

Change the menu

Food served on trains in India are in dire need for strict hygiene standards preferably enforced by a third agency



JYOTI MUKUL

While flying a low cost airline recently, it took at least three reminders to get a glass of water. Short haul or long, it is worth knowing whether serving bottled water is a free or a paid service on a low-cost flight where meal is charged separately.

Food is an important if not an essential part of travel especially if the journey takes more than two to three hours. There could be many reasons for it, ranging from killing boredom to ensuring that the meal time is not disrupted just because it coincides with one's time of travel. Travellers, therefore, consider both quality and quantity of food served during their journey an important determinant of their choice of airline or train. There are many who travel by premium trains, like Rajdhani and Shatabdi, but prefer to carry their own food simply because they are not satisfied with the quality of food served on these trains or they have some doubts about its hygiene.

From the perspective of airlines, paid food service is one of the ways of generating an extra source of revenue while trying to keep fares affordable. News

platforms on Wednesday said Air India will carry food all the way from India for its return journey on some of its routes. These don't include the non-stop flights to the US. It might not be totally incorrect to say that this is akin to certain communities preferring to carry packaged ready-to-eat Indian meals to overcome food issues while travelling abroad; though the reason in the case of Air India is cutting costs. Unnamed airline officials quoted in media reports said the loss making airline spends around ₹600-800 crore on catering services and sourcing food from India is both cost effective and more to the taste of Indian palates.

A few months back, Air India had halved the quantity of cheese boards served in the premium class on international flights which helped it save ₹2.5 crore. It had earlier stopped non-vege-

tarian meals for economy class passengers on domestic routes. Despite its losses, the national carrier does not want to charge patrons for the food if they travel economy class. Perhaps, this is the reason why some of its customers prefer to stick to the airline.

There aren't any rules that make it obligatory for airlines to serve food if the travel time is beyond a specific period. All that the Directorate General of Civil Aviation says is that for flights delayed less than 24 hours, airlines have to serve food and refreshments to the passengers at the airport. Beyond that, hotel accommodation and transfer facility are to be provided.

By way of guidelines there are international food safety standards for on-board catering services that have been framed by various organisations including International Flight Services Association. These generally lay down norms like the distance between airport and kitchen, keeping premises free of rodents, and so on.

Largely, airline catering adheres to these norms. Even if the fare offered by them are not great these days, rarely are they found wanting in food hygiene

unlike the case with the Indian Railways. In a scathing report in 2017, the Comptroller and Auditor General cited an incident when a passenger on a Lucknow-Anand Vihar double decker train had ordered a cutlet but noticed an iron nail while consuming it. Cockroaches and rats were seen in the pantry car in train numbers 12260 (Duranto Express-ER) and 12269 (Duranto Express-SR).

Though food is still not optional on trains like Rajdhani and Shatabdi, it has to be bought in other trains that have a pantry car or from vendors that board at various stations if there isn't a food coach. In that respect, the food business for the railways is more segregated and widely spread compared to flight kitchens. But this surely cannot be the reason for sub-standard hygiene conditions. Unlike the airlines, the Railways, have a prescribed weight and volume for food served on-board to give passengers value for money. But while meals and water bottles on airlines are getting smaller by the day, those on railway routes are in dire need for strict hygiene standards preferably enforced by a third agency.

CHINESE WHISPERS

No feast for RJD



This will be the third year in a row that Rashtriya Janata Dal chief Lalit Prasad's (pictured) family will give the traditional makar sankranti festivities a miss. The reason? Prasad had not been granted bail in the fodder scam case. Party spokesperson Bhai Virender said RJD members would have celebrated the event with the traditional *chuda-dahi* meal on Monday if Prasad had got bail. People in Bihar consume *chuda-dahi* or curd with flattened rice during the festival. Many RJD leaders still remember how makar sankranti had always been a big event for party workers across Bihar to pay a visit to the former Bihar chief minister at his residence.

Pothole story

Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) leader Jayant Chaudhary has urged party members and civic workers to be careful about the increasing number of potholes in Uttar Pradesh. Citing instances of the state government's alleged apathy towards the condition of the roads in the state, Chaudhary tweeted images of pothole-ridden stretches and asked party workers to wear helmets while campaigning. The UP government had promised to make the state pothole free by June 15, 2017. To remind the government about its promise, the RLD had launched a campaign in October 2018, #Selfiewithgaddhda, asking people to post their pictures with potholes, thus forcing the government to act on its promise.

