

PARADIGM SHIFT

New education policy aims at fighting colonial hangover

NEP 2020 envisions providing students with the idea that only the job which ensures their happiness is a good job. Only a person who performs his job with perfection deserves respect.

OPINION

K.S. RADHAKRISHNAN



The vision statement of the new National Education Policy 2020, formulated by a committee headed by Dr K. Kasturirangan, foresees a major change in the processes of the generation, dissemination and use of knowledge in society. It aims at a paradigm shift from the Eurocentric monolithic structure of education to a pluralistic contextual structure. The NEP envisions a shift from a stagnant knowledge society to a vibrant one.

It is not an easy task to effect changes in a society which has remained stagnant due to many reasons. Our knowledge society has been formulated by Eurocentric conceptual frames formulated by British experts on education. Eurocentrism is a theory which believes that Europe is the centre of science, social science, technology, art, literature, music, religion and philosophy—of all wisdom, knowledge, and information. It is a belief shared by the intellectual community of Europe, irrespective of their ideological differences.

Eurocentric intellectuals, politicians and religious spiritualists believed that everything that is European is superior to what remains

in the rest of the world. Europeans, they believed, were the group of people chosen to redeem others. They subscribed to the view that among the people of the world, Aryans are greater and among the Europeans, the Germans are greater. Adolf Hitler extended the logic further, and thought that among the Europeans, Germans were the superior lot and declared that he himself was the most superior among the Germans. Hitler was not an accidental occurrence but the historical necessity of Eurocentric theory.

The shades of Hitler were evidently seen in the behavioural patterns of those who subscribe to Eurocentrism. They believed in a monolithic structure of life and society. They believed in one God, one text, one Son of God, and one redeemer. This monistic dogmatism of the Eurocentric outlook prompted them to believe in methodological monism, which is the hallmark of European science. They believed that individualism was the only one valid scientific method and only those claims-to-know formulated by the method of individualism alone could be considered as true sciences.

They considered all other claims to knowledge as fake knowledge. So, they argued that everything that was non-European should be replaced by European models. Such an unquestionable belief in Eurocentrism was shared by Lord Macaulay and Karl Marx alike. Like most of the European intellectuals of his era, Marx also believed that India was a land of uncivilised

and barbarous people. He also insisted on replacing the Indian patterns of life with the European models. The religious heads of the European church, ignoring their congregational differences, insisted that scientific Christianity should replace pagan religious practices. The Eurocentric masters who preached colonialism, irrespective of their fractional feuds, desired to establish political authority using religious, commercial, and military tools. This was evident in the preface, written by Lord Macaulay, to the policy draft to implement English education in India in 1835, in which he wrote that India did not have religion, philosophy, science, social science, art, literature, culture, etc. So, the superior European systems should replace all those inferior Indian systems of wisdom, knowledge and information. He concluded that the dissemination of Eurocentric wisdom could create people who were Indians in their appearance and Europeans in their spirit and culture.

Macaulay did not hesitate to reveal the real intention of the introduction of a Eurocentric education in India. In his address to the British council of India, he said that "unless we break the backbone of this nation (India), which is her spiritual and cultural heritage, the British could never conquer India. He decided to use English education as a tool to create a population which was Indian in appearance and European in culture."

Mahatma Gandhi realised the hidden danger of English education and the European patterns of life. He exposed their illogicality and impracticability in his thought-provoking work *Hind Swaraj* in 1908. It was the first logically valid and intellectually sublime attack on Eurocentrism. He exposed the logical inconsistencies of methodological monism and he preached methodological pluralism in every form of



A file photo of Union Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' handing over the final policy document of the National Education Policy 2020 to Vice President M. Venkaiah Naidu, in New Delhi. ANI

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human knowledge. The Eurocentric intellectual criticised Gandhi severely in India and abroad. But Macaulay was absolutely correct because he could create educated Indians with an unconditional submission to Eurocentric enslavement. Nawaharal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, was an ardent admirer of Eurocentrism. Gandhi and his teachings came to be treated as academic untouchables by the Indian academic community, and hence, we followed the Eurocentric paradigm in our system of education.

The vision statement of NEP 2020 reveals that it aims at a paradigm shift

from such Eurocentrism to Indian contextualism. The direct corollary of Eurocentrism is anthropocentrism, a belief shared by the Greco-Roman culture, which says that man is the centre of the universe and everything in the universe should be interpreted in terms of the interests of man. The Hellenic philosophy, the prophetic religions, and the Eurocentric sciences unanimously advocate for the establishment of the man-centred world. According to the Old Testament, man alone was created in the image of God. Further, it believed that God entrusted man to rule over the rest of the creations for and on behalf of God.

Therefore, it concluded that man is superior to the rest of the creations and there is nothing wrong with interpreting the universe to meet his interests.

Aristotle defined man as a rational animal. He placed man at the top of the ladder of evolution and admitted that there was no creature equal to man in the universe.

Religion, philosophy and science unanimously spread the belief that man enjoys unconditional rights

over natural phenomena and that man was free to exploit nature to satisfy his unquenchable thirst to enjoy worldly pleasures. The unfettered exploitation of nature by human beings, which has been glorified by Eurocentrism, is the reason for ecological imbalance. The vision statement of the NEP, thus, designs a paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. Ecocentrism is the view that reminds human beings that they are not the masters of the universe but only one among its many phenomena. Man cannot ensure his survival by ignoring the natural rights of other phenomena in the universe.

Nothing in the world should be controlled by anything other than the thing itself. Everything in the universe should be controlled by its own centre, not by an external force. It conceives the universe as the communion of self-regulating manifestations, where man is only one among the many, not the master of the rest. Similarly, the concepts of Swaraj or Aatmanirbhar Bharat aim at the creation of a world in which every

phenomenon is controlled by the force inside it. Hence, the much-celebrated dependence on the enslavement to Eurocentrism of the Indian academic community should be replaced by the process of contextualisation.

Naturally, there should be a paradigm shift from the learning of abstract ideas to concrete and contextualised pragmatic knowledge. The present system of education insists that students mug up theories devoid of pragmatic use as part of their curriculum, which creates a lethargic mindset in the students. There are many students who secure a bachelor's degree in technology only to do the job of an office assistant, which never provides a chance to use what they learnt as part of their curriculum. Such a state of affairs creates a feeling of alienation among them and they become lethargic in life. This is one of the bad outcomes of the present system of education as it bifurcates the courses of study into job-oriented courses and job-alienated courses. Hence, it creates the false notion that job-oriented courses are better because they guarantee good jobs. 'Good jobs' usually mean the jobs which ensure more security and financial gains for the candidate. This is the reason behind the rat race for getting admission to the so-called professional courses.

In this regard, the NEP envisions providing students with the idea that only the job which ensures their happiness is a good job. Only a person who performs his job with perfection deserves respect. This is the reason that a first-rate barber commands more respect in society than a third-rate professor.

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PERSPECTIVE
UNGA SESSION

COLD WAR 2.0 IS HERE

The battle lines are drawn. If anyone still believes that the world has not got divided into two blocs and the icy winds of Cold War 2.0 are not freezing relations, needs to take a look at the speeches delivered at the United Nations General Assembly this week to know which way things are headed. The UNGA is commemorating 75 years of the end of the Second World War, or "World Anti-Fascist War" as Chinese President Xi Jinping termed it in his speech. On this forum the contours of the new world order are becoming clearer—a broadly bipolar world inside which multipolarity functions. One of these two poles is occupied by communist China, while the other by the world's premier superpower, the United

States. China has pushed the world towards bipolarity, with the ultimate aim of fashioning a unipolar world where it is the sole imperial power and everyone else to take a look at the speeches delivered at the United Nations General Assembly this week to know which way things are headed. The UNGA is commemorating 75 years of the end of the Second World War, or "World Anti-Fascist War" as Chinese President Xi Jinping termed it in his speech. On this forum the contours of the new world order are becoming clearer—a broadly bipolar world inside which multipolarity functions. One of these two poles is occupied by communist China, while the other by the world's premier superpower, the United

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The main entrance to the United Nations headquarters in New York.

because of the trade war unleashed by Donald Trump. At the other end of the pole, the US President launched a no-holds-barred attack on the "invisible enemy" that is the "China virus".

He compared the "mobilisation" against the virus in his country being the "most aggressive" since the second world war, thus placing Xi Jinping's China firmly in the company of Hitler's Nazi

Germany—a comparison Xi has been attracting from many quarters courtesy his aggressive, expansionist policies and his treatment of minorities in his country. As for Russia, its President,

Vladimir Putin too did not mince words in identifying the United States and its allies as being the adversaries, who are not paying heed to Russia's appeal for "mutual restraint" with regard "to deploying new missile systems". Countries such as Cuba, Venezuela and Iran went a step further to denounce the "hegemony" and "imperialist ideas" of the US, apart from labelling it as the "greatest danger to international peace and security"—language that is straight out of the Cold War playbook. Interestingly, all of them talked about a multipolar world, while throwing their lot in with China, in what will likely be a unipolar world if the Chinese achieve their objective of displacing the US as the world's number

one superpower. And now the most important question: which side does India go with, now that Cold War 2.0 is here? While multipolarity is a good intention, the reality is bipolarity, and sooner or later, reality will clash with the intention. Will India stop waffling then? Will India choose correctly? Which way should India go? With the authoritarian and its rag-tag bunch of bankrupt dictators and losers of Cold War 1.0? Or with the free world that is trying to come together to take on the most malign power that this globe has witnessed in several decades, a power that has India's dismemberment at the core of its Asian policy? The answer is a no-brainer.

Joyeeta Basu

OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | OTHER SPHERE



A Tata-Mistry divorce deal may prove thorny

Mistry's family selling its stake in Tata Sons to the conglomerate could end a long corporate battle. Divergences over legal rights and the firm's valuation, though, might prove vexatious

Now that India's biggest ever business battle seems headed for record books as our most expensive corporate divorce, it may be tempting to expect a truce between the Tata Group led by Ratan Tata and the Shapoorji Pallonji (SP) camp under Cyrus Mistry. Sighs of relief, though, seem premature. There are signs that their acrimony will extend to a settlement deal. On Tuesday, Mistry's team declared SP's readiness to part ways with Tata, a parting that is expected to entail the sale back to the Group of his family's 18.4% stake in Tata Sons, the shareholding company from which he was ousted in 2016 as chairman, sparking off a bitter dispute that has involved legal wrangles, mud-slinging and ungainly allegations. That stake has been a big bone of contention all along, and could stay so for a while. At one level, SP's offer appears to be a victory for the Tata Group. The \$10 billion conglomerate controls four-fifths of Tata Sons, has been especially keen to prevent those shares from being sold to a third party, and had moved the Supreme Court to stop the cash-strapped SP group from pawning them for money. Notably, it was only after the apex court restrained SP from pledging its Tata shares that a buy-back deal began to take shape. How it will pan out is still unclear. Had Mistry's own businesses not been so hard up, however, it might have held out for a better deal (possibly with another buyer). Even now, Mistry may opt to drive a hard bargain on how much his group's 18.4% stake is worth.

The SP group has asked for an "early, fair and equitable" way out at a price that reflects the value of Tata Sons' "underlying tangible and

intangible assets". While the value of Tata's listed companies is easy to calculate, and that of its unlisted entities can be estimated on business parameters, what the Tata brand—owned by Tata Sons—is worth could be hard to settle. Reports suggest that SP places Tata Sons' overall value at over \$9.7 trillion, a figure that includes \$1.46 trillion for the brand. But a recent court filing by Tata estimates SP's 18.4% stake to be worth some \$1.5 trillion, which would translate to under \$8.2 trillion for the whole company. Even if brand value experts are called in, the gap between the two sides' calculations could cause disharmony.

The relative strength of their bargaining positions could play a role in the negotiations that ensue. While SP has been weakened by its dire finances, these talks could be infected by the legal status of Article 75 under Tata Sons' Articles of Association, which restricts SP's leeway to dispose of its stake without Tata's nod. This acts as a clamp on those shares, but its validity has been challenged by the Mistry camp, arguing that its invocation would amount to oppression of a minority shareholder. While some legal experts take a dim view of this clause, others consider it a valid tool for a principal owner to retain control. The top court is yet to rule on this issue. If time runs out for Mistry before that happens, he may simply have to take what's on the table. The Tata Group, though, is debt-laden and not cash-rich enough to buy SP's stake, even at a low price, without a scramble to raise funds. The Group may need to offload a chunk of its 72% holding in Tata Consultancy Services. If so, a tighter hold on Tata Sons would leave it with a looser grip on its cash cow.

