

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Carryovers from 2018

From surging nationalisms to global warming — challenges for the new year



VIKRAM MEHTA

OF ITS OWN MAKING

Cow welfare cess is not the solution to a problem the UP government has created for itself

UTTAR PRADESH CHIEF Minister Yogi Adityanath has ordered district authorities to move all stray cattle in the state to cow shelters by January 10. This follows his government imposing a 0.5 per cent "gau kalyan" (cow welfare) cess on liquor and road toll collections, besides doubling an existing 1 per cent levy on the incomes of wholesale produce markets, with the proceeds to fund construction and maintenance of new shelters. These represent a wasteful deployment of government machinery and unnecessary imposts, at best, in response to a totally manmade problem. Today, UP and many other states are seeing an unprecedented situation of cows and bulls being let loose by angry farmers, tired of keeping vigil to prevent their standing crop from being devoured. They have even been herding and locking up unwanted animals in primary health centres, schools and government buildings.

The above problem is only due to public policy not adapting to changing times and being held hostage to religious dogma. Banning cattle slaughter makes no sense when bullocks are no longer required for ploughing fields, drawing water from wells for irrigation, separating grain from chaff or transporting produce to markets. When there are tractors, diesel/electric pumpsets, harvester combines and power threshers to do these jobs — and also artificial insemination to replace bulls — no farmer wants to keep male cattle. Even cows cease to have economic utility once they are 8-9 years old and do not yield enough milk to justify recurring fodder and feed expenses. Till recently, when cattle slaughter bans were only on paper, farmers sold their spent animals to butchers and used that money to purchase new cows. It facilitated a regular herd turnover, which sustained the dairy economy alongside the thriving, even if below-the-radar, beef and leather industries. The "Hindu" farmer and the "Muslim" butcher, thus, shared an unspoken symbiotic relationship.

Unfortunately, that social compact has been destroyed by gaurakshak vigilantes, emboldened by governments determined to implement a ban out of sync with modern agriculture. With no takers for their unproductive cattle, farmers are at their wits' end — damned if they keep them, damned if they abandon them. The solution to this cannot be building more gashalas. UP alone has a cattle population of nearly 2 crore, as per the 2012 Livestock Census. Even taking a conservative herd turnover ratio of 10 per cent, it would mean about 20 lakh "surplus" animals every year — which were earlier going out of the system, but are now getting cumulatively added and roaming the countryside as well as urban streets. A time may soon come when governments will have to decide whether to allocate budgetary resources for cattle shelters or schools and hospitals. Allowing selective culling in well-regulated modern cattle abattoirs is the only practical and sustainable alternative.

THE DARK SIDE

Chinese mission to unexplored part of the moon is a breakthrough, could help open new vistas of knowledge

THE MAN IN the moon never seems to look away from the Earth. During its different phases, the Earth's only natural satellite changes shape, but the sentinel never seems to disappear from his heavenly seat. The first human-made object to touch down on the moon, the Luna-2 of the erstwhile Soviet Union, landed in his territory in 1959. Ten years later, Neil Armstrong became the first human to step on this side of the moon. And till last week, all lunar missions would descend on the same realm. 2019 has begun with a Chinese spacecraft, the Chang'e4, landing on an unexplored part of the Earth's satellite, popularly called the Dark Side of the Moon.

The appellation is a misnomer. All sides of the moon receive sunlight at different points during the moon's orbit around the Earth. But the moon points only one hemisphere towards the Earth. Astronomers use the terms, the "near side" and "far side," to refer to the two parts of the satellite. The far side was so far only known from orbital images. But its unexplored surface is believed to contain a treasure trove of information that could advance our understanding of the history of the solar system. Space scientists believe that lava from ancient asteroids has washed away a lot of the records of the moon's formation on the side that has been the subject of research so far. The realm of the moon on which the Chang'e4 landed, in contrast, is much more heavily cratered and far more pristine, though it too was pounded by asteroids. The success of the Chinese mission opens the door to understanding such resilience.