In defence of Durga puja



West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee (pictured) has urged Durga puja committees in Kolkata to unite against "unholy forces". Last week, the Kolkata branch of the Income Tax Department had served notices to at least 40 big-budget Durga pujas in the city to file their TDS and also disclose the sources of donation. "Are Tirupati Balaji, Golden Temple, Jagannath Temple, Siddhi Vinayak Temple, Ajmer Sharif going to be taxed, too?" asked the West Bengal CM. Launching a blistering attack on the central government, Banerjee said, "We will not allow them to loot people who want to respect Goddess Durga and celebrate their own festival."

The big problem of micro and small enterprises

Under pressure, many banks are in perennial search of Mudra loan seekers. In the process, the credit risks are rising



BANKER'S TRUST

TAMAL BANDYOPADHYAY

A few months ago, the NBFCs (non-banking finance companies) were the flavour of the season. Now the MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises) are. Both, for the wrong reasons.

The NBFC sector stole the limelight when many started staring at stark asset-liability mismatches as a result of their greed for growth, mispricing the risks. A sudden rise in the short-term rates caught them unawares. The MSMEs are credit-starved and many of them are not able to service their loans as their businesses have gone for a toss.

More than banks, the NBFCs were meeting MSMEs' credit needs but they are being forced to rein in growth in their loan books. In fact, many of them are selling their portfolios as they do not have adequate liquidity to support loan assets.

The banking industry's exposure to the micro and small industries declined from 3.1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2013-14 to 2.22 per cent in 2017-18. During the same period, bank loans to the medium-scale industries too dropped from 1.1 per cent to 0.62 per cent of GDP.

The NBFCs stepped in, sensing the opportunity. Their share in financing the MSMEs rose from 7.9 per cent in December 2015 to 11.3 per cent in June 2018. They get funds from the banks to be on-lent to MSMEs. In fact, bank lending to NBFCs grew by a staggering 26.9 per cent in 2017-18.

According to MSME Pulse, a TransUnion Cibil Ltd-Sidbi quarterly publication, the share of public sector banks (PSBs) in the MSME loan pie has dropped from 55.8 per cent in June 2017 to 50.7 per cent in June 2018. During the same period, private sector banks' share has grown from 28.1 per cent to 29.9 per cent, and that of NBFCs from 9.6 per cent to 11.3 per cent.

The bad loans of the PSBs in the MSME segment rose from 14.5 per cent to 15.2 per cent during this period but the private banks' bad loans in this segment declined marginally to 3.9 per cent even as 5 per cent of the NBFC loans turned bad.

The Inclusive Finance India Report 2018, an ACCESS publication edited by Alok Misra and Jay Tankha, has traced how the share of MSMEs in the overall industrial credit has been going down. It has been stagnant at around 13.8 per cent for past two years, down from 15.7 per cent in 2010. Between 2010 and 2018, the medium industries' share dropped dramatically from 10.1 per cent to 3.8 per cent but the large industry's share has risen from 74.1 per cent to 82.3 per cent.

Indeed, credit flow has been drying up for the MSMEs but why are their businesses in a mess? Both demonetisation and the goods and services tax (GST) traumatised most of these units, a Reserve Bank of India (RBI) study (*Mint Street Memo*) says.

While contract labour in businesses such as apparel and gems and jewellery suffered as the employers used



TRICKY SITUATION The bad loans of the PSBs in the MSME segment rose from 14.5 per cent in June 2017 to 15.2 per cent in June 2018

to pay the wages in cash, the new nationwide tax increased the compliance costs. The turnover shrank and many units got rid of thousands of employees. Quoting the Labour Bureau's Sixth Annual Employment-Unemployment Survey, a recent Business Standard report has pointed out the unemployment rate rose to a four-year high in 2016-17, the year of demonetisation.

There is hurry to alleviate the pain of the MSMEs as elections are round the corner. The GST Council last week decided to move two million such units out of the scope of the tax by raising the exemption threshold of annual turnover for GST registration from ₹20 lakh to ₹40 lakh.

Ahead of that, the RBI allowed lenders having up to ₹25 crore fund and non-fund exposure to the stressed MSMEs a one-time loan recast. They can continue to treat these assets as "standard". Incidentally, in June 2018,

the RBI had allowed certain relaxations to the banks in regard to treatment of all stressed MSME loans that were earlier applicable to only those that were GST-compliant.

