

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

EASY DOES IT

Low inflation stokes expectations of further monetary easing. But macroeconomic stability concerns remain

ON MONDAY, AFTER Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's address to the RBI board on the interim budget, Governor Shaktikanta Das said that the central bank would discuss the issue of transmission of rates with banks this week. It has been over 10 days since the repo rate was cut by 25 basis points. The RBI appears concerned that credit flow has not been broadbased. The move to nudge banks to lower rates comes at a time when the latest data from the Central Statistics Office shows annual consumer price index (CPI) inflation to have touched a 19-month-low of 2.05 per cent, which is half of the RBI target. While the decline is largely on account of food inflation — which has now been negative for four successive months — it has, nevertheless, fueled expectations of the RBI effecting yet another cut in its benchmark repo or overnight lending rate. Most market players and analysts are not ruling out a fresh 0.25 percentage point reduction in April, before the coming Lok Sabha election. The possibility of further monetary easing has been reinforced by the release of the latest industrial production data for December, which shows a year-on-year growth of just 2.4 per cent.

The overall trajectory of inflation in India forcing even an otherwise conservative RBI to reassess demand conditions in the economy comes at a time when global policymakers, too, are reviewing their earlier monetary policy "normalisation" stance in the face of a slowdown in China and Europe. Until late last year, the bets were on the US Federal Reserve raising rates at least a couple of times this year. But the chairman of the world's most powerful central bank, Jerome Powell, has signaled that the Fed will now be "patient" when it comes to raising rates, after looking at headwinds to growth in major economies. Even the IMF, which, just over a year ago, talked of a "synchronised" global growth recovery, has warned of a bumpy road ahead.

Simply put, India may well enter the election season with low inflation (more so, in food) and falling interest rates, apart from a strong rupee and stable global crude prices (which were both worries only four months ago). This should ordinarily be good news for a ruling party. But when low or negative food inflation is also synonymous with agrarian distress and the RBI and, in turn, banks being under pressure to slash interest rates (despite fiscal slippages on the part of the Centre as well as states) a sign of weak growth, investment and job conditions, matters become more complex. In the past, staying the course on macroeconomic stability has always proved beneficial for the Indian economy. There is no reason to assume otherwise in today's uncertain times.

WHO RULES?

Kiran Bedi's face-off with Chief Minister Narayanasamy in Puducherry raises questions about role of Lt Governor in UTs

THE UNSEEMLY CONFRONTATION between Lieutenant Governor Kiran Bedi and Chief Minister V Narayanasamy in Puducherry raises serious questions about the remit of the LG's office in this Union Territory with an elected government. Narayanasamy is sitting on a dharna outside the Raj Bhavan since February 13 demanding that the LG approve his cabinet's proposals concerning social welfare schemes and other governance matters. Bedi, who left Puducherry for Delhi a day after the dharna began, cut short her visit and returned to the state capital on Sunday. Both parties have preferred to engage through open letters, public statements and social media barbs instead of sitting across the table and sorting out their differences. Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and his deputy, Manish Sisodia, visited Narayanasamy on Monday to express solidarity and to highlight what they see as an attempt by the Centre to usurp the powers of elected governments through the LG's office.

In Delhi, a combative government has taken its disputes with the LG to the Supreme Court. Though the issues in Delhi and Puducherry seem similar, the LG of the National Capital Territory has more executive powers compared to his counterpart in the southern UT. This is understandable since Delhi is also the home of the Union government. The Government of Union Territories Act, 1963 allows the office discretionary powers, but these must be exercised judiciously and only in exceptional circumstances. Puducherry has an elected assembly and the task of law making should be entrusted with it. Similarly, public policy and administration must be left to the elected representatives. Bedi has chosen to ignore this simple principle and is insisting that the elected government function under her direction. For instance, among the proposals Bedi has refused to approve are a government initiative for free rice — the LG has mooted cash transfers, instead — and salaries for teachers in aided institutions. The LG may disagree with these, but should she stall them, especially since some of these proposals were a part of the ruling party's election manifesto and are within the ambit of law?

The UT Act was legislated more than half a century ago. Much has changed in UTs like Delhi and Puducherry, which have legislative assemblies. The office and role of the LG needs to be restructured to recognise the shift in public sentiment towards more democracy. Clearly, there is a need to reimagine the political system in the UTs in favour of the popular government.

SPACE FOR HUMOUR

Nasa seeks jokers in the pack to keep cooped-up crews in good humour. It has been imagined before

HAVING RECRUITED PILOTS, aerospace engineers, electronics technicians and meteorologists for decades, Nasa is turning the attention of its human resource department on an unexpected profession — natural clowns. As it prepares for the era of long-haul spaceflight, it confronts a problem that has provided the plot for hundreds of science fiction stories: How do humans trapped in the tiny cabin of a spacecraft hang together for months or years, and not attack each other? The ideal solution (seen to best advantage in Arthur C Clarke's 2001: A Space Odyssey) is to put them to sleep. But neither ageing nor waking and sleeping are understood well enough for us to interfere with them. And besides, a cheaper solution is already available — humour.

It has been observed that teams work better together if one of the members has a sense of humour. A bit of chaffing cuts through formality, and a joke helps to break the tension when people have serious differences, often by diverting attention from the point at contention. The capacity for humour is innate, and researchers are now helping Nasa to identify the traits that would let it zero in on the joker in the pack. The world's premier space agency has made it clear that a good line of gags won't automatically qualify a candidate for the job. The person must also be able to read the space altimeter, do some extra-vehicular activity, repair the leaking thingamajig, and generally lend a shoulder.

However, it must be pointed out that these pioneering humorists will not be the first clowns in space. In the popular imagination, that honour must go to the cast of the 1988 cult classic, the Chiodo Brothers' *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*. As always, reality is doomed to toss fretfully in the wake of the human imagination.

I grieve for my men

But having led Punjab Police in fight against terrorism, I can say that strong-arm tactics alone will not work



JULIO RIBEIRO

I GRIEVE FOR my men who lost their lives so suddenly in Pulwama. The entire country is grieving. More so, the man who once commanded the force. After my three years-plus as Mumbai city's police chief, I was asked to head the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), which I did for a few weeks in 1985 till the then prime minister felt that the state of Gujarat needed my services.

Earlier, as a middle-ranking officer, I had served the CRPF as the Range DIGP in Hyderabad for three and a half years before doing a staff assignment at its headquarters in Delhi for another two and a half years. Having spent six years in this excellent force, readers will forgive me for shedding more tears than others who do not know the ethos that informs the performance of its brave jawans.

Unlike the army that recruits mainly from the martial races and organises its regiments accordingly, the CRPF casts its net all over the country. Great care is taken to ensure that all states, all communities, all religions, all castes and all languages are represented in each battalion. The men soon learn a common language that is Hindi or Hindustani and they adjust to a common diet and a common ethos. They live away from their families for months together, most often in the most primitive conditions.

In the ranks, the CRPF is slyly referred to as "Chalte Raho Pyare" because of the constant moves a battalion is called upon to undertake when unrest raises its ugly head in some remote corner of the land. There is not to reason why. They are to obey and obey instantly without any waste of time.

