

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

MGNREGA TO NYAY

Congress manifesto should have promised better implementation of MGNREGA instead of another scheme

IN ITS PREVIOUS ruling stint in New Delhi, the Congress's flagship social welfare programme was MGNREGA, which provides 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. For its next shot at power, the grand old party is promising to implement a minimum income support programme called NYAY. For all its drawbacks — from the quality of assets built to not providing work when needed and delayed wage payments — MGNREGA's inherent appeal has been its self-targeting mechanism of beneficiary selection. Since the better-off would ordinarily refrain from participating, the programme has largely benefited the needy. MGNREGA's utility was demonstrated in 2009-10, a drought year, when 283.59 crore person-days of employment was generated and the average household got 53.91 days of work. Those numbers dropped to 166.21 crore person-days and 40.17 days in 2014-15, the first year of the Narendra Modi government. But to the latter's credit, both asset quality (usefulness and durability) and money reaching the intended beneficiaries (through electronic transfer of wages into their Aadhaar-seeded bank accounts) have improved significantly under it.

NYAY, by contrast, offers no advantage of self-targeting. The Congress manifesto has, instead, promised to transfer Rs 72,000 every year to the country's 5 crore poorest families constituting a fifth of its population. The eligibility of beneficiaries here will ostensibly be based on administrative targeting, which is prone to both exclusion and inclusion errors. Moreover, the poor may not always remain poor, just as the person who isn't in the bottom 20 per cent today could well slip into that tomorrow. These issues aren't there in MGNREGA, where the person ceasing to be needy will simply stop seeking work under the programme. Given that the Congress can lay claim to MGNREGA as its baby, the focus ought to have been more on making it a genuinely demand-driven scheme. On paper, beneficiaries are to get work within 15 days of application, failing which they are entitled to an unemployment allowance. Disbursement of wages, too, is supposed to happen within 15 days of the work getting done. Rather than promising to implement these already-existing operational guidelines and providing sufficient budgetary resources for MGNREGA, the manifesto has committed to yet another entitlement scheme.

Identification complications and associated scope for corruption apart, NYAY is going to be fiscal challenging: No Congress leader has given a credible answer to how, and from where, the Rs 3,60,000-crore annual fund requirement for it will come. More persuasive would have been a pledge to secure "nyay" (justice) for MGNREGA by ensuring that it is not underfunded.

TIMED OUT

TikTok causes concern with familiar social media problem of promoting extreme behaviour. Answer is oversight, not a ban

THE MADRAS HIGH Court has asked the government to ban the video-sharing platform, TikTok, for encouraging pornography and possibly exposing children to predators. They're late to the party. Indonesia banned the platform for precisely the same reasons last year, plus blasphemy, but revoked it when TikTok instituted a team to screen Indonesian content. About the same time, Bangladesh blocked access to the service. Chinese media watchdogs took it to task for "unacceptable" content and this year, they threatened to punish the promoter, ByteDance, for violating guidelines. A survey in the UK had suggested that one in 10 children on TikTok had faced inappropriate behaviour. And this year, the Madras High Court has been approached with concerns of cyberbullying, explicit content and deepfakes. Despite the bad press, TikTok is one of the most popular social apps, offering the curious attraction of being able to perform for strangers.

TikTok is to video what Twitter is to text. Users compose 15-second acts instead of 280-character messages, and post in search of world fame. Therein lies both the utility and the weakness of such networks. Like its text equivalent, TikTok is a great equaliser, allowing talents without access to traditional networks to break the surface, and amplifying voices disadvantaged by history, geography or economics. But being focused on younger people, including schoolchildren, TikTok is perceived to bear more moral liability than Twitter or Instagram. The fault lies with the business model driving all of social media, which rewards controversial behaviour and exhibitionism with digital clicks, likes and follows which translate into real power and money. Extreme behaviour is rewarded, and children are generally less cautious than adults. And it is not only a question of the content that children are exposed to, but also the purchasing choices that they are nudged towards, an important issue as younger people are beginning to buy directly off social network promotions.

TikTok's little setback in India is a sliver of a larger issue: The double-edged nature of social media. Twitter and Facebook powered both the hope represented by the Arab Spring and the betrayal of democracy in the Cambridge Analytica scandal. The answer to TikTok is not the ban that the Madras High Court has called for, but the Indonesian strategy of nudging the company to institute an effective screening mechanism. As social media companies flounder to contain problematic content, governments should insist that they screen user content more diligently.



CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT

TRUTH USED TO be a major concern in India's public sphere. The word was part of ideological "brands", ranging from the title of the book by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (founder of the Arya Samaj), Satyarth Prakash (The Light of Truth), to the name of Jyotirao Phule's Satyashodhak Samaj (The Truth Seekers Society) and the title of another book, Mahatma Gandhi's "The Story of My Experiments with Truth". One hundred years later, untruth has become pervasive, banal and the new normal. Last month, a Microsoft report revealed that "India has more fake news than any other country in the world". The ruling party, whose responsibility it is to be a role model, contributes to this state of things, by action or omission.

By omission, because the propagation of wrong information sometimes reflects a lack of historical culture. Recently, for instance, it was claimed (1) that the UPA was responsible for the liberation of Masood Azhar, who, in fact, was handed over to the Pakistani authorities by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, (2) that Jawaharlal Nehru was PM when Pakistan attacked in 1965, whereas Lal Bahadur Shastri was at the helm of government and (3) that, according to Arun Jaitley, Nehru initiated political dynasticism by appointing Indira to the same position, whereas Nehru had made it clear, long before he died, that the Congress would decide who takes over from him — and that was Shastri.

But ignorance of history is not the only reason why wrong pieces of information are circulating. Disinformation is also a way to discredit opponents. For at least five years, trolls have spread canards, including photoshopped pictures, (1) of Rajiv and Rahul Gandhi at the funeral of Abdul Ghaffar Khan in Kabul in 1988, claiming that they were burying Indira Gandhi the Muslim way, (2) of Ashok Gehlot waving Pakistan's flag, (3) of "Rohingya eating Hindus"... The list is so long that websites have specialised in exposing this travesty of reality. Attempts at controlling communication have resulted in a record number of internet shutdowns in 2018, with Rajasthan being second only to J&K, where security reasons have been invoked for these suspensions.

