



The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

The next revolution

After polls, steps must be taken to flip ratio between fossils and renewables in India's energy basket



VIKRAM SINGH MEHTA

SETTING LIMITS

Raghuram Rajan's suggestion on protecting RBI governor's tenure must trigger wider debate on institutional autonomy

THE FORMER GOVERNOR of the RBI, Raghuram Rajan, has reignited the debate on the autonomy or independence of the country's central bank by suggesting that it was perhaps an opportune time to set statutory limits to protect the term of the governor. In an interview to 'The Indian Express' last week, he said that imposing checks on the government's powers was important to secure operational independence and to put an end to constant interference by the sovereign, to achieve the broader objective of price and financial stability. The former RBI chief's remarks appear to have been framed in the context of the exit late last year of Urjit Patel, well before the end of his term, after a spat with the government, as well as his own uneasy relationship during his three-year tenure.

Of course, Rajan is not alone in voicing this suggestion. Some of his predecessors, too, have in the past pitched for a secure five-year term for the RBI Governor, arguing that a full service central bank — like the one India has — with a mandate not just for monetary policy but also oversight of the financial sector, besides currency management and payments and settlements, needs to be autonomous. But over the last few years, the bank and government have differed often over how to achieve its goals — especially on interest rate management and the approach to resolving the issue of bad loans. It is not unusual to see such differences globally — like in the US, where President, Donald Trump, unhappy with the US Federal Reserve's stance on interest rates, has issued threats to the world's most powerful central bank chairman, Jerome Powell. These conflicts are natural given the shorter political horizon of elected governments and the need for central banks to take a non-political medium-term approach to achieving price or financial stability. The 2008 financial crisis further underlined the importance of macro-economic stability and the fact that the policies for achieving it are inter-linked, signalling the importance of having a strong central bank free of political compulsions. One institutional response to ensure that and to shield the central bank from growing political assaults is to make it directly accountable to the Parliament without being dependent on funding, like the way the US Fed derives its powers from the Congress. But that statutory protection to the RBI and its chief must be accompanied by an accountability mechanism. Simply put, there is merit in central bank independence — not unbridled — as there are macro economic gains which would accrue besides boosting policy credibility. >

Ultimately, as the first Indian governor of the RBI, CD Deshmukh, said seven decades ago, it is not the constitution of the institution that matters, but the spirit in which the partnership between the ministry of finance and the bank is worked. And that the success of the partnership will, in the final analysis, depend on the manner in which the government asks to be served and provides opportunities accordingly. It is the display of such a spirit by any government that will be critical to the future of India's public institutions, including the RBI.

ENERGY WILL NOT be central to the unfolding electoral campaign. It is not a priority subject for the electorate. But once the new government is sworn in, it should be brought front and square onto the policy agenda: Because its current trajectory is fundamentally antithetical to the objective of sustainable development. And, because time is of the essence.

Today, every projection of India's energy future draws the same broad conclusion. Whether it be multilateral institutions like the International Energy Agency (IEA), multinationals like Exxon-Mobil, BP or Shell, the erstwhile Planning Commission, or now the NITI Aayog, the forecast is that energy demand will move on an upward curve; indigenous supplies will fail to keep pace with this increase in demand; energy imports will rise in absolute and relative terms, and, the environment will face increasing stress. More specifically, coal will dominate, oil and gas will have significance; renewables, whilst on a rising trend, will account for a relatively inconsequential share and air pollution, depleting water tables and extreme weather conditions will presage ecological collapse.

Take, for example, BP's most recent energy outlook published just a few weeks back. It avers that in 2040, fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) will account for between 70-75 per cent of India's primary energy consumption — down from approximately 90 per cent today. Of that, coal will account for 45 per cent (down from the current 55 per cent); oil 20 per cent (down from 30 per cent today) and natural gas at the same levels as today of around seven per cent. Renewables market share will increase to 15 per cent up from the current 3-4 per cent. Consequently, India will import 95 per cent of its oil requirements; 60 per cent of its gas requirements and 30 per cent of its coal requirements (despite the fact that it contains the fifth largest deposits of coal in the world). India will meet its Paris commitments to reduce GHG emissions by 35 per cent in 2035 relative to 2005. But, given this level of fossil fuel consumption, it will be one of the largest absolute emitters of pollutants in the world.

The costs of transitioning to renewables are huge. And there are technological issues to overcome before clean energy can be brought to scale. The future projected by these reports may be based on sound logic. It may tick every economic box and it may be the only politically feasible option. But it is clearly not a future that we wish for our children and grandchildren. This logic must be challenged. Energy economics needs to be redefined.

The reasoning underpinning all these reports is well known: Coal is abundantly available — it is the cheapest of fuels and there are no competitive substitutes for liquids as a fuel for mobility. The costs of transitioning to renewables — whether calculated in terms of the sunk costs of stranded thermal power assets or the creation of transmission and distribution infrastructure to overcome the problem of "intermittency" (the sun does not shine all the time; nor does the wind blow with regularity) are huge. And there are technological (that is, storage or carbon sequestration) and regulatory (conservation norms, emissions standards) issues to overcome before clean energy can be brought to scale.

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Two decades back, the US was the largest importer of liquid fuels in the world. Global geopolitics pivoted around this reality. Policies were contrived to reduce this dependence but no one imagined that the US would ever secure self-sufficiency. Today, the US is the largest producer of liquids in the world. More extraordinarily, it is now placing approximately 2,00,000 barrels a day of oil into the global market. This energy revolution happened because an independent entrepreneur in Texas refused to accept the straitjacket of convention. Rather than apply the technologies of hydraulic fracturing (of the rock faces) and horizontal drilling separately, as was the then norm, he asked the counterfactual: What if these technologies were applied jointly? He "fractured" the rock faces by a blast of high pressure liquids and used the design of the horizontal wells to bring the released molecules of oil and gas to the surface cost-effectively. His success triggered the "shale revolution" and fundamentally altered the commercial, strategic and geopolitical landscape of the global petroleum industry.