The pandemic could help us all recognize what real education is

Covid disruptions have highlighted the invaluable role of true learning in fulfilling aspirations



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The pandemic cuts to the core of our character. Of our society, our institutions, and our very selves. But that is, if we care to look. Instead of wallowing in the delusion that India is doing very well, or living with lead-blinders of apathy. The core of education too is revealed by this wound on the body of our nation. What all is in this basic character of education?

First is the brutal inequity, fragility and injustice that most children live with. A tiny sliver of students have such resources that it doesn't matter that schools are shut; such children will also be back in school the very day they open up. But for the vast majority of children, the shutting down of schools is potentially a change in the trajectory of their lives. It is not only a loss of education today, it's probably for much longer. And for too many, perhaps even permanently. They may never return to school to may return much later, caught in the tangle of an economic upheaval. For millions of such children, deprivation arising from shut schools is more than that of education. It's a loss of assured meals and withdrawal of an anchor of support in life. Innumerable girls face social pressure to drop out of school and get married. The mismanagement of uncertainty is also forcing the hard-won social consensus that sending children to school must be the norm. We truly face the prospect of losing decades

of gains in getting our children in to schools.

Second, education is a social-human endeavour. Physical presence, attention, thought and emotions, all must be sewn towards learning goals, step-by-step, often back-and-forth, and differently for each student. This requires intense verbal and non-verbal interactions amongst teachers and students, which is possible only in groups within proximity. Online education is ineffective because of this basic character of education, and not merely because of lack of access to the net and online resources. Any harried parent who has gone through months of watching over online classes will bear testimony to this. Ask the teachers; their frustration will burst forth. No wonder state after state that was enthusiastic about online education in May this year has backtracked and tried to implement other modes of student engagement. Such as teachers systematically going to the communities where students live and organizing classes with small groups, usually out in the open. The widespread struggle across the world to open schools at the earliest is energized by a deep realization of the social-human nature of education.

Third, education is effective only when it is truly animated by the spirit of public service. Most private schools are bothered about making money and not about education or people. Unconcerned about the dire situation of their students, they have pushed every lever to squeeze every penny. Demanding fees for "re-admission", insisting on parents buying net-access devices, lobbying for the charade of online education, and more. They have exploited their teachers even more than usual, cutting or not paying their salaries arbitrarily while making them toil. This vicious fraud has been forced open in the open by the pandemic. Public (government) school systems, in the same troubled times, have attempted a range of things to keep their students

engaged. Some have been more effective than others, but they have tried over and over. And that is because their goal is public service. As is that of a small percentage of schools run and owned by private bodies, which are truly public spirited. Unfortunately, these are few.

Fourth, teachers are central to education. Without them, there is no education. With them, education can happen anywhere, even under a tree without any other resource, as thousands of dedicated public-school teachers have shown. Parents trying to play teacher have learnt how complex and demanding the role is. It is about subject knowledge and pedagogy, but also a lot more. It is about patience and dedication, about empathy and judgment, and also about balancing all this in the service of the overall development of the child. Ultimately, it is a matter of deep human relationships and bonds. Even if unmet, these circumstances have also made many realize how poorly we do for our teachers.

Fifth, an education system is the most precious of things for any society. It shapes the future of a society and keeps it going. At the most basic level, the education system is also a vast child-care system too. The disruptions in our rhythms of social and economic life, in the here and now, have made that clear. It has also made it clear that for the aspirations and promises of our society to be fulfilled, education is the fundamental social process. Perhaps even more so than parenting.

We did not need a once-in-a-century pandemic with its devastating human toll to reveal all this about education. Our gaze would have encountered the same basic character of education anytime if we had opened our eyes and paid attention. But the lacerating wound of the pandemic will possibly let the light finally enter, to purgation. Rumi. And perhaps the light will enter us as a people, making us more, and more, together. We need that desperately.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.

JAMES MADISON

THEIR VIEW

Fraenkel's theory of the dual state may need an update

ALOK SHEEL



is RBI chair professor in macroeconomics, ICRIER

In *The Dual State: A contribution to the Theory of Dictatorship*, first published in 1941 after his author fled Germany, Ernst Fraenkel developed a theory based on his experience as an attorney in the Berlin Court of Appeals in Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1938. He was a witness to the decay of the German legal system after the passage of the Reichstag Fire Decree and Enabling Act, which gave the "prerogative state" powers that were used to override the "normative State", as the usual rights were denied to those defined by the state as its enemies, such as communists, liberals, even conservatives, and of course Jews. The latter's personal status was restricted under the Nuremberg laws. This was after they were left a limited sphere in the country's economic system. By 1936, the Reich Supreme Court had declared them "legally dead".

The major difference between dictatorships and democracies is the latter's inflexible implementation of the rule of law. In a democracy, everybody is equal in the eyes of

the law. The law is codified and not arbitrary, applied equally in each case, without exception, and has the mandate of the governed. This is usually in the form of a constitution, with laws enacted by democratically-elected legislatures consistent with it. There are institutions at arm's length from the state, most notably the judiciary, to uphold laws.

Distinguishing dictatorships from democracies in the 20th century was easy. The latter had constitutions in place based on Enlightenment principles such as individual liberty, equality before the law, humanism, reason, and secularism informed by religious universalism. Periodic elections were held based on universal franchise, and the laws made in compliance with the constitution were enforced by the state, with anomalies and disputes resolved through an independent judicial system. Dictators overthrew such constitutions and imposed draconian laws without the sanction of popular will, centralizing power in their own hands. Several right- and left-wing dictatorships, including that in the former Soviet Union, used such means. Yet, dictators could also be elected through the ballot box, which they subsequently suspended, abolished or subordinated to their will. The Emergency of the 1970s in India bore some characteristics

of this, though Adolf Hitler's power-grab was by far the most egregious example; he never intended to adhere to the Weimar Constitution at all.

Does that mean there is no place for the rule of law in dictatorships?

It is extremely difficult to organize society

or a production process where there is no underlying consensus and trust among stakeholders in the predictability of outcomes if these vary from case to case. It would be impossible to run a capitalist system in such circumstances, or to maintain social order, if there are no rules for private and intangible property, entrepreneurial freedom, sanctity of contracts, unfair competition, labour employment, etc. The special provisions or new laws brought in by 20th century dictators curtailed individual liberties in the political domain. The laws relating to civil society remained mostly in place, with arbitrary exceptions in a few cases where the state used its specially acquired overriding powers.

Fraenkel's theory of dictatorships and the dual state has resonance in current times. According to him, there existed dual state under dictatorships, comprising both a normative and prerogative state. Germany had one of the best legal systems in Europe, and the normative state continued to function in day-to-day transactions even under Nazi rule.

The prerogative state, on the other hand, "was that governmental system that exercises unlimited arbitrariness and violence unchecked by any legal guarantees". Both existed simultaneously.

In the 21st century, it has technically become harder to tell democracies apart from populist dictatorships. Having learnt the 20th century lesson that overthrowing constitutional and legal structures loses the regime legitimacy, with their power proving pyrrhic and short-lived, the latter have kept formal legal structures in place, including constitutions, laws, estate institutions, universal adult franchise and the judiciary. Instead, they use the popular

mandate and their cult status to buttress their power, even though they might surreptitiously tamper with electoral processes. They are akin to what another political theorist, Carl Schmitt, described as "sovereign dictators" in his 1921 classic *Die Diktator*. Since the state and its allied pressure groups are able to bend institutions, even though they do not always get their way, the picture gets muddled. A straightforward application of Fraenkel's theory falls short, as there are no special prerogative provisions.

Modern dictatorships solidify their hold on power not through special laws, but by leveraging their executive authority under extant laws to capture legal and other civil society institutions. They appoint minions to key positions, and through them use legitimate institutions to enforce the will of the prerogative state. The normative state functions normally in most cases. But by controlling the outcomes of only a few cases, the prerogative state captures all state power. Populist dictatorships have emerged across the world's democracies, from Latin America to Eastern Europe and Asia, even as cult-based rightist parties have gained sway in the US and Western Europe. Whether they will prove more durable than dictatorships of 20th century remains to be seen.

A localized approach to address the economic fallout of covid-19

A study of slums in Patna and Bengaluru reveals sufficient variation in the pandemic's impact to justify customized relief



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India now has the second-highest number of covid cases worldwide, and huge dips in earnings have been reported. Yet, these aggregate figures obscure important local differences—across cities and between neighbourhoods. The extent of these differences is illustrated by our ongoing study.

In August, we commenced phone surveys in 20 settlements each in Patna and Bengaluru, selected to reflect the diversity of slum living conditions. With a grant from the International Growth Centre, we are conducting phone interviews with three key respondents in each settlement, consisting of neighbourhood leaders and other well-informed individuals, including at least one woman. We have studied these and other settlements for years. We ask each respondent about conditions both in their neighbourhood, in general, and in their own household. These means of discovery and triangulation have revealed a wide diversity of local situations. Here is what we found.

Sickness is under control in Patna slums. Over the past month, not a single death due to covid (or due to some unknown cause) has been reported from any of its 20 selected slums; no one was sick on account of covid, either in hospital or at home.

Localized concentrations of sickness persist in Bengaluru. The situation is similar to Patna in the majority of Bengaluru's slums—no deaths and hardly any instances of illness due to covid. In a distinct pocket of settlements in Bengaluru, however, the illness gives cause for greater concern. Consistently over the past two fortnights and into the current one, it is estimated that more than 15% of families living in MV Gardens, Montipura and Siddhartha Nagar have members sick with the disease, many in hospital. Pinpointed rather than blanket responses will be more effective in this situation.

Mask wearing is common: Across slums of both cities, more than 80% of residents are wearing masks in public. Social distancing, a luxury in cramped quarters, is not nearly as common.

There are contrasting livelihood situations, with an uptrend in Bengaluru and creeping hopelessness in Patna. Most slum women as well as men work for a wage. The average slum household has 4.4 members in Bengaluru and 6.4 members in Patna, and has, respectively, 1.9 and 1.7 earning members.

Even before the pandemic, the average slum household in Bengaluru was better off than the one in Patna. The average monthly income of a slum household was more than ₹23,000 in Bengaluru and just about ₹17,000 in Patna.

Very few households in the slums of both cities earned incomes in the first two or three months of the pandemic. Manual labourers, the majority, including maids and construction workers, were



least likely to keep their incomes. The few key informants in Patna slums who kept making incomes through this time had the following positions (with monthly incomes in brackets): anganwadi sevika (₹5,500), sanitation worker (₹7,200), stumpation worker (₹9,000), lecturer (₹45,000), three local shopkeepers (₹5,000, ₹8,000, ₹12,000) and a dairy operator (₹20,000). In Bengaluru, the few who kept being paid through the first three months included the following self-reported positions: a product surveyor for TTC (₹15,000), a sales executive of Paytm (₹22,000), and an executive at Bajaj Finserv (₹20,000). The range as well as the nature of positions is tellingly different across the two cities.

Less well off to begin with, Patna's slum residents were hit much harder economically. As late as the middle of September, they had recovered only half of prior incomes, while Bengaluru slum residents had recovered more than two-thirds. More than 80% in Bengaluru report going back to their old jobs, but only 30% in Patna.

Making ends meet is the principal challenge facing more than 90% in Patna's slums, whose situation is typified by a household of four persons in a slum known as Chitkohra Pul ke Neeche or Jagiwan Nagar. The father used to work as a gardener (₹8,000), and one of the sons worked as a dance teacher (₹10,000). Neither has seen any income since April. They sold two goats, cut back on food and other essentials, and are negotiating a

loan from a neighbour at 5% per month, an interest rate that was commonly reported.

Dwindling assistance: In the early part of the pandemic, most slums of Bengaluru reported receiving subsidized food rations from the government or political parties; about half also received gas cylinders. Neighbourhoods where informal social networks and local leaders were more active were more likely to receive assistance, not those with the greatest need or the highest disease incidence. Hardly any assistance is being received currently, even though people's situations continue to be difficult, particularly in Patna.

Women's groups have played important roles in both cities, arranging for cash and essential commodities and resolving disputes. Diminishing hopes in Patna: A longer and harsher lockdown in Patna has gone together with a diminished incidence of the disease and considerably greater economic hardships. Because of the unrelenting hardship they have faced, an overwhelming majority in Patna's slums expect that three months, or even six months, from now things will still be worse than before the pandemic. The corresponding share in Bengaluru is less than 10%.

Ramping up the pace of job recovery in Patna is urgently needed. Rekindling hope will require changing the experience. *Subject Kumar and Anirudh Krishna provided assistance for this column.*

MINT CURATOR



The ISS crew shifted to the Soyuz spacecraft for ease of evacuation.

