Important Editorials from Read to Succeed 11th sept

Agri exports fell by 1.8% in Jun qtr

Covid-19 hits exports of livestock and marine products

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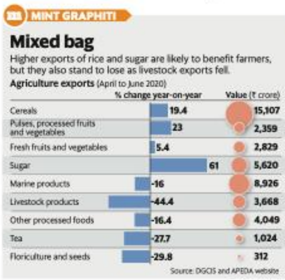

PARAS JAIN/MINT

Lower exports of livestock and marine products led the decline in India's agriculture exports in the June quarter of 2020-21, according to an analysis of government data.

Exports of major farm products were recorded at ₹43,894 crore between April and June, a fall of 1.8% from the year-ago period.

The overall decline in value is despite a 70% increase in the export of non-basmati rice and a 61% increase in the export of sugar.

Higher exports of rice and sugar are likely to benefit farmers, but they also stand to lose as livestock exports fell by 44% to ₹3,668 crore, while marine exports fell by 16% to ₹8,926 crore.

The overall decline in farm exports was expected due to the covid-19 pandemic, which hit global demand and supply chains.

However, the numbers, computed by *Mint* from data published by the Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics, and the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority, are in sharp contrast to the numbers put out by the agriculture ministry.

Export of farm commodities increased sharply by 23% to ₹25,552 crore between March and June, the ministry said on 18 August.

"Even during the difficult time of the lockdown, India took care not to disturb the world food supply chain and continued to export," the ministry said.

The decline was despite a 70% increase in the export of non-basmati rice and a 61% rise in the export of sugar

It selected a four-month period of March to June as the reference period for analysis, but the difference in the value of exports is probably because of the exclusion of marine and livestock products, which witnessed a significant decline.

During this period, exports of buffalo meat and marine products fell by a steep 46% to ₹11,890 crore.

An analysis of the export numbers for the June quarter shows that the export value of cereals went up by 19%, while that of pulses and processed fruits and vegetables grew by 23%. Export of sugar increased by 61%, export of other processed foods and tea fell by 16% and 28%, respectively.

India has set itself an ambitious target of achieving $60 billion of farm exports by 2022. The Centre's export strategy focuses on catering to niche global markets of wellness foods, development of 'Brand India' and an emphasis on value addition. India's farm export basket accounts for just 2.15% of global agricultural trade, according to the Economic Survey.

What is GDP, explained with an idli
bit.ly/35tsNXj

A DATE NEARLY TWO MILLENNIA IN THE MAKING

A MATTER OF NUMBERS
DILIP D'SOUZA

Respond to this column at feedback@livemint.com

Stephen Colbert, of all people. In the years I've written this column, I never thought I might start one with the famous late-night talk show host. Yet here we are. This is prompted by a conversation he had a few weeks ago with Laura Linney, star of the hit series *Ozark*.

Colbert tells Linney that he has a present for her: a loaf of bread that he has baked. But not just any loaf. This is sourdough bread, baked using a blend of flour, water and bacteria known as a "starter". The blend is "alive" — like yogurt cultures are alive — and that's why it acts as a catalyst for baking the bread. Nothing particularly out of the ordinary so far. But the sourdough starter Colbert used, he tells a visibly moved Linney, is 150 years old.

What can this possibly mean? You create a sourdough starter typically by mixing whole wheat (*atta*) and water, then letting it stand for some days so that bacteria can settle into it. Then you use a bit of it — as you would yeast — when you want to bake. You replace that in your starter with more flour and water. This is why the stuff is "alive"—because it grows and is regularly fed water and flour. You do the same every time you bake—and pretty soon, 150 years have gone by.

But is this stuff in your fridge actually 150 years old? It traces its origin back that long, sure. There's an unbroken thread of life in it that goes back that long, sure. But consider you, meaning the human being you are. You owe your existence to your parents, who owe theirs to theirs, and on and on in an unbroken thread of life stretching back to the dawn of human history itself. Now that is a humbling, awe-inspiring thought. But would anyone say you are several million years old? Probably not.

And yet there is still charm and nostalgia, in assigning an age to a sourdough starter. A San Francisco bakery called Boudin's is "still using the same yeast culture that Isidore Boudin collected 160 years ago", said one breathless report. A Canadian woman uses homegrown sourdough that, another report told me, "at 120 years ...is much older" than she herself is.

And there's a physicist called Seamus Blackley. Last year, from some samples of ancient Egyptian pottery in two Boston museums, he collected some 4,500-year-old yeast. He wrote: "Using careful technique... and sterilized, freshly milled Barley and Einkorn flour, I awoke and fed the sample organisms. Although this sample surely contains contaminants, it also likely contains actual ancient yeast strains." A week later, he had a starter that was "bubbly and ready to try baking with". About the loaf he baked, he said: "The aroma is amazing and new. It's much sweeter and more rich than the sourdough we are used to."

Now there's something astonishing. Who would expect to breathe life into organisms that you'd think, after 4,500 years, would in all respects be dead? Also, is this reference to yeast that's 4,500 years old more or less reasonable than saying your sourdough starter is 150 years old?

But wait: in a similar vein, researchers in Israel have grown dates from 2,000-year-old seeds. Edible and delicious dates.

Some quick history: In the 1st century AD, the occupying Romans faced fierce Jewish resistance in what is modern-day Israel. But the Romans proved too powerful for the Jewish fighters. Their last hold out was the desert fortress of Masada, on a plateau 400 metres above the nearby Dead Sea. By 73 AD, Roman forces had surrounded Masada and were building a massive ramp for a final assault. When they eventually swarmed into Masada, they found everyone dead. These last 1,000 Jewish rebels had preferred suicide to capture by Rome.

Masada was excavated in the 1960s. Today, it is a spectacular, profoundly moving place, and a popular tourist attraction. In 1998, a special someone and I camped below, and hiked up the hill early one morning. From the top, the old Roman encampments are still visible. So is the ramp. Looking at it all, you feel an involuntary frisson of the same sense of doom the rebels must have felt. Masada is so remote that hardly any humans came up here between 73 AD and the excavation. For that reason and because of the dry climate, most artefacts had survived in remarkable shape for nearly 2,000 years.

Judean dates grown by researchers is a remarkable model for seed longevity study

As for dates: they are among the earliest fruits mankind domesticated. Date palms once grew all over the arid lands that stretch from North Africa in the west, through the Middle East to the Indus Valley in the east. Dates from what's now Israel — "Judean dates" — were celebrated even two millennia ago for their taste, size and medicinal properties. But pitched warfare destroyed the Judean date plantations. By the 19th century, none remained. But the excavation of Masada in the 1960s turned up several date seeds. In 2005, Dr Sarah Sallon from the Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem got herself a few of them. She and Dr Elaine Solowey, an expert in agriculture in arid conditions, planted some of them at a kibbutz in southern Israel. Dr Solowey told *The New York Times* that she wasn't really expecting them to germinate, but she did use a few "horticultural tricks" anyway: "Warming, careful hydration, a plant hormone and enzymatic fertilizer."

Miraculously, and in just weeks, one had germinated. However, it was a male, and male date palms don't produce much and need to be mated with female palms. So these seed enthusiasts got themselves 32 more date seeds from Masada and other archaeological sites in the area, including Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1946. More miracles: after those 32 were planted, six germinated, and two were female.

Six years after they germinated, one of the female palms produced yet another miracle: flowers. An excited Dr Solowey took some pollen from the male palm and spread it on the flowers of this female. This mating-by-hand was successful: flowers turned into dates. A few months later — and only a few days ago — they were ready to be picked. Dr Sallon called the dates "beautiful", and as *The New York Times* reported: "The honey-blonde, semi-dry flesh had a fibrous, chewy texture and a subtle sweetness." They were not as sweet as the popular "medjoul" variety, from Morocco, but reminiscent of a less-sweet Iraqi date called "zahidi". All that, from seeds nearly two millennia old. To my mind certainly, and unlike sourdough starters, there is a real sense in which these dates are really that old.

How did the seeds retain some spark of life for that long? In a paper about their findings, Solowey, Sallon and several colleagues write that seed longevity "has been related to the ability to remain in a dry quiescent state [and] low precipitation and very low humidity around the Dead Sea could have contributed (too)." They also speculate that "other extreme environmental conditions" in the area might have helped: "At 415 m below mean sea level, the Dead Sea and its surroundings have the thickest atmosphere on Earth, leading to... a complex haze layer associated with the composition of the Dead Sea water."

We will need plenty more investigation to understand why the seeds survived so long. Still, "the date palm is a remarkable model for seed longevity research", they write. What's more, the sheer quality of the fruit they produced suggests that "aspects of ancient cultivation (are) of potential relevance to the agronomic improvement of modern dates". History coming to the aid of modern science: what a thought.

As Dr Sallon remarked: "To pollinate and produce these incredible dates is like a beam of light in a dark time."

Quotes from "Origins and insights into the historic Judean date palm based on genetic analysis of germinated ancient seeds and morphometric studies", *Sarah Sallon, Elaine Solowey et al, Science Advances, 5 February 2020.*

Once a computer scientist, Dilip D'Souza now lives in Mumbai and writes for his dinners. His Twitter handle is @DeathEndsFun

Q2 to pave way for Hindalco's recovery: Birla

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Aditya Birla group chairman Kumar Mangalam Birla. MINT

Hindalco Industries Ltd expects its second quarter performance to pave the way for a recovery, considering that all its aluminium upstream plants are operating nearly at full capacity. Aluminium production is recovering rapidly to pre-covid levels, with all logistics infrastructure back on track, Aditya Birla group chairman Kumar Mangalam Birla told shareholders at the annual general meeting.

"All aluminium downstream plants are operating at partial capacity to meet market conditions. The export demand remains stable and continues to offset the subdued domestic market conditions," Birla said.

"The copper facilities are also ramping up to their optimal levels. At Novelis, all plants are operational, and many are now running at full capacity. All the automotive customers in North America and China are now pulling at nearly pre-covid levels," he said.

In FY20, Hindalco had delinked 80% of its consolidated earnings before interest and taxes from the London Metal Exchange (LME) prices.