We have to contemplate just such a "revolutionary" change. We have to ask the coun-

terfactual and contemplate the counterintuitive — "What institutional, economic, technological, financial and collaborative steps must be taken to flip the ratio between fossils and renewables in the energy basket of emergent India?" There will be no clear answer but such questions will at least enhance the chances of finding a path off the currently trodden track of fossil fuels.

A few early steps must be taken by the new government to start this process. First, it must replace the lens that is currently used to look at the energy sector. This lens provides a disaggregated picture and encourages a siloed approach to energy governance. It does not facilitate a holistic overview of the linkages between the different components of energy (oil, gas, coal, renewables, nuclear, hydro, bio, non-commercial); nor between fuel usage, electricity, mobility, industry, and agriculture, on the one hand, and, ecology on the other. A general equilibrium macro model is required that captures such linkages and enables decision-makers to consider the systemic implications of changes in one or more of these variables.

Second, and this is a corollary of the first, we have to create the appropriate institutional structures of decision-making. The current structure of multiple "energy" ministries (petroleum, coal, renewables, power, atomic) should be collapsed into one omnibus Ministry of Energy and Environment. This will enable integrated decision making; it will also provide a platform for collaborative public-private and constructively "disruptive" innovation. Besides, it will also bring sustainability to the fore of policy.

Finally, the government should use its newly derived mandate to legislate an "Energy and Environment Security" Act. The purpose should be to engage the public in the larger debate on how to weaken if not break the current unhealthy nexus between economic growth, energy demand and environmental degradation. It should be to elevate the objective of wrecking an energy "discontinuity" into a national priority.

The writer is chairman & senior fellow, Brookings India

MURDER IN MOHALI

Killing of Neha Shoree must shake Punjab government out of complacency, revive urgency in efforts to tackle drug menace

LAST FRIDAY, NEHA Shoree, a young woman officer posted in the Food and Drug Administration's zonal licensing authority of Punjab, was shot dead in her office, apparently for doing her job. She had cancelled the chemist's licence of the accused, a pharmacy owner, on the suspicion of drug peddling. While Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh has ordered an investigation and all steps must be taken to ensure that the case reaches a quick and just conclusion, the brazenness of the crime is a horrific reminder of a longstanding nexus — between drugs and crime — in the state. The accused, described as mentally disturbed by his family, not only managed to easily procure a gun licence in a state where it can take months to do so, but was also carrying the weapon despite the election code of conduct coming into force.

Over two years ago, the Congress government rode to power amid much grandstanding on the issue of drugs. The film "Udta Punjab", showing the nexus between drug cartels, police and politicians, had drawn people's attention to Punjab's building crisis. "Chitta", a term for synthetic drugs in Punjab, became the theme of many a poll jingle. Accusing the Akali Dal regime of complicity, the Congress promised to wipe off drug supply, distribution and consumption in the state in four weeks. Though the Amarinder Singh government launched its efforts with much fanfare, setting up a special task force with a direct line to the CM, and ordering a crackdown on the black sheep in the enforcement agencies, the drive against this menace appears to have lost urgency since.

Two years on, more than 50 per cent of villages and wards in the state continue to be in the grip of drugs as per official records. In Ferozepur, a whopping 97 per cent of villages are reeling under the influence. The situation continues to be alarming in the border belt of Tarn Taran and Amritsar (rural) as well. The police have been painfully slow in filing challans in drug-related cases, leading to hundreds of peddlers, big and small, getting bail. In what is being seen as both better enforcement and a spike in demand, drug seizures have more than doubled in the last two years — the police seized 83 kg of heroin in the last three months of 2018 against 36 kg in the corresponding period in 2017. But with the popular political narrative in the state shifting to incidents of sacrilege dating back to 2015, the drive against drugs appears to have taken a back seat. The brutal murder of an honest officer in her own office should shake the state government out of its stupor. The killing is a symptom. The state will do well to urgently treat the malaise.



SNEHA VAKHARIA

HEROES, NOT ALWAYS SAVIOURS

Looking up to heroes elevates us, but also leaves us vulnerable to betrayal

EARLY LAST YEAR, actor Sonali Bendre revealed on Instagram that she was fighting a "high grade cancer" that had metastasized. In her first public appearance after her diagnosis, having just undergone chemotherapy, she talked about struggling to accept the new changes in her body: Missing her eyebrows and eyelashes, accepting that she now looked different. "I've always thought I'm someone comfortable with my body," she said, "but obviously, I'm not. Everytime I step out, I have to cross a threshold. There is fear in the pit of my stomach. It holds me down. I start making excuses for it. Then I say no, there is no excuse. No hair, that's fine. Body's different, it's okay. I'm not comfortable with my body yet, but I will be. I tell myself that I will become comfortable with my body. I will find beauty in it."

The interview was raw and brave. And it brought home to me a personal struggle of my own. I am currently struggling with a milder, not congruent, but similar predicament. I'm struggling with loving a body that wears the scars of disease.

There is a term in moral psychology for the phenomenon of being inspired by someone. It is called elevation. Jonathan Haidt, a pioneering moral psychologist, describes elevation like this: "A warm, uplifting feeling that people experience when they see unexpected acts of human good-ness, kindness,



ONE OF
800
MILLION
A VOICE, UNDER 35

Having a hero comes with risk. It requires placing faith outside ourselves. That opens us up for elevation, but also for betrayal. When we have heroes, we are easily inspired, but we are also easily misled.

courage, or compassion." Elevation is what happens when we experience moral beauty. When we see what we most value manifest in the world. We expand. We rise. Elevation is how our heroes make us feel. It is how Sonali Bendre makes me feel.