While MSMEs need support, the worry is the rise in bad loans. Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana in April 2015 to provide loans up to ₹10 lakh to the non-corporate, non-farm, small and micro enterprises for income-generating activities. Commercial banks, regional rural banks, small finance banks, cooperative banks, microfinance institutions and NBFCs give such loans, the interest rates of which are in the range of 8-12 per cent.

The non-performing assets (NPAs) of Mudra loans given by PSBs have nearly doubled to ₹2,77.31 crore in 2017-18 from ₹3,790.35 crore in 2016-17 (₹596.72 crore in 2015-16). The PSBs had given ₹92,492.69 crore Mudra loans in 2017-18 and ₹71,953.66 crore

in 2016-17.

Overall, ₹2.53 trillion was disbursed in 2017-18 and ₹1.80 trillion in 2016-17, taking the total corpus to ₹5.73 trillion in past three years. For 2018-19, the target is ₹3 trillion.

While NPAs of PSBs in Mudra loans are 3.43 per cent, the overall loans in this category have 5.38 per cent NPAs as on March 31, 2018.

The Inclusive Finance India report says that despite its shrinking market share in the MSME segment, the PSBs hold a dominant position in the segment below ₹10 lakh (79 per cent market share) and the overall bad assets of the banking industry are as high as 11.2 per cent in this pocket. "The higher NPAs in this category have to be seen as early warning that target-based lending does not work in the long run," it says.

This has hit the nail on the head. Indeed, there are at least 63 million MSME units employing around 111 million workers and accounting for 45 per cent in manufacturing output and 40 per cent of exports but target-based lending is not the panacea for them.

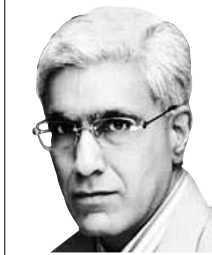
Targets can work for opening deposits as bankers can grab anyone walking on the pavement near a bank branch and force a deposit down one's throat. Such depositors don't need to keep money in the account and even if there is just one transaction in two years, banks won't complain. But this does not work for loans. Under pressure, many banks are in perennial search of Mudra loan seekers. In the process, the credit risks are rising. What we are seeing today is just the beginning.

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AS I SEE IT

It's not about social justice for all

Why the government's decision to amend the Constitution to permit 10 per cent reservation for economically backward upper castes smacks of desperation



KARAN THAPAR

What does the government's decision to amend the Constitution to permit 10 per cent reservation in educational institutions and government jobs for economically weak persons from the section of the population presently not benefiting from reservations tell us about the Prime Minister and the Bharatiya Janata Party? Their supporters will claim it is proof of an abiding commitment to the poor and to social justice for all. However, to leave it at that would be facile and glib. For it is also true this move reveals a sense of panic as the PM and his party view their electoral prospects.

Let me, therefore, first address the claim this move is not primarily intended to enhance social justice. If it had been, the government would have initiated it at the outset of its tenure and not barely 90 days before the elections. Equally, it would have made strenuous efforts to convince all political parties rather than spring a surprise and hope their delay tactics fail in the Rajya Sabha. Third, if reports that the Constitutional Amendment Bill was prepared in haste and secrecy are true, they would

corroborate the view the measure was initiated as an electoral ploy rather than an ideological commitment.

Why the BJP is apprehensive of its election prospects is easy to establish. After losing Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, the party could see its Lok Sabha tally decline by up to 44 seats. Perhaps more significantly, after the Samajwadi and Bahujan Samaj parties have so convincingly agreed on an alliance the BJP could lose another 30 or 40 seats in UP. And after the state election outcomes in Gujarat and Karnataka it is hard to see the BJP winning as many seats again in these two states. Finally, making up for these losses will be difficult when it is losing allies in Bihar, upsetting them in UP and the North-east and possibly fighting against them in Maharashtra.

On top of this, there is rural distress and the government's failure to create the promised two crore jobs a year. In fact, the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy believes 84 per cent of the 11 million jobs lost last year were rural jobs. No wonder Naresh Gajral, an Akali Dal MP and ally, has publicly predicted the BJP cannot get more than 150 seats.