The job of the officers and the NCOs is to ensure that discipline is always maintained

and that the training of the men to tackle terrorists and violent mobs is imparted in such a manner that the minimum possible force is used on each occasion. Hence, it grieves me to learn of the instant loss in one explosion detonated by a "fidayeen" of 40-odd well-trained and highly motivated men of the force I once called my own.

Was it preventable? Many will argue that more precautions could have been taken to sanitise the road on which the convoy travelled. That is easy for arm-chair analysts to conclude. They need to be reminded that security forces have to be lucky all the time in operational areas in order to survive. The terrorists need such luck only once in order to succeed. A determined suicide bomber knows that once he has escaped the intelligence networks and security cordons, no power on earth can stop him. If the going is impossible on a dozen occasions, a chink in the security armour may possibly be found on the thirteenth try. And the consequences are disastrous, as we have seen. You have to be alert 24x7 each day in such terrain if you want to die in your own bed at home.

The sacrifices these men have made have been acknowledged by ordinary folks all over the country. In Mumbai, the city in which I live, street corner gatherings of men and women of all ages, castes and creeds, have been spontaneously organised with lamps being lit in memory of the fallen brave.

At a western classical music concert at the NCPA on Saturday evening, the orchestra conductor asked the audience to stand in silence for a couple of minutes to remember the dead. A day earlier, the Turf Club authorities had asked race-goers to do the same at

Outpourings of grief, specially spontaneous ones by common citizens, are reflections of human feelings and love of the country. But they alone will not usher in an end to the trouble our country faces in Kashmir or in other parts of the land where terrorism and insurgencies threaten normal civilised existence. At the cost of sounding politically incorrect, let me point out that the classical form of terrorism that we face today in Kashmir requires a classical response.

HOPE & DESPAIR OF GULLY BOY

The film frames the wretched reality of urban poverty and the dream of a better life



SATYAM VISWANATHAN

GULLY BOY HAS rapped its way into Hindi-speaking India's consciousness with a new clarion call for a country simmering with aspiration. *Apna time ayega* (my time will come) is the conviction that helps Murad, a young Muslim man in Mumbai's inhuman slums, cope with the abyss between his wretched daily reality and the dream of a better, fuller life.

Most of us privileged Indians go about our daily lives acting as if the grotesque poverty all around us is invisible. We're too busy expanding our incomes and advantages to be bothered with the problem of systemic and widespread poverty. In this context, to set a big-budget Bollywood film with A-list stars inside a Mumbai slum, and accurately reflect the lives of its inhabitants — the standard-issue brutality and unbearable stress that defines their daily existence — is an act of empathy and acknowledgement that is rare in our country. That the movie seeks to understand the people living in slums on their own terms, without reducing them to stereotypes that serve elite needs — as sources of cheap labour and objects of pity — makes it an even more important work of art.

Gully Boy is getting relatively affluent Indians who stare unsympathetically (or maybe even with hostility) at slum dwellers every day, to cheer from their plush multiplex seats as an underdog tries to forge a path out of poverty and drudgery. It is worth noting, however, that the movie, in a nod to just how vicious life in Mumbai can be, does not try to give us a rags-to-riches tale. The story does not offer its protagonist anything

more substantial than the promise of a Rs 10 lakh prize and a bit of fame. Ten lakhs doesn't go very far in Mumbai. Divine and Naezy, the original gully boys whose life stories inspired the movie, still live in the city's slums.

If foreigners could tell Indians apart based on the colour of our skin we would be ostracised by the global community for practicing a form of apartheid. Mumbai would look very much like Johannesburg or segregation-era America if class and caste distinctions were reflected in the colour of our skin. Though its citizens all live cheek-by-jowl, Mumbai has long been ghettoised — formal housing is largely the preserve of Hindus, while Muslims and Dalits (or Neo-Buddhists) are over-represented in the city's sprawling slums. If this divide was visible through a South African or North American lens, Mumbai's high rises and plusher localities would be almost entirely white, and its slums predominantly black.

We cheer for those who try and rise up against the odds in India but are unconcerned with the structural divides that prevent them from accessing opportunities and advancing (no running water and sanitation, no security that the flimsy roof above your head won't be demolished on a whim, no access to decent education). Human beings reduced to their stomachs, struggling daily with the uncertainty and indignity of not knowing how they will fill and empty their bodies, have their minds completely preoccupied with meeting these basic needs. Political parties benefit when voters are on edge and easily infuri-

ated. Incremental sops that keep the poor mired in an endless cycle of poverty create a fertile ground for identity politics that distract attention from poor governance, widespread corruption and appalling apathy.

An optimist would say that *Gully Boy*, with its big blockbuster credentials, speaks across India's seemingly unbridgeable divide, saying to our society's have-nots that the haves see them, acknowledge their struggle, and want them to succeed. Maybe the cheers for *Gully Boy* in Mumbai's swanky multiplexes are a sign that the elites who typically live in India by disengaging from its reality, are recognising that a society cannot continue to function without a serious churning, unless there is a concerted effort to engage with the vast majority of have-nots, with their stories, dreams and aspirations.

A pessimist would say that *Gully Boy* is a great feel-good story that makes relatively more affluent Indians feel noble about supporting the underdogs who they otherwise exploit and ignore with studied indifference. The cynical view is that it allows us to feel like we are caring and well-intentioned — and to buy this self-image for the price of a movie ticket, before flaunting it on Facebook.

Apna time ayega is a clarion call that brims with the hope of a better future, but also contains the seeds of crushing despair. Because talent is distributed evenly, but opportunities are not.

The writer is a consumer researcher and part of the founding team at Junoon Theatre



FEBRUARY 19, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

CHINA-VIETNAM RIFT
VIETNAMESE FORCES HAVE stalled the drive of a Chinese armoured column reinforced by infantry units five kilometres inside the rugged northwestern mountain province of Hoang Lien Song, the Voice of Vietnam said. The broadcast, monitored in Bangkok, said that a column of 10 Chinese T-62 heavy tanks had ground to a halt and was awaiting reinforcements from China. The column, originally consisting of 18 Chinese tanks, began crossing a floating bridge near Muong Khuong village in northwestern Vietnam, but Vietnamese forces managed to blow up the bridge destroying eight of the tanks, the Vietnamese claim. Thai intelligence sources indicated that the Chinese infantry too had been stalled by