Thirdly, truth sometimes cannot prevail because data are doctored or concealed. Besides the controversy about the growth rate of India under the Manmohan Singh govern-

Targeting facts

Ignorance of history and disinformation campaigns shrink the possibilities of genuine debate ahead of polls

ment compared to the present one, the evaluation of joblessness is a case in point. Two months ago, a NSSO report was revealed by the media, showing that the unemployment rate, at more than 6 per cent, was the highest since 1972-73. The NITI Aayog vice-chairman contested these figures which were not released officially. The government's decision not to publish the job data led the acting chief of the National Statistical Commission to resign. Incidentally, the most reliable source, the NSSO Employment-Unemployment Survey, supposed to take place every five years, was postponed in 2016 and the Labour Bureau Survey is not available beyond this date either. It is not as rich as the National Sample Survey anyway. For instance, religion and caste are not systematically factored in. These variables are also missing, now, in other statistical compilations. In 2015, the Modi government decided to no longer make public the percentage of Muslims in the Indian police, which amounted to rescinding an innovation introduced by the Vajpayee government in 1999. Similarly, since 2014, the National Crime Records Bureau is not taking the caste and religion of the jail inmates into account — the 2013 data, the last available, showed a substantial over-representation of SCs/STs and Muslims in Indian prisons.

Data reflects a degradation of the job market that is especially disturbing so far as young Indians are concerned. This trend is partly explained by another set of data about investment, independently provided by the CMIE. This organisation has shown that investments, in 2018, in the "ended December quarter fell to a 14-year-low". A very telling graph shows "private sector investment stalling near all-time high". What went wrong? An election campaign is the right time for reviewing policies and mechanisms of accountability.

Sometimes, independent sources tell the truth, like the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy. In its last report on unemployment in India, the CMIE showed that if the unemployed who are "willing to work but inactive in seeking jobs" are taken into account, the unemployment rate is 7.87 per cent, if they are not, 5.67 per cent. While these data are in tune with the NSSO's, the CMIE shows more, that the last rate — the one we will retain — conceals immense variations.

In terms of education, the more educated are more badly affected by unemployment. The rate increases from 1.27 per cent for the uneducated, to 3.39 per cent for the 6th-9th standard pass, to 8.89 per cent for the 10th-12th standard and 12 per cent for the graduates and post-graduates. Similarly, there are huge disparities age-wise: The unemployment rate peaks at 38.34 per cent for the 15-19 year-olds and reaches 27.27 per cent for the 20-24 year-olds. These two categories are even more badly affected in the urban context where the respective rates are 43.17 per cent

and 32.59 per cent. Last but not least, while some regional variations are spectacular, many rich states are below average, including Haryana, where the urban youth is dramatically affected by joblessness: 67 per cent of the 20-24 year-olds are looking for a job in this state where the unemployment rate among urbanites is above 17 per cent. In Gujarat, where the average unemployment rate is low (4.8 per cent), the young people are also struggling: 22 per cent of them are job-seekers.

These data reflect a degradation of the job market that is especially disturbing so far as young Indians are concerned. This trend is partly explained by another set of data about investment, independently provided by the CMIE. This organisation has shown that investments, in 2018, in the "ended December quarter fell to a 14-year-low". A very telling graph shows "private sector investment stalling near all-time high". What went wrong? An election campaign is the right time for reviewing policies and mechanisms of accountability. But in contrast to the 2014 election campaign, public debates on the past term are not taking off, partly because of paucity of information for assessing the policies, such as Make in India and Skill India.

Five years ago, a famous line was "The Nation Wants to Know". Today, it seems that, even if it wanted to know, it cannot. In a parliamentary democracy, statutory committees may be alternative channels of communication — especially when press conferences are out of question. The Estimates Committee and the Public Accounts Committee, which should be accountable only to parliament, may recover some room for manoeuvre and freedom of expression after the Lok Sabha elections. For the moment, some academics and some media try to make a genuine debate happen, besides the Opposition whose agenda is inevitably more politics — than policy-oriented. But can such a debate take place in an atmosphere of general disinformation where facts are systematically targeted?

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IN GOOD FAITH
KHALID ALVI

WHILE MOST associate Holi with a Hindu ethos, even a cursory glance through the pages of history reveals otherwise. Holi always falls in the month of March, which in the Mughal era fell close on the heels of another significant festival, Navroz. Over time, both the festivals became twins.

The Mughals were known to be liberal and openly enjoyed celebrating Indian festivals. Historian Zakaullah writes that Babur was so wonderstruck when he saw Holi celebrations where people were splashing around in a pool of coloured water that he followed suit and filled a pool with his favourite coloured liquid — wine. Abul Fazal writes in *Ain-e-Akbari* that Akbar used to start collecting beautiful squirts and syringes of different sizes throughout the year in anticipation. This was one of the rare occasions when Akbar would come out from his fort and play Holi with even the commoners. *Tuzk-e-Jahangir* mentions that Jahangir played Holi actively and organised musical gatherings.

Shajahan would watch the Holi celebrations from the *Jharoka* of Red Fort. He also gave it the name *Eid-e-Gulabi* (the festival of colour), *Jashn-e-Aab-Pashi* (the festival of spraying water). During Shahjahan's rule, a Holi fair was organised near what is today Rajghat which included pantomimes in

COLOURS OF POETRY

From Mughals to Sufi poets, Holi has been part of Muslim culture, literature

which jesters would imitate the king and princes and nobody took offence. Bahadur Shah Zafar went as far as making Holi the official festival of the Red Fort and patronised a new genre of Urdu poetry called Hori, which was sung on the day of Holi.

Before the Mughals, even Muslim Sufi poets had used this festive opportunity to propagate the message of brotherhood. Holi was celebrated at most Sufi monasteries. Nizamuddin Auliya, who is considered to be among the first secular theorists, advocated love for people of all faiths. He also directed his protégée to compose poetry in the language of the commoners and started celebrating Holi at his monastery. Khusrau was not only an enthusiastic Holi player but also composed verse for the occasion: *Aaj rang hai, maa ri aaj rang hai/Morey khwaja ke ghar aaj rang hai/Mohey peer payo Nijamuddin aulia/Des bides mien phiri ri, tera rang bhayo nijamuddin aulia/Aaj sajan mila morey aangan mien (Its colour today, my mother its colour today, My beloved is found in my own yard).*

This tradition of celebrating Holi became such an integral part of Sufi culture that even today, a ritual "rang" is observed on the last day of the annual celebrations at every shrine.

The tales of elaborate Holi celebrations abound as much in Lucknow as they do in Delhi. Nawab Saadat Ali Khan and Asifuddaula would spend crores on Holi celebrations. The participating nautch girls, singers, prostitutes

and courtiers were famously rewarded with gold coins and velvet cloth.