The persistent threat of debris in outer space

Astronauts aboard the International Space Station were carrying out a "avoidance manoeuvre" on Tuesday to ensure the station would not be hit by a piece of debris, the US space agency NASA announced. The debris should pass within "several kilometres" of the International Space Station (ISS), but out of an abundance of caution, its trajectory was being changed to move it further away from the object. The three crew members—two Russians and an American—relocated to their Soyuz spacecraft as the manoeuvre began so they could evacuate if necessary, NASA said. "Manoeuvre burn complete. The astronauts are coming out of safe haven," NASA chief Jim Bridenstine said on Twitter. The "time of closest approach" was 22:21 GMT, NASA said. ... 25 such manoeuvres had occurred between 1990 and 2018.

The Guardian

To take or not to take Putin's free vaccine offer

What do you do when Vladimir Putin offers you Russia's new coronavirus vaccine, for free? United Nations staff in New York and around the world are now facing that choice, after the Russian president offered Tuesday to provide them the Sputnik-V vaccine in a speech to this year's General Assembly marking the body's 75th birthday. Only results from small early studies on the Russian vaccine have been published, raising concerns among some scientists that it isn't ready yet for widespread use—and prompting worldwide memes about potential bizarre side effects. "Any one of us could face this dangerous virus. The virus has not spared the staff of the United Nations, its headquarters and regional entities," Putin said in a pre-recorded speech from Moscow.

AP

Where the glitter of gold blinds people to risks

With the coronavirus devastating jobs across the country, desperate Indonesians are flocking to illegal gold mines as the soaring price of the precious metal overrides the risk to their lives and the environment. Spooked by the economic destruction wrought by the pandemic, consumers and investors around the world have been snapping up gold, which is seen as a hedge against volatility, sending its price to a record above US\$2,000 per ounce last month. The surge in demand has fuelled a boom in mineral-rich Indonesia's illegal mining industry, with workers ignoring the threat of arrest, mercury poisoning or being caught in the middle of gun battles. The miners here don't use mercury, he said, but there are plenty of other dangers lurking in Indonesia's rugged easternmost territory.

The Straits Times

Nasa plans a giant leap for womankind in 2024

NASA has big plans for 2024. The space agency said that in four years, it plans to land the first woman ever on the Moon and the first man since 1972 through its Artemis program. The program calls for \$28 billion in funding through 2025 for Phase I. NASA said in its news release. Artemis is named after the Greek goddess of the moon and twin sister of Apollo. NASA's Apollo 11 mission succeeded in landing the first humans on the moon on July 20, 1969. Only 12 humans, all male, have ever walked on the moon and they were all American, according to Bettina Incán, NASA Communications Director. "The last person walked on the Moon in 1972," Incán told CNN in a statement. The spacecraft is complete, NASA said, and the core stage and four attached rockets are undergoing final tests.

CNN

London hopes to be fully eco-friendly by 2050

London, like the rest of the UK, is committed to becoming net-zero carbon by 2050. That means greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions would be dramatically slashed and any remaining emissions offset, neutralising environmental impact and slowing climate change. But how does a city choked with traffic and packed full of carbon-emitting processes and structures reach such a goal? ... Efforts such as London's congestion charge, its Ultra Low Emission Zone and the UK's plan to ban all new petrol and diesel cars by 2035 are the first steps towards achieving this. In London's current environment plan, local zero-emission zones will be introduced in 2025, which will then be expanded until they extend citywide. But this could simply result in a city full of ultra-low-emission vehicles.

BBC

The case for universal responses to crises of humanity

BIJU DOMINIC



is chief evangelist, Fractal Analytics, and chairman, Final Mile Consulting.

The covid pandemic is truly a global problem. The same virus strain was largely responsible for spreading the disease in 188 countries. India too had been differently depending on climatic conditions or people's food habits. There are no reports of any major mutation of the virus. Its symptoms have been consistent across the globe. And the key reason for its spread was global travel, a byproduct of globalization.

Management of the pandemic, however, was not done at a global level. Different countries had different ways of dealing with it. Some like Taiwan managed it at a country level. India had a few national-level interventions, like a lockdown, but delegated most of the pandemic's management to state governments. Then there are countries like the US that did very little at the national level. The responsibility to manage the pandemic was left to state leaderships.

But one standout initiative is the effort to develop a vaccine, for which multiple teams of health experts from various countries,

pharmaceutical companies and universities around the world came together. These global teams are an excellent example of dealing with such a problem at a global level.

World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom has warned that covid is not going to be the last of the pandemics we are going to face. So, the next time we face a global scourge of this kind, how differently should we manage it? This evaluation can only help manage the next crisis more efficiently, but also our existing problems better.

All problems have four broad stages in their management. These are: Understanding the problem, developing solutions, implementing the solutions, and monitoring the same. Of these, there is no doubt that the last two stages—of implementation and monitoring—are always best managed at the local level. Often, the first two stages—of understanding the problem and developing solutions—are also moved to the local level. This is because there is a strong belief among policy makers that differences in local cultures play a significant role in the conduct of a problem. But some recent developments in the field of cultural neuroscience have thrown up a divergent view.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, in his latest book *The Strange Order of Things: Life,*

Feeling, and the Making of Cultures, mentions that unicellular organisms tend to cooperate with the larger group. In this regard, it is pertinent to note that some of the earliest human civilisations, there were embedded in living beings billions of years ago. The nervous system, the source of behaviour, has been in development for the past 600 million years. Culture, defined by cultural anthropologist Edward Tylor as "the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man (sic) as a member of society", can be traced to its genesis only about 50,000 years ago.

While studying a human behaviour problem, it makes sense to search for common codes that are relevant and embedded in the basic nature of the nervous system, or in the life form itself. This approach could lead to a solution that is far more fundamental and universal. Even if we take culture into con-

sideration, it makes sense to look for similarities and then search for differences. If we pay too much attention to where such boundaries lie, we tend to pay less attention to the problem's complete picture.

Even during the covid crisis, there were very many commonalities of behaviour across countries. For example, people across the world showed reluctance to adopt new social protocols like wearing masks.

Such common human responses are visible in other problems too. For example, Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman did not see an easy path to success on climate change because as humans we are not willing to accept certain short-term costs and compromises in our living standards to mitigate higher but uncertain losses that are far in the future. Also, road accidents across the world are caused by the same human behaviour, which is over-speeding.

An analysis of accidents suffered by railway-track trespassers in Mumbai found that the human brain underestimates the speed

of large incoming objects. The proposed solution to this problem was based on the insight that humans always use a reference point while judging the speed of an object. So, as part of the solution, a series of track sleepers in the train's path were intermittently painted yellow to act as a visual reference of its oncoming speed. Thus, an understanding of the cause of the problem as well as its solution emanated from study of the basic construct of the human brain. This solution, therefore, can be applied anywhere in the world, irrespective of possible differences in culture.

One good thing to come out of the covid crisis is that the virus's universality has made the world's best talent working single-mindedly towards formulating a vaccine that could serve as a universal solution. This approach is more efficient than each country trying to develop a vaccine to suit its own population on the basis of perceived differences. So, much like the global vaccine development teams, can we constitute global teams that could take a more holistic view of various other global problems? While solving global problems, can we not focus more on the similarities of the human brain that has evolved over hundreds of millennia, than on our relatively recent differences of culture?

We must study behavioural traits common to all humans for solutions to problems like our pandemic

6 EDITORIAL



A light touch

Problematic content abounds in the digital space, but regulation must be sagacious

The Government has, in recent days, twice signalled that more rules to tackle the problems of unlawful content and harm-causing disinformation in the digital media space are in the offing. On Monday, in an affidavit filed in the case involving Sudarshan TV, responding to the Supreme Court's call for suggestions to improve the self-regulatory mechanism for electronic media, the Centre said that the regulation of web-based digital media is the need of the hour, instead. Without any checks, it told the Court, digital media can spread "venomous hatred", terror and violence. On the same day, the Minister of State for Electronics and IT Sanjay Dhotre said in a written reply to the Lok Sabha that his ministry is working to amend the Information Technology (Intermediaries Guidelines) Rules, 2011, to make intermediaries more responsive and accountable. It is difficult to disagree with the view that the Internet is a space where finding truthful facts can be often challenging, and that polarising opinions, hate speech, and disinformation abound. Many lives have been lost to such disinformation-fuelled violence in India in recent years. But it is also difficult to agree with the view that more rules are an answer to an age-old problem, only, now amplified by technology-based platforms. That more regulation will solve this is a fanciful idea.

For one, the laws to tackle incendiary content and hate speech that fuels violence are already in place. What is seen lacking is a will to uniformly apply these rules, irrespective of political affiliations. The flip side is that the net is a place where there is a free sharing of information and ideas. So, the question worth asking is if it is possible to ever regulate the Internet without throttling it, like China has done. The fear that bringing more rules is a euphemism for censorship cannot be brushed away. These questions are all the more important because there has been a wave of investments in the digital news media space in recent years. A large number of these media sites and magazines pursue legitimate journalism initiatives, which not only have the proper mechanisms to deliver quality but also operate with a high degree of accountability. Attempts at making new rules for intermediaries such as Google and Facebook need to be well thought-out and measured. Earlier attempts at imposing a high degree of liability on them for content posted on their platforms have not survived legal scrutiny, with Section 79(1) of the IT Act, 2000, giving them some immunity in this regard. An intervention that is light and well considered is what will work.

Unlocking campuses

A surge in cases in schools and colleges should be prevented using a 'test-trace-isolate' model

The University Grants Commission has published a revised academic calendar for 2020-21, under which classes can be started for first year undergraduate and postgraduate students from November 1, but the prospects of a normalised regime of education remain far from clear. In a circular that factors in the uncertainties surrounding COVID-19, the UGC has offered institutions the option of online, offline or blended modes of instruction. For school education, many States have allowed reopening for Classes 9 and above from September 21, based on the Centre's instructions for the unlock phase. These measures, with their semblance of normality, may bring some relief to parents, but their outcomes are not predictable. That becomes clear from the experience of the U.S. and the U.K.: there is apprehension among parents, teachers and staff that they may get infected, and governments are under greater pressure to test, trace and isolate in communities with schools and colleges. A U.S. study in pre-print, conducted by four educational institutions after students returned to in-person classes, showed that infections for counties with campuses rose by 3,000 a day over the median value. Another estimate for virus cases linked to school reopening, made by other researchers, put the figure at over 21,000; college cases in the U.S. exceeded 88,000. In Britain, teachers' unions voiced deep concern over poor preparedness ahead of school reopening in September. The government's guidance there included a rotation system for students, and compulsory face masks in contact areas.

India's move to unlock education coincides with a reported reduction in overall daily incidence of infection, although absolute numbers are frighteningly high. If the UGC's campus calendar is implemented as planned, it would require a high level of commitment among States to do what countries such as Germany, Denmark and Norway have done: provide free RT-PCR testing and pursue contact tracing where students test positive. Yet, some State governments seem to be focused on managing the numbers rather than the pandemic, slashing overall testing rates, and inflating test numbers using less reliable rapid antigen tests to reduce positivity rates. This approach is fraught, and the consequences of statistical illusions could prove disastrous. Students have, no doubt, experienced a long summer of discontent, with just the option of online classes; the examination schedule and admissions systems were severely disrupted. But it is also true that many of them live in multi-generational households, potentially bringing home the risk of infection to older, at-risk individuals. Unless for schools and colleges can, therefore, be seen only as a work in progress, requiring constant vigil, strict adherence to masking and distancing, and full access to testing and treatment. The government's messaging cannot carry conviction if it cautions the public about the pandemic on the one hand, while relaxing norms for campus activity on the other.

Seeing dystopia in India's democracy

The state's attachment to the procedures of democracy has not been matched by concern for a fulfilling life for Indians



PULPAPE BALAKRISHNAN

The United Nations has declared September 15 'International Day of Democracy'. An entry on its website states that this "provides an opportunity to review the state of democracy in the world". To review the state of democracy in India would be timely given the times we are living through. Indeed by now, as India meets fresh challenges almost daily, for us to do so is arguably more important than to celebrate independence which we do of habit annually. What to review the state of democracy in India we would need to adopt a suitable criteria.

A partial evaluation

Formally, India is a democracy alright. There are multi-party elections with universal suffrage subject only to an age restriction. In evaluations of democracy in India it is often observed, to its credit, that it is the world's largest democracy. Further plaudits are given for the smooth chameleon in government after elections, the existence of an independent press and judiciary, and the guarantee of civil liberties justiciable in courts of law. While these are valid observations, the assessment is based on a partial evaluation. To an extent it amounts to admiring a form of government for its own sake without concern for the socioeconomic outcomes that are produced. It is like admiring the architecture of a building without pausing to enquire whether its inhabitants are

happy to be living in it.

