

## How Not To Be an Antiracist

**By Kenneth L. Marcus**

**People's Liberation Army soldiers on parade**

Third, because creating broader networks of capable, like-minded partners is core to our strategy to disrupt the Chinese Communist Party's malign influence, the Pentagon continues to build the capacity of our partners globally. This occurs through programs such as the Maritime

PLA modernization is a trend the world must study and prepare for—much like the U.S. and the West studied and addressed the Soviet armed forces in the 20th century. The PLA openly declared its intentions to complete military modernization by 2035 and become a world-class force by 2049. Its comprehensive modernization plan includes a powerful arsenal of conventional missiles alongside a suite of advanced cyber, space and electronic warfare capabilities. It also includes the deployment of artificial intelligence to strengthen

Mr. Esper is U.S. defense secretary.

**Congress last month on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education's Office**

The new antiracism's failures run deeper. Consider University of Southern California student Rose Ritch, who recently resigned as vice presi-

It is encouraging that many Americans are now conscious of the prejudice that African-Americans and other minorities often face. Sadly, the new nationalism provides all the wrong answers. Rather than turn our focus away from invidious discrimination, we must confront it directly. To defeat racism, we must turn away from the new nationalism.

Mr. Marcus is founder and chairman of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law. He served as assistant U.S. secretary of education for civil rights, 2018-20.

## OPINION

### Joe Biden's Leap of Faith



MAIN STREET  
By William McGurn

By now Joe Biden's rosy must be the most famous beard in the world. "The grade Catholic who carries a rosary wherever he goes," reports the *Washington Post*. Biden almost always has rosary beads in his pocket, says the *Washington Post*. Even Rolling Stone priestly claims in, presenting the former vice president as a "practicing Catholic" who "wears his late son Beau's rosary on his wrist." If all beads Mr. Biden's image as the surly Irish Catholic from Scranton, Pa. Today it's an image that also serves a crucial political purpose—to soothe voters who might be troubled by a man who presents himself as an ordinary Catholic even as he advocates for abortion on demand, with no restrictions and paid for by taxpayer dollars where necessary.

But in this election there's a new religious wrinkle, much more consequential than the first debate over whether Mr. Biden is or isn't a good Catholic. For the issue today is no longer whether progressive dogmas from abortion and marriage equality to gender identity will prevail. Most already have.

The question now is whether those who dissent from the new orthodoxy will be permitted to live their lives and run their institutions in ac-

cordance with their beliefs. Let's start with one: A campaign ad released this month features Mr. Biden happily chatting with Catholic nuns on St. Peter's Square. These "lovely women," he says, have always inspired him because they are all about being their brothers' keeper. He even chose a nun to lead the invocation's opening prayer the night he accepted the nomination for president.

But Mr. Biden's policy preferences reveal a less friendly relationship with nuns. As part of ObamaCare, the administration in which he served issued a rule requiring Catholic care providers like the Little Sisters of the Poor to violate their faith by providing contraception and abortifacients for their employees or face religious fines.

The sisters have since won at Supreme Court. Mr. Biden's response? Restore the mandate with the fake exemption the Little Sisters objected to in the first place. This is how "lovely women" who live out a vocation of tending to the least among us can expect to be treated under a Biden presidency.

Now make, say, his running mate Kamala Harris, you won't catch Mr. Biden talking about the Knights of Columbus as though it were a hate group whose members are racist for federal judgeships. It's not his nature. Nevertheless, a Biden-Harris administration would mean a federal bureaucracy less interested in accommodating religious Americans and their institu-

tions than in constricting them. Democrats say so in their platform, in which they "reject" the "broad religious exemptions" that "allow businesses, medical providers, social service agencies and others to discriminate." In other words, religious liberty. This is the sleeper threat. It's already playing out in everything from housing requirements (the Supreme Court is now deciding whether it's not just abortion. The Democrats' stand on religious liberty should trouble voters.

Catholic agencies that don't place children with gay couples can offer foster care) and even, as in the case of Jewish schools, for losing their status for adhering to biblical definitions of marriage to conscience protections (a nurse in Vermont was forced to participate in arranging an abortion against her will). Moreover, meanwhile, wonder if the Equality Act, which is meant to protect LGBT Americans and is strongly backed by Mr. Biden and Ms. Harris, would make Brigham Young University students ineligible for federal research dollars, Pell grants and student loans. Americans were given a preview of coming attractions during Covid-19, when Democratic officials treated bars and casinos better than churches.

All these things will come in the name of "protective health," "equity," "inclusion" and "nondiscrimination." And a Biden administration would push them. How do we know? Because, as the New York Sun's Seth Lipsky says, it's hard to find a single religious-rights case where the Democrats took the religious side. He rattles off the list. "Little Sisters of the Poor, Hosanna Tabor, the Green Family, the cake baker, the town of Greece, N.Y., the pharmacist (who doesn't want to fill birth control prescriptions), the Salinas Herdman who want to require modest dress in their stores, the regulation of circumcision, the Blackwood Cross," says Mr. Lipsky. "Name a case where the broad Democratic Party leadership sides with the religious party."

President Trump was mocked when he said Mr. Biden would "hurt God and hurt the Bible." But however inert the words, today's Democratic Party is willing to use the full force of the federal bureaucracy to bring religious institutions to heel—no matter how genuinely Joe Biden may love his rosary beads.

Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have this upside down," says Bill Muma, CEO and chairman of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty. "The Constitution protects religion from government interference. But in their view, any government objective, no matter how controversial, takes priority over religious belief."

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### BOOKSHELF | By Rian Fertel

## To Taste The Untamed

### Feasting Wild

By Gina Rae La Cerva  
(Greystone, 317 pages, \$26.95)

Gina Rae La Cerva wishes we all ate a little wilder. Wild life humans ate for 99% of their history, leaving behind gathering and domesticated and uncultivated foods. Wild life Henry David Thoreau preferred his fruits: native berries picked from the bush, bitter-sweet white-oak acorns nibbled on a "black November week." Oranges, lemons, pineapples and other famed "table fruits," Thoreau said, "do not feed the imagination as these wild fruits do."

In the early 19th century, back when Thoreau foraged for wild flavors, half the North Americans diet still came from the wild—wolves, geese, fish, sealfood. Today, Ms. La Cerva writes, sealfood remains the only widely consumed wild food, though the rapid rise of aquaculture is making the future of wild-caught fish, shrimp and oysters increasingly uncertain.

In "Feasting Wild," she sets out to "taste the untamed," to experience the feeling that consumed foods that are processed foods, the most adulterated, which haven't been overbred, monocultured, and passed through innumerable unseen hands." In doing so, she not only writes an intense and illuminating travelogue, she offers a corrective to the patriarchal white gaze promoted by dietitrians and chefs like Anthony Bourdain and Andrew Zimmern. Though she focuses on wild foods that most of us would not dare poke with a B-57 fork, Ms. La Cerva combines environmental history with feminist memoir to craft a narrative more in tune with recent works by Robin Wall Kimmerer, Helen MacDonald and Elizabeth Barlowe than any episode of "Bizarre Foods."

We first follow the author to Copenhagen, where she forages for wild plants among the tombs at Assistens Cemetery. Despite the risks—the inadvertent ingestion of lead and other heavy metals—when foraging remains part of the Danish identity. Foraging tourists take note: near Kerteminde's grave grows mallow, a wild onion related to the North American allium commonly called ramps, while the yellow-blooming antipeppermint known as St. John's wort prefers the final resting spot of Nicks Bohr.

Ms. La Cerva hops back to Poland's Białowieża Forest, one of the few remaining primeval forests that cover fragmented Europe, to seek on wild boar ("like pork but earthier") and a superabundance of mushrooms (more than 4,000 species grow here). Polish women, like the author's great-grandmother Esther, could once identify the gustatory and medicinal properties of this forest food: how to best cure toothaches, Jedi's ear for infections of the ear and eye, stinkhorns as aphrodisiacs. But like the old-growth forests, knowledge of "wildcrafting"—of gathering both wild food and this folk pharmacopeia—has all but disappeared.

Eating wild food is an "act of nostalgia," she writes, "for both the natural abundance and the material poverty of the past." This especially resonates for the author during a stay in the Democratic Republic of Congo to report on the trade in "brusque," a catfish meat for any wildlife species hunted for human consumption, including forest elephants, gorilla, turtles, pangolins (rarely sold as pets and bushmeat). Once the prime source of protein for most Congolese, wildlife conservation efforts and the proliferation of affordably farmed meats like chicken have turned brusque into a luxury marker for posh Kinshasa diners (the five-star Grand Hotel dining room offers antelope and goat chops) and immigrants willing to smuggle frozen blocks of meat abroad. At one notable wild-game restaurant, Ms. La Cerva coolly orders crocodile and tomato and spice-simmered duck—a small sub-Saharan salad—even though "it's impossible to know if it was hunted legally or not."

### A bracing travelogue by a culinary forager seeking rare, undomesticated, unadulterated foods in the rapidly disappearing wild.

She writes more passionately about the women who trade in semitail wild-meat markets. "These women deserve an entire book written about them," Ms. La Cerva notes. "Not only because they are long suffering, poor, marginalized, or illiterate... but because these women know how to hunt." That hunt involves circumventing the entrenched colonial racist order. "If a white man kills a wild animal and eats it, we call it *treatment*," she reflects. "If a black man kills a wild animal and eats it, we call it *treatment*." The DRC allows Ms. La Cerva mother glimpse into the wild life, in the form of a Ramones T-shirt and leopard-tooth necklace-wearing, motorcycle-riding, anti-poaching conservationist she calls the Hunter. Together, they make a pair of "lovely and forward-looking," she writes, "and lovers, one might say. Their affair, inevitably doomed, soon takes center stage. They separate, pine from afar through text messages and, reuniting in his native Sweden, hunt a moose. This book would have all the better had Ms. La Cerva turned her instincts to write more on the meat women of Kinshasa and less on the hunt.

The author's journey ends, says Hunter, in Borneo, home of the edible-nest swiftlet. Woven with translucent strands of swiftlet saliva, edible bird's nests are a Chinese delicacy that one perpetually care who ever kills you, from bad skin to a weak libido. One of the world's most expensive foods, the swiftlet nest is now the basis of a \$5 billion industry luring bird's-nest gummy bears, bird's-nest instant coffee, and black-currant-flavored, stem-cell-regaining, wrinkle-fighting, anticancer bird's-nest cookies. Naturally, the wild swiftlet population has collapsed, by nearly 95%, due to overharvesting and the transformation of Borneo's insect-rich rain forests into palm-oil plantations. Today, edible bird's nests are farmed out of massive concrete nestings—open compounds built out of the limestone caves where wild swiftlets once roosted.

What's the solution to the disappearing wild? Ms. La Cerva asks again and again. It's too late to turn back our own culinary clocks, she acknowledges, for humanity to survive on wild asparagus and moose. Yet, she writes, it's never too soon to begin "loving the wild back into existence," enhancing value through consumption—a belief akin to the "eat it to save it" adage promoted by the Slow Food movement. And therein lies the conundrum we must face: By loving the wild, do we risk loving it to death?

Mr. Fertel is the author of "The One True Barbecue."

## The U.S. Admits Too Few Refugees

### By Reid Riddle

While President Trump has rightly criticized the automatic loss of citizenship on his administration's watch the U.S. has increasingly turned away victims of communism and religious persecution. In 2016, before Mr. Trump took office, slightly under 85,000 refugees were admitted to America. Since then, the administration has systematically slashed the ceiling for refugee arrivals, resulting in a historically low cap of 8,000 for this fiscal year. Only about 6,602 have been permitted entry so far, which is on track for a decline of almost 90% from 2016.

Among those kept out are people fleeing leftist authoritarian regimes. For example, only seven Cuban refugees have been resettled since the beginning of 2018, compared with an average of about 2,800 resettled annually during the previous decade. This administration has allowed the resettlement of only 14 Venezuelans and zero Nicaraguans.

The drastic reduction in refugee resettlement has also harmed those fleeing oppression because of their religion, undermining the administration's otherwise commendable commitment to religious liberty. A new report from Open Doors USA—an organization that supports persecuted Christians abroad—and World Relief documents how

abruptly the door has been closed. From the 50 countries where Christians face the most severe oppression in the U.S. resettled about 16,500 Christian refugees in 2016. Midway through 2020, the U.S. had resettled fewer than 950.

Resettlement of other persecuted religious groups—Muslims from Myanmar, Jews from Iran, Yazidis from Iraq—has plummeted at similarly stark levels. "The U.S. government has fallen down on this issue," laments Open Doors USA CEO David Curry.

Rather than banning all immigrants from jihadist regions, which has been U.S. policy since, as a Heritage Foundation report notes, refugees "undergo more rigorous security checks than any other immigrant group." Only a foolish terrorist would seek to use the refugee program as a means of entry. Since the Refugee Ad became law in 1980, none of the more than three million refugees resettled has taken an American life in a terrorist attack, according to the Cato Institute.

With hopes of resettlement to the U.S. diminished, those fleeing persecution are left with only one level option to find safety in America: reaching the country and requesting asylum. The number of individuals granted asylum—

having proved a credible fear of persecution to the satisfaction of an asylum officer or immigration judge—searly declined from fiscal years 2015 to 2018.

But the Trump administration is seeking to block this process as well, proposing sweeping new rules that would reduce basic terms within existing law ("persecution," "political opinion" and "torture," among others) to "America should open its doors to those fleeing communism and religious persecution."

severely restrict who qualifies for asylum. Not everyone who reaches the border should receive asylum, but these regulations would minimize the due process that Congress intended to ensure that the U.S. doesn't send people back to be persecuted or even killed.

The American commitment to protecting the persecuted is rooted in our founding conviction that all are created equal with certain unalienable rights, an idea inspired by the Judeo-Christian belief that all people are made in the image of God. The Bible teaches that "anyone who kills the fatherless or the widow" is cursed.

Knowing how their support has bolstered the Trump administration, American Chris-

tians should feel an acute responsibility to critique these policies. Many have: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, chaired by conservative evangelical Tony Perkins, has urged a return to a historically normal ceiling on refugee admissions of 85,000 a year. The Institute for Religion representing the largest number of Christians in the U.S.—the National Association of Evangelicals, the Southern Baptist Convention and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops—have all been outspoken in urging the restoration of the refugee resettlement program and a rejection of the new asylum rules.