Now that these new reservations have been passed by Parliament they stand up to judicial scrutiny? There are key issues that the Supreme Court will want to study. First, can the Constitution be legitimately amended to permit reservations for the economically weak?

There are two concerns here. A nine-judge constitutional bench in the Indra Sawhney case of 1992 ruled that "a backward class cannot be determined only and exclusively with

reference to economic criterion". This Amendment is trying to do just that. Equally importantly, it also changes the very character of reservations. Hitherto they were intended to tackle the historical deprivation of those who for generations have been socially and educationally backward. Now they're also being used as a way of undertaking poverty alleviation. Will this be acceptable to the Supreme Court?

A second issue is the view these reservations breach the 50 per cent cap placed by the Court in the Indra Sawhney judgment. Despite Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's argument that the cap does not impinge upon the new category of reservations for the economically weak, former chief justice A M Ahmadi, who was part of the nine-judge bench that delivered the judgement, has said these reservations are "directly in conflict" with the Supreme Court's position. "The judgement clearly mentions that reservations should not exceed 50 per cent", he has said. "The Supreme Court had put a cap so that reservations are not introduced, and the limit increased, only for election purposes."

I assume the BJP is hoping the majority of the intended beneficiaries will not be aware of these potential legal infirmities or will give the party credit for taking a step others have merely promised but never implemented. In other words, the BJP is hoping to gain by making the attempt rather than by its success. That, again, suggests the tactical and opportunistic nature of this initiative. It's to win electoral support rather than deliver actual results.

LETTERS

Too little, too late

The former Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) Director Alok Verma's resignation has come a bit too late. He failed to read the writing on the wall after the Supreme Court's order reinstating him but with a caveat. It would have been more honourable for him to have stepped down immediately after assuming charge as the director thereby sparing himself the embarrassment of an ignominious exit from the CBI.

The court's direction to the select committee headed by the Prime Minister for deciding his continuation in office would have also become infructuous. Instead, he betrayed a lack of discretion and administrative maturity by reversing the transfer orders passed by the interim director only to be nullified by the latter soon after his exit. The only silver lining for him is his vindication by the Delhi High Court dismissing the petition of Rakesh Asthana for quashing the FIR filed under Verma's direction. But, given the Central Vigilance Commission's reports recommending further investigation, Verma has to be prepared for a protracted legal battle. These developments have left the CBI's credibility badly bruised for which the Narendra Modi government has to accept the bigger share of the blame.

SK Choudhury Bengaluru

Intriguing observation

This refers to the report "RBI accountable to Centre, says Bimal Jalan" (January 11). Facts first. The former RBI governor who is now chairing the Economic Capital Framework Panel appointed by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has reportedly said in an interview given to Reuters that "the RBI is accountable to the government for executing the kind of monetary policy that has been announced". Jalan has said the obvious.

Here is why.

After the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) was formed, the RBI announces the monetary policy based on the majority view taken by the MPC. The MPC that has statutory backing has three members including the governor from RBI and three experts nominated by the government of India. In such committees, once constituted, members apply their independent minds in deliberations and decisions are taken in public interest. A practice different from legislatures where political parties can use a whip. The governor who chairs the MPC has a casting vote, not to give RBI any specific advantage, but keeping in view the chances for a tie because of the even number (six) membership. In a way, all the members of the MPC are government nominees. In the circumstances how the thought of RBI going back on monetary policy announced by it came to Jalan's mind is intriguing. An answer may emerge in the coming days.

M G Warrior Mumbai

Seize the initiative

The Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi is a very relevant exercise supported by our government in order to speed up the process of establishing lasting peace in Afghanistan. There is nothing wrong in the invited speakers thinking out of the box and expressing their personal opinions in this academic forum of experts.

Diplomacy and dialogue are always better options than continuing a conflict. Today a stalemate exists, as the legitimate Afghan government is controlling basically the urban areas with its security forces, whereas the Taliban have been left unchecked in the vast thinly populated and rugged rural areas.

General Bipin Rawat is one of the few people in India who is aware of the fact that there are more Pakhtoons living in Pakistan than in Afghanistan itself. The Taliban basically represent the Pakhtoons' interest to dominate the affairs of Afghanistan in the long term, while their call for strict Islamic rule is to serve their need for quick consolidation of power and avoidance of any power sharing with the significant Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara population. General Rawat's clarification that peace should be given a chance in Kashmir too by holding talks with separatists and militants without preconditions is timely advice to our policymakers in order to break the ongoing cycle of violence and to show good faith while dealing with our own citizens. This way, we can seize the initiative and break the long impasse.

