



Going electric

The budgetary measures can speed up India's plans to switch to electric vehicles

The Union Budget has announced a bold move to make a transition to electric vehicles, and offered a tax incentive for the early adopters. Its stated vision to leapfrog into an era of electric mobility and domestic vehicle manufacturing, led by public transport and commercial vehicles, is forward-looking. It is also inevitable because poor air quality and noise pollution have sharply affected the quality of life, and pose a serious public health challenge. As the NITI Aayog has stated, the goal of shifting to electric vehicles cannot make progress without deadlines, and a market-driven approach sought by some sections of the automotive industry will leave India's capabilities and infrastructure for e-mobility trailing others, notably China. With 2030 as the outer limit, the imperative is to fix a realistic time-frame by which scooters, motorcycles, three-wheel carriages and, later, all new vehicles will be battery powered. An additional income tax deduction of ₹1.5 lakh is now offered on interest paid on loans to purchase electric vehicles, and the GST Council has been moved to cut the tax on e-vehicles to 5% from 12%. Both demands were made by the industry earlier. There is a significant outlay under the second iteration of the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing (of Hybrid and) Electric Vehicles (FAME) plan of ₹10,000 crore, to give a fillip to commercial vehicles and to set up charging stations.

The budgetary measures will have an immediate impact on the pricing of electric vehicles and bring in more models, but it will take a sustained effort by the Centre, in partnership with State governments, to enable a fast rollout of charging infrastructure. The Ministry of Power issued guidelines and standards for this in December last year, setting technical parameters for public charging stations that can enable normal and fast charging. With price competition, a speedy spread of electric two-wheelers can be expected, given that over 80% of conventional vehicles sold in India come under that category. Affordable charging will make these vehicles and commercial three-wheelers attractive because operating costs are a fraction of petrol and diesel equivalents. Yet, longer range travel will require more than a charge-at-home facility, and this would have to be in the form of fast charging at parking lots, retrofitted fuel outlets, new public charging stations, hotels, offices and so on. Swapping the battery at convenient locations with one that is pre-charged, especially for commercial vehicles that run longer and need a quick turnaround, is worth considering. A longer-term policy priority has to be the setting up of lithium battery production and solar charging infrastructure of a scale that matches the ambition. The Centre has accepted some of the demands of the auto industry to popularise EVs.

Losing steam

Markets react negatively to the Budget's populism and inability to force reforms

Many investors who were hoping for business-friendly reforms were not too impressed by the maiden Budget of the second Narendra Modi government. After a moderate negative reaction when the Budget was presented in Parliament on Friday, both the Sensex and the Nifty witnessed their biggest fall in over two years on Monday. The Sensex incurred a huge loss of 792.82 points while the Nifty shed about 250 points. Sectors such as banking, automobiles and power were the worst-hit, each witnessing a loss of over 3%. Investors were spooked by a variety of proposals made by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman that are expected to increase the tax burden on them. These include the proposal to increase long term capital gains tax on foreign portfolio investors and to tax the buy-back of shares by companies at 20%. The negative signal sent by the increased surcharge on people earning over ₹2 crore a year also weighed on markets. This tax on the "super-rich" is unlikely to make much of a difference to the government's fiscal position. However, it does damage the image of the present government as a pro-business one and can affect fund flow into the country if the wealthy prefer to move to other countries. The proposal to raise minimum public shareholding in listed companies from 25% to 35% is also seen as an unnecessary intervention in markets. Global factors like strong jobs data coming from the United States which lowers the chances of an interest rate cut by the Federal Reserve, and the potential systemic risk posed by the troubles faced by Deutsche Bank may have also weighed on the markets. However, the losses experienced by western markets on Monday were nowhere as heavy as the losses faced by the Indian markets.

All these aside, the larger issue bothering the Indian investor may be the Budget's supposed tilt towards populism as the government expands the size of its welfare projects instead of taking steps to revive private investment in the slowing economy. Apart from a few words from the Finance Minister on simplifying labour laws and relieving start-up investors from the regressive "angel tax", the Budget was largely bereft of any major structural reforms that could instil confidence among investors. The trajectory of markets in the coming months will depend on the kind of reforms the government manages to push through, and on the actions of central banks across the globe. While the Reserve Bank of India looks to be easing its policy, any global liquidity tightening can affect foreign fund inflows. Despite lacklustre company earnings and other fundamental issues, markets in the past have been pushed up aggressively by the ample liquidity provided by central banks. But without enough reforms to strengthen the fundamentals that can back lofty valuations, it may be only a matter of time before markets begin to lose steam.