But the bad policies persist and are poised to get worse. The best way to dismantle the Trump administration would be to oust it from Mr. Trump voters—not only organizations—particularly the conservative evangelicals to which the president knows he relies.

Finally, at its best, has stood firmly against socialism and for economic, political and religious freedom. The credibility of these commitments is tested by the country's response to these fascist repressive regimes and seeking refuge. May we not fail the test.

Mr. Riddle, a Republican, represented Wisconsin's Eighth Congressional District, 2011-17. Walter Russell Mead is away.

## When the Postal Service Was the Bomb

### By Bob Greene

The postmaster general was in a pickle. He had failed with mail delivery in a way that had infuriated the public, put members of Congress in the hot seat with their constituents, and landed the president into a political canner. He was looking for a way to re-elevate his national stature.

So he commiserated a mischievous capability of carrying a nuclear warhead. As comically bizarre as this may sound—like a plot that even a deceased B-movie producer would reject—it happened. In 1957 the U.S. postmaster general, Arthur E. Summerfield, attempted to deal with a budgetary shortfall by doing what, in his mind, was the surest way to get rid of the deadweight mail.

The idea backfired. The public was enraged when, on Saturday, April 13, mail was delivered. Elected officials

knew they had to fix things, and fast. Within three days Congress had passed an emergency appropriation and President Dwight D. Eisenhower had signed it off. The next Saturday, the mail was back.

Postmaster Arthur Summerfield had an explosive idea to win the public's trust.

Shut by the bad publicity, Summerfield looked for a way to show his constituents he was providing swift and reliable mail service. Within two years, he had worked out a plan.

Operating in secrecy with the U.S. Navy, he arranged for the use of the submarine USS Barbero, which was equipped to launch nuclear missiles. Then he requested, and was granted, access to a live-on Regulus missile-carrying submarine. Summerfield's plan was to

remove the part of the missile that held the warhead, and replace it with a container full of mail. Then, from out at sea, the Navy would launch the missile toward a distant target. When it got there, Summerfield would retrieve the letters and have them delivered to their addressees, thus proving a preview of the speed of future mail.

On a spring morning in 1953, from 100 miles out in the Atlantic Ocean, the USS Barbero launched the missile in the direction of Mayport Auxiliary Naval Air Station, near Jacksonville, Fla. Twenty-two minutes later, the missile, equipped with leading gear, arrived with its payload intact. Waiting for it was the postmaster general himself.

He helped to unload the approximately 3,000 letters, all of which had been written and signed by him. Each envelope bore a U.S. destination here a forest fire closed stamp. The letters were ad-

dressed to various government officials and dignitaries.

An ebullient Summerfield believed this "advanced his theory." Before mail reached the moon, mail will be delivered within hours from New York to California, to England, to India or Australia by guided missiles. Postal workers at the Naval base hustled the letters onto trucks, en route to their final destinations.

There would never be another missile delivery of U.S. mail. Summerfield's enthusiasm aside, no one in government wanted to pursue it. In ensuing decades, electronic advances made the delivery of written information instantaneous. Most time you're walking down the street checking email on your phone, be grateful you don't have to instead send the sky for screaming squadrons of incoming postal rockets.

Mr. Greene's books include "Queen Bees and Wannabes," "Queen Night."



# HEALTH & WELLNESS PERSONAL JOURNAL.

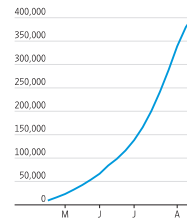
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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Tuesday, August 25, 2020 | **A11**



**Cumulative confirmed COVID-19 cases in the U.S. among children**



Note: Data represents preliminary cumulative counts reported by 49 states in addition to NYC, D.C., Puerto Rico and Guam since they began reporting. Age ranges reported for children varied by state (0-14, 0-17, 0-18, 0-19, 0-20 years).

Sources: American Academy of Pediatrics; Children's Hospital Association



**YOUR HEALTH  
SUMATHI REDDY**

## A Watch for Long-Term Covid Symptoms in Kids

As child cases rise, doctors monitor for possible longer-term effects

**A**s more children become infected with Covid-19, doctors are paying closer attention to potential long-term effects.

In adults, one of Covid's most troubling effects has been so-called long-haul cases, in which people whose illness initially seemed moderate and up having symptoms for months, sometimes getting worse over time. Now as doctors warn that children may be more vulnerable to the virus than initially believed, researchers are looking more closely at longer-term symptoms in kids, too.

Children now represent about 9% of all Covid-19 cases in the U.S., up from 2% in March, according to the most recent weekly report issued from Children's Hospital Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics. The number of child Covid-19 cases has doubled since July 9, totaling 406,109 as of Aug. 13, according to cases reported from 49 states.

The majority of children experience mild illness or even no symptoms from Covid-19, doctors say. But some are reporting symptoms that persist for weeks, or the development of post-viral syndromes. Symptoms reported include fever, cough, headaches, shortness of breath and gastrointestinal problems.

"It's an important area for study because certainly we're still learning a lot about the virus, particularly about its impact on children," says Sean O'Leary, vice chair of

the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Infectious Diseases, who himself is experiencing long-term symptoms from Covid-19. "At least acutely it's less severe in children, but we also need to understand whether there are potentially consequences of long-term effects."

One challenge with tracking long-term symptoms in children is that testing has been inconsistent. Covid-19 tests were difficult to get for children in the early weeks of the pandemic. The number of tests done in children has increased over the past five months, though declined in recent weeks. So far, discussion of children and Covid-19 around school reopening, for instance—has focused more on risks for community transmission than potential longer-term effects.

Matthew Kelly, an assistant professor of pediatric infectious diseases at Duke University Medical Center, oversees a registry of more than 400 children in North Carolina who tested positive for Covid or who had a close contact test positive.

So far, children under age 14 appear to recover quickly and have fewer symptoms, according to preliminary results from the registry published Saturday on the preprint server medRxiv that haven't yet been reviewed by other researchers. Patients 14 to 20 years old had a

range of symptoms similar to what adults have experienced, with respiratory and flu-like symptoms, such as headache and muscle aches. And while most teens had symptoms that resolved in a week, 25% still reported symptoms after 12 days, and 10% still had symptoms after 17 days, such as cough, fever and shortness of breath.

So far the main complication in children with Covid is multisystem inflammatory syndrome (MIS-C), a serious inflammatory syndrome where different body parts—including the heart and brain—can become inflamed, causing a fever, stomach pain, rash and gastrointestinal symptoms. There have been at least 570 cases of MIS-C, according to the CDC. Children usually present with the syndrome two to four weeks after having Covid-19 and are often hospitalized.

Dr. Kelly speculates that MIS-C is likely the extreme end of a spectrum of post-infectious inflammatory syndromes children may experience after Covid-19. "That's the severest form, but there seems to be a larger group of children who develop inflammatory illnesses less severe than what is seen in MIS-C," says Dr. Kelly.

Gabriela Maron, an associate fac-

ulty member in the infectious diseases department at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn., and Ronald Dallas, a clinical research scientist in the infectious diseases department at St. Jude's, oversee and manage another pediatric Covid-19 registry. So far it includes about 4,000 cases of children and adolescents under age 21 with lab-confirmed Covid.

**25**  
Percent of 14 to 20 year olds in a Covid registry who still had symptoms after 12 days

For most, symptoms resolved on average three days later. But between days eight and 28, about 199 kids out of roughly 2,500 whose long-term information has been entered were still reporting symptoms.

Tania Dempsey is an internist and integrative medicine doctor in Purchase, N.Y., who specializes in autoimmune disorders. She has a couple of teenage patients who she has diagnosed with mast cell activation syndrome, a disorder of the immune system that she believes was triggered by a Covid-19 infection.

"I think it's becoming clearer as more kids are getting sick that there's a cohort of children whose immune systems are going to react inappropriately and set off an escalating degree of inflammation," says Dr. Dempsey.



**ANATOMY OF A WORKOUT**  
JEN MURPHY

## How to Build Strong and Flexible Shoulders

**A** normal Major League Baseball season typically has 162 games, plus four to six weeks of spring training.

"That's a lot of throwing," says Andrea Hayden, the assistant strength and conditioning coach for the Minnesota Twins—and the first woman to be a strength and conditioning coach in Major League Baseball. "And a lot of

wear and tear on the shoulders," Ms. Hayden thinks of the shoulder as the knee of the upper body.

We tend to give our hamstrings and quadriceps, the two main muscle groups that stabilize and move the knee joint, a lot of love in the gym but neglect the muscles that keep our shoulders healthy, she says.

The shoulder is a ball-and-socket joint. The ball-like head of the humerus (the long bone of your upper arm) is twice the size of the shoulder socket it fits into, making the joint mobile, but also unstable.

The four muscles of the rotator cuff help move and stabilize the shoulder. Sports that involve repetitive overhead-throwing motions, like baseball and swimming, and professions where the arms

are raised overhead such as hair styling and construction, are at risk of shoulder injuries. And if you sit at a desk, building shoulder strength can help undo the effects of being in that hunched position, says Ms. Hayden.

Working shoulder mobility and strength also will make it easier to perform everyday tasks like reaching up for an item on a high shelf or reaching down to tie your shoe.

Head online to [WSJ.com](http://WSJ.com) to find a six-exercise workout that includes one-arm prone trapezius raises, banded pull-aparts, banded face pulls, forearm plank to dolphin pose, external rotation to wall and plank shoulder taps to keep your shoulders healthy, strong and injury-free. Perform them as a workout or add one or two to your daily routine, she says.

## The Exercise One-Arm Prone Trapezius Raise

**Why:** Sports like baseball, tennis and volleyball rely heavily on the ability to raise the arm overhead, says Ms. Hayden, who demonstrates this exercise in the images above.

When the arm lifts overhead the scapula, or shoulder blade, needs to be able to move freely around the rib cage. Pitchers tend to lose their upward rotation over the course of the season, says Ms. Hayden.

Also, "inefficient movement patterns can cause the average person to have limited range of motion," she says. This exercise trains the scapula to upwardly rotate to allow the

arm to fully extend up and out away from your body, pain free.

**How:** Lie face down on a bench or the side of your bed with one arm dangling down to the side.

Your chin can rest on the bench or bed. Lift the arm upward and outward to 45 degrees, parallel to the ground, palm facing toward your head.

At the top of the movement your body should form a half of a Y-shape. Slowly lower down. Repeat 8 to 10 times.

**Options:** Ms. Hayden says if you add weight, keep it light, around 2.5 pounds.

"The idea is to create proper movement patterning so the right muscles are firing to perform the movement," she says.

BRUCE HEINZELGARN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL ©2

# Opinion

The New York Times

## EDITORIAL

## Politicizing Science Will Cost Lives



ALEX BRANDON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Dr. Stephen Hahn of the F.D.A., which gave authorization to a Covid-19 therapy after complaints by President Trump.

The Food and Drug Administration is no stranger to political interference. Special interests have played as much of a role as actual data in the approval of questionable cancer drugs and faulty medical devices for almost as long as the agency has existed.

Yet the latest breach of principle by the F.D.A. feels far more perilous than earlier ones — in part because of the number of lives and livelihoods at stake, but also because it's part and parcel of a systematic undermining of the nation's premier scientific institutions.

On Sunday the agency granted an emergency authorization for the use of plasma from people with coronavirus antibodies to treat Covid-19 patients, absent substantial evidence that the treatment actually works or a definitive sense of who might benefit from it.

Last week, regulators appeared to be holding off on authorizing wider use of such "convalescent plasma," owing to scientists' concerns about that lack of evidence. But after President Trump complained bitterly about that delay, the F.D.A. decided to move forward.

In announcing the new decision, the president and his team have vastly overstated the promise of convalescent plasma, calling it a "major therapeutic breakthrough" and claiming that it has been proven to "reduce mortality from Covid by as much as 30 to 50 percent," without explaining that any such findings come with heavy caveats.

Dr. Stephen Hahn, the F.D.A.'s commissioner, went so far as to suggest that the plasma therapy could save the lives of 35 out of every 100 coronavirus patients who took it. As STAT News reports, the number is much closer to three to five out of every 100, and even that lower estimate is questionable: The data came from an observational study, not a rigorous clinical trial.

Dr. Hahn could have made a more honest case for authorizing plasma therapy by simply pointing to the urgency of the moment and the apparent safety of the treatment. The administration could have helped resolve the questions around convalescent plasma by arranging for more rigorous clinical trials. That it instead chose egregious overselling of its benefit is unconscionable, especially as an election nears.

This is hardly the first time the Trump administration has sacrificed scientific integrity for the sake of political theater.

The president pressed the F.D.A. to grant a similar authorization to the malaria drugs chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, despite ample warning from scientists that the drugs were not only unproven for the coronavirus but potentially dangerous. That authorization was revoked in June, after the drugs were linked to serious heart complications in more than 100 patients, including at least 25 who died.

The administration also stripped the agency of its ability to regulate lab-developed diagnostic tests, a move that may improve the supply of coronavirus diagnostics but will also wreak havoc on countless patients suffering from other serious conditions. Nearly from the start of the pandemic, the president has sidelined, muzzled and disempowered the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an agency with perhaps the highest concentration of infectious disease expertise in the world.

To the administration's supporters — indeed, to anyone eager for coronavirus treatments — it may seem like a win to eliminate roadblocks that keep tests, treatments and vaccines from entering the marketplace. But skipping science now only costs more time, and potentially more lives, in the long run.

What if convalescent plasma doesn't work? What if it does, but only on a specific subset of patients? What if it's good for some patients but actually dangerous for others? Authorizing the therapy makes it all but impossible to answer those questions, because patients who can get it from their doctors are unlikely to sign up for a clinical trial.

Politicizing the regulatory process — tying the authorization and approval of treatments to political considerations — undermines the entire system. On Saturday, the president accused the F.D.A. of deliberately thwarting the development of a coronavirus vaccine in an effort to imperil his re-election.

The agency's latest moves show that it's susceptible to such criticism. This makes it hard to trust that regulators will do their jobs to fully and publicly vet any prospective vaccines before allowing them on the market.

If widespread vaccination is the key to victory over a pandemic that has already cost more than 170,000 American lives, injecting politics into medical science is dangerous and potentially fatal.