Scientists have studied elevation and have found results that are tremendously heartening. In an experiment that induced elevation in new mothers, it was found that the mothers were then more likely to leak milk, nurse or cuddle their babies when elevated. Elevation was also likely to improve functioning in those suffering from depression and anxiety. Elevation was seen to increase prosocial behaviour, and in another experiment, altruistic behaviour. We are kinder, more effective, generous and loving when we are elevated. In other words, when they inspire us, when they reflect what we value in the world, our heroes make us better people.

But sometimes our heroes let us down. In a documentary released last month, *Leaving Neverland*, two men describe how when they were seven and 12 respectively, Michael Jackson abused their trust, and them. Jackson frequently invited Wade Robson and James Safechuck — both MJ fans — on lavish holidays and to stay with him in the glorious grounds of Neverland, often with their families. And so taken in were

these families by Jackson's generosity and success, that nobody questioned why he was sleeping with the little boys in his bedroom at night.

And so it is with many heroes, public and personal, toppled by #MeToo. For long their crimes were eclipsed by their status as heroes and by our experiences of elevation. And now that they have been outed — comedians, actors, artists, friends, colleagues, brothers, fathers — we have to confront that they don't live by ideals we thought we shared. That our experiences of elevation from them were a lie.

This is a loss, and it leaves us either grieving or in denial (which is but a stage of grief). We are hurt, confused and betrayed. The opposite of elevation, according to Haidt, is disgust, and we are disgusted.

Having a hero comes with risk. It requires placing faith outside ourselves. That opens us up for elevation, but also for betrayal. When we have heroes, we are easily inspired, but we are also easily misled. Does this mean that we should lock away our hearts, abandoning all our heroes altogether? Or should we trust still: Leave our hearts dangerously open to the possibility of elevation?

The answer probably lies somewhere in between.

The writer is a Bengaluru-based journalist

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



APRIL 1, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

FREEDOM OF RELIGION
THE PRIME MINISTER, Morarji Desai expressed himself in favour of the Freedom of Religion Bill and said the government could not allow forced or lured conversions. He told a deputation of Christians who called on him that he had equal respect for all the religions, but he could never appreciate conversions by lure. At the same time, he explained, there must be no obstruction if an adult decided to change his religion voluntarily. But this did not apply to minors, as they were not in a position to know what they were doing.

OPPOSING THE BILL
IT WAS ALMOST on the eve of last Christmas

that an innocuous-looking private member's bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha by O P Tyagi (Janata). In seeking Parliament to legislate against forcible conversions from one religion to another, Tyagi has stirred the veritable hornets' nest. The Christian community has expressed its consternation. Even the saintly Mother Teresa joined the issue by beseeching Prime Minister Morarji Desai to see that the Bill was not passed.

NEW BANGLADESH PM
THE LABOUR MINISTER, Shah Azizur Rahman, was named the new prime minister of Bangladesh. He was chosen parliamentary leader of the ruling Nationalist Party by

its Parliament members in a meeting in Dhaka. The selection makes him the party's prime ministerial nominee. Formal confirmation by Parliament is expected on April 2.

SAUDI EGYPT RIFT
HARDLINE AND MODERATE Arabs broke their deadlock today and agreed to a complete economic boycott of Egypt and an eventual break in all diplomatic relations with the Anwar Sadat regime. The agreement, reached on the fifth day of often volatile negotiations, indicates that the conservative bloc led by Saudi Arabia has acceded to nearly all the hardline demands for sanctions against Sadat.

THE IDEAS PAGE

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

US govt's sway on Google deserves global vigilance.

— GLOBAL TIMES CHINA

Limits of handout politics

Congress may be talking to economists and experts. But is it listening to the voter?



RAMA BIJAPURKAR & RAJESH SHUKLA

CONGRESS PRESIDENT Rahul Gandhi's plan for a "surgical strike on poverty" is built around some key numbers: Rs 12,000, the target minimum monthly income for a household; 5 crore households (amounting to 20 per cent of all Indian households); Rs 6,000, their average monthly earning; and therefore, Rs 6,000, the monthly amount required to be transferred to each. Since his political and financial calculations hinge around these numbers, a fact check is useful, more so because neither he nor the eminent people he consulted have told us where these numbers came from.

Official government surveys measure household expenditure, not income. Hardly any robust household income study exists in India, because adopting and administering rigorous internationally prescribed measurement methodology and designing samples that effectively capture the complexity of India is tough and hellishly expensive. We know this from our own experience of doing such studies, the most recent of which was in 2016 (www.ice360.in). It gave us India's household income distribution (share of income "owned" by every 10 per cent slab of households from the richest to the poorest). Not much has happened to disrupt income distributions since then. So we were able to estimate today's income of Indian households by applying our survey income distribution to India's total household disposable income for 2018-19, a number put out by the government.

Based on our data, the good news for the Congress is Indian households are not as poor as they assume them to be. Only the poorest 10 per cent of Indian households, and not the poorest 20 per cent, earn less than Rs 12,000 per month. Their average income is Rs 9,500, not Rs 6,500 as assumed. The next richest 10 per cent earn about Rs 15,700 a month. Given decreasing family sizes, there are 30 million households in each slab, not 28 million.

To reach the target monthly income of Rs 12,000 per month, only 30 million households need a cash infusion and of only Rs 3,000 per month instead of the planned Rs 6,000. This slashes the money requirement to a quarter of what their plan assumes. Of course, the ability to identify these households, as has been pointed out several times, will need some serious work, but it is not impossible to find a set of household characteristics that act as a proxy for income.