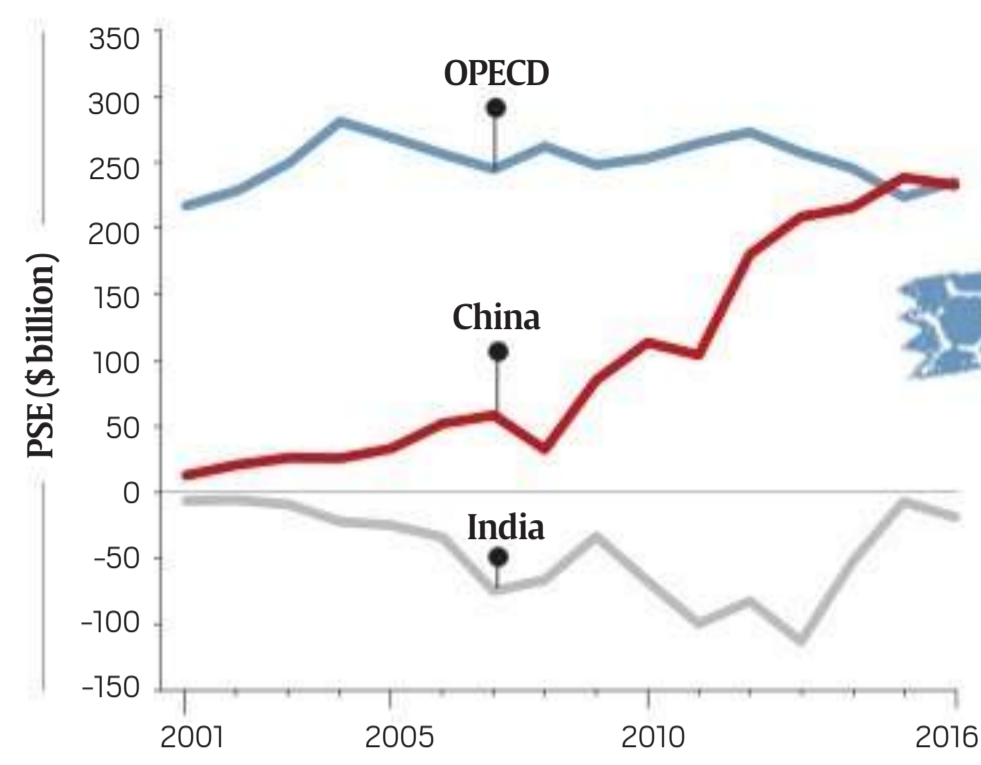
barriers consisting of sharpened bamboo sticks and landmines laid by retreating Vietnamese units.

CONGRESS (I) BOYCOTT
CONGRESS (I) MPS will boycott the joint session of the two Houses. President Neelam Sanjiva Reddy is due to address the joint sitting of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, marking the beginning of the 13-week budget session. The boycott decision was conveyed to the President by C M Stephen, leader of the Congress-in the Lok Sabha and Kamalapati Tripathi, party leader in the Rajya Sabha. The two Congress-I leaders met the President and submitted a memorandum listing their reasons for abstaining from the joint session.

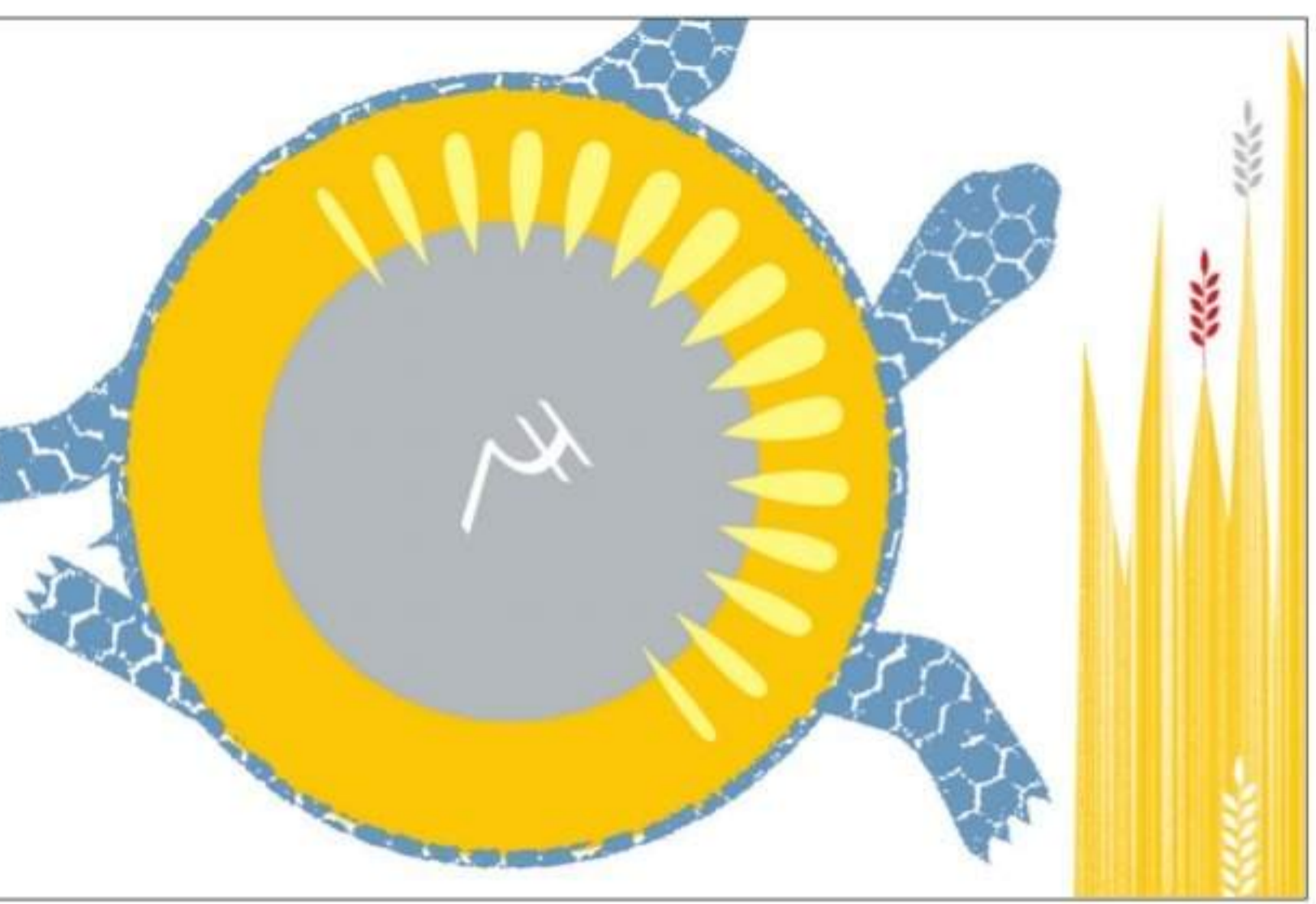
VAJPAYEE'S CHINA VISIT
NOT CONCEALING HIS anxiety at the Chinese action against Vietnam, External Affairs Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee cut short his China visit by a day and returned home to a quiet, low-key farewell. He looked a trifle disappointed as he boarded the Hovercraft to Hong Kong, rather like a well-settled batsman who returns to the dressing room in the last over of the day. Canton was only the last stretch of his one-week visit to China, which had so far seemed satisfactory. During the three days in Peking, Vajpayee talked to Chairman Hua Guofeng, Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping and Foreign Minister Huang Hua, reviewing both the international scene and bilateral issues.

15 THE IDEAS PAGE

LEVEL AND COMPOSITION OF PRODUCER SUPPORT ESTIMATES (PSEs) IN CHINA, OECD AND INDIA (2001 TO 2016)



Source: OECD Monitoring and Evaluation Report, 2017



C R Sasikumar

A race to atone for neglect of the farmer

But last-minute attempts, ahead of elections, are no substitute for the structural reforms and investments needed in the agriculture sector



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI

WITH ELECTIONS APPROACHING, every party is swearing by farmers and trying to woo them for their votes. The Narendra Modi government has already announced a package of Rs 75,000 crore for about 12.6 crore small and marginal farmers. While in absolute terms, this looks sizeable, once it is divided by the number of farm families to be covered, the amount is very small — just Rs 6,000 per family per year, which is about 6 per cent of their annual income. This level of support, unless augmented further, may not go far in winning the farmers' confidence. Most would agree that farmers have been under stress for quite some time, and have not got justice so far.