Chang'e4 landed on the Von Kramer crater within the South Pole-Aitken basin, known to be the biggest depression in the solar system. Studying the composition of ancient craters such as the Von Kramer can help scientists gain an insight into the asteroids that rained down on the Earth during the planet's youth. Understanding the history of contact with these heavenly bodies could yield important clues to the origins of life on the planet. Moreover, Chang'e4's success could help realise the long-held astronomers' dream of an observatory on the moon. The side facing the Earth is not suitable for such a project because noises from GPS satellites, Wi-fi, TV stations and many other human interferences hamper the transmission of low-frequency messages. But the Earth's satellite protects its far side from such noise. The Chinese mission's success could lead to telescopes beaming observations from the Dark Side of the Moon. The popular appellation could then be consigned to history books.

THE ONSET OF the New Year is an occasion for reflection, and herewith are some thoughts that coursed through my mind as I contemplated 2018.

The surge of nationalistic fervour that has swept across the globe and upended the post-World War II, liberal, multilateral and rules-based world order, is in reaction to the forces of liberalism, globalism and technology that promised a win for all but, in fact, left the majority that did not have the skills or opportunity to jump onto the Internet bandwagon, standing still. The minority that had these qualities were able to climb aboard and benefited disproportionately. The "left-behind" majority expressed their frustrations at the polling booth and voted into positions of leadership innately autocratic populists with an inward isolationist bent. This has rendered the world a riskier place. Its leaders are stepping off the international stage at a time it faces major transnational problems like climate change, pandemics, migration, nuclear proliferation, water stress and fundamentalism.

The science of global warming is incontrovertible. The planet is headed for a climate-induced catastrophe. The criticality of containing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions is universally acknowledged. This said, the measures agreed to at the climate summits, first in Paris in 2015 and, recently in Katowice, Poland, are not enough to avert the crisis. The question has to, therefore, be asked: Are such top down, multilateral summits with each participant sovereign government constrained by domestic pressures, the appropriate fora for tackling this potentially existential and planetary threat? Would this problem not be better addressed through subnational fora (for example cities, NGOs, industry professionals) with each locality/sector/association looking to address the issue wide a decentralised collective? Can the public afford to leave the fate of the planet in the hands of leaders who, because of the nature of the electoral process, represent only a minority of their electorate?

A few years back, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Liquat Ahmed, wrote a fascinating biography, *Lords of Finance: The Bankers Who Broke the World*, about the four

heads of the central banks of the US, France, UK and Germany in the 1920s. The book tells us that the economic catastrophe of the Great Depression of 1929-1931 was not foreordained but was the "cumulative impact of a series of misjudgements" by these four individuals, each lacking in "intellectual will" but with strong, inflated egos. I am reminded of this book as I contemplate the escalation of the tariff war between China and US; the stupidity of Brexit; the humanitarian crisis in Yemen; the gruesome murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi and more — all decisions made by leaders with an exaggerated sense of self and/or a limited understanding of economics and geopolitics. In 1929, the world went over the edge because the series of crises fed on each other to create an "economic whirlwind" that engulfed the globe. Today, the problems may be substantively and geographically disparate, but in our connected world they have a bearing on each other. The consequences of unfettered power in the hands of narcissists is frightening.

Why is it that reputed business leaders fail so often to deliver on the promises made to their boards? There are many explanations but the one that I believe needs debate is whether an investment evaluation model that focuses only on measurable ratios like return on investment; earnings before tax and depreciation, market share etc. can fully capture the risks inherent in today's non-linear and disruptive business environment; whether the governance model that emphasises growth and maximisation of shareholder profits is compatible with current and emergent political, cultural, social and environmental trends; and, whether the model needs to be redesigned to integrate "non-measurables" so as to enable the evaluation of business risks within the broader context of societal change.

Jugaad entrepreneurs have an unshackled mindset. They respect in letter but seldom in spirit the established norms of corporate governance. They can remain below the radar as long as they are small. But once they are mainstream and 'big', they need to adjust their corporate governance models. Most, however, fail to do so.

breaking, regulatory norms and facing societal scrutiny. The travails assailing Facebook offer a high-profile case in point. Its early motto was "move fast and break things". They did so and they have been phenomenally successful. They did not, however, adapt their corporate culture correspondingly, and today they are in the crosshairs of regulators across the globe.

