



WORDLY WISE
IMAGINATION IS THE HIGHEST
FORM OF RESEARCH.
— ALBERT EINSTEIN

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

It begins in school

India's growth story will stand, or slip, on the foundational skills it gives its children



ASHISH DHAWAN

ANDHRA SPECTRES

Jagan Reddy government needs to pursue a governance agenda instead of working to erase Naidu's legacy

RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS in Andhra Pradesh suggest that the state could find itself a victim of the vendetta politics unleashed by its chief minister, YS Jagan Mohan Reddy. Apparently blinded by his antipathy to political rival and TDP supremo, Chandrababu Naidu, Reddy has been focused on undoing the schemes and projects initiated when the former was chief minister. This seeming witch-hunt is likely to have serious economic costs and impact Reddy's own plans to stamp his legacy on the new state. The move to keep Naidu and his son, Nara Lokesh, under house arrest during the weekend ahead of a TDP rally confirms that the government has lost the plot.

Despite sweeping the assembly elections in May, Reddy seems to be haunted by Naidu at every step. In the past 100 days, Reddy has cancelled power purchase agreements signed by the Naidu government, ordered re-tendering of the multi-river basin Polavaram project, and most importantly, stalled the building of Amaravati, the capital city. Thousands of crores are now stuck in these projects, though the Andhra Pradesh High Court stopped the Polavaram re-tendering. Reddy has spooked industry and financiers by proposing multiple capital cities for the state, instead of completing the work at Amaravati. The World Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank have dropped their plans to lend to the Amaravati project, which will put pressure on the state's finances, and cause cost overruns when work restarts in the future. Construction majors have shifted men and material out of the under-construction city, while the government has been busy pulling down buildings that served as the offices of Naidu. Simultaneously, the Reddy government has introduced the AP Employment of Local Candidates in Industries and Factories Bill, 2019 that makes it mandatory for industry to hire 75 per cent of its workforce from the local population. Reddy, who is fighting corruption cases, has justified his actions as part of an attempt to detect "irregularities" in contracts and projects, and course correct. However, few seem persuaded by this argument as the lack of continuity in policies and the populist move to reserve employment for locals turns industrialists wary of investing in Andhra. Business sentiment in a state once known for its entrepreneurial energy is low, which could impact Reddy's own political plans. How is he going to raise funds for the expansive welfare schemes and enhanced emoluments he promised in the campaign if investments dry up?

Reddy's father, the late YSR, won consecutive elections by expanding the welfare state. He could do that because the economy of undivided Andhra Pradesh was doing well. Jagan Reddy doesn't have that luxury — with Hyderabad going to Telangana, he will need a booming Amaravati and more to shore up the state's finances. He should seek a lasting legacy not by erasing Naidu's work, but by building a stronger economy and ensuring political freedoms.

BY NEXT YEAR, the average age of an Indian is expected to be 29 years, while it will be 37 in China and 48 in Japan. Additionally, around 12 million youth in India are now reaching the employable age each year. Perhaps, it is this demographic trend that prompted the government to announce its ambition of making India a \$10 trillion economy by 2030. However, the country's youth will be able to do very little to push the economy upward if we fail to invest in universal quality education. School education is the most important socio-economic issue that will generate the demographic dividend needed to power India's growth story.

During the past 10 years, the Right to Education Act ensured a steady increase in school enrollment with more than 260 million children in the age group of six to 14 years enrolled in schools. However, this is only half the job done as just ensuring schooling does not result in learning. In India, according to ASER 2018, only a little over one-quarter of third grade students can read second grade text or subtract one two-digit number from another. Further, the Indian government's own National Achievement Survey (NAS), too, indicates that a large proportion of children are not picking up critical skills in the early grades. To say that we have a crisis in school education would be an understatement, and to address it, its outlines and nature will have to be diagnosed well.

Benefits of good quality school education accrue only when students complete and leave school after having acquired the gateway skills. Like one learns to walk before running, similarly one picks up advanced skills only after picking the basic foundational skills. The advent of the knowledge economy poses new challenges, and one of the severe consequences of having an uneducated workforce will be our inability to keep pace with the global economy. Without a strong learning foundation at the primary level,

there can be little or no improvement in higher education or skill development.

The draft National Education Policy (NEP) identifies foundational literacy and numeracy — the ability to read, write and perform basic calculations — as prerequisites for all learning. The draft NEP states that attainment of foundational skills has to be given the highest priority, which, if not achieved, would render all other efforts irrelevant for a large section of population.

As research indicates, Class 3 is the inflection point. Children are expected to "learn to read" by class 3 so that they can "read to learn" after that. Beyond this critical stage, it becomes extremely difficult for children to pick up these basics and if they are still unable to read simple text or do simple math, they start to fall behind. A longitudinal study of 40,000 students in Andhra Pradesh from class 1 to 5 clearly brought to light the widening gap in learning levels for a huge majority of students who were falling behind due to lack of foundational skills. Almost all of these students were never able to catch up as their learning trajectory flattened over a period of time and additional years of schooling beyond the inflection point yielded little or no improvement in learning.

The absence of foundational skills hits children from poor households or first generation learners the most. Their ill-equipped home environment combined with the lack of other external influences makes it even more difficult for them to make up for the lack of gateway skills. In primary schools, teachers are usually guided by the curriculum-based textbooks, and they choose to focus on the children who are easiest to teach or who are most likely to follow and finish the curriculum. Due to this challenge in our school education system, children who don't know these critical skills tend to get left behind. Universal acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy skills can be a great

equaliser for such students and can go a long way in making learning for all possible.

The challenge is that, in our country, delivering quality education is complex, and we do not have the resources to simultaneously focus on multiple things. But, we also now have sufficient learnings from successful foundational learning programmes in India and around the world that tell us that there are four critical pillars for any state-driven reform to achieve scalable long-term impact.