JK Achuthan Ernakulam

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HAMBONE



BY MIKE FLANAGAN
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Reform defence budgeting

Both allocations as well as expenditure flows need attention

Recent reports that Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) was forced to take a bank loan of ₹781 crore to pay its employees' December salaries reflect the government's strange approach to defence budgeting and spending. As this newspaper reported, the government currently owes HAL ₹15,700 crore for products and services already delivered, of which ₹7,000 crore is outstanding from the preceding year. With more bills likely to arise over the coming three months and no money to pay them, outstanding dues will swell to ₹20,000 crore by the end of the financial year. HAL has asked the defence ministry to make some payments so that ongoing development projects, manufacture and the maintenance of the Indian Air Force's (IAF's) aircraft fleet are not severely impacted. But, given the government's financial pressure with an election looming, HAL does not expect relief in the revised Budget estimates. Nor is HAL the only defence public sector undertaking (DPSU) that finds itself in these straits. The military also owes Bharat Electronics Ltd (BEL) thousands of crores in unpaid bills. It was one thing to defer payments when HAL and BEL were wholly owned defence ministry enterprises. But, after their partial divestment, there are also interests of private shareholders, which will be adversely affected by non-payment of bills.

Things have come to this pass for a simple reason: The government has not allocated the capital budget needed for payments that were falling due this year. The navy projected to the defence ministry a capital requirement of ₹30,358 crore, but was allocated only ₹19,083 crore, a shortfall of 37 per cent. The army asked for ₹37,122 crore, but was given ₹21,338 crore, short by 43 per cent. The IAF, with instalments due for the Rafale fighter and Apache and Chinook helicopters, asked for a whopping ₹72,482 crore but was allocated ₹33,100 crore, short by 54 per cent. Further, of the amount allocated for capital expenditure, about 90 per cent was pre-committed towards instalments on previous years' purchases. In the circumstances, it was almost inevitable the military would be left short of money.

Framing any budget is a competitive exercise in resource allocation. It is for the Union Cabinet to decide how much it can spare for defence from pressing competitive requirements like education and health care. This year, 16.6 per cent of central government expenditure went to defence. Next, this amount must be divided between the three services. Overseeing realistic budgeting is one task of the Defence Planning Committee (DPC), established in April with fanfare under the National Security Advisor. It is not clear how the DPC could fail to anticipate the current crisis in HAL. Beyond allocation, there are other issues as well. In several previous years, including twice in the first three years of this government, thousands of crores of military capital budget allocation lapsed because it could not be spent in time. This needs to change, given the feast-or-famine nature of procurement spending, where one year could see little expenditure because of hitches in finalising some contracts, while the subsequent year sees a glut of contracts, with multiple payments falling due. Successive governments have promised to institute a "roll-on capital fund" — to insulate against the lumpy nature of defence capital expenditure and smoothen the cash flows — but none has done so.

Not cricket

Alok Verma should have been allowed to complete his term

The extraordinary reinstatement and removal of Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) Director Alok Verma within 48 hours last week have scarcely enhanced the reputation of the government. In the light of comments by retired Supreme Court judge A K Patnaik, who was overseeing the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) investigation into allegations against Mr Verma, it is clear that the CBI chief should have been allowed to complete his term. The three-member selection committee, in a 2-1 decision, removed Mr Verma on grounds of "the extremely serious nature of observations made by the CVC against Verma".

Mallikarjun Kharge, a Congress Member of Parliament and the sole dissenting member on the panel, said the CVC investigation did not come to any definitive conclusion on the allegations against Mr Verma (the complaints against him appear to focus on tardiness to act in some key cases rather than outright dishonesty). Mr Kharge's observations could have been dismissed as the standard dissent of an implacable opposition party ahead of the general elections. But Justice Patnaik has corroborated those arguments by repudiating in no uncertain terms the CVC's report and suggesting other irregularities in the manner in which the investigation was conducted. He described the panel's decision to dismiss Mr Verma in a singular understatement as "very, very hasty".

