominee as in 1924. No walkouts like Theodore Roosevelt's progressive Republicans in 1912. No contested vice-presidential nominations: That last happened at the 1956 Democratic convention.

For more than 40 years, the conventions have been made-for-television moments, originally with 1960s production values that were "polished" between "Hee Haw" and a Jerry Lewis Television. More recently, the conventions morphed into extravagantly staged and highly rated miniseries. Some 30 million Americans watched Hillary Clinton's 2016 acceptance speech, and 32.2 million watched Donald Trump's. But now the roads to Biden and Trump, breathless gavel-to-gavel coverage, and occasional moments of drama are gone. They won't come back.

**Conventions are over, and voters may actually care about the vice president.**

Like the conventions, the campaign after Labor Day will be different in many ways, and not only because it will happen in a time of plague and social distancing. With the two oldest candidates ever to seek the Oval Office, the vice-presidential picks matter more than usual, especially for Joe Biden. It is quite unlikely that, if elected, he'll seek a second term at 81. Sen. Kamala Harris will face more scrutiny than most running mates. Americans will carefully consider whether

high negatives. The pandemic has focused attention on the incumbent's response, which the public has judged harshly. Still, as Mr. Biden comes into focus, doubts may grow about him and his policies, if the Trump campaign is disciplined in turning attention to him.

The race will likely rest on who voters think can better confront our nation's broad challenges. Mr. Biden has the advantage among those whose paramount fear is coronavirus, though his edge could be diminished by events—for instance, if a vaccine arrives soon or if cases and deaths fall. His only real argument is that Mr. Trump has bungled the pandemic response; the Democratic nominee has offered little evidence he has better ideas on how to cope with Covid.

Mr. Trump holds the edge with those who won't tolerate lawlessness in American cities and those who think he'll do a better job in restoring the economy after the plague recedes. He is also likely to win on who is tougher on China. But his weakness is that so far he hasn't laid out an agenda for a second term.

No single ad—along the lines of Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" or Lyndon B. Johnson's "Daisy spot"—will settle this election. Victory will come from the cumulative effect of raising doubts about the other candidate and his values. Red-meat attacks that rouse the parties'

respective electoral bases will reinforce, not persuade. What will be persuasive are themes that resonate with that 10% or 12% of voters who still can't see the fence or leaning one way, particularly suburbanites. Carefully and creatively raised doubts about the other candidate will be more effective than taking a figurative baseball bat to his head.

One more piece of advice: It's time to start spending money. Neither campaign should sit on its war chest. President Obama killed off public financing by declining it so that he could spend unlimited money on his 2008 general-election campaign. Since then, winning presidential campaigns have had more money at the end than they could effectively spend. Candidates kick themselves for not investing earlier in productive activities. The huge increase in early voting and difficulty of persuading swing voters makes wise early investments more important. The candidates will raise more than enough money in the months ahead.

A parting prediction: The race will get closer—and weirder, too—in the dozen weeks left before Nov. 3.

Mr. Rowe helped organize the political-action committee *American Crossroads* and is author of *"The Triumph of William McKinley"* (Simon & Schuster, 2015).

Daniel Henninger is away.

BOOKSHELF | By Gerard Helferlich

## 'Man Can Only Mar It'

Leave It as It Is

By David Gessner  
(Simon & Schuster, 338 pages, \$28)

More than a century after his death, Theodore Roosevelt still inspires with his ferocious energy, consummate intelligence and manifold achievements. But perhaps most fascinating is his complex, even paradoxical, personality. A man with genuine empathy for the disadvantaged, he embraced the racial and cultural prejudices of his time; an avowed trustbuster, he accepted the patronage of banks and corporations; a steadfast conservationist, he slaughtered hundreds of wild animals. Today, when the legacies of many American heroes are being re-examined, what are we to make of Teddy Roosevelt?

David Gessner considers Roosevelt's environmental record in his thoughtful "Leave It as It Is." The title comes from a speech that TR gave at the Grand Canyon in 1903, exhorting his fellow citizens: "Leave it as it is. You can not improve on it. The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it."

The phrase was the watchword of Roosevelt's conservationist ethos. As president, he set aside 230 million federal acres for posterity, creating five national parks, 31 federal bird preserves, four national game preserves and 150 national forests. He also designated 18 national monuments, including the Grand Canyon, later named a national park.

In establishing these monuments he invoked the Antiquities Act, which he had signed in 1906; it gave presidents the authority to protect federally owned "historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest." Taken as a whole, Roosevelt's record is unparalleled, and Mr. Gessner is right to call TR "our first and greatest environmental president."

In shielding federal land from unbridled development (as in many other matters), Roosevelt was often opposed by powerful commercial interests and a reluctant Congress. Today conserving wilderness areas is still unpopular among those who believe, as candidate Donald Trump declared in 2016: "We'll be fine with the environment. We can leave a little bit, but you can't destroy businesses." In 2017, to free up more public land for mining and oil and gas drilling, Mr. Trump drastically reduced the size of two scientifically and culturally important national monuments, Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante, both located in Utah. (The former was designated a national monument in 2016, by President Obama; the latter by President Clinton in 1996.) Removing nearly two million acres from protection, it was the greatest rollback of its kind in history.

The action inspired Mr. Gessner, a writing professor and environmental author, to make a cross-country drive to the threatened monuments, as well as to several sites that had inspired Theodore Roosevelt, including the Badlands of North Dakota, Muir Woods in California, and the Yellowstone, Yosemite and Grand Canyon national parks. In route, the author was hoping to reconnect with his hero and to find a relevance for TR in our own era. Not least, he was looking for reasons to hope.

**Though a paradoxical figure, Teddy Roosevelt was undoubtedly a fighter for what he believed in, including the preservation of the natural world.**

The road trip forms the backbone of his book, but Mr. Gessner fleshes it out with succinct sections on Roosevelt's life, especially the periods that helped to shape his environmentalism, such as his boyhood, when he became enamored with natural history, and his stint as a rancher in North Dakota. He especially delves into Roosevelt's presidency, where TR's environmental legacy includes, most tangibly, all those national parks, preserves, monuments and forests. But through his lively pulpit, his books, articles and speeches, Roosevelt also inspired his fellow Americans to care about the environment and to see it in a new way. "One of Theodore Roosevelt's great legacies," Mr. Gessner writes, "was giving us a story to tell ourselves about this country and its land." TR believed, he adds, that the land "was part of us, and we were part of it. It defined us, and our love for it was one of the best things about us. These ideas may now sound like platitudes, to him they were felt truths."

Yet on the environment, Roosevelt's record is not pristine, especially as it concerns Native Americans. An ardent advocate of Manifest Destiny, he published a four-volume history, "The Winning of the West," whose title aptly captures his point of view. He could never accept what happened to Native Americans as genocide, and when the presence of Native peoples stood in the way of perceived progress, including the creation of national parks and monuments, his solution was to remove them from the land and to be assimilated into the dominant culture.

Mr. Gessner doesn't excuse Roosevelt's limitations and hypocrisies, but neither does he want them to cancel his signal achievements. "We are all hypocrites," he writes, quoting his friend the environmental planner Dan Driscoll. "But we need a good story. And that's the fight." And there's no question that Roosevelt was a fighter for what he believed in, including the natural world. Perhaps his greatest environmental contribution was to promote a wider vision, beyond the anthropocentrism that Mr. Gessner warns is destroying the planet. "For all his self-centeredness and egotism," the author writes, "he seemed to understand this primary insight: that the world is more important than we are."