"Despite the slump in Q1 gross domestic product (of the Indian economy), the activity levels are gradually normalizing. I remain confident that India's long-term growth potential remains intact despite the covid-19 setback," Birla said.

"For Hindalco, I expect Q2 to be better than Q1. We should be back to pre-covid levels in H2FY21," he said. Birla said the company has earmarked $450-500 million as capital expenditure for Novelis for FY21, and ₹1,500 crore for Hindalco's domestic operations. The company will cut fixed costs by 15% in FY21.

"On a broader level, our strategy of improving business sustainability by reducing our exposure to LME price fluctuations and increasing the share of downstream value-added products across businesses is playing out well," Birla said.

"Your company will continue to strengthen the balance sheet through growth strategies and generating positive free cash flows. What continues to hurt the domestic aluminium and copper industry is low-cost imports. In response, the company is maintaining a relentless focus on better efficiencies and cost competitiveness," he said. "All of our smelters continue to be in the first quartile of the global cost curve. Cash conservation and maintaining adequate liquidity will help us deliver sustained performance despite the current tough environment due to covid-19," Birla added.

Big fund transfers may need bank visits

Disha Sanghvi & Renu Yadav
MUMBAI/NEW DELHI

The cap limits the risk of bank customers falling prey to fraud. HT

Customers who prefer to transact and transfer funds online under the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic may run into bank-specific caps for high-value transactions, prompting them to visit bank branches.

The cap on daily transfers limits the risk of people falling prey to fraud. The RBI sets no cap on the amount transferred via National Electronic Funds Transfer (NEFT) and Real-Time Gross Settlement (RTGS), while payments via Immediate Payment Service (IMPS) and Unified Payments Interface have a cap of ₹2 lakh and ₹1 lakh, respectively.

Experts said banks also tend to cap the transaction amount to lower liquidity risk.

"The RBI has given banks the freedom to set their own upper ceiling on the NEFT and RTGS transactions based on their risk management and liquidity management. Banks have placed certain upper limits on their NEFT transactions applicable on RTGS holidays and off-business hours since the introduction of 24x7 NEFT facility," said Sahil Arora, director, Paisabazaar.com.

State Bank of India, for instance, has a cap of ₹10 lakh on RTGS transactions, while HDFC Bank has a ₹25 lakh upper limit. Kotak Mahindra Bank has a per-beneficiary cap of ₹5 lakh and a per-day transaction limit of ₹10 lakh for NEFT transactions.

"Our retail customers can transfer up to a maximum of ₹20 lakh in a day using both mobile and internet banking channels via RTGS, NEFT, IMPS and UPI," said Jithesh P. V., deputy vice president and head digital, Federal Bank. "We have set a daily upper cap limit of ₹10 lakh for our retail mobile banking app. Our customers can do payments/transfers including NEFT up to this limit on a daily basis."

Adhil Shetty, chief executive, BankBazaar, said the limits vary depending on the customer segment, the tool used for transaction and the channel. "Some banks allow customers to transfer as much as ₹25 lakh, while others restrict it to ₹10 lakh. For instance, one bank limits NEFT transfer to ₹2 lakh, but allows multiple transactions for a total value of ₹25 lakh or third-party transfer limit chosen by customers."

Further, banks also give customers the choice to put a cap on the transaction limit.

"A retail customer can transfer up to a maximum of ₹20 lakh in a day using both mobile and internet banking channels. Customers can always use the branch channel to transfer money beyond this limit. However, in our corporate net banking channel, corporate clients can set their required limit without any restrictions," said Jithesh.

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Important Editorials from Read to Succeed 11th sept

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In a crisis, U-TURNS CAN BE GOOD

Startups are building resilient business models that are nimble, can pivot quickly and survive the harsh covid-19 era

Shweta Taneja

Early March, Deepshika Kumar Anand was in for a business shock. Her startup SpeakIn, which arranged for speakers for corporate events, received several cancellations, bringing business to a halt. "Events were cancelled, there were no new client queries and even clients who had asked for speakers, now wanted refunds," says Noida-based Anand. Within a couple of weeks, funds had dried up, even with salary cuts for employees, and the business she had worked so hard to build was at risk of shutting down, with no "return to normal".

After few days of introspection, Anand was back at her drawing board, refiguring an online model for her offline one. "Leveraging our expert network, we proposed online webinars for companies with industry leaders and created conversations around businesses in current times," she explains. As event management companies still struggled to survive, by April, Anand and her team successfully pivoted the business into a learning platform that organizes virtual sessions with thought leaders and webinars aimed at corporates. Till date, Anand and her team have conducted more than 200 sessions, launched an e-learning app that includes content in most Indian languages and are on the way to becoming a robust business.

Though the past few years were uncertain for businesses because of technological disruption, covid-19 has brought in a need to pivot as soon as possible. The pandemic is unlike the dot-com crisis of 2002, where only the technological sector got affected, or even the financial crisis of 2008, where people had at least some idea of how to deal with implosion of financial bubbles, says Sourav Mukherji, professor (organizational behaviour and human resource management), at the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore. "Businesses are groping in the dark with our entire economy impacted," he says.

RELOOK, RETHINK, REINVENT

In these dark times, survival of businesses depends on dynamically reinventing business models. "Business resilience is the ability to recover, rebuild and thriving during a crisis, and the ability to do that repeatedly," says Prof. Mukherji. Throughout history, the businesses that survive crisis like the 9/11 terrorist attacks or wars have had a hardwired sense of resilience in their DNA, he explains. "They accept reality, act fast, adapt and move into new markets with a deep sense of purpose," he says, adding that businesses that can anticipate changes so well that they never get into the crisis mode are the only ones that will survive in today's world.

Survival is definitely the first step to ensure that your business sees another day, agrees Mumbai-based Yukti Jhangiani Verma. Like others, her retail-store based startup Kosha, which sold mountaineering apparel for travellers, shut down suddenly. "It felt like a mountain expedition with weather gone bad, food supplies over and my team cooped up in a tent without the possibility to climb up or return to base," says Verma, a mountaineer at heart. Verma's production and sales were at a standstill, but even when the lockdown opened up, there was no sight of recovery as consumer demand in specialized apparel had dwindled.

Till February, Verma had been all about scaling up her retail outlets. By the end of March, she ditched all earlier plans and immediately took a U-turn, starting to become lean to survive in the new normal. "By May, I had reduced our inventory cost by 80%, discontinued consultants and given their work to my senior team and asked more than half of the workers to return to their villages."

Knowing that the lack of travel-related demand might not emerge soon, Verma also turned her business focus to consumers who live in the mountains rather than travel to them. To keep money flowing in, she is producing surgical scrubs for hospitals and has launched rainwear for monsoons. "You don't stop after climbing one mountain. You come back, and train for the next climb and the dangers it represents," says Verma.

Delhi-based Sumit Garg, co-founder of Luxury Ride, a pre-owned luxury car sales company, too, saw that his retail-focused business model was at stake during the nationwide lockdown. Rather than wait, he started to ramp up his online website and connected with customers. As the lockdown opened up, retail customers still stayed away from outlets. Garg developed a hybrid model: Customers could view all available cars in their city and he would bring the cars to their homes to inspect and buy. It worked, as by May, Garg's online business saw an increase in sales to 60% from 40%.

What it takes to survive any crisis: accept reality, act fast, adapt and move into new markets with a deep sense of purpose

A DASH OF PESSIMISM HELPS

Turnaround into new verticals is possible only if you are nimble. When Near.Store's core business of taking orders for local *kirana* stores online came to a standstill because of the lockdown and no local supplies, they put their energy into a new possibility—a community ordering platform that allowed housing societies to order directly from large and small brands. They launched this within eight days of the lockdown. "In hindsight, it was a great strategy to partner with brands who could deliver bulk orders," says Ashish Kumar, co-founder, Near.Store, based in Mumbai. By June, the business had offerings from 60-plus brands and revenue grown 10 times. "We adapted quickly as we were nimble and could put together a new line of business and launch it in a week," says Kumar, adding that a good balance of resilience and healthy pessimism helps you in surviving in uncertain markets.

Nimbleness is hard to achieve but helps you survive, insists Srishti Dhir, founder Hub and Oak, a premium co-working spaces company. Dhir was left with a lot of real estate costs—building maintenance, rent—leading to huge losses.

To improve her business's nimbleness and survive, she put an end to rented spaces, and instead headed to hotels to turn their unused rooms and banquets into spaces to hire. "This is a light asset model where we don't own the inventory but only market and sell unused spaces within these hotels," says Dhir. Moving to a leaner business vertical has helped Dhir make sure her business survives in the new world.

Business adaptability, believes Shyam Thakur, who runs Delhi-based food chain Momo King, is essential. As sales for his takeaway Himalayan food chain dwindled, he turned his retail spaces into cloud kitchens, which could be rented out to brands and focused on the delivery-only model. The model is doing so well that Thakur is planning on opening up 15-20 cloud kitchens by the end of 2020. "You need to focus your energies and adapt your business to suit your customer best," he says.

SpeakIn's Anand agrees. Adaptability is an essential part of bouncing back, quick and eager. It was the fact that she moved fast and changed her business model that she could survive. "The prompt response gave us first mover advantage. We were even able to find investors for our new business model."

Write to us at businessoflife@livemint.com

We need to define who gets access to what type of data

TECH FOR GOOD

SUSHANT KUMAR

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Existing data governance policies are driven by a market-centric approach, based on the concepts of data ownership, and treat data as property. This leads to concentration of profits and power in the hands of a few tech players. Moreover, the value of data remains trapped in silos, which can otherwise be utilized to make incredible advancements, such as healthcare breakthroughs.

The government-appointed committee for non-personal data governance, which released its draft report in July, has called out such systemic flaws. It has recognized the necessity for addressing collective harms, and suggested ways to unlock advances in AI and public interest. These deliberations place India at the forefront of global thinking on data governance, alongside the European Union.

But there are three main areas that require a pragmatic rethink—business implications related to incentives for innovation and compliance burden, need for a policy framework for data trusts, and adopting a practical approach to value of data.

