



Delaying bad news

Banks that do not recognise their problems will likely not resolve them

For now, Indian banks burdened by sour loans will not have to admit the true size of their likely losses. On Friday, the Reserve Bank of India postponed the implementation of the Indian Accounting Standards (Ind AS) norms for banks indefinitely, citing the need for amendments to be made by the government to the relevant banking laws. The RBI had initially planned to implement the norms starting April 1, 2018 in order to bring Indian accounting standards in line with international standards, but the Centre's delay in enacting the necessary amendments had given breathing space for banks for another year. It is believed that the adoption of the accounting standard could cause significant credit losses to banks, which will be forced to prematurely recognise losses on their loans and build up the necessary underlying capital required to overcome the impact of such losses. Under the proposed norms, financial institutions like banks will have to calculate expected credit losses (ECL) on their loans during each reporting period and make necessary adjustments to their profit-and-loss account even before a borrower may default on a certain loan. This is in contrast to the present accounting norms wherein banks incur credit losses in their books only after outstanding loans have been in a state of default over a certain number of days as stated in the rules laid down by the RBI.

Given the losses they would likely have to incur, it is understandable why banks would try to avoid adopting the accounting norms for as long as possible. So the delay in the implementation of the Ind AS norms is not surprising at all. Further, to adjust to the new norms, banks will have to improve their ability to forecast future credit losses with precision. Until this happens, bank earnings could experience volatility. The Central government, which has been trying to bail out public sector banks without carrying out the structural reforms required to clean up balance sheets, might also prefer to delay the enactment of the legislation. For the new norms will cause more outstanding loans to be added to the huge existing pile of bad loans and cause further headaches to the government. According to estimates made by India Ratings & Research, public sector banks would have to make additional provision of over a trillion rupees if the norms are adopted right away. The Centre may not be able to foot the bill, and may instead prefer to help public sector banks to hide the true size of their bad loans. This does not bode well for the health of the banking system as banks that do not recognise their problems might not resolve them.

Out of the frying pan

But it's too early for the U.S. President to put the Mueller investigation behind him

U.S. President Donald Trump has won a rare reprieve in the 22-month investigation, led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, into whether there was any collusion between him or members of his 2016 campaign and Russian covert operatives vying to influence the outcome of the presidential election that year. A summary released by Attorney General William Barr said the investigation "did not establish that members of the Trump Campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities". This, despite the fact that the Special Counsel has brought criminal charges against a number of Russian nationals and entities in connection with two illicit activities. First, attempts by Russia's Internet Research Agency to conduct disinformation and social media operations in the U.S. Second, Russian government agents' hack and theft of emails from persons affiliated with the Hillary Clinton campaign and various Democratic Party organisations, followed by public dissemination of those documents through WikiLeaks. Although Mr. Trump soon tweeted, "No Collusion, No Obstruction, Complete and Total EXONERATION," Mr. Mueller's report made clear that "while this report does not conclude that the President committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him." This conclusion relates to the second question of obstruction of justice. In this matter the Special Counsel did not draw a conclusion either way as to whether Mr. Trump's conduct constituted any obstruction. This only implies the absence of proof beyond a reasonable doubt that he acted "with corrupt intent and engaged in obstructive conduct with a sufficient nexus to a pending or contemplated proceeding".

However, any sense of relief that Mr. Trump and his associates get from these findings may be short-lived given that there are numerous other investigations under way. While some of these cases rely on evidence that came to light through the Mueller investigation, they go beyond the question of Russian collusion to issues such as the President's tax filings, his charitable foundation's operations, and the infamously expensive Trump inaugural ceremony. A criminal investigation is also ongoing in New York over allegations that Mr. Trump directed his lawyer Michael Cohen to pay illegal hush money to quash mounting sex scandals during the 2016 campaign. Also, there is anger in Washington over the fact that Mr. Barr, a Trump appointee, took Mr. Mueller's report one step further within 48 hours of its completion to conclude that there was not enough evidence to establish that Mr. Trump obstructed justice. Now Democrats, including Congressman Jerrold Nadler, the Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, are calling on Mr. Barr to testify on "very concerning discrepancies" regarding possible inferences made from the Mueller report. Unless more material is made known, the public will remain enveloped in a fog of unknowing over whether and where their President flouted the law.