The growing power of the lumpen

The national bar against hate crime has been lowered, but resolute corrective action is possible



RADHA KUMAR

Once again, the first weeks of the Narendra Modi administration have been marked by hate crimes – two Muslim men beaten by mobs in Jharkhand and Mumbai, demanding they shout 'Jai Shri Ram', one so mercilessly that he died. Another man, a tribal, lynched in Tripura on suspicion of being a cattle thief. Most recently, 24 men accused of being cattle smugglers, beaten and made to shout 'Gau Mata ki Jai', in Rajasthan.

This time, however, there is a rising tide of concern, both domestically and internationally. Domestically, there have been a number of editorials, OpEds and talk shows calling for action; internationally, India has begun to feature prominently on a growing list of countries marked by hate crime, including hate speech in electoral campaigns.

A rising graph

Studies of hate crimes in India show that they have steadily risen over the past five years. Amnesty International India documented 721 such incidents between 2015 and 2018. Last year alone, it tracked 218 hate crimes, 142 of which were against Dalits, 50 against Muslims, 40 against women, and eight each against Christians, Adivasis, and transgenders. The more common hate crimes, they found, were honour killings – that have sadly occurred for decades – and 'cow-related violence', that was rare earlier but has become more frequent over

the past five years.

According to Hate Crime Watch, crimes based on religious identity were in single digits until 2014, when they surged from nine in 2013 to 92 in 2018. Of the 291 incidents mentioned by the website, 152 occurred in Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-ruled States, 40 in Congress-ruled States and the rest in States ruled by regional parties or coalitions. Rarely, if ever, did bystanders attempt to stop the violence or police arrive on time to do so. In both studies, Uttar Pradesh topped the list of States with the largest number of hate crimes for the third year, followed by Gujarat, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Bihar.

These facts are striking enough to concern any government. The Prime Minister expressed pain at the sickening murder of Tabrez Ansari in Jharkhand, but clearly far more is required. The Rajasthan administration is introducing a Bill prohibiting cow vigilantism, but that deals with only one hate crime. An omnibus act against all hate crimes, including hate speech, is required across India and should be a priority of the 17th Lok Sabha. Germany, for example, amended Section 46 of its Criminal Procedure Code, dealing with sentencing in violent crime, to say the sentence must be based on consideration of 'the motives and aims of the offender, particularly where they are of a racist or xenophobic nature or where they show contempt for human dignity'.

We have a number of sections in the Indian Penal Code that can be used to punish or even prevent hate crime, but they are disparate and few policemen are aware of them. Those that are, fear to use them in areas whose political leaders mobilise through hate speech. Though some Indian analysts debate whether there is a correlation between hate speech and hate



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crime, worldwide data show that hate speech encourages or legitimises acts of violence and a climate of impunity. France has a draft Bill to prohibit hate speech, and Germany has already enacted one.

According to a study by NDTV there are at least 45 politicians in our newly elected union legislature who have indulged in hate speech over the past five years; 35 of them belong to the BJP. No action has been taken as yet by the party, though it is in such a position of strength electorally that it would lose little by acting against them.

Court directives

In 2018, the Supreme Court directed Central and State governments to make it widely known that lynching and mob violence would 'invite serious consequence under the law' (*Tehseen S. Poonawalla v. Union of India & Ors*). Then Home Minister Rajnath Singh told Parliament that the government had formed a panel to suggest measures to tackle mob violence, and would enact a law if necessary. The panel's recommendations are not in the public domain, and acts of hate crime do not appear to have diminished in the year since Mr. Singh's promise.

In a May 2019 report, Human Rights Watch India pointed out

More appeasement than justice

Maratha reservation borders on class legislation rather than signifying reasonable classification



FAIZAN MUSTAFA

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), once considered to be just a party of upper caste Hindus, is beginning to expand its social base. And a party that has consistently criticised the Indian National Congress for its so-called appeasement policies including sub-quotas for minorities within Other Backward Classes (OBC) and reservation for OBC Muslims is no longer hesitant in extending reservation to newer castes.

In keeping with this line, one has seen it introduce reservation for politically dominant castes such as the Gujjars in Rajasthan, Patidars in Gujarat and the Marathas in Maharashtra. The BJP government in Uttar Pradesh has included 17 OBC castes in the Scheduled Castes list. Even the judiciary that has so far been quite concerned about the 'merit', 'efficiency in administration' and interests of 'general candidates', has sent out mixed signals on invoking the strict scrutiny test in examining the constitutionality of a reser-

vation policy. The Supreme Court has refused to stay the Central government's decision to grant 10% quota in jobs and education to the economically-weaker sections and the Bombay High Court has now upheld reservation for the Maratha community.