## LETTERS

### The Rush to Proclaim Covid Treatments

TO THE EDITOR:  
Re "Stung by Trump, F.D.A. Authorizes Plasma Therapy" (front page, Aug. 24):

President Trump has no scruples about prematurely pronouncing the efficacy of inadequately tested Covid-19 treatments and vaccines. By undermining the independent authority of the Food and Drug Administration and labeling the federal agency as populated by "deep state" operatives, all pandemic-oriented medical decisions under his watch are suspect — another norm shattered.

It couldn't be clearer that our lives and the lives of our loved ones are meaningless when pitted against his blind political ambition.

ANDREW MALEKOFF  
LONG BEACH, N.Y.

TO THE EDITOR:

It now appears that our president has managed to bully the Food and Drug Administration into allowing the use of plasma therapy to treat coronavirus patients without the proper double-blind studies to prove its effectiveness and safety. It seems that Donald Trump is playing with America's health the way he plays golf: He cheats.

RICHARD GOLDMAN, SOLON, OHIO

TO THE EDITOR:

It is shameful that the F.D.A. caved to political pressure to give this emergency use authorization. The Infectious Diseases Society of America, reviewing the same data, concluded that the utility of this treatment is not yet clear.

Is the administration going to exert this same pressure on the F.D.A. (which obviously caved)

### Arctic Oil Leases

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "U.S. Plans to Auction Oil Leases as Arctic Protections End" (news article, Aug. 18): Of all the abhorrent acts in President Trump's "Little Shop of Horrors" presidency, auctioning oil leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska is among the worst.

We can fix the Postal Service; we can change immigration and tax laws; we can streamline our response to Covid-19 based on science. But once this pristine area is overwhelmed with oil rigs, trucks and human detritus, it is lost forever. And oil is the fuel that we are pinned in order to save the planet, so the only justification for despoiling a national treasure for future generations is so that a few people can make a lot of money.

Sadly, this is the philosophical essence of Mr. Trump's reign. If we are lucky, the process will not play out quickly enough, and President Joe Biden can shut it down. We can hope!

CAROL KRAINES, DEERFIELD, ILL.

### Justice for Lori Loughlin

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Full House" Actress Gets Two Months in College Admissions Scandal" (news article, Aug. 22):

As an advocate for educational justice and a prison abolitionist, I can't say I'm thrilled with Lori Loughlin's jail sentence. Instead of sending her to jail, the judge should have sent her back to high school.

Actually doing the work required to get into the University of Southern California — getting high grades, participating in extracurriculars and acing the SATs — would give her better appreciation for why her actions are not just illegal, but also unethical.

KIMBERLY PROBUS  
BREWSTER, MASS.

### Flight of the Trump Donors

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Trump's Campaign Coffers Low on Big-Dollar Checks" (front page, Aug. 17):

It's not surprising that multimillionaire and billionaire donations to President Trump's re-election campaign have tapered off. Yes, he promised — and provided — billions in tax cuts for the wealthiest.

But the rich like to bet on the winner. And even billionaires need a competent government so they don't have to bury their relatives, shut their businesses and suffer losses when their employees and customers are homebound.

Mangling public health and the economy disproportionately devastates poor families. Ultimately, however, disdain for government hurts us all.

AMY HANAUER, WASHINGTON

The writer is executive director of the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy.

regarding emergency use authorization for a vaccine? Where is the regard for the health of Americans? Certainly not at the F.D.A. or the White House.

ALICE BARUCH, NEW YORK

The writer is an infectious disease specialist.

TO THE EDITOR:

How interesting (and not surprising) that President Trump makes an announcement late Sunday afternoon about convalescent plasma as a miracle drug to fight the coronavirus. The president makes it sound as if this is a major breakthrough to save lives. Yet I'm confused, because convalescent plasma has been around for a while, and it has been given to patients with the virus, but there have been doubts about how helpful it has been.

As the Republican convention begins, will each day this week bring another "announcement"? JENNIFER DORN, NEW YORK

TO THE EDITOR:

I have two words for President Trump and others in his administration who are politicizing the search for a Covid-19 vaccine and treatments by cutting corners and ignoring well-established approval protocols: Remember thalidomide.

ROBERT S. CARROLL, STATEN ISLAND

TO THE EDITOR:

I will not be vaccinated against the Covid-19 virus until I have seen the president and the first lady being publicly vaccinated, proving that they believe that the vaccine is safe and effective, and that it has not been produced in a hurried process for political reasons.

LAURA M. WILBUR  
SOUTHPORT, CONN.

### The Risks if Biden Loses

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Learning to Love Joe Biden" (column, Aug. 16):

Jennifer Senior gives us a clear-eyed mini-portrait of Joe Biden, and then ends her piece with a clear-eyed question: If Joe Biden doesn't win, could we survive his loss? Because I believe that the survival of America as a democratic nation, and the survival of the planet as ecologically sustainable, will be at great risk if he loses, I am working extremely hard for him and Kamala Harris.

He wasn't my first, second or even third choice in the primaries, and I don't "love" him. But if he is elected, I believe he will surround himself with a top-flight group of advisers, and an competent and honest cabinet and administration — which would be the exact opposite of what we have been forced to endure since Jan. 20, 2017.

I will be able to take deep breaths once again, knowing that while mistakes will undoubtedly be made, they will come from the best of, rather than the most corrupt, intentions.

RICHARD J. BRENNER  
MILLER PLACE, N.Y.

### Prisoners Who Fight Fires

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "A Wary California Released Inmate Firefighters. Now Fires Rage" (front page, Aug. 23):

I grew up in Santa Cruz, and my family and friends still live there. I have also spent the last 20 years of my life trying to end the war on drugs and reduce the number of people behind bars who shouldn't be there.

I find it incredibly ironic and hypocritical that California would use and depend on the labor of people behind bars, have them risk their lives to put out fires, while paying them a measly couple of dollars. Not to mention that the same people we depend on to fight these fires, and others who are incarcerated, are treated terribly and inhumanely so much of the time.

If we are happy to use their skills when they are behind bars, why not pay them a decent wage and hire them now that they are out of prison? There is no reason to fly in firefighters from around the world when people who are currently or formerly incarcerated have experience and are in California.

Paying a real salary to the incarcerated firefighters would be a positive step to make up for the exploitation of their work from before. It would also be a win-win both for them and the people of California who need their skills to help save their homes.

TONY NEWMAN, BROOKLYN

## MICHELLE GOLDBERG

## New York's School Chaos Is Breaking Me

I'M WRITING THIS COLUMN at 4 a.m., because I can't sleep, again.

In New York City, where I live, in-person school is supposed to start in just over two weeks. Officially, my kids' public elementary school has adopted one of those logistically demented hybrid schedules, in which students attend either Tuesday and Thursday or Wednesday and Friday, plus every other Monday. But parents haven't been told their days yet, and despite the insistence of Mayor Bill de Blasio, I'm increasingly unsure the school will open at all.

There is widespread opposition to the mayor's plan among principals, including the principal of my own kids' school. The teachers union is talking about striking.

It's extremely unlikely that schools will open on Sept. 8; my city councilman, Brad Lander, told me, though he said he thinks there's a slightly better-than-even chance that they'll open later this fall.

Until we actually know what's happening, it's impossible to make plans of any sort. I'm lucky enough to have some options, even if they are all terrible. I can move to the coronavirus hot spot where my retired parents live and get their help. I can go into debt to get my kids into learning pods, if I can find openings.

Yet when I lie in bed struggling to figure out how to balance physical risk, economic sustainability and emotional well-being, I can't make the equation work. And if I can't do it, I'm not sure how parents with far fewer resources are doing it either.

A friend who works in chronically underfunded city high schools pointed out that privileged parents like me are getting a taste of something that other urban parents have always gone through. No matter what I do — no matter how much futile energy I spend trying to think my way out of this — an adequate public education is

now out of reach for my family, and I'm not quite sure how to secure a private one. I'm one of many relatively rich people experiencing what poor people experience all the time — total abandonment by our government.

The abandonment starts, of course, at the top, with a president who has refused to take the necessary steps to get the pandemic under control. By blundering into

*So this is how it feels to be abandoned by your government.*

the debate over schools, issuing threats and pressuring the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to change its guidelines, the administration has destroyed many people's confidence that schools can be reopened safely, even in places like New York City that have very low transmission rates.

Republican senators have abandoned families by refusing to pass new funding to allow schools to improve ventilation and make other urgently required upgrades. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has abandoned families by refusing to raise taxes on the wealthy even as state budget cuts could mean 9,000 teacher layoffs in the city. The State Legislature has failed families by refusing to let the city borrow money as a stopgap measure.

I nearly sobbed with relief when I learned, on Monday, that the mayor and schools chancellor had finally unveiled a plan for outdoor classrooms — because it's been so punishingly rare during this pandemic for anyone with authority to use it creatively on children's behalf. Yet, welcome as this plan is, it's impossible to un-

derstand why they made us wait all summer for it.

Recently I ran into an acquaintance, a psychotherapist named Lesley Alderman, who told me that among her patients, those with young children were generally struggling the most. "Parents with young kids, they're tearing their hair out," she told me. Many of them, she said, "want their kids desperately to go back to school, and then there's this kind of guilt: 'Am I selfish for wanting this? Am I putting my kids in jeopardy? Are we putting the teachers in jeopardy?'"

These aren't dilemmas that individuals should have to solve. "Why isn't the government, particularly here in New York City, helping the schools, funding the schools properly, so that the schools can be a safe place where their kids can go?" asked Alderman. Though parents are blaming themselves for not being able to make their lives work, she said, "Someone failed them."

Alderman works on a sliding scale, so her patients range from the middle class to the affluent. Because, in this environment, parents need a lot of money to have even a minimally tolerable quality of life, many whom she talks to feel both newly envious of others and ashamed of that envy. "They just feel like, all the sudden, what if I've done my kids wrong?" she says.

When safety and education are so profoundly privatized, when even the meager social supports America once offered to families simply disappear, panic and self-recrimination result. There are only two ways out of pandemic-driven insecurity: great personal wealth or a functioning government.

Right now, many of us who'd thought we were insulated from American precarity are finding out just how frightening the world can be when you don't have either. □



BRET STEPHENS

## Biden's Loose Lips Could Sink Him

IF JOE BIDEN isn't careful, Donald Trump might have a new nickname for him: "Shutdown Joe." Or maybe, "Shut Down Joe." Those monikers came to mind after the former vice president's biggest blunder in the campaign thus far.

I'm referring to Biden's comment, in his interview last week with ABC's David Muir, that if scientists advised him to shut down the country again to contain a winter surge of Covid-19 and the flu, "I would shut it down; I would listen to the scientists." It's the sort of remark that surely plays well with voters who already support him. It might even have national majority support.

But it doesn't help with the voters Biden needs to avoid antagonizing in swing districts.

Few stories bring that reality into sharper focus than Simon Romero's report in Monday's Times on New Mexico's neck-and-neck congressional race between first-term Democratic incumbent, Rep. Xochitl Torres Small, and Yvette Herrell, her Republican challenger. New Mexico has trended Democratic in recent years, and a June poll had Biden with a comfortable lead in the state.

But Romero reports red-hot anger in the district over the restrictive coro-

### Democracies elect presidents to lead, not to defer.

navirus policies of the Democratic governor, Michelle Lujan Grisham, that have helped keep case counts low at a painful economic price. There is "open defiance by sheriffs, business owners, and many others of Ms. Lujan Grisham's policies." Turnout in the G.O.P. primary surged by more than 40 percent over 2016, as against a Democratic increase of 5 percent.

The strategy of running hard to the right by avowing loyalty to Mr. Trump while blasting Democrats for problems associated with the pandemic, Romero adds, "could be working for Ms. Herrell, who lost the 2018 race by fewer than 4,000 votes."

What's happening in Torres Small's district, which in 2016 went for Trump by a 10-point margin, isn't going to decide the presidential race, even in New Mexico. But it offers a taste of a powerful current of anxiety and resentment that Trump has positioned himself to exploit, and that — to judge by his shutdown remark — Biden doesn't seem to grasp.

The anxiety is from people hanging on by their fingernails (if they're still hanging on at all) to jobs, businesses, livelihoods and homes on account of a pandemic whose toll in lives and health can be weighed against the costs of fighting it. In the hierarchy of fears, what is Covid-19 to a healthy 35-year-old restaurateur next to the prospect of losing everything except a meager government check?

The resentment goes just as deep among those who feel talked down to by people whose own track record as experts leaves something to be desired. Remember when (on Feb. 29) the surgeon general tweeted, "Seriously people — STOP BUYING MASKS?" Remember when the most urgent national need was for face mask makers — until those fears proved largely unfounded? Remember the scientists who hypocritically failed to abide by the sort of strictures they demanded of the public?

None of this is a failure of science per se, or an excuse for reckless personal behavior. It is certainly no justification for Trump's appalling management of our crisis, particularly his failure to promote and provide for adequate testing. But it is a failure by people who claim to speak, with unassailable authority, in the name of science. And loose talk of nationwide shutdowns plays into the fears of voters who feel they have been both impoverished and patronized.

The danger Biden now courts is twofold. He is promising to hand over his decision-making authority to unelected people who, whatever their education, expertise or virtues, haven't gained the trust of fence-sitting voters.

And he is proposing to resort to a strategy, such as Wall Street Journal reporter Greg Ip reported on Monday, is now being viewed by some economists and even health experts as "an overly blunt and economically costly tool" that could have been avoided in favor of "alternative strategies that could slow the spread of the epidemic at much less cost."

All of this creates a dangerous opening for Trump. Voters won't necessarily turn to Biden if they feel he will merely rubber-stamp the same set of policies that they wanted to avoid in the first place. Democracies elect leaders to lead, not defer; to occasionally buck conventional wisdom, not parrot it.

Biden and his advisers may suppose they're on a glide path to reelection against a manifestly flawed and failed incumbent. But they face an opponent who fights best when he's cornered, and who will take the same ruthless political advantage of Biden's line that George W. Bush's campaign did of John Kerry's calamitous classic about the Iraq war, "I actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it." The Hippocratic oath for the Biden campaign should be, "First, do no self-harm."