Firstly, the government needs to, urgently and ruthlessly, focus on foundational learning. They need to address key issues — be it the gaps in expectation setting across the entire chain of stakeholders or the lack of sharp and actionable literacy and numeracy skills-based goals or limited involvement of parents. The gaps in classroom instruction practices is the second pillar that need a more holistic approach. Appropriate teaching-learning material, tools, training and teacher support need to be made available.

Thirdly, we need to ensure system enabling conditions, such as teacher training, for teaching foundational skills and dedicated teacher allocation for primary classes. Lastly, improved accountability through independent monitoring and measurement can play a critical role in setting the system reform agenda. To cite an example, in Peru, every stakeholder in school education knows that a student has to fluently read 40 words per minute in class 2 and 60 words per minute in class 3.

Improvement in the education system is crucial for India to cement its position as a global leader. Making foundational learning a priority is the need of the hour. For, foundational learning opens up opportunities for better income, health, sanitation, safety, and so on.

The writer is founder-chairman of Central Square Foundation, a founding member of Ashoka University

LET'S TALK SAFETY

Centre's amended Motor Vehicles Act addresses urgent need, provokes a welcome discussion. States must join in

THE NEW MOTOR Vehicles Act, which came into effect on September 1, has provoked controversy. The overarching aim of the new law — to bring down the number of road accidents in the country — has wide support. But the penalties stipulated under the Act have attracted criticism. Gujarat, where the BJP is in power, has slashed the fines for 15 violations under the Act, reducing the quantum of penalties by 50 to 70 per cent. Two other BJP-run state governments, Uttarakhand and Karnataka, have also expressed reservations about the new law. Four Opposition-helmed states have put the implementation of the Act on hold. Union Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari has responded by saying "that the states are well within their rights to bring down the fines". He has, however, argued that stringent penalties are necessary. Because, as he said, "people's lives must be saved".

Given that 1,50,000 people die in road accidents in the country — 10 per cent of all such fatalities worldwide — the necessity of a road safety law cannot be overstated. The Motor Vehicles Act stipulates a 10-fold increase in fines for road safety traffic violations, driving under the influence of alcohol, not using seat belts and driving without seat belts. Its litmus test will lie in effective implementation by enforcement agencies. Punitive measures, however stringent, will not achieve much without adequate number of traffic police personnel and road-safety devices like traffic lights. Moreover, unless law enforcement officials haul up wrongdoers without succumbing to old habits like bribery, the purpose of the new law will be defeated. The Motor Vehicles Act does recognise these imperatives. "The Central Government shall make rules for the electronic monitoring and enforcement of road safety including speed cameras, closed-circuit television cameras, speed guns, body wearable cameras and such other technology," it says. It also asks state governments to ensure "electronic monitoring on national and state highways".

The critics of the amended law haven't disputed its rationale. For instance, the Odisha government, which has relaxed the implementation of the law for three months, has asked traffic regulators "to counsel and handhold the public". Rajasthan, which has partially implemented the Act, has decided to take steps to "self-motivate people". In the context of road safety, the self-motivation versus deterrence debate is not new. It's heartening that the new Motor Vehicles Act has rekindled this discussion. This conversation must be joined.

OUTSIDE THE BOX

There is freedom out there. Freedom to make, to make up. And, with some imagination, to make good the deficits of policy

SCHOOL STUDENTS HAVE always held that the chief utility of mathematics is to harass them. Now, they have found a friend in Piyush Goyal, commerce minister, ephemeral finance minister and whilom national treasurer of the BJP. He has been a numbers man in all three roles, and yet he discourages critics of government policy from allowing themselves to be confused by the numbers, and by the structural restrictions that formal logic has imposed upon their thought. To get out of a financial hole, he seems to suggest, you must think out of the box.

Goyal has masterfully formalised and expanded the scope of a new strain of economic thought whose spark was lit by finance minister Nirmla Sitharaman, when she blamed the grim downturn in the automobile sector to the unholly nexus of millennials and taxicab aggregators. The kernel of the new vision was in plain sight, but it was sectorally limited. It remained to take the spirit of the thing and run with it, right out of the box and out to the great open spaces, where the mind is without fear and speech is free.

In keeping with the spirit of times, Goyal confidently attributed the gravitational theory to Albert Einstein, who had apparently arrived at it without getting confused by the numbers. True, there were few numbers involved in tracing the curvature of space-time. There were a lot of baffling Greek alphabets in those equations, instead. Let us set aside such confusions and concentrate on the achievement of bursting the bonds of numbers and logic that have held us hostage for so long. It is a transcendental, Promethean triumph. Let us celebrate it, but within reason. For the long tradition of Indian thought, back to Aryabhata and Brahmagupta, has been quite reasonable.

CAPITAL FREEDOM

SEBI should operationalise framework for easing restrictions on raising money abroad



PRATIK DATTA

FORMER FINANCE MINISTER Arun Jaitley had ushered in a critical, yet often overlooked, reform — the Depository Receipts Scheme, 2014. On paper, this scheme generously liberalised the overseas listing regime for Indian corporates. But, it was never fully operationalised. This was a major setback for Indian corporates. From 2013 to 2018, only one Indian company raised \$185 million on the New York Stock Exchange.

Fortunately, this situation may soon change. Finance minister Nirmla Sitharaman recently unveiled a set of measures to boost economic growth. This includes the operationalisation of the scheme by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI). Indian companies use depository receipts (DRs) to access international capital markets. DR issuance involves two steps — Indian securities are deposited with a custodian in India; against such deposited securities, DRs are issued by a depository bank in a foreign jurisdiction. Consequently, DRs are foreign securities which are traded and settled off-shore. This arrangement has three major advantages for Indian corporates.