Influential reach

Anyone familiar with Maharashtra will know that the Maratha community is an influential and politically dominant caste which has not faced any systematic social discrimination or exclusion. Most of the State's Chief Ministers have been Marathas. While the Mandal Commission identified Marathas to be a 'forward' community, two State Backward Class Commissions, namely the Khatri Commission (1995) and Bapat Commission (2008), recommended not to include them within the OBC category. After the High Court had stayed the 16% reservation made on the basis of the recommendations of non-statutory Narayan Rane Commission (2015), the matter was referred to the M.G. Gaikwad Commission in 2017, which submitted its report in 2018. The Bill was passed and brought into force in less than two weeks.

The Mandal Commission had 11 yardsticks to determine backwardness. On certain parameters, the Gaikwad Commission did go beyond Mandal; some of the yard-



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sticks it adopted were controversial. For example, the Commission noted that of the total farmer suicides of 13,368) 2,152 Maratha farmers had ended their lives. It ignored the fact that these were not due to backwardness but because of agrarian crises. The Commission also attached great importance to its finding that while 69% Maratha families sought medical treatment for jaundice, 9.65% sought treatment from tantriks while 0.54% left it 'to the mercy of god'; superstition, and 'blind vows' were factored in as proof of backwardness though such irrational practices or beliefs are prevalent even among the higher castes as well. The Commission also found that a large number of Marathas in Mumbai are engaged in the business of dabbawallas. Acceptance of food from them shows that people do not consider them low caste. The finding of 71% Marathas owning land of less than 2.5 acres was considered a sign of backwardness but such small holdings are due to fragmentation

that only some States had complied with the Supreme Court's orders to designate a senior police officer in every district to prevent incidents of mob violence and ensure that the police take prompt action, including safety for witnesses; set up fast-track courts in such cases; and take action against policemen or officials who failed to comply. Those State governments that did comply, the report commented, did so only partially. In several instances, the police actually obstructed investigations, even filing charges against the victims.

Whether it is political hate speech or police bias on the ground, there is little doubt that the national bar against hate crime has been lowered. On television, we see replays of hate speech and videos of lynching. Though the accompanying commentary is critical, repeated iterations normalise the hateful. Indeed, anchors themselves resort to invective far more often than before – note how Kashmiris are routinely heckled and abused on talk shows. The print media too is failing. Several newspapers now publish triumphalist opinion articles, including comments to articles that are hate speech by any definition. Criticism of blatantly communal government actions such as extension of refugee and citizenship on religious identity has grown increasingly muted.

Key steps needed

One of the policy issues that is high on the Modi administration's list is dealing with incitement to violence through social media. But the focus is on hate in relation to terrorism, and it is unclear whether government policy will extend to cover hate crime. Important as it is to do so, the digital media is not the only offender. In fact,

there are several obvious steps which would be easier to take and yield more immediate results than regulation of the digital media. Parliament could enact an omnibus act against hate crime, and the Home Minister could set benchmarks for policemen and administrators to deal with hate crime. The legislature and political parties could suspend or dismiss members who are implicated in hate crimes or practise hate speech. The electronic and print media could stop showing or publishing hateful comments and threats. Priests could preach the values of tolerance and respect that are common to all religions and schools could revitalise courses on the directive principles of our Constitution.

For Mr. Modi, there is an additional challenge. He has twice spoken out against hate crime, but his words of pain have not been backed by action, either by his party or by BJP-led administrations. Does he have so little influence over his own? We have to hope not.

For a demographically diverse country such as India, hate crimes – including crimes of contempt – are a disaster. Each of our religious and caste communities number in the millions, and crimes that are directed against any of these groups could result in a magnitude of disaffection that impels violence, even terrorism. Far less diverse countries than India are already suffering the result of hate 'moving into the mainstream', as UN Secretary General António Guterres recently highlighted. We can still contain its spread if we act resolutely. Or else our political leaders might find the lumpen tail wagging their dog.

Radha Kumar is a writer and policy analyst

Gurvinder Singh (2016) though along with Gujjars, four other castes were also given the benefit. Jat reservation, in *Ram Singh* (2015), was declared unconstitutional because only one caste was favoured. Maratha reservation thus borders on class legislation rather than reasonable classification. Article 14 prohibits class legislation.