The references to Holi are innumerable in Urdu poetry. Almost no important Urdu poet, from Khusrau to Sahir Ludhyanvi, left this topic untouched. Nazeer Akbarabadi, who is hailed as an enthusiastic ambassador of Hindu culture, composed eight long poems about Holi. Shah Niaz, a Sufi and a poet, was a contemporary of Nazeer. He wrote: *Hori hoye rahi hai Ahmad geo ke duwar/ Hazrat Ali ke rang bano hai Hasan Husain khilar. Shah Niaz* (Holi is being played at the gate of Prophet Mohammad, Ali has brought colours, Husain and Hasan are playing).

Qayam, an 18th century poet, has famously depicted the real naughtiness of Holi. His importance can be understood through Ghalib's acknowledgement of Qayam as his *Ustad*. In his long poem *Chandpur ki Holi*, Qayam paints a scene of an inebriated Maulvi who has forgotten his way to the mosque. This is the state of people on Holi. People from all spheres of life whether pious or habitual drinkers, celebrate together and indulge in mud-slinging. It makes everyone equal and free. Qayam ends his poem with a prayer: *Ilahi hai jab takke ye shor ho alam mien/Holi seybaqasar* (O God let the festivity of Holi survive till the world does).

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FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



APRIL 8, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

BILLA, RANGA TO DIE
JASBIR SINGH ALIAS Billa and Kuljit Singh alias Ranga were sentenced to death by hanging for the murder of Geeta Chopra, 17 and Sanjay Chopra, 15 Chopra on August 26 last year. The overcrowded courtroom cheered as soon as the additional district and sessions judge, MK Chawla, announced the death sentence. Shouts of "phansi ho gai" rang through the crowded corridors of the first floor court room as the message was passed from person to person till even the huge crowd collected outside the court was aware of it. Pronouncing the sentence, the judge said the "ends of justice would only be met if the two accused are put to

eternal sleep, thereby allowing the others in peace".

IRAN EX-PM SHOT
THE FORMER IRANIAN prime minister, Amir Abbas Hoveida, was executed by an Islamic firing squad in Teheran. An Islamic court found Hoveida guilty of all charges of being "a corrupt element on earth, responsible for spreading corruption, and treason to Iran". The firing squad immediately carried out the death sentence after the revolutionary court passed its verdict. Hoveida, in his last defence, reportedly said he was "used as a front" by the deposed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and requested forgiveness from

all those prosecuted as political prisoners during his 13-year prime ministership.

BHUTTO AFTERMATH
ONE DEATH was confirmed as rioting and arson to protest the hanging of former prime minister Z A Bhutto continued for the second day in Pakistan. Unconfirmed reports said two to four others might have died. The police appeared to have the situation under control in Islamabad but was pressed hard in Lahore. Rioters set fire to 17 vehicles, four gasoline stations and at least three public buildings. Disturbances were reported in more than a dozen neighbourhoods of Karachi.

THE IDEAS PAGE

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Just when it seemed that democracy was all but dead in Turkey, voters delivered a sharp electoral rebuke to their authoritarian president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan."
— THE NEW YORK TIMES

Digital is no panacea

We are asking students to eat digital cake in lieu of the unavailable basic bread



ANURAG MEHRA

POLICY MAKERS seem to be drowning in a sea of buzzwords. This tendency seems particularly marked in "digital" initiatives. Digital, it seems, is the ultimate panacea for every problem. Our classrooms — in schools and universities — will soon be adorned with "digital boards". These boards "will work on emerging technologies including Machine Learning (ML), Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Data Analytics and provide 'Intelligent Tutoring' to students based on their personal requirements." ("Over 1.5 lakh schools to get digital boards under scheme," IE, February 20) The deployment of this technology is expected to improve the quality of teaching-learning and also ensure that graduates are no longer "unsuitable for the requirements of the society and market". That sounds quite a lot for a digital board to achieve.

It is not even clear what this technology is because another report on "Operation Digital Board" says that these "digital or smart boards will be in the form of TV monitors, computers or projectors with user interfaces." An estimated 7,000 to 1,00,000 crore will be needed over three years, and apparently, all blackboards, in government and government-aided institutions, will be replaced by 2022.

On the face of it, why would one not welcome electronic infrastructure into educational institutions? But questions do need to be asked: Is this money well spent? Do these digital boards address some outstanding bottleneck that is affecting teaching and learning in our schools and universities? The answer to both questions is a clear no.

Consider, first, the actual problem plaguing schools. A walk through any of the Kendriya Vidyalayas (Central Schools) — which represent a segment that is "decently funded" by the central government — will reveal poor quality civil infrastructure, collapsing and in need of dire repairs. This includes rickety chairs and desks, falling and missing windows and cupboards, seeping walls and cracked floors, and often, broken blackboards. The existing state of electronic infrastructure — computers, a lone projector, a few printers — remains persistently pathetic on account of poor or zero maintenance. Even internet availability is intermittent and usually of poor quality. Then comes the problem of teacher shortage even in these schools. The data, reported publicly, indicates the severity of the problem — in some areas, the shortage is more than 50 per cent of what is sanctioned.

The state of elementary schools is even more worrisome. There are over 1 lakh schools with just one teacher. We need not even think of the state of these issues in poorer schools in urban and, of course, rural areas. These schools would be better served if their blackboards were repaired and the huge amounts of money sanc-

tioned for digital boards be channelled into developing and repairing existing infrastructure, as well as on maintaining the sparse electronic resources already available so that these do not just rot away. In this scenario, any talk of personalised adaptive learning or the use of artificial intelligence and machine learning to provide intelligent tutoring sounds somewhat like asking students to eat digital cake in lieu of the unavailable basic bread. We are still grappling with regulations that should govern digital spaces, data privacy and security — what kind of student data will be captured, who will own and regulate it? It is very likely that these devices will fall into the same state of disrepair and disuse as many of the items currently deployed in schools.

In the case of institutions of higher learning what demands is it fulfilling? The state of infrastructure in public institutions — except the top tier institutions (which already have enough digital infrastructure) — is also usually lamentable. Poorly maintained hardware, used occasionally when functional, lies around everywhere. The alleged problems of these institutions, such as outdated curricula, indifferent faculty, poor learning outcomes, lack of meaningful pedagogies, or unemployable graduates have nothing to do with digital technology bottlenecks. Faculty shortages are crippling the publicly-funded higher educational system, as well. The lack of interest, among students, in academic work arising from a conditioning produced by a combination of poor schooling, aggressive coaching and lack of appropriate jobs cannot be treated with any digital medicine.