While the Modi government claims that its record on overall growth (GDP) is better than the UPA government's (notwithstanding the suspicions many have about the revised GDP series), it is the nature of growth that matters as well. In a country where 47 per cent of the workforce is engaged in agriculture, it is the growth of agri-GDP that is even more critical for the alleviation of poverty and providing nutritious food.

The average annual agri-GDP growth in the first four years of the Modi government, for which data is available, is just 2.5 per cent compared to 5.2 per cent in the last four years of the UPA government. The exports of agri-produce have fallen since the peak of \$42.5 billion, achieved in 2013-14, to a negative growth in agri-exports during the Modi government's tenure. On the other hand, agri-imports have consistently risen, reducing the net export surplus (exports minus imports)

from about \$25 billion in 2013-14 to less than \$10 billion in 2017-18. This has led to a glut of agri-produce at home and, consequently, prices have fallen, reducing the profitability ratio across most crops significantly, since 2013-14. And so also is the case with dairy. The government is saddled with massive stocks of grains, far above the buffer stock norms. For example, rice stocks with government agencies touched about 37 MMT on January 1, as against a buffer norm of only 7.6 MMT for that date. This speaks of massive inefficiency in the grain management system.

Needless to say, agriculture has been crying for wholesale structural reforms, especially in agri-marketing, from abolition/pruning of the Essential Commodities Act to reforming APMC, to futures trading, to a negotiable warehouse receipt system, to building commodity-specific value chains on the lines of Amul's milk model, etc. But the time for structural reforms has run out. And now, there is a race to compensate farmers for their losses, an admission of the failure of the agriculture policy followed so far, which has a massive in-built consumer bias.

India wants to compete with China and become a force in the world. It cannot do so unless it supports its farmers in a systematic manner. The Producer Support Estimates (PSEs) of India, China and the OECD clearly show that India has been implicitly taxing its farmers through restrictive trade and marketing policies. On the contrary, China supported its farmers to the tune of \$232 billion and the OECD countries by \$235 billion in 2016-17 alone (see graph). No wonder China produces more than triple of India's agri-output from a lesser cropped area.

Congress President Rahul Gandhi is going around the country and promising loan waivers to farmers, promising even higher MSPs (in Chhattisgarh, the Congress government has raised the MSP for paddy from Rs 1,750/quintal to Rs 2,500/quintal), and now a minimum monthly income for the poor. He has not spelt out yet what would be its size, and who all would be covered under it. Loan waivers and higher MSPs have serious limitations in terms of their reach. They cannot

reach more than 30 per cent of the farmers. Direct income support has much better reach but will also cost more. My guess is that the package could be anywhere between Rs 2 lakh crore to Rs 3 lakh crore, almost three to four times higher than the package announced by the Modi government. And this can swing farmers' votes.

If the fisc has to be kept within reasonable bounds, money has to be found by rationalising some other programmes. My two-penny unsolicited advice to all political parties is that it is time to revisit the food subsidy and MGNREGA programmes and rationalise them. Food subsidy for consumers is Rs 1,84,220 crore and the MGNREGA is budgeted at Rs 60,000 crore in the current Union budget. On top of this, there are the pending bills of the Food Corporation of India, which amounted to about Rs 1.35 lakh crore in April 2018, and may not be much less in April 2019. So, in a way, for the so-called "poor", the safety nets cost anywhere between Rs 3.5 to 4 lakh crore.

The problem is that food subsidy covers 67 per cent of the population, with massive leakages. This needs restructuring and rationalisation. For example, if one restricts food subsidy to the bottom 20-25 per cent of the population, and links issue price to at least half the economic cost of the FCI, gives cash in lieu of grains to farmers, and restricts MGNREGA to drought years and/or merges it with agri-operations, one can easily save more than Rs 1 lakh crore per annum. This can be diverted to farmers. Similarly, put the fertiliser subsidy directly into the accounts of farmers, and let them choose whether they want to do organic farming or use chemicals. DBT through cash in farmers' account with linkage to Aadhaar, their bank accounts, geo-tagging of farms, and updating of land records is a better way to support farmers than loan waivers and unduly high MSPs. It may be noted that this is not a substitute to either the structural reforms or investments that are needed in agriculture. In fact, this is a sort of atonement for not acting on those fronts.

Gulati is an Infosys Chair professor for Agriculture at ICRIR

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Islamabad is hoping to attract oodles of investment money as Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman arrived in the country on Sunday."
—THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE

Nationalism comes to Saudi Arabia

Prince Salman's downplaying of pan-Islamism offers New Delhi an opportunity to forge a strategic partnership with Riyadh



RAJA MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

WHEN WE THINK of nationalism in the Middle East, we recall "Arab nationalism" that animated Indian engagement with the region over the last several decades. But as Delhi prepares to host the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman this week, India must come to terms with an unfamiliar idea — "nationalism in Arabia".

Promoting nationalism and downplaying pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism is at the very heart of Crown Prince Salman's effort to reorient Saudi Arabia's internal and external policies. And he is not the only one. Others, especially the United Arab Emirates, are also trying to construct a national identity to cope with the turbulence in the Middle East.

The kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula did not have to fight for their "national" independence from colonial rulers. Nor did they inherit a clear and continuous territorial entity on which to found a nation. The Arabian monarchies, naturally, chose to rely on tribal and religious identities for their political legitimacy. The Arabian monarchies were also quite happy to go with the regional flow on supra-national politics. Today, as the Gulf monarchies review the growing threat of transcendental ethnic and religious movements, they are turning to nationalism as an insurance.

The rulers of the Arabian peninsula are also acknowledging that the construction of coherent communities out of their societies — overflowing with expatriates of different faiths and denominations — will need more than shared religion, sect, tribe or ethnicity. That is where "nationalism in Arabia" comes in. It is very different from "Arab nationalism", which was supposed to transcend national boundaries. Nationalism in Arabia is about defining the interests of separate sovereign states. In the past, Arab nationalism was seen, especially in India, as a progressive force countering conservative religious impulses. Today "nationalism in Arabia" has risen out of the debris of Arab unity and Islamic solidarity. That the old illusions are irrelevant is reflected in the fact that the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation are both in a shambles.

For newly-independent India, "Arab nationalism" had a special appeal. It resonated with the ideas of anti-imperialism as well as the slogans of state socialism and non-alignment. The issues that dominated the region — the conflict between the Arabs and Israel, the Palestinian struggle for nationhood and the joint initiatives by the Arabs — reinforced India's decision to frame the politics of the region on those terms.

As Arab nationalism went on the backfoot after the stinging defeat suffered by the Arabs in the 1967 war with Israel, the Saudis took the lead in launching the Organisation of Islamic Conference in 1969.

With the emergence of political Islam as the dominant discourse in the Middle East

came the concerns in Delhi at OIC's meddling in India's disputes with Pakistan, including Kashmir. In cultural terms, the Indian foreign policy elite and political classes were more comfortable with the pan-Arab Baathists in suits rather than the Gulf Sheikhs in their white thawbs or the Iranian mullahs in black. Neither India's traditional enthusiasm for Arab solidarity nor Delhi's fears about Islamic unity are of little policy consequence in the region.