First, DRs help Indian companies overcome the home bias problem. Home bias refers to the tendency of foreign investors to disproportionately allocate their funds to their domestic jurisdiction. Consequently, very few Indian companies are able to attract foreign investment. DRs avoid this home bias since foreign investors invest in DRs just like any other security in their home jurisdiction.

Second, DRs unlock valuation potential of Indian companies in innovative sectors like technology and e-commerce. Valuation of a business depends on the market analysts' exposure to comparable businesses. Since in-

ternational capital markets are more likely to have comparable businesses in innovative sectors, the analysts in those markets are better equipped to unlock the valuation potential of these Indian companies. In the absence of a functional DR route, Indian businesses are forced to use an overseas holding structure to list abroad.

Third, DRs offer various commercial advantages to Indian companies. An Indian company issuing DRs submits itself to the corporate governance standards of that foreign jurisdiction. This "legal bonding" helps gain trust of local customers, government and earn brand recognition in that foreign market.

India's tryst with DRs began with the first scheme in 1993. Liberalisation gave a major boost to export-oriented services sector companies. Given their high growth potential, they could easily raise equity capital. International financial centres offered sophisticated analysts who could unlock their valuation potential. Their marquee clients were also in developed countries like USA. All these factors shaped the 1993 scheme. From 1993 to 2013, over 330 Indian companies used DRs to access international capital markets.

In 2013, the Indian Finance Ministry set up the Sahoo Committee to review the 1993 scheme. The Committee recommended liberalising the 1993 scheme. Jaitley accepted the recommendation and announced a liberalised DR scheme in his maiden budget speech in July 2014.

This scheme recognised the principle of competitive neutrality. It allowed DRs to be issued on any Indian security in which a non-resident could invest under the Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999 (FEMA). The scheme also allowed any Indian com-

pany, listed or unlisted, private or public, to sponsor DR programmes. Indian entrepreneurs were given full freedom to raise capital in India or abroad.

The scheme also addressed the risks of market abuse. It allowed DRs to be issued only in permissible jurisdictions which are members of Financial Action Task force (FATF) and International Organisation of Securities Commissions (IOSCO). Further, it clarified that market abuse through DRs having any impact in India would be market abuse under Indian laws.

The RBI promptly amended the FEMA regulations to operationalise the scheme. However, SEBI was concerned with beneficial ownership. Indian law requires every beneficial owner of equity shares holding 10 per cent or more of the ultimate beneficial interest in a company to file a declaration with that company. The challenge was to ensure compliance by foreign holders of DRs on underlying Indian equity shares.

This issue was finally laid to rest by SEBI's Expert Committee in 2018. It observed that the threshold prescribed for beneficial ownership declaration under Indian law is similar to that followed in the permissible jurisdictions for DR issuance. It concluded that beneficial ownership requirements could be met by the information provided by DR investors in the manner prescribed under the laws of the permissible jurisdiction.

With this, the path to operationalising the scheme is now absolutely clear. Hopefully, SEBI will take immediate steps to fulfil one of the few incomplete legacies of Jaitley's tenure.

The writer is a Senior Research Fellow at Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas & Co



SEPTEMBER 13, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

INC PRESIDENT
DEVARAJ URS WAS declared elected, unanimously, president of the Indian National Congress at the pre-split session of the AICC. As soon as the session resumed its deliberations after the lunch break, Mohamed Shafi Qureshi, the returning officer, announced to the cheering delegates that Urs' was the only nomination to be received and six papers had been filed on his behalf.

MARUTI REPORT
FIVE FORMER CHIEF ministers have attracted adverse comments from Justice Alak Chandra Gupta of the Supreme Court for committing irregularities in official proce-

dures to help Sanjay Gandhi's Maruti concerns. While Bansi Lai of Haryana has been indicted for helping Sanjay Gandhi acquire land at the cost of defence interests, Harideo Joshi of Rajasthan, S C Shukla of Madhya Pradesh and N D Tewari of Uttar Pradesh have been indicted for helping him with bus-body building orders.

ELECTION LAWS
CHIEF ELECTION COMMISSIONER S L Shakhder said according to the law, no person could be debarred from contesting elections merely because he was being tried in a court of law. The disqualification clause could only be applied after a person had been "finally"

convicted. Elaborating, he said that if after conviction a person went in appeal to a superior court, he could still contest the election because the very fact that the appeal was under consideration meant the conviction had been stayed till the pending of the appeal.

IOC WORKERS' STRIKE
THE COUNTRY-WIDE STRIKE by over 11,000 workers of the Indian Oil Corporation threatens to disrupt normal life unless a settlement is arrived soon. The strike, led by mainly CPI-controlled unions, was complete in the 700-km product pipeline sector: Between Barauni and Kanpur, two refineries and the marketing network in the northern and southern regions.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The Israeli political leadership, with the help of Donald Trump, is making finding a way out of conflict with the Palestinians impossible." —THE GUARDIAN

Quota questions

Let's listen to the RSS chief. Contentious issues about India's reservation policies need to be examined



FAIZAN MUSTAFA

"THE WORST FORM of inequality is to try to make unequal things equal," said Aristotle. India has all kinds of unequals who were historically disadvantaged and exploited. Should they be treated now at par with the upper castes or as equals is the crux of the matter that RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has raised. He has not opposed reservation and the Opposition is unnecessarily targeting him. He has just called for a debate on reservation in a harmonious atmosphere between those who are for social justice through quotas and those who favour "merit". Reservation is considered anti-merit and a compromise on quality and efficiency of administration. Of course, no one really knows what "merit" and "efficiency" really mean. The RSS itself does not have clarity on reservation and that's why not only it has been talking in multiple voices but even Bhagwat has been contradicting himself on the issue.

The Congress has promptly termed the RSS and BJP as anti-Dalit. It seems to be still in denial and overlooks the remarkable achievement of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in not only making caste irrelevant in the 2019 general elections but in making substantial inroads into the so-called Dalit vote bank.