The point of having democracy

Public policy must launch an assault on capability deprivation and rising unemployment



PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

As the general election approaches, we are reminded of the observation by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein that while raisins may well be the better part of a cake, "a bag of raisins is not a cake". For, while elections may be an integral part of democracy, surely they cannot be its end. The end is the demos, or the people, and the content of their lives. However, going by the actions of political parties when in power and their pronouncements when they are not, the end of democracy gets overlooked in the political process in India.

Nationalism, secularism

In the run-up to the present, indeed through the greater part of the past five years, two constructs have repeatedly been projected by the main political formations in the country. These are nationalism and secularism, associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress, respectively. As are raisins to the cake, so we might say these two ideals are to Indian democracy. But unlike the fruit which, given to us in a natural state, is not malleable, the concepts of nationalism and secularism have proved to be quite that in the use to which they are put by India's political parties. This by itself may have proved to be less disappointing if they had not in addition privileged these constructs over everything else.

Actually, it is possible for na-

tionalism and secularism to be part of state policy even in the absence of democracy. Thus both Iran under the last Shah and Iraq under Saddam Hussein ran a secular state, though they were both dictators. The People's Republic of China is so nationalist that even its socialism is said to be imbued with "Chinese characteristics". Its state is not just secular but avowedly atheist. However, it is not a democracy. What is at stake here is that democracy is meant to be something more than just nationalism and secularism. None of this suggests that these two concepts are unrelated to democracy. Indeed they are of it.

Take nationalism first, once we have imagined ourselves as a democratic community we must defend our national interest. Threats to India come from two sources. There are authoritarian regimes in the region that are hostile to India. Second, the western powers have captured global bodies to promote their economic and political interests, for which think of the multi-lateral agencies that attempt to prise open India's market without yielding the West's to migration.

Take secularism next. Based on first principles, we would say that a democracy cannot allow any religious influence on the state's actions. However, there is a reality in India today that requires a contextual understanding, and this would require the secular state to go beyond this limited brief to protect religious minorities. The relevance of this is brought home by an incident that took place on Holi day when a gang of hoodlums, attacked without provocation, a Muslim family including young children with iron roads in broad daylight in Gurugram outside the



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national capital. The video, uploaded on the Internet, makes for horrific viewing. It should leave every thinking Hindu raging with anger that terror is directed at innocent Indians in his or her name.

Political responses

To accept the relevance of both nationalism and secularism to Indian society does not, however, entail agreement with the use made of these constructs by India's political parties. We have just completed five years during which a toxic nationalism has been unleashed. In the BJP's hands, nationalism or national pride has shown itself to be a means to establish Hindu majoritarian rule, a project with potentially destructive consequences for the country. A substantial part of India views this with trepidation. For its part, over the past 30-plus years the Congress party has often resorted to a sham secularism, the high mark of which came in the form of its response to the Supreme Court ruling on the Shah Bano case. Many citizens, including Muslim Indians, were deeply demoralised. In the State of Kerala, the Congress routinely shares power with sectarian parties while proclaiming its secular creden-

tials. Nobody is fooled.

Of all the leaders India has produced, it is Jawaharlal Nehru who has been the most clear-eyed on the goals of Indian democracy. When asked by the French writer André Malraux as to what he considered his biggest challenge Nehru had replied: "creating a just state by just means [and] creating a secular state in a religious country." The significance of this was that Nehru saw these goals as challenges to be overcome. Not for him the thought that these tasks were done merely by stating "acche din aane wale hai" or publicised visits to mahants and imams. Some years earlier, at the moment of the ending of colonial rule, Nehru had stated that it was an opportunity to create a "prosperous, democratic and progressive" India. He had read the aspirations of his compatriots astutely. Prosperity was not considered second to progressive thinking, even if the latter meant nationalism and secularism.

Just society by just means

In the close to three quarters of a century since, the goal of Indian democracy had been articulated prosperity is not in sight for the vast majority. On the other hand, a section of Indians has surged ahead economically. Not just the very rich but the middle classes too are now much richer than they were. For the rest of the country, however, it is an ongoing struggle to earn a living. A just society must seem far away to these Indians. But a just society by just means is no longer a pipe dream, it is entirely feasible, and in our times at that. The pathway to it lies in adopting the right public policies, and it is in the hands of India's political

parties to do so.

