



A thought for today

When you're in a turnaround situation, you cannot incrementalise your way out of it

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# Turning The Corner

2019 should be the year for a fresh start, as bad ideas exhaust themselves

As a new year begins today, the tectonic plates of Indian politics have shifted. BJP entered last year on a roll, looking unbeatable and a shoo-in for Lok Sabha polls this year. In 2017 it gained four states in assembly elections, retained two and lost Punjab where it was Akali Dal's junior partner. The scale of its landslide victory in the key state of UP prompted Nitish Kumar's JD(U) to return to NDA, breaking the mahagathbandhan in Bihar. But in 2018 the tables turned. BJP lost four large states – Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Karnataka and only won three north-eastern states, less significant from a Lok Sabha perspective. At this point of time BJP looks distinctly vulnerable in general elections to be held in a few months, even though it still remains the party to beat.

Perhaps the Gujarat assembly elections held in December 2017 prefigured the shape of things to come. BJP had to struggle hard to hold on to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state, which also happens to be the party's bastion. Political commentary often looks at anti-incumbency as an inevitable factor of Indian politics. But it need not be seen as the unavoidable destiny of any ruling party.

A clue to a better explanation would be the old Bill Clinton slogan "It's the economy, stupid" – the state of the economy is finally catching up despite today's hyper-partisan political discourse being about anything but and hinging mostly on identity issues (if not degenerating into plain abuse, invective and name calling). Private investments haven't really taken off from their peak soon after the Modi government came to power; the bad loan problem remains unresolved, demonetisation hollowed out the economy, an overly complicated and cumbersome GST hasn't helped, consumer confidence is low, fiscal deficits are rising, there is a jobs crisis, farmers are in distress.

This year, however, can be one of regeneration and turnaround. Unfortunately the election season has unleashed a surfeit of economic populism, a festival of bad ideas. One can only hope it draws down soon and a stable government gets elected, which subsequently embarks on a programme of responsible and serious structural reform so that India's promise begins to be realised. On the specific shape such reform should take the accompanying lead opinion essay – drawing on ideas collated from leading Indian economists – offers plenty of suggestions that are worth serious consideration.



# Hasina Wins Again

But the Bangladeshi PM must address the charge of authoritarianism

In a massive election victory, Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League party have won a third consecutive term to lead Bangladesh. The Awami and its allies have reportedly secured a landslide 288 out of 300 seats. True, the main opposition alliance, the Jatiya Oikya Front, which includes the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, has alleged irregularities and called for a re-election. But Bangladesh has a history of losing parties not accepting election results. Meanwhile, it cannot be denied that Hasina remains hugely popular and under her tenure Bangladesh's economy has posted strong growth. Bangladesh's per capita GDP surpassed that of Pakistan in 2017 and the country is poised to join the developing countries category by 2024.

Add to this the fact that Hasina and the Awami have a secular vision for Bangladesh. Not only has the Awami regime overseen appropriate amendments to the Bangladeshi constitution which have restored some of its democratic foundational tenets, but also delivered on the long-pending demand of trial of war criminals of Bangladesh's 1971 liberation struggle. Additionally, the Awami dispensation has cracked down hard against Islamists and local terror cells. Plus, ties between India and Bangladesh have soared under Hasina, leading to cooperation in sectors as diverse as power, education, infrastructure, railways and waterways connectivity.

Thus, Hasina's return at the helm of Bangladesh should further aid New Delhi-Dhaka ties. That said one of the issues the opposition campaigned on, justifiably, was the increasingly authoritarian ways of the Awami government. Hasina would do well to redress this quickly. Failing to do so would provide scope for the Islamists to stage a comeback. Additionally, the Awami should guard against hubris which would undo the successes it has achieved so far.



# Why #NotAllMen

These men doth protest too much, methinks

Radhika Vaz



Many of you have your New Year resolutions firmly in place. For those who don't may I suggest one of mine – to push for the removal of sexual harassment from the workplace. And thanks to some very brave women who have already risked everything for us I think we can do it.

Last year the comedy industry (amongst others) became ground zero for #MeToo in India. Jokers – big and small – were found out. One of the smaller ones sent a picture of his even smaller genitals to a female colleague. Gentlemen – no matter how unthreatening your bits and pieces may be in real life sending a high-resolution image of them to anyone is a violent act. To add insult to injury this man's male supervisor knew about the incident but chose to ignore it – the very definition of a boys' club. It has to go.

I know that supporting every accusation under the #MeToo umbrella has not been easy. We have to take a woman's word for it because it is rare for the victim to have collected enough evidence for an open and shut case. But this is precisely what the perpetrators and their support system depend on. No man is an island and this is particularly true of sexual predators. They need a network of likeminded bros to prop up their habit. And the more these bros are dependent on one another for their livelihoods the stronger the support system is.

Of course the moment #MeToo started trending online then #NotAllMen started to trend as well. I recall wondering who these insensitive imbeciles were! What was it that intimidated them so much about a simple hashtag? And why did they think we needed reminding that not all men are harassers and rapists? Clearly #MeToo had hit a nerve if it had men scurrying to their smartphones.