Sooner rather than later, clean energy will be competitive against fossil fuels. The mid-long term constraint on building a non-fossil fuel-based energy system is not economics but scale. To remove this constraint, the government must adopt a multipronged (holistic), multilayered (Centre/State/Cities) and non-linear policy approach focused on the transformation of the organisation, institutions, infrastructure and customers of the energy sector.

"Lord... grant me chastity and continence but not yet". So did our brilliant former Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian invoke St Augustine to forewarn against pushing renewables. His argument was, this would impact adversely the livelihood of the millions employed by the coal and power industry; it would strand thermal power assets; it would deepen the NPA stress facing banks, and, it would lead to higher energy prices. I cannot refute the economics of his argument. His logic is solid. But I am not persuaded. For me, it brings to the fore the conundrum — how to overcome vested, incumbent, "sunk" interests to bring about essential long term change.

Something has to be done to improve the operational autonomy of the public sector. Privatisation is for the present, not an option. The government lacks the political will and it will not cede control. So what might be that something? First, strengthen the boards; second, unshackle the management from political and bureaucratic interference; third, allow them to recruit top talent and, fourth, remove the constraints imposed by investigative agencies (CBI, CVC, CAG). In all events, create a blueprint that can stanch inefficiencies.

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WHOSE SONG IS IT ANYWAY?

Vande Mataram, the ode to Bengal, continues to stir controversy



SUANSHU KHURANA

IN ONE WAY or another, all art is political. And any visible shift in the social and political discourse of the times has artists at the forefront. But what is a little puzzling is how a song which was meant to be an enchanting elegy to a writer's physical setting, acquires a sinister political edge.

In a recent decision by the new Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister, Kamal Nath, at 10:45 am on the first working day of every month, "a police band will play the tunes that encourage patriotic feelings during their march from Shaurya Smarak to Vallabh Bhawan in Bhopal. On arrival at the Bhawan, the national anthem and Vande Mataram will be sung." This has come only days after Nath ordered that it was no longer mandatory to sing the Vande Mataram in the Secretariat, a practice that was started by three-time former Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan. The order had provoked protests from Chouhan and the Opposition, with many BJP members criticising the decision to not sing the national song.

The national song has been a bone of contention for decades now. A battle cry for Indian independence, it compares certain qualities of the motherland with that of Goddess Durga and Lakshmi in the later paragraphs.

A few months ago, BJP President Amit Shah had accused the Congress of appeasing Muslims by retaining only two paragraphs of the song and not including the latter ones (with mentions of Durga and Lakshmi) during the freedom movement. In 2017, it caused a rift between BJP members of the Meerut municipal-

ity and Muslim councillors. The latter walked out during a session of the Meerut Municipal Corporation when the piece was sung. When the seven Muslim councillors returned, they weren't allowed back in. The cries of "Hindustan mein rehna hai to Vande Mataram kehna hai" were heard.

Shafiqur Rahman Barq, BSP member from Sambhal in Uttar Pradesh, had also walked out of the Lok Sabha in 2013 when the song was played.

In the 1870s, about 35 km North of Calcutta, on the banks of the Hoogly where the Malik Ghat is, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, deputy collector of Jessore under the British government, sat in an ivory-hued house and wrote *Bande Mataram* (I pray/bow down to thee, Mother). This poetic identification with Bengal, written in Bengali and Sanskrit, was inspired by the Sanyasi Rebellion of the late 18th century and the rebellion of 1857 — both against the East India Company. While the former took place in Murshidabad and Baikunthpur forests of Jalpaiguri, the Mutiny was in Meerut.

First published in his magazine *Bangadarshan* to fill up a blank page, the poem eventually ended up becoming one of the significant highlights of the Bengal Renaissance and also found itself in Chattopadhyay's seminal book *Anand Math* — written after three famines ravaged Bengal. The story was that of the Fakir Sanyasi Rebellion and described a group of monks that fought the British.