The next time Biden is asked about lockdowns, he might cite a line from John F. Kennedy: "Scientists alone can establish the objectives of their research," the 35th president said. "But society, in extending support to science, must take into account its own needs." That's a line to live over a wavering voter. □



Janet Yellen and Jared Bernstein

IT BECAME clear this summer that public health measures across much of the country were coming more soon and without proper medical safeguards against the coronavirus. So now, once again, the commerce that Americans rely upon is reeling. About 40 percent of Americans live in places that are pausing or dialing back reopening.

Yet the Senate left for its August recess without a compromise plan on a coronavirus relief bill for states, cities, the unemployed, businesses and the public health system. If senators still fail to return after Labor Day, millions of needy Americans will suffer — and the overall economy could degrade from its current slow rebound in growth to no growth at all.

Both monetary policy, which is the Federal Reserve's job, and fiscal policy, the job of the federal government, have complementary roles to play in supporting the economy. (State governments can't help because their revenues are plummeting and they are mandated to balance their budgets, which require spending cuts and layoffs and only add to the economy's woes.)

The economics of this moment are not complicated: A self-sustaining recovery cannot occur unless the virus is controlled. It is true that after the first shutdowns of March and April, the economy did begin, in May and June, to pull itself out of a deep, pandemic-induced hole, thanks in part to generous federal unemployment assistance that the Senate let expire in July after negotiations between Democrats and Republicans broke down.

Now, so-called real-time data show consumer spending slowing overall and deteriorating conditions for low-income households, who have become more anxious about how they will pay for their rent and their food. In a recent survey, 12 percent of American adults, or 30 million, reported that their households sometimes or often didn't have enough food in the past week. (For Black and Latino households, the share was about 21 percent.)

The numbers reflect the consequence of at least three forces: acceleration of the spread of the virus; expiration of the supplemental federal unemployment benefits; and the ending of various eviction moratoriums. All three developments disproportionately affect low-income people and persons of color. And aside from the

grave ethical questions raised by ending crucial safeguards for the vulnerable, such actions endanger the economy as a whole.

The Federal Reserve has largely done its job. By mid-March, it cut short-term interest rates to zero, and all but promised to keep them there for quite a long time. The Fed also bought large quantities of government bonds and government-backed mortgage securities to keep markets functioning and to keep borrowing costs low. These actions have pushed the 10-year Treasury yield down to almost its lowest level ever, which will spur more spending

### The Fed has largely done its job. Politicians are still on vacation.

in crucial sectors like housing and automobiles.

In March, when the credit market, the economy's bloodstream, began to clog, the Fed established emergency measures to keep credit flowing — to businesses small and large and to state and local governments. This forceful response cleared the blockages.

Congress, however, cannot expect the Fed to keep everything together on its own.

When unemployment is exceptionally high and inflation is historically low, as they both are now, the economy needs more fiscal spending to support hiring. Monetary power sets the table and Congress's fiscal dollars bring in the diners.

In this way, they form a potent one-two punch against stagnation. The Fed makes sure the credit backdrop supports growth; Congress and the president make sure families and businesses have enough

money in their pockets.

As his chair, Jerome Powell, has recently stressed, the Fed has "lending powers, not spending powers." The Fed can't send out checks to households, increase unemployment payments, stay evictions or provide grants to small businesses on the verge of shuttering. These are jobs for Congress and for the Trump administration.

Until August, Congress had actually been quite a strong partner to the Fed's work. The situation now — congressional inaction in extending fiscal support — is reminiscent of a similar period after the last recession.

At the start of 2011, unemployment was still elevated at just over 9 percent. The Fed had lowered interest rates to around zero. But Congress allowed fiscal support to lapse, worried more about deficits than all those still unemployed. The Fed chair then to restart. But we could not be more confident that our economic prescription is the right one. The Fed stepped up once again, it's Congress's turn. □

So why, then, are we back here again? Why is Mr. Powell having to make the same plea to Congress that Mr. Bernanke did and why is a Fed chair being ignored again?

We weren't in the room, so we don't know exactly why congressional negotiations broke down or what it will take for them to restart. But we could not be more confident that our economic prescription is the right one. The Fed stepped up once again, it's Congress's turn. □

Why this fixation on phantom menaces? There has always been a paranoid style in American politics that sees sinister conspiracies behind social and cultural change — a style going all the way back to fear of Catholic immigrants in the 19th century. Those of us who remember the 1990s know that QAnon-type conspiracy theories have been out there for decades; they've just become more visible thanks to social media and a president who attributes all his failures to the machinations of the "deep state."

Beyond that, however, a lot of the focus on imaginary threats represents a defensive response from people who repeatedly demonstrated, even before the coronavirus hit, that they have no idea how to do policy, that is, to cope with real threats.

After all, America on the day Trump took office was in utopia. The overall economy was doing well, with steady job growth and falling unemployment — trends that continued, with no visible break, for the next three years. But much of the country suffered from persistent economic weakness and low employment. Homicides were low, but "deaths of despair" from drugs, suicide and alcohol were rising sharply.

So a president who really cared about American carnage would have had plenty to work on.

But Trump never even tried. His response, such as it was, to regional decline was a trade war that, on net, reduced manufacturing employment. The rest of his economic policy was standard Republican fare, focused on corporate tax cuts that didn't even boost business investment. His only visible response to the opioid crisis was a push to take away health insurance from millions.

Then came Covid-19 — which, by the way, has already killed far more Americans than were murdered in the decade that preceded Trump's inauguration. And the administration's response, aside from the occasional promotion of quick remedies, has consisted of little bit denial and insistence that the whole thing will miraculously go away.

Trump, in other words, can't devise policies that respond to the nation's actual needs, nor is he willing to listen to those who can. He won't even try. And at some level both he and those around him seem aware of his basic inadequacy for the job of being president.

What he and they can do, however, is conjure up imaginary threats that play into his supporters' prejudices, coupled with conspiracy theories that resonate with their fear and envy of know-it-all elites: QAnon is only the most ludicrous example of this genre, all of which portrays Trump as the hero defending us from invisible evil.

If all of this sounds crazy, that's because it is. And it's almost certainly not a political tactic that can win over a majority of American voters. It might, however, scare enough people, or even convince them with vote suppression and the unrepresentative nature of the Electoral College, Trump can manage, barely, to hang on to power.

I don't think this desperate strategy is going to work. But it's all Trump has left. The only thing he can hope for is fear itself — Late Mammals, unreasoning, or even terror based on nothing real at all. □

PAUL KRUGMAN

## QAnon Is Trump's Last, Best Chance

LAST WEEK'S Democratic National Convention was mainly about decency about portraying Joe Biden and his party as good people who will do their best to heal a nation afflicted by a pandemic and a depression. There were plenty of dire warnings about the threat of Trumpism; there was frank acknowledgment of the toll taken by disease and unemployment; but on the whole the message was surprisingly upbeat.

This week's Republican National Convention, by contrast, however positive its official theme, is going to be QAnon all the way.

I don't mean that there will be featured speeches claiming that Donald Trump is protecting us from an imaginary cabal of liberal pedophiles, although anything is possible. But it's safe to predict that the next few days will be filled with QAnon-type warnings about terrible events that aren't actually happening and evil conspiracies that don't actually exist.

That has, after all, been Trump's style since the very first day of his presidency.

New presidents traditionally use their inaugural addresses to deliver a message of hope and unity, even in dark times: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Trump, however, offered a vision of "American carnage," in particular of inner cities devastated by violent crime. His rhetoric was ugly and had clear racial overtones, but it also had another problem: It bore no relationship to reality. Trump took office in a nation whose violent crime rate had been falling for decades; our big cities were as safe as they had ever been.

The same pattern of attempts to panic Americans over nonexistent threats recurs throughout this administration. If you get your information from administration officials or Fox News, you probably believe that millions of undocumented immigrants cast fraudulent votes, even though actual voter fraud hardly ever happens; that Black Lives Matter

### The only thing he can hope for is fear itself.

protests, which with some exceptions have been remarkably nonviolent, have turned major cities into smoking ruins; and more.

Why this fixation on phantom menaces? There has always been a paranoid style in American politics that sees sinister conspiracies behind social and cultural change — a style going all the way back to fear of Catholic immigrants in the 19th century. Those of us who remember the 1990s know that QAnon-type conspiracy theories have been out there for decades; they've just become more visible thanks to social media and a president who attributes all his failures to the machinations of the "deep state."

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## Enfold Yourself in Small Comforts

Margaret Renkl  
NASHVILLE

THE scent of sun-dried sheets fresh off the clothesline can completely change my state of mind. Like the sense of well-being that comes over me when a song from my youth is playing on the radio, the smell of line-dried sheets takes me home to Alabama, back to a time when all my beloved elders were still alive, still humming as they shook out a wad of damp bedsheet and pinned them to the line.

This summer I have repeatedly washed not just my sheets but also our 20-year-old matelassé coverlet, whose scalloped edges are now beginning to fray. I have washed the dust ruffle for possibly the first time in its entire existence. Once the linens are reassembled, I crawl between the sheets, breathe in and feel the muscles across the top of my back begin to loosen. As my friend Serenity's mother is fond of saying, "There are very few problems in this world that putting clean sheets on the bed won't improve, even if just a little bit."

These days it's truly just a little bit, even when the clean sheets have been dried on a clothesline in the bright summer sun. Everyone I know is either suffering terribly or terribly worried about someone who is suffering. When they ever find work? What if they get sick at work and can't afford to take time off? What if they bring the virus home to the people they love? How will they work if their kids also home-school their children? Will their parents die of the virus? Will their parents die of loneliness before they can die of the virus?

For months now, all my phone calls and texts and emails have begun, "How are you, really?" or "How is...?" Sometimes I'm the one who's asking and sometimes I'm the one who's being asked, but every conversation begins the same way.

Without even thinking about why, I engage in useless compensation. Bringing a few swallowtail caterpillars inside to save them from the red wings. Repotting eight years' worth of Mother's Day orchids. Buying mask after mask, as though this virus or this style or this pattern will somehow protect me and those I love from getting through these days primarily by way of magical thinking, and sheets billowing on a hot August wind are my talismans against fear and loss.

In June, after 25 years in this house, my husband set to work on our 70-year-old kitchen cabinets, chiseling out layers of paint, planing and sanding warped edges.

When he was finished, the cabinet doors would close all the way, and stay closed, for the first time in decades. If you ask him why he went to all this trouble, he has no explanation beyond the obvious: For 25 years it needed to be done, and so he did it.

But I think it's more than that. I think he was worrying about his lonesome father, quarantined in an efficiency apartment, and that's why he fixed these cupboard doors. He was worrying about our oldest son's newborn wedding and our middle son's new job as an essential worker. He was worrying about whether our youngest son's university would make the inevitable decision to hold classes online because we had to sign a yearlong lease for an apartment our son might never set foot in. My husband can't control any of those

### 'I now iron our masks' and other tales of coping in the pandemic era.

things, much less cure Covid-19, but he can by God make the kitchen cabinets stop flying open and knocking us in the head while we cook.

The other day, I posted a picture on Facebook of our masks drying on the clothesline. "At some point I'm going to have to stop buying masks with flowers on them," I wrote. "I don't know why I keep this new mask with flowers on it will solve everything, but I keep thinking it will."

My friends began to chime in. "In case you are wondering, ice cream doesn't seem to solve anything either, but I'm still collecting data," my friend Nomi wrote. "I confess I have not picked up an iron in years, but I now iron our masks each week," wrote Tina. "It's important to get the pleats just right. For some reason."

We know the reason. In Margaret Atwood's 1989 debut novel, "The Edible Woman," a character named Duncan copes with chaos by ironing: "I like flattening things out, getting rid of the wrinkles, it gives me something to do with my hands," he says.

A few days later I was still thinking about Tina ironing those masks, so I asked why my Facebook friends are doing to manage their own anxieties. When I

checked back a few hours later, there were more than 100 comments, and every one of them was a lesson, or at least a needed reminder, for me.

My friends are giving themselves difficult and absorbing assignments: reading classic novels, learning a new language or working complicated puzzles. "I am doing so many puzzles because it feels good to put something back together again," my friend Erica wrote. They are throwing themselves into the domestic arts: preparing complex meals, learning to make paper flowers and, yes, ironing. "I've been ironing my pillowcases," wrote Elizabeth. "They are feeding the birds and sometimes the turtles, rescuing orphaned opossums, walking in the woods. They are sitting on the porch — just sitting there, listening. At night they are going outside to look at the stars."

They are taking care of others — adopting puppies and lonely neighbors, coaching elderly aspiring writers via Zoom, breaking their own rules against pets in bed, taking the time to get to know their U.S. Mail carriers. They are meeting friends for coffee or a walk from a safe distance — and making a pact to talk about anything but the coronavirus. They are reveling in the slower pace of family life and falling in love with their partners all over again. My sister, who still lives in Alabama, is sending boxes of Chilton County peaches to faraway friends who have never before experienced the taste of heaven.

Tears welled up as I read their stories, and by the time I'd reached the end, I was openly weeping. It felt like nothing less than a blessing, in this hurt and hurtful time, to remember how creative human beings can be, how tender and how kind.

We may be in the middle of a story whose end we don't know, or even whether it will end, but we are not helpless characters created and directed by an unseen novelist. We have the power, even in this Age of Anxiety, to enfold ourselves in small comforts, in tiny, joyful pleasures.

We can walk out into the dark and look up at the sky. We can remind ourselves that the universe is so much bigger than this fretful, feverish world, and that it is still expanding. And still filled with stars. □

MARGARET RENKL is a contributing opinion writer and the author of the book "Late Mammals: Unreasoning, or Even Terror Based on Nothing Real at All."

Please visit [nytimes.com/opinion](https://www.nytimes.com/opinion) for Opinion coverage of the Republican National Convention

## IT TAKES TWO

Amid economic distress, farm sector provides hope. But broad-based recovery will need urban economic activity to step up too

OVER THE PAST month or so, leading economic indicators have pointed towards a two-paced recovery. Sales of tractors and two-wheelers, proxies of rural demand, appear to have rebounded strongly, indicating that the pickup in rural areas has been swifter than in the urban centres which have borne the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic. In large part, this optimism over the relatively stronger rural recovery stems from the healthy performance of the agricultural sector which was excluded from the lockdown restrictions. As per CARE Ratings, the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector is likely to grow by 3.5 per cent in the first quarter of the current financial year. This, as reported in this paper, implies that for the first time since quarterly estimates of growth have been published, the farm sector is likely to register positive growth even as the rest of the economy (barring the government sector) contracts. The last time the economy had contracted was in 1979-80 by 5.2 per cent, but that year, agricultural GDP had also registered a contraction.