Since the National Commission for Backward Classes was not consulted, the constitutionality of Maratha reservation is suspect but the High Court observed that the NBCC had in no way taken away the powers of the State commission. Similarly, the Uttar Pradesh government has ignored the National Commission for Scheduled Castes in according SC status to 17 castes.

The weakest part of the judgment is ignoring the 50% upper limit of reservation by relying on the small window of exception permitted in *Indra Sawhney*, i.e. the factor of remote or far flung areas and an absence from national main stream. None is available to the Marathas.

Let the BJP not deviate from its stated policy on appeasement and do justice to all including Marathas and Muslims.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Karnataka crisis

The political charade in Karnataka has come to such a pass that the Bharatiya Janata Party that had unsuccessfully formed the first government after the election is at government formation again by trial and error and subverting the will of the people of Karnataka (Editorial, "The visible hand", July 9). Both the party and its State party president and former Karnataka Chief Minister, B.S. Yeddyurappa, have a yen to wrest power even if they lose elections.

Consequently, the party with a difference has metamorphosed into a party of defectors and the MLAs who are raring to cross over have betrayed the trust of the people. If the JD(S) and the Congress give rebel MLAs ministerial berths, it will be a surefire way for others to rebel. This is a vicious circle. Even if the BJP manages to form a

government with floating MLAs, its longevity will be suspect again. This will give rise to a piquant situation. One can safely conclude that democracy in Karnataka is at the mercy of power-hungry politicians.

ABDUL ASSIS P.A.,
Kandassankadavu, Thrissur, Kerala

■ Even if the BJP forms the government through the back door, it would not be the government of, for and by the people, but of, for and by defectors. The party leadership in Delhi may claim that it has nothing to do with the crisis but the acts of their State leaders make it crystal clear that these cannot be without clearance from Delhi. Perhaps the time has come to dissolve the House and let voters decide who they want.

N. NAGARAJAN,
Secunderabad

■ If the party leadership somehow succeeds in

appeasing the disgruntled MLAs they can never be trusted. Amidst political uncertainty the administration will be in a state of inertia. Parties must think about dealing with horse trading and shifting allegiance in a serious manner. Existing anti-defection laws are ineffective and law-makers find out ample loopholes to escape disqualification. Those who vitiate democratic credibility must be debarred from accessing all benefits as elected representatives.

DR. GEORGE VAREEKAL,
Burhanpur, Madhya Pradesh

Quota and caste

The assertion in the article, "Reinforcing caste hierarchies" (Editorial page, July 9) is that "reservation is not the real answer" though in the context of its latest avatar, the Maratha quota, is a good enough reason to revisit the time when it was first introduced. At that time,

this short-term special measure was intended to bring the 'backward' sections to a level that was on a par with others. That it continues and expands is an indication of the failure of the scheme. Instead of there being a scientific assessment, the issue has been treated politically. To perpetuate the short-term plan and to expand it in all directions are the hallmarks of vote-bank politics. How it reduces the 'merit' element in education, the bureaucracy, legislature and other sections is a governance issue. This is the reason why caste hierarchies continue and are reinforced. Only proper Constitutional amendments to delete discriminatory provisions can help progress.

P.R.V. RAJA,
Pandalam, Kerala

■ The objective of reservation was to uplift the 'downtrodden' and not to encourage indiscriminate

profiteering at the expense of deserving candidates. The system today not only strengthens the caste divide but also creates resentment in communities unable to reap the benefits of reservation. It may not be an exaggeration to say that 'brain drain' is a consequence of the reservation system. Capable students prefer to move abroad where their work and capabilities are rewarded.

KSHITIJ MANI TRIPATHI,
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

Road safety

Though the human factor is often cited in fatal road accidents, one cannot

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The report headlined "Shutdown in Valley on Wani's death anniversary" (July 9, 2019) referred to Burhan Wani's killing on June 8, 2016. It should have been July 8, 2016. Also, it talked about slowing down of internet speeds on Tuesday. It should have been Monday.

An Editorial page article titled "A shot at economic logic" (July 9, 2019) talked about the creation of an African common market with a GDP of \$3.4 billion. It should have been \$3.4 trillion.