And then I got it. These #NotAllMen men, are basically guys who are #NotSureIfTheyRapedAGirl. These men were never taught the meaning of the word #consent and they have gone through life behaving inappropriately with women and being excused for it. They have enjoyed the benefit of being a man but they can see that the tide is turning. By posting #NotAllMen, these dudes are not trying to remind us women of anything – they are simply trying to convince themselves that there is no dirt in their past.

The writer is a comedian

# Eight Things India Must Do In 2019

The economic challenges we face and the reforms we need to carry out now

Raghuram Rajan and Abhijit Banerjee



Last October thirteen of us, all economists, got together in the hope that as the country gears up for elections, we could start a conversation by identifying a set of policy ideas that might help inform party manifestos and policy visions. While our views stretch across the spectrum from right to left, we found surprising agreement on the challenges India faces and reforms it needs now. Two of us sifted through the set of ideas, picking what we felt were the top challenges and proposals to address them.

As we see it, rethinking government is key. Government capacity is limited. We need to target it better while trying to enhance it. Stability in government policy is important so that our farmers and firms can plan better, and markets can play a more effective role. Cooperative federalism, Centre and states working together and learning from each other, is essential.

1. The massive aggregate fiscal deficit of the states and Centre combined leaves fewer, costlier, resources for private investment. We should aim to hit the FRBM-suggested 5% by 2023, but not by creative accounting or off-balance sheet transactions. Instead, we must increase revenues, both through better compliance and more progressive taxation, and target spending better. State deficits have grown, partly because markets assume that the Centre will bail out over-extended states and therefore do not charge them higher interest rates. To incentivise better behaviour, any state's borrowing above agreed limits should be funded through special bonds that are explicitly free of any federal guarantee. A Centre-state council modelled on the successful GST council could supervise fiscal federalism.

2. Three sectors that are distressed today are agriculture, power, and banking, despite massive past government intervention, and often because of it. For example, periodic export bans and large-scale imports to keep food inflation down have radically moved the terms of trade against agriculture, while reducing the farmer's ability to plan. Cheap or



Uday Deb

free power to farmers have depleted the water table to the point of disaster. Farmers do need assistance. However, the instruments used – loan waivers, inflated MSPs without adequate procurement, and input price subsidies – often exacerbate the problem. In addition to enhancing investment in new technologies and irrigation, a government move towards lump sum payments to farmers for holding below a certain limit, in the spirit of Telangana's Rythu Bandhu scheme, will be an improvement.

Similarly, distressed state-owned power distribution companies stand between power producers who want to sell more and consumers who want more reliable power. The solutions are well-known – better metering, less distorted pricing of both power as well as energy inputs, and the use of new, cleaner technologies for distributed production and decentralising distribution. All these require rethinking the government's role, as will any sustainable solution to banking sector distress.

3. We need a better business environment – whether to create the jobs for those leaving agriculture, urban schools, or our universities, or to ramp up our woefully inadequate exports. We need to learn from state experiences about what works in areas like land acquisition, industrial regulation, provision of power

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and logistics, and environmental clearances. A Centre-State Productivity Council can be useful for this; such a Council could revive the idea of Special Economic Zones where coordinated land, environmental clearances and transportation infrastructure are available on a "plug-in" basis. Such zones, not necessarily targeted at exports, may also be used to experiment with reforms such as changes in labour laws before an all-India roll-out, to provide the evidence needed to build consensus for them.

4. Sustainable growth requires more effective but less burdensome regulation. Our cities are choking and climate change is upon us. Municipalities need the powers and funding to deal with these challenges, which means more decentralisation. In other areas, we need more centralisation: for instance, a new and technically beefed up environmental regulator, combining powers that are currently with multiple bodies, setting fees based on careful analysis of

# How to fix our inverted public health pyramid

Ruha Shadab



Ever wondered why our government hospitals look like homeless shelters? Why are there so many people sleeping in their corridors? Do we have too few hospitals? Or too few doctors? The reasons are aplenty; one of the main ones is the poor realisation of a theoretically sound policy.

India's current public health set-up is often traced to the Bhoré committee of 1946. The committee's continued relevance signifies its foresight, and our inability to achieve its recommendations. For instance, it recommended setting up 75-bedded hospitals for a population of 10,000 to 20,000. The bed to population ratio, 70 years later, is 9 per 10,000.

The three-tiered government health centre model that forms the core of the National Health Mission (NHM), has evolved from the committee's recommendations. There is a base of sub-centres (SC; covering 3,000 to 5,000 people) and primary health centres (PHC; covering 20,000 to 30,000 people) which are the first points of contact for the patient with the government health system. These centres are capable of a basic set of services, which includes conducting normal (vaginal) deliveries.

If the patient's needs are beyond the services available, she is referred to a higher centre which houses specialists.

These community health centres (CHC) cover 80,000 to 1,20,000 people, and have a physician, a gynaecologist, a surgeon, and a paediatrician. For even more complicated procedures and diseases, the patient is further referred to district hospitals (DH; also called tertiary centres). This system of graded care with referral linkages helps to bring health and medical care close to a patient's home and ensures timely treatment.