The digital fixation now pervades so much of public policy recommendations. Witness the brouhaha over how the Aakash tablet was to revolutionise learning, and more currently, how online courses will take care of all the problems linked to outdated syllabi as well as faculty shortages. And then of course there is the constant discourse on e-learning, smart tutorials and the like, that will breathe a new life into India's educational systems. Education is not just about acquiring more and more information. What we need is more teachers and more institutions, everything else is just a supplement.

Perhaps, a culture of consultation with stakeholders can help us to get over unrealistic fixations. Evgeny Morozov, in a critique of technological solutionism, in his book, *To Save Everything, Click Here*, warns us that, "the quick fixes it peddles do not exist in a political vacuum. In promising almost immediate and much cheaper results, they can easily undermine support for the more ambitious, more intellectually stimulating, but also more demanding reform projects". For policy-makers, the most important question that must always be answered for such projects — it was asked in the context of the One-Laptop-Per-Child project — remains: "The real question isn't whether laptop programmes help students, but whether they're more effective than other programmes competing for the same money." Are we, therefore, hurting learning and teaching by diverting funds from blackboards to digital boards?

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

CHICAGO'S EXAMPLE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Lighting it up' (IE, April 5). Lori Lightfoot has been elected as Chicago's first gay African-American mayor by defeating Toni Preckwinkle, another African-American veteran Democratic politician. This is a particularly historic win, given that the voters are disillusioned with President Donald Trump's anti-black, anti-LGBTQ and anti-women rhetoric.

Sauro Dasgupta, Kolkata

SOPS AND DOLES

THIS REFERS TO the article 'More fiscal imprudence' (IE, April 4). The propensity of political parties to offer sops and doles on the eve of elections only shows that they have no stamina or ability to search for permanent solutions to the problems faced by people. Unfortunately we have got used to this tendency of our political class and do not raise our voices against them.

Tarsem Singh, Mahilpur

KNEE-JERK MEASURES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A dead end' (IE, April 5). Knee-jerk measures like shutting down a highway in Kashmir shall exacerbate the problem in the area and cause more anguish

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

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

THE WINNER RECEIVES SELECT EXPRESS PUBLICATIONS

among the inhabitants. The main objective of deploying security forces is to provide safety and promote trust and create a semblance of peace. Creating a hostile environment and a fostering an atmosphere of fear mongering has led to immense damage to the state.

Deepak Singhal, Noida

C R Sasikumar

The poverty of pedagogy

We need to question deletions and exclusions from school textbooks. We also need to see knowledge as an experience of enchantment, not an act of consumption



AVIJIT PATHAK

"SCHOOLS DO NOT merely 'process' people; they 'process' knowledge as well. They enhance and give legitimacy to particular types of cultural resources which are related to unequal economic forms" — Michael Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*

As the CBSE and the NCERT reportedly decide to delete three substantial chapters pertaining to caste from their Class IX history textbooks, it has become clear once again that it is difficult to be free from the politics of knowledge — and the construction of the "official" curriculum. Even though we are told that this deletion is aimed at doing good for the children — reducing the heavy burden of syllabus that, needless to add, causes severe stress and anxiety — the facts are not as simple as they are made out to be. Do you reduce the burden of the "high status" knowledge streams of mathematics and physics with an equally intense zeal? Or, is this yet another attempt to trivialise what is often seen as "irrelevant" in the age of techno-science and commerce — history, literature and social science?

To begin with, I must acknowledge that the NCERT textbooks which have emerged out of a critically and creatively nuanced endeavour — initiated by a team of great scholars, educationists and concerned teachers — indicate the possibility of a new beginning. Indeed, in an environment invaded by guide books and coaching centre "notes", the NCERT "project" — which follows as an outcome of the 2005 National Curriculum Framework — is a refreshing departure. The books, as I see, are written in a form that seeks to activate the imagination of the young learner, and aims at nurturing what Paulo Freire would have regarded as a "problem-posing education".

Furthermore, the chapters that have been deleted, I have no hesitation in saying, are beautiful for their ability to blend bundles of information with a conceptual/theoretical perspective. They encourage the reader to see history through, say, the eyes of the wheat farmers of the US or the opium farmers of Bengal. They also, for instance, help to understand the political history of cricket in the context of colonialism, or, for that matter, probe into the dynamics of caste, class and gender through the history of clothing. In a way, far from being a chronicle of wars and treaties, and the rise and fall of empires, history becomes the people's history. And it is always a great endeavour that evokes a sense of history among children.

However, I insist that we need to raise yet another critical question which we — leftists as well as rightists — often miss out because of our preoccupation. The preoccupation is primarily to do with the content of school knowledge rather than the actual process of dissemination and reception of these texts in the classrooms. It is in this context that I wish to make two significant points. First, I do believe it to be unfortunate that we love to equate knowledge with information: We are in a hurry, and, as a result, we burden the child with all sorts of things — mathematics, computer, history (ancient/medieval/modern), geography, physics, moral studies and even yoga. Even play, for a small child, has lost its spontaneity. We are eager to teach her counting and the alphabet through what the gift industry regards as "play".

This is like seeing knowledge as an act of consumption rather than an experience of enchantment or creative engagement with the self and the world; and it is dangerous. It kills the joy of learning. Hence, to take a hypothetical situation, even if you want to inform the child through a series of textbooks of everything that is politically correct and sanctified by the subaltern scholars, it may prove to be counterproductive — it may be felt as a "burden". Let learning be a continual process of exploration and self-discovery. There is no harm if, at the tender age of 12 or 13, the child doesn't know about Ranajit Guha or Uma Chakrabarty, so long as she is encouraged to cultivate all the faculties of learning: Reason and intuition, observation

and experience, besides a sense of wonder and the urge to question. Eventually, she would discover Birsa Munda and Savitribai Phule.

My second point is about the absolute asymmetry that prevails between these otherwise well-meaning texts and the actual practice of examinations and evaluation, that has a strong impact on the way books are read and received. For instance, the narratives implicit in these texts and the creative use of cartoons, poetry and even cinematic imageries, are ruthlessly murdered in our classrooms because the prevailing pattern of examinations compels them to glean only the "hard facts" (or bullet points) from the chapters. There is a need to evolve an instrumental/strategic relationship with the books. And, barring exceptions, the teachers, too, see these narratives (say, a story of M S Sathyu's *Garam Hawa*, or a brilliant black-and-white picture of the traumatic movement of the people during the Partition in a chapter on the making of the new nation) as just "deviations". Filling the mind of the student with mere "facts", making them hyper-conscious of "performance" that is purely quantified, and, disciplining them through a cycle of weekly tests and home assignments — all this ensures our children grow up in an environment that is pedagogically impoverished and aesthetically insensitive. Neither Gandhi's pilgrimage to Noakhali nor Pablo Neruda's poetry, nothing leaves a lasting imprint. Everything is just a piece of information to be remembered, and then forgotten after the examinations. My anxiety is that if we do nothing about the poverty of pedagogy, even the most radical texts will be destroyed in our classrooms.