Let us now examine the reasonableness of the minimum income target of Rs 12,000 per month. We have been tracking household surplus (households' income minus expenditure) since 1990, and find that the poorest 20 per cent have always had to spend more than they earned in order to live, and they invariably are trapped in debt. It is only the next richest 20 per cent of households that manage to have an 8 to 10 per cent surplus — still vulnerable to even slight price shocks, but mostly able to live

within their income. Householders think about their expenditure as "routine" and "non-routine" (for example, one-offs like health emergencies or social ceremonies or capitation fees for college admission in higher income groups). Households who earn Rs 9,500 per month (the average income of the poorest 10 per cent) barely cover even their routine expenditure. Households earning Rs 15,700 per month (the next richest 10 per cent) cover their routine expenditure and manage a surplus of around 10 per cent, but are in debt after their non-routine expenditure. Only the households in the rung above them achieve surpluses even after non-routine expenditure. So the midway number of Rs 12,000 to Rs 13,000 seems to be a reasonable minimum monthly income target to have.

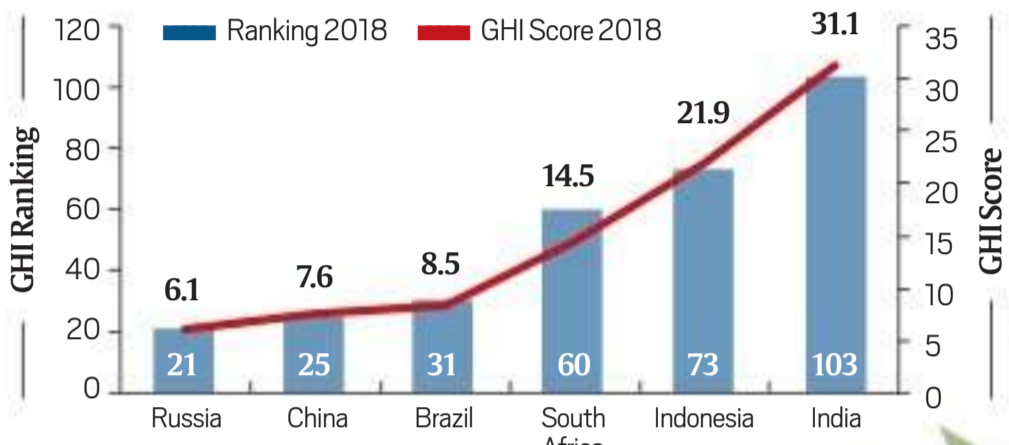
Elections, however, are not won by spread-sheet arithmetic. So we looked at the state-wise distribution of the poorest 10 per cent of households who qualify for this cash infusion. The answer is sobering: This scheme will hardly make a dent in many states. The proportion of India's poorest 10 per cent households present in a state to total households in that state is highest at 21 per cent of Jharkhand followed by 15 to 19 per cent of Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh, in that order. Surprisingly, it is only 12 per cent of UP, 13 per cent of Chhattisgarh, and 10 per cent of Rajasthan. In Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat the proportion is 5 per cent whereas it is 8 per cent of Telangana, 9 per cent of Assam, and even lower elsewhere. So in non-BJP, non-Congress states like West Bengal, Odisha, where the proportion is higher than 15 per cent, the Congress's poll proposition of MIG may fragment votes to the BJP's advantage. Expectedly, 83 per cent of the poorest 10 per cent households live in underdeveloped rural areas, 11 per cent in big towns and adjoining villages.

Beyond these facts, there is the issue of what people in an aspirational society want, something Prime Minister Narendra Modi understands better. Cash transfers are welcome, but what they desire is ways to earn more, for their children to be a part of the higher earning, better life possibilities that they see around them. If we examine the occupation of the chief wage-earner of these households, about half of them are daily-wage labourers, 30 per cent non-agricultural and 16 per cent agricultural. Surely, the Congress remembers what the BJP has forgotten: The real magic of MGNREGA was its ability to boost incomes and bargaining power by serving as a wage benchmark. Another 22 per cent are tiny farmers, and working schemes exist in some states that manage both their financial and aspiration needs. Yet another slab of 22 per cent are households living off remittances from children and rent, typically older people.

The real tragedy is the highest education level attained by any family member in these poorest 10 per cent households is primary school for 45 per cent and far less for 44 per cent. No party is addressing this. Bundling capability building for social mobility with MIG (minimum income guarantee) will be the winning formula. Having listened to economists and experts, maybe it's time to also listen to the customer-voter.

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India's ranking and score of Global Hunger Index (2018) amongst BRICS countries



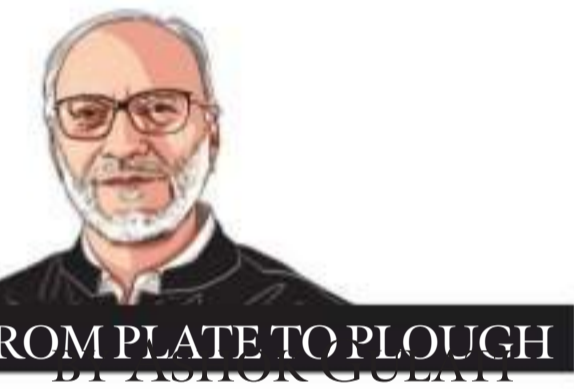
Source: 2018 Global Hunger Index



CR Sasikumar

A festival of rash promises

Both BJP's PM Kisan and Congress's Nyay acknowledge that small and marginal farmers and bottom 20 per cent of population have not benefited from current policies. But both schemes raise further questions



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

IF IT IS TIME to celebrate the biggest spectacle of democracy on this planet. About 900 million people are eligible to exercise their right — to choose their representatives to the Lok Sabha. This festival of democracy will last for about a month-and-a-half. Notwithstanding several shortcomings of democracy, it works better than dictatorships or centralised communist regimes. China may have done better when it comes to economic growth, but can Indians accept the one-child nor can that China enforced between 1981 and 2016. Can there be open dissent in China's media about its government's policies as we have in Indian media channels? The obvious answer is no. We can accept a lower growth rate of 7 per cent per annum, compared to China's 9-10 per cent, but cannot compromise on democracy, no matter how messy it is.