As we face environmental dangers unimaginable in Roosevelt's day, Mr. Gessner asks what TR would do with our surviving wilderness. The impassioned response: Leave it as it is. Although protecting public lands, in itself, won't reverse global warming, it could play a key role in counterbalancing carbon emissions and preserving intact species. And maybe he'd tell us to stop worrying about ourselves, but he believes that "wild, beautiful land is the greatest thing about our country. It is the single best reason for hope. . . . A physical statement of our belief in the future." Or to Theodore Roosevelt put it more than a century ago: "There is nothing more practical than the preservation of beauty."

Mr. Helferlich's most recent book is "An Unlikely Trust: Theodore Roosevelt, J.P. Morgan, and the Improbable Partnership That Remade American Business."

## 'Covid Powers' Wreck My Neighborhood

By Julia Vitullo-Martin

New York For many years I've lived in paradise—the Upper West Side. We have convivial neighbors, beautiful buildings, great subways, excellent theater and dance, fine libraries and bookstores, wonderful restaurants, pleasant markets. There were problems but we worked them out amicably.

Then Covid-19 hit. The streets emptied as people sheltered in place. Retail stores, already hurt by online shopping, closed. Restaurants were shut down. The city cut sanitation pickups. Cops stopped walking the beat. At the same time, vagrancy—a perennial problem—seemed to increase, with panhandlers on many corners, and people with their belongings occupying space on the sidewalks.

Weird things started to happen, and the city government was missing in action. Rather than returning to the depot, bus drivers began parking in underserved areas overnight and for hours during the day. When challenged, they dismissively told residents to call 311, the city's nonemergency service number. Private delivery drivers selected blocks as distribution areas, with dozens of workers suddenly knocking up and unloading hundreds of boxes onto the bike lanes and sidewalks. The Transportation Department refused to help, saying it had no jurisdiction over the trucks and therefore

couldn't regulate them.

Things got even worse when the government did show up. Without a word of warning, to "residents" or elected officials, the Department of Homeless Services, citing "emergency Covid powers," in May moved more than 100 single men into the boutique Belnord Hotel on a quiet residential block of West 87th Street. Four buses full of people had pulled up unannounced in the early morning. The department, which has a six-month lease, refuses to say whether the shelter is permanent.

Almost simultaneously the department moved 130 men into the Hotel Belleclaire, 10 blocks south. In late July it converted yet another hotel, the Lucerne, to a temporary shelter, moving in 283 men, most recovering alcoholics and drug users according to the agency.

In a Zoom call organized by the office of the Manhattan borough president, participants from the Department of Homeless Services and advocacy groups urged that parents use "nontoxic language" when referring to what they call the "West Side's new residents who are our brothers and our fathers." One argued that photos of drunken men sleeping on sidewalks and the Broadway means "strip these people of any shred of humanity." What about the humanity of parents frightened for their families and residents worried about their neighborhood?

**New York City has commandeered three hotels and moved in hundreds of addicts.**

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Ms. Vitullo-Martin is a writer and political scientist.

## Kamala, Goddess of Wealth Creation

By Tunku Varadarajan

Joe Biden has revealed the identity of his running mate: Sen. Kamala Devi Harris. Why did he take so long to decide? Maybe he needed time to learn how to say her name.

How do you say Kamala? It's an Indian name, proof that Ms. Harris's dual ethnicity can't be written about in the script in the racially soliloquistic politics of the U.S. Her mother—as many (though not enough) people know—was an Indian immigrant. The senator's given name, Kamala Devi—Goddess Kamala—is a synonym for Lakshmi, the Hindu deity of wealth and fortune. The word *Devi* literally means "she of the lotus," the flower on which Lakshmi is said to repose in the Hindu heavens.

As her name floods the news, I wince each time it is uttered by anchors and politicians who mangle the stress of its vowels. It is pronounced "komma-lah"—like the punctua-

tion mark. "Ms. Harris explains in her memoir, not "Camel-ah," to rhyme with Pamela, or even "come-on-Hi-lah," the commonest mispronunciation.

To make matters complicated: That last sounding of syllables was the way in which being named for a goddess, a wrestler from Senatobia, Miss., nicknamed "The Ugandan Giant," pronounced his stage name—which, bafflingly, was

**It's 'komma-lah,' and don't mix her up with the late pro wrestler.**

"Kamala." A giant black man as the Lady of the Lotus? Perhaps his handlers confused the name with the capital of Uganda. That was certainly the case with the autocorrect function on iPhones, which, for much of Tuesday, was changing Ms. Harris's first name to "Kampala," so much so that "Kampala Harris" was trending on Twitter. It can only have

been by cosmic alignment that Mr. Harris the wrestler died two days before Ms. Harris the politician was nominated. He was 70.

There are other ironies. Ms. Harris's progressive economic beliefs sit awkwardly with her being named for a goddess of wealth creation. And her mother, Jhymala Gopalan (her first name is pronounced "Shyama-mul-lah"), was an Iyer Brahmin, at the pinnacle of the caste structure of her native Tamil Nadu, a state in south India. The complex politics of that region have caused many Tamil Brahmins to seek their fortunes elsewhere, including Silicon Valley. Gopalan, who died in 2009, was a medical researcher at the University of California, Berkeley.

The pronunciation of Ms. Harris's name is, to be sure, a trivial aspect of her political adventurism. More fraught by far is the extent to which she can—and must—calibrate her Indianness on the American political stage. For an ethnic group that is more successful

materially in the U.S. than virtually any other, Indian-Americans are a strikingly anti-Republican bunch: 84% voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016. Ms. Harris doesn't need to play that ethnic game, especially as it is a tiny fraction of the electorate.

Instead, she must play up her paternal side—African, via her Jamaican father. The Democrats are a party of ethnic hierarchies, in which smaller ethnicities—such as Indians—must efface themselves and wait their turn. It is ironic that the party many Indian-Americans disdain is the one to have given this country two Indian-American governors (Bobby Jindal of Louisiana and Nikki Haley of South Carolina).

It's not inconceivable that in 2024, America could have to choose between Ms. Harris and Ms. Haley for president. Which will it be, the Tamil Brahmin or the Sikh?

Mr. Varadarajan is executive editor at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.



## OPINION

## The Gulf War Ended Too Soon

By Paul Wolfowitz

Thirty years ago this month, on Aug. 2, 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. The U.S. mounted an impressive response, but strategic errors at the end of the Gulf War had consequences the world still lives with today.

As Defense Secretary Dick Cheney's representative on the Deputies Committee, I had the privilege to observe President George H.W. Bush from the second row. I have nothing but admiration for Bush's leadership in responding to an aggressive act virtually no one had anticipated. Swallowing an entire country and its oil wealth shocked the world. While it left no doubt about the danger Saddam posed, it made the challenge all the more formidable. In less than a week from a cold start, Bush put together the basic elements of a political-military strategy to force Saddam to relinquish his conquest—peacefully if possible, by force if necessary.

**Bush was right not to go all the way to Baghdad, but he should have backed Shiite rebels in southern Iraq.**

Bush recognized that he could do little, and nothing militarily, without Saudi support. But he also understood the dilemma at the heart of Riyadh's thinking. For them, the one thing worse than dealing with an aggressive Saddam on their own would be to accept U.S. support only to see it waver, as Jimmy Carter did with Iran and Ronald Reagan in Lebanon.

Bush ignored advice to play down the size of the force the U.S. would have to deploy to defend Saudi oil fields. He authorized Mr. Cheney to tell them the full extent of what was needed. The Saudi ambassador swallowed hard, then said: "At least we know you're serious."

The president reinforced that seriousness by his spontaneous statement to reporters: "This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait." Implicitly it committed him to taking military action if all else failed. Asked where that phrase



A U.S. tank and a picture of Saddam Hussein in Kuwait, March 1, 1991.

came from, Bush replied: "That's wrong. . . . That's what I feel."