First, the committee should reconsider mandatory data sharing across all sectors, which will distort the business incentive structures, create a first-mover disadvantage and raise the compliance burden. The report proposes all "data businesses" above a certain unspecified threshold must register and report their meta data on an open platform. Any entity can request raw data based on the publicly available declaration of meta data. The proposed regulator can adjudicate and make this data sharing mandatory.

Let's take an example of a startup that has invested in drones to collect data about soil and farm conditions to provide crop insurance services. It will need to report all its meta data on the public platform. Another new entrant can ask for access to all the raw data for free, without making any infrastructure investments. Such an outcome is likely to upend the incentives for innovation. Commentators have arguably labelled this approach as "appropriation of intellectual property" and "nationalization of data". While some criticisms are extreme, the sharp commentary has focused the spotlight on the distortion of incentives. In addition, regulatory burden is likely to increase with the need for extensive reporting and responding to data requests.

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The goal of data sharing for public interest can be met by creating a bottom-up, narrow and well-defined framework for who gets access to what type of data and why. This will help identify specific sectors, considered critical to public and community interest, through an extensive consultation process. For example, it seems reasonable to suggest that private charter buses that operate public transport be mandated to share data for urban planning, as part of licensing requirements. The UK's Bus Services Act of 2017 helped implement this and made data available to improve commuting across the country. In addition, legislation for portability for data—similar to mobile number portability—can help aid competition and incentivize innovation, without imposing high costs.

Second, the report introduces the concept of trustees and data trusts without clearly defining the role, accountability and legal basis of such institutions. The committee should recommend sandbox experiments at academic centres that can help create policy and tech framework for data trusts. These steps can fast track creation of data trusts with a solid foundation based on practical learnings.

Third, the committee's conclusions on valuation of data are inconsistent and unnecessary. A narrow focus on public interest outcomes in specific sectors will obviate the need for a data marketplace. The report rightly reasons the theoretical and empirical framework for value of data is untested and complex. Yet, it has recommended creation of a digital marketplace to discover a fair price of data. This does not adequately account for costs of liabilities such as re-anonymization and privacy breach. Similarly, the recommended compensation on the basis of FRAND (fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory) is not a tested methodology for data markets; the standards, comparisons and jurisprudence to determine this compensation is sketchy.

India's goal of unlocking value of non-personal data can benefit from transparent consultations on foundational questions related to value of data, incentives in data markets, competition laws, role of trusteeship, data trusts, communities and a framework for prioritization of public interest use cases. The intent to shift the Overton window on data governance should not translate into a haste to encumber business sentiments.

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What will work, office 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.*

Important Editorials from Read to Succeed 11th sept

OUR VIEW

MINT

It's time to rid the EPFO of investment opacity

The internal contradictions of this state-run manager of our retirement funds are bubbling up to the surface now, as seen in its split payout for the year. Our provident fund needs reform

The decision of India's Employees' Provident Fund Organization (EPFO) board to split its payout for 2019-20 into two parts—8.15% from its bond investments right now and 0.35% from its equity investments later this year—was unprecedented alright. But it was no big surprise, given the poor performance of its stock portfolio. Provident fund (PF) subscribers should not fret too much. Even if they must content themselves with just the main tranche, a rate of 8.15% is superior to anything a bank deposit could have offered in these times of low interest rates. In fact, some economists have argued that PF account holders are rewarded far too handsomely, distorting credit markets by getting in the way of efforts by the central bank to cheapen loans. It is an argument that holds some weight, and so the state-run manager of our retirement kitty has been generous. Fund management is not about generosity, however, and its deferral of the equity slice of its annual payout is yet another sign that it is woefully out of step with the times.

That one cannot be partially market-linked is something that this newspaper has flagged over the past few years, ever since the EPFO decided to open the door a crack to allow stock market investments. Today, 15% of its incremental inflows go into stocks through select exchange traded funds (ETFs), and equity investments make up just under 5% of its corpus of over ₹12 trillion. While the organization decided to start investing in shares back in 2015, it seems to have done nothing to account for how its equity returns would be reflected in a subscriber's account statement. The only way to do this for mark-to-market holdings such as publicly-listed equity is to unitize these investments, the way mutual funds do. Even the National Pension System (NPS) does it. But how does one split a portion of the pool into units and not the rest? The EPFO went into loops trying to solve this unsolvable problem of keeping a part of the portfolio opaque while shining the light of transparency on another part, and then trying to offer a consolidated return. Ideally, both the debt and equity parts of its overall portfolio should reflect up-to-date market values, and a single return given. The NPS, which has performed better, could serve as a model for this.

More than two decades ago, India learnt a lesson at the cost of millions of retail investors by letting Unit Trust of India manage dark pools of public money and declare dividends that were out of whack with the actual market value of its assets. Such opaque pools of non-market linked public assets pose a systemic risk to an economy that hopes to be the world's third-largest within a decade. A solution to our EPFO problem would need political will. Not only must we expose its corpus to third-party scrutiny, but also risk upsetting subscribers with a stiff dose of market reality. So far, our attempts to fix this comfort blanket for our salaried middle-class have evoked public uproars. In the years ahead, though, we may have no option but to reform the scheme to reflect the true value of its holdings. Until we do this, we will have the bizarre spectacle of a certain return being declared without any information on what this mega-fund's equity operations yielded for subscribers. That's a throwback to the 1970s' way of doing things.

MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS

The policy adventurism that has led India to its economic woes

Moves made without preparation may have contributed more to our GDP contraction than covid

HIMANSHU
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The much-awaited gross domestic product (GDP) data for the first quarter of this fiscal year has confirmed the worst fears of policymakers. The decline in GDP of 23.9% is the worst among major economies. The largest contractions were in construction (-50.3%), trade, hotels, transport and communication (-47%), and manufacturing (-39.3%). These together account for three-fourths of all non-agricultural employment in the country and 43% of all workers. Their sharp contraction has implications for wages and employment, particularly at a time when the economy is suffering from a demand contraction. Not surprisingly, most forecasters now estimate a decline in GDP of more than 10% this fiscal year.

Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman was quick to attribute the decline to covid, which she had described as an "act of God". There have also been premature celebrations of green shoots and a V-shaped recovery, none of which is visible in available data. While the pandemic did contribute to the economy's contraction to a large extent, it would be an exaggeration to blame the shrinkage entirely on it. The fact is that gross value added (GVA) in the manufacturing sector has contracted with increasing magnitude in the last four quarters. Construction has been contracting for three quarters. Even trade, hotels, transport and communication, as a group, has seen its GVA decelerate. The economy was slowing down sharply even before the pandemic hit, with India's official GDP growth rate decelerating from 8.2% in the fourth quarter of 2017-18 to 3.1% in the same quarter of 2019-20. In other words, had we not been hit by the pandemic, last quarter's growth would still have been barely positive, at best.

The deceleration of the last two years had nothing to do with any exogenous shock, but was entirely a result of the government's policy adventurism. Notable examples of it are the abrupt demonetization of late 2016 and a hasty roll-out of the goods and services tax (GST) within a year of that. These broke the backbone of three dominant sectors of the non-farm economy. It is no surprise that unemployment and distress in the economy have increased. These sectors are also the largest contributors to India's informal economy, which bore the brunt of those policy shocks. Demonetization disrupted the operations of most enterprises in sectors that rely heavily on cash transactions. As did GST, by raising their compliance costs, and arbitrary revisions in the rates and regulations of the tax.

Last year's tax waiver for India's corporate sector of around ₹1.5 trillion was another example of policy adventurism that seemed to ignore the need to protect the unorganized sector. It is now clear that most of the organized sector used the largesse not to increase investments, but to balance their accounts.

The most recent act of adventurism was India's sudden lockdown in March after the covid outbreak. While a lockdown was desirable and it did slow the transmission of infections, the strict restrictions imposed without either warning or preparation, and that too at a time when the daily case count was only a few hundred, were yet another example of the government's shock-and-awe methods. India's economy suffered much more on account of its lockdown than other countries, which imposed them gradually and in a relatively well-planned and localized manner. Once again, the move affected the unorganized sector much more than it did the organized sector. The latter was cushioned by the large cash balances of formal enterprises and also because these were able to function by shifting work to the homes of their employees. But this was not possible for most of the unorganized sector. It was precisely the same three sectors that took the hardest impact. Most of their enterprises were not just informal, they also had limited cash balances. The outcome was that millions lost their jobs and incomes, and many of them had to take long walks back to their rural homes.

While the government opened its purse to corporate entities months before the pandemic, it has seemed reluctant to help the unorganized sector. This has not only delayed an economic recovery, but also made it hard to tackle a humanitarian crisis.

The pandemic has struck everyone. No country is unaffected. What matters is the response to this exogenous shock. In the case of India, the way our policy has responded has resulted in our economy being impacted the hardest. But covid is not the only reason why the economy is in such a crisis. That is a result largely of the policy adventurism seen over the last three years.

QUICK READ

Pinning blame on covid for our economy's sharp contraction exaggerates its impact. Yes, the pandemic did hurt the economy but not as much as the policy adventurism of recent years.

The economy was slowing well before covid, hurt by the 2016 shock of demonetization, followed by a hasty GST roll-out, and most recently by an abrupt lockdown with little preparation.

10 YEARS AGO

JUST A THOUGHT

"I find it astonishing that in 2020, a smile or a hug has become an act of revolution.

KARA D. SPAIN

THE NEW NORMAL

Death of romance amid a pandemic of twisted hearts

SUSHMITA BOSE

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

At times I do an Aldous Huxley and reimagine my very own bravura *Brave New World*. Thermal monitoring, intelligence streamed from covid data, mandatory app-controlled movement from point to point, bio-weaponry, and other such usual suspects. In the midst of all this dystopia, I also think of love… No, not love for humanity or community or offsprings or siblings, but the overwhelmingly grandiose romantic version that impels kings to abdicate thrones.

For instance, what will happen to lovers if Valentine's Day beckons and the virus shows no sign of retreat? Will they be content to moon over objects of affection on Zoom? Or, even if they are courageous enough to get together for a face-to-face, will they be foolhardy enough to unmask and kiss?