To address the economic hardship of the majority of Indians, public policy should now shift gear to launch an assault on the capability deprivation which underlies India's low human development indicators. The poorly educated millions are helplessly caught in the eddies of a market economy. Their skills do not match what is required for them to earn a decent living. Overcoming this requires two actions to be undertaken. It would require committing resources to education and training and then governing their use. In fact, we elect and then maintain a political class to govern the system. Instead, it acts as if its sole task is to lecture the public on either nationalism or secularism, as the case may be, leaving the task of governance entirely to the bureaucracy. This empowers the bureaucracy in an undesirable way, amounting to its not having to be accountable.

The second task of public policy in India at this moment is to raise the tempo of economic activity. Jobs are an issue. The government cannot create jobs directly but it can create the preconditions. It does so through public investment and macroeconomic policy. For about a decade now, the latter has been conducted unimaginatively. Amateurish economic management is responsible for rising unemployment. India's political parties cannot say that the pathway to the ends of democracy has not been shown to them. If they fail to take the country there, they must assume responsibility.

Pulpapre Balakrishnan is Professor, Ashoka University, Sonapat and Senior Fellow, IIM Kozhikode

Paradigm shift for TB control

Ending TB by 2025 is impossible but sustaining its decline is in the realm of reality



T. JACOB JOHN & SHOBHA VARTHAMAN

Tuberculosis (TB) remains the biggest killer disease in India, outnumbering all other infectious diseases put together – this despite our battle against it from 1962, when the National TB Programme (NTP) was launched. All hope was pinned on mass BCG vaccination to prevent TB. In 1978, the Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI) began, giving BCG to all babies soon after birth and achieving more than 90% coverage. Yet, when evaluated in 1990, the NTP and the EPI had not reduced India's TB burden.

In 1993, the Revised National TB Control Programme (RNTCP) was launched, offering free diagnosis and treatment for patients, rescuing them from otherwise sure death. However, treatment is not prevention. Prevention is essential for control.

Short on control

Why did the NTP and the EPI fail? Visionary leaders had initiated a BCG vaccine clinical trial in 1964 in Chingelpet district, Tamil Nadu. Its final report (published in the *Indian Journal of Medical Research* in 1999) was: BCG did not protect against TB infection or adult pulmonary TB, the 'infectious' form.

By then, the RNTCP was in expansion mode; experts hoped that curing pulmonary TB might control TB by preventing new infections. That assumption was without validation in high prevalence countries.

BCG immunisation does prevent severe multi-organ TB disease in young children, and must be continued but will not control TB.

In countries with 5-10 cases in a lakh people annually, curing TB sustains the low disease burden. In India, with 200-300 cases in a lakh in a year, curing TB is essential to reduce mortality, but is not sufficient to prevent transmission. By 2014-15, the RNTCP was found to be very successful in reducing mortality, but failing to control TB. Why? From when a person becomes infectious to when he/she turns non-infectious by treatment, there is a gap of several weeks during which the infection saturates contacts in the vicinity. Delays in care seeking and diagnosis are the result of lack of universal primary health care.

The way forward to control TB and to monitor its trajectory was proposed in 2009, in an editorial in *Tropical Medicine & International Health* titled "Paradigm shift for tuberculosis control in high prevalence countries". According to the editorial, an innovative strategy was necessary.

Tamil Nadu pilot model

True to its reputation as being one of the most progressive in health management, Tamil Nadu is planning to implement this new strate-



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gy in one revenue district, Tiruvannamalai. If successful, it will be replicated in all other districts. To ensure public participation – a missing element in the RNTCP – the new model will be in public-private participation mode. The Rotary movement, having demonstrated its social mobilisation strengths in polio eradication, will partner with the State government in the TB control demonstration project.

Tiruvannamalai, a pioneer district in health management, was the first in India (1988-90) to eliminate polio using the inactivated polio vaccine (IPV), under a Health Ministry-Indian Council of Medical Research-Christian Medical College project.

The Directorate of Public Health and Preventive Medicine and the National Health Mission will lead all national, State and district health agencies, district and local administration, departments of education, social welfare and public relations and government medical college. The Rotary will ensure the participation of all players (health and non-health) in the private sector.

Last year we wrote in these co-

lums that TB control requires the slowing down of infection, progression and transmission. Pulmonary TB causes transmission, resulting in infection which leads to progression as TB disease. To transform this vicious cycle into a virtuous cycle of TB control, spiralling down TB prevalence continuously, transmission, infection and progression must be addressed simultaneously – this is the Tiruvannamalai TB mantra.