The network of this infrastructure comprises 1.5 lakh SC, 25,000 PHC, 5,600 CHC and 760 DH. This still falls short of the population norms mentioned above, by 19-30%. While the brick-and-mortar gap should be plugged, it is worthwhile to take stock of whether these 2 lakh institutions are working efficiently. If they were, our public health pyramid would not currently be balancing on its tip.

Studies show that more than 50% of patients at tertiary centres are only in need of primary care. One can also use this inverted pyramid to partially explain why so many patients choose to visit quacks, euphemistically referred to as rural medical practitioners (abbreviated as RMP; which is also the abbreviation for legitimate medical doctors: registered medical practitioners). The latest round of National Family Health Survey 2015-16 which had a sample of 5.7 lakh households, shows that the most common reasons for non-availing of services at government health centres are poor quality of services, no nearby health



**Ever wondered why our government hospitals look like homeless shelters?**

facility, and long waiting lines.

To address these issues, firstly, the public healthcare system in India needs to build a reputation for credibility. SCs are being transformed to health and wellness centres (HWCs) under the Ayushman Bharat programme. This transformation will entail a reorientation of SC from beyond the historic focus on reproductive and child health (deliveries, immunisation, childhood diarrhoea and pneumonia) to include non-communicable diseases, oral health, emergency medical care, etc. Measures to improve service delivery and not

merely expanding its ambit are critical. A strong foundation of first-point-of-contact centres will lessen the burden on specialist hospitals where much time and money are wasted.

Secondly, a humble acknowledgement of the limitations of the public healthcare sector needs to be made and an assessment of the complementarities of the private sector should be done. While Niti Aayog has been encouraging states to take up a PPP model for setting up hospitals, the regulatory environment must also incentivise more single doctor clinics to plug the rural-urban inequality.

Thirdly, technology has been tested to improve access and its quality. Tata Trusts and the Karnataka government put forth the 'Digital Nerve Centre' which merges the last two suggestions. It uses tele-medicine, video-conferencing and e-appointments systems to improve patients' experience. While there may be limitations in its scalability, such innovative interventions need to be tried out across the country.

With government spending on health stagnating at 1% of GDP, capacity building of the existing institutional framework will be a challenge. Much hinges on creating an ecosystem of partnership and innovation which brings to the fore a renewed vigour for improving India's healthcare system.

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# This Year, Resolve To Be Loving And Giving

Mata Amritanandamayi Devi

Another new year is here. All people dream of a happy and fortuitous future. May this New Year be filled with happiness and peace, with less war and conflict than in the year gone by. It's not enough to pray and hope for a favourable future. We should also be ready to work with alertness, determination and self-confidence. Realising our past mistakes and learning from them, we should move forward and work with enthusiasm. If we put in effort, we will definitely receive God's grace. Then, we may be able to create a world filled with goodness, peace and love. May the New Year enable us to come closer to God, nature and our fellow beings.

All of us enjoy newness, but what is it that lends something that sense of freshness? It is when our heart has love and openness – that is when we

are able to see goodness and beauty in everything.

A garden filled with fallen leaves and dry twigs will cover all the flowers and their beauty will be lost. Wild plants growing in the forest do not require watering or fertiliser. They get their nutrients naturally from the soil. Yet, if we want the same plants to blossom after being transplanted into our garden, we will have to regularly water and nurture them. It is the same with the garden of our heart. Currently the flowers that exude the fragrance of pure love are covered with the dead leaves of selfishness, anger and jealousy. This prevents us from being able to awaken the goodness within us. Let us clear away hatred and jealousy and awaken positive thoughts. Let us nurture a mind that does not harbour past animosities but welcomes

everything afresh. If we can do this, we will be able to see newness and beauty everywhere and discover joy in that.

Two friends were sitting in a flower garden. One thought, "My girlfriend would be so pleased if I gave her one of these flowers!" He began thinking of her, enjoying the flower and soon became lost in dreams about the conversations they would have. His friend, on the other hand, was reminded of a time when he had given flowers to his ex-girlfriend: "We loved each other so much. But then she left me for someone else!" Angry, he ripped out a handful of flowers, threw them down and stomped on them. Both friends saw the same flowers. The angry one could not enjoy their beauty.

Everything depends on the mind. If we have an open heart, we will be able to

see goodness in anything and enjoy its beauty.

At the end of each day, lemonade sellers, for example, will calculate exactly how many lemons they used, the quantity they sold, and how much was wasted. If sales were poor, they will reflect and find out if there is something else they could sell instead. They are constantly thinking about ways to increase their profits. Similarly, daily, just before going to bed, we should reflect on our day: "Selfish, I became angry and hurt this many people today." And then we should earnestly resolve, "Let me not do this tomorrow."

Nurture a mind that finds joy in loving and giving – a mind that accepts criticism with love. This should be our New Year resolution. Those who have this will never fail.

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