Throughout the next seven months, Bush made repeated difficult decisions crisply after consulting with his advisers. Some involved great risks, and often the advisers didn't all agree. By the beginning of April 1991, Saddam's army was evicted from Kuwait with miraculously low American and coalition casualties.

But unlike his principal advisers, Bush was not "exhilarated" by the outcome. "How can I be exhilarated," he said to reporters, "when Saddam Hussein is still in power?" That unhappiness, only briefly displayed publicly, comes through clearly in Jon Meachem's authorized 2015 biography of Bush, who allowed the author access to his diaries.

"I don't feel euphoria," Bush wrote on Feb. 28, 1991, the day after the combatants announced a cease-fire. "Hitler is alive, indeed, Hitler is still in office, and that's the problem. . . . American people elated, [but] I have no elation." What Mr. Meachem calls "Bush's postwar despondency" was rooted in the "failure to bring about Saddam's fall" and some specific contributing failures.

Bush regretted the decision not to force Saddam to the surrender table at Safwan, just across the Kuwait border, where U.S. and Iraqi troops had a standoff after the withdrawal and cease-fire. "More substantively," Meachem writes, "when the rebellions against Saddam began

after Safwan, everything went wrong. The United States did nothing to support the insurgents, and the uprising was put down in part by Iraqi helicopters," which Saddam's army had been allowed to keep on the pretext that it needed them because the bridges had been destroyed, not strafed and drop mustard gas on the Shiite rebels.

Historians examining how that happened need to ask why the formal decision structure, which Bush had used masterfully until then to make critical decisions almost daily, broke down at the very end.

I still believe Bush was right not to risk American lives pursuing the retreating enemy into Iraq or all the way to Baghdad, particularly since Iraqi defenses against Iran had stiffened when on their own territory. It turned out also that several Republican Guard divisions were still intact.

But there were at least three alternative courses of action that should have been considered, separately or together, as part of a post-combat strategy: Demand that Saddam or one of his principal subordinates surrender personally; secure United Nations Security Council endorsement of the large "disengagement" zone along Iraq's entire southern border, which our U.N. Ambassador Thomas Pickering had proposed; and insist that Saddam stop using at least his helicopters, if not his tanks as well, to slaughter the Shiite rebels in southern Iraq.

The helicopters were a focus of attention because Iraq had been per-

mitted to keep them on the pretext that they were needed for transportation because of the damage done by coalition bombing. At that point, the fate of the rebellions was the single most important issue for the future of Iraq and for the reputation of the U.S. in the eyes of the Iraqi people. The president himself, personally and publicly (at a March 13 press conference in Canada), had warned Iraq to stop using helicopters against the rebels.

Moreover, Saudi leaders had urged Secretary of State James Baker, during his early March visit to Riyadh, to support the Iraqi rebels. They said, as I remember, that Saddam was still dangerous, "like a wounded snake," and added that we're not afraid of the Shia of Iraq, who are "Arabs and not Persians," and had remained loyal to Iraq during eight years of war with Iran.

None of those alternatives would have caused the coalition to collapse—particularly with the Saudis on board—nor would they have required the U.S. to occupy Baghdad. In combination, they would have been an appropriate response to Iraq's treacherous abuse of the permission it had obtained to fly helicopters.

Supporting the rebellions had risks of its own, but those risks should have been deliberated carefully, as so many others had been over the course of the preceding seven months. But leaders were anxious to end the war and avoid mission creep that would get the U.S. stuck in Iraq, so they weren't. As a result, Saddam played a cat-and-mouse game that kept the U.S. stuck anyway for 12 more years and beyond.

There was time to allow the president to think things through, but it wasn't used. The lesson: If time is on your side, don't succumb to a self-generated sense of urgency. Take the time to examine whether there are better outcomes than simply abandoning "endless wars" in the mistaken belief that you won't be forced back to war again.

*Mr. Wolfowitz, a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, served as U.S. ambassador to Indonesia (1986-89), undersecretary of defense for policy (1989-93) and deputy defense secretary (2001-05).*

## Law Alone Can't Protect Free Speech

By Greg Lukianoff  
And Adam Goldstein

Cancel culture notwithstanding, legal commentator Ken White argues that "this is a golden age for free speech in America." For decades, he notes, the Supreme Court has protected all manner of objectionable speech, from burning the American flag to homophobic protests outside servicemen's funerals. That's true—but those victories rest on a broad cultural consensus. If campus norms continue to displace free speech culture, judges and lawyers will eventually start to ignore the First Amendment or, worse, chip away at it until it is meaningless.

Free-speech culture gave us the First Amendment to begin with. It kept free speech alive in the tumultuous 19th century. It reinvigorated the First Amendment in the 20th century. It informs interpretations of the First Amendment today—and it will determine whether free-speech protections will survive.

**If today's cultural trends continue, judges will eventually curtail First Amendment rights.**

That's very much in doubt, considering the state of those norms in higher education. Our organization was founded in 1999. Back then, if Princeton investigated a professor because he wrote an op-ed disagreeing with activist demands, or the public called on Auburn to fire a professor for expressing antipolice views online, or a conservative University of North Carolina-Wilmington professor was hounded to suicide for abusive public statements, it would be a very bad semester. All this happened within two weeks last month, and the fall semester hasn't even begun. As students graduate, cancel-culture norms spread beyond campus, to newsrooms, corporate boardrooms—and sooner or later courtsrooms.

What is free-speech culture? Folk wisdom like "it's a free country" is one window into cultural values, and free-speech values pervade our idioms. Sentiments like "to each his own" and "everyone's entitled to an opinion" can be found all over First Amendment law. "Freedom to differ is not limited to things that do not concern us," the justices observed in *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943). In *Cohen v. California* (1971), they declared that "one man's vulgarity is another's lyric." Idioms like these have lost much of their cultural force. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me" is mocked as an affront to women and minorities rather than a mantra a free-speech teacher children to help them become resilient. Free-speech culture has a high tolerance for difference—a presumption that, for most of us, personal political differences need not interfere with cooperating in our day-to-day lives, and that even "bad" people can be great at their jobs. "To each his own."

Free-speech culture can survive without good free-speech law. In 18th-century France, one of the greatest philosophical periods in human history flourished even though tyrannical despots, including Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau and the Marquis de Condorcet, had to flee to avoid arrest, or in some cases were arrested. The cultural norm of open discussion was so strong that they kept writing and challenging norms despite the legal risk.

But without a corresponding culture, free-speech law becomes a mockery. Consider the following constitutional provisions:

- "Everyone shall be guaranteed freedom of thought and speech."
  - "Citizens are guaranteed freedom of speech, the press, assembly, demonstration and association."
  - "Everyone has the right to express and disseminate his/her thoughts and opinions by speech."
- Each of these promises sounds similar to the First Amendment's Free Speech Clause. But Russia, North Korea and Turkey, respectively, lack the free-speech culture necessary to make them real. Even in freer countries such as Spain, Britain and France, people have been imprisoned for rap lyrics, social-media posts, and reading choices.

That's where America is headed if we get complacent. A free-speech culture can exist without protective law, but not the other way around—at least not for very long.

*Mr. Lukianoff is president and CEO and Mr. Goldstein senior research counsel of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. This article is adapted from a debate between Mr. Lukianoff and Ken White published by Reason.*

## Individual Choice Is a Bad Fit for Covid Safety

By Alan S. Blinder

The U.S. government's disastrous failure in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic is a tragedy in many acts—from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's initial errors with test kits and masking, to a know-nothing president who confuses magical thinking with thinking, even to craven political considerations when the pandemic was seen as a blue-state problem, and much more.