The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) reservation in Parliament was made initially for just 10 years. Thus, unlike Article 370 that referred to no time frame, this reservation was indeed temporary. As far as reservation in jobs and educational institutions is concerned, this is on a weaker ground as there is no fundamental right to reservation. Articles 15 and 16 are merely enabling provisions that lay down that if the state decides to make reservation in favour of SC/ST/OBC, this will not be considered as violation of the right to equality. Thus, any government is free to end reservation as and when it wants. With the abrogation of Article 370 and the abolition of privy purses, pre-constitution solemn pacts/agreements like the Poona Pact between caste Hindus and depressed classes no more have any sanctity.

This is not the first time that the RSS chief has made a demand for a debate on reservation. In September 2016, he had given a similar call for a review of our reservation policies and suggested setting up of an apolitical committee to undertake this exercise. In an interview to the RSS mouthpiece, *Organiser*, he had said that "we believe in forming a committee of people genuinely concerned for the interest of the whole nation and committed for social equality, including representatives from the society, they should decide which categories require reservation and for how long." Though Bhagwat had not advocated the abolition of reservation, the BJP quickly disowned him. By December 2016, Bhagwat himself made a U-turn and conceded ground probably due to another round of assembly elections and said "as long as discrimination remains in the society, reservation is needed." Meanwhile, at the Jaipur Literary Festival, Manmohan Vaidya, head of RSS's communication department, again advocated the abolition of reservation and said that "it is against the principle of equality. (Give them) opportunities, not reservation." In yet another damage control



CR Sasikumar

exercise, the RSS joint secretary clarified that the "underprivileged deserve reservation."

Since the RSS and BJP are two faces of a coin, it is difficult to understand why the BJP government in Maharashtra recently extended reservation to Marathas though the Mandal commission had identified them as forward caste and state backward class commissions had twice refused to consider them as OBC. In the process, the BJP government breached even the 50 per cent upper ceiling on reservation. Similarly, BJP governments have extended reservation to Gujjars in Rajasthan and Patidars in Gujarat. There was no statement from the RSS in opposition to these extensions to newer and politically dominant groups. Prior to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, even the Modi government created a new category of economically backward classes and provided 10 per cent reservation for them over and above existing quotas. The Modi government also argued in the Supreme Court in favour of reservation in promotions in Jarnail Singh (2018). All these actions of the BJP demonstrate that it is not opposed to reservation. In fact, it favours extending reservation to newer groups.

As a matter of fact, there is some merit in Bhagwat's argument. We need to examine some highly contentious issues about our reservation policies: How far have the benefits percolated down the ladder? Has an elite within the SCs/STs monopolised all the benefits of reservation? Should we extend the exclusion of the creamy layer to SCs/STs as well? Should benefits of reservation be confined to admissions or jobs? Should reservation at promotions be withdrawn? How do we define backwardness? Should social backwardness be replaced with economic backwardness?

We need to certainly examine some highly contentious issues about our reservation policies: How far have benefits percolated down the ladder? Has an elite within the SCs/STs monopolised all the benefits of reservation? Should we extend the exclusion of the creamy layer to SCs/STs as well? Should benefits of reservation be confined to admissions or jobs? Should reservation at promotions be withdrawn? How do we define backwardness? Should social backwardness be replaced with economic backwardness?

well? Should benefits of reservation be confined to either admissions or jobs? Should reservation at promotion be withdrawn? How do we define backwardness? Should social backwardness be replaced with economic backwardness? Have the 11 parameters of social and educational backwardness identified by the Mandal commission and approved by the nine judge bench of the apex court in Indira Sawhney (1992) become outdated and need revision? Should reservation be extended to the private sector? Similarly, in some states, if the number of SCs/STs and OBCs is more than 75 per cent, should we still insist on the 50 per cent upper limit of reservation? The "carrying forward" rule under which unfilled posts are carried forward to subsequent years, needs a critical examination. Similarly, the "catch up" rule on consequential seniority too must be seriously debated as officers of unreserved categories do feel frustrated when their own batchmates are promoted and become their bosses.

Even western countries promote the use of several mechanisms to ensure that societal diversity is reflected in all public institutions. The reservation system has indeed contributed to the diversity in our state institutions. If we are convinced that reservation does promote equality, the question of its abolition till we achieve substantial equality becomes redundant.

The writer is vice-chancellor, NALSAR University of Law. Views are personal

Orphaned by State

A state-directed stripping of rights is rendering citizens alien and inaudible



PAMELA PHILOPOSE

THE CIVIC DEATH of nearly two million in Assam has been met with an odd response from the rest of the country. How does one describe it? Ennui? Apathy? Acquiescence? Denial? Considering its ramifications, there has been surprisingly little public action or even conversation on it. A People's Tribunal on "Contested Citizenship in Assam", held recently in New Delhi, which unpacked the enormous human suffering and chaos unleashed by NRC procedures, was a rare initiative of its kind.

Could this indifference be because Assam has always stood on the periphery of the mainland's consciousness, and the fate of its newly declared "non-citizens" even more so? Could it be because there is some cold comfort in the fact that those left out of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) were not quite so many as initially projected? The argument has been raised, after all, that the final NRC result has been somehow "fair"; that the very fact that nobody is happy over its outcome; that there are both Hindus and Muslims among those now deprived of citizenship, should buttress faith in the system.

Could it also reflect a certain relief that the "Bangladeshi" spectre will finally get to be exorcised? It's been three decades now since Shiv Sena-led governments in Maharashtra drew political capital out of much publicised "deportation" drives involving the rounding up of terrified Bangla-speaking slum-dwellers, and packing them into trains headed for Kolkata. From election speech to election speech, their numbers were bumped up exponentially, growing from a few thousands to unstopppable millions. With religion as their main marker, they were profiled as job-stealers, bomb planters, destroyers of local cultures, grabbers of land.