That Saudi Arabia is ranged against the political Islam of Turkey and Iran and is confronting groups like the Muslim Brotherhood says something about the unfolding structural shift in the region's politics. The House of Saud, which let religion play an ever larger role in its domestic politics and foreign policy since the late 1970s, woke up to existential threats after 9/11 attacks, the Arab Spring beyond its borders and the challenge, from within, of the extremist groups that championed political Islam.

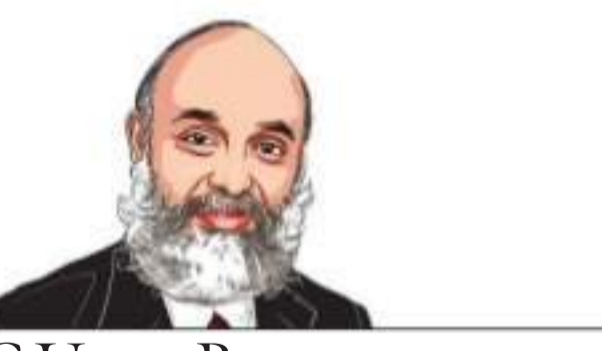
The attempts to strengthen nationalism in Saudi Arabia began under King Abdullah during his long years as the crown prince. The annual Janadriyah festival, that he began, celebrates the Arabian peninsula's heritage and culture. In 2005, he declared the Saudi National Day — September 23 — as a national holiday. This is the only non-religious holiday in the kingdom.

Crown Prince Salman is taking forward this agenda. Being a "Saudi" is slowly, but certainly, becoming as important as being a "Muslim" or an "Arab". The word "traitor" is increasingly being preferred over "infidel" to describe the enemies of the state. Sports, especially football, have begun to forge a new secular bond among the Saudis. "Patriotism" has also become the trope to mobilise popular sentiment behind the Saudi armed forces participating in the civil war in Yemen.

Prince Salman's nationalism is not all about symbols and vocabulary. In a land that has not known freedom of religion for non-Sunni Islamic denominations and non-Muslim faiths, he is taking some tentative steps. There is a conscious effort to strengthen the outreach to the long-suffering Shia minority in the kingdom's eastern part. There is mounting speculation that Riyadh might have its first Shia mosque in the not too distant future. The first ever mass of Coptic Christians was held on December 1 last year at a private home in Riyadh and Prince Salman has received delegations of American Christian evangelicals.

These are but small steps in one of the world's most conservative societies. Salman's nationalism is also, without question, a top-down project. It will surely run into many a problem. But that does not take anything away from the fact that the kingdom is experimenting with long overdue change at home. Reorienting foreign policy has been much easier for Salman, who now talks of putting "Saudi Arabia First". As the importance of religion begins to decline in the conduct of Riyadh's foreign policy, India will have much to benefit from a closer strategic partnership between Prince Salman and other votaries of "nationalism in Arabia".

The writer is director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express



C UDAY BHASKAR

Watcher of the Valley

Major General Afsir Karim was prescient about a Pulwama-like attack

THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR the Pulwama terror attack, that resulted in the loss of precious lives of CRPF personnel, has been brazenly claimed by the JeM (Jaish-e-Mohammad). The objective of the terror group and their handlers was clearly more than blowing up the convoy of buses. Some of the more corrosive ripples have been felt across India by citizens of Kashmiri origin and, to the credit of the CRPF, the organisation has reached out to those who have been targeted because of the angry post-Pulwama mood currently animating some Indians.

In a commendable outreach that speaks volumes about the professionalism of the CRPF, a tweet reads: "Kashmiri students and general public, presently out of Kashmir can contact @CRPFmadadgaar on 24x7 toll free number 14411 or SMS us at 7082814411 for speedy assistance in case they face any difficulties/harassment."

It is often forgotten that India is dealing with a complex Pakistan-sponsored proxy war in J&K that began in early 1990 with the forced expulsion of the local Hindu community. The Indian state abdicated its responsibility then and, 29 years later, a heavy price is being paid by the soldier. What are the objectives of this proxy war with its Islamic terror contour? Regrettably, the most insight-

ful, informed and analytically incisive professional who had spent years studying this challenge to Indian security — Major General Afsir Karim — is no longer with us.

Afsir sir, as many of us referred to him, passed away on February 12 after a prolonged illness and was buried in Aligarh the following day, with his comrades-in-arms from the Para regiment doing the final farewell. Founder-editor of *Aakrosh* (India's first transnational terrorism journal), Karim, in a prescient editorial (January 2018) cautioned that as part of the Pakistan-supported proxy war, there would be the "advent of fideyees with the aim of causing maximum casualties among the security forces in high-security areas". Pulwama occurred soon after his demise.

Detailing the objectives of the proxy war being waged by Islamic terror groups such as the JeM and the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Karim had specifically listed 10 of them. One objective is very relevant in relation to Pulwama: "Destroying political and social cohesion between diverse ethnic, caste and religious subgroups that exist in Kashmir" and, by extension, in the rest of the country. The insightful editorial also highlighted the proxy war pattern wherein, "Incidents calculated to increase alienation would be cre-

ated." Sadly, what is happening in those parts of India where the post-Pulwama outrage has manifested in Kashmiri-owned shops being damaged, are cases in point.

General Karim was the Division Commander in Gujarat before he retired in the late 1980s and had dealt with the emerging internal security challenges that would soon get embedded in the Indian political dynamic. His firm handling of certain covert and malevolent local political conspiracies that sought to stoke communal discord ensured that peace and order in his area of responsibility was not disturbed. While this was gratefully appreciated by the affected communities, my conjecture is that his superiors in Delhi were not quite enthused. However, given his deeply ingrained trait of not drawing attention to his many professional accomplishments, General Karim would never divulge more than what I needed to for my study on civil-military relations.

Deeply dismayed by the events of the last few years in J&K and the growing intolerance within India's social fabric, General Karim brought high-calibre lucidity into the understanding of the internal security challenge and its external overlap. The Kashmir imbroglio, in his view, was being exacerbated

by: "The absence of any political dialogue, the slump of the local economy, high unemployment rate and excessive militarisation of the public space which helped the Wahhabi movement."

A review of J&K would indicate that the socio-religious transformation in the state has seen an increasing radicalisation that has choked the more tolerant Sufi tradition and introduced a new Wahhabi culture in the Valley. The 20-year-old Adil Ahmed Dar who rammed an explosive-laden car into the CRPF bus is representative of how young Kashmiri youth can be indoctrinated to blindly pursue the path of terrorism.

The abiding concern for many security professionals in recent years is the manner in which Indian politics is evolving and the negative impact this trend is having on the internal security fabric of India. Afsir Karim shared this concern. Thus, it was ironic that on the day of his burial in Aligarh, students of the local university were being booked for sedition and this was ostensibly triggered by fake news.

RIP General Karim. Soldier-scholar of the highest professional integrity.