But one of the most important sources of government failure has received comparatively little attention—and it's economic in nature. Economists are often accused of being madly in love with free markets, and there is some truth to that. But one of the most important ideas we teach every economics student is that unfettered markets systematically get it wrong in the presence of externalities—cases in which the decisions of some people or businesses have important effects on third parties who have no say in the decision.

Externalities can be beneficial or harmful. A classic example of a beneficial externality is your neighbor's beautiful garden. Although you planted nothing and pay no fee, you benefit daily. Free markets will systematically underprovide such activities.

A far bigger beneficial externality inheres in business spending on research and development. Firms that engage in successful R&D capture only a portion of the benefits of their innovations. The rest ac-

crue to other companies and to consumers. So firms in free markets, left to their own devices, will invest too little in R&D. Governments around the world have long understood this problem, which is why they both subsidize R&D and patent it themselves.

Negative externalities are often more spectacular—and more worrisome. The classic example is pollution. If firms aren't charged for the pollutants they spew into the atmosphere, they will emit too many. For

**Consider the externalities: We each choose whether to isolate or wear a mask, but all society bears the costs.**

over a century, economists have advocated a straightforward fix for this market failure: Tax polluters for the damages they inflict on others. This analysis applies directly to climate change. CO<sub>2</sub> is not a classic pollutant: It doesn't burn your eyes, make you cough, or turn the skies gray. Rather, cumulative CO<sub>2</sub> emissions heat up the atmosphere, causing climate changes of all sorts—most of them bad. Because this huge negative externality has been allowed to run rampant, we are gradually making the Earth an inhospitable place for humans.

What does all this have to do with the coronavirus? The Covid-19 pandemic creates a giant externality through contagion, and we aren't

doing nearly enough to contain it.

Absent a vaccine, our main defenses against this "plague" are extremely similar to what people did in the Middle Ages: Wear face masks and keep your distance from people who might be contagious. Americans afraid of contracting the disease are taking these precautions now—or at least some are. And that's where the externality comes in.

Start with face masks. First, they cost. Probably not important, they are uncomfortable to wear and make you look—how shall I say it?—a bit odd. Individuals who make decisions in their own best interests as against the social costs against the benefit of reducing their susceptibility to the virus—which, scientists tell us, is small. Based on this personal cost-benefit calculus, each individual will decide whether or not to wear a mask.

But wait. What about neighbors, co-workers, and passersby? Since wearing a mask benefits other people more than it does ourselves, the beneficial externality from mask-wearing is huge. Consistent with that, several studies have estimated that the health gains from masking are large while the economic costs are small. A good deal. Yet basic economics tells us that self-interested decision makers will not wear masks enough.

## Notable &amp; Quotable: NASA

From an Aug. 5 National Aeronautics and Space Administration press release:

As the scientific community works to identify and address systemic discrimination and inequality in all aspects of the field, it has become clear that certain cosmic nicknames are not only insensitive, but can be actively harmful. NASA is examining its use of unofficial terminology for cosmic objects as part of its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

As an initial step, NASA will no longer refer to "Polaris" as the "North Star," the glowing remains of a Sun-like star that is blowing off its outer layers at the end of its life, as the "Eskimo Nebula." "Eskimo" is widely viewed as a colonial term with racist history, imposed on the indigenous people of Arctic regions. Most official documents have moved away from its use. NASA will also no longer use the term "Tyche's Twin Galaxy" to refer to NGC 4567 and NGC 4568,

a pair of spiral galaxies found in the Virgo Galaxy Cluster. Moving forward, NASA will use only the official, International Astronomical Union designations in cases where nicknames are inappropriate.

"I support our ongoing reevaluation of the names by which we refer to astronomical objects," said Thomas Zurbuchen, associate administrator of NASA's Science Mission Directorate at Headquarters, Washington. "Our goal is that all names are aligned with our values of diversity and inclusion, and we'll proactively work with the scientific community to help ensure that. Science is for everyone, and every facet of our work needs to reflect that value."

Nicknames are often more approachable and public-friendly than official names for cosmic objects, such as Barnard 33, whose nickname "the Horsehead Nebula" invokes its appearance. But often seemingly innocuous nicknames can be harmful and detract from the science.

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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## Dial-up dreams to Wi-Fi wonderland

MILESTONE As India completes 25 years since internet access was first offered, people who pushed open doors recount days of excitement, trepidation

Bhaskar Dasgupta  
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**NEW DELHI:** On August 15, 1996, Indians woke up to the fact that a new sort of communication service they could purchase dial-up internet. At Rs 15,000 a year, it was not quite something the average Indian could afford then. The subscription would run out of someone connected for more than 20 hours over the year. The speed, breathtaking by the standards then, was 8 kilobytes per second.

Today, internet connectivity is at least 4,000 times as fast, and costs a fraction of what it did 25 years ago. It had in 1996 all of 23,500 websites (compared to 1.8 billion now, according to Internet Live Stats). The most novel use at the time was sending and receiving e-mails. Today, it's the backbone on which tomorrow's self-driving cars, autonomous robots and immersive virtual reality are being built. In India, it is now where conversations in the smallest of towns take place.

But, like most ages of epochal change, India's internet journey began with slight trepidation, heaps of excitement, and the collective efforts of a small but driven group of people.

In the years before 1996, there were a few institutions or groups that were experimenting with access to internet. One was the academic network, called EARNET, and the other was the Internet User Club India which was led by none other than Shantini Kapoor, said Rajendra Kumar Singhal, the then managing director of Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL) and the man largely credited with bringing internet access to the country.

VSNL's service, called the Gateway Internet Access Service (GIAS), was available first in Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata and Chennai. The company held a virtual monopoly till 1999 when the potential of the technology began to be realised.

"The launch was the result of a great camaraderie between all those people, the enthusiasts, the scientists — no one at any point tried to pull anyone down," added Singhal.

To understand what the launch of dial-up meant, it is important to look at the state of the internet in India prior to that. Surfing the World Wide Web, at the time a collection of mostly text-

based web pages, and email were possibly the only applications that most people used the internet for. A large proportion of these were scientists, researchers and professors in seven of the country's top colleges who became part of EARNET (Education and Research Network) that began in 1986, sharing insights about their respective fields.

But this was still time when local exchanges in India were too rudimentary to sustain data links. "With telecom lines being very unreliable IIT Kanpur started an F-Mail where every week all e-mails would be copied onto a floppy and couriered to NCT of Bombay that would send the mails and copy back the incoming mails and courier the floppy back to IIT Kanpur," wrote professors S Sadagopan, the director of IIT Bangalore, and N Mahanarayanan, the former Director General of EARNET India, in an open-ended piece for telecommunications website Voice4Data.

This was the beginning of the coocon phase for India's internet story, the metamorphosis to when it finally took wings happened roughly around 1996 and 1998. VSNL's service was active, but it suffered from teething troubles. "I will admit, we made mistakes in the beginning. We did not anticipate demand and the infrastructure was extremely inadequate," said Singhal, adding, "If you ask me, everything that could go wrong went wrong."

At the same time, however, the fledgling software industry and the enthusiasm, particularly led by the tech evangelism of Bollywood star Shantini Kapoor succeeded to sell the vision of an internet-based India to much of India. "At one point, we made what was closest to video call between the then telecom minister and myself," said Harish Mehta, one of the founders of Information Technology industry collective NASCOM and was part of early internet advocacy groups.