The militarised terminology used to refer to people in search of better lives as "Muslim infiltrators", marked not just the first information reports of the police. It permeated the language of the highest judiciary. The Supreme Court verdict in *Sarbananda Sonowal vs Union of India & Anr*, delivered by the bench of R C Lahoti, G P Mathur and P K Balasubramanyam in 2005, quoted approvingly and without context, the communally coloured observations of a British official in the 1931 Census report, which saw migration as an "invasion" of "land-hungry immigrants, mostly Muslims". The bench observed that the state of Assam is facing "external aggression and internal disturbance" on account of "large scale illegal migration of Bangladeshi nationals". Such a communal framing has dominated the narrative on the issue over decades. But today, with a party committed to Hindutva in power both at the Centre and in Assam, such a framing has become

politically weaponised.

The irony is that this seeming indifference to the NRC process and the possibility that it could alter forever the constitutional notion of citizenship, is taking place against a steel-like political resolve to extend it to the rest of India. Union Minister of Home Amit Shah has not just termed "illegal immigrants" as "termites", he has continuously and emphatically iterated that his government will not allow "one single immigrant" to stay in India.

President Ram Nath Kovind was only reflecting this in his address to Parliament in July when he affirmed that his government "has decided to implement the process of National Register of Citizens on priority basis in areas affected by infiltration". Baby steps in this regard have already been undertaken. On the very day it was sworn back to power on May 30, the Modi government moved to decentralise decision-making on foreigners' tribunals. State governments and even lowly district collectors now have the power to set them up without a formal nod from the Centre. Another significant notification, involving the National Population Register, followed three months later. It is to be updated in 2020 and will allow the government to aggregate the personal data of people living across the country as a first step towards mapping, marking and classifying the population, should it choose to do so.

There is a curious paradox in all of this. At a time when India is searching for a top slot in the global order and possibly a seat in the Security Council, obligations undertaken by India vis-a-vis a slew of international treaties have either been discarded or trampled upon in NRC procedures. For instance, the right to the protection of the family as the "natural and fundamental group unit of society", guaranteed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, has been violated extensively. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, to cite another example, a child "shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents". Yet, among the most searing testimonies during the recent people's tribunal, were the impacts on children. In innumerable cases, parents are in the NRC but their children's names don't figure in it, and vice versa. A mother, who had lost her newborn while she stood under the sun without water to get her certification, wanted to know who had killed her baby.

Those who argue that India is under no obligation to conform to the letter and spirit of international treaties, need to be reminded that Article 51(c) of the Indian Constitution enjoins the fostering of respect for treaty obligations and many of these principles now inform national law today.

We understand citizenship as state-guaranteed right to have rights. We now need to become more conscious of statelessness as state-directed stripping of rights, and what it entails for the lives of those who are rendered alien and inaudible.

Philipoose is author of *'Media's Shifting Terrain: Five Years that Transformed the Way India Communicates'*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SAFETY FOR DOCTORS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Doctors as victims' (IE, September 12). The author makes a case for special provisions for doctors because violence against them may impact the health care of the patients. This is an irrational argument. The Constitution talks of equality. By the author's argument, there should be a case for the special provision for engineers as their services enable many to access hospitals.

Suchak D Patel, Ahmedabad

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Doctors as victims' (IE, September 12). The Centre has met the long-pending demand of medical fraternity by presenting a draft bill which has provisions to penalise those involved in violence against doctors. Causes for such assaults range from skewed patient-doctor ratio and a lack of understanding of medical phenomena among patients and their relatives, many of whom have unrealistic expectations from doctors. Increasing safety provisions in hospitals is essential to reverse the situations. Behaviour therapy is usually part of medical training and most doctors are trained in dealing with patients. But the increasing incidents of violence has created fear in their minds.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

GREENING LAND

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Shades of green' (IE, September 12). Nearly 30 per cent of the country's land area has

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

been degraded through deforestation, over cultivation and depletion of wetlands. The ambition of restoring degraded lands needs to be followed up by re-evaluating the methods used to measure the country's green cover. PM Narendra Modi said desertification will be reversed by adopting a landscape-restoration approach. This requires a strict land-use policy and better watershed management initiatives.

Sakshi Mathur Jaipur



AMIT MALVIYA AND KISHORE DESAI

Poised for a turnaround

Government's measures show that it is responsive to the economic slowdown

THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL Office recently released estimates of the GDP for Q1 2019-20. As per the release, India's GDP in the first quarter grew by 5 per cent. This was one of the slowest quarterly growth rates in the recent past and it comes in the backdrop of a consistent slowdown in growth for the last five quarters.

The release has kicked off intense speculation on the state of the economy. Picking on the recent data releases, certain sections of stakeholders have concluded, rather hastily, that the Indian economy is in a recession and that the country is staring at a "financial emergency". Is the economic situation really this worrisome? Is panic and fear mongering over the health of economy really justified? Perhaps a dispassionate assessment of hardcore economic data is needed to understand if indeed there is any merit in the doom and gloom scenario being painted by those sections.

Consider the macro fundamentals first. First, in 2011-12, India's GDP grew at 5.2 per cent. Compared to that, during the last 5 years (2014-15 to 2018-19), GDP grew at an average annual growth rate of 7.5 per cent. Growth touched 8.2 per cent in 2016-17 before moderating to 6.8 per cent last year. At this rate, India's economic growth surpassed most large and developed economies across the world. Moreover, this economic expansion

was accompanied by significant moderation in inflation and deficits on the fiscal and current account.

Second, annual inflation has been brought down from more than 10 per cent prior to 2014-15 to 3.4 per cent in 2018-19, one of the lowest in recent times. In fact, the average inflation (over the period 2014-15 to 2018-19) stayed at 4.4 per cent. Third, the fiscal deficit, that had reached unsustainable levels of about 6 per cent of the GDP in 2011-12, was brought down to 3.4 per cent in 2018-19. The current account deficit was also halved from 4.2 per cent of GDP in 2011-12 to 2.1 per cent in 2018-19.