Outcomes differ among countries that are democracies. Take for instance the life satisfaction that citizens report. First, it should be noted that this is potentially an important metric as it is based on people's perceptions on what matters most, including the responsiveness of the government to their needs. In the UN's World Happiness Report for 2020 (<https://bit.ly/32UqMe> and <https://bit.ly/2HqduN2>), the list of top 10 countries is heavily loaded with the democracies of western Europe. The U.S. barely edges into the top 20. India, on the other hand, is ranked 144 out of the 153 countries on the happiness index and its score.

Further, its ranking has dropped in recent years. We should be giving serious thought to both the fact of India's low ranking on the happiness index and its score. To my mind, the criterion that in a democracy the people must be satisfied with their life is given very little thought these days. It was not so in the early days of our republic.

Built by the people

Two leaders who had recognised this criterion in their engagements with the public were Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. Nehru was explicit in his speech on August 15, 1947 when he stated that the goal of independence was to create institutions which will ensure justice and fullness of life to every man and woman. Note that Nehru had not promised that the government will create these institutions. He was far too aware that democracy is not synonymous with statism; it is about the people. Ultimately, the institutions that enable persons to lead fulfilling lives are built by the people themselves. Let me give



you three examples, all from the United States. In the 1960s, that country saw movements for black empowerment, women's emancipation and sexual liberation. These movements were remarkably successful in the outcomes they achieved, while receiving no support from the U.S. state. This is the sense in which it may be said that it is the people who build the institutions that matter. That said, however, the state has a role in their building. Laws must not constrain liberty when it is self-affirming and must change when it is realised that they do.

On development

The role of the state does not end with removing restraints though. It extends to the endowment of individuals with capabilities in the sense of Amartya Sen. Prof. Sen had thought of capabilities as the endowments that allow individuals to undertake the functions, or do the things, that they value. We can think of a person's health and education as among the most important inputs into the capabilities that they end up possessing. While radical approaches to empowerment rightly emphasise the importance of self-help, it is not sufficiently recognised that individuals cannot easily equip themselves with capabilities, requiring the state to intervene.

Think of a person born into poverty or a woman born into wealth but into a world with social sanction against education for women. Similarly, historically, the caste system in India had excluded a large section from education. While private initiative should not be de-legitimised, it has had only a limited impact on building capabilities in India as it has focused on those with the ability to pay. In a move to measure the capabilities of a population, the UN devised the Human Development Index. The main elements of this are health and education. As with the UN's Happiness Index, India fares very poorly in the UN's Human Development Index too. In 2019, India ranked 129th out of 189 countries. Judged in terms of human development – and one would be hard put to defend any other sense of development – India's development is severely challenged.

Pointing to the incongruence between India's low level of human development and its status as a democracy evokes the response that this is to see the latter in instrumental terms. Democracy it is asserted is a form of government, namely government by discussion. The answer to this deflection is that democracy may be a form of government but surely the people have come to adopt this particular form of government with a goal in mind. We may safely assume a fulfilling life is that goal. Authoritarianism is both incompatible with such a life, and most democracy, which at least in principle grants individuals a voice in governance, is. Second, people adopt democracy so that they can participate in their own governance. They cannot but have foreseen that they must be endowed with capabilities if this is to be possible at all. Thus, liberty

and capability are conjoined as the ultimate aspiration in a democracy.

Neglect and repression

In India, the state's ritualistic attachment with the procedures of democracy has not been matched by an awareness of its implicit goal of a fulfilling life for Indians. By the 1950s, freedom of speech had been restricted by the First Amendment to the Constitution and the Directive Principles, that had enjoined upon the state to promote health and education, had been all but forgotten. Inevitably, the consequential underinvestment in a public health system has left the country severely underprepared for the emergency when COVID-19 struck. After reading of bodies left lying in their wards, we now read of an emerging shortage of something so basic as oxygen supply in metropolitan hospitals. COVID-19 affects the human respiratory system and oxygen is vital to avert the loss of life. Those who have come to share their lives with foreboding of a gruesome end. Not only has the state neglected its responsibility but it has resorted to repression when its inaction is questioned. Recently, an agency reported that a representative of the State in southern Andhra Pradesh publicly threatened with arrest a government doctor who had dared to mention at a review meeting that there were not enough beds in the primary health centre that he was responsible for.

Dystopia was imagined as a place where the people experience great suffering as they fend for themselves under the watchful eyes of an authoritarian state. Is it so far from where we live today?

Pulpape Balakrishnan is Professor of Economics at Ashoka University, Sonapat

Weighing in on the efficacy of female leadership

It is necessary to get rid of inherent biases and perceptions about the effectiveness of women in roles of authority



BHASKAR DUTTA

What do Germany, Taiwan and New Zealand have in common? These are all countries that have women heading their governments. And although they are located in three different continents, the three countries seem to have managed the pandemic much better than their neighbours. Much along the same lines, a detailed recent study by researchers in the United States reports that States which have female governors had fewer COVID-19 related deaths, perhaps partly because female governors acted more decisively by issuing earlier stay-at-home orders. The authors of the study conclude that women leaders are more effective than their male counterparts in times of crises. There will be several critics (no need to guess their gender) who will question the reliability of this conclusion by pointing out deficiencies in the data – admittedly somewhat limited – or the econometric rigour of the analysis. Many will also point out that it is dangerous to make sweeping generalisations based on one study.

The point about the danger of making sweeping generalisations is valid. Of course, studies such as these do not establish the superiority of all female leaders over their male counterparts. All female leaders are not necessarily efficient, and there are many men who have proved to be more effective and charismatic leaders. The important takeaway from the re-

cent experience and such studies is the necessity of getting rid of inherent biases and perceptions about female effectiveness in leadership roles.

India's gram panchayats

Importantly, female leaders also bring something quite different to the table. In particular, they perform significantly better than men in implementing policies that meet the interests of women. This was demonstrated in another study conducted by Nobel Laureate Esther Duflo and co-author Raghabendra Chattopadhyay, who used the system of mandated reservations of *pradhans* in gram panchayats to test the effectiveness of female leadership. Their study was made possible by the 1993 amendment of the Indian Constitution, which mandated that all States had to reserve one-third of all positions of *pradhans* for women. Since villages chosen for the mandated reservations were randomly selected, subsequent differences in investment decisions made by gram panchayats could be attributed to the differences in gender of the *pradhans*. Chattopadhyay and Duflo concluded that *pradhans* invested more in rural infrastructure that served better the needs of their own gender. For instance, women *pradhans* were more likely to invest in providing easy access to drinking water since the collection of drinking water is primarily, if not solely, the responsibility of women.

In addition to the instrumental importance of promoting more space for women in public policy, this is also an important goal for the perspective of gender equality. The right to vote is arguably the most important dimension of participation in public life. There are others. What proportion of wo-



men stand for election to the various State and central legislatures? How many are elected? Perhaps more important, how many women occupy important positions in the executive branch of government?

About suffrage

Independent India can rightly be proud of its achievement in so far as women's suffrage is concerned. Women were allowed to vote from 1950 onwards and so could participate in an equal footing with men from the first general election of 1952. This is in striking contrast to the experience in the so-called "mature democracies" of western Europe and the United States. In the U.S., it took several decades of struggle before women were allowed to vote in 1920. Most countries in Europe also achieved universal suffrage during the inter-war period. Since most able-bodied men went away to the battlefields during the First World War, increasing numbers of women had the opportunity to show that they were adequate substitutes in activities that were earlier the sole preserve of men. This, it is suggested, mitigated the anti-female bias and earned women the right to vote in European countries.

We have had and have charismatic female leaders like Indira Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Mayawati, Shushma Swaraj and Mamata Ba-

nerjee among several others. Interestingly, a glaring example of gender stereotyping was the labelling of Indira Gandhi as the "only man in the cabinet". Apart from these stalwarts, the overall figures of female representation in Indian Parliament, the Bill was first presented to the Lok Sabha by the H.D. Deve Gowda government in 1996. Male members from several parties opposed the Bill on various pretexts. Subsequently, both the NDA and United Progressive Alliance governments have reintroduced the Bill in successive Parliaments but without any success. Although the Rajya Sabha did pass the bill in 2010, the Lok Sabha and the State legislatures are yet to give their approval – despite the 24 years that have passed since it was first presented in the Lok Sabha.

The women's Bill represents a blot on the functioning of the Indian Parliament. The Bill was first presented to the Lok Sabha by the H.D. Deve Gowda government in 1996. Male members from several parties opposed the Bill on various pretexts. Subsequently, both the NDA and United Progressive Alliance governments have reintroduced the Bill in successive Parliaments but without any success. Although the Rajya Sabha did pass the bill in 2010, the Lok Sabha and the State legislatures are yet to give their approval – despite the 24 years that have passed since it was first presented in the Lok Sabha.

The women's Bill languishes

Since women running for elections face numerous challenges, it is essential to create a level-playing field through appropriate legal measures. The establishment of quotas for women is an obvious answer. I have mentioned earlier that mandated reservation for women in gram panchayats was established in all major States since the mid-1990s. Attempts have also been made to extend quotas for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies through a Women's Reservation Bill. Unfortunately,

the fate of this Bill represents a blot on the functioning of the Indian Parliament. The Bill was first presented to the Lok Sabha by the H.D. Deve Gowda government in 1996. Male members from several parties opposed the Bill on various pretexts. Subsequently, both the NDA and United Progressive Alliance governments have reintroduced the Bill in successive Parliaments but without any success. Although the Rajya Sabha did pass the bill in 2010, the Lok Sabha and the State legislatures are yet to give their approval – despite the 24 years that have passed since it was first presented in the Lok Sabha.

Of course, there is a simple fix to the problem. The major party constituents of the NDA and UPA alliances can sidestep the logjam in Parliament by reserving say a third of party nominations for women. This will surely result in increasing numbers of women in legislatures and subsequently in cabinets. The importance of this cannot be overestimated. There is substantial evidence showing that increased female representation in policy making goes a long way in improving perceptions about the effectiveness in leadership roles. This decreases the bias among voters against women candidates, and results in a subsequent increase in the percentage of female politicians contesting and winning elections. So, such quotas have both a short-term and long-term impact. Indeed, voter perceptions about the efficacy of female leadership may change so drastically in the long run that quotas may no longer be necessary!

Bhaskar Dutta is Professor, Ashoka University. The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

Parley in Parliament

It is sad that the quality of parliamentary events is deteriorating with each session. It is true that the present BJP government enjoys a majority that bestows on it the right to decide on the course of governance and also bring in policy changes in the interest of the nation. However, the entire fulcrum of parliamentary democracy rests on the majority of according a proportional share of opinion to the other political parties. The party in power has a

larger responsibility vested in it to ensure that it makes sincere efforts to strive for political consensus and accommodation on major policies. Political and strategic differences may not pave the way for a smooth course, but that should not come in the way of attempting to transcend differences and by engaging the Opposition. People expect a government with a majority and confident of its governance to display better valour in upholding parliamentary traditions.

N. SEKAR, Salem, Tamil Nadu

■ The Opposition has all the rights to oppose and defend Bills, but not in a violent manner. There are ways and means to register its protest in a dignified manner. Given the current monsoon session, the Opposition should have debated the issues in an established way.

VAISHNAVI R. PAUL, Kollam, Kerala

FCI's grain preservation The cartoon (OpEd page, September 22) conveys a bitter truth in upholding the Food Corporation of India (FCI). The FCI, as the central nodal agency

responsible for the procurement, storage and distribution of foodgrains across India, does so maintaining the highest level of standards in maintenance and preservation. The cartoon gives the impression that the FCI's preservation and maintenance of food grain stocks are of very low standards, leaving the nation vulnerable to foodgrains at the mercy of rodents. Damage of foodgrains in the FCI's storage during 2020/21 (as on September 22) was hardly 0.004% against the total quantity of 338 lakh metric tonnes foodgrains

distributed by the FCI. Even this meagre quantity happened because of natural calamities such as floods, and not rodents. Despite the FCI's voluminous operations and multi-level handling, the losses in storage are currently zero; the losses in transit, while transporting foodgrains across thousands of kilometres, from procuring centres to consuming centres, have also been very low during the past few years as a result of robust operations and scientific preservation techniques. In the pandemic period, the

FCI has made foodgrains available to fair price shops not only under the Public Distribution System but also under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMKAY).

The FCI has moved 9,637 rakes (train loads), across thousands of kilometres, about 270 LMT foodgrains (since March 2020), which is way higher than its operations in normal times.