The writer is director, Society for Policy Studies, New Delhi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PEACE IS FOREMOST

THIS IS WITH reference to the editorial, 'What terror feeds on' (IE, February 18). Students from Jammu and Kashmir cannot be held responsible for the actions of terrorists. In fact, the ones inflicting violence on them are playing into the hands of those who want to create a rift in the country.
Sanjay Chawla, Amritsar

YOUTH HOLD THE KEY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Punishing Jaish' (IE, February 16). While the nation mourns and while we take every diplomatic recourse to demonstrate our anger, we must not be blind to the core issue in Kashmir. Why are the educated, well-off youth of Kashmir getting drawn to terror? Kashmir needs to be nursed back to health with a multi pronged strategy.
Sangeeta Kampani, Delhi

LET BABRI NOT FESTER

This refers to the articles, 'A new temple, a new mosque' (IE, February 6), 'A rotten compromise' (IE, February 14), and 'Reconciliation with honour' (IE, February 16). The suggestions of the authors on the resolution of the Babri Masjid dispute are worth responding to. A mosque is the house of Allah. Do we re-

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

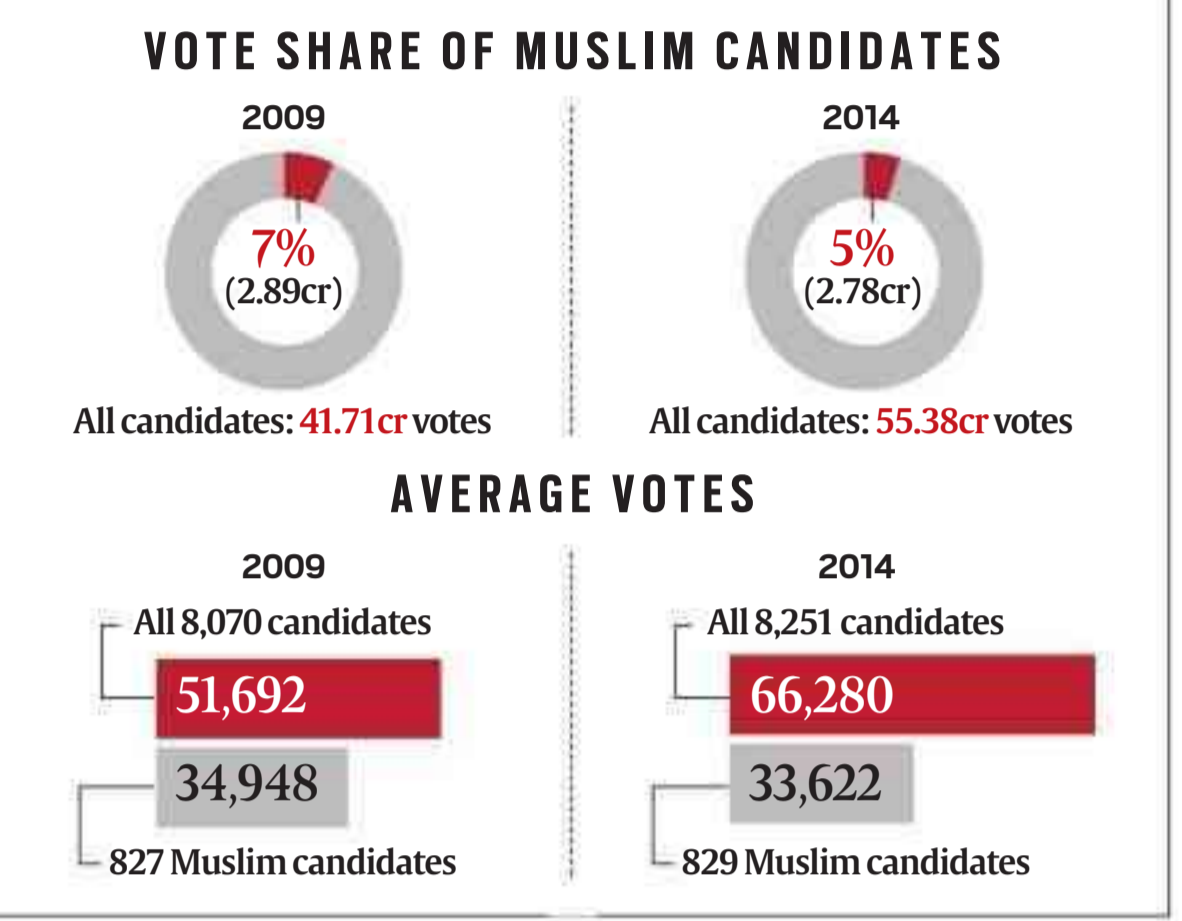
To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301. Letter writers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

ally need to reconstruct the Babri Masjid? Recall the trauma Hindus and Muslims have suffered over it. Remember the frightening riots in Mumbai in 1993 and Gujarat in 2002. The brutality in the name of God was cruel and numbing. Allah will be more pleased if we educate our poor, and turn them into worthy citizens.
JS Bandulkwala via e-mail

DECISION 2019
THE QUESTIONS THAT MATTER

What has been the extent of Muslim representation in elections & results?

Electorate larger, Muslim candidates got fewer votes



ZEESHAN SHAIKH
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 18

DATA FROM the last two parliamentary elections underline a low vote count for Muslim candidates, and a low representation in Lok Sabha. Muslims make up 14.2% of the population; in both elections, just under 10% of the candidates were Muslim. Of the winners in 2014, 22 were Muslim, the lowest ever. The total votes cast rose from 41.71 crore in 2009 to 55.38 crore in 2014, but the votes polled by Muslim candidates fell 3.6%. Muslim candidates of 2009 polled 2.89 crore votes, or 6.9% of the total; those of 2014 polled 2.78 crore, or 5%. Muslim candidates polled an average of 34,948 votes in 2009, compared to an average 51,692 for all candidates; Muslim candidates' average fell in 2014 when the average for all candidates rose.

The states
In Maharashtra in 2009, 114 Muslim candidates had together polled 13.1 lakh votes, or 3.53%; in 2014, 127 nominees polled 6.5 lakh votes, or only 1.34%.
In Assam, votes for Muslim candidates fell from 24.4 lakh to 19.6 lakh. Of 40 Muslims contesting 14 seats, two won. Muslims account for 34.2% of Assam's population (2011). In Andhra Pradesh, the number of votes polled by Muslim candidates fell from 22.4 lakh to 15.6 lakh,

and in Gujarat, from 4.3 lakh to 4.1 lakh. In UP, Muslim candidates polled 73 lakh votes (13.2%) in 2009, followed by 1 crore (12.4%) in 2014. Muslims make up 18.5% of UP's population; none of its 80 MPs is a Muslim. In Bihar, Muslim candidates polled 32.44 lakh votes in 2009 (82 candidates, 12.3%) and 43.94 lakh in 2014 (79, 12.2%). West Bengal, with a 25% Muslim population, elected 8 Muslim MPs. In 2009, 57 candidates polled 58.13 lakh (13.6%); in 2014, 88 polled 89.42 lakh votes (17.3%).

The reasons
A Muslim MP said the political climate of 2014 made it very difficult for Muslim candidates to get votes from outside their community. Some sociologists disagree. "Data can not truly represent the complexities of constituencies. There are other factors at play... Unlike popular perception, there is a high degree of sociological plurality in the community. This diversity determines their nature of political engagement. In my mind there are many Muslim communities who do not want Muslim candidates to represent them," said Hilal Ahmed, associate professor with the Centre for Study of Developing Societies.