Effectively, at the close of 2018-19, the annual GDP growth was 7 per cent, inflation was 3.4 per cent, the fiscal deficit was at 3.4 per cent and the current account deficit was 2.1 per cent. It is, therefore, not surprising that global investors and multi-national corporations saw merit in committing their hard-earned monies into India. Foreign direct investment increased from \$34 billion in 2012-13 to \$65 billion in 2018-19 (as per the Union budget).

Let's consider the external environment next. Globally, most economies are facing downward pressures to growth. The annual growth rates of large economies like the US, Germany, Japan, UK (excluding China) remained below 3 per cent during the last 5

years. To make matters worse, trade remained sluggish because of tariff wars between the US and China. As a result, Indian exports stayed more or less flat growing from \$310 billion in 2014-15 to \$330 billion in 2018-19. The less than desired growth in exports did put a stress on the Indian economy. Despite this, India's trade balance stayed at comfortable levels due to increased import substitution and softening of crude oil prices.

Data and arguments presented in the above paragraphs indicate that the economy today is "structurally" robust and stronger than it has been in the recent past. In other words, the vitals of the economy like inflation, deficit levels, trade balance are well within the comfortable range. These key indicators allude to the long-term stability and soundness of the Indian economy and that it is resilient enough to withstand the short to medium term domestic and external headwinds.

At the same time, the economy today is facing pressures from multiple quarters. This is evident from the slowing growth rate and other indicators such as PMI, core industry growth. While reduced domestic demand and global externalities may be contributing to this, the signs of a slowdown are evident. That said, fortunately, the government has not buried its head in the sand and has taken several proactive policy initiatives to tackle

the slowdown head on. Some of these include merger of public sector banks, credit expansion through NBFCs, bank recapitalisation and easy loans to MSMEs, faster dispute resolution and so on. Consultations are also on with stakeholders of other major sectors such as auto and real estate to urgently devise ways to address sector specific issues.

The above moves show that the government is cognisant of the urgency of the situation and its responsiveness is evident from its proportionate and swift action. It is listening, assessing and willing to take decisive steps to safely navigate the economy through the current turbulence. One may expect that the recent initiatives as well as those taken in the last few years should start bearing desired results pretty soon. While the next one or two quarters may still be difficult, the structural soundness of Indian economy will help weather the cyclical downturn. While economic alarmists from certain quarters may continue to spread the not so festive cheer, hard facts point towards a healthy Indian economy well on its way towards a decisive turnaround.

Malviya is National Convener, Technology Cell, Bharatiya Janata Party and Desai is a former Officer on Special Duty at Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister and NITI Aayog

THIS WORD MEANS

K2-18B

A planet with temperatures that can potentially support life, now found to have water vapour too



Artist's impression of K2-18b and its host star. M Kornmesser, ESA/Hubble, via NASA

ABOUT 110 light years from Earth, an exoplanet eight times the mass of Earth orbits a star. Called K2-18b, it was discovered in 2015 by NASA's Kepler spacecraft. It resides in a habitable zone — the region around a star in which liquid water could potentially pool on the surface of a rocky planet. Now, scientists have found signatures of water vapour in the atmosphere of K2-18b. That makes it the only planet orbiting a star outside the Solar System that is known to have both water and temperatures that could support life. Its atmosphere was studied by astronomers at the University College London (UCL). The results are published in *Nature Astronomy*.

The discovery of water vapour is not the final word on the possibility of life. For one thing, K2-18b's size and surface gravity are much larger than Earth's. Its radiation environment, too, may be hostile. "K2-18b is not 'Earth 2.0' as it is significantly heavier and has a different atmospheric composition. However, it brings us closer to answering the fundamental question: Is the Earth unique?" study first author Dr Angelos Tsaras said in a statement issued by UCL.

The researchers used 2016-17 data from the Hubble Space Telescope and developed algorithms to analyse the starlight filtered through K2-18b's atmosphere. The results revealed the molecular signature of water vapour, also indicating the presence of hydrogen and helium in the planet's atmosphere.

SIMPLY PUT QUESTION & ANSWER

How world is losing fertile land

UN Convention to Combat Desertification meeting nears conclusion in Greater Noida. What is causing desertification of land around the world, and what role does the Convention play in trying to combat it?

AMITABH SINHA
PUNE, SEPTEMBER 12

For the last two weeks, India has been hosting the meeting of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification. A major global agreement on issues related to land, the convention (UNCCD) seeks to address the phenomenon of desertification, the process through which fertile and productive land become degraded and unfit for useful activities like agriculture. The UNCCD meeting takes place every two years and the ongoing one in Greater Noida is the 14th such meeting. At the end of talks on Friday, the conference is expected to come out with a declaration on the decisions taken here to deal with desertification.

Why is desertification a concern?

A variety of factors, both natural and human-induced, are known to be affecting the productivity of land, and making them desert-like. Increasing populations and the resultant rise in demand for food and water, feed for cattle, and a wide variety of ecosystem services these offer, have prompted human beings to clear forests, use chemicals, cultivate multiple crops, and over-exploit groundwater. This has affected both the health and productivity of land. Natural processes such as rising global temperatures increase the frequency and intensity of droughts, and changing weather patterns have put further pressure on the land.

A recent report by the International Resources Panel, a scientific body hosted by the UN Environment Programme, said that about 25 per cent of world's land area has been degraded. Another report, by the Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, said that nearly 40 per cent of world's population was being impacted negatively because of land degradation.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) too came out with a special report on land a few months ago, in which it said that the rate of soil erosion in many areas of the world was up to 100 times faster than the rate of soil formation. It also said the annual area of drylands in drought had been increasing at more than 1 per cent every year in the last 50 years, and that nearly 500 million people lived in areas that have experienced desertification after the 1980s.