Among these people was Dewang Mehta, who went on to become one of the most prominent faces of the Indian software industry. "Dewang came up with the slogan — roti, kapda, makaan aur bandwidth — and a minister we met at the time had no idea what bandwidth was. This is how new it was to explain connectivity to the powers in Delhi," said Mehta, describing the slogan as the starting point for much of the movement.

Dewang Mehta died in 2001 at the age of 38, but left a significant legacy in India's IT industry. He was named by Computerworld Magazine as Software Evangelist of the Year three years in a row. In late 2000, the Geneva-based World Economic Forum selected him as one of the 100 "Global Leaders of Tomorrow".

Harish Mehta, at present the executive chairman of Onward Technologies, was also among people who started the Bombay Computer Club, which would grow into the Internet Users Club of India and draft Kapoor as one of its star advocates. "In services sector, we sell something that is not visible, it is a solution. In marketing, we would bank on something called evidence-based marketing where we would cite our past record. We asked Shantini ji to use the same model to sell the internet vision in India," he said.

After all, Kapoor was, as was pointed out at the time, the original Yahoo. "All that excitement culminated into nudging the government to allow more companies to offer internet services," Mehta added. This phase allowed the momentum for an inflection point that was marked by a "dramatic drop in costs".

By 1998, cyber cafes began mushrooming across India — at first in the metro-cities, before they became prevalent in tier II cities by the turn of the millennium. Till late 2004, bandwidth grew steadily as VSNL networks complemented home dial-up connections. In 2004, the government announced the Broadband Policy, defining broadband as a minimum speed of 8 Mbps and an average latency of 100 ms.

Today, most people in India access the internet on their mobile phones. "The communications revolution, now when I look back at this two-decade journey, was integral to the India Inc story. It helped us arrive in Silicon Valley, take our products global," Mehta said.

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ILLUSTRATION: MALAY KANNAN

## Digital archives keep track of lost websites, lapsed domain names from the early years

Rachael Lopez  
@rachaellopez

**MUMBAI:** What do you remember of the first time you used the internet? The screen beep of the modem connecting? The joy of seeing little computer icons linking to each other in your taskbar, indicating that your dial-up was working? Or paying the cyber café guy till to book your train ticket?

When India first got online 25 years ago, it was slow going. Pages took ages to load (with the hourglass icon turning endlessly). But once we got comfortable, we were hooked. You filled your Modem folder with MP3 files, saw the MSN Yahoo rivalry unfold like a repeat of the 'Wesley' wars, did a web search through Ask Jeeves. And it was all free, and, as free.

Users got their first taste of power in 1994, with public-journal formats that allowed anyone to post their thoughts for the world. We didn't even call them blogs until 1999, but by 2004, Blog was Oxford English Dictionary's Word of the Year.

The internet's first-ever website, Info.cern.ch, has been saved for posterity by the guys who built the internet. But where do you go to see the first of it? When domain names lapse, or companies collapse, it's a website lost to the ether. The Machine lets you see what a page looked like when it was archived, even if the site has changed or been taken down. More than 418 billion pages have been saved so far. It's not nearly enough. The internet has more than 60 trillion web pages. And with social media, there's more to archive than ever.

Meanwhile, not everyone's thrilled about record keeping. Because the Wayback Machine collects site caches without asking, it raised questions about copyright infringement and privacy. In 2017, Internet Archive was among 2,000 sites listed by the Indian government as part of the fight against digital piracy. And in the coronavirus data lockdown, publishers used the non-profit for making its digitised library available globally.

**PIECES OF THE PAST** Symbols.com, the first domain name ever registered on the internet, was already 19 years old when India logged on in 1995. It used to be a computer programming business. But it is now the Big Internet Museum.

Some governments are taking steps too. In Sweden, every webpage that ends in .se has been saved by the National Library's Web Archive division. The Indian Library has archived billion pages. India doesn't have such an archive, and to top it up, it's time-related data. The Wayback Machine has been paying attention to India almost from the start. There are more than 34,000 captures for the Hindustan Times site, for instance, some dating back to 2001.

That is why India's prime focus for Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India) should be the technologies it chooses to base its digital infrastructure on. India needs to build the semiconductor or mine the rare minerals for electronic components, rather, it can focus on the layers of technology built on top of these, both the assembled hardware and apps.

India also needs laws that are more stringent than Europe's Data Protection Regulation. Yes, it needs to prevent the export of data, more fundamentally, it must ensure that all Indian residents' data remain their own, for use only with their explicit permission. This will entail dramatically strengthening India's privacy laws, to limit any company's ability to spy on its users.

India doesn't have to lose its battle to the modern-day East India companies from the East or West. It has the talent to build its own infrastructure. It could be creating world-changing technology companies that challenge Silicon Valley as well as China. Let it do so.

Vivek Wadhwa is distinguished fellow, Labour and Welfare Program, Harvard Law School, US, and co-author of the forthcoming book 'From Here to There: How Large Companies Can See the Future and Retain It'.

## For Rediff boss, early success meant ignoring sceptics, self-learning tools

Natasha Repa  
@natasharepa

**MUMBAI:** Ajit Balakrishnan, the advertising and tech entrepreneur who set up India's first web portal in 1996, still writes code (for fun and practice) every morning. "It comes intuitively to me," he says.

When he launched Rediff on the Net, the internet was barely five months old in the country, and had a total of 18,000 users.

Balakrishnan, then 47, had spent the previous 22 years in advertising, having co-founded the successful ad agency Rediffusion in 1973. In 1987, he also helped set up PSI Data Systems, which manufactured some of the first computers made in India. Given his unique experience, he says, he could see a wonderful world was about to dawn.

"I told my partners in the other two companies to take care of business, I was going after the internet," Balakrishnan says. "At that time, some financial big wig would catch me at conferences and tell me, don't make a fool of yourself with

this 'internet' business."

For a year before he launched, Balakrishnan, now 72, worked alone out of a 600-sq-ft office at Fort, Mumbai. He tapped into the programming knowledge he had acquired two decades earlier, working on IBM mainframes as a student at the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta (IIM-C). "No one in India knew HTML, so I learnt it myself," he says.

Rediff introduced Indians to the wonderful possibilities of the internet. It was the first Indian news portal; it also provided what it introduced email and messenger services, a search engine, and e-commerce (it sold mainly electronics and computer peripherals).

"The key challenge then was that India had very few active internet users," Balakrishnan says. "The second major challenge was that the tech was fast-evolving. As a computer science student who knew state-of-the-art programming was hard. But we hired kids from IIT-B and other top engineering colleges and trained them, and this was resolved."

In the first round, he hired five people, who've since gone on to found their own ventures. Three years in, with 100,000 users, RediffMail was servicing half of India's million users. The company would soon get its first venture capitalist investor, and list on Nasdaq in 2000.

Apart from their news vertical, Rediff's core business today is the enterprise email service called RediffMailPro, with 27,000 clients on the roster.

Today, they are over half a billion internet users in India. If companies have managed to continue to function, do business, get their products out and keep supply chain intact through the lockdown, it is because of the wide-ranging internet tools that allow employees to perform multifunctions from home.

But Balakrishnan has some misgivings about the directions in which things are headed. "There is a sort of ideology in the tech world called shareholder wealth maximisation, where everyone thinks the purpose of business is to provide a service to the people, but to charge as much as possible," he says.

## India must focus on digital infrastructure, data protection laws

BY INVITATION

VIVEK WADHWA

India's public access to the internet commenced 25 years ago, when Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited announced that it could literally control the world. It has been perfecting the capabilities of spying on every person on the planet by spying on its own people, and seeks to instill a global public opinion through social media and monopolise almost every supply chain by controlling digital infrastructure.