A. N. NAREEM, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (SOOTH), FOOD CORPORATION OF INDIA, Chennai



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THE HINDU
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2020

OPED 7

The mental health needs of the homeless

An integrated approach that is in place in Tamil Nadu will ensure that the lives of those on the fringes matter



As many as 66.1% of those worst affected in India during the Spanish Flu belonged to oppressed classes and suffered the consequences of multidimensional poverty. Similar trends persist today. The inability to adhere to public health protocols that prescribe distancing and use of hygienic products, the absence of private toilets and basic amenities, and the lack of adequate nutrition are all realities in lower- and middle-income countries. Amongst those most affected are homeless persons and the ultra-poor, many of whom are employed in the informal sector. They are exposed to greater adversity against the backdrop of intergenerational social disadvantage and lack of social security.

Health shocks could precipitate a downward spiral into a state of not just homelessness, but also hopelessness. Globally, unpreparedness to handle the pandemic and near collapse of the health systems denuded our ability to focus on health. Many countries have attempted to make amends for the unjustifiable perpetuation of structural barriers and inequities. However, as we awakened to the needs of our poor only during a disaster? The pandemic has made a sound case for increased investments in the health and social sectors. States must also re-examine the role of social determinants of health in perpetuating unjust structures that normalise deprivation. A person's social context and health intersect to help achieve a better quality of life. Relative poverty and its co-relation to stress, mental health and well-being have been evidenced. While distress cannot always be pathologised, data suggest that deaths by suicide and common mental disorders have also been on the rise during the pandemic.

Distinctly deprived

Within this context, distinctly deprived are homeless persons living with a mental illness. They are at risk



Patients of the Institute of Mental Health visit the Marina Beach in Chennai in 2019. — V. VEDHAN

of violent victimisation, assault and long-term incarceration. In India, close to two million individuals sleep rough; 35% of them live with one or the other mental health concern.

The presence of homeless persons with mental illness elicits a range of responses from a desire to help, triggered by evocation of pity or sympathy, to wilfully wishing them away or shunning them from mainstream society. Historically, in a limited context of religiosity associated with renunciation and hearing voices (considered unique to the saint), a few were defied; however, the majority were feared, found to be repulsive and often treated as objects of ridicule. This has resulted in their occupying a lowly place in society's hierarchical structure even today.

Pathways into homelessness include abject poverty, conflict, natural or man-made disasters, lack of access to health and mental health care, social hardships, disruptions in care-giving and domestic violence. In India, homeless persons with mental illness are also the largest number of long-stay patients in State mental hospitals. Besides a few exceptions, services for this under-served group are scarce globally. As they are susceptible to physical co-morbidities and co-occurring substance misuse, and unshielded against the consequences of homelessness, malnutrition, sexual violation, loss of support networks and kinship, homeless persons find their longevity impacted. Further, their experience of loneliness and hyper-segregation contributes to their low sense of self-worth and shrunken group identity, weakening their collective ability to influence change. Additionally, we unfortunately inherited a legacy of name-calling and large and unwholesome lunatic asylums and poor houses from the colonial era which got off to an altruistic start but were later ridden with inadequacies and often deployed as punitive measures to initiate 'reform'. Inadequate care staff resulted in a grossly overwhelming caregiving climate. Fortunately, strong resistance has been built against parochial practices which are giving way to newer dimensions of therapeutic and social care. However, much remains to be done.

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A person-centric action plan

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres's call to "step up for the vulnerable" cannot be more timely. The UN set up a fund of \$2 billion to alleviate the distress of the ultra-vulnerable, including those living with disability or chronic illness. Along similar lines, the Tamil Nadu government, taking cognisance of the mental health needs of homeless persons, will take to scale Emergency Care and Recovery Centres (ECRC) that will support the treatment and community inclusion of this vulnerable section in 10 districts (in addition to the five districts where ECRCs were set up in 2018). The Department of Health, the National Health Mission, the Institute of Mental Health in Chennai, and The Banyan, a mental health care establishment, in partnership with multi-sectoral service providers, will together pursue the goal of improving mental health access and mitigating social and oppor-

tunity losses.

Three hundred bed spaces will be earmarked for homeless persons in psychosocial distress, with a capacity to service more than 1,000 people a year, in smaller and integrated care units in district hospitals and/or social care centres. Early enrolment into care may result in reduction of exposure to harm, injury and starvation, and better prognosis. An integrated approach may also help address stigma associated with this group. Additionally, facilitation of social needs care and livelihoods may reduce the recurrence of episodic homelessness, critical to sustaining support to address mental health issues. Three sectors — the government, development and corporate sectors — will partner to ensure that the lives of those who live on the fringes matter. The mental health teams that anchor the Centre may also lend further support to the District Mental Health Programme, and offer counselling support to address mental health issues in the context of the pandemic.

However, we must remember that issues of homelessness and mental ill health even independently present intractable problems; in combination, one may confront ethical dilemmas and emerging constraints and challenges. We realise that the ECRCs are not a panacea to all distress undergone by homeless individuals, and that we cannot make the problem within a restrictive and normative orientation. Incorporation of heterogeneity of experiences and multi-nodal approaches to care, which are embedded in values of accountability and integrity and take into account varied distress markers, maybe critical for the evolution of newer meaning-making around social and psychiatric phenomenology. More importantly, these care paradigms have to be informed by the long overdue voice of the 'subject in distress'. While this is a powerful start to acknowledge the need to focus on minority mental health, we also hope to benefit from feedback to further build on care plans and mental health systems for the vulnerable.

Vandana Gopikumar is Co-founder, The Banyan and The Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health, and J. Radhakrishnan is Principal Secretary, Department of Health and Family Welfare, Government of Tamil Nadu

The BJP's widening social base

Securing largely upper caste-OBC alliances has propelled the BJP to great heights and has also impacted Dalit politics



Political alignments in Bihar for the forthcoming elections offer a peek into the various ways the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) constructs its electoral building blocks. Taking into consideration the specifics of each State, the NDA has been able to secure the votes of the upper castes as well as large sections of non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (OBCs), especially in large parts of north and central India. And due to its successes, prominent Dalit leaders are either aligning with it or going soft on it.

Models in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh

In Bihar, the Hindutva discourse is still not sufficient for the BJP to win votes, unlike in, say, Uttar Pradesh. If alliance-building in Bihar fails, the BJP also fails. This was seen in 2015 when Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (United) and Lalu Prasad of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) joined hands and defeated the BJP. The BJP's model in Bihar is to build a strong alliance, where it is able to secure the support of many upper castes, Mr. Kumar is able to mobilise the Kurmis and other non-Yadav OBCs, and Lok Janshakti Party chief Ram Vilas Paswan, a significant section of Dalits (the Dusadhs). In 2015, a coalition of the JD(U), the RJD and other parties successfully defeated the BJP. This time is different as the JD(U) walked out of that coalition in 2017.

Political developments in U.P. point to a different template. In U.P., unlike in Bihar, the BJP could fight back successfully against an attempted Dalit-OBC-Muslim alliance by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Congress in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. Following that defeat, BSP chief Mayawati broke her alliance with the SP. Since then, she has been soft on the Centre. She supported the Centre's move on Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir and also credited the Supreme Court for paving the way for construction of the Ram Mandir.

How does one understand the BJP's continued success in U.P.? Since the 1990s, the general sense was that caste combines could always defeat the ideology of Hindutva in U.P., as in Bihar. The reasoning was that caste is an expression of divergences, and if subaltern castes made common cause

against 'Brahminical' Hindutva, evoking the discourse of Bahujan (the majority), they would win.

In 1995, the SP and the BSP defeated the BJP soon after the demolition of the Babri Masjid on the strength of the Bahujan discourse. However, that alliance came apart within two years. When the two parties came together again in 2019, the BJP defeated them on its own, securing the support of the upper castes and large sections of the OBCs and thus creating a new Bahujan, as it were. The non-Yadav OBCs felt that the Yadavs were reaping the fruits of social justice and wanted to vote for the BJP. The BJP seems to no longer need alliances in the State.

In U.P., the BJP portrays the Muslims primarily, and then the Yadavs, as the 'other'. In Haryana, the Jats, who are the dominant caste, are projected as the 'other'. In Maharashtra, the Marathas are the 'other'. The BJP is thus able to attract many upper castes, OBCs and even some Dalits.

Impact on Dalit politics

These models of largely upper caste-OBC alliances have propelled the BJP to great heights. They have also impacted Dalit politics. A prime driver of Dalit politics since the 1980s was the need for greater representation. Power, it was believed, was crucial for Dalit uplift as Dalits lacked the resources to be able to rise without representation.

The sudden widening of the BJP's social base under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has convinced established Dalit leaders that the BJP is here to stay. They believe that transacting with the party is now a necessity. In Bihar, Mr. Paswan has supported the BJP for some years now. In Ram Manjil, a symbol of non-Dusadhi Dalit politics, also supports the party. In U.P., Ms. Mayawati has softened her approach towards the BJP. In 2019, Ramdas Athavale told Parliament that he supported the BJP as he had seen which way the wind was blowing. The message is thus clear: unless there is a serious challenge to the BJP at the Centre, Dalit leaders have to be open to supporting the BJP on many issues.

The belief that a Dalit-Muslim alliance can defeat the BJP is a romantic one held by some liberals. The fact is that prominent Dalit faces like Mr. Paswan are with the NDA today. And strident Dalit critics of the regime like Chandrashekhar Azad are electorally unliked.

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The people of nowhere

Those excluded from the NRC in Assam are left with no forum to even assert their 'right to have rights'

TANISHK GOYAL

In 1943, Hannah Arendt began a narrative that had the potential to confer a sense of identity on millions of people who faced the misfortune of not only having lost a home, but also the impossibility of having to find a new one. She challenged the framework that made access to citizenship the sole prerogative of the state. Through this framework, the ideas of ethical and racial homogeneity were propagated. This subsequently linked the idea of being a rights-bearing individual to the concept of citizenship. More specifically, the narrative of citizenship being the sole prerogative of the nation state linked the idea of a rights-bearing individual to the idea of belongingness to a particular formalised political community.

Inclusion, a precondition

The predicaments that such an idea brought with itself were acknowledged by Arendt, when she recognised the inefficacy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She said that in order to be entitled even to basic human rights, a person is required to be something more than just a human being. The person is required to be a member of a political community which can enforce her other civil, economic and political rights. Arendt emphasised on this right to inclusion in a political community which precedes even the most basic of human rights and phrased it as the 'right to have rights'. This premise stemmed from the fact that a right without a corresponding remedy or means of enforcement is practically meaningless. Against this backdrop, she appraised the world of the plight of the stateless who have been denationalised or denaturalised, and whose very need for a validating community or the right of inclusion has inclusion as its precondition.

With respect to India, this concept of being regarded as a rights-bearing individual only when one belongs to a particular formalised political community has become so well entrenched in the socio-legal ethos that

hardly anyone has raised questions about its soundness in the last seven decades. This has been fundamental by because the assumptions about the access to citizenship have always seemed so settled that we have forgotten that such assumptions were once instituted through a narrative, and can be revised as such.

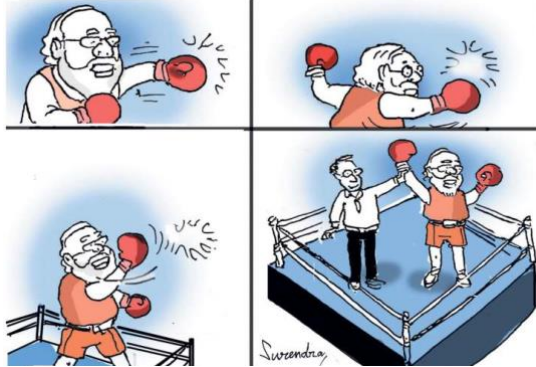
No citizenship, no belonging

The exclusion of 10 lakh people from the National Register of Citizens in Assam stripped them not only of their citizenship, but also their bare status as human beings. They are left with no forum whatsoever to even assert their "right to have rights." This is essentially because once the Foreigners Tribunal decides that an individual is a foreigner, she is sent to a detention camp where she is to be kept until she can be sent back to her country of origin.

This is problematic as it reinforces Arendt's argument that it is possible for humans to exist in a place called nowhere. This is due to the twin effects of the lack of a validating community which will accept these individuals (unless there is an agreement to the effect with the alleged country of origin) and the sheer impracticality of the rightsless laying claim to a community from which they have been wilfully excluded. To add on to this, the flawed determination procedures of the Foreigners Tribunal have also ensured that such individuals are also precluded from the reasonable protection of a social order.

Natural rights theorists assert that basic rights should be available even if only a single human being remains on earth, but history demonstrates that resistance and political mobilisation are the first steps towards asserting such rights. This asymmetry is neither new nor unprecedented. It is just a constant reminder of the world order we live in, where the "rightness" of the stateless is assumed, rather than asserted, let alone argued.