Health etiquette

TB bacteria float in the air, people inhale that air and get infected. The closer one is to a pulmonary TB person, the greater the probability of catching infection. We must reduce chances of transmission by insisting that the TB affected should cover their mouth and nose while coughing and sneezing and not to spit in open spaces. Only when the public at large practise cough and sneeze etiquette and refrain from spitting in the open, can we ensure that the TB affected also will follow suit. The Rotary will spearhead public education for behaviour modification, starting in all schools and continuing through to adults.

Progression to TB disease from infection can be prevented by giving World Health Organisation-recommended short-term 'preventive treatment'. Infection is silent, but diagnosable with the tuberculin skin test (TST). Testing all people periodically is not possible. Cohorts of schoolchildren (5, 10 and 15 years) can be tested and those TST positive given preven-

tive treatment. This tactic achieves three results at one go – an infected child gets preventive treatment and points to adults with undiagnosed TB in the household. Finally, the annual TST positive rate provides an objective measure of annual infection frequency for plotting the control trajectory.

World TB Day is observed on March 24. In 2019 the slogan was "It's Time..." to take TB control seriously. On March 13, 2018, the Prime Minister, who was inaugurating the End TB Summit, declared that India would end TB by 2025. On September 26, 2018, the first ever United Nations High Level Meeting on TB declared the urgent agenda "United to end TB – an urgent global response to a global epidemic". Rhetoric and declarations cannot control TB; a strategy of simultaneously using all biomedical and socio-behavioural interventions can.

Ending TB by 2025 is impossible but pulling the TB curve down by 2025 and sustaining the decline ever after is in the realm of reality. True to the spirit of World TB Day theme, we laud Tamil Nadu for deciding 'It's time – to take bold and imaginative initiatives to create a TB control model'. Tamil Nadu, an erstwhile global leader in TB research during the 1960s through the 1990s, will now become the global leader in TB control.

Dr. T. Jacob John, a retired doctor from CMC Vellore, is Chairman, Rotary Club of Vellore TB Control Society. Dr. Shobha Varthaman is a volunteer with Doctors without Borders and a Rotarian

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

Misleading content

Disinformation is a high-sounding euphemism for fake news (OpEd page, "Disinformation is everywhere in India", March 25). Some of it is palpable while some distorts and manipulates information to purvey disinformation. The last category is difficult to detect as it uses subterfuge to mislead readers. Take, for example, Congress president Rahul Gandhi's abuse of the Prime Minister by calling him 'thief'. The Goebbelsian tactic of flaunting this obnoxious appellation ad nauseam is a deceitful way to spread disinformation as it intends to ensure that the label of dishonesty sticks to the Prime Minister. Even so-called objective opinion writers can fabricate desired outcomes by the

clever use of hyperbole, irony, sweeping generalisations, distortion of historical parallels and misleading headlines. In a democracy, erecting firewalls to block perceived disinformation (algorithmically or through human moderators) is unacceptable as it will amount to pre-censorship. The only sensible weapon is the exercise of restraint and heightened awareness on the part of digital platforms, political parties, content creators, media outlets and, most importantly, consumers of news.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

■ Social media has produced a number of paper tigers who do not give any thought to the wider repercussions, especially a divide on the

communal front, while forwarding undesirable messages. Service providers and the government can play only a limited role to stem the rot of misinformation. What is required is self-discipline and dissemination of information on a rational basis. For reasons not known, media houses prefer to keep away rather than make efforts to help the gullible distinguish between fact and fiction.

V. SUBRAMANIAN
Chennai

■ The common man is under double attack – first at the hands of the government which is tweaking facts and figures to its advantage, and the second with the flood of fake news through myriad platforms. There is a crying need for urgent regulation.

DEEPAK SINGHAL,
Noida

Choice for Sivaganga

The Congress party, especially in Tamil Nadu, does not appear to have learnt its lessons from past mistakes. It is committing blunder after blunder, tarnishing its image in the process. The party, once powerful, is now at the mercy of regional parties. After its setback following the 2014 elections, one was certain that it was picking up the threads of its lost glory. Therefore, one is at a loss to understand the party's choice of candidate in the Sivaganga constituency for the Lok Sabha elections – a person who is under a cloud for alleged offences (Page 1, "Uproar in T.N. Congress over choice of Karti", March 25).

The party is sinking in quicksand as people have developed an aversion for candidates who are corrupt

or have a criminal background. The decision, a truly baffling one, will only give ammunition to the Opposition.