NEXT #18 Why can Shiv Sena and BJP not stay apart in Maharashtra?

SIMPLY PUT QUESTION & ANSWER

Should we worry of recession?

Economics Nobel winner Paul Krugman warns that the US could possibly be heading for a recession. Amid slowdown in Europe, how strong are the grounds for such fears in the US, and what can it mean for India?

SHAJI VIKRAMAN
CHENNAI, FEBRUARY 18

IN AUGUST-September last year, much of the commentary about a decade of the global financial crisis of 2008 featured the global recovery and the rebound in the United States economy. The bounce-back was strong enough for the US Federal Reserve to signal two rate cuts in 2019 and for global central banks to give notice that a prolonged phase of easy money was coming to an end. Did all of them speak a little too soon? A few days ago, Nobel laureate Paul Krugman sounded a warning in Dubai when he told Bloomberg that the world's biggest economy, the US, could be heading for a recession late in 2019 or in 2020. "I couldn't be definitive, but it seems pretty likely," he said.

What is the ground for such fears?
According to Krugman, the US is in worse shape than it was in 2008. What the economist was apparently referring to is the country's huge public debt which, at a little over \$22 trillion, has been growing over the last few years, and debt-to-GDP ratio — a measure of the ability of a country to repay debt — rising to 104% now. He is looking at a recession also because of the slowdown in Europe, where economic powerhouse Germany has been hit because of tariff wars involving the US and China, a recession in Italy, and slowing growth in France.

"Europe is clearly experiencing a slowdown to recessionary levels already and has no recourse. Draghi (chief of the European central bank ECB) can't cut rates because they are negative already. So I think Europe is in a danger spot, potentially as big as China," Krugman told Bloomberg. The worry regarding China is the trade war with the US which, if not settled, could dampen growth or stoke a recession, according to some. The other reason for Krugman to be downbeat is the current US leadership including the US Treasury Secretary — whom he contrasts with the "remarkable" leadership during the 2008 global financial crisis.

The pessimism also stems from Krugman's reading as well as that of another doomsday predictor, economist Nouriel Roubini (who wrote in September 2018 in *Project Syndicate* that in 2020, conditions would be ripe for a financial crisis followed by a global recession). Like Krugman, Roubini also believes that trade disputes, an unsustainable stimulus and a massive public debt will leave little room for a stimulus the next time around. That is because the top central banks of the world may not have the firepower to cushion the impact of a recession, having bought massively into bonds and other assets during the global financial crisis to combat that and to ensure easy money. In short, what the doomsday predictions point to is that the top global central banks may not have the policy tools to provide easy liquidity given the liabilities on their balance sheets.

Are the fears overblown?
US President Donald Trump may still be euphoric about the world's biggest economy (at a growth of 4%) but it is interesting to weigh what Jerome Powell, the chairman of the US Federal Reserve, the world's most powerful central bank, had to say in January,



A vegetable stand in Palermo, Italy, in November 2018. Italy's economy has been shrinking and the eurozone's barely growing, raising concern about a global slowdown. Around October last year, predictions of a major economic downturn or recession in 2019 went from being a crank view to conventional wisdom. Gianni Cipriano/The New York Times
(left) Paul Krugman, then a professor at Princeton University, speaks at a press conference on October 13, 2008, soon after he was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences. Jessica Kourkounis/The New York Times

WORLD ECONOMIC OUTLOOK PROJECTIONS
(YEAR-OVER-YEAR PERCENTAGE CHANGE)

	2019	2020
World output	3.5	3.6
United States	2.0	1.7
China	1.9	1.9
Japan	1.1	0.5
Germany	1.3	1.6
UK	1.5	1.6
India*	6.7	7.3
France	1.5	1.6
Brazil	2.5	2.2
Italy	0.6	0.9
Canada	1.9	1.9

* For India, data and forecasts are presented on a fiscal year basis and GDP from 2011 onward is based on GDP at market prices with FY2011/12 as a base year. Source: IMF

at the annual meeting of the American Economic Association, where he was flanked by two of his predecessors, Janet Yellen and Ben Bernanke. The US economy is in strong shape but the market was pricing in downside risks that weren't visible yet, according to Powell. Inflation is still muted and the jobs or labour market is still strong, with high-frequency data yet to mirror some of these worries and with asset prices picking up. The monetary policy of the European Central Bank, or the Bank of England, too is accommodative at this point — a far cry from the time last year when most bets were on them moving towards raising interest rates. The normalisation of policy or a return to the policy before the era of cheap money dating to 2008 appears to be a couple of quarters away. Krugman and Roubini may not be convinced but Powell said last month that the US Federal Reserve will be prepared to adjust policy quickly and flexibly, and to use all its policy tools to support the economy, should that be appropriate, to keep expansion on track, the labour market strong and inflation close to 2%. What he has indicated is that the central bank will be on course to change tack as it did in 2016 when, after signalling the possibility of multiple rate increases, it settled for just one because of the

underlying economic conditions.
Could the predictions be wrong?
Roubini, who earned the name "Dr Doom" after famously calling the 2008 housing bubble in the US, is seen as being cynical. For those worried about the forecasts of a "perfect storm" in 2020, there may be some comfort. Krugman himself admits that he has been wrong in the past. "My track record is bad," CNBC has quoted him as saying.

Where does all that leave India?
An upside of the current scenario, marked by low interest rates and an accommodative policy of central banks and low inflation, will be that the RBI could have more room for cutting interest rates further. Oil prices, a major threat to macroeconomic stability, have been relatively low. Foreign flows have ebbed for quite a while with domestic investors putting money into stocks and mutual funds. That has also seen a slide, but once the political uncertainty is over after the Lok Sabha polls and there is clarity on policies and the direction of reforms and measures to address agrarian distress, the tide could change. That would also be contingent on getting the fisc back in shape, and any near-term impact in the wake of the terrorist attack in Kashmir.