Talks of "upcoming" romantic weekend getaways have been shelved, stories on being "spoilt for choice" on Tinder are being swiped left, and plans of walks down pretty aisles are in cold storage. What's more, the Big Fat Indian Wedding industry, which had promised to bask in the spotlight of eternal sunrise, is sighting a sunset looming on the not-so-distant horizon.

At one level, I'm deriving a kind of sadistic pleasure: bragging rights and silly giggles on matters of the heart are on mute mode, and the silence is rapturous.

At another level, I'm a bit worried. The other day, I heard an odd tale. A married man known to a friend of mine boasted that he'd created a fake profile on a dating site "for kicks". He wants to be entertained by going through other members' bios, my friend said, because he's "bored out of his skull".

"Scary much?" I asked, doing a balancing act, talking on the phone while trying to prise out the last-remaining lot of kettle-fried chips from its packet—my second bag of treats for the day. "He's obviously a stalker."

She: "He has gone on record to say he's 'just looking'. You know, like harmless window shopping, with no intent or means to touch-feel, let alone buy."

Me: "So his wife knows, and she's okay with it?"

She: "Obviously not, she'd be furious! But he's really zoned out with his life and wife right now, all these months of being boxed in at home, so it's a diversion. By the way, he's keen to check out the men as well, says he wants to know more about these 'losers' who are looking for love in the time of corona."

Me: "When the pandemic knocks on the door, love flies out of the window?"

She: "That's cruel! Let's just say familiarity breeds contempt."

Clearly, it's not only the serial daters or relationship enthusiasts who are experiencing FOMO—the fear of missing out—and having a bad time. Those in the thick of things seem to be equally miserable.

Someone told me of this honeymooning couple stuck in a lovely Mediterranean coastal spot for more than three months because the lockdown was imposed all too suddenly, and are now being counselled since they are seriously considering a divorce. The first few weeks were reportedly great—the two of them, a love suite, olive and feta salads, and the sound of the sea. After that, with beaches out of bounds, it was downhill all the way, till they could no longer stand the sight of each other.

My favourite love story for the season, however, belongs to a dear friend who lives in Dubai. Let's call her Tosh—not least because I've been watching *Shetland*. She and her husband were mighty thrilled when work-from-home was imposed by both their respective companies. "We'll be working, but also getting to be together 24x7 at home." Her WhatsApp status from thereon read: "Do Not Disturb".

I took the cue and called her only a month later. She immediately informed me that her husband gets on her nerves: "I can't wait to get back to work, he calls me a nag and a whiner… It's been a bad time."

One day, they squabbled more than usual. To make up for the excesses, Tosh made spaghetti Bolognese in the evening, cracked open a bottle of Chianti, and laid out the dinner table with a mimosa-scented candle as its centrepiece. Man and wife sat down to eat, and, as she carefully poured wine into fine goblets, he trained his gaze on her (she swore there wasn't a twinkle in either of his eyes).

"I have something to say," he began. "I may have started believing in reincarnation: I'm sure you were my mother-in-law in an earlier life."

"You mean you were married to my daughter?" she asked. "Kind of icky, right?"

He: "I meant I must have been your daughter-in-law, and you were a *saas* of the desi variety, the sort who spawns Balaji Films' soap operas with her taunts and bickerings."

She spilt a little wine on the crisp table linen. "My heart literally bled." But by the end of dinner, they were in splits. "I guess that's what really matters, being able to laugh together," Tosh sighed. "Oh, I'm joining work tomorrow."

QUICK READ

As we brace for a post-covid world of thermal scanners, tracker apps and other dystopic stuff, one wonders how it will affect romance. Will lovers, for instance, ever get to kiss again?

The pandemic's impact on relationships of co-habitation has not been benign, as evident in the way it has driven cuddlers apart through contempt bred by extra home-bound familiarity.

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO GIVE UP YOUR PREJUDICES.
— HENRY DAVID THOREAU

The Indian EXPRESS
FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

CRISIS & SAFETY NET

In uncertain environment, EPFO must align itself with interest rates in broader economy, avoid risks

IN EARLY MARCH this year, the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) had lowered the interest rate on provident fund savings for 2019-20 to a seven-year low of 8.5 per cent, down from 8.65 per cent the previous year. On Wednesday, the central board of trustees of the EPFO recommended paying the 8.5 per cent interest in a staggered manner due to "exceptional circumstances arising out of COVID-19". According to the recommendation, which will now have to be approved by the Finance Ministry, EPFO subscribers will get 8.15 per cent interest for 2019-20 immediately, while the balance 0.35 per cent or around Rs 2,700 crore will be credited by the end of December, subject to the redemption of its units in exchange traded funds (ETFs). While in March, when the 8.5 per cent interest was announced, the estimates showed that it would leave a surplus of Rs 700 crore with the fund, the decision now to stagger the interest payment has been driven by the fund's losses on its equity holdings. The collapse of the stock market in March owing to uncertainty over the state of the economy due to the spread of COVID-19 and the imposition of the national lockdown, dragged down the fund's return on equity investments to (-) 8.3 per cent in 2019-20, from 14.7 per cent in the prior fiscal year.

EPFO subscribers may have to brace themselves for an even lower interest rate this year. While any reduction in the interest rate is bound to be unpopular with its over 6 crore subscribers, this will be the right decision. With the monetary policy committee of the Reserve Bank of India cutting the benchmark repo rate sharply over the past few months, and the central bank actively intervening in the bond market in order to stimulate economic activity, there has been a sharp reduction in both short- and long-term rates in the broader economy. In fact, the 10-year G-sec yield now stands at 6.05 per cent. Add to that the possibility of continuing stock market volatility due to lingering uncertainty, and proposing a higher interest rate that is not in sync with the conditions in the broader economy will be unsustainable. In fact, in the past too, the finance ministry is reported to have raised questions over the organisation recommending a high interest rate.

The EPFO and its subscribers must be mindful that promises of returns higher than yields on government securities will be met through riskier investments such as corporate debt and equities. In an uncertain economic environment, for an organisation that provides social security for India's formal workforce, the risks of such exposures can hardly be emphasised enough. In the past, too, the EPFO has been questioned over its exposure to risky entities such as the IL&FS. The organisation thus must seek to minimise the risk for its subscribers, and align itself more closely with the overall interest rate scenario in the economy.

MONSOON TWIST

Temporal distribution of rain may be a problem. But government resolve of freeing agricultural markets must not waver

THE SOUTHWEST MONSOON rainfall has been 6.6 per cent surplus so far, farmers have sown 6.3 per cent more area under kharif crops compared to last year, and retail fertiliser sales during April-August were up 33.6 per cent over the same period of 2019. With the desert locusts, too, not wreaking havoc as was initially feared, a bumper kharif harvest seems in the offing — on top of the excellent rabi crop that helped the farm sector grow by 3.4 per cent during April-June amid the overall economy shrinking 22.8 per cent. But as a story in this newspaper has shown, it isn't as simple as that. Yes, the monsoon has been good at an aggregate level and also spatially well-distributed, with only three out of the country's 36 meteorological subdivisions registering deficient rains. The problem, though, has been with the temporal distribution.

This time, the monsoon arrived well in time, leading to aggressive plantings by farmers. The rains were 17.6 per cent above normal in June. However, July not only recorded a 9.7 per cent deficit, the whole of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and mainland Gujarat witnessed a dry spell that extended beyond the first week of August. As a result, the early sown crop experienced significant moisture stress. But then the monsoon revived, so much as to cause flooding and waterlogged fields in the very same areas. The soyabean, urad (black gram), chilli and banana crops in MP have suffered large-scale damage from excess rains through the last week of August. There are similar reports of massive losses to the standing kharif onions in North Karnataka, which normally arrive in the markets from September. All hopes now are on the new crop of Maharashtra, which will start coming in only towards October-end.

In short, while the current kharif season's production is definitely going to be better than last year's (which was impacted by the monsoon's poor first-half performance), how much better remains to be seen. It is quite possible that the benefits of the 26.6 per cent surplus August rains, plus forecasts of a wet winter from a developing La Nina weather event, would be felt more in the coming rabi season. But in the immediate run, one can expect prices of onions and maybe pulses to firm up — aided also by festival season demand and a recovery of sorts underway in global commodity markets. That could test the NDA government's resolve to stick to its recent reforms of freeing agricultural markets and imposing stockholding limits only in extraordinary situations.

#OSCARSSODIVERSE

More diversity in movies would be very welcome. But it need not be a math sum

AS THE FLAG-BEARER for film awards, the Oscars has never had a heavier burden. Contending with falling viewership as much as an exacting one, held up to standards on screen and off it, the Academy of Motion Pictures and Arts has been doing a high-string balancing act, from expanding its pool, to requiring "unconscious bias training" for them, and introducing more nominees to going host-less. The post-George Floyd world has inspired the latest: #OscarsSoWhite seeks to be #OscarsSoDiverse.

From 2024, Best Picture nominees would have to pass at least two criteria of diversity and inclusion — the films must feature unrepresented groups (women, queer, nonwhite, disabled), on screen or in their crew, or on the distribution, marketing, publicity side. But read between the lines, and there hides a twist worthy of its own award. Almost none of the films that provoked a backlash in recent years would be disqualified on the above grounds — *The Irishman* (for ignoring women), had a Mexican cinematographer; *The Green Book* (for its white saviour theme) had a black man as lead and several others in the cast, and so on. Even *Gone With The Wind*, that old favourite wilting in new light, might have slipped its way in.

For the Academy that dreads another 2015, when all its 20 acting nominees were white, the course to a happy ending may be different. In 2020, *Parasite* became the first non-English film to win Best Picture, showing the one criterion the Academy does need to change: Of "foreign film". Or, it can go the Berlinale way and become gender-neutral (though it's debatable where it will leave women in such a male-dominated industry). Diversity, like Oscar winning writer-director Joel Coen pointed out in 2016, is hardly a math sum. "You don't sit down… say, 'I'm going to write a story that involves four black people, three Jews, and a dog' — right?"

Not Centre vs States

On GST compensation, the way out requires states to come forward to work with Centre

SUSHIL KUMAR MODI

THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC has played havoc with the economy. Revenue streams of the government, the private sector and individuals have been severely impacted while the expenditure, particularly of the government, is shooting up with a rise in commitments.