It is high time we took the debate beyond merely the content of knowledge — Aurangzeb or Shivaji, Savarkar or Ambedkar, Vedic rites or Nizamuddin Auliya's verses. It is time we gave equal importance to the practice of liberating pedagogy that deconditions the mind, arouses creative imagination and cultivates a rhythmic/relaxed mode of learning.

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VIEW FROM THE NEIGHBOURHOOD



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

WAR AND LIES

"AMIDST THE FOG of war," begins *Dawn's* editorial on April 7, "the truth is often lost as propaganda is trotted out by the belligerents to confuse and demoralise their opponent." The editorial talks of the "particularly vitriolic" role the media played in whipping up jingoism and "war hysteria" in both India and Pakistan.

In the context of misinformation during the post-Pulwama crisis a report in the US publication, *Foreign Policy*, is brought up by the editorial: "Basing this claim on sources within the US defence establishment, the publication has said that all of Pakistan's F-16s were 'present and accounted for'." This admission should be sobering for the ultra-nationalist hawks in the Indian establishment as well as elements within the Indian media. It shows jingoism and war hysteria cannot always cover up the facts, which often emerge sooner or later."

The editorial, however, does not tom-tom the report and accuse India of spreading lies, etc. It does draw lessons from it: "Perhaps the lesson to be learnt from the whole post-Pulwama crisis in general, and the tale of the F-16 in particular, is that when disinformation is spread and promoted in such a toxic manner, it feeds into the larger narrative and

ends up vitiating the atmosphere. This can have grave consequences, such as dragging two nuclear-armed states close to war. Moreover, when disinformation becomes the norm, even after the crisis abates, the road towards normalisation is all the more difficult. The war clouds may have dissipated over South Asia for the moment, but the mistrust between India and Pakistan currently is at extremely high levels."

NEPAL AND CITIZENSHIP

IN NEPAL, LIKE in India, citizenship, its acquisition and the legal provisions around it seem to be a matter of much debate and contention. According to the April 5 editorial in *The Himalayan Times*, "Citizenship has always been a highly complicated issue in the country. People who have migrated to Nepal and have been living here permanently for many years find it hard to obtain citizenship due to the complicated legal provisions. The new constitution, promulgated in 2015, has clearly stated that no citizen shall be deprived of Nepali citizenship. It means all people living in Nepal have the right to acquire citizenship paper. However, the Federal Parliament, which is the sole authority to make a law on this issue, is taking much time to make the first amendment to the

Citizenship Act."

Because of the gaping legal lacunae still unaddressed by the government, "thousands of bona fide Nepali children born to parents who had obtained Nepali citizenship by birth have been deprived of the official paper essential to get enrolled in college, open a bank account, get employment, purchase land or enjoy the government services they are entitled to."

Currently, notifications by the home ministry of Nepal provide some succour. But now, according to the editorial, "the Supreme Court had also told the ministry not to execute it until a law to this effect was enacted. Hence, this circular will not wholly address the hardships faced by those children due to the absence of a law in line with the constitutional provision. The Federal Parliament must enact the law at the earliest to see that those people can acquire citizenship without any legal hurdles."

BANGLADESH RISING

THE EDITORIAL IN *The Dhaka Tribune* on April 4 asserts, in a somewhat patriotic manner, that "the number don't lie". Bangladesh's "Bangladesh's economic growth in these last few years have shown tremendous dynamism, and we could be well on our way to

becoming a powerhouse of Asia. In its latest economic report, Manila-based Asian Development Bank has assessed Bangladesh to be the fastest growing economy in the Asia-Pacific region, forecasting a robust 8% GDP growth rate for the current fiscal year," it says.

However, the editorial warns against complacency and exhorts the government and other economic actors to "keep their eye on the ball". Its advice is: "Our growth is largely attributable to strong private consumption as well as public investment in infrastructural projects, and it is important that these large-scale projects are seen through to completion without unnecessary delays. Diversifying our export basket further will increase the resilience of our exporting sector, which has been reliant mostly on our high-performing ready-made garments industry; and we should be branching out and looking more closely to the potential of leather, jute, IT, electronic goods, and other products. This comes hand in hand with training in the right skills, because Bangladesh is a country with a very large youth population, and in order to remain competitive as the world moves into a technology-based future, the government must invest in a forward-thinking, future-oriented education."



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@expressindia.com

TELLING NUMBERS

Women outlive men, maternal deaths a concern: WHO report

WOMEN OUTLIVE men everywhere, the World Health Organization (WHO) said recently while releasing its World Health Statistics Overview 2019. "Whether it's homicide, road accidents, suicide, cardiovascular disease — time and time again, men are doing worse than women," the United Nations quoted the WHO report's main author, Dr Richard Cihulskis, as saying.