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The malaise of malnutrition

India needs to double yearly rate of fall in stunting cases to achieve its 2022 target



THOMAS ABRAHAM

A new report, ‘Food and Nutrition Security Analysis, India, 2019’, authored by the Government of India and the United Nations World Food Programme, paints a picture of hunger and malnutrition amongst children in large pockets of India. This punctures the image of a nation marching towards prosperity. It raises moral and ethical questions about the nature of a state and society that, after 70 years of independence, still condemns hundreds of millions of its poorest and vulnerable citizens to lives of hunger and desperation. And it once again forces us to ask why despite rapid economic growth, declining levels of poverty, enough food to export, and a multiplicity of government programmes, malnutrition amongst the poorest remains high.

A trap of poverty, malnutrition

The report shows the poorest sections of society caught in a trap of poverty and malnutrition, which is being passed on from generation to generation. Mothers who are hungry and malnourished produce children who are stunted, underweight and unlikely to develop to achieve their full human potential.

The effects of malnourishment in a small child are not merely physical. A developing brain that is deprived of nutrients does not reach its full mental potential. A study in the *Lancet* notes, “Undernutrition can affect cognitive development by causing direct structural damage to the brain and by impairing infant motor development.” This in turn affects the child’s ability to learn at school, leading to a lifetime of poverty and lack of opportunity.

Another study in the *Lancet* observes, “These disadvantaged children are likely to do poorly in school and subsequently have low incomes, high fertility, and provide poor care for their children, thus contributing to the inter-generational transmission of poverty.” In other words, today’s poor hungry children are likely to be tomorrow’s hungry, unemployed and undereducated adults.

The findings in the report are not new: many studies over the last five



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years have exposed the failure of the Indian state to ensure that its most vulnerable citizens are provided adequate nutrition in their early years. India has long been home to the largest number of malnourished children in the world. Some progress has been made in reducing the extent of malnutrition. The proportion of children with chronic malnutrition decreased from 48% percent in 2005-06 to 38.4% in 2015-16. The percentage of underweight children decreased from 42.5% to 35.7% over the same period. Anaemia in young children decreased from 69.5% to 58.5% during this period. But this progress is small.

An ambitious target

The government’s National Nutrition Mission (renamed as Poshan Abhiyaan) aims to reduce stunting (a measure of malnutrition that is defined as height that is significantly below the norm for age) by 2% a year, bringing down the proportion of stunted children in the population to 25% by 2022. But even this modest target will require doubling the current annual rate of reduction in stunting.

The minutes of recent meetings of the Executive Committee of Poshan Abhiyaan do not inspire much confidence about whether this can be achieved. A year after it was launched, State and Union Territory governments have only used 16% of the funds allocated to them. Fortified rice and milk were to be introduced in one district per State by March this year. But the minutes of a March 29 meeting showed that this had not been done, and officials in charge of public distribution had not yet got their act together. Or, as the minutes put it, “The matter is under active consideration of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution”. Anganwadis are key to the distribution of services to mothers and children. But many States, including Bihar and Od-

isha, which have large vulnerable populations, are struggling to set up functioning anganwadis, and recruit staff.

The key to ending the tragedy of child nutrition lies with a handful of State governments: the highest levels of stunted and underweight children are found in Jharkand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Malnutrition is a reflection of age-old patterns of social and economic exclusion. Over 40% of children from Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes are stunted. Close to 40% of children from the Other Backward Classes are stunted. The lack of nutrition in their childhood years can reduce their mental as well as physical development and condemn them to a life in the margins of society.

Stunting and malnourishment starts not with the child, but with the mother. An adolescent girl who is malnourished and anaemic tends to be a mother who is malnourished and anaemic. This in turn increased the chances of her child being stunted.

The problem is access to food

As Amartya Sen noted, famines are caused not by shortages of food, but by inadequate access to food. And for the poor and marginalised, access to food is impeded by social, administrative and economic barriers. In the case of children and their mothers, this could be anything from non-functioning or neglectful governments at the State, district and local levels to entrenched social attitudes that see the poor and marginalised as less than equal citizens who are meant to be an underclass and are undeserving of government efforts to provide them food and lift them out of poverty.

A lot of attention has focussed on the government’s aim of turning India into a \$5 trillion economy in the next five years. Whether this will achieved is a matter for debate. But these declarations only serve to obscure a larger reality. There is a large section of society, the poorest two-fifths of the country’s population, that is still largely untouched by the modern economy which the rest of the country inhabits. As one part of the country lives in a 21st century economy, ordering exotic cuisines over apps, another part struggles with the most ancient of realities: finding enough to eat to tide them over till the next day.

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A pre-election strike on Iran?