The strong performance of the farm sector has been on the back of a good rabi harvest — the Agriculture Ministry has pegged the output of wheat, chana and other rabi crops at 151.72 million tonnes, up 5.6 per cent from last year. Further, a favourable monsoon season — rains were 7 per cent above the long-term average as on August 21 — also bodes well for agriculture. Total area under kharif coverage was up 9 per cent as compared to the previous year. Higher food inflation in some commodities may also lead to greater realisations for farmers. This rise in agricultural activity, coupled with higher allocations to the MGNREGA (total outlay under the scheme has risen to a record high of Rs 1.14 lakh crore this year), also appeared to have led to a sharp drop in rural unemployment during this period, as observed in the CMIE data. However, healthy growth of the farm sector, even if it continues, is unlikely to offset the economic losses suffered by other parts of the economy. The declining share of agriculture in rural household incomes — sectors like construction now account for a sizeable portion — implies that prospects of a broad-based rural recovery remain uncertain. As the Reserve Bank of India noted in its annual report, fuller recovery in rural areas is being "held back by muted wage growth which is still hostage to migrant crisis and associated employment losses".

As rural households depend on sectors like construction, manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade to a greater extent than before, how these activities shape up will determine the pace of revival of the broader rural economy. This in turn depends on the trajectory of the pandemic and is a consequence of how economic activities shape up in urban areas. It is possible that heightened risk aversion, self imposed restrictions, and localised lockdowns continue to drag on activities in urban areas, impinging upon rural economic activity as well.

## TEACHER'S DAY & NIGHT

Many teachers are using disruption of pandemic to come up with solutions adapted to their environments, local needs

THE PANDEMIC HAS forced schooling to move online, but the burden of digital inequality has fallen on the great majority of children who do not have access to smartphones, let alone laptops, or the internet. But is there no alternative to virtual classrooms? Several creative teacher-led initiatives on the ground, reported in this newspaper, demonstrate that it is not just desirable but also possible for governments and communities to design solutions that take the last child along.

In Karnataka, for instance, the vataru shaale model of community schooling — using open community spaces like temples, courtyards and prayer halls to teach children in small groups, with social distancing norms in place — began when a group of government school teachers sought to create a pandemic classroom that was inclusive. Like in many other states, only about 30 per cent of children in the state have digital access. Spliced for other factors like caste and gender, it throws up a grim picture — as well as the possibility that children, especially in the more impoverished parts, would be sucked into wage labour or child marriage. Similarly, in Sikkim, a maths teacher's concern for the students of her village led her to visit them at their home for short lessons that ensure they do not fall off the learning grid. The local administration of a village in Bastar, Chhattisgarh, has allowed teachers to broadcast English lessons through loudspeakers. Both the Sikkim and Karnataka state governments have responded by absorbing elements of these innovations in new learning programmes designed to adapt to the COVID-19 challenge.

Few they might be, but these examples are a glimmer of hope in an education system that stifles creativity in both teachers and students. They also show up the generalisation of the commitment-less, undertrained government school teacher as a lazy stereotype. The fact is that schools and teachers exist in a continuum with local communities, and are more responsive to their needs than they are given credit for. Many teachers used the disruption of the pandemic to come up with solutions that adapted to their environments and local needs — and placed the concerns of children who might be left behind at the centre, without being told to by government circles. Some used the unavailability of textbooks and blackboards to set aside the pressure of rote learning for a more inclusive pedagogy. The crisis of the pandemic must be used, therefore, not to ram through the chimera of futuristic tech-savvy education. It must be used to empower the public school teacher with genuine autonomy and support.

Berlinale's decision not to have separate awards for male and female actors is enormously welcome

THERE IS A cliché that segregationists across cultures have employed as a defence — "separate but equal". The logic behind this dictum is simple: A class that is historically, socially and economically discriminated against is given its own, special job, which both overtly and tacitly endorses it as being less than the mainstream. For some years now, this logic has been challenged across industries when it comes to gender. In cinema, both male and female thespians are referred to as "actors" and yet, awards that recognise their work continue to have different categories — best actor and best actress. The decision by the organisers of the Berlin Film Festival to no longer have separate awards for male and female actors is enormously welcome.

A defence for the separate categories to honour actors has been that given that there are more substantial parts for men in films across the board, fewer women are likely to be awarded. This amounts to pandering to a system of inequality rather than attempting to address it systematically. Imagine if the response to #Oscarssowhite — a hashtag and movement that called out the Academy Awards for their lack of racial diversity — had been to institute a different category for non-White film-makers.

In fact, few other honours and awards for intellectual and artistic pursuits are segregated along gender lines. Both Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie have received the Booker Prize — hers was not for a "woman writer". The Pulitzer prize is gender neutral, as are most scholarships and grants. In mainstream cinema, greater recognition and even pay scales for male actors have been justified by the fact that they draw bigger audiences. But an award is not a recognition of commercial viability. Now that Berlinale, the largest film festival in the world, has decided that the judgements about acting and film-making should not be gender-hyphenated, hopefully others will follow suit.



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

POLITICAL SCIENTIST NEELANJAN Sircar, in an important paper, "The Politics of Vishwas" (Contemporary South Asia, Volume 20, Number 2), argued based on data that Indian politics had decisively moved to a "politics of vishwas". Voters prefer to centralise power in a charismatic strong leader and they have faith that whatever the leader does is good. This model is in contrast to the usual models of politics, where leaders are held accountable on performance or because they serve a coalition of interests.

Sircar offers two broad explanations underlying this phenomenon. The faith in the leader is not merely a materially instrumental faith; it represents an underlying shift in the ideological preference for a Hindu nation, an entity that is untied and rises above the messy negotiations with difference. Faith in the leader is deeply facilitated by nationalism: The leader as the simplified embodiment of unity, will and purpose. Behind this phenomenon of producing vishwas is an extraordinary machinery of communication, which literally deploys as many elements in a communicative tool kit as there are feathers in a dancing peacock: From the semiotic command of images to a saturation with messages, the most old-fashioned hard-working party outreach to literal control of the media.

Three predictions follow from this shift in the underlying model of politics. The first is an immunity to any accountability. You can preside over poor economic performance, suffer a military setback, inflict suffering through failed schemes, like demonetisation, and yet the trust does not decline. In fact, it thrives on a certain nonchalance about actual performance. In the face of vishwas, it is impossible to point out that India is in the midst of what historians used to describe as a military-fiscal crisis — both in a fiscal and a military corner. The point about vishwas is that fact, performance and interests are all petty. The second prediction is that this politics requires the continual feeding of ethnonationalism, moving from one issue or one enemy to the other. And there, it is the fact that vishwas is not just a political artefact — it has to be continually sustained by a saturation of the mindspace and control of media.

## Simply vishwas

Politics of belief is different from one based on fact and interest. It has an underlying cultural nihilism

But what is it that enables this politics of vishwas to function? Do we need a deeper cultural excavation? Propaganda plays a huge part, but that is not the entire story. It is a feature of societies run entirely by propaganda that through coercion they produce compliance, but the underlying cynicism in society is also apparent. The bhakti is genuine. Another explanation might be: There is no other alternative to Modi. Given the state of opposition parties, we acquire an investment in keeping faith alive. We need someone to believe in after all. There is a lot to this explanation. But it also does not seem entirely satisfying. For one thing, there can be a reverse cause and effect: The Opposition is spectacularly inept. But it appears more hopeless than it is because no matter what it does, what facts it marshals, what incompetence or corruption the government displays, the Leader's image seems immune. The deeper neuroses of the Opposition could be an effect, not just a cause of the fact that politics is at a dead end.

But more importantly, disenchantment with the government can deeply express itself even in the absence of alternatives. It may not politically manifest itself in a national alternative but historically, disenchantment can signal a retreat to other forms of local resistance, often mediated through caste, region, or even class groups. One striking thing about this moment is not just a shift to Hindu nationalism. It is also that the conventional social bases of mobilisation have dissipated. The logic of caste mobilisation now is not the logic of agglomeration, building bigger coalition blocks; it is the logic of fragmentation, subdivision and internal differentiation. So long as the central government does not do anything to provoke a confrontation on regional lines, the politics of regionalism can be domesticated. And class, agrarian or labour, has not been, for a variety of reasons, the source of political resistance for a while.

In short, the challenge is not just mobilising an alternative at the national level, it is also that the political failures mean that internal failures mean that India is not on a pathway to being a high performer. The elites, including India's most powerful, are latching onto this vishwas because it disguises their own failures. They are not putting up with Hindutva for growth, sacrificing constitutional liberties for economic transformation. They are putting up with it because they have been exposed to being a mediocre and corrupt bourgeoisie, whose own internal failures mean that India is not on a pathway to being a high performer.

ated politically. But with no obvious social base to latch on to, the politics of mobilisation becomes difficult.

So there is a disquieting possibility: Politics has, to a greater extent than before, become autonomous from economic or pre-existing social conjunctures. It operates in the realm of the imagination, and the rules and protocols of politics in this realm are different from the politics of fact and interest. There is an underlying cultural nihilism that makes this politics of fantasy possible. Contrary to the rhetoric of the leader, a politics of vishwas is a sign of deep psychological pessimism. For vishwas is necessary only when you have lost complete confidence in your own ability to make, remake the economic and political world.

The elites, including India's most powerful, are latching onto this vishwas because it disguises their own failures. They are not putting up with Hindutva for growth, sacrificing constitutional liberties for economic transformation. They are putting up with it because they have been exposed as being a mediocre and corrupt bourgeoisie, whose own internal failures mean that India is not on a pathway to being a high performer.

Ironically, when there is a lot of political and economic criticism of a government, it displays a greater optimism. The criticism is in the name of wanting to do better. When there is no performance accountability but just vishwas, it is a pessimistic admission that we are believing for the sake of believing.

But, perhaps, there is an aesthetic allure. After all, the virtue of our current politics of vishwas is that it is not tied to any moral ideals; it is the logic of fragmentation, subdivision and internal differentiation. All our resentments, grudges, rancour, prejudices, the thrill of combat can be given free rein. We also participate, not in making the world, but in the construction of the leader's image. And so, as Adorno has noted in another context, the "leader's image gratifies the two-fold wish to submit to authority and be authority". The greatest allure of vishwas is that you maintain it by simply believing. You don't actually have to do anything else. It is truly liberating.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express



SATINDER K LAMBAH

THE POSTHUMOUS NISHAN-IMTIAZ for Sadequain and Ahmad Faraz revived my memories of these legends, who I got to know during my two postings in Pakistan. Sadequain (1930-1987), born in Amroha, is considered one of Pakistan's most famous painters and calligraphers. In a recent article commemorating his 90th birthday anniversary, Raza Naem wrote that Sadequain is among the four gifted names in the field of art and culture in Pakistan.

I met Sadequain, shortly after my arrival in Islamabad in 1978 on my first posting to Pakistan, at the house of a common friend, Naem Jaan. My initial introduction to his art was through the boldly exhibited paintings of four nude nymphs depicting the seasons, on the glass panels of Naem Jaan's living room doors. This attracted more attention because of the strategically-placed two broad black stripes across the body of each figure. These stripes were the contribution of the lady of the house, who felt that with three growing daughters there was a need to maintain an element of decorum. Our friendship grew over the next four years of my tenure.

On one occasion he sought my help for his visit to India, where he was taking part in an exhibition. His request was three-fold: A meeting with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the Indian government should pay for his

## PAINTER AND THE POET

Pakistan's Sadequain and Ahmad Faraz favoured closer ties with India

train fare from Delhi to Amroha, and that the PWD Guest House should be reserved for him although he would not stay there. The air ticket for his international travel between Delhi and Islamabad would be taken care of by himself. Each request stemmed from his childhood memories. By being booked in the PWD Guesthouse, where as a child he was prevented from playing as he was told only important people lived there, he wanted to exhibit to the people of his birthplace, relatives and friends, his new status. On return, he thanked me for fulfilling all his wishes but added he had a major regret. He had been invited for an early morning meeting with PM Indira Gandhi, but as no photographer was present at that hour, a photograph with the PM could not be taken.

Sadequain, a frequent visitor to our house in Islamabad, made a portrait of my wife, which has since travelled with us to all our postings. I was told by an art critic that Sadequain had made very few portraits. Sadequain was, at times, referred to as the M F Hussain of Pakistan. On a visit to Karachi, when told of this, Hussain responded he would like to be called Sadequain of India. Sadequain told me this was the best compliment paid to him.

Ahmad Faraz (1931-2008), amongst the most famous Urdu poets of Pakistan, was a fierce critic of military and authoritarian rule.

He was jailed and exiled on different occasions. Mahinder Singh Bedi Sahar, the Indian Urdu poet, was a common link between us. During my first posting in Islamabad, Bedi made several visits to attend literary events. According to Faraz, Bedi treated him like a son. During our discussions, the idea to publish a book on the selected works of Mahinder Singh Bedi emerged. After Benazir Bhutto came to power, Faraz was appointed chairman of the Government Publishing House. In my foreword to the book, it was mentioned that this book was only possible due to his determined efforts.

My last meeting with Ahmad Faraz was at my farewell reception. He remained till the end and recited some of his Urdu couplets to the delighted guests. One of these, which he composed on the spot, mentioned that I was born a decade after him, but the cries of our birth.

Kohat and Peshawar, were only 50 miles apart. Determined and strong-willed with clear cut lines and dislikes, Sadequain and Ahmad Faraz took pride in their artistic achievements. Both were in favour of increased contacts with India in the field of art and culture.

The writer was High Commissioner of India to Pakistan (1992-1995) and Special Envoy of the Prime Minister of India (2005-2014)



## AUGUST 26, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO

OPTIMISM ON ASSAM A NEW INITIATIVE to break the impasse on the Assam issue will be taken by Union Home Minister Zail Singh in the next three or four days. The fresh move to restart the deadlocked negotiation will be made both at the political and administrative levels, sources in the Congress said. This has emerged after the Home Minister's meetings with Manipur Chief Minister R K Dorendra Singh and Congress I functionaries of Assam in the past few days. Sources said Dorendra Singh met Zail Singh again today who requested him to be in command in handling talks with the agitators.