Now look to the West, where US policy makers from both sides of politics have been grilling the CEOs of some of the largest technology companies, trying to have them take responsibility for the global carnage their products have caused. Yet both the ruling and opposition parties in the US are trying to control these companies' influence and power. The hearings served to document the abuses they had committed, but not to correct them.

Then there are widening income inequality and a growing technological divide. As the present pandemic decimates global economies, hundreds of millions of people lose their jobs, and hundreds of thousands succumb to coronavirus disease, the market valuations of these companies are reaching

all-time highs, their owners becoming wealthier by the day. In the US and Europe, more and more people, paying the price for their products, are being used to fan the flames and to exploit ignorance and bias.

As discussed in *The Driverless Car*, a book that warned about the dark side of technologies, the situation will get only worse — unless we first ways to share the prosperity we are creating and chart higher standards for its use. For India,



A VSNL communication centre lying in disuse.

HT ARCHIVE

the future could also hold a modern form of colonialism, with foreign companies dominating its industries and taking all the spoils.

The problem is that the same technologies that bring us together also monitor everything we do. Through our smartphones and their applications, Apple, Google, Xiaomi, Tencent, and Facebook track our movements and habits. They know who we speak to. They know what we say. They read our texts and e-mails. And our web searches and the videos we watch tell them our thoughts and preferences. When we pour our photos

on social media, they store them, recognise our faces and our friends' and use them to learn who we know and where we were and are.

These companies use all these data to sell us ideas. That is how they make their billions. The problem, as we saw with the US Congressional hearings on Big Tech, is that they lack scruples and the guidance of the most basic ethics. They will allow a person or a government to serve misinformation and propaganda to anyone who fits specified criteria. And this gives them more power than governments have.

Chinese companies carry the greater risks of the Communist Party's ambition of making the rest of the world subservient to China as it has succeeded in doing to neighbouring states and even imposing force as it has done in Hong Kong. That ambition rests on technological reach. Phone applications such as TikTok and the software on Xiaomi, Lenovo, Oppo, and other Chinese phones are probably not doing much damage just yet, but they have that potential. Almost any technology that connects to the internet can get a software update that turns it into spyware and worse.

China's National Intelligence Law of 2017 requires every company and citizen to "support, assist and cooperate with the state intelligence work". So the Chinese government can induct these companies whenever it wishes to.

Mastery over our lives is not the role that we envisaged for these technolo-

gies. And it's not the future that India wants to build for itself.

That is why India's prime focus for Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India) should be the technologies it chooses to base its digital infrastructure on. India needs to build the semiconductor or mine the rare minerals for electronic components, rather, it can focus on the layers of technology built on top of these, both the assembled hardware and apps.

India also needs laws that are more stringent than Europe's Data Protection Regulation. Yes, it needs to prevent the export of data, more fundamentally, it must ensure that all Indian residents' data remain their own, for use only with their explicit permission. This will entail dramatically strengthening India's privacy laws, to limit any company's ability to spy on its users.

India doesn't have to lose its battle to the modern-day East India companies from the East or West. It has the talent to build its own infrastructure. It could be creating world-changing technology companies that challenge Silicon Valley as well as China. Let it do so.

Vivek Wadhwa is distinguished fellow, Labour and Welfare Program, Harvard Law School, US, and co-author of the forthcoming book 'From Here to There: How Large Companies Can See the Future and Retain It'.



# SHOULD WE BE paid for our data?

Tech giants grow larger by the day on the data we provide, but we have a right to ask for a better bargain—a greater share of value and a minimization of harm



TECH FOR GOOD  
SUSHANT KUMAR

He is a social business officer at the Internet Society

**W**e've all come to expect services on the internet to be available for free. For everything, from getting directions to the clinic to messaging friends, we use free apps. The two companies providing a vast majority of these services, Google and Facebook, rank No. 4 and No. 6, respectively, in the list of world's top firms by market capitalization. It is well known that Google and Facebook make money from digital advertising.

Advertisers pay for the user's attention and engagement, or clicks. This business model utilizes user data to make predictions about their behaviour with a goal to serve relevant content and advertising at the right time. For example, if you search for an ophthalmologist, you're likely to see an ad for an eyewear shop in your neighbourhood for the next few days, even if you don't make an appointment to see the doctor.

This is a benign representation of the "age of surveillance capitalism", a term made prominent by Harvard University's Shoshana Zuboff, who describes how large internet companies have

built tremendous power and revenue through collection of data about users. The holy grail of this business model is to "think the thought before you do", or in other words, predict your behaviour. The best way to achieve this is to collect and analyse all the data about your demographic, online search, purchase history, friends, address, video-viewing patterns and much more, which accurately defines your digital presence and identity. Such deep understanding, combined with non-personal data such as weather and traffic patterns, has helped create viable online businesses. Tech giants in the field of online advertising, ride-sharing, gig economy and e-commerce, all thrive on data.

Does this mean our data is the "raw material" and should we get paid for it? After all, on average, Facebook made a revenue of \$30 per user worldwide in 2019. The answer lies in understanding the unique nature of data and its value, and in enabling tools of greater societal value creation.

Data is unique in its conception. It has been compared to oil, gold, coal, poison and carbon dioxide. These comparisons seek to establish that data is a resource, which can be utilized for value creation (oil, gold) or that it can lead to individual and public harm (carbon dioxide, poison).

There are four characteristics of data and its value that uniquely complicate the task of attributing costs and benefits to it. First, from an economic lens, data does not diminish as it gets used, unlike resources such as oil or coal. Many copies of the same data can be made and used any number of times by several organizations. Second, data involves externalities—benefits

or costs imposed on third parties that are not related to the transaction. Some externalities are beneficial. A person's daily commute data when anonymized and aggregated with the wider population data, will help boost traffic prediction in Google Maps. In an example of harm, data about individual members of a community can be aggregated to discriminate against an entire community.

Third, value of data can be exponentially enhanced by combining it with other data sets. At the same time, the liabilities are also likely to increase manifold. Therefore, the understanding of value will need to account for all aspects of individual benefits and harms, societal welfare and profits for businesses.

Lastly, there is an exchange of value. Value creation is driven by at least five stakeholders: technology company, government, community, gig economy worker and individuals. The company collects and processes data and realizes value through monetization. Individuals and communities receive economic value of services from tech corporations such as maps, news, email, networking. Governments receive some tax revenue, and gig workers make wages. However, it is increasingly clear that the current design of the data economy leads to concentration of profits with the technology giants and does not support

realization of fair value for people and society.

There is some good news, though. There is a growing class of tech services that promise to provide control, empowerment and minimization of harm to users. Personal data stores such as Solid, Digi.me, Hub of All Things and Meeco promise users the ability to store and manage permissions to their data. These efforts are in early stages of development, and discovery of business models. Greater control in the hands of users could lead us towards optimal outcomes.

The responsibility of creating a fair data economy, however, cannot be shouldered only by individuals. They are usually not in a position to negotiate their rights and economic gains. In India, first-time internet users are increasingly transacting online and are especially vulnerable to harm.

There are three ideas under exploration for political and policy efforts that can nudge the data economy towards equitable outcomes for all stakeholders. First, a progressive tax levied on monetization of data can serve to extract some value for the purpose of redistribution. Noble prize-winning economist Paul Romer has proposed that the revenue generated from monetization of data should be subject to a progressive tax, which can serve to disincentivize collection and monetization of user data. While the original proposal intends to minimize surveillance, this tool

can be further explored for its efficacy in aiding redistribution of economic gains. The progressive nature will ensure that early-stage innovators are not disadvantaged.