Why a purportedly ‘limited’ attack by the U.S. is likely — and worrying



TABISH KHAIR

Is Iran being set up for a ‘limited scale conflict’ just before the U.S. presidential election? This is a suspicion that might be far from the minds of North and West European leaders, hailing from countries that, since World War II, have been sceptical of war, especially in their own neighbourhoods. But Iran is not really in their neighbourhood. Will countries like Germany, France or Brexiting-U.K. have the conviction or coherence to stand up for Iran, which has been pushed into a corner by the one-sided withdrawal of Donald Trump’s U.S. from the international nuclear deal brokered under former U.S. President Barack Obama? It remains one of the great ironies of politics today that Mr. Trump is such good friends with North Korea, which seems to have no intention of abandoning its nuclear weapons, and so belligerent towards Iran, which did sign an international nuclear deal!

Liberal Europe might have trouble imagining the effect of a ‘limited scale conflict’ on a national electorate just before elections, but surely we Indians have larger imaginations? I am not saying that Mr. Trump and his publicity troops are planning a ‘hot’, instead of the currently ‘cold’, conflict with Iran. What I am saying is that there are very good ‘factors’ which may lead to it.

Demonstration of ‘greatness’

Mr. Trump needs a ‘patriotic’ surge to be certain of victory in the coming presidential election, and he is a politician not averse to chest-thumping heroics at the cost of other people’s sons. Not surprisingly, this year marked the first 4th of July celebration in recent memory that was highly politicised and in which the U.S. armed forces were clearly inserted into the current Republican slogan of ‘Make America Great Again’. It was also a far more military show than in the past. This overlap of the ‘greatness’ of the American military — U.S. military expenditure in 2018 was around \$650 billion (China was second with \$250 billion, and Saudi Arabia and India, hurrah, were third and fourth with about \$67 billion each) — with the political rhetoric of ‘greatness’ pursued



AFP

by Mr. Trump’s Republicans can lead to a ‘demonstration’ of ‘greatness’ on Iran. Such a ‘demonstration’ is likely in other ways too. For instance, the U.S.’s two best friends — Saudi Arabia and Israel — clearly want Iran dismantled as much as possible. The rhetoric of ‘Islamist terror’ can be used to effect this, particularly because most Americans cannot distinguish between Shia and Sunni Muslims, and hence do not know that the hated Islamic State and al Qaeda are Sunni, while Iran is Shia.

To this will be added a certain section of the liberal voice in the ‘free’ West: people who have good reasons to dislike the clerical regime in Iran, people who would like to see Iran become democratic. While their reasons are good, many of them are too idealistic or too removed from Iran to think of what might happen once the conflict begins — and escalates. Perhaps I am being pessimistic, but I have seen a number of countries go to pieces under the flag of ‘freedom’ in recent years: Iraq, Libya, Syria, Sudan. In every case, there was hope and many good arguments for a change of regime. In every case, the hopes have been belied and, looking back, the earlier status quo seems to have been a relative mercy.

Moreover, North and West European states are bogged down in a post-Brexit situation, have highly developed but stagnant economies, and pacifist but increasingly parochial electorates. They would not be willing to do much to stop a conflict. Given the fact that the two biggest industries in the world — weapons and oil — might have vested interests in a ‘limited conflict’ in Iran, and these industries are not voiceless in Europe either, one can also expect the worst.

Finally, the ‘national ethos’ of Iran will contribute to it too. Iran is one of the major nations of the world, the core of an ancient civilisation. Many Ira-

nians would be too proud to eat humble pie in the face of American might. They are likely to be encouraged into war-like sentiments by the more radical Iranian mullahs, with their own Islamic suspicion of the U.S. and the West. The ability of the religious to believe that God will intervene on their behalf is not a reassuring element either.

A different matter

The likelihood of a staged conflict just before the U.S. presidential election getting out of hand ought to worry India. A conflict between the U.S. and Iran would not be like a conflict between India and Pakistan, which are neighbours. They can inflict some damage on each other. And the only likelihood — victory by India, which is the greater military power — would leave matters unresolved for the victor: India will not only have to control much of hostile captured territory but still be exposed to ‘Islamist’ attacks from other Muslim countries, because even beyond Pakistan there lie other Muslim nations and regions. Incidentally, these other neighbours do not desire major trouble between India and Pakistan; they prefer the current status quo. There will also be no ‘global’ or ‘liberal’ cheerleading for either India or Pakistan in the case of a conflict.