But a political system must lead to policies that improve people's welfare. The state's first duty is to provide security to lives and property of people. Next, it must eliminate poverty, hunger, and malnutrition. While we feel proud of what India has achieved in road construction but much worse in agriculture performance — agri-GDP grew 2.9 per cent per annum as compared to 4.3 per cent under UPA 2. Over a longer period, since 1991, the Indian economy has attained a growth of 6.8 per cent, and the agri-GDP has grown at about 3.15 per cent. And, it is time to continue roughly at this pace unless the policy decisions are undertaken to further growth.

Since more than two-thirds of our population still lives in rural areas and their occupation is agriculture, agri-food policies are crucial to the welfare of the masses. The manifestos of political parties should be evaluated by keeping this yardstick in mind. Since the mid-1960s, when India was moving from "ship to mouth" for basic food grains, we gloat about the improvement in India's

and when people used to queue up for two hours to get two litres of milk, even in Delhi, India has come a long way. Bold, timely and rational policies undertaken by governments of the day — the Congress, BJP or coalition governments — brought about the Green Revolution (wheat and rice), White Revolution (milk), Red Revolution (meat, especially poultry), Blue Revolution (fisheries), Golden Revolution (fruits and vegetables), Gene Revolution (cotton) and so on. India is the largest exporter of rice, buffalo meat and the second largest exporter of cotton. Overall, it is a net exporter of agri-produce — although in the last five years, agri-export surplus has come down significantly. Those who say that they have done more in the last five years than the Congress in 55 years only reveal their arrogance and ignorance of India's history. Surely, some governments do better than the predecessors in some respect or the other, but they also do worse. If we compare the NDA's performance with UPA 2, the former comes out better in road construction but much worse in agriculture performance — agri-GDP grew 2.9 per cent per annum as compared to 4.3 per cent under UPA 2. Over a longer period, since 1991, the Indian economy has attained a growth of 6.8 per cent, and the agri-GDP has grown at about 3.15 per cent. And, it is time to continue roughly at this pace unless the policy decisions are undertaken to further growth.

No temple is a place of worship, if it does not serve continually as a sign and site for man's on-going, never-ending search for God. If and when this inward reality changes, a temple becomes a monument. 'Believers' may swell. Priests may ply rites and rituals. But it's no longer, spiritually, a temple. A communitarian meeting place? An identity marker? A sign of religious splendour and ascendancy? Sure; but not, in truth, a place of worship.

ranking (77th) in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index, we don't want to talk about India's hunger index ranking, which is the real indicator of people's welfare. That reflects the elitist biases in our politics and policy-making. Can any political party promise in its manifesto that in the next five — or even 10 — years, that India's GHI ranking will improve so that the country is among the top 50 countries, if not 25? That will require a major shift in policies.

It is in this context that we look at what Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Congress president Rahul Gandhi have recently announced as direct income support (DIS) to certain sections of society. While PM Modi has announced Rs 6,000 per year per farm family (owning upto 2 ha) under the PM-KISAN scheme, costing roughly Rs 75,000 crore to the exchequer, Rahul Gandhi has promised a Rs 72,000 per family per year support for the bottom 20 per cent (5 crore) of the population, through NYAY, which may cost the exchequer nearly Rs 3.6 lakh crore. Both these policies, in a way, acknowledge that small and marginal farmers as well as the bottom 20 per cent of the population have not benefited from the current set of policies as much as they should have. These, then, are desperate attempts to get votes.

Both schemes are supposed to be add-ons to the existing subsidy schemes. Both schemes beg the question: From where will the resources come and how will the potential beneficiaries be identified? There are no fool-proof lists about incomes of people — even land records of farmers.

Solutions are not easy. Much groundwork is required before such schemes can be effectively rolled out. But who has the time? It is time to promise the moon and then go scot-free without fulfilling promises.

It is here that the media has a national obligation to ask tough questions to political leaders and educate voters to make better choices.

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VIEW FROM THE NEIGHBOURHOOD



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

REFUGEE RELOCATION

MOHAMMAD ZAMAN WRITES a measure of the overwhelming preference is to remain in Bangladesh, which is a safe haven for the refugees, and is not too far from the Myanmar border. The proximity to Cox's Bazar, is not too far from the Bangladesh government's decision to relocate approximately 1,00,000 Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char — a remote, uninhabited island, about a three to four hour long boat ride away from the mainland. Pointing out that such random relocation camps globally... The dispersal and relocation to Bhasan Char or other alternatives set-refugees, he writes, "The relocation of 100,000 refugees, only one-tenth of the population in Cox's Bazar, is not a solution to ease congestion or overcrowding in the camps as claimed by the government. It may potentially complicate refugee repatriation and resettlement. Even if dispersal and resettlement was required to lessen the pressure on the squalid settlements in the camps, why relocate such a huge number of refugee population to an inaccessible and physically hostile environment on a remote island in the Bay of Bengal?" He acknowledges the fact that the government has made an effort to show that it would aim "to redefine access to refugees, via videos, where they are headed, shelter, clothing, health and education and the pros and cons. However, he says, "they seem to have no intention of moving to the distant and isolated char in the Bay of Bengal." Instead, he says, an increase in the amount of money the

state intends to spend on underprivileged segments of society — from Rs 80bn to Rs 120bn by 2020." The editorial recognises the soundness of the decision but, it says, "The problem is with the path forward." The editorial reminds readers that, "In the past, too, we have heard the prime minister speak about stunting in children and malnutrition, and the distribution of poultry as income support for low-income households." However, it adds, "To date, there is scant evidence that much has been done to follow up on these announcements. To earnestly improve access to food, shelter, clothing, health and education, far more than constitutional amendments will be required." The editorial claims that to get such initiatives off the ground, the first thing required would be "numbers in parliament to make this amendment to the constitution". But it is quick to point out how, "Given the kind of relationship that Mr Khan and his government have with the opposition parties, this looks like a challenging task."