Second, the idea of giving every citizen a "data dividend" can be explored. This idea, proposed by California governor Gavin Newsom, and again more recently by Andrew Yang's Data Dividend Project, is similar to universal basic income, albeit focused on data-related economic activity.

Lastly, catalysing greater societal value creation, such as finding a cure for cancer using data, can create immense value for societies. The European Union's data strategy report has emphasized unlocking value of data for society by enabling greater access to community data sets. Responsible stewardship of data through mechanisms such as cooperatives, trusts, exchanges, personal data stores and account aggregators will ensure right safeguards and enable greater data sharing by people. Individuals and communities may be open to sharing health data for research, without expecting monetary compensation when offered a safe mechanism that prevents misuse.

On balance, there are complex trade-offs associated with the data economy. We can all agree that individuals have a right to ask for a better bargain—greater share of value and minimization of harms. The road to an equitable data economy will undoubtedly begin with questioning the structural dominance of large tech enterprises.

Sushant Kumar is principal at Omidyar Network India. (Omidyar is an investor in Digi.me)

**Some good news: a growing class of tech services promise to provide control, empowerment and minimization of harm to users**

## Why mom's office presentation is the one that has to wait

Reem Khokhar

**P**ooja Malhotra has been working from home for the past five years. A senior writer at APCEI Life Sciences, a global provider of safety and technology services, Malhotra used to clock in six hours of focused work daily, till the nationwide lockdown happened in March. Mounting household chores, absence of house help and looking after the needs of family members, who, like her, are bound to the house because of the virus, now take up much of her time and energy. "I have always had a dedicated office space at home, but over the past months getting mind space has become a struggle."

For women particularly, lockdown has challenged professional productivity, with the paucity of space, mental and physical stress and, in many cases, inadequate family support.

### LET'S TALK ABOUT SHARING

Traditionally, women in India have always done more unpaid work—an average of six hours daily compared to less than an hour a day by men, shows a report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Indian men, who never considered housework their responsibility, have been doing more housework during the lockdown, but are still largely

helping on the periphery, leaving much of the heavy lifting to the women, even if both partners have equally demanding professions.

More families are acquainting their children with household chores as well. But Maltrayee Chaudhary, sociology professor at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, says, socialization is still very gendered. "Even if families encourage young boys to help in housework, it may be subject to ridicule among peers, neighbours or even the extended family."

There is a glorification of a woman's "natural" ability to multi-task. Some cope admirably while others struggle to keep up, bearing additional pressure on themselves. Shaheen Bhatnagar, a communications consultant at a senior care platform, never opted to work from home in the past, despite her company's flexible work options. "At home, my multi-tasking mind takes over and I feel I should put the cooker on while checking my mail, which makes the same amount of time unfocused and not as productive as in the office."

Some of the stress of multi-tasking is due to a self-inflicted pressure to control standards. Kaveri Nag, marketing lead at an automobile company, feels incredibly stretched these days. Though her husband has tried to help around the house, she believes it's easier if she does most of the tasks. Constantly exhausted, she feels guilty for not spending



enough time with her children.

A multi-generation family-sharing living space does not make for the most peaceful work environment. The days tend to be longer with professional work being relegated to time slots when the children are asleep or when housework is over.

"I can only focus on work in slots of half an hour

or max 45 minutes, sometimes only 10 minutes," says Malhotra.

Companies are trying to help employees work as efficiently as possible, incorporating initiatives like well-being calls, mental health checks and virtual fitness activities. But these do not always translate practically. Nag says there is no down-time when working from home. "There are company initiatives like family lunch hour, where we are discouraged from working, but I end up eating at my desk."

Forestalling conclusions that the gender imbalance in housework has remained unchanged at this time are the experiences of women for whom the transition has been easier as husbands and other family members share the load.

Jocelyn Jose, who works with an NGO, enjoys the focus her home environment brings. "I don't have children or elderly family members with me. Between my husband and myself we manage all our chores and office work smoothly. My husband does most of the cooking since his type of work and timings are much less strenuous than mine."

Mutual respect for each other's professional roles and sharing in unpaid work is imperative for work from home to be comfortable. Nicky Singh, vice-president, Golini Opinion-Multimedia, a PR organization, says her transition has been easy. "In our family, home is the responsibility of every member. Their responsibilities have been clearly

laid out for them since day one."

For working from home to be successful for all genders and age groups, it is important that problem areas exposed by the lockdown are addressed. Among them, gender parity in housework and childcare, and not just occasional assistance, is among the most essential ones.

Prof. Chaudhary believes change will neither be instant nor meaningful through individual efforts alone. "There is more sharing, but there is also resistance. There has to be broader social consciousness—media, politics, policies," she insists. Women also need to allow other family members to participate, even if they make mistakes. And most importantly, it is important for women to be kind to themselves. As Malhotra has learnt, "Multi-tasking drains you. It's okay not to be able to do everything perfectly."

Write to us at [businessoflife@livemint.com](mailto:businessoflife@livemint.com)

What will work, after life and networking be like in the post-covid world? Find out in *Business of Life's* podcast *The Working Life* hosted by Rashmi Menon and Sohini Sen.





## OUR VIEW



## MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS

## The illusion of a revival in the country's agricultural sector

Big hopes are being pinned on farming but its performance is not as impressive as made out to be



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## Taxation as a fair deal spelt out by the state

The tax transparency platform announced by the Prime Minister could reassure taxpayers of the system's righteousness. Their rewards, though, will lie in the fulfilment of its promise

Given the battering our economy has received from the raging covid-19 pandemic, it was important for the government to reach out to taxpayers, remind them of their responsibility in shoring up the exchequer to enable a recovery, and reassure them of an effective and fair—even friendly—taxation regime. On Thursday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi did just that. He launched a platform to honour and reward those who have been paying their dues honestly, even as his administration seeks to reform and simplify our notoriously complex tax system. Unveiled under the title "Transparent Taxation—Honouring the Honest", its principal promise is to turn tax collection as transparent as digital tools allow. This, he said, will make the system fairer and taxpayers fearless. The three support pillars of the platform are faceless tax assessments, with no officials in the picture, a provision for faceless appeals, and a taxpayers' charter of duties and entitlements. Apart from the online appeal mechanism, which kicks off on 25 September, the other two take effect immediately. The sample of assessments placed under scrutiny will be picked randomly by computer software, squashing the role of individual discretion and thus scope for harassment. The broad objective is to eliminate bias through automation.

Under the newly published charter, the tax department expects honesty, accuracy of calculations and timely payments, among other things, and commits itself to assuming innocence unless there's a reason not to, respecting everyone's privacy, taking decisions within specified time frames, offering redressal mechanisms, and suchlike. Much of this might be considered implicit in the so-called social

contract that governs our relationship with the state, but not everyone is aware of its finer points. That there is "no quid pro quo" involved, for example, often seems lost on those who complain of not directly getting their money's worth, or imagine that the revenue raked in should be spent on what they deem fit. The existence of a public charter, therefore, could go some way in setting the record straight on what the deal is. While there will always be citizens who see taxes as extortion, to be paid only in fear of being hauled up and penalized, the government has done well to emphasize its own end of the bargain for the first time in such an explicit manner.

In general, the government has expended much effort in recent times on portraying India's taxation set-up as taxpayer-friendly rather than coercive. This is to be welcomed. There is, however, a context to this exercise, one generated by perceptions of an overkill on the part of authorities in their zeal to maximize tax collections. So, while the Centre's aavals would surely be noted by all concerned, their proof would lie in how well they are implemented. This may require a substantive simplification of levies. The rules on personal income tax, for example, offer a choice between different rates applied with or without availing exemptions. Then there is the novelty of pre-filled forms, enabled by the e-capture of information and new database links, but it is unclear if this would relieve taxpayers of the need to calculate every little liability, be it shares or other assets. If revised norms and processes reduce tax-related litigation, then so much the better. For now, though, we can only hope that our shift towards digitization lives up to the hype around its wonders. A fulfilment of that expectation would be its own reward.