One significant area of loss of revenue to both the Centre and the states is GST. While the states have the comfort of assured 14 per cent growth through the compensation mechanism, the Centre has no such guarantee. The Compensation Act mandates compensating the states for revenue loss on GST implementation from the Compensation Fund.

The course of action to be adopted in the event of the amount in the Fund falling short of requirements was discussed at length in the GST Council. The late Arun Jaitley, then chairman, had, in the 8th meeting, assured that "… in case the amount in the GST Compensation Fund fell short of the compensation payable, the GST Council shall decide the mode of raising additional resources including borrowing from the market which could be repaid by collection of cess in the sixth year or further subsequent years"; the Council had agreed to this suggestion. Quite clearly, the sense of the house and, consequently, the decision of the Council, was that it is the Council (and not the Government of India) that shall decide the mode of raising additional resources in the event of a shortfall and this is reflected in Section 10(1) of the Compensation Act.

Additional resources could be raised by increasing the tax or the cess but in the present difficult times it would not be advisable to raise the burden of either the tax or the cess; if anything, it is the time to mitigate the burden on the common man. Hence, the only way out of this difficult situation is borrowings. The question that has been in the public domain is: Who should borrow — the Centre or the states?

It is being argued by some that since borrowings by the Centre or by the states make no difference in the context of fiscal discipline, the Centre should borrow in view of its higher borrowing and debt-servicing capacity and its ability to borrow at lower rates. Under normal circumstances, this might have been true but we are in an unprecedentedly abnormal situation. Even otherwise, it would be difficult for all if the Centre were to borrow.

> It makes sense for the states to borrow. The two options presented in this context involve borrowing by the states. In one option, the entire shortfall can be borrowed in one go while only the shortfall attributable to GST implementation is to be borrowed in the other option with the remaining shortfall to be made good from the Cess Fund post the transition period. In both the options, the principal amount will be serviced from the Cess Fund. Of the two options presented by the Centre, option-1 seems to be superior in all respects.

Article 292 (1) mandates that the Centre can borrow on the security of the Consolidated Fund of India (CFI). It may be recalled that since the idea of providing compensation to the states from the Consolidated Fund of India was not agreed to in the Council, it is difficult to agree with the suggestion that GoI borrow on the basis of the said CFI.

It is also financially imprudent for the Centre to borrow since large borrowings by the Centre would push up the bond yield rates, which in turn would push up the bond yield of the states setting off a spiral leading to hike in the interest rates for businesses and individuals. The states' borrowing would become costlier if the Centre were to borrow for this purpose.

It is also not correct to contend that the Centre should borrow to honour its commitment to fully compensating the states; the Council had agreed that the means of financing the shortfall are to be decided by the Council and not by the Government of India.

The borrowing capacity of the states, too, is not very inferior. The RBI study of state finances shows that the debt receipts of all the states as a percentage of GDP has hovered between 2.4 per cent and 3.6 per cent during the last four years and an average level of 2.9 per cent; the states have on the average borrowed just about 1.25 per cent of the GSDP thus far.

The point being made here is that the states are consistently borrowing less than they can borrow (legally and financially), which makes sound financial sense but which can be utilised in times like this. Further, the cost of state borrowings for this purpose can be considerably lowered if arranged through a special window.

The Centre has already breached the budgeted borrowing limits for the current year in the first four months itself and, with revenues taking a battering, it is anybody's guess that the Central borrowings will exceed the revised target of Rs 12 lakh crore against the originally budgeted Rs 7.96 lakh crore.

Thus it makes sense for the states to borrow. The two options presented in this context involve borrowing by the states. In one option, the entire shortfall can be borrowed in one go while only the shortfall attributable to GST implementation is to be borrowed in the other option with the remaining shortfall to be made good from the Cess Fund post the transition period. In both the options, the principal amount will be serviced from the Cess Fund.

Of the two options presented by the Centre, option-1 seems to be superior in all respects. Borrowing the entire shortfall, as envisaged in option-2, will hurt both the markets and the private sector, pushing up the interest rate. On the other hand, the single window under option-1 being arranged by the Centre and the entire debt being serviced from future cess receipts will ensure that the cost remains close to the G-sec rate. Moreover, there will be no variation in the interest rate as between the states.

There will be considerable flexibility in borrowings for the states in these stressed times as certain conditionalities have been relaxed for option-1, besides retaining the roll-over option for borrowing limits. Most significantly, the 14 per cent assured growth has been maintained; only a part of it has been deferred.

It is heartening to note that the Centre has not reneged on its promise to find ways to compensate the states for loss of revenue. I think the states should come forward and work with the Centre in the true spirit of cooperative federalism that the Council has come to be known for these past few years.

The writer is Deputy Chief Minister, Bihar

OUR SPECIAL JAMAI

Pranabda struck a chord with people of Bangladesh with his wisdom and warmth

FAROOQ SOBHAN

THE DEATH OF the former President of India, Pranab Mukherjee, has been mourned by the whole of Bangladesh. The moving tribute paid to him by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as well as the countless tributes to him by people from across the country provide ample testimony of the high esteem with which he was held in Bangladesh.

Pranabda, as he was affectionately known by his countless friends and admirers in India and Bangladesh, made a very emotional speech at the University of Dhaka during his visit to Bangladesh in 2013. He referred to himself as a "jamai" or son-in-law of Bangladesh — his wife was from Narail in Bangladesh. He said, "India and Bangladesh are interlinked like no other nations on earth. Our destinies are interwoven just like our history and geography".

Pranabda was one of the first persons I called on after my arrival in Delhi as Bangladesh's High Commissioner in 1992. He was the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, then. What was to have been a routine half-an-hour courtesy call lasted for over two hours, over many cups of tea. What made a deep impression on me was Pranabda's enormous interest in Bangladesh — he was very knowledgeable about our economy, our politics and of course, all aspects of the relations between the two countries. Pranabda told me that I should not hesitate to get in touch with him if ever I needed any help and that we could meet, even if it was just for an informal chat.

> During his many years in Cabinet, no matter which portfolio he held, Pranabda's determination to strengthen cooperation with Bangladesh never wavered. His approach encompassed not just bilateral cooperation but also extended to regional and sub-regional cooperation. He took a special interest in the expansion of trade and investment between the two countries.

During my three years as High Commissioner and in the 25 years thereafter, I had many meetings with Pranabda, most of which were one-on-one meetings. Once, he was out of the country when I was visiting Delhi. I was able to reach him on the phone late at night on the eve of my departure, shortly after he had got back home. I said I had called to pay my respects and to apologise for my inability to meet him. Pranabda asked how long it would take me to get to his house. "Twenty minutes," I replied. He said I should come as quickly as possible. It was close to midnight. I spent more than an hour with him. When tea was served, he smiled and said: "ektu mishti khaan" (please have some sweets). Pranabda was prepared to stay up late after returning from a long trip just so that he could talk about something close to his heart — Bangladesh.

Perhaps my most memorable meeting with Pranabda was at his residence in March 2010. I had taken a 12-member delegation to Delhi for the Second BEI-ORF Security Dialogue. Pranabda — at that time Finance Minister — had offered to host a reception for the participants. When we arrived at his residence, we were informed that he was still in Parliament. Former Indian Foreign Secretary M K Rasgotra, who was heading the ORF delegation, wondered whether it would be possible for the Finance Minister to get away from Parliament in the middle of the Budget session. That very minute, a smiling Pranabda arrived and greeted us with a warm namaste.

Pranabda then announced that he had asked Mrs Mukherjee to join us even though she had not been keeping well. I was told by one of his personal staff that this was a very special gesture. During the reception, he took me aside and said that it was a matter of enormous satisfaction for him to see that Indo-Bangladesh relations under Sheikh Hasina had made significant progress. He referred in particular to the improvement in security cooperation that had taken place during the past year. He said that India would reciprocate in every possible way.

Pranabda insisted on walking me to my car and stood and waved goodbye as we drove off. I told one of my surprised colleagues that this gesture was Pranabda's way of demonstrating the importance he attached to India's relations with Bangladesh.

During his many years in Cabinet, no matter which portfolio he held, Pranabda's determination to strengthen cooperation with Bangladesh never wavered. His approach encompassed not just bilateral cooperation but also extended to regional and sub-regional cooperation. He took a special interest in the expansion of trade and investment between the two countries.

Pranabda will always be fondly remembered by Bangladesh's 165 million people as our special jamai who did so much for Bangladesh from the time of our Liberation War until his death.

The writer is Former Foreign Secretary, Bangladesh and former High Commissioner to India

SEPTEMBER 11, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO

STRIFE IN MORADABAD

VIOLENCE ERUPTED ON a large scale in Moradabad town. The police had to open fire at two places and day curfew had to be re-imposed. According to Home Secretary S D Srivastava, five persons were killed and a dozen injured. He said two persons were killed and a dozen injured in police firing in Barah Dari locality where a police party was attacked with acid filled bottles and brickbats. The entire town except the Civil Lines area has been put on curfew for an indefinite period.

LIBYA SYRIA MERGE

THE LEADERS OF Libya and Syria announced the merger of their physically distant nations and agreed to meet within a month to form a unified government. The proclamation was read on Damascus radio after President Assad returned from two days of meetings in Tripoli with the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. A "revolutionary Congress" will assume legislative powers in the unified state which will be a single international entity, the communique said.

US STRICTURES LOOM

BOTH THE US Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee said that no more fuel will be sent to Tarapur. The two houses now have till October 1 to consider the recommendation and overturn President Jimmy Carter's decision to make the two pending shipments. The administration thinks it can win in the Senate though it expects to be defeated in the lower house.

SANJAY CRASH PROBE

SABOTAGE HAS NOW been completely ruled out in the plane crash which killed Sanjay Gandhi. The investigation has established that there was no explosion on board the plane, neither had the engine or any of the controls been tampered with. The investigation was conducted in secrecy by the Director of Air Safety, H B Singh.