NEPAL AMENDS SERVICE RULES

An editorial in *The Himalayan Times* takes a look at the Nepal government's decision,

taken last week in a cabinet meeting, to amend their Civil Service Rules. The new amendment, which would allow families of civil servants who die while serving the government to claim the complete amount, will also have a retrospective effect: Families of those who've died before the rules were amended, can also claim full pension amount. But the editorial gives context to why such an amendment has been pushed: "The new provision is being introduced to benefit the spouse of Yubraj Dahal, under-secretary at the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, who died in a chopper crash on February 27 in Taplejung. Dahal had not completed 20 years of service. It is apparent that the government is looking for options to support Dahal's family, whose financial status is weak." The editorial says that "such a decision will incur a huge financial liability to the government coffers" which, the editorial states, is already under strain. It argues that no rule or law should be changed, "simply to provide monetary benefits to someone who is close to the corridors of power." The editorial says that, "Instead of amending the Civil Service Rules, which is certain to increase additional liability to the government, ex gratia payment can be made to the affected families."

LET POOR DECIDE THE DEBATE ON Universal Basic Income (UBI) and its variants are driven by economists and politicians. The poor do not figure in the debate. The need for UBI has come to the centre stage thanks to the dominance of the elites in society, polity, and economy. These, in turn, has given rise to populism. The elites are repeating the mistake ignoring the voice of the poor.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

LET POOR DECIDE

THE DEBATE ON Universal Basic Income (UBI) and its variants are driven by economists and politicians. The poor do not figure in the debate. The need for UBI has come to the centre stage thanks to the dominance of the elites in society, polity, and economy. These, in turn, has given rise to populism. The elites are repeating the mistake ignoring the voice of the poor.

Suchak D Patel, Ahmedabad

LEADERSHIP DEFICIT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The Mueller ending' (IE, March 29). The Mueller report has exonerated US President Donald Trump from any criminal collusion with Russia during his election campaign but there are other serious charges against him. Heads of several countries today face investigations.

Deepak Singhal, Noida

KEEP ANSWERING

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Striking out questions' (IE, March 28). The achievement of our scientists is a matter of great pride for every Indian but it should not be used by the ruling dis-

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

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compensation at the Centre to insulate itself from the pressing national concerns. It must not flinch from answering burning national concerns like the agrarian distress and joblessness.

Sambhav Mishra, Delhi



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FACT CHECK, GROUND REALITY

'MUSHROOMS' ON MARS: DO THESE COUNT AS EVIDENCE OF LIFE?

A NEW study, whose findings have been widely reported including by British tabloids such as *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Express*, claims to have found "evidence" — photographs that are supposedly of mushrooms — to support the hypothesis that life exists on Mars. It has led to interest because the photographs were taken by NASA rovers Curiosity and Opportunity. However, it has also been met with skepticism, and the paper itself concedes that the evidence is not proof.



Image from Mars surface taken by Opportunity, NASA

phology, however, is not proof." Of six scientists and eight scientists who reviewed the paper, three rejected it.

Yet the paper argues that the evidence in total weighs in favour of biology.

In an article questioning the paper, the science news portal *Science Alert* referred to comments by various Reddit users, NASA's own previous findings on these objects, and remarks by the researchers themselves. One Reddit user, Zeeblecroid, wrote: "There's a community of self-proclaimed astrobiologists who use the same crackpot tricks (mostly misrepresenting mundane photos of basic geological features as hard evidence of life) and have been for decades."

Science Alert refers to a NASA post in which the NASA images being lifeforms. It claims that a significant majority agreed "there is a high probability fungi and lichens may have colonized the Red Planet".

Is it proof?

The paper states: "Nevertheless, much of the evidence remains circumstantial and unverified, and the possibility of life on Mars remains an open question." At another point, it states: "Similarity in mor-

ISIS loses ground but little else

How decisive a blow was the fall of the last ISIS village in Syria? A three-time Pulitzer Prize finalist and multiple award-winning journalist, currently foreign correspondent with *The New York Times*, draws on her experience covering ISIS to explain how far the loss of territory will restrict the group, but stresses that it continues to exist. She was interviewed by NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN



RUKMINI CALLIMACHI

How important was territory to the IS, and what does the loss of that territory mean for it?

ISIS has been in Iraq since the 2000s. For a long time it held no territory at all. But it was a no less deadly or destructive force then. In many ways, the Caliphate period is an anomaly, an outlier if you look at the arc of the group's history. Starting in 2014, it took large swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria, and that was the time when it declared itself the Caliphate. At one time, it was literally the size of Great Britain.

It collected taxes from millions of people and that allowed them to become the world's richest terrorist group. It used that safe haven to make a number of innovations including learning how to manufacture their own weapons, their own rockets and mortars. That made it self-sufficient. So territory was crucial to the height they reached as a terrorist organisation.

The loss of territory means they no longer have the ability to collect taxes, they no longer have the most visible symbol of their brand which allowed them to recruit tens of thousands of foreign fighters.

But ISIS lives on and today it is much stronger than it was in 2011, when American troops pulled out of Iraq and the group was considered defeated. At that point, CIA estimated that the group had just 700 fighters. Now according to General Joseph Votel [the top US general overseeing military operations in the Middle East], it has tens of thousands of fighters, and is present as a physical insurgency in Iraq and Syria and remains as deadly and as destructive a terrorist force as it was.

When I was in Syria in February [to report on the battle to liberate Baghuz, the last piece of land under ISIS control], we had to travel 100 miles over a highway that had been liberated years ago to reach Baghuz. And yet every week, there are ambushes and IED attacks on that road by ISIS. My driver was more scared to drive that highway that had been liberated than he was of going to the frontline in Baghuz.

When the coalition forces liberate an area, there's a honeymoon period when ISIS fighters retreat, and there are no attacks. But after coalition forces withdraw, it becomes an area of insecurity, it becomes an area that is under threat from the ISIS. They may not be able to hold a city, but they threaten a city; they may not be able to hold a road, but they threaten a road.