D. SETHURAMAN,
Chennai

Hasty retreat

When actor and politician Rajinikanth announced that he would not contest in the general election, actor and politician Kamal Haasan criticised him. Now Mr. Haasan says he prefers to watch the game from the sidelines.

In a short time, Mr. Haasan has mastered the art of political hypocrisy (Tamil Nadu "Kamal not to contest

election this time", March 25).

P.G. MENON,
Chennai

Sparrow watch

I remember now how these tiny birds sat in clusters in the trees in our backyard flitting in and out of the house in a flash to peck at grains strewn on the floor. On a recent visit to Devarayanadurga temple in Karnataka, I saw a cluster of sparrows on the temple ground at the hill ('Life' page, March 21).

S. ARJUN PRASANNA,
Bengaluru

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the report headlined "NDA lists candidates for 39 of 40 seats in Bihar" (March, 24, 2019, some editions), the reference to Economically Backward Class should be corrected to read Extremely Backward Class. It was an editing error.

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Learning love from New Zealand

Hate has curdled the capacity for compassion in India. Will Indians take a leaf out of New Zealand's book?



HARSH MANDER

"We are broken-hearted, but we are not broken," declared Imam Gamal Fouda, while leading Friday prayers in Christchurch in New Zealand one week after the terror attack. "We are alive, we are together, we are determined to not let anyone divide us."

In a moment of immense tragedy, the people of New Zealand have shown a world riven by bigotry and hatred what solidarity and love can accomplish, even in the darkest times. It is a lesson which Indians, more bitterly divided today than ever since the blood-drenched days of Partition, must heed. But will we?

Display of solidarity

The *azaan* was broadcast before the memorial service all across New Zealand. Outside the mosques where the terrorist had massacred the worshippers, and in mosques around the country, hundreds of men, women and children assembled in solidarity with the families of the dead. They locked their hands with each other, creating a wall around their Muslim brothers and sisters who prayed. Many of the women wore hijabs.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern attended the prayer meeting, her head covered by a black dupatta. After the prayers she quoted Prophet Mohammad. "According to Prophet Mohammad... the believers in their mutual kindness, compassion, and sympathy are just like one body. When any part of the body suffers, the whole body feels pain," she said. "New Zealand mourns with you; we are one."

Earlier too, when Ms. Ardern visited the mourning families to comfort them, her head was covered by a black dupatta. As she embraced them, her face mirrored their pain, making plain to those who had lost their loved ones in the shootings that she shared their suffering.

The contrast with India over the last five years could not have been more telling. There have been many brutal mob attacks against Muslims, videotaped and circulated widely on



"Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern covered her head to show respect to a stricken people, not necessarily as an endorsement of a practice." Ms. Ardern at the Kilbirnie mosque on March 17 in Wellington, New Zealand. *GETTY IMAGES

social media. These hate attacks – by individuals and mobs – have spread fear and anguish among Muslims across the land. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has never once visited the bereaved families and has never communicated his empathy in a public address or through social media. When Kashmiri students were being attacked in many parts of India after a suicide bomber killed 40 Central Reserve Police Force personnel in Pulwama, Kashmir, Mr. Modi declared that the rage that burnt in the hearts of people burnt in his heart too. It was an unambiguous message encouraging revenge.

While Muslims constitute 14% of India's people, in New Zealand they are only over 1%. Ms. Ardern recognised that many of them could be migrants or refugees, but "they are us... The perpetrator is not". The message that Mr. Modi communicates with his deafening silences is exactly the opposite. He is rooted in the ideology of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which believes that the Muslim who has been part of this country for centuries is not one of "us", but the perpetrator of violence is.

In the last several months, we have made 27 harrowing journeys of the Karwan-e-Mohabbat into 15 States of India. In each, we have gone to the homes of the families of those who have lost their loved ones to hate and violence. Each time we have learnt afresh how much our simple gesture of reaching out means to these distraught families. They feel alone and abandoned as they battle

loss and the hate of their neighbours or strangers who attacked their loved ones. As we embrace and hold each other's hands, our eyes turn moist as they weep. Often, families in distant parts say that we are the first people who reached out to them.

It is this that Ms. Ardern did for the loved ones of those slaughtered while in prayer in Christchurch. I have often wished that this is what our Prime Minister and leaders of the Opposition who claim to stand for secular politics would do. But none of them has shown the spontaneous compassion or the political courage to reach out to these stricken victims forced to battle hate alone.