STATUS QUO ON SINDRI THE SUPREME COURT today ordered that the Sindri Fertiliser Factory should not be dismantled or disposed of until the status quo should be maintained. This followed a writ petition filed by the employees of the factory who alleged that the whole public sector unit worth Rs 51 crore had been sold this year to a Calcutta scrap dealer for Rs 4 crore.

SETHI OBJECTS THE UNION HOUSING MINISTRY P C Sethi has crossed a strong exception to written replies by the Madhya Pradesh Chief

Minister Arjun Singh in the Vidhan Sabha in regard to the alleged "indiscriminate" use of a state plane and helicopter during the President's Rule in the state. He has explained the circumstances in which he used the state plane and helicopter and said he was pained to see that the full facts were not brought before the Vidhan Sabha.

EXTREMISTS REPELLED BANGLADESH RIFLES PUSHED BACK Tripura area a gang of about 12 Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti men crossed into Bangladesh in "search of arms", according to an official source.



THE INDIAN EXPRESS, WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 26, 2020

# THE IDEAS PAGE

## Their Kamala, not ours

A majoritarian democracy could not have produced a Kamala Harris



**NUPUR ANAND**  
president on the Democratic ticket in the US presidential elections has sent India into raptures. Indians, Tamils, Tamil Brahmins, even AIADMK party men, have gone wild with joy. In their book, she has won already. Chittis of the world are ecstatic at being under the spotlight. Soon, even the Besant Nagar A-block Residents Welfare Association may pass a resolution that all ex-residents of this south Chennai neighbourhood, now in the US, must stand with her.

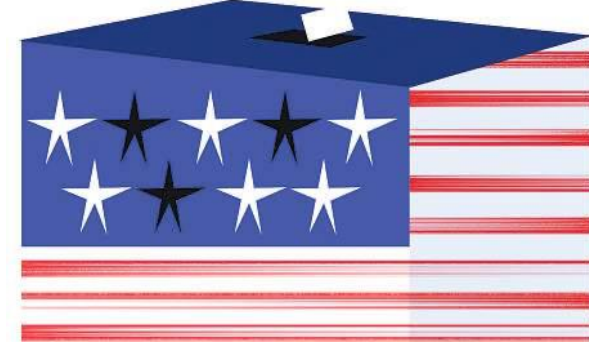
The predominant sentiment is of pride in "our girl". Even the strategic community believes she is going to be "good for India", for H1B visas, for trade, and generally for India-US relations, never mind that the elections are still ahead. As for Joe Biden, the presidential candidate, he is a footnote in all the debate about Harris and her Indian family.

What will certainly not be discussed at all, or as much, are the home truths about India that Senator Harris's nomination and her extraordinary journey serve to highlight. For one, a majoritarian democracy like the one India has become in the 21st century could not have produced a Kamala Harris.

As a woman, and a member of a racial and ethnic minority in the US, Harris's rise to the top levels of the American polity, like President Barack Obama's, was possible because of a system that recognises and accepts diversity. True, the recent protests in the United States have demonstrated that America's oldest fault line is not just alive, it has grown wider and deeper in many respects. But the country's democratic instincts run deep too. What has also been evident over the last few months is an acute awareness about the dangers of white supremacy, and the institutional, political, media and civil society pushback to prevent its rise, and President Donald Trump's own attempts to fan it.

Black political representation is not a rarity. Data on the Pew Research Centre site shows that despite uneven progress, Black political leadership in the US has risen over the last 50 years, and is today at par with the share of blacks in the population. In 2019, there were 52 black representatives, the highest number since 1965, comprising 12 per cent of the House — about the percentage of blacks, the largest racial minority in the US, whose share in the population is about 13.5 per cent. While there are only three black senators (including Harris) and no black governors, overall, the trend is more representative than less. This is the ecosystem in which Harris grew as a politician. Notwithstanding her Tamil Brahmin ancestry, the comparison to Harris's political rise in the US has to be with the shrinking space today for Muslim politicians in India, and the lack of all kinds of diversity in non-political areas as well.

In India, Muslims, who are the largest religious minority and form about 15 per cent of the population, are comparable in size to the black community in the US. But their political representation has been sliding over the decades, since the highest tally of 49 Muslim Members of Parliament elected in 1980. In



C.R. Sankar

2019, 27 Muslim members were elected to the Lok Sabha, 4.97 per cent of the total 543 elected. The BJP fielded just six Muslim candidates. All of them lost. The 16th Lok Sabha had 23 Muslims. None of them were from the BJP. The party, the political vehicle of Hindu and Hindu majoritarianism, has fielded a total of 20 candidates over the last 40 years and only three of them have won (Christopher Jaffrelot and Gilles Verniers, IE, July 30, 2018). As of date, the 242-member Rajya Sabha has 16 Muslims, or 6.6 per cent. Non-Hindu political parties are also increasingly fielding fewer Muslim candidates as they play catch up with the BJP. Senator Harris's Indian Tamil mother and her dad, a black Jamaican, both foreigners in the US, met as participants during the Civil Rights Movement that was sweeping the country in the 1950s and 1960s. Leave aside the counter-factual that had they been deported to their respective countries for participating in a protest, as a German student at IIT-Madras was last year for marching with others in the campus against the Citizenship Amendment Act, there would have been no Kamala Harris to celebrate from Chennai to Delhi. Marriages between Indians and black Americans are rare, frowned upon by Indian parents. Most likely, the Minni Khair film, is nearly 30 years old. While attitudes to inter-racial marriages across groups in the US have loosened much over this time, among Indians, marriage to a black person continues to be discouraged and looked down upon by family and community. To understand this, check how black people are treated in India, not just those who are dark-skinned. Marrying a Dalit or a Muslim is enough to set off group violence.

Communalism is now so normalised in India that all too many people no longer demur at their solution was the best one for older people in Zanzibar, and not keep driving the government to set aside more money for facilities to put away older people? "No place like home" is the heading of the Economist's account of what the pandemic has revealed. Across the rich world, nearly half of all deaths from COVID-19 have happened in care and nursing homes, even though less than 1 per cent of people live in them. Countries with fewer care homes have had fewer COVID-19 deaths, all else being equal. Older people want to add more life to their lives, not more years to their life. As well as exposing fragile business models, the pandemic has highlighted the tension between keeping old people safe and keeping them well. "People should be the boss of their own lives. It is better to live in a house than a warehouse," says Bill Thomas, the American geriatrician who founded the Green House movement for the care of older persons.

All things must be considered before prescribing strong medicines. Indeed, this is why

As a woman, and a member of a racial and ethnic minority in the US, Harris's rise to the top levels of the American polity, like President Barack Obama's, was possible because of a system that recognises and accepts diversity. True, the recent protests in the United States have demonstrated that America's oldest fault line is not just alive, it has grown wider and deeper in many respects. But the country's democratic instincts run deep too. What has also been evident over the last few months is an acute awareness about the dangers of white supremacy, and the institutional, political, media and civil society pushback to prevent its rise, and President Donald Trump's own attempts to fan it.

includes changing the rules to enable demographic change. Kamala Harris, on the other hand, is the Other and represents the othered, identifying herself primarily as a black person, so much that few in the US knew she was half-Indian until last year.

Her nomination speaks to the recent Black Lives Matter campaign. Despite the divide between black and brown in the US, the participation of Indians in the protests over George Floyd's murder by a policeman was a development noted for its potential for blurring the constructed political separatism of the two. In India, many see police brutality as a necessity to rein in lawlessness, never mind if the police themselves break every law in the book while doing so. The policemen who killed the alleged rapists of a woman in Telangana were showered with flower petals. The UP chief minister has been seen to encourage "encounters" such as the one in which the doctor Vikas Dubey was killed last month. Movies are made about so-called "encounter-specialists", making heroes of them.

In her speech accepting her nomination on August 19, Harris spoke about the "the promise of equality, liberty, and justice for all", and how her mother Shyamala Gopalan had taught her two daughters "to be conscious and compassionate about the struggles of all people. To believe public service is a noble cause and the fight for justice is a shared responsibility". The "spoke of a vision of our nation as a Beloved Community — where all are welcome, no matter what we look like, where we come from, or who we love. A country where we may not agree on every detail, but we are united by the fundamental belief that every human being is of infinite worth, deserving of compassion, dignity and respect. A country where we look out for one another, where we rise and fall as one, where we face our challenges, and celebrate our triumphs — together. Today, that country feels distant."

There will always be those who are referring to India, where a nomination of a person like her would have been swiftly denounced as minority "appeasement" and her party accused of "minoritism".

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## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"[Biden] has tried to be his party's candidate for president of the United States twice before. The third time he was lucky, and the Democrats were fortunate too, in that, by accident as well as design, he is probably their best hope of defeating Donald Trump in November."  
—THE INDEPENDENT

## The TINA delusion

PM Modi's success owes to his striking a chord with people, not because there isn't anyone to challenge him



ANUPAM KHER

I HAVE BEEN in India for the past five months, writing extensively — a book on COVID is on the way — working on interesting film projects, spending quality time with myself and sometimes with my mother (Kironji being in Chandigarh). I have also been reflecting on various subjects. That I am passionate and outspoken about matters pertaining to my country is well-known. Among the many topics, the one that has caught my eye is the repeated political success of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Is it destiny? Or hard work? Is it about facing an easy opposition? My thoughts and research took me to the different arguments, which I will touch upon before sharing my views.

PM Modi's critics — they like to call themselves Modi haters as well — have been consistent on one thing. They have spun tales about him, used all sorts of adjectives to describe him.

On October 7, 2001, when Modi first took over as Gujarat CM, the dominant view was: One year and he will be history. That was soon proved wrong. Through his tenure as CM, Modi was portrayed as a regional leader — satrap at best — who had no takers outside his home state. In the winter of 2013 and spring of 2014, the project "Modi is unelectable" reached its climax. The subsequent summer obviously proved them horribly wrong. The years after 2014 were spent convincing themselves and each other that Modi is a one-term phenomenon. Had any government voted to office with such a large mandate returned again, they asked.

On May 23, 2018, an oath-taking ceremony in Bengaluru became the cynosure of many eyes. Standing on one platform were the all ends of India's political spectrum, hand in hand, together in letter and spirit. This grand alliance would ensure the end of Modi, they vowed. Exactly a year later, on May 23, 2019, Narendra Modi returned to office with even more seats. (On a side note, the government in Karnataka did not last long, tumbling due to the weight of its contradictions a few months later.)

Since May 2019, the naysayers, cynics and so-called Modi haters have taken to another delusional tale — the "TINA medicine". "Modi wins because there is no alternative", "Modi's best friends are the Opposition today", "Only Modi can bring Modi down," they now argue.

Unfortunately, the more Narendra Modi grows, the more delusional his critics become. Democracy can never have one pole, there will always be two or more poles, however minuscule the non-dominant one may be. The fact that the voting machine has a list of multiple candidates, represented by different symbols, shows that democracy is never short of alternatives.

Modi bashers have toyed with dozens of alternatives. Everyone has been koshier in denouncing leftists, jihadists, failed dynasties, anarchists, separatists, even those who had earlier worked with Modi in the RSS and

BJP. In 2013 and 2018, "alternatives" were seen even in Modi's own party. Therefore, if any Modi basher is telling you, Modi succeeds because there is no alternative to Modi, they are obviously lying and being delusional.

The truth is, all alternatives were tried, propped up and supported but none cut ice with the voters. They have time and again reposed faith in Modi, who they see as a decisive, reliable and dedicated leader. Every alternative to Modi has failed because none of them can serve like him. In the last six years, he has delivered on the largest poverty alleviation drive seen in the history of India. The Jan Dhan Yojana got 40 crore citizens not just bank accounts but also a leak-proof way of getting due assistance from the state. Ayushman Bharat, PM-KISAN, Atal Pension Yojana, PM Fasal Bima Yojana and many more such social security schemes gave a safety net for the poorest of Indians to fall back on and prevented them from sliding into poverty. Ten crore toilets were built under the Swachh Bharat Yojana and eight crore households were made smoke-free by way of the Ujjwala Yojana. In the last year alone, two crore households have been given piped drinking water connections — every household in India is to be given the same by 2024.

Under Modi, the corridors of power no longer reek of the stench of big-ticket corruption. Defence deals no longer feed the monetary hunger of a select few dynasties. Instead, they strengthen the nation's armed forces.

The same Modi who was once seen as a mere CM and thus being unable to conduct foreign policy has demonstrated what an "India first" foreign policy looks like.

Which of the so-called alternatives to Modi offer such vast amounts of deliverables? From seeing him celebrate Diwali with flood victims in Kashmir, or with troops on the border to seeing him touch the feet of an elderly tribal woman or a sadai karamchhi; from seeing him wield the memento to hearing him talk about menstrual hygiene from the Red Fort, India relates with Modi. He appreciates and celebrates the ethos of the 130-crore Indians. Which other leader thought of writing touching letters or emotional tweets to sportspersons, artists, cultural icons and youngsters? He has made a place in lakhs of households as just another family member, with the people in good and bad times.

There are many alternative to such leadership? I would love to know.

My father often taught me: If you are speaking the truth, you do not have to remember it. Today, Narendra Modi is the best serving administrative head compared to all previous prime ministers. He has held the office of CM and PM for a combined total of almost 19 years. No previous PM has held both positions cumulatively for such long. Such political success and affection have not come his way because "there were no alternatives" to him. It has come because Modi has immersed himself in his work, political landmines and personal slander have been answered by more development. No wonder, while Modi is implementing his vision for a New India, those who are stuck where they were two decades ago — confused about alternatives to him.

The writer is an actor and former chairperson, Film and Television Institute of India



ARUN MAIRA

THE MOST VULNERABLE persons during the COVID pandemic are the elderly. If infected, their odds of survival are the lowest. When shut away to save them from infection, they are likely to suffer from neglect — from lack of care for other ailments, and loneliness. The pandemic has highlighted humanity's dilemma of what to do with older people.