In December of 2017, the Prime Minister of Iraq declared ISIS had been defeated. In just the 10 months since then, there have been over 1,270 attacks in Iraq.

What reaction from ISIS can we expect to this loss? A regrouping to take back territory? Is it capable of that? Or does it decide now that it is far easier to be an amorphous organisation with members, franchises all across the world?

In the way people seem to think about ISIS, there is this dichotomy — that ISIS is either territory, or it is an idea in people's heads. That misses the piece in between. ISIS continues to exist as a physical insurgency, in Iraq and Syria.

It has lost its territory but it still has thousands of ISIS fighters just in Iraq and Syria. And that's not counting their presence out-



US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces fighters stand guard on men evacuated out of Baghuz village in Syria in February. AP/File



side Iraq and Syria. ISIS's Khorasan province, its province in East Asia in the Philippines, ISIS's West Africa province, are not ideas in the heads of people. These are groups that are robust on the ground and there is enough evidence to suggest that there is connective tissue between the affiliates and ISIS's core group in Iraq and Syria.

A claim of an attack in Afghanistan put up by ISIS's affiliate uses the same template as a claim of attack by ISIS in Iraq or Syria. That shows that ISIS is at a minimum coordinating the media output of its far-flung branches.

Where is ISIS strongest now outside of Iraq and Syria?

ISIS's presence is strong and growing in Afghanistan, in the Philippines and in West Africa. Anecdotally we are seeing evidence of some foreign fighters travelling to these outposts instead of Iraq and Syria, suggesting a pattern. The estimates we have in Afghanistan is that they have 2,500 fighters, according to a recent United Nations report. They are present from Nangarhar to Kunar and Kabul.

Where is all the money that ISIS collected?

No one really knows, but some of the ISIS operatives that were caught fleeing ISIS's last territory in Syria were carrying huge amounts of cash, like \$20,000. There are also reports that ISIS has invested some of its cash in local businesses.

And where is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and how strong is his hold over ISIS now?

No one really knows where Baghdadi is but the working theory is that he is somewhere in Iraq and Syria. He is the Caliph of the Islamic State, and he is the person to whom

every fighter pledges his allegiance and so he remains an important symbol for the group.

Is it correct that ISIS not been able to grow in Afghanistan because of a pushback from the Taliban? And in a situation where the Taliban may well be in power in Kabul, are governments now dependent on the Taliban to keep Daesh out of Afghanistan?

I am surprised that you think ISIS has not grown in Afghanistan. Remember, in 2011, according to the CIA there were only around 700 ISIS fighters in Iraq. There are several multiples of that in Afghanistan today. The Taliban and ISIS are groups that are at odds, and the Taliban has been fighting ISIS for some time. This is not a new development.

What about India? The country has the third largest Muslim population in the world, yet it has managed to keep ISIS down to less than 100. Do you think in its post-territory phase, ISIS would be looking at India?

India is in many ways an example of countering radicalisation. You have close to 200 million Muslims and less than 100 persons have travelled to join the group in Iraq and Syria. Compare that to Tajikistan, a country that has a Muslim population of 9 million. And over 1,300 of them have travelled to join ISIS.

There have been of late numerous acts of violence against Muslims in India as well as the BJP rhetoric against Islam — which creates fertile ground for radicalisation, but to me the low numbers clearly point to the fact that despite the difficulties, the country still seems to be doing something right. It speaks to the plurality of your society that the ISIS message has not seeped down.

There have been frequent arrests of ISIS suspects...

There were media reports of arrests made late last year [in December] and though I have not read the intelligence reports on that, the plot had a sophistication that suggested that the Khorasan province must be looking at India.

You have written about how the so-called lone wolves arrested in India in 2016 were not really so, but were being mentored and guided extensively down to arranging weapons by their online recruiters.

The style of the attacks that were being

plotted in Hyderabad was entirely remote-controlled, by ISIS operatives based abroad. That style of attack seems to have been contingent on a safe haven in the Islamic State somewhere in Syria. It was a low-risk, low-cost manoeuvre. How the loss of territory affects that kind of operation, we have yet to see. We have evidence that they have moved resources to Khorasan and Libya. Is the remote-controlled style of attacks going to find another safe haven somewhere else?

There is also the Rohingya issue which must be attractive to ISIS...

ISIS is always pushing a narrative of Muslim victimhood, but one of the ironies is that their message has been most receptive amongst Muslims that have experienced little or no discrimination themselves. Take Huzaifah, the Canadian recruit profiled in Caliphate, who explains that he and his family were treated well in Canada, and yet he decided to join the group. By contrast, Muslim communities that have experienced real trauma and true discrimination have been almost immune to ISIS recruitment. I do not know of a single Rohingya Muslim that has joined ISIS and the number of Uighur Muslims from China that have joined ISIS are minuscule.

This is where I think ISIS propaganda falls flat. So while the Rohingya and the Uighurs are experiencing great suffering and hardship, I have not seen anything to suggest that ISIS has made any real inroads there.

How serious is the ISIS threat in Kashmir? There have been ISIS flags on occasion, but also the feeling that Daesh does not pose a threat in Kashmir...

In most of the countries that have had an ISIS attack, local authorities initially deny the ISIS presence. Take Bangladesh. The attack at the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka was by the Islamic State and we know this because as the attack was ongoing, the militants were able to send photos from inside the venue directly to ISIS's central media apparatus. The wholesale denial of ISIS's role by Bangladesh, even though the attackers were posting in real time on ISIS's official media, is just ludicrous. On the Telegram chatrooms that I am in — these are authentic ISIS chatrooms — I have seen the ISIS flag being displayed in Kashmir. While the extent of ISIS's support in the Valley is unclear and the amount of coordination they have with ISIS's central organisation is unknown, I think denying the presence outright would not be correct.