Take also the symbolic question of headgear. Ms. Ardern covered her head with a dupatta to show respect to a stricken people, not necessarily as an endorsement of the practice. Inspired by the Prime Minister's gesture, women all over New Zealand – newsreaders, policewomen, ordinary people – covered their heads with hijab scarves. Imam Fouda said to Ms. Ardern, "Thank you for holding our families close and honouring us with a simple scarf." By contrast, Mr. Modi has worn every conceivable form of headgear in his travels across a diverse India, but he has pointedly refused only one, and this is the Muslim skull cap.

Ms. Ardern also took firm steps to not allow the hate propaganda of the killer or the video he live-streamed to be circulated, and pledged never to utter his name publicly. By contrast, the videos that perpetrators of lynch-

ing and hate attacks shoot and upload in India are freely circulated. So are the hate speeches by them and indeed by many leading members of the ruling establishment. Those charged with hate killings are celebrated by Union Ministers, with garlands and the national flag.

Religious leaders of Christian and Jewish faiths in New Zealand, Australia and around the Western world have come out in iridescent solidarity with the Muslim community, and have attended joint prayers in mosques. Stu Cameron, Minister of Newlife Church on the Gold Coast, said, "Good neighbours always weep when the other is weeping, and stand together in solidarity when the other feels threatened." Sikh gurdwaras in New Zealand opened up for the survivors' families. In India, there have been no similar demonstrations of care by religious leaders after brutal hate attacks.

Lack of empathy

However, what is even more worrying than the failures of political and religious leaders in India to resist hate violence is the profound lack of compassion and solidarity in local communities wherever these attacks have occurred. There is no empathy with people who are so pushed into fear that they can no longer recognise this as a country to which they belong. Nowhere in our journeys of the Karwan have we heard reports of care and support for survivors of hate attacks by neighbours from other religions and castes. In upmarket Gurugram, mobs supported by the administration have succeeded in bullying Muslim worshippers to reduce the numbers of places where they can worship on Fridays to a tenth of the original number. It is nothing short of a civilisational crisis that we have allowed hate to curdle even our capacity for compassion.

Imam Fouda in New Zealand said, "We are broken-hearted but not broken." Our civilisation crisis is that as our brothers and sisters are being felled by hate around the country, we are not broken-hearted. We just don't care. In fact, some of us endorse and celebrate the attacks. This is how broken we have become as a people.

Harsh Mander is a human rights worker, writer and teacher

Encouraging secret donations

The electoral bonds scheme needs to recognise the complementary nature of the rights to privacy and information



SAYAN BHATTACHARYA & VISHAL RAKECHA

Despite massive campaign spending in India, there is barely any public scrutiny of such spending because of the opaque nature of the transactions. The electoral bonds scheme amplifies such opacity by not disclosing the identity of the donor. Recently, in an affidavit countering the CPI(M)'s petition challenging the scheme, the Central government argued that the scheme has a two-fold purpose: one, it enhances transparency in political funding; two, it protects the right to privacy of donors. In reality, the scheme undermines the complementary nature of the rights to privacy and information, namely, to make the state more transparent.

Electoral bonds were introduced in 2017 when the Finance Act amended four different statutes: the Reserve Bank of India Act, 1934; the Representation of Peoples Act, 1951; the Income Tax Act, 1961; and the Companies Act, 2013. The government argued that the use of bank routes would likely reduce under-the-table cash transactions and promote transparency in election funding. It said that transactions through banks would incentivise the use of white money, and KYC requirements of banks would ensure paper trails.

Dismantling previous restrictions

However, the terms of the scheme appear to have disastrous consequences for political transparency. Under the scheme, both the purchaser of the bond and the political party receiving the money have a right to not disclose the identity of the donor. Also, the policy dismantles several restrictions that checked illegal corporate sponsoring previously – for example, by removing a cap on corporate sponsorship. Donations can now be made by any "artificial juridical person". This means that even foreign donations are now allowed. The requirement that a company has to be in existence for three years for it to make political donations has also been removed. This ignores all the concerns regarding the use of shell companies to siphon black money into the system.

These changes show that access to the paper trails will be outside the scope of pu-

blic scrutiny as it will lie exclusively with the banks. As bonds can be issued only by public sector banks, the only entity with full knowledge of the transactions will be the Central government. History has shown that money laundering often takes place through banks, so the government's argument that the use of banks will reduce under-the-table transactions does not hold.