Chatterjee would have never thought that

his ballad for Bengal will have leading politicians of the nation and its people contend over its meanings and patriotism. *Bande Mataram*, the first phrase of this poem, an ode to Bengal, like all Hindi pronunciations of Bengali words, became *Vande Matram*. The words go *Saptakotikantha kala kala nidadakarale, Dbsaptakoti Bhujaidhrta kharakarbal* (When the swords flash out in 70 million hands, and 70 million voices roar). The population of Bengal at the time the song was penned was about 6.2 crore. So 70 million makes sense. The population of undivided India was about 23 crore.

Jadunath Bhattacharya, the court musician of Panchetgarh and poet Chatterjee's teacher, set the poem to raag Desh. A sweet sounding, hymn-like melody from the Malhar family, the ascent of the composition first found a taker in Rabinindranath Tagore, who sang it in the 1896 session of the Indian National Congress, thus turning it into a rallying cry for the days leading up to Independence. Lata Mangeshkar sang it in the 1952 film *Anandmath* and singer Hemant Kumar's debut composition became earmarked as one of the finest pieces of compositions in Indian cinema, reaching people via radio and 72 RPMs.

While Tagore considered it universal and made it about India, many made it about religion, and about politics. In an atmosphere rife with tension and insecurities, one wonders if the only way forward is to treat art as just art.



ONE OF 800 MILLION A VOICE, UNDER 35

Chatterjee would have never thought that his ballad for Bengal will have leading politicians of the nation and its people contend over its meanings and patriotism. *Bande Mataram*, the first phrase of this poem, an ode to Bengal, like all Hindi pronunciations of Bengali words, became *Vande Matram*.

FREEZE FRAME

EP UNNY



JANUARY 7, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

CHANGES IN IRAN THE NEW IRAN Prime Minister, Shapour Bakhtiar, who promised to lead the country from political turmoil toward social democracy, took power and said Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi would remain on the throne as a constitutional monarch. Reaction to the new government, which replaced the military regime after two months in power, was mixed. The Shah's leading opponent, the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini, branded the Bakhtiar Government as "illegal" but stopped short of demanding its overthrow. In the holy city of Qom, nearly a lakh people marched through the streets to demand the Shah's abdication in favour of an Islamic republic.

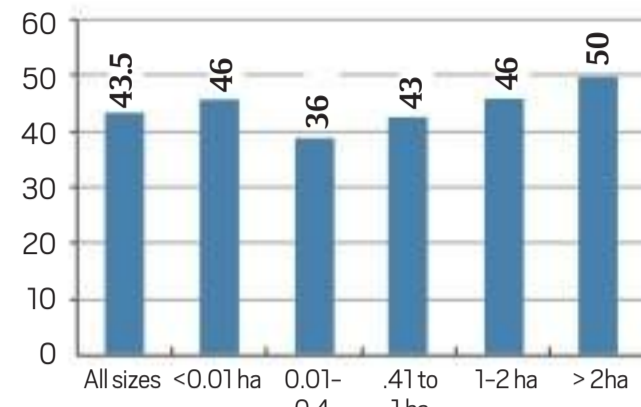
NAGA VIOLENCE BOTH ASSAM AND Nagaland rushed fresh armed police reinforcements to the scene of ghastly arson and killings by armed Nagas in five Assam villages in the Sibsagar area of the disputed Assam-Nagaland border following reports that some Assamese villagers were planning retaliatory action against the Nagas living on the other side of the border. The chief secretary of Nagaland contacted his counterpart in Assam to inform him that reports reaching him from the disturbed border areas indicated that some Assamese villagers were planning retaliatory attacks on Nagas living in villages close to the border.

BIHAR EX-CM BOOKED THE VIGILANCE DEPARTMENT filed a charge-sheet against former Bihar chief minister, Jagannath Mishra, alleging, among other things, misuse of army jeeps for the Congress campaigns in the Lok Sabha election of March.