But a purportedly ‘limited’ attack by the U.S. on Iran is a different matter: the U.S. would remain largely unaffected, because it is too far away and far too strong. Iran has neighbours — not just Saudi Arabia and Israel — who would love to see it bombed a few decades back into the past. And there will even be a degree of ‘global’ and ‘liberal’ cheerleading for a presumed ‘return to democracy’ in Iran. The prospects, to say the least, are worrying.

Tabish Khair is an Indian novelist and academic who works in Denmark

Global problem, local solutions

Forest dwellers and farmers are the best hope to preserve biodiversity and ensure food security

SOUMYA SARKAR

The Dongria Kondh tribe of Niyamgiri Hills are among the best conservationists in the world. Known for the spirited defence of their forested habitat against short-sighted industrialisation, they have through millennia evolved a lifestyle that is in perfect harmony with nature. Across India, there are scores of indigenous people who have managed to lead meaningful lives without wanton destruction of natural ecosystems.

These tribes, along with marginalised communities living on the fringes of forests and millions of smallholder farmers, are the best hope that India has to preserve biodiversity and ensure food security. At a time when nature faces the threat of another mass extinction of species, their importance cannot be emphasised enough because they offer us solutions to avert an imminent meltdown.

The first global assessment of biodiversity by a UN-backed panel, which released its report in May, held humans squarely responsible for the looming mass extinction of species. Without radical efforts towards conservation, the rate of species extinction will only gather momentum. The red flag comes close on the heels of a February report by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). A loss in biodiversity simply means that plants and animals are more vulnerable to pests and diseases, and it puts food security and nutrition at risk, the FAO said.

At a higher risk

Although biodiversity loss is a global problem, it can be countered only with local solutions. There’s no one-size-fits-all approach. A solution that has succeeded in a temperate, wealthy nation may not be suitable for a country like India. Our tropical homeland is rich in biodiversity, but the imperatives of relentless economic growth, urbanisation, deforestation and overpopulation place it at risk more than many other places.

Nothing can be achieved without

the active participation of communities that live close to nature — farmers and forest dwellers. It is now obvious that intensive agriculture, exploitative forestry and overfishing are the main threats to biodiversity in India and the world. In their prognosis, UN agencies are unanimous that the best way to correct the present course is



to heed the accumulated wisdom of indigenous peoples, fishers and farmers.

The situation with our forests is even more dire. Instead of evicting forest dwellers from their homes, we should be encouraging them to conserve and nurture their habitats.

Pressure from industrialisation does not care too much about conservation and biodiversity. The same holds true for the overexploitation of our rivers and seas.

For solutions one has to just look at the growing movement of zero-budget natural farming in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, or the community-driven forest conservation initiatives in Odisha and the Northeast, to realise that there is hope for the natural ecosystem, if only we act on the advice of local communities.

No silver bullet

There is no silver bullet to solve the problem of crop and biodiversity loss at the national level. The natural farming movement in Andhra Pradesh may not be suitable for, say, Punjab. Fortunately, India’s farmers and tribes are nothing if not innovative and they do have local solutions.

Loss of biodiversity and the threat of species extinction along with the alarming changes wrought by global warming are the primary concerns of our times. Our best bet for survival depends on how well we address these issues. We can do that only if we put people at the centre of our actions. If we continue to ride roughshod over the people who are essential to revitalising nature, we do so only at our peril.

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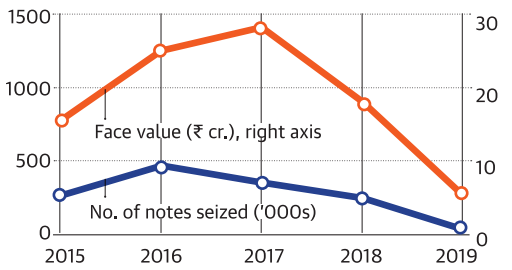
DATA POINT

Money, but not really

The number of seized fake currency notes and the cumulative face value of these notes declined from 2015 to 2019*. Delhi accounted for the highest quantum of fake currency notes seized between 2015 and 2019. The ₹500 note is the most counterfeited note in terms of numbers. By Varun B. Krishnan