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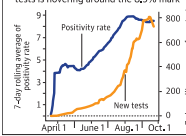
DATA POINT

A drop in testing

The number of new COVID-19 cases in India recorded a significant fall in the last five days after consistently breaching the 90,000 mark on several days earlier this month. The drop in cases could be due to a significant decrease in the number of tests conducted. In at least 10 States, there was a sharp fall in the number of tests conducted in the last 10 days despite an increase in the share of people testing positive.

By Sumant Sen, Nareesh Singaravelu and Vignesh Radhakrishnan

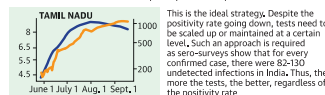
1. RAPID FALL IN TESTS | Over the last 10 days, the number of new COVID-19 tests conducted per million people in India has been declining rapidly. While the share of people testing positive (positivity rate) has remained high and even increased a little over the last five days, the number of tests per million people dropped from 811 to 722 over the last 10 days. The share of positive tests is hovering around the 4.5% mark.



2. AMONG STATES | Not all States recorded a decline in tests. They can be classified into three types based on their recent testing levels

THE BAD | In Maharashtra and Assam, tests are going down, while the share of positive cases is going up. Using such a strategy would mean missing a lot of positive cases. Other States in this category include Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, M.P., Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura, Chhattisgarh and Karnataka

THE GOOD | In T.N., tests are going up, while the positivity rate is going down. Other States include Delhi, Bihar, Jharkhand, Mizoram and W.B.



MODULING STATES | In Gujarat and Telangana, tests are dropping, but the share of positive cases is going down. In these States, tests should be maintained at a certain level, if not increased, to ensure that the share of positives does not necessarily go down due to decreasing testing levels

■ In Andhra Pradesh, tests as well as the share of positives are rising. Such States need to increase their testing levels to capture more positives. Nine other States are following this trend: Haryana, J&K, Punjab, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya, U.P. and Kerala

LAST WORD | The positivity rate varies widely based on the method of testing. For instance, over the past seven days, 81% of tests in Delhi were Rapid Antigen Detection Tests (RADT), which are not as reliable as RT-PCR tests. RADTs can register as many as 50% 'false negative' results. In India, RADTs are not used. Thus, while the positivity rate in T.N. may be closest to the actual rate, the same cannot be said about Delhi. The share of RADTs in select States is as follows: A.P. (54%), Chhattisgarh (68%), Karnataka (42%), W.B. (55%), Mizoram (25%), Nagaland (7%)

The Hindu

FROM THE ARCHIVES
FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 24, 1970

Selection basis unconstitutional

A Division Bench of the Supreme Court has unanimously held that the unit-wise system of selection, adopted by the Tamil Nadu government in regard to admissions to the first year integrated M.B.B.S. course in the State medical colleges for the year 1970-71, is unconstitutional, being violative of the fundamental rights under Articles 14 and 15. The court further held that the impugned selection was not validly made, and that the interviews conducted by the selection committees constituted for the purpose were not held in accordance with the relevant rules. The Bench also held that the interviews were invalid for the reason that the committees took into consideration irrelevant matters, and at the same time failed to take into consideration matters required to be taken into consideration (prescribed under the relevant rules governing the interviews).

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 24, 1920

Imperial Secretariat

(from an editorial)

In view of the coming changes in the administration of India, the reorganisation of the Imperial Secretariat is a subject of some interest to the public. The Government of India have considered the proposals of the Committee which recently investigated the question and accepted the major part of its recommendations, some for immediate execution, some for tentative examination and the rest for eventual adoption. The Committee's proposals begin with a scheme for the readjustment of departments and a new allocation of business. It is proposed, for instance, to amalgamate the civil agencies dealing with public health under the Education Department, education and public health will thus be two sections of one department, each section under the charge of an expert, with the connecting link providing in a common Secretary. Each of the two sections will be assisted by an Advisory Board which is to have the privilege of addressing and interviewing the Viceroy and will be represented, at the Viceroy's discretion, in meetings of the Executive Council and in the discussion of respective questions of each section. Another recommendation of the Committee relates to the reunion of the allied subjects of Commerce and Industry and the creation of a separate Department of Ways and Communications to co-ordinate the duties of the Postal, Telegraphic and Transport departments.

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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2020

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

THE G IN NGO

New FCRA Bill frames state suspicion, shrinks space for NGOs, undercuts their role in deepening grass-roots democracy

THE FOREIGN CONTRIBUTION (Regulation) Bill (FCRA) 2020, passed by the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday and the Lok Sabha a day earlier, puts many questions on the viability of NGOs at a time when the country especially requires robust civil society organisations and networks to deal with a range of challenges including the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government claims that its aim is to bring about transparency in the working of non-profits. That is an unexceptionable goal, and questions relating to financial propriety have, indeed, been asked of some NGOs. However, some of the provisions of the Bill that now awaits the President's approval—capping the administrative expenses of non-profits at 20 per cent of their foreign donations, requiring them to have a State Bank of India account at a Delhi Branch, prohibiting the transfer of grants received under FCRA to any other outfit and sweeping powers to the Ministry of Home Affairs to cancel the FCRA certificate of an NGO—speak of the Centre's mistrust of the entire civil society sector. These clauses could make almost any non-profit vulnerable to harassment and shrink the already embattled space for civil society activity in the country.

According to the government's FCRA dashboard, there are more than 20,000 non-profits registered under the FCRA Act. They are engaged in diverse activities, relating to human and labour rights, gender issues, healthcare, environment, education, legal aid, even research. They endeavour to plug gaps in the government's programmes and reach out to sections of people often left untouched by state projects. During the pandemic, many such organisations have tried to bridge the gap between state agencies and the most vulnerable sections of the population, migrant workers for example, by generating awareness and facilitating the transfer of government aid. In fact, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly said that the fight against the coronavirus "is a combination of the efforts of the government and the civil society". Community-level outfits and self-help groups have led from the front in the battle against the virus in several states, including Kerala, Odisha and Rajasthan. In the past, such grass-roots organisations have been enabled by collaborations with bigger NGOs and research agencies that have access to foreign funding. The new FCRA provisions—especially the one that constrains NGOs from sub-granting—threaten this spirit of collaboration in the country's development sector.

NGO activity is not just about philanthropy. Their engagement with people at the grass roots level acquires civil society workers with the deficiencies of government programmes, and often makes them ask difficult questions—about discrimination, marginalisation, violation of constitutional rights and human dignity. Such interventions and criticisms are crucial to a humane society. In fact, civil society initiatives have informed some of the path-breaking laws in the country, including the Environmental Protection Act, Right to Education Act, Forest Rights Act and Right to Information Act. To hobble such activism, by burdening it with distrust and suspicion, does a disservice to democracy.

FRIENDS & NEIGHBOURS

Ramped up engagement with Maldives, US-Maldives defence pact, point to a reset of equations. Delhi needs to build on it

THE SIGNING OF a defence agreement between the Maldives and the United States earlier this month shows how geopolitical tensions are making themselves in several strategic spaces, and how Delhi's own responses have changed in the new environment. The "Framework for US, Department of Defence-Maldives Ministry of Defence and Security Relationship" agreement is emblematic. In 2013, a year after Maldivian Democratic Party leader Mohammed Nasheed had been ousted, a US proposal for a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the Indian Ocean nation met with stiff opposition in Delhi. The plan was shelved, but Delhi, despite the heightened awareness of China's growing influence in its neighbourhood, was not enthused by the Obama "pivot to Asia". Not any more.

Delhi has made it clear that the broad framework agreement, which includes a security dialogue and "sets forth both countries' intent to deepen engagement and co-operation in support of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean", is "in line" with India's overall interests and regional stability. After watching Male in a tight embrace with Beijing under the 2014-18 Abdullah Yameen government, Delhi's response is one of quiet relief. It has also ramped up bilateral engagement.

Last month, India committed to providing \$250 million in budgetary support to the Maldives to help it tide over the pandemic-induced economic crisis that has crippled tourism. Delhi is also providing a \$400 million line of credit for the construction of what is billed as the single-largest infrastructure project in the Maldives, the Greater Male Connectivity project, which aims to provide streamlined connectivity between Male and three other islands. Maldives is also the only neighbouring country with whom India has a travel bubble. Most significant is the cargo ferry service between the two countries inaugurated earlier this week. Three years ago, the Maldives government had entered into a Free Trade Agreement with China in response to European trade sanctions against the authoritarian Yameen government. But the successor government of President Ibrahim Solih decided not to bring in the enabling legislation because it was heavily loaded against the import-dependent economy. There is a lesson in this for Delhi: For the cargo service to be useful to both sides, India must take care to ensure that it is not perceived to be dumping goods on that country. There is bound to be asymmetry in the hours entailed, so be it.

HEART OF THE MATTER

African countries have chosen cooperation as a strategy to deal with pandemic. Rest of the world should take note

IN THE EARLY days of the pandemic, until about three months ago, the modelling predicting the volume and death rate in Africa was almost casually catastrophic. These early models have been proven wrong, and the continent, home to over 1.5 billion people, has seen 34,000 confirmed deaths and just over a million cases. According to John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control (ACDC), it is through pan-African solidarity, timely lockdowns, avoiding panic and strategically using resources that Africa as a continent appears to be faring better than many other regions.

There is a sub-genre of science fiction that has almost been forgotten now, as dystopian future fantasies—symbolic of the anxieties around democratic politics, the pandemic, and AI—have become the norm. The idea was that faced with an existential crisis—climate change, disease or even an alien attack—humanity would band together. In much of the world, that has not been the case. The US is more polarised than ever. Europe is still struggling through Brexit and in South Asia, the cleavages seem to have deepened.

The countries of Africa, though, present a more hopeful picture. The region was ravaged by colonialism, civil wars and ethnic violence to an unmatched degree. It continues to be a theatre for the geo-economic manoeuvrings of external powers. And it is still haunted by the over 12 million deaths from HIV in the time it took to get treatment medicines there cheaply. Solidarity and strategy in dealing with the pandemic have proven effective in Africa, and the ACDC has, in just three years since its formation, lived up to its mandate. Now, as the competition among countries over a vaccine and the infrastructure for its distribution intensifies, the rest of the world could do well to follow Africa's example.



SUKHBIR SINGH BADAL

THE COUNTRY is going through an extremely sensitive and troubled period with 70 per cent of its population, the farmers, out on the streets, agitating against the Centre's decision to amend the laws with regard to the marketing of farm produce. On the face of it, the issue relates to the continuance of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) regime for certain crops. But, in fact, the implications of the Centre's new legislation go much deeper and wider. At stake is the entire system of "Assured Procurement" by government of India agencies such as the Food Corporation of India.

On its part, the government has sought to address apprehensions of the farmers by declaring that it has no intention of discontinuing or diluting either the practice of the MSP or of the assured procurement of farmers' key crops by government agencies. So what then sets the government and the farmers on a collision course? What, after all, is so critically important because of which one of the longest-standing allies of the BJP and a key founding member of the NDA has first had to plead with the government to listen to the farmers and later to quit the government through the resignation of its sole representative in the Union Cabinet, Harimrat Kaur Badal?

All along, the SAD tried all it could as a responsible constituent of the NDA and as a representative predominantly of the farmers to act as a bridge between the two. I had a long exchange of views with organisations of the farmers in Punjab and offered to accompany them anywhere they wanted me to go to argue their cause. I pleaded with the government to insert constitutional and legislative guarantees in the bills as commitment to the farmers about the continuance of official procurement at the MSP.

The government, first verbally and later in writing, gave assurances to this effect. But it refused to incorporate these guarantees into the Acts. The farmers were not willing to buy any assurances of the government short of legislative clauses. As a party predominantly of farmers, the SAD resisted the temptation of playing to the gallery and worked quietly towards a solution acceptable to both sides.



AMITABH BEHAR

THE SECURITIES AND Exchange Board's (SEBI) working group has submitted its report with recommendations regarding the structure, mechanisms, and regulatory framework for the proposed Social Stock Exchange (SSE). The response to the report has been muted and sceptical from civil society, which is reeling under a deep funding crisis due to COVID-19 with projections of it getting worse in the coming years.

The scepticism stems from a comprehensive reading of the intent and actions of the finance ministry. The 2020-21 Union Budget says that not-for-profit organisations will need to apply every five years for income tax registration to ascertain their charitable status and will also need to renew their 80(G) certificate that provides tax relief to their donors. These requirements will create havoc in the not-for-profit sector as they would not be able to survive without the tax-exempt charitable status, not to mention opening the flood gates to corruption and bullying by the tax and government bureaucracy.