Globally, the population aged 65 and over is growing faster than other age groups. Life spans are increasing with better healthcare, nutrition and sanitation. In 2018, for the first time in history, people aged 65 or above outnumbered children. Children are our future, no doubt. However, the changing shape of populations threatens to bankrupt economies. How will fewer young people provide for the care of larger numbers of older persons if the latter no longer contribute to communities?

When the president of HelpAge International in 2017, he posed the question to us: Rights of older people are enshrined in Zanzibar's constitution. It directs the government to set aside money to maintain a good home for older people. He wanted me to see the well-equipped home the government ran. The problem was it was under-used because older people would rather stay with their families.

Later, the minister for social development and the president of the 'Older Persons' Association explained the President's dilemma. Both of them were grandparents

## Let's not shut out the old

During pandemic, we must keep older people engaged, not isolate them

who enjoyed being with their grandchildren, and their families also liked having them around. Grandparents kept an eye on the house and the children when the parents went to work. The arrangement was good for the economy, and for society too, they felt.

I asked what help they wanted from HelpAge International. The minister asked could we convince international aid agencies that their solution was the best one for older people in Zanzibar, and not keep driving the government to set aside more money for facilities to put away older people?

Economist's account of what the pandemic has revealed. Across the rich world, nearly half of all deaths from COVID-19 have happened in care and nursing homes, even though less than 1 per cent of people live in them. Countries with fewer care homes have had fewer COVID-19 deaths, all else being equal. Older people want to add more life to their lives, not more years to their life. As well as exposing fragile business models, the pandemic has highlighted the tension between keeping old people safe and keeping them well. "People should be the boss of their own lives. It is better to live in a house than a warehouse," says Bill Thomas, the American geriatrician who founded the Green House movement for the care of older persons.

All things must be considered before prescribing strong medicines. Indeed, this is why

we are so careful about testing new medicines for COVID-19 before releasing them for public use. The pandemic has revealed many factors that contribute to human well-being. Lockdowns — a strong medicine to prevent COVID-19 deaths — have harmed human well-being in many ways, by other medical problems that could not be attended to and even by starvation in poorer countries due to disruption of the economy. In India, as elsewhere, attention is focused every day on counting the deaths caused by COVID-19. The other tragedies, though not counted, are visible in heart-rending images of migrants struggling to find succour, and people denied healthcare for other diseases.

What we have learned from the pandemic is that local systems solutions, developed and implemented by communities, are necessary to solve complex problems. Communities understand their needs and their capabilities better than experts who are distant from them. Collaboration on the ground has enabled many communities to prevent the spread of the pandemic, as well as taken care of other needs of their members. In India, Kerala, with its systems of local collaborative action, seems to have done much better than other states. Internationally, countries with strong local systems have done better.

Vietnam seems to have survived the pandemic better than most countries. One reason is the strength of the OPA (Older Persons' Associations) movement which the government has supported for many years. OPAs operate in all districts of the country. They are adding young members and transforming themselves into inter-generational Self-Help Groups. They take responsibility for the most vulnerable people in their communities — most of whom are older people. They also work with local officials to improve local services and infrastructure for the benefit of the whole community. They are "nodes" in networks of actors who know what is required and who can, working together, improve services for everyone. The older members of these groups are proving to be valuable assets for the community. Moreover, because they are active and they feel valued, they add more good life to their main years.

Older people have an invaluable role to play in our collective future. We must keep older people engaged, not shut them out to protect their bodies from the virus. Unfortunately, the generic medicine of "physical distancing" to fight the pandemic has been branded as "social distancing". We need "social cohesion", not "social distancing", in communities, and in humanity as a whole, to fight this pandemic and also improve human well-being.

Maira is Chairman, HelpAge International and author of Transforming Systems: Why the World Needs a New Ethical Toolkit

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### ERROR CORRECTED

This refers to the editorial, 'Perish and publish' (IE, August 25). The book is, no doubt, an inflammatory piece of propaganda. The Satanic Verses was fiction, while this book claims to be the "untold truth" — and that makes a difference. Peaceful disapproval of and online outcry over anything is a right. The people are protesting against the one-sidedness and obvious falsity of the book and its claims. False news, as long as in the traditional print or digital forms, is considered immoral and unjust by all. True, a publishing house should have a spine, but when it is wrong, it must accept it, for it does not, being a "responsible" publisher, have a right to spread hatred through misinformation.

Yusuf Chazali, Tana

### BILATERAL PROBLEM

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A finer balance' (IE, August 25). Kashmir is a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan, and this has been acknowledged by almost all major powers, including China. The idea of inviting any third party to mediate on the Kashmir issue is preposterous. The Tibetan diaspora call India their home away from home. The Tibetan community in exile and its leadership are an asset to India's strategic community and betrayal would harm India's interest.

Sudip Kumar Singh, Kolkata

**IDEAS ONLINE**

EDUCATION, NOT RAISING AGE OF CONSENT, IS KEY.

MADHU MEHRA

COVID AND THE HEART: TS KLER

www.indianexpress.com

### CAGED BY CONTEMPT

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'An apology will be contempt of my conscience' (IE, August 25). Prashant Bhushan is right to urge the government to apologise to the court. I am overwhelmed by his courageous decision. The Supreme Court and high courts are meant to act as guardians of the Constitution and protectors of the fundamental rights of the people. Yet, when citizens express views and opinions, the courts curb their right to do so. Before punishing Bhushan, the SC should reconsider its decision. The contempt jurisdiction should never be used to bludgeon critics.

Radhika Pansare, via email

## OUR VIEW

## MY VIEW | ARTHANOMICS



## India needs an upturn in telecom data tariffs

After the double whammy of a tariff war and a massive revenue-sharing bill, the industry may have no option but to raise prices. For the economy's sake, they must not go too high

As the viability of India's telecom industry takes centre stage, the seemingly endless tryst of mobile phone users with super-cheap data tariffs may be nearing an end. Sunil Bharti Mittal, chairman of the country's second-largest operator, Bharti Airtel, seemed to suggest as much on Monday. As reported, he described the consumption of 16 gigabytes (GB) of data for just ₹160 per month as a tragedy. He had a point. While wireless networks are costly to set up and run, nowhere else in the world does a gigabyte beam across a pinch its recipient so lightly. According to a UK-based data tracker, 1GB in India was selling for less than 10 cents this February, the lowest globally, followed closely by Israel, Kyrgyzstan, Italy and Ukraine. By contrast, the same cost \$8 in the US, \$14 in the UK, and 60 cents in China. Indian user charges have fallen about 70% since November 2018, when our tariff war intensified, the one set off by Reliance Jio's 20¢ entry as a price warrior out to turn voice users into data consumers. It was a war of attrition, leaving several operators badly strapped for resources. And that too, just as big money was needed for network upgradation to keep up with advances in a field that forms the substratum of a modern economy. If that wasn't bad enough, a Supreme Court ruling last year landed another whammy, forcing operators to pay the government huge sums on a recalculation of their past-year dues under an old revenue-sharing deal. The bill for all this will have to be borne by consumers, ultimately.

A significant part of the industry's woes can be attributed to what looks like an extractive approach adopted by the Centre. Last October,

the apex court accepted the telecom department's contention that telecom service providers should pay a fraction of all their revenues even from non-telecom sources as licence fees and spectrum charges. For years, they had been paying only what their licences and airwaves enabled them to earn, and were suddenly slapped with demands totalling about ₹16 trillion. It was not just their own dues that were demanded, it turned out, but also of insolvent companies they had either acquired or used the airwaves of. Whether or not bankruptcy processes had wiped the slate clean on spectrum liabilities has been under legal dispute, and the apex court is now expected to rule on the matter. Its verdict would determine payouts by Airtel, which uses airwaves allotted to Airoel and Videocon, and Jio, which took over some of Reliance Communications'.

With revenues restrained and operating costs bloating, survival has been difficult in this market. Just three private players are left: Reliance Jio, Bharti Airtel and Vodafone-Idea. Only the first two of these seem in a position to plough in the investments needed to revitalize telecom services in the country as new technologies emerge that promise to empower us in new ways. For this fresh capital to pay for itself, data tariffs must start rising. Mittal reckons that the average revenue per user must hit ₹300 per month, almost twice the current level. Reduced rivalry in the arena, however, must not tempt monopolistic pricing into play. Nor must users find that what they're paying for is mostly thin air. In a country of high price sensitivity, what the state charges for airwave usage should ideally be very low. As commerce goes online, such a cost advantage could brighten our economic prospects.

## Prepare for the irreversible rise of non-profit activity everywhere

The non-profit sector deserves attention as its role in the economy looks set to grow dramatically



R. JAGANNATHAN  
is editorial director, 'Swarajya' magazine

The last quarter century, which saw major economic crises every few years, should be seen more as a crash of the discipline of economics than anything else. The future we see around us tells us that global socio-political-economic realities have changed, but economists are still wringing their hands in despair over the impending demise of free trade and the rise of protectionist policies. But protectionism isn't a problem, it is a desperate remedy that accountable politicians have been eager to grasp, while unaccountable economic experts offer no better solution than the endless printing of money. Economists no longer seem to understand the complex realities engulfing us.

In a world where cheap capital-financed technology is adding more to gross domestic product (GDP) than almost any other factor of production, we have to internalize some observable truths. One, human skills will always be trumped by machines. This implies that jobs depend on making human skills compatible with what machines and computers already do much better. Two, skill demand will be extremely polarized, with high demand for super-skills, and low demand for middle skills, and reasonably high demand for easily learnable skills. This is the essence of our jobs crisis, and the solutions don't lie in lowering taxes or providing cheap

money to zombie firms. Three, all the material things needed for human survival already exist in abundance. It is only their distribution that is the problem. Four, large parts of the real output of goods and services are moving into the non-monetizable part of the economy, and hence disappear from GDP. The proverbial homemaker economy, where real services are provided without showing up in GDP numbers, is now spreading beyond gender-based distribution of paid and unpaid work.

The last point can easily be demonstrated in the world of media, where there is an organized sector with an advertising-driven business model. But this model is under attack from millions of "free" publications and blogs that individuals and non-profit micro-companies produce. According to one estimate, there are now more than 500 million blogs that produce more than two million posts daily. Very little of this free output is showing up in GDP. Most large media houses have also become partial non-profit organizations, as they make much of their money from activities beyond their core business.

These observed facts point us in one direction: that the new global economy will rapidly polarize between a market economy dominated by firms that produce goods and services efficiently, and a non-market economy that needs to exist so as to find "work" and distribute incomes or goods and services, almost like non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The market economy is reliant on the expansion of non-state services financed by profits or wealth generated within. In the years ahead, we will probably see a dramatic expansion of the non-market economy, something that free-traders and globalizers don't seem to see as factors in their economic forecasts.

Today, many governments focus on making work (like our rural employment guarantee scheme) and income-distribution schemes unrelated to work, from universal basic income to cash payouts

of the kind the Narendra Modi government is now making to farmers and female Jan Dhan account holders. Some of these are camouflaged as loans, which may soon go bad and need write-offs and waivers. If we are asking corporates to compulsorily allot 2% of net profits to social activities, again this is a free income or services scheme. Zombie firms that exist only because of cheap liquidity are also non-profits kept alive for social and political reasons. The market economy may come to depend on the rapid expansion of such non-government and zombie firms.

This means non-profits will be crucial for social cohesion and harmony. As a corollary, governments need to make this sector more efficient and vibrant, and as deserving of deregulation as the mainstream corporate sector.

The number of non-profits is rising dramatically because of a huge unmet demand for public goods and services. A Central Bureau of Investigation survey in 2015 found there were more than 3.1 million registered NGOs. The current number could be around 3.5 million. We have one NGO for every 400 citizens. Most of them may be poorly run, with some even created for shady purposes like money-laundering and vote-buying. Since many NGOs exist only to achieve single goals—preventing pollution or saving wildlife—their activities could get in the way of profitable economic processes. Despite the apparent legitimacy of anti-pollution concerns, the short-term outcomes can be economically negative—as the closure of a Sertile plant in Tamil Nadu shows.

However, there is little doubt that the non-profit sector plays a huge role in the economy. It needs better regulation, enlightened leadership and greater professionalisation to deliver healthy social and economic outcomes when the market economy is failing to do its job. The NGO-ization of economies is irreversible. We should focus on making them more responsible and productive, and less obstructive.

### 10 YEARS AGO



### JUST A THOUGHT

If you exclude 50% of the talent pool, it's no wonder you find yourself in a war for talent.

THERESA J. WHITMARSH

### MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

## Umbrella entities for digital payments are on their way

RAHUL MATTHAN



is a partner at Trilegal and also has a podcast by the name Ex Machina. His Twitter handle is @matthan

Last week, following on from a policy paper that it had issued in January 2019, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) released a document setting out the framework it plans to adopt to authorize the establishment of new umbrella entities (NUEs) for retail payments. Once in place, these newly authorized entities will be able to operate their own clearing and settlement systems, establish new standards and technologies, and develop innovative new payment systems that enhance customer access, convenience and safety. All NUEs will have to be interoperable with the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI)—the umbrella entity that currently manages the identity of retail payments in India—but, somewhat surprisingly, would also be allowed to set themselves up as for-profit entities, and they will themselves be able to participate in RBI's payment and settlement systems.

I had studied the policy paper when it was issued last year and remember being surprised that RBI was going down this path.

The NPCI is at the epicentre of the explosion in digital payments in the country, and I could not for the life of me figure out why the central bank was trying to fix something that was not broken.

But then, if you take a closer look at the extent to which NPCI has insulated itself into the digital payments ecosystem, you may begin to get a sense of what RBI might be concerned about. Between the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), Immediate Payment Service (IMPS), Aadhaar-enabled payments, Bharat BillPay, and all the other payment systems that it manages, 48% of all electronic retail payments in the country pass through the NPCI infrastructure. It is not an understatement to say that when it comes to payments, NPCI is the fulcrum around which everything digital revolves. That being the case, perhaps RBI's concern stems from having the operations of so much of the country's payment system concentrated in one entity.

But, surely, there is nothing wrong with having all digital transactions flow through a single entity—so long as that entity is neutral. If the concern is technical, we could build sufficient redundancy into NPCI's technical architecture to ensure that there is no single point of failure in the system. What

is clear to me is that creating multiple umbrella entities is not the answer to this problem, particularly since the framework document allows for NUEs to establish themselves as profit-oriented entities that can participate in the payments ecosystem. How will an NUE be able to assure neutrality when it has so much skin of its own in the game?