Part of the reason is that while the agriculture sector as a whole grew at more than 3%, there was wide variance in the performance of its sub-sectors. Agriculture comprises the crop sub-sector and allied sectors such as livestock, forestry and fishing. But it is the crop sector that most Indian farmers are employed in and derive their income from. The crop sub-sector doesn't just form the largest chunk of agricultural value added, accounting for two-thirds of the total value added in the overall sector in 2013-14. It is also the key determinant of farmer incomes. However, its performance under the first five years of the NDA government was far less impressive than that of the broader sector, with its net value added declining at constant prices. Between 2013-14 and 2018-19, the crop sub-sector's net value added fell 0.3% per annum, implying a decline in farmer incomes. Even though the value of output at constant prices for the crop sub-sector increased by 1.5% per annum, input costs increased by an annual 2.7%, resulting in a decline in the overall value added by the sub-sector. The increase in input costs was largely driven by higher electricity and diesel costs. These rose at 7% and 6.8% per annum, respectively, during the period, despite a significant fall in international energy prices.

## QUICK READ

Hopes of a broad revival in demand led by agriculture are likely to end in disappointment as crop value addition continues to contract even while the overall sector displays healthy growth.

Most farmers depend on crops for their income, but face rising input costs and falling price realizations, both of which need to be reversed by the Centre for the sake of a farm sector revival.

However, the broader agricultural sector continues to show growth at more than 3% per annum. A big contributor to this is growth in the livestock and fishing sub-sectors, which posted 8% and 11% annual increases between 2013-14 and 2018-19, respectively. These high growth rates are surprising, given the past trends, and also attract suspicion since the crop sub-sector contracted during this period. In general, the livestock sub-sector tends to show a similar trend as crops. Moreover, there is reason to doubt these numbers, given that unlike the crop sub-sector, in which a large part of the data is derived from crop-cutting experiments and is therefore more reliable, estimates of the better-performing sub-sectors are based on less reliable methods. But even if the data is assumed to be accurate, a decline in the value added by crops means that overall agricultural growth might not be the best indicator of farmer incomes. The decline also partly explains the past two years' broader slowdown in the rural economy despite good aggregate growth in agriculture.

Some of the trends that contributed to the fall in the crop sub-sector's net value added remain relevant even after the pandemic. While output prices have fallen across the board for most crops in the last four months, the government has refused to pass on the decline in energy prices to farmers. In fact, in many states, the price of diesel has increased. However, unlike the past five years, farmers are now also reeling from falling poultry and milk prices, two commodities that saw among the highest growth rates within the livestock sub-sector. If these trends continue, it is likely that the value added in agriculture will be not only turn out to be lower than expected, it may actually deepen distress in the rural economy. If the government is serious about reviving rural demand, it must urgently subsidize input costs and raise the value added in the crop sub-sector through price support measures.

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

The income tax created more criminals than any other single act of government.

BARRY GOLDWATER

## THE NEW NORMAL

## Fluctuating fashion gives way to #StayAtHome comfort

SUSHMITA BOSE



is a journalist, editor and the author of 'Single In The City'.

Sometime in the age of BC—Before Corona—I was extended an invitation to a dinner party at very short notice. The gathering was at 8pm, and I was sent a text a couple of hours before the designated time. In my rush to get dressed, I pounced upon whatever was lying around the house: notably, a top I'd worn to bed occasionally paired with palazzo that once belonged to my sister-in-law. When I arrived at the chomping venue, the host—who likes to be identified as one with all fingers firmly on fashionable pulses—exclaimed approvingly, "Look at you! So with it, so on-trend! I bet you checked out Demi Lovato's Instagram post, the peplum she was wearing."

I didn't have the heart to reveal the secrets of my sartorial baggage and trigger a skulk of disappointment on his expressive face. Or the fact that I'm not on Insta. So I shrugged airily and said, "Yep, that's me, always the Lovato pretender. Now tell me, what's for food?"

I've never understood why a particular item of apparel or accessory can be all the rage suddenly just because a celebrity was "spotted" in it while she (or he) was perambulating, why brands start spawning spin-offs of the same, and why self-appointed fashionistas hotfoot to stores—literally or virtually—to access them.

Equally mystifying: Why do these same articles of faith become "obsolete" and "oh-so-last-season" in three or four short months because, hey, didn't you know, it's now the summer of despair, no longer the spring of hope?

These days, I'm pleased as punch that even though the pandemic curve is yet to be flattened definitively, fashion has been beaten down to "StayAtHome" lines and fort wear with pops of personalized style cues. I'm not trying to say we shouldn't be fashionable. Of course we should. But fashion isn't a statement, one that has to be conformed to; it's a choice. I mean, why can't I wear the 70s' Bobby print (remember Dilip Kapadia's polka dots?) unless a post-millennial rock star shows me the way in 2020? Or why should I go with the flow that purple or red or orange is the colour to be seen in for random stretches of time just because a

bunch of designers have mullied over (what they consider) calendar-bound chromatic? Or why can't I be totally at ease in well-fitting wedges bought locally in the company of others where branded soles blink out a thousand-dollar message?

A few years ago, we did a cover story on an emerging trend called "athleisure" in the magazine I was editing then. It sounded ridiculous to me, this almost oxymoronic marriage of sports and leisure wear that gave birth to collections of couture and high-street fashion all over the world. One could go for a formal meeting to finalize a million-dollar deal or a five-star brunch and a mismatch that had been factory-fitted, accessorized and validated to look "basic".

"Seriously?" I asked the 23-year-old bright spark who wanted to do the story. "This is worth a cover story!"

"Yes, Sush," she said excitedly. "Athleisure is

the talk of town." As it turned out, the shoot was one of the best we had done till that point, and was a thumping success. I had to eat humble pie, but there was a crumbly feel to it.

Little wonder I'm pleased the pandemic has reduced organized fashion's DNA down to a basic: I am all too familiar with Comfort.

There are times being written on how the fashion industry will change... perhaps forever. The grimy sweatpants, for instance, has become a fast-moving item today. In the bottoming-out evolution—from capris to boyfriend jeans to rompers to lounge pants to god knows what else—this looks like it's here to stay.

In a brilliantly-empirical piece on what's next on the cards for global fashion by Irina Aleksander for *The New York Times*, the standout line, for me, was, "The more important question is whether people will buy clothes that aren't sweatpants in the near future." The

author goes on to quote designer Joseph Altuzarra as saying, "I think after spending months in sweatpants, people are going to want to feel comfortable."

One interesting takeaway from the ongoing fashion debate is that of ethical, sustainable wear. Earlier, it defied the purpose when one became an acolyte of the genre because diktats guided us, almost sheep-like, to "choose wisely." There was safety in names and the numbers they would induce to take up cudgels for a cause. The best thing the virus has probably done is made us, as individuals, more empathetic to causes. If we choose sustainable fashion, it's because we are more discreet, not because Gwyneth Paltrow is asking us to.

For me, the age of covid has become an endorsement of being able to wear what I want to wear. Not that it's revoked my sense of aesthetics. The other day, I gave the twice-over to a woman wearing a casually asymmetrical blue kurta over white patiala pants, her face muffled with a damask indigo mask, while observing social distancing in a line to get into Wenger's. I didn't think once whether that blue and white were the colours of the mean season. She just looked, well, comfortably fashionable.