From schemes to systems: Why the difference matters

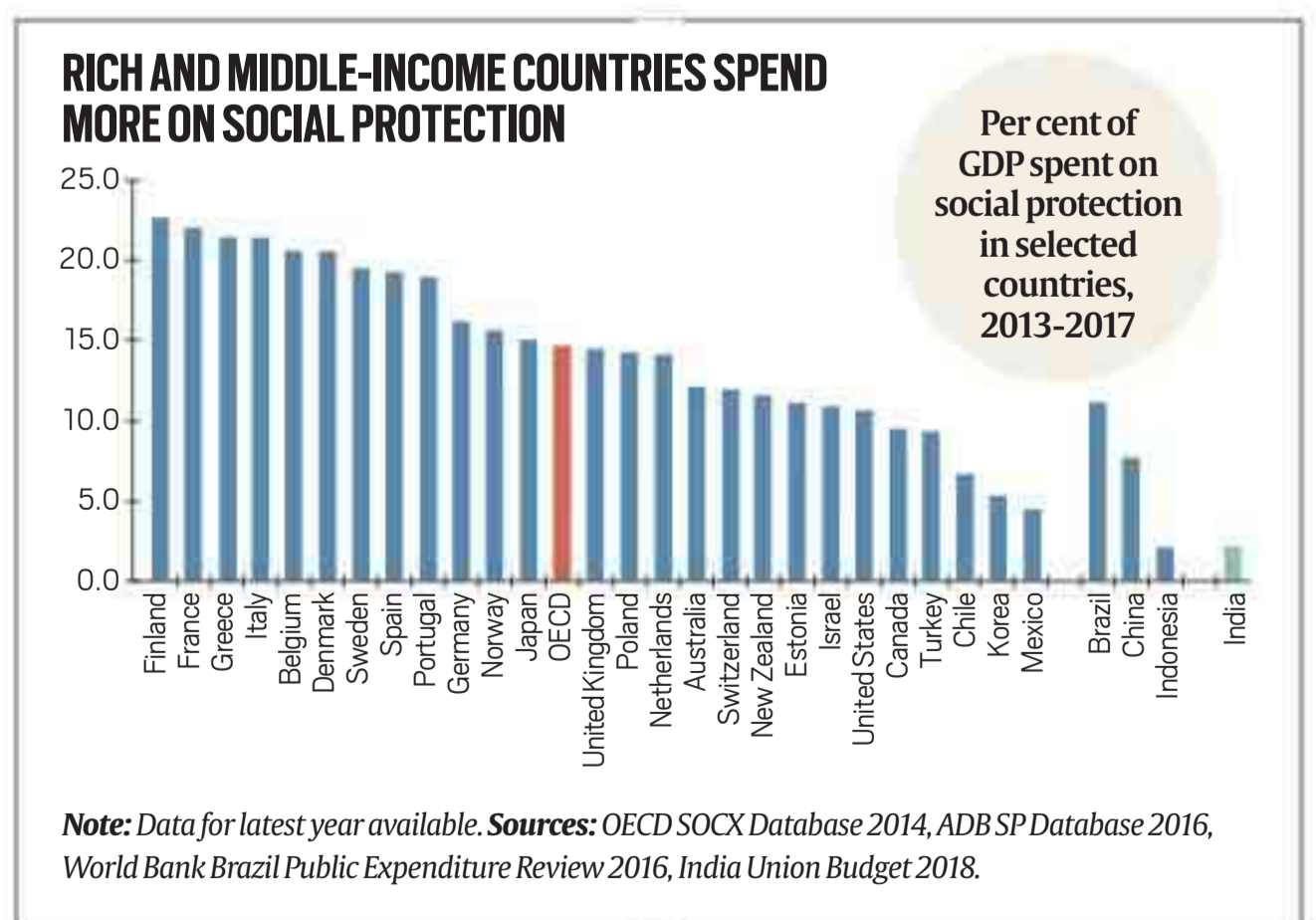
From loan waivers to income support for farmers, Ayushman Bharat to Ujjwala, Jan Dhan to Mudra, social welfare is shaping the national conversation as Lok Sabha elections approach. In a series, World Bank experts take stock of social protection in India

IN ELECTION YEAR EXPERTS EXPLAIN
PART 1

JUNAID AHMAD

BETWEEN 1997 and 2017, India's per capita national income increased more than four-fold. The pace of poverty reduction accelerated, with a three-to-four-fold increase after 2000. To progress further, India needs a large, productive, and healthy middle class. This requires sustained expansion of good jobs, human capital, and equal opportunities. While India faces an exceptional task due to its size and diversity, it doesn't have to tackle challenges posed by pursuing fast-paced economic transformation in isolation. International experience holds important insights, particularly on how strong social protection systems can support the growth process. Most G20 countries have increased expenditure on social protection as they grow. Why? Because while growth can lift people out of poverty, it cannot ensure escape from vulnerability to crises. Rich countries invest significantly in protecting their citizens from risks posed by hospitalisation, disasters or old age. Moving forward, social protection in India is poised for a fundamental transformation from a set of fragmented schemes to an inte-

grated system — a fundamental point missed in the simplistic discussion about Universal Basic Income (UBI) or quasi-UBI measures such as guaranteed income support. Successive Indian state and central governments have invested in important building blocks of a social protection system. Budgets have been enhanced, a larger number of people are being covered, and a series of new programs have been launched with a focus on rights-based entitlements and technological innovations. The Socio-Economic Census (SEC) in 2011, which collected new data on asset and socio-demographic information, can make the beneficiary identification process more transparent. Government-to-person payments have received strong impetus through campaigns to open bank accounts and to transition to digital payments through the Direct Benefit Transfer initiative. The NITI Aayog and the Fourteenth Finance Commission have also enabled a framework for consolidation of schemes and for states to gain greater fiscal autonomy. New insurance schemes for health, life, crop failure and accidents have been announced and given priority. India has signed on to achieve the UN SDG calling for "nationally appropriate social protection floors and systems". But progress towards outcomes remains *ad hoc*, often restricted to specific schemes and states. And the jump towards UBI or guaranteed income may fall into a similar trap. Instead, the focus needs to be on tran-



sitioning the many innovations that currently operate in silos into a harmonised and scaled-up system of social protection. How should this be done?
At this stage of development, India needs an overarching social protection strategy to guide how various laws, innovations, schemes, staff and budgets will coordinate tactics to consolidate delivery costs, avoid administrative duplication, and respond to India's diverse and changing risk profile. A large share of social protection schemes operating in modern India are designed for the past. India, even of the recent past of 1977, was mired in chronic poverty, with a largely agrarian labour force, and barely networked. That India now only exists in pockets — most of the country has seen booming tele-digital and transport connectivity, sharp declines in income poverty, and new neglected

sources of risks related to climate, urbanisation, and migration. This is important policy and cognitive shift requires national and state governments to establish a nodal policy vehicle through which strategic thinking and coordination across schemes and states can be achieved. As India moves towards defining a social protection strategy for its future, international experience suggest three important lessons. Global experience highlights that universal and adequate insurance cannot be achieved by hundreds of state and central schemes operating in silos. Emerging economies have focussed on comprehensive coverage through program consolidation and convergence. Countries like Brazil have streamlined schemes and established integrated platforms which combine delivery of cash transfers to poor households with delivery of health, nutrition and education. China and Indonesia implement fewer than 10 national social assistance programs. International experience also emphasises the need to move away from a one-size-fits-all model by allowing sub-national governments greater flexibility as political economy, labour markets, demographic attributes and risk profiles vary by location. The Chinese, Brazilian and Indonesian social protection architecture are heavily decentralised, enabling local governments to design, plan, and deliver a core basket of benefits within a nationally defined policy

framework and budget. Most importantly, global experience suggests that no strategy can create an effective social protection architecture without a capable state. Of late, there appears to be a growing political appetite to consider quasi-UBI schemes at the national and state level. However, these programs require a strong tech-enabled delivery chain which can target and administer benefits. Ensuring technology is leveraged effectively without triggering exclusion and privacy violations requires robust regulation. As more flexibility is given to states, their capacity to plan, learn and implement programs must also be strengthened, particularly at the sub-district level. Brazil and Mexico have invested heavily in local administration and social workers to manage dynamic social registries and public dealing. India doesn't need to mimic programs in Brazil or China. It must incorporate international lessons as it evolves and catches up with the changing needs of its people. It's time to think beyond singular schemes. A broader social protection strategy for a more urban, middle-income, mobile, diverse and decentralised India is urgently required.