11 THE INDIAN EXPRESS, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2020

THE IDEAS PAGE

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"This is not a counsel of despair, but of realism. There will be no quick fix. The good news is that the hard work of scientists, medical staff, officials and others worldwide are giving us precious tools." — THE GUARDIAN

Don't look back in anger

A society that lives in denial of its trauma and rage will turn on itself, as we have turned on Rhea Chakraborty and her family with the ferocity of an unhinged mob

AMRITA DUTTA

C R Sasikumar

THE NEWS ON our screens is utterly broken, but what about us? India in 2020 is a country in pain — millions have lost their jobs and livelihoods in these last five months; the economic crisis has shrunk not just salaries, but the horizons of the once-aspiring Indian; the pandemic has claimed thousands of lives; and the virus rages on, a daily ticker of our mortality.

Is it to turn away from this distress that many of us watch rapt, with fury and without mercy, the spectacle of television warriors hunting in a pack for "answers" to the death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput? A sense of vicarious victimhood has certainly licensed the single-minded hounding of actor Rhea Chakraborty, now anointed Public Enemy No.1 — though Sushant, by many accounts, did not see himself as a victim nor his girlfriend as an enemy.

This is not the first (nor will it be the last) media trial to run on the fuel of salaciousness, sexism and conspiracy theories. But the breakdown of reason and propriety, the glut of rage that only finds a release in the logic of retribution, tells us something about our emotional health. It suggests that we assent to an infantilisation of our minds in return for the drug of denial, the avoidance of hard questions. Every few days, the 24x7 coverage of the suicide has thrown up a new enemy that seems to recognise our old wounds — the "nepotism" of Hindi film industry's elite, the unfairness of a world in which Sushant's idealism could not survive, before finally settling on the girlfriend, that original troublemaker in the Indian family's paradise. It is a narrative with uncanny parallels to contemporary Indian politics, which has allowed the BJP and RSS to harvest a million resentments against ancien regimes and dead Muslim invaders to win power on the promise of a new age.

It is human to respond to injustice with anger, but why is rage, abuse and a visceral rejection of another point of view now a reflex reaction for most of us? What does this surfeit of televised anger feed on? Where does it lead us? By whetting our appetite for vengeance (in the name of justice), where does it leave our morality?

Some answers might lie in the career of Kangana Ranaut. A fresh-faced actor from a small town in Himachal Pradesh, Kangana faced her share of cruel public mockery for her accent, her dress and choices in her early years in Bollywood. She transformed into a woman who played by her own rules, who gave it back to the cosy club on their own sleek couch. Those who dismiss her as an "uneducated starlet" do not realise that Kangana's street cred comes from an insider's knowledge of the grubby secrets of tinsel town, as well as a personal sense of injury — shared by millions of others given the many inequalities in India — that she has amplified through social media.

But righteous rage, without being leavened by empathy or humility, does not bring forth new tomorrows. It replicates old hierarchies in the name of a revolution. It replaces old victims with new. The revolution that the ruling BJP has choreographed continues to weaponise differences and disenchantments. In the name of dislodging the elite, it has birthed an unprecedented attack on civil liberties, students and intellectuals, some of whom have been languishing without trial in jail for two years.

Kangana has used Sushant's death to wage a nasty, scorched-earth, innuendo-rich battle from TV pulpits that ended up in a vicious witch-hunt of Chakraborty. Can she not see in this shameful spectacle an echo from her past? In 2016, another young actor's family had accused his ex of black magic, feeding him menstrual blood and of being a closet *pisachin*. The victim of that tabloid inquisition? Kangana.

But it isn't just the connections between the two actors, both outsiders in an extremely competitive industry, both easily devalued by a value system historically suspicious of women performers, that we are missing. The playbook of news channels and organised algorithms, working in tandem, has pushed us towards a more profound denial of our basic emotional realities.

It has peddled the myth of the Indian family as a place of unquestioned rectitude, whose prime products (the sons) must be defended against the scheming girlfriend — much as it places a democratic government beyond questions by defending it against the bogey of "anti-nationals".

By accepting such a crude reality, we reject what we know in our bones — that the family is a place of contest, power-play as well as love; that the state's unchecked power swallows up our freedoms. That young men can grow up to resent their families, that lovers offer each other a shelter from their parents' incomprehension; that Indian families find it hard to accept that their boys can grow up to be vulnerable men. It delegitimises the experience of generations of young men and women, who, like Sushant, Kangana and Rhea, have stepped out of conventions to make a life that bears a stamp of their own individual journeys and desires. It allows the family — an institution that is rarely called to reform its casteism and patriarchal impulses — to slam the door on difficult, befuddling conversations on mental health, which ails the young in India in epidemic proportions. It is this fundamental denial of our complex emotional lives and the crumbling economic reality that traps us in inarticulate rage, that forecloses all avenues of resolution.

> That young men can grow up to resent their families, that lovers offer each other a shelter from their parents' incomprehension; that Indian families find it hard to accept that their boys can grow up to be vulnerable men. It delegitimises the experience of generations of young men and women, who, like Sushant, Kangana and Rhea, have stepped out of conventions to make a life that bears a stamp of their own individual journeys and desires. It allows the family — an institution that is rarely called to reform its casteism and patriarchal impulses — to slam the door on difficult, befuddling conversations on mental health, which ails the young in India in epidemic proportions.

A society that lives in denial of its trauma and anger will turn on itself, as we have turned on Rhea Chakraborty and her family with the ferocity of an unhinged mob. Whether or not she is guilty of something more grievous than possession of a few grams of marijuana is for an investigation to find out, but the demonisation of even her most humane responses — why did she say sorry to Sushant's body? why was she taking him to psychiatrists? — is the sign of a collective moral failure.

Both profit-hungry algorithms and totalitarian ideologies benefit from such a failure of moral imagination, that primes us daily into a murderous rage, that keeps us in permanent need of our daily fix of televised vengeance, that fashions us into a mob in search of an enemy — and holds us in thrall of flawed heroes and false gods.

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Democracy in question

Parliaments do not dispense with questions even in time of war. If questions are disallowed in Parliament, more will be asked outside it

SALMAN KHURSHID

COVID-19 has changed everything, not all for the better. But as a society we have not been the best subjects of these troubled times. There is little point regurgitating arguments about the failure to note the alert against the virus in early January and February of 2020, and then haste to unlock when the virus curve was still refusing to flatten. Of course, the government might say, "we lose if we do and we lose if we don't".

Citizens of many countries have expressed dissatisfaction with the manner in which their governments have dealt with the pandemic. The US might be the first to register the discontent in the presidential election in November. What appeared to be easy sailing for the incumbent has already turned into a difficult climb to retain the White House. India is unusual in having suffered the near worst, with more uncertainty ahead, and yet not complained. Instead, we joined to beat kitchen vessels and applauded IAF aircraft flying in formation across the sky. The acknowledgement and gratitude towards medical professionals and other service providers was due and was expressed fairly. But sensitivity and humanity cannot bypass the need for robust preparedness and intelligent response to the challenge posed by COVID-19.

Whatever might be the reaction to the timing of the lockdown, there is a completely separate issue about how it was imposed, particularly for the thousands of working-class families stranded without wages or food far away from home and with no arrangements to journey back. The pitiable sight of the Partition-era like migration on foot will remain etched as a reminder of how easily we can go wrong and cause unprecedented misery to our compatriots. It is surprising that this happened not because there are no legal structures in place to secure the welfare of migrant labour, but because the steel frame of governance simply collapsed.

The total cost of the COVID-19 catastrophe can only be estimated in terms of reports that are available from the marketplace. There is yet no sign of the pandemic easing and the much talked about herd immunity has proven to be an empty promise. The spurts and spikes in cases — but with some comfort in terms of the fatality figures — have become routine bad news, a bit like the incidents at the LAC with China. The breakthrough of a vaccine against COVID-19 and a breakthrough with China with the two leaders working out what lesser humans have failed to do, both seem evasive for the present. But there are questions galore that the people of India want to ask even if the fourth pillar of democracy, the media, seems reluctant to ask. Going by what one gets to see on the TV screens and in social media, one would have thought the 20 martyrs in Galwan valley raise no concern while the sad suicide of a rising Bollywood star overwhelms us with agony and curiosity.

Democracy is judged by the debate it encourages and sustains. The government in a democracy performs to honour its manifesto and the Opposition questions to underscore its own. The people judge, not just at election time but at all times. That makes democracy a participatory one. The questions are asked from civil society platforms, the mass media, community gatherings and ultimately within the highest temple of democracy, the legislature itself. Now, understandably, the hustle bustle of the marketplace of ideas is deserted because of COVID-19 though the conversations have moved to the digital platforms. Important institutions like the high courts and the Supreme Court have been conducting proceedings on digital platforms and have, after four months, begun to take furtive steps to return to physical hearings. Heavens have not come down. There is no reason to believe that they are waiting for Parliament to meet in order to unleash their fury.

One can imagine innumerable ways in which proceedings in Parliament could be modified to reduce the necessity to touch surfaces and to maintain social distance. But the mind is puzzled to think that curtailing the Zero Hour or cancelling the Question Hour has anything to do with containment of COVID-19. The pressing need is for us to re-configure how we conduct ourselves (the namaste or aadaab instead of the handshake) rather than what we say or how much we say.

It is no one's case that the Zero Hour is an example of etiquette and best behaviour, but the decibels, particularly when projected on the screen, bring out the passion of strongly felt opinions. Similarly, the Question Hour is the heartbeat of democratic accountability. If ever there was a need for questions to be asked and answers to be given, it is now and here. Interestingly, as is the practice of the government, it opts to let people guess why something is done or left undone. If they have taken an unprecedented decision there must be some reasoning behind it. Sharing that reasoning might not convince the Opposition, but it will at least show some dialogue that follows when questions are asked.

Asking questions is the essence of democracy. National parliaments do not dispense with questions even at the time of war. If questions are disallowed in Parliament, many more will be asked outside it. If the questions can lead to greater unity of national purpose, the government will do itself and the nation a great injustice by attempting to stifle them.