The proposal for SSE surprised many. SSE exists in one form or another in UK, Singapore, South Africa, Canada and Brazil, but it is yet to take off in any country. It has been an instrument focussed on social enterprises with rather poor results. The proposed SSE in our country could have been an interesting innovation if it was a first. But to replicate a failed experiment from elsewhere in an extremely complex environment of endemic poverty, high inequality and regional variations does

Why my party withdrew its minister from the NDA government on the farmers' issue

All along, the SAD tried all it could as a responsible constituent of the NDA and as a representative predominantly of the farmers to act as a bridge between the two. I had a long exchange of views with organisations of the farmers in Punjab and offered to accompany them anywhere they wanted me to go to argue their cause. I pleaded with the government to insert constitutional and legislative guarantees in the bills as commitment to the farmers about the continuance of official procurement at the MSP. The government, first verbally and later in writing, gave assurances to this effect. But it refused to incorporate these guarantees into the Acts. The farmers were not willing to buy any assurances of the government short of legislative clauses.

But finally, finding that there was no sympathetic ear in the government either to the millions of toiling farmers or to earnest and passionate pleas of one of its own key allies, the SAD, to save the farmers, our party decided to pull out of the government. The SAD could not be a party to anything which in its view had the potential of destroying the already beleaguered peasantry in the country, especially in Punjab.

Punjab forms close to 2 per cent of the area and population of the country. And yet its farmers have always contributed the bulk of foodgrain, often exceeding 50 per cent of the national grain. There was a time when the country faced not just famines but also international ignominy as our prime ministers had to go around the world with capital with a begging bowl in hand. Late PM Lal Bahadur Shastri j then gave a clarion call to Punjab farmers to come to the rescue of the country. Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan. The farmers of Punjab responded with the Green Revolution which transformed India from a nation of food shortages to a food surplus and food exporting country—all in a matter of just six to seven years.

The farmers, especially from Punjab, came to the rescue of the nation when the nation's survival was in danger. Now, the farmers' lives are in danger. Now it is the nation's turn to come to its rescue. Farmers' incomes have shrunk dramatically even as there has been an exponential increase in the price of farm inputs and no comparable rise in the price of produce. All this has led to the shocking spectre of farmers' suicides across the country. This should stir the conscience of the nation.

But the three bills reveal an inexplicable insensitivity and ingratitude towards the farmers.

This legislation throws the market for farmers' crops open to the private sector and the big corporate sharks are eyeing with greed the fruit of farmers' sweat and toil. The bills create two sets of laws—one for the state procurement agencies where taxes like the Rural Development Fund, market fees etc cut into the actual price which the farmer gets. But the reward for that is that the farmer

WORDLY WISE

AN INDIVIDUAL MUST ENDEAVOUR TO ASSUME THE UNIVERSALISM INHERENT IN THE HUMAN CONDITION. —FRANTZ FANON

Bills of ingratitude

does not have to worry about the sale of his crops at the Minimum Support Price. Punjab has created one of the best networks of agricultural marketing infrastructure in the world. This ensures that the farmer does not have to go far to sell his crop, protecting him against uncertainties of the market as well as reducing his expenses.

But under the present laws, the private buyer will not have to pay any taxes to the government. Consequently, he can afford to lure the farmer with offers of a higher per quintal price. And as a part of their marketing strategy, big corporate sharks will initially offer prices considerably higher than the official MSP. The simple-hearted farmer will fall for the bait and this would look good for the first few years. But the net result would be that this would decimate the existing marketing regime and the farmer would be finally thrown entirely at the mercy of the private sharks. There will be no one then to save the farmers from these sharks.

We saw this strategy employed by Jio mobile. It was virtually free at the start. But once corporates kill competition and monopolise the market, they have the consumer eating out of their hand. Then, the prices are hiked at corporates' own sweet will. This is called the tyranny of private monopoly. This is what the farmer, especially in Punjab, is up against. But he won't be alone in this fight.

The SAD has a history of making sacrifices in defence of the toiling and beleaguered farmers. It has a legacy to live up to.

We have approached the honourable President of India, requesting him to return these bills to Parliament for reconsideration. We still hope that the government will not stand on prestige and will refer the bills to a Select Committee which would then take the stakeholders—the farmers—on board.

If that doesn't happen, the SAD will uphold its legacy of standing shoulder to shoulder with farmers. But in the interest of our country, we still hope that the government would agree to withdraw these bills and reintroduce them in amended form.

The writer is President, Shiromani Akali Dal

IMPORTING A FAILED EXPERIMENT

Social Stock Exchange is yet to take off in any country

not seem a reasoned decision. It is therefore important to analyse why it has been pushed as a key policy, what it seeks to achieve, and its implications for civil society and our democracy.

The SEBI working group was constituted of business leaders, government and SEBI officials with a token representative from civil society. The top-sided composition of the committee reflects the real intent of the SSE, which is to create instruments for market to enter the social sector. A preliminary glance even this could be a laudable objective and surely many well-intentioned backers of this idea are working with this narrative of "bringing capital markets for the social sector". However, the way the exchange is envisioned makes it clear that the interests of the private sector are guiding the idea of SSE and not the systemic developmental challenges of the country.

In the last decade, forays of private actors including large consulting firms into the social sector as profitable enterprises have opened up new arenas for profit-making. The SSE will create a pathway for the private sector to enter the social sector from the comforts of Dalal Street without enduring the heat and dust of India's developmental challenges, which are embedded in complex terrains including politics, caste, patriarchy, feudalism and corruption.

The proponents of the SSE argue that it would help set standards and a performance matrix for the social sector, do bench-mark-

ing of sector actors (credibility checks), organise information and data, help in impact assessments, and do capacity building for the sector. This approach is flawed.

The assumption that extremely complex problems have blueprints of success is erroneous. Poverty or injustice are essentially systemic and political questions that need multi-pronged dynamic engagement. Developing set standards of impact assessment and performance matrix has the risk of privileging only one approach to the developmental challenges at hand, or even worse, steering the discourse onto the solvable parts of the larger systemic questions—at best addressing the symptom and not the root cause.

Apart from these deeper questions, operationally also, the SSE would create more intermediaries and benefit larger organisations with English-speaking professionals skilled in the language of markets at the cost of smaller grass roots groups, who are the real frontline actors in addressing the challenges we face as a society and country. More than 99 per cent of the three million NGOs in the country are in the small category and will be untouched by the SSE.

Finally, the idea of setting up the SSE within the rubric of SEBI again reflects the confusion. If the core business of the SSE is to strengthen the social sector and bring new resources to it, then SEBI for sure itself would admit that it is not the appropriate anchor.

The writer is CEO, Oxfam India

SEPTEMBER 24, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO

IRAN-IRAQ BOMBINGS IRAQI FORCES INVADED Iran at four points, captured a major border town and laid siege to the strategic refinery city of Abadan as the conflict between the two neighbours exploded into an all-out war, according to reports from both sides of the border. Fires were reported raging out of control at the giant Abadan refinery complex, one of the world's largest and heart of Iran's oil industry. Waves of Iranian warplanes bombed Baghdad and other Iraqi cities, reportedly killing dozens of people. Iraq claimed more than two dozen Iranian aircraft had been shot down. A second air attack was reported in Baghdad at nightfall.

CRPC AMENDED AN ORDINANCE. The second in two days, was promulgated vesting more powers with the executive. The ordinance amended the Criminal Procedure Code with a view to effectively deal with habitual criminals and those creating enemy between different groups and communities. Certain powers under the CRPC, hitherto enjoyed by the Centre and state governments will now be exercised by the district magistrates.

PRESS ATTACKED THE PRESS WAS held to ransom by Youth Congress (I) workers who laid siege to the offices of four leading newspapers of

Bangalore. Readers of four newspapers—Indian Express, Deccan Herald, Kannada Prabha and Prajaganti—went without their copies. More than 200 employees were locked in and held hostage by slogan-shouting activists who demanded "fair treatment" for chief minister Gundu Rao.

UP FLOODED AGAIN FLOOD-AFFECTED AZAMGARH AND Jaunpur towns of Uttar Pradesh are once again under threat without the Tons and Gomti crossing the Ganges mark in these areas. Reports from Hamirpur, Unnao and Kanpur also talk of heavy destruction due to rains.

New Delhi

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THE IDEAS PAGE

Opening in the impasse

Five-point consensus reached by India and China recognises importance of dialogue and disengagement. Now, focus should shift to maintenance of status quo along each other's perception of LAC



SUJAN R CHINO

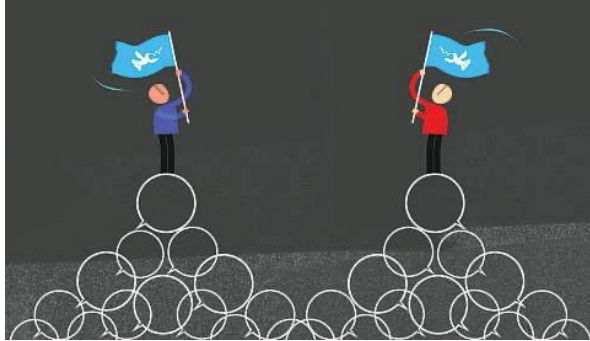
INDIA'S DEFENCE MINISTER Rajnath Singh made firm and thoughtful statements in the two Houses of Parliament on September 15 and 17 concerning the situation in Ladakh. Apart from lauding the indomitable courage and readiness of India's armed forces to deal with any eventuality to protect the country's territorial integrity, he gave a broad overview of the boundary question and the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

One of his key points was that there is no commonly delineated LAC in the border areas and that after 2003, the LAC clarification exercise ground to a halt due to China's intransigence. China had agreed in the 1993 "Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas" that, pending an ultimate resolution of the boundary question, the two sides shall strictly respect and observe the LAC. Further, there was agreement that, when necessary, the two sides shall jointly check and determine the segments of the LAC where they have different views regarding its alignment. Article X of the 1996 "Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas" also commits the two sides to speed up the process of clarification and confirmation of the LAC in order to arrive at a common understanding.

It is clear that without exchanging maps depicting each other's LAC, a common understanding will remain elusive. Even after reaching that goal, there would remain the challenge of ensuring that both sides refrain from activities in and along the overlapping areas that threaten peace and tranquillity. Confirmation of the LAC presupposes delineation on a map and, thereafter, demarcation on the ground, of a single, mutually accepted line. This is an altogether more difficult task since it may entail territorial adjustments. So far, the first step of clarifying each other's perception of the LAC has only been carried out in the middle sector.

Why has China declined to continue the LAC clarification exercise? In the western sector, China's so-called LAC of November 7, 1959, is essentially coterminous with its boundary claim line, except in the north where it falls short. In some places, the post-1962 variant of its LAC went beyond the line that China had claimed before the conflict. When India-China border talks recommenced in December 1981, the Chinese side had essentially reiterated the "package proposal" first conveyed by Deng Xiaoping to then Foreign Minister Arsalan Vajpayee in 1979, and subsequently agreed through Indian journalists, suggesting a settlement based on the de facto LAC in the eastern and western sectors. However, at the crucial Sixth Round in 1985, the Chinese did a volte-face. They claimed that the largest dispute lay in the eastern sector and that India would have to make substantial concessions, to which China would reciprocate with corresponding adjustments in the western sector. China subsequently never clarified the details.

China's reluctance to clarify the LAC to



C R Sankar

India's LAC claims are exaggerated concerning its actual control and effective jurisdiction. Little does this argument take into account the fact that China itself had never physically controlled any part of Aksai Chin until the People's Liberation Army (PLA) rolled into Xinjiang and Tibet in 1949 and 1950, respectively. Thereafter, the story of the Chinese LAC is one of the nebulous claims followed by an incremental acquisition of territory.

The recent meetings in Moscow between the defence ministers and foreign ministers of India and China, in quick succession, have provided an opportune moment for both sides to reduce tensions. The five-point consensus reached by the two sides has recognised the importance of dialogue, disengagement and bilateral confidence-building measures. The joint press release of the 6th round of senior commanders' meeting is encouraging, since it speaks of strengthening communication, avoiding misunderstandings and refraining from any further action, including build-up of troops and unilateral attempts to alter the ground situation. In his statement at the 75th Session of the UNGA on September 22, President Xi Jinping made two key points — that China has no intention to fight a Cold War or "hot war" with any country, and that China will continue to narrow differences with others through dialogue and negotiations.

The bilateral consensus and subsequent pronouncements offer India and China an opportunity to bring their LAC into a common understanding. The consensus reached so far can be further buttressed by both sides reiterating at their next meeting a key formulation contained in Article 1 of the 1993 agreement, that "neither side shall use or threaten to use force against the other by any means". This, of course, requires China to sincerely walk the talk by refraining from unilateral action and military means to address differences. It would also require China to stop insisting on a unilateral interpretation of the LAC and to disengage meaningfully its unilateral military deployments that triggered the escalation in the first place.