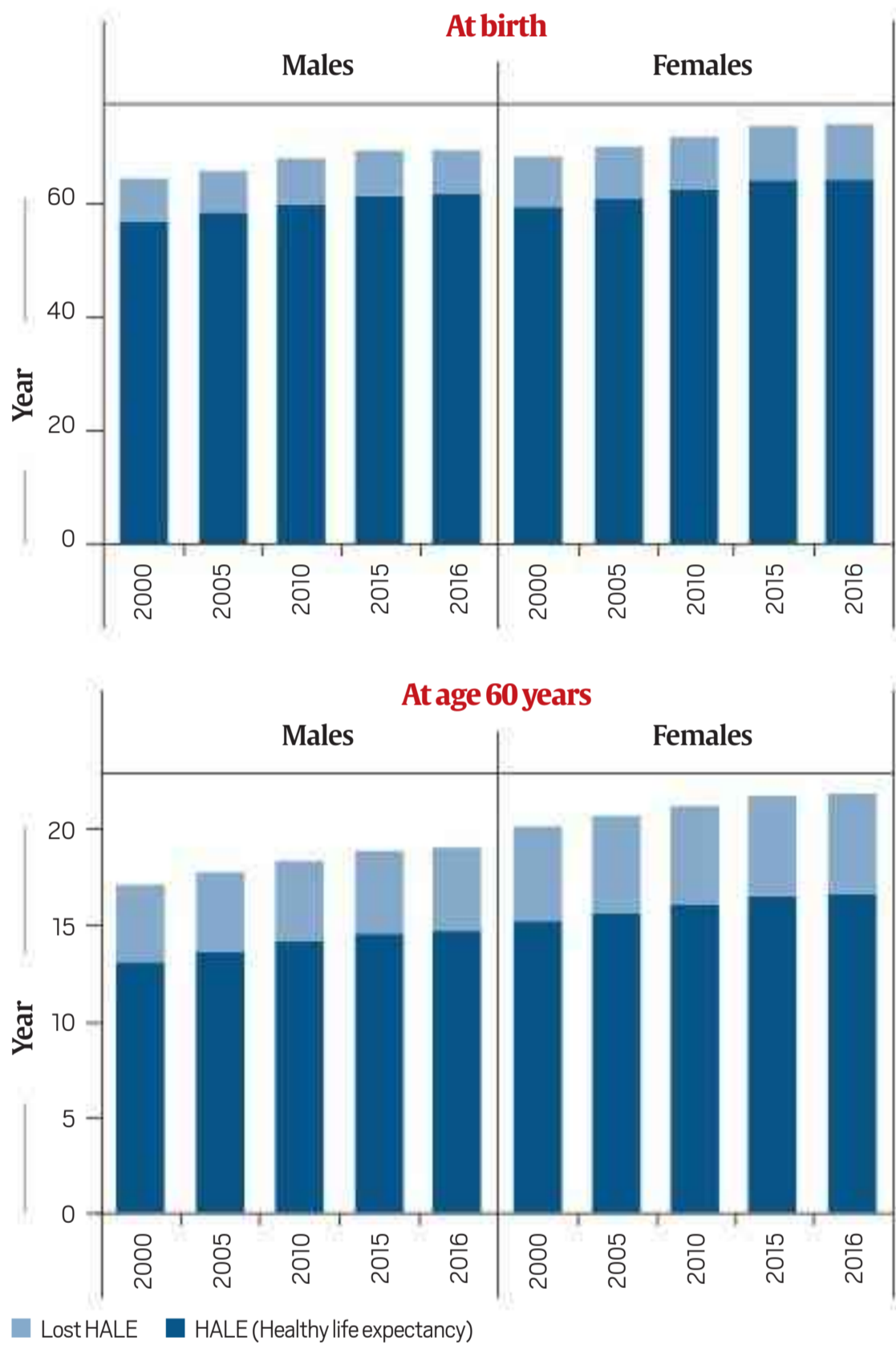
For men and women combined, average life-expectancy has increased by 5½ years since the turn of the century — from 66.5 years in 2000 to 72 years in 2016 — while "healthy" life expectancy (the number of years lived in full health) increased from 58.5 years in 2000, to 63.3 years in 2016. In 2019, the WHO report said, more than 141 million children will be born: 73 million boys and 68 million girls. Based on recent mortality risks the boys will live, on average, 69.8 years and the girls 74.2 years — a difference of 4.4 years. Life expectancy at age 60 years is also greater for women than men: 21.9 versus 19.0 years, it said.

The report attributes the discrep-

ancy to differing attitudes to health-care between men and women. In countries with generalised HIV epidemics, for example, men "are less likely than women to take an HIV test, less likely to access antiretroviral therapy and more likely to die of AIDS-related illnesses than women", the study finds. The same principle applies for tuberculosis sufferers, with male patients less likely to seek care than women.

On the other hand, the study also indicates that the life expectancy gap is narrowest where women lack access to health services. Maternal deaths contribute "more than any other cause" to reducing female life expectancy, the UN statement quoted Dr Samira Asma, WHO Assistant Director General for Data, Analytics and Delivery, as saying. The risk of maternal death is hugely different between high-income and low-income countries. Data indicate that one in 41 women dies from a maternal cause in a low-income country, compared with one in 3,300 in a high-income setting, the report found.

GLOBAL LIFE EXPECTANCY AND HEALTHY LIFE EXPECTANCY, 2000-2016



Source: Global health estimates 2016: Life expectancy, 2000–2016. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2018 (https://www.who.int/gho/mortality_burden_disease/life_tables/en/, accessed 21 March 2019) via World Health Statistics Overview 2019.

SIMPLY PUT QUESTION & ANSWER

How EC runs poll machinery

Mamata has questioned police officers' transfer, Election Commission has said it acted within its rights. How does EC draw manpower for polls, and what disciplinary control does it exercise over these officers?

RITIKA CHOPRA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 7

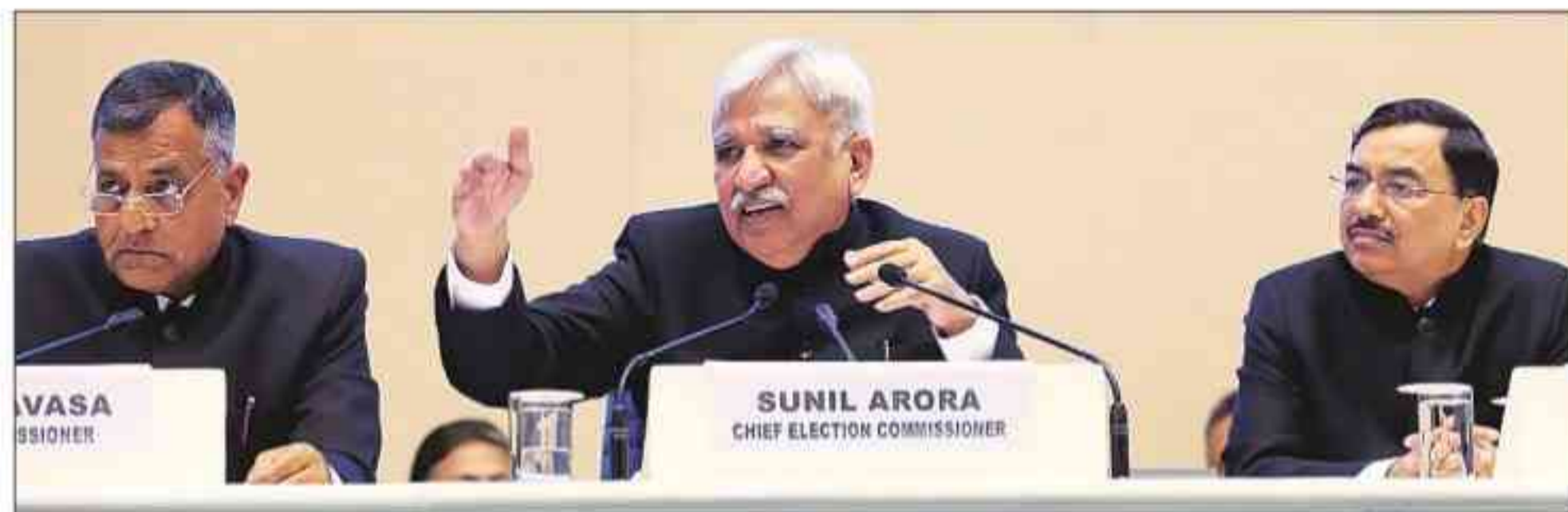
A WAR of words has broken out between West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and the Election Commission, with Mamata questioning the latter's decision to transfer four senior police officers in her state, and the EC responding that it is within its rights to act against police officers on poll duty. It brings into focus the Commission's remit when it comes to exercising disciplinary control over the election machinery:

Does the EC have its own team for conducting an election?