Parched fields near a dam in Beed, Maharashtra, during a drought in June 2019. Natural factors such as drought and various man-made factors are affecting the productivity of land worldwide. Amit Chakravarty/File photo

Desertification has implications for food and water security, livelihoods, migration, conflicts and even international security. Combating desertification refers to activities that prevent or reduce land degradation, and restore partially or fully degraded land.

The UNFCCC holds its general meetings every year, while CBD and CCD meet every two years.

Why was the need felt for such a convention?

At the time the UNCCD was born in Rio, degradation of land was mostly viewed as a localised problem, one that was mainly affecting countries in Africa. In fact, it was on the demand of the African countries that CCD came into being. The Convention repeatedly makes a mention of the special needs of Africa in fighting desertification.

Over the years, it has become increasingly clear that land degradation was impacting the global network of food and commodity supply chains and was getting impacted in return. The crops being grown and the quantities in which they were being grown were dictated not by local needs but by global demands. Changes in food habits and international trade have altered cropping patterns in many areas. Large-scale migration to urban centres and industrial hubs has seen a heavy concentration of populations in small

areas, putting unsustainable pressure on land and water resources. As an issue, therefore, land degradation of land is, therefore, much more complex than it appears.

To what extent does land degradation fit into the context of climate change?

Land has always been an important conversation in the climate change debate. That is because land affects, and is affected by, climate change. Forests, trees and vegetation cover are important sinks of carbon dioxide. Land degradation, therefore, reduces the amount of carbon dioxide that is absorbed, and consequently leads to a rise in emissions. At the same time, agriculture and activities such as cattle rearing contribute to emissions and are a major source of methane which is a much stronger greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. Restoration of degraded land can, therefore, have major co-benefits for climate change objectives. According to the report by the International Resources Panel referred to earlier, restoring 350 million hectares of degraded landscape by 2030 would take out between 13 to 26 billion tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions from the atmosphere. This would more than offset the emissions from activities like agriculture and cattle-rearing. The IPCC report mentioned earlier had estimated that such activities contribute about 25 per cent of annual greenhouse gas emissions, or about 12 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent.

What change can be expected on the basis of a CCD meeting?

A meeting of the UNCCD is not expected to come up with any headline-grabbing decision. The discussions at the CCD have so far remained academic and technical, mainly focusing on the kinds of activities that can be undertaken to restore degraded lands. During the conference that is ending Friday, India announced that it would restore 26 million hectares of degraded land by 2030.

Working on a recent mandate of the CCD, countries are making efforts towards achieving what is called Land Degradation Neutrality, or LDN, within their territories, and trying to ensure that the amount and quality of land necessary to support ecosystem services and strengthen food security remains stable or increases within time periods targeted by them.

TELLING NUMBERS

27,000 H1N1 cases in 2019 so far, peak years were 2015 and 2017

UNTIL SEPTEMBER 1, the year 2019 has had over 27,505 reported cases of H1N1 (swine flu) in India, with 1,137 deaths. A report by the National Centre for Disease Control, listing H1N1 cases since 2012, shows that two full calendar years (2015 and 2017) have had more cases than 2019 so far.

In 2019, the highest number of cases has been recorded in Rajasthan (5,052 cases and 206 deaths until September 1), followed by Gujarat (4,832 and 149), Delhi (3,583 and 31), Maharashtra (2,173 and 208 until August 31), Uttar Pradesh (1,057 and 25 until July 14) and Karnataka (1,882 and 88 until August 30). In 2018, which saw 15,266 cases and 1,128 deaths, the states with the most cases were Tamil Nadu (2,812), Maharashtra (2,593), Rajasthan (2,375), Gujarat (2,164) and Karnataka (1,733).

Across all years, the largest outbreaks in terms of cases have happened in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Rajasthan. H1N1 cases in these three states have contributed significantly to 2015 and 2017 being peak years, followed by 2019 so far.

H1N1 IN INDIA, SINCE 2012

Year	Cases	Deaths
2012	5,044	405
2013	5,253	699
2014	937	218
2015	42,592	2,991
2016	1,786	263
2017	38,811	2,270
2018	15,266	1,128
2019*	27,505	1,137

*Until September 1

LARGE OUTBREAKS, BY CASES

Maharashtra, 2015	8,583
Gujarat, 2017	7,709
Gujarat, 2015	7,180
Rajasthan, 2015	6,858
Maharashtra, 2017	6,144

Source: National Centre for Disease Control

MIT & Epstein: 'good money, bad guy' issue

YASHEE
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 12

JOICHI "Joi" Ito, director of MIT's Media Lab, resigned on September 7, a day after *The New Yorker* blew the lid off efforts by the high-profile research hub to hide a deep fundraising relationship with Jeffrey Epstein, the financier who committed suicide in prison last month while awaiting trial for sex-trafficking.

While MIT has ordered an investigation into the institution's ties with Epstein, the revelations in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times* have raised questions about the ethics of accepting money for "good causes" from tainted sources and, by ignoring accusations of sexual offences against powerful men, seemingly enabling them to claw back to acceptability, even respectability.

Ito and Epstein

Ito, a tech evangelist who came to head the Media Lab in 2011, has been described as a "master networker" who connected equally effectively with both idealistic students and



Joichi 'Joi' Ito has resigned as the director of MIT Media Lab. MIT

fatcat donors. The media reports have established that he accepted money from Epstein while being fully aware of the sexual abuse charges. Ito admitted to having taken a \$525,000 donation from Epstein for the Lab, and \$1.2 million for his personal investment funds. *The New Yorker* investigation showed that the Lab got, at Epstein's behest, gifts of \$2 million from philanthropist Bill Gates, and \$5.5 million from the investor Leon Black.