Two rights, many wrongs

The Centre informed the Supreme Court that protecting the privacy of electoral bond buyers is vital. While the right to privacy in India safeguards the individual's autonomy and dignity, it is subject to restriction on the basis of "compelling public interest". If the information pertains to matters which affect the lives of others, or is closely linked to a public person, it must be disclosed. The policy choices and decisions of public officials have to be brought under public scrutiny to ensure that they have not acted in a manner that unfairly benefits them or their benefactors. The same logic can then be extended to the funding of political parties, where the funder's actions are bound to have an influence on the policy decisions of the party, if the party wins. A clear conflict of interest would likely arise if important policy decisions are taken that could affect the donors to the party. Let's imagine that an Indian company decides to make a huge political donation through the electoral bonds scheme and the political party it donates to emerges victorious. What if the government decides to provide favourable deals to the sector in question? The public will have no way of knowing what guided such a biased action.

The Central government in its affidavit further argued that the right to keep the identity of the donor private was an extension of their right to vote in a secret ballot. The Supreme Court has almost unequivocally read a right to information and knowledge implicit in the right to freedom of speech and expression. The freedom to vote (as different from the right to vote) is seen as an essential facet of Article 19 of the Constitution. It is difficult to understand how a liberal democratic structure can sustain its legitimacy when information is not fully available to voters exercising their choice. The policy on electoral bonds thus needs to recognise the complementary nature of the rights to privacy and information, namely, to make the state more accountable.

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SINGLE FILE

Balancing work

More women can be a part of the workforce only if men share the burden of unpaid care work

GARIMELLA SUBRAMANIAM



The underlying gender bias in unpaid care work is a critical factor contributing to gender inequality, says the International Labour Organization's (ILO) latest report. The ILO's 2017 global sample survey established that 70% of women were eager to be in paid employment outside their home. But an ILO study last year found that only about 45% of women had jobs. This underscores the gap between their desires and reality.

The report, 'A quantum leap for gender equality: For a better future of work for all', which was launched earlier this month, shows that unpaid care work posed the biggest impediment to women's employment. Some 21.7% of women of working age are engaged full time in caregiving without pay, says the report. Only 1.5% of men fall in this category.

The impact of unpaid work on women manifests itself at many levels. There is motherhood penalty (which means that mothers in the workforce experience additional disadvantages compared to women who are not mothers). This is more acute for women with children in the 0-5 age group than among those with older children. In addition, there is also the parenthood employment gap that unfairly privileges fathers. The ILO reports an increase in both these groups in several countries that were surveyed. More starkly, there is a wage penalty associated with motherhood, as opposed to a wage premium linked to fatherhood, over an entire career span. This translates into a leadership penalty. Only about 25% of women with young children are said to occupy managerial positions. This contrasts with some 75% among fathers in comparable situations.

A skewed distribution of unpaid work yields unequal dividends from educational attainments. Gender enrolment gaps were said to have closed by 2017 in secondary and tertiary education. But women make up over 69% of youth who are not in employment, education or training. These numbers should explain why the bulk of women drift into unpaid care activities. In most of the developing world, even when they are engaged in paid work, it is predominantly in the unorganised sector.

Among adults with a university degree, 41.5% of women are either unemployed or outside the labour force, compared to 17.2% among men. But those who manage to break through barriers are better qualified than men and rise to the top even faster. Across the world, over 44% of women managers hold an advanced degree, as compared to 38.3% among male counterparts.

A rebalancing of current roles is critical to expand the arena of paid work for women and reduce the long working hours for men. That may also be the answer to promoting women's participation in the workforce.