The EC has a separate secretariat headquartered in Delhi, but this set-up is not enough to conduct elections, especially on the scale of the Lok Sabha polls. The EC secretariat has roughly 400 officers at the level of deputy election commissioners, director general, director, senior principal secretary, principal secretary, under secretary and section officers, among others. While officers at the level of deputy election commissioner, director general and director are normally appointed on deputation from civil services, other positions are occupied by the permanent staff of the Commission.

So, how does the Commission get the manpower to conduct elections?

The EC headquarters in Delhi essentially monitors the conduct of elections. The bulk of the work, such as preparation and revision of the voters' list and the actual conduct of polls, is executed on the ground and for that the Commission needs the help of the state machinery. Article 324 of the Constitution provides that the President or the Governor of a state is obliged to provide all "such staff as may be necessary" for the EC to conduct elections, not just in the state concerned, but outside as well. The electoral machinery in the field is headed by the Chief Electoral Officer (a senior government official) and consists mainly of district election officers (usually a district magistrate), electoral registration officers (sub-divisional magistrate), assistant electoral registration officers (tehsildar), returning officers (district magistrate), assistant returning officers (additional magistrate) and booth-level officers (government schoolteachers, anganwadi workers,



Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora with Election Commissioners Ashok Lavasa, Sunil Chandra in March. Express Archive

postmen etc). Closer to an election, when the electoral roll is prepared, hundreds of thousands of government workers are drafted in to perform duties as enumerators, presiding officers, polling officers and counting assistants, and others. During the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, nearly one crore people, including local police and central paramilitary forces, helped in the conduct of elections.

The expression "such staff as may be necessary" under Article 324 was at the centre of a controversy in 1993 when the EC sought a certain number of senior officers from the Union government to be deployed as observers for some Assembly elections. While the Commission maintained it has the prerogative to determine the number of staff required to conduct free and fair elections, the Centre felt it was for the government to decide how much staff it could spare. The Commission petitioned the Supreme Court, which decided that the EC and the government should jointly decide the staff and paramilitary forces required for conduct of elections. Since then, it has always been done through mutual consultation.

Are there exceptions to who can be drafted for making poll arrangements?

There are 10 categories of government officers and employees that are exempted from election duty. These are senior officers of the Indian Forest Service; doctors and compounders working in veterinary hospitals; Grade B officers of veterinary hospitals; medical staff including doctors and nurses; terri-

torial staff of the forest departments; All India Radio employees; Doordarshan employees, operational/technical staff of UPSC, BSNL and educational institutions; officers/staff of commercial banks located in rural areas which happen to be a single-officer branch; and a person retiring in six months.

What is the EC's disciplinary control over the electoral machinery?

Under the Representation of the People Act, all staff roped in for making election arrangements in their respective states and outside are deemed to be on deputation to the EC and are subject to its control and discipline. For instance, a state police officer drafted for poll duty will be under the EC's control from the date elections are notified till the results are announced. State Chief Secretaries, Home Secretaries and Directors-General of Police are also understood to be under the Commission's disciplinary control during poll season.

In 2000, at the Supreme Court's behest, the EC and the Centre mutually agreed on the former's disciplinary control over the election machinery. The agreed terms are: "The disciplinary functions of the Election Commission of India over officers, staff and police deputed to perform election duty during election period shall extend to: (a) suspending any officer/police personnel for insubordination or dereliction of duty; (b) substituting any officer/official/police personnel by another such person, and returning the substituted individual to the cadre to

which he belongs, with appropriate report on his conduct; (c) making recommendation to the competent authority for taking disciplinary action for any act of insubordination or dereliction of duty while on election duty, with such recommendation being promptly acted upon by the disciplinary authority. Such action taken will be communicated to the Election Commission within six months from the date of the EC's recommendations; (d) the Government of India will advise the State governments that they too should follow the above principles and decisions, since a large number of election officials are under their administrative control."

How many times has the EC initiated disciplinary action during the current Lok Sabha elections?

Since March 10, apart from the transfer of the four police officers in West Bengal, high-profile cases include the EC's removal of Andhra Pradesh Chief Secretary Anil Chandra Punetha for defying its orders on the transfer of Director-General of Intelligence A B Venkateswara Rao, Kadapa SP Rahul Dev Sharma, and Srikakulam SP V Ratnam. The three officers were transferred on a complaint by the YSR Congress Party, which had accused them of helping the ruling TDP. Also, the Additional Director General of Police, Special Branch, in Jharkhand was moved to the state Resident Commissioner's office in New Delhi on the direction of the EC after it had received complaints alleging bias on the officer's part.

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, APRIL 7

OVER THE last several days, US President Donald Trump has threatened to close the Mexico border as a measure to check illegal immigration. Last week, he tweeted: "... If for any reason Mexico stops apprehending and bringing the illegals back to where they came from, the U.S. will be forced to tariff at 25% all cars made in Mexico and shipped over the border to us. If that doesn't work, which it will, I will close the border."

While Trump has projected this as a punishment for Mexico, economists have warned that any such move would be disastrous for the US economy. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) facilitates trade by cutting tariffs and streamlining regulations. Reports citing figures from the US Chamber of Commerce said nearly \$1.7 billion of goods and services flow across the Mexico border daily. These include jeans, cars, flat-screen TVs — and avocados, beloved to many Americans. "... What Trump is talking about now, shutting the southern border, would be cata-

strophic. It's just absurd," *The New York Times* quoted Gary Hufbauer of the Peterson Institute for International Economics as saying.

