

# Opinion

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2019

PETER APPS

**I**F IRAN'S GOVERNMENT was truly behind last weekend's cruise missile and drone attack on Saudi Arabia's energy infrastructure, it has put its potential foes across the Middle East in an awkward, uncomfortable position.

Like suspected mine attacks on tanker shipping in the Gulf earlier in the year, the strike—which initially sent energy prices spiking—showed just how little those who ordered it care for the norms of international engagement, even by the standards of the restive Middle East. That's not a surprise: both Iran and its enemies, particularly Israel and increasingly Saudi Arabia, have been fighting a shadow war on and off for years. This attack, however, marked a serious escalation—particularly if US officials are correct when they say the missiles were launched from inside Iranian territory.

Perhaps predictably, President Donald Trump's response was bellicose in flavour, warning the United States was "locked and loaded" but putting the decision on whether or not it should strike firmly in Saudi Arabia's court. So far, Riyadh has shown little enthusiasm for that—it appears increasingly bogged down in a controversial, messy war in Yemen, and neither it nor Washington wants shooting in the Gulf. Amongst those in power in Tehran, the calculations appear more mixed. Outside experts increasingly suspect hardliners believe that since Trump tore up the Iran nuclear deal, they have less to lose. Even if the United States were to launch military action, it would almost certainly only be limited. Trump has made clear his opposition to major Mideast wars, and the departure of National Security Adviser John Bolton removes the only senior U.S. figure who backed them.

## Interventions

With China rising and Russia reasserting itself, the United States is now much less Mideast-focused—and also less dependent on its oil. The end of the era of Iraq-style interventions is broadly positive—not least because it had fuelled Tehran's appetite for a nuclear programme. That had itself proved destabilising, including increasing the risk of Israeli military action, and prompted the Obama administration's focus on a nuclear deal to stop it.

That approach was dramatically ditched by Trump, who tore up the Iran deal with no apparent concept of what to replace it with. Powerful forces in Tehran were already pursuing an agenda of destabilising the region with covert action. The new US approach handed them a chance for ascendancy in Iran's unending internal battle for domestic power, and removed what constraints they had once felt. Particularly over the last decade, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps—and particularly its foreign-facing Quds Force under Major General Qassem Soleimani—has revelled in deniable actions across the Middle East and beyond.

Those actions included supporting insurgents attacking US and British forces in Iraq, Houthi rebels in Yemen and backing Bashar al-Assad's government as it battle for control of Syria. That had fuelled some calls in Washington for the IRGC to be listed as a banned terror

# Iran's new Mideast game

Saudi oil attack shows how Iran and its enemies, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia, have been fighting a shadow war on and off for years



A damaged pipeline seen at Saudi Aramco oil facility in Khurais, Saudi Arabia

REUTERS

group—but doing so, as the Trump administration did earlier this year, seems just to have increased its appetite for action.

Iran has long had a sophisticated missile programme, and has been testing drones and supplying them to regional allies such as Hezbollah for years. This attack, however, showed significant recent progress. That the missiles were reportedly able to evade Saudi air defences by flying behind them demonstrates striking sophistication.

## Houthis

Yemen's Houthis dispute US claims the missiles and drones came from within Iranian territory, saying they were launched from within Yemen itself. Whatever the truth, the attack clearly represents a leap forward in both technology and the appetite to use it.

So far, damage to facilities belonging to Saudi oil firm Aramco appears limited—Saudi authorities say full produc-

tion will shortly be resumed. That's unlikely to bother anyone in Tehran significantly. They may well not have been looking for a knockout blow, but have demonstrated their ability to strike the most sensitive facilities in Saudi Arabia without warning. Other potential foes, including United Arab Emirates and Israel, will have noted that with some alarm.

Such behaviour, the United States and its allies clearly believe, must not be without consequences—and Tehran should be braced for another round of sanctions. Much of the challenge here, however, is keeping the hope of diplomacy alive, giving Iran incentives to moderate its behaviour and regain admittance to the wider international community. That was the strategy favoured by the Obama administration—and then ripped up by Trump without any discernible alternative. In a particularly counterproductive step, the United States then moved this year to sanction even relatively moderate

members of the government in Tehran, including foreign minister Mohammed Javad Zarif, its chief negotiator for the nuclear deal.