The writer is a senior Congress leader

The Digital Didis

An army of helpers could be raised to facilitate transactions, complete transformation

BHAGWAN CHOWDHRY

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi promised a new digital India that will financially include everyone, from workers in the informal sector to women working at home to our ageing parents receiving a pension. The JAM trinity consisting of Jan Dhan Yojana — bank accounts for everyone, a unique electronic Aadhaar ID, and mobile banking facilitated by UPI — are all in place. Indeed, we have come a long way with 80 per cent of the people with bank accounts, 1.25 billion Aadhaar IDs, and the ever-increasing use of digital payments and mobile banking accelerated by UPI, that has made cash transfers simple, direct and without leakages that were rampant in the past.

Yet, we are far from declaring victory. Just ask yourself how many of you are paying your household help digitally. When we look around, we find that many of our older relatives do not feel comfortable using their smartphones for banking transactions or even digital payments for auto-rickshaw fares, or day-to-day shopping and chores. Cash is still king.

There appear to be two major missing features in financial inclusion — convenience and safety. Even as digital payment apps are becoming simpler to use, they are still not as intuitive as using cash. Further, after a digital transaction, many users are afraid whether the transaction really took place or not, especially when it comes to receiving a payment in one's bank account. Fear of fraud and tampering with one's hard-earned money is a severe deterrent for many.

When I attend conferences on financial inclusion, most participants are sophisticated and understand these issues. The solution that is offered is that we need to create digital literacy. But that is easier said than done. How do we do it effectively enough so that the fears and misgivings many people have are not merely alleviated but are, in fact, eliminated? We certainly cannot offer classes in digital literacy.

I propose a solution. My proposal is to employ an army of young women in high schools and colleges, let us call them Digital Didis. A Digital Didi would be easy to spot and identify using some official uniform and badge, who will in effect become a digital helper that anyone could feel comfortable approaching, in malls, in buses and trains, on the street and in stores, to help them with any digital transaction. A helper Didi, a trustworthy Didi — a Didi who would patiently show and help people how to carry out a transaction and assure them of its safety. The transaction could be tagged with Digital Didi's identity for accountability and incentives.

A Didi who helps many successfully could become a candidate for an attractive job. Didis would be paid a small stipend, by banks or financial institutions, and this would be something Didis would do not necessarily full time, but in their downtime, as they are walking about doing their other daily chores including going to or back from school or college, or shopping, or other leisurely activities. Use of Didis would reduce the need for opening up many bank branches and hiring full-time employees and funds released from these savings could help employ many Didis whose presence will become ubiquitous. Over time, people will begin to know and trust a few Didis, who would become their regular go-to Didis for mobile financial transactions.

The most effective method by which we learn is by imitation. When mobile phones were introduced, no one offered classes on how to use them. People learned how to use them by watching other people. Now mobile phones are being used effectively not only by the rich and the middle-class people but even by many of the poor in villages all over the world. As people begin to build trust interacting with Didis, many would slowly learn how to carry out digital transactions on their own. Also, young women who become Didis will not only earn some money on the side, their experience with helping more and more people successfully will build their confidence and make them stand-out for more attractive formal jobs.

"Chalo Didi se poochho" with Didis everywhere, could help make the digital transformation of India complete.

The writer is Professor of Finance and Executive Director of Digital Identity Research Initiative (DIRI) at the Indian School of Business (ISB) and a Research Professor at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

CURBING FREEDOM

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Students vs Rowdies' (IE. September 10). When universities and colleges attempt to squash dissent on campus, they do so under the guise of eliminating political agendas, which, ironically, is an agenda in itself. To an extent, the political orientation of the management dictates the politics of the campus. As a college student, I can confirm there is a culture of snubbing anti-status quo opinions in the Indian education space which has implications beyond politics. It conveys that to reason, to question, to oppose — at which the political opposition itself is faltering — is something anomalous that must be corrected; whereas, in a democracy, this should be the norm. The Indian youth is in the spring of independent thought, which should not entail reprehension but must be backed for ideas and debates to breathe freely.

Saundarya Jain, *via email*

STATES FALL SHORT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The Facilitator' (IE, September 10). The Centre's hand-holding approach towards states to tackle the Covid pandemic is laudable. However, the kind of glaring gaps — as basic lack of information and knowledge among surveillance workers and supervisory teams — which the Centre is helping to plug directly indicate that the states have failed to utilise the lockdown period to ramp up their health system to meet the oncoming challenges. The reasons for failure could be located in the CAG audit published in August 2018, which found a significant shortage of doctors, healthcare support staff, technicians essential medicines and equipment in districts hospitals, sub-divisional hospitals, community and primary health centres across India. Could states be enabled without correcting these deficiencies?

L R Murmu, *Delhi*

NATURE'S WARNING

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'World's wildlife population down by 68 per cent since 1970' (IE, September 10). Data on the existential perils faced by nature are alarming. It is time to be concerned about our surroundings and the extinction which it might face in the near future due to human activities. Wetlands are the most important connection through which we can access our daily needs. Their decline and erosion will have severe consequences. There is a need for adequate funds for the committees which provide data and ways to manage the loss. The WWF Living Planet Report shows that we should start acting on the plans that we made on paper for sustainable development.

Aamil Lodhi, *Gandhinagar*

The Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

The battle in Indian finance

While the debate is framed as one between banks and debtors, focus on the bigger picture

A key structural issue behind the slowdown, and now the contraction, in the Indian economy is the crisis-ridden financial sector. The challenge has only become bigger over the past decade. As pointed out by former chief economic adviser, Arvind Subramanian, what was initially a twin-balance sheet crisis — encompassing banks and infrastructure companies — became a four-balance sheet crisis, including non-banking financial companies and real estate firms. The pandemic's shock has made matters worse. According to the report of the KV Kamath Committee, set up by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to look into the restructuring of loans after the Covid-19 shock, almost 70% of banking sector debt has been affected by the shock of the pandemic.

In this backdrop, the Centre's credit guarantee scheme for micro, small and medium enterprises and RBI's moratorium on payment of existing loans were crucial relief measures. Both these measures, however, cannot go on forever. Banks will eventually need to recover their capital. The longer this takes, the larger will be their forgone income and accumulated losses. But if the economy does not recover soon — and most experts believe this will take time — businesses might not be in a position to start paying back these loans if the moratorium is revoked immediately. A rush to invoke bankruptcy proceedings against defaulters could lead to destruction of firms and, therefore, productive capacity of the economy.

This policy dilemma is currently playing out in the Supreme Court. The apex court has asked banks to not declare accounts as non-performing assets until a final order is passed. The court will resume hearing on the issue on September 28. The entire issue looks like a zero-sum game at the moment; either banks or debtors will emerge victorious. However, the larger economy will continue to suffer, irrespective of which party bears the burden right now. The only meaningful resolution is to expedite an economic recovery. This will rejuvenate revenue flow and facilitate timely payment of debts. This newspaper has consistently argued that a fiscal stimulus is essential to give a boost to the economy. At the same time, RBI and banks need to make sure that due diligence is exercised while separating genuine borrowers who hold promise in the future from those who will perish in keeping with the market's logic of creative destruction.

The evidence against Donald Trump

Covid-19, which has killed at least 200,000 Americans, may still claim the presidency of Donald Trump. A new book by journalist Bob Woodward, *Rage*, on the Trump administration quotes the president admitting that he deliberately played down the pandemic and that he knew it was much more lethal than seasonal influenza. The book adds to other unflattering revelations about Mr Trump's disdain for men in uniform, his belief in dictatorship and the dysfunctionality of his family in articles, interviews and books written by his former lawyer, his niece and others who have worked with him. The question is whether any of this will make a difference to his re-election campaign.

Mr Trump commands the blind loyalty of about 40% of the electorate. They believe he has been good for their livelihoods. They believe he has taken on the Washington "establishment". They also believe in his not-so-discreet White supremacist politics. But this is not enough for him to win the elections. There is a broad consensus that a middle bloc of suburban women, Hispanics and educated conservative White men — many of whom support Mr Trump on policies but dislike his personality — will determine the final result. Mr Trump's blatant attempts to play on racial and class fears aim to bring this group back into his fold. But many, especially women, are more concerned about the pandemic. These women voted for Barack Obama, turned against Hillary Clinton, and are now leaning towards Democratic candidate Joe Biden. Mr Woodward's revelations and the growing number of Covid-19 cases in heartland America could just tip an election that is on a knife's edge — or the point of a hypodermic syringe.

India will have to make hard choices

The United States has long wanted it to act as a counterweight to China. Will New Delhi do so?

Manjari Chatterjee Miller

A recent policy brief issued by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace asserted that even in a pandemic world, India's influence would enable it to become a strong counterweight to China. A cursory search of recent newspapers, policy statements, and even academic journals reveals this widespread belief.

One may be forgiven for thinking that this idea dates to contemporary watershed moments of military or economic strength —such as India's economic reforms of the early 1990s or the nuclear tests of 1998 — but this would be wrong. Shortly after India turned independent in 1947, and the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, *The New York Times* declared that independent India would become "a great counterweight to China". Given that in the eyes of the world, India has apparently been in the process of becoming a counterweight to China for 70 years, it's important to examine what this means. In other words, if India were a counterweight to China, what would that entail? And whom would it benefit?

The concept of one country being a counterweight to another, or "counterbalancing" as it is sometimes known, comes from realist and neo-realist theories in international relations. If there is one dominant power either in the world-at-large or within a region, the best chance of reducing the likelihood of war is for one country (or a group of countries) to counter it by acting as a balance. A counterbalancing country would take deliberate and assertive steps to match the dominant power in not simply size and population but in military spending and prowess, economic power, global influence, participation in international institutions, the strength of its alliances, and its reputation. This would make it risky for the dominant power to go to outright war with the counter-balancer. The father of neo-realism, Kenneth Waltz, famously declared that the most stable world was one that was bipolar, much like the Cold War world with the United States (US) and the Soviet Union counterbalancing each other.

Which brings us to the current post-Cold War world where the rise of China is a source of huge worry for the dominant power, the US. While the US' capabilities and influence still outstrip China's — simply put, it is a superpower and China is not (yet) — it is important for it to find allies with a common cause to counter China's rise. Thus, when it comes to counterbalancing, particularly in Asia, the US thinks of India. This is partly because China and India are heavyweights in the region. It is also because India is a democracy, and the US, therefore, sees India as a country akin to it.