Some of the likely impacts if the border were indeed to close:

Cars, TVs & hardware

The NYT report listed US manufacture as among the biggest victims of a border shutdown. US industries rely on Mexico, either by selling goods and services into Mexico or by using Mexican materials in their products. Mexico is the United States' third largest trading partner, with the latter importing \$349.6 billion from Mexico in 2018, and exporting \$265 billion, *The NYT* said citing statistics from the United Nations' International Trade Center.

Among those affected would be automobile makers, with supply chains disrupted, as would those manufacturers of flat-screen TVs, computer hardware and medical devices, besides the apparel industry that sources raw materials from the US and makes finished products in Mexico. Mexico also depends on the US for natural gas through cross-border pipelines, while hundreds of thousands of US jobs are tied to transportation to and from Mexico.

Overall, *The NYT* said, top multinational companies would be affected — including Ford, Toyota, Boeing — and so would countless small- and medium-size businesses.

Avocados & other food

The US depends on Mexico for fresh fruit and vegetables like avocados — Mexico supplies 80% of the avocados eaten in the US — as well as tomatoes, strawberries, grapes and mangoes, while Mexico relies on US soybeans, corn, dairy products, *The NYT* said. Shutting the border would most likely lead to dwindling of supplies, a spike in prices of food items imported from Mexico, and a drop in prices of US crops besides a loss of market.

Lance Jungmeyer, president of the Fresh Produce Association of the Americas, told *The NYT* that Mexico supplies more than 60% of all US produce in the winter and early spring, and that a shutdown could result in immediate and uncontrollable spikes in prices for items like squash, tomatoes, cucumbers, melons — and the beloved avocado.

Business at home & away

The US Chamber of Commerce said in a

statement: "Closing the US-Mexico border would inflict severe economic harm on American families, workers, farmers and manufacturers across the United States." *The NYT* said this would likely prompt a drop in the stock market, denting the retirement savings of many Americans, as well as affect the ability of companies to raise money in the capital markets. It added that if business relations with Mexico are strained, border communities in the US would most likely suffer, from decreased economic activity as well as potentially higher costs from crime and migration.

More migration?

While Trump's threat to close the border is meant to be a measure to contain migration, *The NYT* suggests that it could actually end up increasing migration — with mass unemployment a likely outcome in Northern Mexican cities that depend on trade with the US, it could prompt more attempts to cross the US border. The newspaper quoted Hufbauer, of the Peterson Institute, as saying: "If anything, it would promote more poverty in Mexico, which would then turn into more pressure on immigration in the US."

Pak F-16 controversy: 3 key questions, evidence on the ground and in the air

SUSHANT SINGH
NEW DELHI, APRIL 7

THE AIR action on February 27 — which took place the day after the Indian airstrike on the Jaish-e-Mohammad camp in Balakot in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province — in Nowshera sector near the Line of Control (LoC) remains mired in controversy.

There are three major questions — first, whether the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) used an American F-16 fighter jet during the air action; second, whether this usage amounted to a violation of American sale conditions for the F-16 aircraft; and third, whether Pakistan lost an F-16 in the dogfight.

Use of F-16

Although the director-general of Pakistan's Inter Services Public Relations had initially said that Pakistan did not use the F-16 in the air action, it has now been established that the PAF did, in fact, use the American-made warjet that morning. India had presented evidence that included the wreckage of a fired AIM-120 AMRAAM missile that fell on the Indian side of the LoC that shows the use of F-16 aircraft. Among

all the aircraft in PAF's inventory, only the F-16 is capable of firing the beyond-visual-range air-to-air missile, which was supplied to it by the US in 2011.

The IAF also had electronic signatures and radio intercepts which proved that F-16s were part of the big package of PAF fighter jets that bombed military installations in Rajouri sector. Faced with overwhelming evidence, Pakistan issued a long-winded statement last month, indirectly conceding that it had used the F-16 during that air action.

Sale condition

The PAF's use of the F-16 in the attack is contentious because certain restrictions were imposed on the use of these aircraft when they were sold by the US to Pakistan. Those conditions, which are part of the End User Monitoring Agreement (EUMA) or Extended End User Monitoring Agreement (EEUMA) signed at the time of the sale of the aircraft, have not been made public.

There were few restrictions on the F-16 sold in the late 1980s to Pakistan, but it is believed that once they were upgraded in Turkey a few years ago, certain conditions may have been imposed on them. As far as the F-16 C/D Block 52 fighter received by



Joint briefing by armed forces on February 28, when India presented parts of a missile that could only have been fired from a F-16. Express Archive

Pakistan during the Global War on Terror are concerned, these were paid for with American money and the sale conditions were extensively debated in the US Congress.

It is believed that certain restrictions were imposed on their use, including on modifying them for the delivery of nuclear weapons. US sources have said that the American

sale conditions specify that the use of the F-16s must be limited to self-defence. However, such terms, unless explicitly and clearly defined, are vague and open to interpretation. Pakistan could argue that it used the F-16 in a self-defence role after India launched the airstrike on Balakot, or that even when employed in the aerial attack on Rajouri, the F-16s were used only for self-defence. Such a claim would make it very difficult for the US to impose a penalty on Pakistan.

Jet downed?

The final question is about the IAF claim that the Wing Commander Abhinandan shot down an F-16 before he was himself shot down and taken captive. India has officially claimed this "kill" while Pakistan has denied it from the day of the air action. India's claim is based on circumstantial evidence, which includes contradictory official Pakistani statements, the electronic signature of the PAF aircraft, images from Electronic Support Measures of AWACS, crash site debris which showed parts that did not belong to the Mig-21 Bison that Wg Cdr Abhinandan was flying, radio telephony intercepts which showed that one aircraft did not return, and wireless intercepts of Pakistani army units

by the Army. Any conclusive proof that a F-16 was shot down — the camera and radar image — was lost with the crash of Wg Cdr Abhinandan's Mig-21 Bison that crashed on the Pakistani side of the LoC.

An article published in *Foreign Policy* magazine Friday claimed that the US had counted the F-16 aircraft with the PAF and found none of these jets in its inventory missing. The report cited unnamed Pentagon officials as saying that the counting was done on Pakistan's request as part of the end user agreement, and took some time as the aircraft were deployed. The report also quoted US officials as saying Pakistan did not violate any sale conditions of the F-16 by using them against India on February 27.

But on Saturday, a Pentagon spokesperson was quoted as having said that the US Defence Department "weren't aware of any investigation like that", while referring the query to the US State Department. The State Department, however, was quoted as having said that "As a matter of policy, the Department does not publicly comment on details of government-to-government agreements on end-use monitoring of US-origin defence articles."