The writer is a Deputy Editor at The Hindu in Chennai

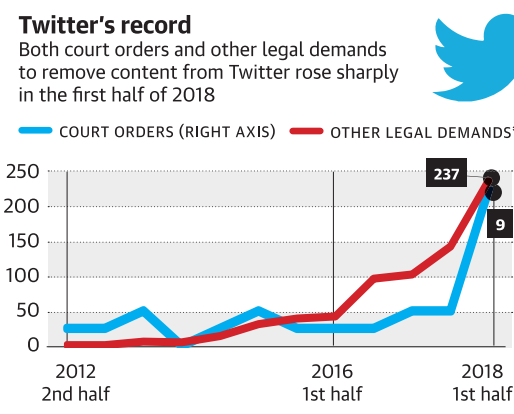
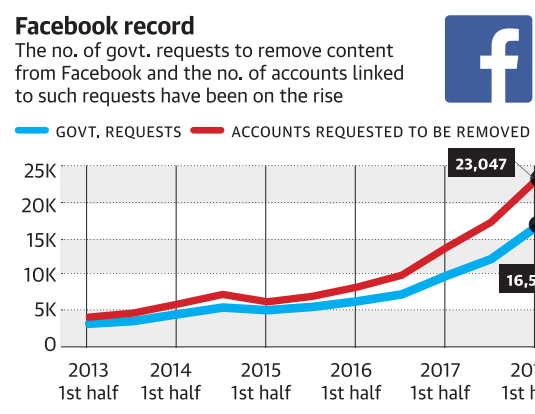
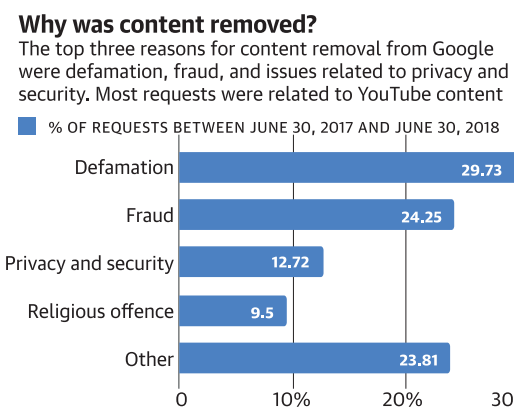
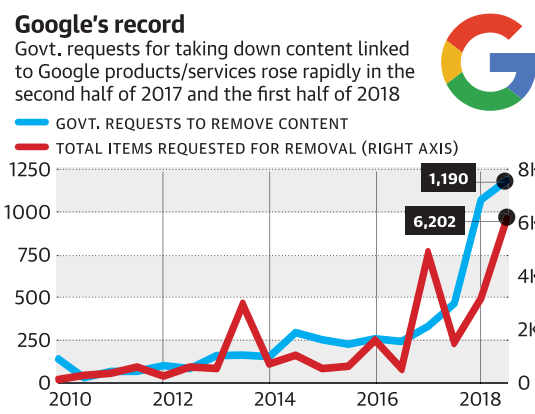


DATA POINT

Pulling down content

The government's requests to remove content from Google, Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms have been gradually increasing in recent years. Such requests started showing a significant increase in the second half of 2017.

By T. Ramachandran



*From gov't. agencies, police departments etc. | Source: Transparency reports of organisations

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 26, 1969

President Ayub Khan steps down

President Ayub Khan handed over power to the Armed Forces to-day [March 25] after four months of countrywide anti-Government demonstrations had culminated in mob violence and lawlessness in both the wings of Pakistan. In a broadcast to the nation, soldier-President, Ayub Khan (61), announced he was standing down as President after a decade of rule and was handing over power to the Army Commander, General Yahya Khan. The 52-year-old General, who has the backing of the Army, Navy and Air Force, immediately proclaimed Martial Law throughout the country. The existing constitution was abrogated and Ministers ceased to hold office, the announcement said. A separate announcement said Field Marshal Ayub was going on three months' leave from to-day and would stay at the President's House in Rawalpindi.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 26, 1919.

Indian Industries. Plea for Action.

Mr. Chandwick gave a digest of the Industrial Report to the Indian section of the Royal Society of Arts on the motion of Sir Charles Armstrong, seconded by Mr. Robbert Millers. The meeting [in London on March 13] took the most exceptional course of passing a Resolution requesting the Council of the Society to convey to the Secretary of State and Government of India its opinion of the desirability of prompt action on the report and the necessity for appointing a special office with adequate staff to give early effect to such recommendations of the Commission as are approved by the Government of India. Sir Charles Mcleod presiding said, the Report was admirable in formulating a strong constructive policy. Sir J. Rees and other speakers supported the argument in the "Times" trade supplement for March that by increasing the Indian purchasing power industrial development was calculated to stimulate British trade in India.

POLL CALL Psephology

Psephology is a branch of political science devoted to the study of elections and voting patterns. It is derived from the Greek word psephos, which means pebbles. (Ancient Greeks used to vote by dropping pebbles into jars.) Psephologists use historical voting data and exhaustive questions in opinion polls to understand trends in voting. In India, given complexities such as caste dynamics, religious formations, pressing local issues (which may be different from State and national issues), a huge population, shifting party alliances and varying voter turnouts, psephologists find it all the more challenging to capture the mood on the ground and analyse the final results.

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