What it expects is for India to undertake a number of significant actions that will cement its role as a counter-balancer. Expanding the Indo-US defence partnership is, of course, one — the US has, for example, agreed to transfer sensitive military technology to India, engage in industry collaboration including 5G networks, and hold high-level defence talks, and joint exercises. But it expects not simply a strategic partnership but one that is implicitly and, perhaps even explicitly, anti-China. The US thus wants India to undertake an expanded role in the Indo-Pacific as a member of the Quad (along with Japan and Australia). It would like India to strengthen its economic and naval profile in Southeast Asia; strengthen its relationship with Japan; develop its own security and economic capabilities and commit to regional partners; and counter China's naval expansion in the Indo-Pacific, including by lending its voice to the negotiating of a code of conduct for China in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

All of this then begs the question of whether India wants to act as a counterweight to China. Here, the evidence gets murky. There is a reason that the idea of India becoming a counterweight to China has been floating around for 70 years with little end in sight —while the word "non-alignment" has essentially faded from the Indian government's vocabulary, the word "alliance" has not replaced it. A counter-balancer needs formal alliances, not simply partnerships — since, by its very definition, counter-balancing involves both serious assertiveness in foreign policy, and, therefore, strong support from a coterie of other countries.

But as external affairs minister, S Jaishankar, pointed out just a few days ago, at a forum with US Vice President Mike Pence, China and India as rising powers needed to reach some kind of "understanding or equilibrium." His statement hints at the reluctance that has always existed in the Indian government to become the US' geopolitical tool.

So if not explicit counterbalancing, what then? What are India's possible options in the geopolitical triangle? India could continue to develop its partnership with the US, and hope that a commitment to any alliances or assurances of explicit security cooperation would not be needed. It could move under a US security umbrella à la Japan and South Korea. It could move away from the US, and commit to non-alignment between any future American and Chinese poles. Or it could, in the least plausible scenario given the current climate, decide to take concrete steps that would lead to long-term rapprochement with China. All of these actions come with costs and benefits. But, all else being equal, at some point India will have to make a difficult choice.

While the word 'non-alignment' has essentially faded from the Indian government's vocabulary, the word 'alliance' has not replaced it HT

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The views expressed are personal

{ BEYOND THE BITE }
Rajdeep Sardesai

On India's stage, the theatre of the absurd

For weeks now, the obituary of TV news has been written by many media observers. The sensational, ethically flawed and, at times, totally inane coverage of actor Sushant Singh Rajput's tragic death is being seen as the last rites of a medium in seemingly terminal decline. But is the maddening 24*7 breaking news whirl — trapped in a vicious cycle of ratings, revenues, hyper-competition and failed regulation — the sole entity that has been exposed by the theatre of the absurd that the case has become? Are other institutions entirely blameless?

Take the role of investigating agencies. When was the last time three of India's top national agencies — Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Enforcement Directorate (ED) and Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) — invested so much time and energy in the case of an actor's death? ED speedily initiated a money laundering case against Rajput's girlfriend, actor Rhea Chakraborty and her family based on an FIR filed by his family in Bihar with an allegation — since proven to be false — that ₹15 crore had been stolen from the actor's account.

Based purely on WhatsApp conversations — selectively leaked initially by ED — NCB then registered a case against Rhea, her brother and Rajput's house help. It would seem that procurement, consumption and financing of even 59 grams of marijuana for an actor is enough for NCB to make a slew of arrests. Whatever happened to NCB's original mandate of catching those who head inter-state and international drug mafias?

The case has unfolded in an almost fantastical manner: A *prima facie* suicide is suddenly investigated as abetment to suicide, then is just as mysteriously claimed to be murder. The narrative swirls from nepotism in Bollywood moves to mafia connections to financial crime to political involvement to now narcotics. Caught in its coils, Bihar and Mumbai Police bad-mouth each other with little effort at coordination. The Supreme Court steps in and orders a CBI inquiry, raising more troubling questions over jurisdiction in such criminal matters.

Which brings us to the elephant in the room: The role of the political class in using the case for score-settling and election propaganda. Every political party in Bihar has embraced the actor as an iconic figure in an attempt to invoke "Bihari pride" ahead of the state elections. Forget the plight of thousands of Bihari students trapped in flood-hit areas and struggling to give their IIT-JEE and NEET entrance exams. Forget the predicament of migrant labour without wages for months. A campaign for justice for an actor is the perfect distraction. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a partner in the ruling Bihar coalition, has even printed posters and got "Sushant masks" made to drive the message home.

In Maharashtra too, the BJP has used the case to try and corner the ruling alliance, in particular the Shiv Sena. That former Maharashtra chief minister, Narayan Rane, chose to make unsubstantiated charges of rape and murder and even sought to draw in a "youth minister" into the alleged conspiracy is a reflection of the coarseness of public life. The attempt is obvious: Use the case to embarrass the Shiv Sena leadership and hope that the rickety three-party coalition collapses.

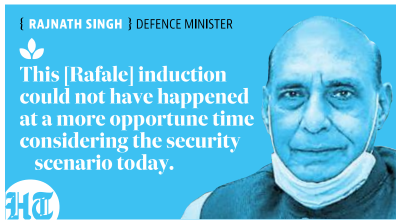
What is more disconcerting is the manner in which civil society has responded. Look at the film industry to which Rajput and Chakraborty belong. Barring a few brave voices, a majority of the elite stars are conspicuously silent, almost frightened into submission by the fear of being trolled. If you can't speak up when an entire industry is being demonised as a den of vice, then the timidity of the rich and powerful movers and shakers of cinema will come to haunt you forever. The vacuum is being filled by self-publicists such as Kangana Ranaut who obviously has her own political agenda. That the Shiv Sena is now targeting Ranaut is another example of how the public discourse has got totally messed up.

Finally, the viewers who lampoon TV news have much to answer for too. In these unrelenting Covid-19 times, when the economy is in sharp decline, jobs are being lost and a belligerent China is sabre-rattling on the border, the average middle-class viewer is taking voyeuristic delight in tracking every twist in the case. Instead of focusing on the issue of drug-taking, mental illness and depression that were at the heart of the actor's existential crisis, as reported by the psychiatrists treating him, the spotlight has been on salacious gossip and even fabricated news. Sadly, if the spectacle of prime time Big Boss style reality TV is the escapist fantasy for a dystopian new India, then why expect any better?

Post-script: Last week in Mumbai, after interviewing the much-sought-after Chakraborty, I went for a morning walk along Marine Drive with friends. The gross domestic product (GDP) numbers had just seen unprecedented contraction and I thought that my business-inclined friends would provide me insights on the faltering economy. "Forget the economy, tell me do you think Rhea is innocent or guilty?" a friend shot back. It makes you wonder, are we hurtling towards becoming a banana republic of manic voyeurs?

The viewers who lampoon TV news have much to answer for, since they are taking voyeuristic delight in salacious gossip HT

Rajdeep Sardesai is a senior journalist and author
The views expressed are personal



To achieve the objectives of NEP, focus on teachers

Satya Narayan Mohanty

In Finland, the tag line for school education is "less is more". It is play and discovery-based learning. This is what the National Education Policy (NEP) has visualised, hoping to fill learning gaps and inculcate critical thinking through scientific methods. But it is unlikely to happen with the ammunition of the past.

In the education system, the three critical elements are teachers, students and the ecosystem of the school such as infrastructure, play arrangements, facilities and the underlying compact with the institution. To encourage creative thinking in students, particularly first-generation learners, the teacher is the most critical component, guiding, encouraging and challenging students. Empirically, studies show government teachers are better qualified and trained, and if made to teach, they deliver better outcomes compared to teachers of the average private schools. But that is for business-as-usual. For the new paradigm of education we are seeking, a complete overhaul is needed.

For one, fun and interactive learning at the early childhood stage will require trained para-teachers. The provision of breakfast may be a solution for nutritional problems of early childhood, but not for play-based learning, where trained teachers will be key.

Two, teachers should be completely disconnected from politics, for it changes their incentives. In some states, there are teachers' constituencies in the bicameral state legislature. Teachers are deeply involved with local politics and that distorts evaluation of the outcomes, assessment of teachers and improving accountability. This relates equally to college and university teachers. By law, it should be proscribed.

The third is the appointment process. School education with a class of 30 would require 2.2 million more teachers. If you add up para-teachers, the numbers will be even higher. Large-scale appointments will be necessary. But it is imperative that teachers remain on probation for a longer period of time, say five years, before they become permanent. This is equally important for higher education. If low faculty motivation currently is a problem, this will be a possible remedy.

Four, teachers and professors should go through a five-year intensive assessment by third parties. Leaving the assessment to state institutions, easily influenced by the government, or to in-house committees, will not work. There must be disciplinary action including removal against those teachers who consistently fare at the bottom. This will result in an uptick in performance.

Five, while NEP has brought in a concept of the school complex, where good teachers support other schools for greater resource efficiency, this needs a system of checks and balances. Otherwise, the base school will suffer with teachers converting themselves into roving ambassadors.

The big pieces in NEP are attempts to reduce workload, remove the tyranny of the examination, and reduce teaching duties to enable interaction with students in colleges and universities. This is accompanied by an emphasis on a common admission test. The direction is correct, but it is to be noted that there are very few people trained in psychometric tests in India. A timeframe should be set to get professionals ready like in the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in the United States, to ensure questions are not repeated or incomprehensible questions are avoided. Indian examiners often end up testing the informational base, rather than the conceptual base and the ability to analyse and synthesise, and this must be avoided. This should be the sixth reform.

And finally, on a different note, envisioning a university in every district is the wrong trajectory for higher education. This exacerbates the problem as the creation of administrative districts is a political activity and has nothing to do with the demand for education. The critical mass required for universities with a modicum of quality may not exist, and poor quality will continue to reduce the return on education, defeating the purpose of NEP.

NEP's goals are noble. But the policy framework needs to be refined and its implementation needs more thought.

Satya Narayan Mohanty is a former education secretary, Government of India
The views expressed are personal

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