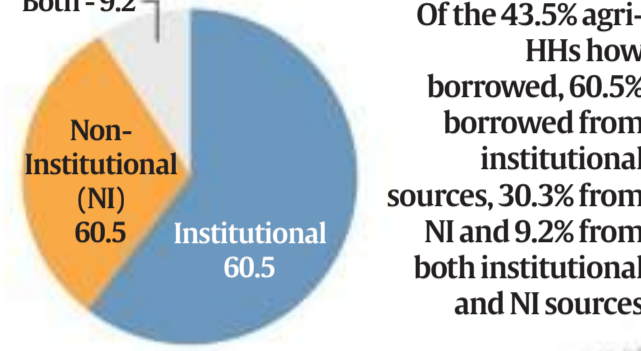
CPI MP KILLED S G MURUGAIYAN, CPI member of the Lok Sabha, was murdered while returning home after addressing a meeting late last night. He was attacked by some persons and murdered while on way to his village after alighting from a bus. The police here suspect that the murder may be a sequel to a land dispute.

THE IDEAS PAGE

% agri-HHs who took loans from any source between July 2015 to June 2016



Sources of loan for those who borrowed (% agri-HHs)



Source: Nabard Nafis



C R Sasikumar

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"In the face of strategic US pressure, peaceful development does not mean grin and bear it. China must resolutely clarify its attitude."
— GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

In 2019, a new outreach

J&K needs a coordinated effort from all stakeholder organisations



SYED ATA HASNAIN

GIVEN THE DEVELOPING regional geopolitical environment at the end of 2018, the feasibility of any movement towards "meaningful" engagement with Pakistan in 2019 appears remote. This hypothesis will have the maximum impact on the situation in J&K, where we can currently boast of military achievements through 2018 but little else. These achievements have resulted in neutralising a large number of terrorists, mostly local. But, they have created an almost similar number of terrorists through recruitment and infiltration, leaving us in sheer quantified terms, where we began in 2018. Politically, the state transitioned to Governor's and then President's rule. It witnessed the successful conduct of the municipal and panchayat polls; but the true proof of success will emerge only when a degree of empowerment of the local bodies occurs. There can be little doubt that the stabilisation of the security situation is necessary for the emergence of initiatives in political, social and economic spheres. While the governor's administration gamely attempts transformational governance without the baggage of politics, what it could be missing out on are the much-needed and oft-demanded initiatives of public outreach.

Surprisingly, the one community of professionals who vouch for the effectiveness of non-military initiatives are military commanders, past and present. Experienced police officers too are of the same opinion. While the army's Operation Sadbhavana (a military civic action initiative of 20 years) has helped in extending marginal outreach, the lack of mass engagement has prevented the development of any perception change and the creation of alternative narratives to counter the propaganda from Pakistan and the separatists. The army's initiatives are personality and formation based; the JK Police is far too embroiled in policing issues. The CRPF, deployed in strength in the urban areas, has been insufficiently used. The political community is largely marginalised in the Valley heartland due to personal security issues and the local administration, despite having some experienced officials, cannot initiate social outreach measures.

Thus, while every well-meaning person in the rest of India decries the insufficiency of outreach and inability to counter propaganda from Pakistan and the separatists, what has been severely lacking, in fact, is the institutional will to follow a doctrine which has existed for long, but without detail on the execution element. It would be sacrilege to not point out one organisation which has the understanding and has been making efforts towards counter-radicalisation: The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). However, isolated efforts by different organisations prevent the emergence of a cogent strategy. This needs to be overcome in 2019. There are four areas in this "outreach strategy" that need refinement and coordination by all stakeholder organisations. The intelligence agencies need to provide their support.

The first involves direct outreach. A

model for that exists from 2010-12 when the army successfully undertook the conduct of public meetings or "awami sunwais" in the field in areas where the reach of the administration had become marginal. In a short while, there were political leaders and administrators clamoring on to the bandwagon under the security cover and characteristic "bandobast" of the army. Local problems that were languishing over time were corrected by officials through direct contact with the people. It gave an opportunity to the leaders and the administrators to listen to the people. A deliberate effort was made to engage with the youth through meetings at universities and schools, something that is difficult to imagine today. The recruiting rallies for different central and state institutions must be exploited for such windows of engagement, as the youth is usually in a different frame of mind while seeking employment opportunities. The idea here must be to give maximum opportunity to the common citizens to speak, criticise and complain, so they can realise that there are enough people willing to listen rather than talk down to the common Kashmiri.