Having overseen, at the Supreme Court's request, the CVC's enquiry, Justice Patnaik told The Indian Express that there was no corruption charge against Mr Verma. Justice Patnaik made several additional points worth noting. First, he said, the enquiry was conducted solely on the claims of Mr Verma's deputy, Rakesh Asthana, and the statement purportedly signed by Mr Asthana on November 9 listing the accusations against Mr Verma was not signed in his presence. Second, the findings of the CVC report were not his. Third, he said, the CVC's word cannot be the final one. Indeed, it is odd that the committee did not seem to consider it relevant that the charges against Mr Verma had been filed by the same person against whom an FIR has been filed for corruption by the CBI, and who is currently being probed in six cases. In his letter of resignation from the Indian Police Service, Mr Verma also raised these issues and said the selection committee did not provide him an opportunity to explain the details as recorded by the CVC before arriving at the decision. The other disturbing signal is the government's refusal to make the report available to the selection committee despite Mr Kharge asking for it.

The weight of evidence makes it obvious that the government has not played with a straight bat, and raises questions about its motives in this undoubtedly unique development in the country's premier investigating agency. It is strange that a government that deemed the corruption charges against Mr Verma serious enough to oust him from the CBI should consider him qualified to head another official post, of Director General, Fire Services, which he has declined. No less odd is the fact that Justice Sikri, who was part of the three-member selection panel and whose vote was decisive in Mr Verma's ouster, did not see fit to raise these obvious points of procedure and law.

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



Foundations for health policy

A key input is networks of health care providers that offer comprehensive care to individuals

We in India are getting poor health care as measured by quality and price. While solving this is important, the best scenario of all is one where there is less sickness. This requires an emphasis on the traditional agenda of public health: A set of old-fashioned preventive interventions. And, it requires re-architecting health care. The ideal health care system is one in which an entire system of medical practitioners engages with people, trying to make sure they do not show up at a health care facility.

Health care in India works badly. There are transactional relationships where a customer shows up in front of a for-profit doctor. The doctor is generally conflicted, and earns more when more procedures and more drugs are prescribed. Doctors make more money when customers are less healthy. In the present system, nobody cares about the health of the customer.

The Indian policy discourse is quite focused on household expenditures on health care. We like insurance programmes where the health care costs of the sick are paid for by the non-sick. While this is nice in terms of consumption smoothing, it does not solve the deeper problems: Of excessive health care costs and of excessive disease.

Our prime focus should be on the health of the population. Our dream for India should be to get a healthy populace. Everyone is vastly better off if a person does not get sick in the first place. The first

battlefront is the traditional conception of public health, of disease prevention.

India has one of the weakest immunisation programmes in the world. If we did better on the number of diseases covered, and the operations of immunisation programmes, fewer people would get sick. Water and sanitation are well established as the root cause of a great deal of infectious disease. Fighting disease vectors such as mosquitoes matters, and we seem to do this less than we did in the 1970s.

New battlefronts have opened up in preventive health. Air quality has become a first order issue. There is carnage on the roads. We are proud of our new roads, but highway engineering is weak, and we have one of the highest accident rates per vehicle-kilometre in the world. Failures of policy are making disasters such as floods more frequent and more harmful, and earthquakes more harmful.

The administrative boundaries of our Ministries of Health are part of the problem. Most of the deep determinants of the health of the people are outside Ministries of Health. This gives an excessive focus upon health care, which is under the purview of Ministries of Health. If the National Highways Authority of India tries to get more vehicle-kilometres done at the lowest possible cost, they will tend to short-change the issues of road safety and disaster resilience.

We need to reorient our policy strategies so as to



SNAKES & LADDERS

AJAY SHAH

Cows, vigilantism, vegetarianism and farmers

I would not advocate vegetarianism. When I reasoned this out in this column a few years ago, I received the usual insults. Environmentalists are expected to be vegetarian or, better, vegan! But what did not register to many was my emphasis: "I am saying this as an Indian environmentalist; not global or Western environmentalist."

My argument has been that Indian farmers practise an agro-silvo-pastoral system and that livestock is a crucial part of their economy. Taking away the meat would demote their assets. It would kill their income. I argued that it is the quantity of meat we consume and how we produce the meat that matters the most to our health and the health of the environment. Industrialised meat production is done at the cost of the environment — by clearing vast forests, feeding animals cereals, antibiotics and all the other junk that they should not be using. But Indian farmers still practise cow-buffalo-goat economy, which is of small scale. In fact, this economy has been sustainable for the fact that it is in the hands of small farm owners. Animals are their insurance policy; their ways of managing bad times, made worse today because of climate change induced variables and extreme weather.