THIS WORD MEANS

DESERT KANGAROO RAT

... Whose ninja kick proved too much for rattlesnake

A SERIES of videos recently gone viral, shot with high-speed cameras and played in slow motion, show a tiny rodent, desert kangaroo rat, using acrobatic jumps and high-flying "ninja kicks" to evade strikes by a sidewinder rattlesnake. The desert kangaroo rat, or *Dipodomys deserti*, is one of several species of kangaroo rat native to western North America. The videos were shot in Arizona and were part of a study, published in *Functional Ecology*, that tracked interactions between radio-implanted sidewinder rattlesnakes (*Crotalus cerastes*) and kangaroo rats.



www.nps.gov

Desert kangaroo rats are barely a foot long and weigh a little more than 100g when full grown but can jump up to 9ft at speeds up to 10ft/s, or 10kph. The acrobatics in its erratic jumps, along with kicks to the rattlesnake's head and at times the sand it flung into the predator's face, helped it survive on several occasions. However, not every specimen studied made it. Out of 32 strikes by 13 rattlesnakes, 15 resulted in bites. Of the 15 bitten kangaroo rats, 8 survived and 7 were eaten by the rattlesnakes. Of the 17 misses, 6 were inaccurate strikes while the other 11 were accurate strikes but missed due to the kangaroo rat being able to move out of the way. These 11 strikes break up further into 7 kangaroo rats leaping out of the way, and 4 contorting their bodies in a way that the snake could not make contact.

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C-sec in India: twice as frequent in 10 yrs, growth twice as fast as world's

ABANTIKA GHOSH
 NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

A STUDY in *JAMA Network Open* throws the spotlight on the rapid growth of caesarean section births in India. French scientists analyse Indian data from National Family Health Surveys, District-Level Household Surveys and Annual Health Survey, and conclude that the proportion of C-sec births has doubled in a decade, and that India's annual increase rate is almost twice the global rate.

Call for monitoring

"The proportion of births delivered by cesarean delivery has increased especially fast during the last decade in India, reaching 17.2% in 2010 to 2016 according to the NFHS-4 survey. This level is already higher than that observed in some industrialized countries in Europe such as the Netherlands or Finland. The emerging situation also points to significant regional and sex dis-

parities, with a substantial deficit of cesarean deliveries among underprivileged groups and almost 2 million excess cesarean births every year among more advanced sections of the population. The need to monitor the further progression of cesarean rates is urgent," the paper states.

The researchers list changes in lifestyles, commercial pressure, and cultural factors as some of the plausible explanations for the rise. At the same time, they highlight the importance of making both women and medical professionals aware why C-Sec is not a commercial or lifestyle choice but a medical one.

The numbers

India's annual birth rate is 2.64 crore per year. The paper flags the growth in C-sec rate to 17.2%, which is above the World Health Organization's recommendation. In a statement in 2015, WHO said: "Since 1985, the international healthcare community has considered the 'ideal rate' for caesarean sections to be between 10% and 15%. New

THE GROWTH

Survey	Ref.Period	C-sec rate
NFHS-1	1992-1993	2.9%
NFHS-2	1994-1999	7.1%
DLHS-2	2000-2004	8.0%
NFHS-3	2001-2006	8.5%
DLHS-3	2004-08	9.2%
NFHS-4	2010-2016	17.2%

Source: JAMA Network Open

studies reveal that when caesarean section rates rise towards 10% across a population, the number of maternal and newborn deaths decreases. But when the rate goes above 10%, there is no evidence that mortality rates improve." If caesarean rates are below 5% in population, WHO suggests it indicates a problem in healthcare access.

The new study says the current caesarean

rate corresponds to an estimated 4.38 million births per year between 2010-16. The change during the last decade corresponds to an annual rate of increase of 7%, almost twice the rate observed in the world, it says. While China had 5.3 million cesarean births in 2008-2014, the cesarean rate is reportedly contracting. In a matter of years, the study estimates, India will become home to the largest number of cesarean births.

NFHS-4 data show an institutional and regional skew — 40.9% of babies in private hospitals are born through C-sec as compared to 11.9% of those born in government hospitals. The C-sec figures range from 87.1% of deliveries in private hospitals of urban Tripura (against 36.4% in government sector) to 25.3% of private hospitals in urban Haryana (10.7% in government). In Tripura, the overall government-private gap was 73.7% to 18.1%.

The choice

Public health experts the world over agree that C-secs save lives. Yet last year,

WHO released a document underscoring its concern about rising C-section rates, while there remains a section of women who do not get it when they need it. "Caesarean birth is associated with short- and long-term risks that can extend many years beyond the current delivery and affect the health of the woman, the child and future pregnancies. These risks are higher in women with limited access to comprehensive obstetric care. Caesarean sections are also costly, and high rates of unnecessary caesarean sections can therefore pull resources away from other essential health services," WHO said.

In 2011, the UK National Institute For Health And Care Excellence listed a set of guidelines. Among the conditions listed as warranting a C-sec are multiple pregnancies, premature birth, and when there is a risk of mother to child transmission of infection.

Behind the growth

Caesarean packages can range between Rs 9,000 (approved rate under Ayushman

Bharat -PMJAY) to well over a lakh in some of the swankier hospitals. That is why C-secs under PMJAY can be reimbursed only if they happen in government hospitals or are pre-authorised by the competent authority to be carried out in a private hospital.

Doctors often say that a non-medical C-sec decision is taken at the behest of the mother or the family. There are also mothers who want their babies to be born on a particular day or a particular time, leading to a C-sec. There are others who are reluctant to go through protracted labour and want to get it over quickly.

According to a paper by the International Union for Scientific Study of Population: "... Unnecessary caesareans generate higher expenditure at individual and national levels and have the potential to divert human and financial resources from higher priority intervention... In 2008, the cost of the global excess/unnecessary C-section delivery was estimated approximately \$2.32 billion."