The second element is to engage the clergy and, through that route, seek its cooperation in messaging the youth and others on the uniqueness of the Indian system. The clergy has a powerful hold over the public in any Islamic society — to the less informed, this need not necessarily give the perception that it is an unnecessary boost to the position of the clergy that might prove counterproductive later.

The third aspect of the strategy is the exploitation of social media, as much as the countering of online propaganda. Surprisingly, intelligence agencies, the MHA itself and the army's public information directorate, have all understood the concept but are hesitant to join forces due to lack of trust and the potential loss of individual space. This was the problem with the domain of intelligence 15 years ago until the Multi Agency Centre (MAC) and the State MAC came into existence, and organisations put their minds and efforts together. The army's focused information warfare at the Corps and Command level is simply outstanding, but exists in isolation. In the recent military literature festival at Chandigarh, I strongly recommended the need for 5,000 young civilian "information warriors" under the aegis of a joint organisation under the Unified Command in J&K. It will give the requisite continuity, technology and content support to the campaign.

The fourth, and final domain, recommended for activation in 2019, is the setting aside of the mutual fears of the people of Jammu and of Kashmir and bringing the people of Ladakh into this ambit as well. If the people of these regions have to live together as an entity of one state, they need to stop suspecting each other. Through the ambit of the central and other universities in the state, we need to create a platform for the "meeting of minds" from all three regions and from different professions and callings.

Operation All Out will no doubt continue successfully through 2019, but it should become a supporting campaign to the four initiatives outlined above instead of the other way around.

The writer a former corps commander of the Srinagar-based 15 Corps, is now Chancellor, Central University of Kashmir

An answer to rural distress

An income transfer policy combined with direct cash transfer is the best way to help the farmer



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI AND SHWETA SAINI

LOSSES IN THE recent elections to the assemblies of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan have given the BJP a jolt. The party had misjudged the gravity of the farm distress problem till then: The Union agriculture minister described farmer agitations as "political drama". However, the party not only acknowledges the crisis today but is also looking for ways to address farmers' issues.

The most pressing problems facing the Indian farmer are the persistently low market prices. From onions to potatoes and pulses to oilseeds, prices of most crops are much below expectations and normal trends. Ideally, the solution lies in holistic and broad-based agrimarket reforms. The stranglehold of the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMC) needs to be broken, the Essential Commodities Act (ECA of 1955) requires reforms, the negotiable warehouse receipt (NWR) system has to be scaled up, value-chains — based on the Amul model — are needed for most crops, land laws need to be less restrictive, contract farming should be promoted and agri-exports are in need of a conducive environment to grow. The prime minister has initiated reforms in some of these areas; they need to be broadened before they can deliver. However, these reforms entail a long gestation period and with the Lok Sabha elections barely four months away, demands for quick-fix solutions are increasing.

Three significant solutions have been doing the rounds: Higher minimum support prices (MSPs), loan waivers, and direct income/investment support. In this article, we evaluate the three to identify one that can be a winner, both politically and economically. For political acceptance, we evaluate the scheme for its reach among the targeted beneficiaries, the farmers, and, for economic viability, we compare costs and benefits.

Congress President Rahul Gandhi prom-

ised higher MSP for paddy (Rs 2,500 per quintal) in Chhattisgarh and loan waivers in the three states where his party emerged victorious. He is quite likely to take this model to the Lok Sabha elections. Similar promises by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during campaigning for the UP assembly elections in 2017 led to gains for the BJP. The PM promised a loan waiver and higher MSPs for 23 commodities. There was a difference, however, in the MSP increase formula offered by the two parties. While the Congress promised an MSP increase of 50 per cent over C2 that is, the comprehensive cost, PM Modi promised the same increase over A2+FL, that is the paid-out costs plus family labour. It may be noted that C2 is about 38 per cent higher than A2+FL.