We need to find ways to nurture this economy in which individual farmers benefit from the small-scale operation. This was the Anand experiment — made famous by the venerable man of India's White Revolution, Verghese Kurien. I am not sure how many

of us have seen the wonder of this movement, as young girls, women and men bring their milk to the local dairy, which gives them a receipt of the fat content and the money that is due to them. This local dairy farming is built on the concept of small, disaggregated animal owners, who are enjoined to the big dairy farm. This is the cooperative-producer model, which is best suited for our people-heavy and employment-desperate country.

Ironic as it is, we celebrate Uber and Airbnb as disruptive models for growth. These models are what Kurien propagated — maximise the return from individual assets. Today, we call a taxi, which is not owned by any taxi company; or book accommodation, which is not owned by any company. This is what Kurien did. He made dairy the big business of small producers. It was, and is, disruptive. We don't recognise it because it is not in "our" world.

But it worked because there was a cow-buffalo economy in place, which included the cost of feeding and maintaining the cattle for milk and then its sale for meat.

Farmers do not have the means to keep "unproductive" cows. Let's be brutally honest about this.

Why am I writing this today? Because as the fortnightly *Down To Earth* reports from the ground, in the past few years, the strident and often violent call for cow protection has led to the total breakdown of this economy of the poor. Cattle are now abandoned. They have become a menace, marauding fields and destroying crops. Remember Indian

bring health risk into the thinking of all departments of government, and achieve state capacity in the traditional areas of public health. This will reduce the need for health care.

Alongside this, we also need to rethink health care. When doctors are paid per procedure, they have an incentive to over-prescribe procedures, and make more money when patients are sickly. Payment per procedure generates wrong incentives.

Can we do this differently? The key insight is to have a contract between a network of providers and the patient, which underwrites all health care for the patient for life, in exchange for fixed monthly payments. This must be not just one doctor but a network of providers that covers all aspects of health care. When I get sick, I would go to my network, and they would render me health care services at no additional cost.

Once this style of contracting is done, the incentives of the health care producer change completely. Now, the health care network is paid by me every month, and these payments are clean profit for them until I get sick. When I get sick, I impose costs upon them. They have no incentive to over-prescribe procedures, and their incentive is to keep me healthy.

Now the health care network has the incentive to ask me to come in for regular check-ups, so that problems are caught early. At all ages, immunisation will be pushed by the health care network so as to avoid the costs associated with illness. The choice of treatments will be done with a view to keeping me healthy.

At present, the conversation between a doctor and a patient in India is a transactional one, where symptoms are described and treatments are explained. The time in that room is a powerful opportunity to change behaviour. A few minutes spent by the doctor evangelising better behaviour tends to have a significant impact on behaviour and health. As an example, a doctor might say: "I'm prescribing a programme of exercise for you, and I want you to come back to me in three months and we will look at the improvements in your cholesterol numbers." This would be quite motivating for most patients. Such practices would result in reduced costs and higher profit for the health care network.

A doctor in such a health care network who sees a surge in the number of people contracting an infectious disease in her neighbourhood would have the incentive to talk with public health officials and initiate public health responses that address the epidemic at its root. This would be efficient behaviour on her part because the health care network makes more money when fewer people get sick.

In the present Indian discourse, there is a prime focus upon reducing the financial risk for households from a malfunctioning health care system. While this is an issue, we need to go deeper. The prime objective of health policy should be to get to the best of all worlds: One where people do not get sick. This requires health-oriented thinking that permeates a wide array of departments of government. And, it requires a health care system that values paying non-customers.

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DOWN TO EARTH

SUNITA NARAIN

The truths out there



BOOK REVIEW

JENNISFER SZALAI

Alternative facts: The term manages to be tedious, ridiculous and perilous at once — a real sign of the times. For anyone who doesn't remember, Kellyanne Conway introduced it in early 2017 to defend the White House's falsehoods about attendance numbers at Donald Trump's inauguration the week before. There she was on "Meet the Press," serenely chiding an exasperated Chuck Todd for being "overly dramatic" as he repeatedly tried to get her to concede that lying to the American public was bad.