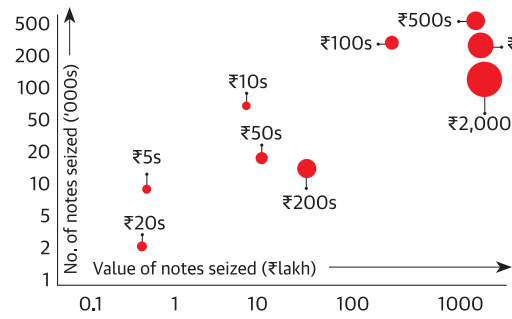
Decline across the board

The year 2017 (after demonetisation) saw a dip in the number of fake currency notes but an upsurge in the face value of notes seized



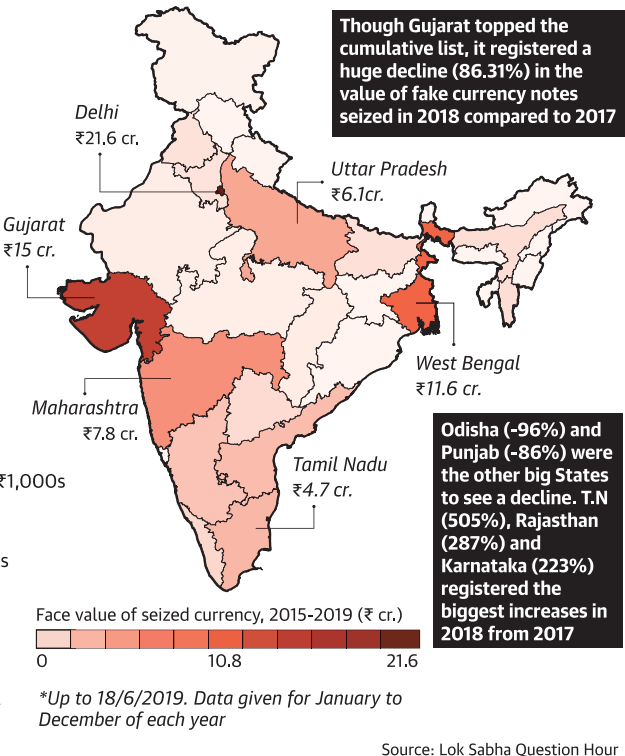
₹2,000 notes catch up

Fake ₹1,000 notes continued to be seized post-demonetisation. The number and face value of fake ₹2,000s seized were high despite being introduced later



Fake currency hotspots

Apart from the national capital, Gujarat and West Bengal registered the highest quantum of fake currency seized in the past five years



Though Gujarat topped the cumulative list, it registered a huge decline (86.31%) in the value of fake currency notes seized in 2018 compared to 2017

Odisha (~96%) and Punjab (~86%) were the other big States to see a decline. T.N (505%), Rajasthan (287%) and Karnataka (223%) registered the biggest increases in 2018 from 2017

*Up to 18/6/2019. Data given for January to December of each year

Source: Lok Sabha Question Hour

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 10, 1969

P.M. wants selective bank take-over

The Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, sprung a major surprise to-night [July 9] by sending a note to the Congress Working Committee - through a special messenger from Delhi - more or less associating herself with the Leftist demand for bank nationalisation. When the Working Committee was discussing the draft on economic policy, prepared by Mr. C. Subramaniam and Mr. Sadiq Ali, the Prime Minister's note was received spelling out her broad approach to problems of agriculture, industry and financial institutions. Mrs. Gandhi did not plead for bank nationalisation as such but expressed the view that the suggestion for selective nationalisation of some of the major banks was worth considering in the context of the larger economic objectives of the Congress Party. The Prime Minister's note was not considered in detail by the Working Committee since there was not enough time before the members adjourned for the dinner given in their honour by the Mysore Pradesh Congress Reception Committee. But it will be discussed at length in Mrs. Gandhi's presence when the Working Committee meets again to-morrow night.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 10, 1919.

German Gold for Indian Sedition.

The mail papers from England bring the sensational news that Mrs. [Annie] Besant in interviews to the Press has made the definite statement that, to her own certain knowledge, German gold energised sedition and unrest in India. Speaking to an interviewer of the London 'Times' she declared that "the revolutionary party in India was supported largely by German money, which had been used for many years in the effort to cause unrest. Even before the war, money had been spent freely on German propaganda work, which was carried on largely by German missionaries who taught children to 'call for the German Kaiser', instead of for our own King-Emperor. The first results of German propaganda were the revolutionary movements in Punjab and Bengal. Impatience at the slow progress made towards freedom by the old peaceful methods had caused the younger men in India, particularly the student class, to despair of those methods ever proving successful. Their participation in revolution was an act of despair, but the number of this class associated with the purely revolutionary movement, who wanted separation, was small."