The irony of a MSP policy is that it pertains to a limited number of farmers. As per NSSO 2012-13, less than 10 per cent of the country's farmers sold their produce at MSPs — the percentage though is a little higher for sugarcane, wheat and rice farmers. If one accounted for the increased procurement of pulses and oilseeds during 2016-17 and 2017-18, this percentage is still not likely to exceed 20 per cent. Moreover, MSP operations mostly benefit large farmers who have marketable surplus; these operations exclude much of country's marginal farmers who produce little surplus. Besides, the large inefficiencies and market distortions caused by a MSP-regime make it an unfavourable choice. For example, even now, wheat and rice stocks with the government (45.4 MMTs) are more than twice its buffer-stock norms (21.4 MMTs), reflecting massive economic inefficiency, not counting the leakages and corruption in the MSP operations of procurement, stocking and distribution.

Let us now consider the loan-waiver option. As per NABARD's Financial Inclusion Survey (NAFIS), between July 2015-June 2016, 43.5 per cent of all agri-households took loans. Of these, 69.7 per cent took institutional loans — 60.5 per cent took only institutional loans and 9.2 per cent took both institutional and non-institutional loans (See Figure 1). This means that about 30.3 per cent (69.7 per cent multiplied with 43.5 per cent) of Indian agri-households took loans from institutions. A loan-waiver is thus likely to benefit only this 30 per cent — even a subset of it, if conditions are imposed on loan waiver schemes. The remaining 70 per cent of Indian farmers, who do not access institutional credit, will not ben-

In terms of costs, our estimates show that a national farm-loan waiver is likely to cost about Rs 4 to 5 trillion. An RBS-style income transfer is likely to cost about Rs 2 trillion (with some improvisation to include tenants, and restrictions to the actual cropped area). A price-deficiency based payment or actual procurement under MSP operations, if done at a large-scale, is going to cost about Rs 1 to 1.5 trillion (depending on whether market prices are 20 per cent or 30 per cent below MSP). Such operations, of course, are likely to be prone to large-scale corruption. Even then, MSP policy and loan waivers are much more distortionary than income/investment support policy.

efit from this scheme. Such high rates of exclusion must be the single-most important failure of our banking system with regard to financial inclusion.

The conclusion, thus, is that through higher MSPs or through loan-waivers, one cannot reach more than 20 to 30 per cent of Indian farmers. This limited reach, therefore, cannot redress the widespread grievances of Indian farmers. Farmer leaders as well as governments who swear by farmers' interests need to make note of this important point.

The third option, pioneered by the Telangana government is income/investment support through the Rythu Bandhu Scheme (RBS). Telangana started RBS in May 2018, whereby it gave Rs 4,000 per acre to every farmer. This transfer is made twice a year, coinciding with the two cropping seasons. By directly giving cash, the KCR government aims to support the input purchases of farmers. The scheme is said to have reached almost 93 per cent of landowners and has clearly yielded political benefits to the TRS — the party won a landslide victory in the elections to the Telangana assembly.

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A cost sharing arrangement between the Centre and states is required to bear such a burden. Eventually, an income transfer policy should be combined with direct cash transfer in lieu of fertiliser and power subsidies to make the policy meaningful.

The time is ripe for action; one hopes the government acknowledges the reality of farm distress and tries to resolve it on priority.

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VIEW FROM THE NEIGHBOURHOOD



A weekly look at the public conversations shaping ideas beyond borders — in the Subcontinent. Curated by Aakash Joshi

COST OF VICTORY

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN, a retired brigadier-general of the Bangladesh Army and associate editor with the *Daily Star* analyses the January 3 victory of the Awami League (AL) and Sheikh Hasina, and whether the elections were truly free and fair. The election has been given "a clean chit by a group of foreign observers who were given a 'guided tour' of some polling centres in the capital only. One had not heard much of this group before, and some of them had no credentials as international election monitors," writes Khan.

That the AL has performed even better than in 2014, when it was virtually without rival, will certainly give the party confidence. That the BNP has dwindled to electoral irrelevance will also mean a change in the country's politics. Khan writes: "Indeed, BNP failed to see through the well-crafted AL strategy. It was taken up with only one issue — release of Khaleda Zia. And one can't expect much from a party that is being back-seat-driven by an absentee landlord sitting a thousand kilometres away; and the party continued to carry a political deadweight like Jamaat with it. But how well can a party fare when the entire state machinery is arrayed against it? To carve out an election strategy

under these circumstances, particularly when most of their mid and grassroots level workers were constantly on the run, was a tall order."