Her phrasing may have been new, but Ms Conway was taking part in what has apparently become a conservative tradi-

tion that it makes the ancient Greek sceptics look like babes in the woods.

You might think this kind of postmodernism would appeal to the French anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour, who has spent a career studying how knowledge is socially constructed. You would be wrong. Such pretensions to reality-creating grandeur, Mr Latour suggests, amount to little more than a vulgar, self-defeating cynicism.

In *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, Mr Latour argues that climate change is forcing all of us to confront truths that seem hard to reconcile but turn out to be two sides of the same thing: 1) reality exists, whether we like it or not; and 2) our attempts to apprehend it are contingent on our social context. Along with Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall's *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread*, Mr Latour's new book offers a way to think through the seemingly insurmountable impasse carved out by political polarization and fake news.

Of the two volumes, *The*

Misinformation Age takes the more methodical and earnest approach. The authors are professors of logic, and they break down the mechanics of misinformation accordingly. They introduce their subject with the Vegetable Lamb of Tartary — a tree that reportedly grew gourd-like fruit filled with tiny lambs. The claim was propagated during medieval times by so many respected naturalists and scholars that it took nearly four centuries before it was satisfactorily debunked.

Those medieval scholars kept citing one another rather than verifying (or disproving) the Vegetable Lamb for themselves. "Social factors are essential to understanding the spread of beliefs," Ms O'Connor and Mr Weatherall write, "including — especially — false beliefs." Similar to the network of right-wing sites that nurtured elaborate conspiracy theories about a Hillary Clinton-sponsored pedophilia ring in a Washington pizzeria, the medieval scholars had created their own ecosystem for fake news.

Ms O'Connor and Mr Weatherall include contemporary examples of misinformation like Pizzagate, but they focus mainly on ideas held by scientists, highlighting how even the most well-inten-

tioned beliefs can get deployed and distorted. After all, they say, "most scientists, most of the time, are doing their best to learn about the world, using the best methods available and paying careful attention to the available evidence." Scientists are "the closest we have to ideal inquirers," even if, as the authors make clear, there's an unavoidable element of uncertainty in the scientific enterprise.

This uncertainty, it turns out, is central to how so much contemporary misinformation works. The authors make a distinction between absolute certainty and the confidence necessary to make informed decisions. Ms O'Connor and Mr Weatherall point out that the scientific consensus has long coalesced around human-caused climate change, even if deniers insist that the science is still unsettled.

The one thing you begin to notice in this book is that propagating a reflexive scepticism and sowing discord aren't terribly difficult, especially when there's a vested interest willing to pay for it; "merely creating the appearance of controversy" is often all that needs to be done.

Mr Latour's *Down to Earth* is a wilder, more playful book. The election of Donald

only for Americans but for the world. Here, finally, was a political figure whose brazen repudiations of reality laid bare what Mr Latour has been saying all along — that a complacent faith in the ability of facts to speak for themselves was what rendered them vulnerable to Trumpian renunciation in the first place.

Mr Latour says that climate change renders the old dichotomy of the global versus the local completely futile. Mr Trump and the "obscurantist elites" who enable him are nurturing an "Out-of-This-World" fantasy by unleashing an aggressive despoliation of the world that ultimately rejects the world they claim to inhabit.

"It is quite useless to become outraged on the pretext that Trump voters 'don't believe in facts,'" Mr Latour writes. Rather than get tangled in shouting matches over fake news, he calls for an entirely new way of understanding the world. He says he wrote this book with a "deliberate bluntness." He vests a surprising hope in Europe, whose colonial past — or "crimes," as he puts it — he depicts as inextricable from the migrations it tries to keep out. "Europe has invaded all peoples; all peoples are coming to Europe in their turn," he writes. "Give and take. There is no way out of this."

Mr Latour also describes migration as the human embodiment of our "new climatic regime." Under the old way of thinking, exploited peoples and places were ignored, silenced and stripped of agency; now migrants and the earth itself are both setting out "to recover what belongs to them."

No doubt some readers will find this to be too much, too philosophical and too French. But maybe it takes a brilliantly mind-bending book like Mr Latour's to show that so much reality can't be denied.

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THE MISINFORMATION AGE

How False Beliefs Spread
Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall
Yale University Press
266 pages; \$26

DOWN TO EARTH

Politics in the New Climatic Regime
Bruno Latour
Translated from the French by Catherine Porter Polity; 128 pages; \$14.95