Henceforth, the focus should shift to the maintenance of the status quo along each other's perception of the LAC and within the overlapping areas in many of which both

India has made clear to China, both through diplomatic and military channels, that any unilateral attempt to change the situation is unacceptable.

Despite the unrealistic claims made by the Chinese mouthpiece *Global Times*, the military balance in the border areas in eastern Ladakh is, in fact, fairly symmetrical. It is a tribute to India's armed forces that neither the difficult terrain nor inclement weather has prevented them from responding robustly to the Chinese build-up in Ladakh, leaving Beijing in no doubt that any adventurism would prove costly.

By adopting the path of peaceful negotiations that President Xi mentioned in his UN address, China stands to benefit from a much-needed image makeover at a time when it faces wide-spread opprobrium for its unilateralism, aggression and "wolf warrior diplomacy".

The last fundamental jolt to bilateral relations was in May 1998, when China had abruptly cancelled all engagements in the aftermath of India's nuclear tests. The exception then was a pre-scheduled meeting of the Experts Group of Diplomatic & Military Officials (EG), led by this writer on the Indian side, which was used to gradually restart the process of engagement, leading to the visit of External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh a year later and culminating in President K R Narayanan's state visit in May 2000.

What is encouraging about the situation today, as compared to May 1998, is that dialogue has remained intact at all levels. It is noteworthy that while expressing India's firm resolve to defend its territory, the defence minister also alluded in his speeches in Parliament to the desire to address the current situation through dialogue. Taken together, these recent developments provide an opening to China to grasp the nettle, and to recognise its own interest in building enduring ties with a large and populous neighbour like India, whose friendship and goodwill will continue to play a crucial role in endorsing the "peaceful rise of China".

The writer, a former Ambassador of India and China specialist, is currently the director general of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

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Staying on in Afghanistan

Geopolitical imperatives make it difficult for US to withdraw forces



ANJU GUPTA

IN 1979, Afghanistan became a theatre of the Cold War. In later years, the land used for " jihad" against "godless" Soviets by the US-Saudi Pakistan axis was converted into a hub for al Qaeda's terrorist network. The al Qaeda trained future jihadis of Afghanistan-Pakistan and thousands of foreign fighters, following the 9/11 attacks, the US targeted the Taliban, which receded into sanctuaries in Pakistan. Despite efforts by the international and Afghan communities, Afghanistan continues to bleed from attacks by the Taliban-al Qaeda network. The intra-Afghan talks began on September 12. Many believe that the US will "exit" this time. However, closer scrutiny suggests that an exit is unlikely, irrespective of the results of the US presidential elections. The network will continue to pose serious threats to Indian and global security.

Like much of the world, India too did not recognise the Taliban government (1996-2001). In December 1999, five Pakistanis from Jehl (Jaish e Mohammad) hijacked Indian Airlines passenger flight IC 814, on route to Delhi from Kathmandu, and landed in Kandahar. Passengers were "swapped" for prisoners in Indian jails. The hijacking showed how Pakistan was using Afghanistan to perpetrate international terrorism.

In August 1998, al Qaeda's operatives bombed US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The US mounted strikes against al Qaeda's

training camps in the Haqqania area in Afghanistan. In 2000, al Qaeda's suicide bombers hit the US Cole in Yemen, 9/11 got the US to go after the network. From the safe havens of Pakistan, Taliban supreme Mullah Omar refused to hand over Osama Bin Laden, who was killed in May 2011 and by US SEALs in his home — a few kilometres from the Pakistan Military Academy.

Due to the West's pro-occupation with "other wars", by 2008, the network had gained control over large swathes of rural Afghanistan and was repeatedly targeting provincial capitals. In December 2009, Barack Obama announced a "troops surge and withdrawal" to turn the tide. The surge to over 14,000 troops (including allies) helped build Afghan forces against the network. At the end of its term, the troops level was down to 8,600 plus the counter-terrorism component. By November 2017, under President Donald Trump, US troops rose to 14,000, now down to 8,600 plus the counter-terrorism component.

The Afghan peace process hinges on the US securing its counter-terrorism interests and the Taliban and the government charting a roadmap to peace. The US-Taliban agreement stipulates an exit before May 2021, if conditions are met.

The "surge and withdrawal" has evolved as a favoured US strategy in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. The strategy entails identifying and em-

powering a local ally against common enemies. It leads to adjusting the US force posture "to ensure that the local ally is not defeated. The core interests are guarded while reducing casualties of their own troops. Different US presidents have couched the strategy in different political terms. This is unlikely to change post-elections.

Unlike in Iraq and Syria, the US has no bases in Central Asia or South Asia. The presence in Afghanistan, critical for counterterrorism, is also crucial for geopolitical imperatives. With China as a rival and a hostile Iran, a credible presence is needed to secure much more than the safety of the Embassy.

The US has identified and invested in Afghan forces as a local ally. The tangible dividends are visible in oversight (SIGAR) reports. The US Defence report, July 2020, reiterates that the vital national interest is "to ensure that (Afghanistan) is never again used as a safe haven from which terrorists can attack the US or our allies or interests abroad". The February 29 US-Afghan joint declaration has committed to "joint assessment and determination" as the basis for an exit.

Without a ceasefire, deep mistrust would affect intra-Afghan talks. Withdrawal, if a part of the Taliban may compromise. In reality, intra-Afghan talks are a "mediation" between the Afghan government and the Taliban Army.

The US strategy has ensured that the network has not overrun governments. Several counter-terrorism targets in Afghanistan-Pakistan have been taken out including top al Qaeda leaders and scores of foreign fighters. The US-Afghan partnership has deterred a genuine "Islamic State" from taking roots in Afghanistan.

The threats from the network remain. AUN Report in July stresses that al Qaeda is currently active in Afghanistan and the al Qaeda chief, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is in Afghanistan. It estimates al Qaeda cadres to be between 400 and 600 and having top-level contacts with the Haqqania network. The report mentions that foreign fighters from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar are present within AQIS (al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent).

Pakistan is lacking the network for its own interest. The network has long taken control of ISKP (IS in Khorasan Province). The shadow boxing of the Taliban with ISKP projects it as a key "ally against IS". Several arrests in India and Afghanistan show how AQIS and ISKP are recruiting online and inciting lone wolf attacks across South Asia. The Afghanistan-Pakistan based network will continue to impact the security of India and the West in South Asia and beyond.

The writer is an IPS officer. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"In August last year, the BJP government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi annexed... Kashmir by revoking its special status. There is concern that by integrating GB (Gilgit-Baltistan) as a province, Pakistan may weaken its case in the way that India has."

— DAWN

The opaque nation

Government is promoting a culture of secrecy, undermining legislation such as RTI



CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT

WHILE TRANSPARENCY is a cornerstone of democracy, today's India is cultivating secrecy. Paradoxically, this culture of secrecy is sometimes justified in the name of transparency.

Electional bonds are a case in point. They were introduced in February 2017 by the Centre in the name of transparency — they allowed anonymous donations to political parties and, therefore, protected the privacy of the donors! The Election Commission of India (ECI) criticised the opacity of this financial mechanism and described it as a "retrograde step". The EC told the government that this arrangement would prevent the state from ascertaining whether a "political party" has taken any donation in violation of provisions under Section 28B of the Representation of the People Act, which prohibits the political parties from taking donations from government companies and foreign sources. Electional bonds also made it impossible to check whether a company was giving to parties more than what the Companies Act (2013) permitted; that is 75 per cent of the net average profit of the three preceding financial years. The government has not been deterred by these legal concerns, presumably because the benefits it derives from behind-the-curtain bargains with the corporate sector are much more attractive than the opprobrium resulting from the EC's reprimands.

What is encouraging about the situation today, as compared to May 1998, is that dialogue has remained intact at all levels. It is noteworthy that while expressing India's firm resolve to defend its territory, the defence minister also alluded in his speeches in Parliament to the desire to address the current situation through dialogue. Taken together, these recent developments provide an opening to China to grasp the nettle, and to recognise its own interest in building enduring ties with a large and populous neighbour like India, whose friendship and goodwill will continue to play a crucial role in endorsing the "peaceful rise of China".

This case for secrecy has affected the Right to Information Act, the UPA-legislated law that had made India progress more quickly than most democracies on the road to transparency. First, the government did not appoint a Chief Information Commissioner for a year after the incumbent retired in August 2014, and did not fill vacant information commissioner posts in the Central Information Commission (CIC) between 2016 and 2018, a year when, consequently, only seven commissioners out of the sanctioned strength of 11 were in place. After the SC intervened, some appointments were made in January 2019, but four posts remained vacant, a clear indication of the gov-

ernment's lack of interest in the CIC and/or its attempt to weaken it. The backlog of pending appeals had reached 30,000 cases in late 2019 as the CIC has become a rather dysfunctional body.

Second, the government refused to disclose information which was previously available under the RTI Act. Queries about phone tapping are not responded to anyone. In 2016-17, the home and finance ministries rejected close to 15 per cent of the applications they received while the RBI and public sector banks rejected 33 per cent. The RBI, for instance, refused to give any information about the decision-making process that led to demonetisation.

Third, during the 2019 Monsoon Session of Parliament, just after the Lok Sabha election, the Modi government amended the RTI Act to limit the power of the CIC. The five-year fixed tenure for the Chief Information Commissioner and information commissioners was abolished. Their salaries were not fixed any more — as with Election Commissioners — but notified separately by the government.

The government also diluted the Whistleblower's Protection Act. Whistleblowers can now be prosecuted for possessing the documents on which the complaint has been made. Issues flagged by them have to be in "public interest" and should not be "affecting the sovereignty and integrity of India", related to "commercial confidence" or "information received in confidence from a foreign government".

In the same vein, data, which has been a critical tool for the government to disseminate statistical information by government organisations. The National Statistical Commission and the Chief Statistician of India faced a credibility crisis during Modi's first term when the new GDP series was released. Subsequently, growth rate figures were changed so often that 108 social scientists jointly sealed envelopes in 2019 inviting the government to "reestablish institutional independence and integrity to the statistical organisations". Similarly, the National Crime Records Bureau has been affected by delays (its 2017 report was released in October 2019) and deletions. For instance, lynchings and "religious killings" are no longer enumerated and the number of members of religious communities has been reduced. The information that had been introduced by the Vajpayee government is not listed. The National Sample Survey Office has also not been spared. In 2018, nearly 200 scholars wrote to the government to release the 75th round survey of consumer expenditures — which had found that the percentage of citizens living below the poverty line had increased between 2011-12 and 2018-19.

This year, given the negative growth that India is bound to register, bad news of that sort are likely to multiply. To conceal the truth would make things worse because the actors in the economy would not be in a position to adjust to the real situation. Transparency is not only necessary for maintaining a democratic polity, it is also necessary for making the economy work. Facts are sometimes unpleasant, but the nation needs to know — and may be wants to know, even if nobody is asking any more.

The writer is senior research fellow at CERI, Sciences Po/CNRS, Paris, professor of Indian Politics and Sociology at King's College, Institute, London, and non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

ORWELLIAN BILLS

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Bills against farmers" (IE, September 23). The agricultural bills passed by Parliament enable big businesses and traders to stockpile crops, eroding farmers' bargaining power. They institutionalise the exploitation of farmers in countless other ways. The free market system, presumed to be fruitful, will leave farmers vulnerable. The way these bills are being presented by the government is highly Orwellian since their suggested purpose is in direct contradiction with the realities of the agrarian sector.

Saundarya Jain, via email

BE PREPARED

THIS REFERS TO the report, "Panic, overuse: Centre pinpoints oxygen issues" (IE, September 23). In disaster management, one has to anticipate the problems. The Centre admitted that there has been an increase in oxygen demand. Consequently, there will be an increase in the number of oxygen-dependent patients, who would require ventilatory support and ICU care. This mandates a level of logistics related to the availability of ventilators and ICU beds etc. In addition, the healthcare system would need critical care ambulances to transport patients from peripheral hos-

IDEAS ONLINE

MEETINGS AT A GLANCE
KAZIM REZA

SELF-RELIANCE
AND THE PATIENT:
GAJENDRA SINGH

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INSINCERE CENTRE

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Putting farmers first" (IE, September 23). For every bill that the government passes, it says: "Opposition is spreading misinformation" and "It is a landmark bill". If the farm sector was a priority, why was it located only 5 per cent of the Atma Nirbhar Bharat Package?

Aamir Lodhi, Gandhinagar

New Delhi