But the greatest threat to democracy that has emerged, ironically from an election, is "the loss of integrity of the election process and election commission.": "Peaceful" and "participatory" has no correlation with the fairness of the process. The common refrain of "sporadic incident" cannot wash. Widespread irregularities were observed but there was no means to record those because photography inside those "secret" rooms were barred. It was quite inexplicable why, when there were thousands lined up outside the centre, were the booths nearly empty, and why the line hardly moved, and why many returned without being able to cast their vote."

PAKISTAN'S AADHAAR

THE NATIONAL DATABASE and Regulatory Authority (Nadra) in Pakistan appears to be mired in controversies similar to those in India with respect to Aadhaar and the UIDAI. Anum Malkani, a development practitioner writes in *Dawn* on January 6 about "questions on the increasingly stringent identification requirements in Pakistan and their im-

pact on civil rights and inclusive development". Over the last few weeks, bank account holders have been asked to visit their branches to have their biometrics scanned, ostensibly for eliminating fake accounts. After establishing the need for security and identity, Malkani highlights "The debate around privacy and surveillance has been a recurring theme with Nadra as it continues to expand its functions and applications". The Safe Cities project for example, pairs footage from a widespread CCTV network with facial recognition software. The data, stored with Nadra, will give a "360-degree view" of citizens to the state, prompting fears of government over-reach and misuse.

Then there's the problem of exclusion: "In the recent case of the drive across Pakistan for banks to have all their customers biometrically verified, the requirement adds yet another layer of complexity for accessing basic financial services — for example, for those whose fingerprints may not be recognised (due to old age or manual labour), or for those who face challenges in visiting bank branches (including women or people in rural areas). Where biometrics are lacking, facial recognition and iris scans are being introduced, but the collection of increasing amounts of physiological data on people comes with its own ethical baggage."

SIRISENA'S TRILEMMA

HURRIED AMENDMENTS TO the Sri Lankan constitution have made a bad situation worse, according to the January 5 editorial of *The Island*. The crisis for President Maithripala Sirisena is this: "The executive presidency is the be-all and end-all of the present Constitution, and there has been a campaign for abolishing it on the grounds that it is too powerful and, therefore, inimical to democracy. But how true is this claim? President Maithripala finds himself in a tight spot; he holds several ministerial posts, but cannot have bills presented in Parliament because he does not have a minister representing his party in the House. He and the UNF ministers are at daggers drawn and he cannot depend on them to act as his proxies in Parliament."

The options before the president are limited. He can try and strong-arm his way through, "but the UNP does not fear him, either legally or politically". He could also make "another u-turn and opt for a national government if the UNP is willing to share power in spite of its nasty experience in October."

"The last option is for the President to give up all ministerial posts... But the question is whether he is prepared to resign himself to retirement after the conclusion of his first term," says the editorial.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

UNTOLD TRAGEDY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Dark Recesses' (IE, January 4). Amidst reports on heady cocktail of promises and populism, political allegations and counter allegations, the gross human tragedy in Meghalaya has gone largely unnoticed in Kerala. Even the incident in the cave in Thailand last year got more media space than the tragedy in Meghalaya.

Sangeeta Kampani, Delhi

PLIABLE ALLIES

THIS REFERS TO the news report, 'IJP, JD(U) laud PM remarks on Ram temple row' (IE, January 4). The IJP and JD(U) leaderships seem to cherry pick and applaud PM Modi's reassuring words on the Ram temple merely to impress upon their restive cadre the need for continuing the alliance with the BJP. But the BJP's track record is none-too-impressive. The IJP and the JD(U), therefore, need to take the PM assurances on the Ram temple with a pinch of salt.

Tarsem Singh, Mahilpur

RICH LAWMAKERS

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Three states, 66 ministers, all crorepaties, 62 of them men' (IE, January 4). It speaks poorly of our democratic system that

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

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the obscenely rich become lawmakers in a country where considerable percentage of people are below the poverty line. The irony is that the marginalised may have elected these rich. At times, monetary sops play a big role during election time, reflecting the flaws of our electoral system.

H R Babu Satyanarayana, Vallabhvidyanagar