And then there is the question of whether the trade-off is even worth it. Replicating the NPCI infrastructure will require heavy investments, especially because this time around, we will need to ensure that all the participants in one NUE can seamlessly interact with those in every other. As much as it may be technically possible to make each umbrella entity interoperable with every other, doing so while still maintaining the security of the underlying infrastructure is going to be difficult and expensive. And then there is the cost of the additional regulatory burden that RBI will have to shoulder, now that the banking sector regulator will have to manage not just

one but multiple umbrella entities.

Having said that, there would be consequences to letting NPCI be the only game in town. Any sort of monopoly results in market inefficiencies, and if we have just one umbrella regulator, we will never be sure if transaction costs are as low as they could be, or if the variety of product offerings available to us could be better.

The way I see it, the real problem with the NPCI is that the NPCI is expected to both manage the digital payments industry as well as come up with the frameworks necessary to foster innovation. When it had just a small number of products in its portfolio (and far fewer market participants to manage), the NPCI was able to perform both functions efficiently.

Now that more than half of the country's digital payment transactions pass through its pipes, the effort of just keeping the system working seems to be taking a great deal of stability to develop the protocols and standards that are needed to encourage innovation in this boom sector.

If we create a standard-setting body for digital payments, we may be able to fast-track innovation

If this is the real problem, one possible solution might be to create a separate and independent standards-setting body that is tasked with coming up with the protocols and standards required to foster innovation in the digital payments space. This is how most successful digital infrastructure systems work. Take the internet, for example. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) develops new standards for the internet that are then adopted by various layers of the infrastructure.

All I am suggesting is that we create a similar standards-setting body for digital payments in India. A new standard that this body creates will have to first be approved by the NPCI, but then it can be rolled out throughout the digital payments ecosystem. This will free up the National Payments Corporation of India to focus on what it, and only it, can do—make sure that the Indian digital payments system continues to work smoothly.

At the same time, by establishing a neutral and independent standards-setting body, we can make sure that the system as a whole in our country evolves in the best traditions of digital infrastructure adopted anywhere in the world.



| MY VIEW | CAFE ECONOMICS

# Our corona crunch is quite unlike any other crisis in recent times

*Lower growth potential, a painfully slow recovery and the risk of hysteresis mean our response can't go by an old guidebook*



**NIRANJANA RAJADHYAKSHA**  
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Meghnad Desai Academy of Economics

India has faced three big economic shocks this century. The first one emanated from the North Atlantic financial crisis at the end of 2008, to end a splendid economic boom. The second one hit when Indian macroeconomic imbalances were exposed after the US Federal Reserve announced in the middle of 2013 that it would gradually end its quantitative easing. We are currently living through the third big shock, as the covid pandemic has brought the entire world to its knees.

A look at key macroeconomic variables as well as policy responses during these three crises is instructive. Let us begin with the initial growth conditions—in the last full fiscal year before each crisis. The Indian economy grew at 9.3% in fiscal year 2007-08, which was the third consecutive year of near-double-digit economic expansion. In the fiscal year ended on 31 March 2013, economic growth was more anaemic, at 5.46%. The recovery from the 2008 shock had dissipated by then. India entered the covid era with weak momentum, thanks to almost eight consecutive quarters of slowing growth. The government estimates that the economy grew an insipid 4.2% in fiscal 2019-20.

The distribution of risks is different when it comes to macroeconomic imbalances. Inflation was climbing before the 2008 crisis. The consumer price index (CPI) for industrial workers grew by 6.2% in August 2008. Inflation based on the new national CPI was 9.63% in June 2013, and 6.58% in February 2020. India had a modest current account deficit of 1.29% of gross domestic product (GDP) in fiscal year 2007-08, thanks to strong export growth. It was a slim 0.5% of GDP in fiscal year 2019-20, though that is better explained by weak domestic aggregate demand, rather than strong exports. On this measure, 2012-13 was the worst, with a massive current account deficit of 4.82% despite a slowing economy.

The terrible combination of slow growth, high inflation and a large current account gap made the rupee especially prone to attack in 2013. It fell from 53.94 to a US dollar in early May 2013 to 66.57 at the end of August. It lost ground in 2008 as well—from 43.79 at the end of August to 49.69 at the end of December. This time around, till now, the rupee has been stable thanks to a balance of payments surplus. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) spent almost \$50 billion to defend the rupee in 2008 and \$16 billion in 2013. The central bank has actually added around \$5 billion to its dollar reserves since March 2020.

What about the monetary and fiscal policy response? Let us begin with monetary policy. India's central bank cut its repo rate by a sizeable 425 basis points in the eight months after the 2008 crisis struck. RBI had the space to go in for large



rate cuts because of the counter-cyclical monetary policy it had pursued in the quarters before the financial crisis. Interest rates had to be increased by 75 basis points in the aftermath of the 2013 shock as part of a classic defence of the rupee. The cumulative covid-era rate cuts since March have equalled 115 basis points.

As with monetary policy, there was ample space for fiscal action in 2008. The combined fiscal deficit of the Union and state governments was a modest 4% of GDP at the end of fiscal 2007-08, thanks to rising tax revenues on the back of rapid economic growth. The expansionary election budget of February 2008, followed by the policy response to deal with the crisis in the second half of the year, took the combined deficit all the way up to 8.3% of GDP. There was minimal fiscal response in 2013, because the failure to manage a timely withdrawal of the 2008 stimulus had meant that the government had little fiscal space, and the inflation plus balance of payments pressures anyway called for fiscal tightening. This time, India has entered the crisis with a very high fiscal deficit, so how it uses its restricted fiscal space in the coming

months deserves to be watched.

What are the lessons from all this? First, India right now has limited policy space to deal with the shock of the pandemic, but comfort on balance of payments should allow the country to take risks. A decline in inflation in the coming months will help as well.

Second, recoveries from the two previous crises were relatively quick, and especially the recovery from the 2008 shock. Yet, there were long-term consequences. India's potential growth appears to have come down by around two percentage points over the past decade. The recovery from the covid shock will be much slower.

It is likely that India's economic output will not go back to its pre-covid level till the fourth quarter of fiscal 2021-22. A quick calculation, assuming trend growth of 6%, shows that, over the next two years, India could lose around \$350 billion of extra output because of the covid shock. Hysteresis could set in, especially if the country's capital stock is damaged by firm bankruptcies. The policy response this time will thus have to be very different from the textbook responses of 2008 and 2013.

## MINT CURATOR



South Koreans are turning their homes into their favourite vacation spots. REUTERS

### Hawaii staycations get closer to the real thing

This time last year Yoon Seok-min, his wife Kim Hyo-jung and their two children were holidaying in the Philippines, Vietnam and Guam... as the global coronavirus pandemic has stifled overseas travel, the family, like other South Koreans, has turned to a new and extreme form of staycation: transforming their home into their favourite vacation spots. Now, Kim and Yoon's five-bedroom apartment in Yongsin city, south of Seoul, is decked out with potted palms and rattan furniture, bringing the breezy feel of the tropics indoors. There are even different locales—the couple's bedroom is meant to resemble a Bali resort, while the living room has been designed on the lines of Hawaii. Yoon and Kim's elaborate home makeover cost them at least 80 million won (\$67,464). The couple runs a furniture business.

Reuters

### A leafy neighbourhood could smarten you up

Growing up in a greener urban environment boosts children's intelligence and lowers levels of difficult behaviour, a study has found. The analysis of more than 600 children aged 10-15 showed a 3% increase in the greenness of their neighbourhood raised their IQ score by an average of 2.6 points. The effect was seen in both richer and poorer areas. There is already significant evidence that green spaces improve various aspects of children's cognitive development but this is the first research to examine IQ. The cause is uncertain but may be linked to lower stress levels, more play and social contact or a quieter environment. The increase in IQ points was particularly significant for those children at the lower end of the spectrum, where small increases could make a big difference, the researchers said.

The Guardian

### A meteorite casts new light on the origins of life

A small rock found by researchers in Antarctica could answer questions about the beginnings of life on earth, NASA scientists believe. The tiny object... was a meteorite now called Asuka 12236. The meteorite was formed in the very early stages of the solar system—or may even predate it. As such, scientists can investigate the building blocks of life in our planetary neighbourhood. Inside Asuka 12236, scientists found a huge amount of amino acids, twice as many as in the next best-preserved meteorite, called Orgueil. Amino acids are organic compounds composed of nitrogen, carbon, hydrogen and oxygen which are used to develop proteins. These came in both left-handed and right-handed varieties, with a great proportion of left-handed ones found in the meteorite.

The Independent

### Has the world stopped caring about antiques?

Since 2000, the world of antiques has suffered a dramatic downturn and in retrospect, I can understand why," says Caroline Cabarrus, an interior design consultant in the UK. "Flat-pack now dominates the cheaper end of the market. Over the past few decades, the growth of low-cost self-assembly furniture has been dizzying, fuelling a disposable culture where items are regularly replaced, rather than cherished for generations. A fashion for minimalism in recent years has also contributed to the decline in antique demand." In the UK, living spaces were shrinking as house prices increased. Bare floorboards, neutral coloured walls and a few pieces of Scandi flat-pack became the narrative 'du jour'. Built-in storage caused a mass redundancy of antique wardrobes and chests of drawers.

BBC

### How to pay for college the post-pandemic way

A junior at Texas State University lost his jobs as a bartender and a barista when the pandemic started. Now he sells instant ramen and CBD-infused baked goods that he makes in his kitchen. A senior at Vassar had some income from an internship, but it wasn't enough to keep her or her family financially secure. So she started an online tarot-reading business... Working through college is nothing new for college students. About 70% have some type of job, a Georgetown University analysis found. When the pandemic hit in the spring semester, about a third of students lost their jobs, according to Temple University's Hope Center for College, Community and Justice. Many of them have had to get creative, taking advantage of a digital economy that grew up around them while college was still a dream.

The New Zealand Herald

## GUEST VIEW

# Act now on gender equality to support India's recovery

OLIVER TONBY & ANU MADGAVKAR



are, respectively, chairman of McKinsey, Asia, and partner of McKinsey Global Institute.

In India, as in many other countries, the economic fallout of covid-19 has had a disproportionate effect on women. The pandemic has left them more vulnerable, set progress back on gender equality, and damaged economies. How and when India responds to this challenge will be a significant factor in the country's recovery from the pandemic and future economic success.

Even before the covid crisis, India's quest for gender equality was stalling. Globally, female participation in the labour force is about two-thirds that of men. That number had hardly changed between 2014 and 2019. But, in India, where women made up just 20% of the workforce, going by data from the International Labour Organization, there was a slight decrease in female labour-force participation in that period. Against this backdrop, covid-19 has been a gender-regressive shock. Women's jobs and livelihoods have been more vulnerable to the pandemic. Globally, the covid-related job loss for women is about 1.8 times higher

than that of men, at 5.7% versus 3.1%, by our estimates. In India, women's share of job losses, considering only the covid impact on the industries in which they work, would have been 17%, but unemployment surveys suggest that they actually account for 23% of overall job losses. Those numbers translate into millions of disrupted livelihoods.

There are several reasons, besides the underlying inequalities, for this disproportionate effect on women. A major factor is that coronavirus has significantly increased the burden of unpaid care. According to one survey, covid-19 has increased by 30% the time women in India spend on family responsibilities. Unsurprisingly, therefore, women have dropped out of the workforce at a higher rate than is explained by market dynamics alone.

Attitudes toward the role of women are also a factor. Over half the respondents to a World Values Survey in many South Asian countries agreed that men have a greater right to a job than women when jobs are scarce—far higher than the one in six respondents who said the same in developed countries. So is financial inclusion, with reduced capital available to support the micro-enterprises that are so often a pathway to work for women.

In India, as elsewhere, policy and business leaders face tough choices on how to respond to the crisis. Decisions often involve competing priorities and trade-offs. In the case of gender equality, though, our recent research suggests that decisions should be easy.

Our research assessed covid's impact on gender equality in India along with five other countries, building on the McKinsey Global Institute's Power of Parity work mapping 15 gender-equality indicators across 95 countries. In each country we focused on, the difference between taking action now on gender equality and doing nothing is substantial. If nothing is done to counter the pandemic's gender-regressive impact, global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2030 could be \$1 trillion lower than it would be if women's employment tracked that of men in each sector.

By contrast, we estimate that achieving best-in-region gender-parity improvements by 2030 could lead to \$13 trillion of incremental global GDP by that year, an 11%

increase relative to a scenario where nothing is done to address gender inequalities. In India, this would be a 14% increase over the gender-regressive scenario, or adding \$734 billion to its economy in 2030.

The research also sends a strong message on timing. A middle path—taking action only after the crisis has subsided rather than now—reduces the potential global opportunity by more than \$5 trillion. The cost of that delay amounts to three quarters of the GDP we could potentially lose to covid-19 this year. Taking action now would help make gender-equality gains and drive inclusive growth. The faster policymakers and business leaders push for it, the bigger the social and economic benefits.

While policies that support gender equality need to be tailored to national contexts, there are tried and tested measures that can be considered. Our Power of Parity research found that 60% of the expected gains from increasing gender equality came from increasing women's labour-force partici-

pation—a good starting point in India, given the reversal on this measure in recent years. Policy measures could include addressing or reducing the amount of unpaid work and rebalancing it between men and women, supporting employer or state-funded provision of childcare, and interventions to address digital and financial inclusion.

Any drive for gender parity arguably starts with efforts to change entrenched, widespread attitudes about women's role in society. This is a very difficult and complex challenge that will require all stakeholders to play a sustained part over the long term. Interventions to address the economic participation of women must also address broader societal aspects of gender inequality, such as safeguarding girls' education, tackling violence against women, and protecting maternal health, to name a few.

The evidence is clear: What is good for gender equality is also good for the economy. This was true before covid-19, but it is more important than ever in the turbulence of the pandemic. Our research shows that time should not be lost pondering these issues. Procrastination is a losing game. Now is the optimum moment for India's policymakers and business leaders to step up and make gender equality a reality.

**Comprehensive research makes it imply clear that what's good for gender parity is good for the economy**