"The effort to conceal the lab's contact with Epstein was so widely known that some staff in the office of the lab's director... referred to Epstein as Voldemort or 'he who must not be named'," Ronan Farrow wrote in *The New Yorker*. Signe Swenson, who worked at the Lab between 2014 to 2016, told *The New York Times* that her repeated expressions of "disgust" at Epstein's involvement "was never listened to" — and that when she pointed out that MIT had officially "disqualified" Epstein as a donor, she was told that Ito had a "relationship" with the financier.

Epstein was accused of sexually abusing scores of women and underage girls, and using some of his victims to get to more girls. He was given a favourable 18-month sentence in 2008, and arrested again on July 6 this year.

Donations and ethics

Epstein donated large sums for scientists, which made him acceptable, despite the allegations he faced, to large sections of society.

In an analysis of "Why MIT Media Lab thought it was doing right by secretly accepting Jeffrey Epstein's money", *Vox* summed

up the argument that "anonymous donations from bad people are good": "Who would you rather have \$5 million: Jeffrey Epstein, or a scientist who wants to use it for research? Presumably the scientist, right?"

This argument — that "if someone is a bad person, taking their anonymous donations is actually the best thing you can do" — wasn't totally absurd within philanthropy, the *Vox* explainer said.

In a post on Medium, Harvard law professor Larry Lessig said that institutions like MIT receive donations from four kinds or people or entities: (1) wealthy individuals who only do good; (2) entities like Google or Facebook, whom some love and some hate; (3) criminals, but whose wealth is not the proceeds of crime; and (4) people whose wealth clearly comes from crime.

Epstein was in the third category, Lessig said, and argued that while a great university "should say, absolutely, it won't take money from criminals", if it does, then those contributions should be anonymous. Because, according to Lessig, "secrecy is the only saving virtue of accepting money like this".

Failed Rohingya repatriation from Bangladesh to Myanmar: a status check

NEHA BANKA
KOLKATA, SEPTEMBER 12

ON WEDNESDAY, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina blamed Myanmar for the failure of a recent attempt to repatriate Rohingya refugees. "We've seen Myanmar could not win Rohingyas' trust in creating a conducive situation for their dignified return," Hasina was quoted as saying in Parliament.

Her comment came two weeks after Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh had refused to board buses that would have taken them to Myanmar. This resulted in Myanmar missing the August 2019 target for repatriation. An earlier deadline was missed in January 2018, when Bangladesh delayed repatriation plans.

Repatriation targets

According to United Nations estimates, some 1 million Rohingyas have fled Myanmar since August 2017, and have been set up in two camps by the Bangladesh government in Cox's Bazar. In November 2017, following talks, Bangladesh announced that a

joint working group of UNHCR, Bangladesh, and Myanmar would be set up to work out the terms of repatriation, which would be completed by 2019. In March 2018, Bangladesh submitted a list of 8,000 refugees for repatriation, but Myanmar accepted the names of only 374, citing incomplete documentation. In May 2018, Myanmar announced that 1,100 verified Rohingya refugees would be repatriated.

Myanmar and the UN signed a confidential memorandum of understanding in June 2018. When details were leaked online, refugees rejected it. Bangladesh-based Rohingya political activist Ko Ko Linn told *The Guardian*, "We have long been seeking a guarantee from the Burmese government of restoration of our citizenship rights before we return. But they have skirted this issue of citizenship in the MoU..."

In 2018, Reuters reported on a list of demands by Rohingya elders at one refugee camp. They wanted Myanmar to announce that it would give the refugees citizenship; recognise them as an ethnic group; return land they once occupied; rebuild their homes, mosques and schools; and hold the



Rohingya refugees in a Bangladesh camp reach out to receive aid in 2017. Reuters

Myanmarese military accountable for killings.

The failed repatriation

The Dhaka Tribune quoted Bangladesh

Foreign Minister A K Abdul Momen as saying that Bangladesh and Myanmar were "fully ready" to resume repatriation, "but some Rohingya leaders and NGOs were reportedly

discouraging them to return". Four refugee families with some 18 people had almost boarded a bus, but were reportedly dissuaded by fellow refugees who told them they would not be able to return to their villages or get citizenship. The UNHCR said in a statement: "So far none of those interviewed have indicated a willingness to repatriate at this time. UNHCR will continue assisting the government of Bangladesh in this process..."

The genesis of the crisis

The Rohingyas are a Bengali-speaking Muslim minority in Myanmar, whose government considers them illegal migrants from Bangladesh, and does not recognise them as citizens under the Burmese Citizenship Law of 1972. The Rohingyas live mainly in the northern region of Myanmar's Rakhine state, which was once part of the Kingdom of Arakan (1429-1785) that also included modern-day Chittagong (Chittagong) in Bangladesh.

The refugee crisis followed attacks on Myanmar border police in October 2016 in Rakhine, for which the insurgent group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army took re-

sponsibility. In retaliation by the military, several Rohingya villagers were killed, raped and jailed. Human rights groups said Myanmar's soldiers were responsible for rape and killings even while Rohingyas were trying to escape.

Rohingya and Bangladesh

The Daily Star has reported that since 2017, 4,300 acres of hills and forests have been sacrificed to make space for refugee shelters. Some 1,485 hectares of forests have been razed and encroached upon for firewood.

In March 2019, Reuters reported that Bangladesh was "struggling to cope with the influx" of refugees, and wanted to start relocating them to the island of Bhasan Char in the Bay of Bengal, with UN help. Refugees began protesting and refused to relocate.

Inside camps, according to UN and media reports, refugees were facing violence, assault and kidnapping by fellow Rohingyas. Bangladesh had to significantly increase police strength inside the camps. Human rights activists reported that Rohingya women were being trafficked to various countries, or being forced into prostitution in Bangladesh.