Without appetite for military action, boosting diplomatic efforts may be the only option—and European states in particular have been desperate to keep such options open. That included President Emmanuel Macron inviting foreign minister Zarif to the G7 summit this summer, much to the irritation of Trump and the US delegation. Nevertheless, US appetite for a new deal may quietly be increasing. Trump's new pick for National Security Advisor, former US chief hostage negotiator Robert O'Brien, has a very different background from the mercurial Bolton. The next US presidential election is barely a year away, and the current incumbent of the White House would rather have a reputation than for stopping wars than starting them.

—REUTERS



**OUT OF MY MIND**

MEGHNAD DESAI

# No winners in the NRC exercise

**BE CAREFUL** what you wish for. When you get it, you may not like it.

This seems to be the situation with the National Register of Citizens (NRC) for the BJP in Assam. The headlines are about the 19 lakh left out. People from outside Assam, home and abroad, say that 19 lakh is too large a number. The BJP has been saying for three decades that the infiltration of Bangladeshi Muslims since 1971 has been massive. It was expecting four or five times the excluded numbers. Alas, once you start counting, guesswork stops.

Let us look at the numbers at stake. In any such statistical exercise, it is routine to say plus, minus 5%. The number excluded is 5% of the total. Statisticians would dismiss these numbers as random measurement errors. The easy (and statistically sound) way would be to say no one will be excluded whatever their papers. The reason for saying this is not political but simple understanding of the difficulty of measuring a large population accurately. Remember the debate about unemployment rates. In the NRC there are special reasons for expecting large errors. The Indian government, since the British colonial times, has always begun with distrust of the population it governs. Independence changed the colour of the Ruler, not the attitude of those in charge towards their subjects (they get treated as citizens only on polling days). One requirement of the NRC is that you produce written evidence of your residency in Assam. These papers have to predate 1971. Forty-eight-year-old pieces of (government-quality, inferior) paper would be in tatters even if you had preserved them.

Whichever way the game ends,

there are no winners. Those who want no exclusion would be unhappy and internationally India's reputation will suffer as an inhumane polity. The Assamese who began this agitation way back in the Rajiv Gandhi days will also never believe the numbers unless they discover that these are huge. For them only 'born and bred' in Assam will qualify, but if I am from a tribe living in Assam but not Assamese speaker, do I have to produce paper evidence? Why did Rajiv Gandhi sign the pact (Assam Accord) in the first place?

The BJP would also like a crore or more 'infiltrators'. But in their search for Bangladeshi Muslims, they should be careful whether their dream of One Nation is not under threat.

What about people from other parts of India who have moved to Assam and have no papers before 1971 proving Assamese residence? Especially if they are Indian Muslims. Are they infiltrators? If the NRC is repeated in each state, are out of state persons infiltrators? There were agitations against South Indians in Mumbai by the Shiv Sena in the 1960s. If the NRC is done in Maharashtra, will only those born and bred in Maharashtra or only Marathi-speaking people count as genuine? For 70 years, Indian economy has never grown fast enough to create sufficient jobs. So there are demands for local jobs for local people, defined as local-language speakers. The NRC will give support to such demands. We will have 29 citizenships for 29 states (Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh will become Union Territories on October 31) with 'outsiders' being hounded. Do we want to break up India in search for Bangladeshi Muslims who may have arrived 48 years ago?



Indian Youth Congress workers stage a protest against the alleged unemployment and economic slowdown in Delhi

PTI

# Golf for television

The 'Skins' game, with its winner-takes-all format is back. And it's tailor-made for viewers

**OVER THE TOP**

Meraj Shah



**THE 'SKINS' ARE** back. And no one's surprised that Tiger Woods will be part of the winner-takes-all format. So will Rory McIlroy. Throw in Jason Day for good measure, and while you're at it, get the local favourite—Hideki Matsuyama—too. That mix works: especially since you're doing this in Japan—golf crazy Japan; lots-of-money-to-spend-on-golf Japan. The PGA Tour has seen the future brothers. It's in Asia.

For those who may not know, the 'Skins' format is basically the pros doing what we rank amateurs do every weekend; a standard Nassau which involves a specific amount of money up for grabs on every hole: if the hole is tied, then the prize money snowballs to the next hole, and so forth, until someone wins a hole. It's a gripping format, both for players, and in this case, those watching. If there ever was a format made for television, then this is it. This event, coming at the end of the regular season on the PGA Tour, has been billed as

'The Challenge,' right along the lines of 'The Match,'—a similar one-on-one event between Woods and arch-rival Phil Mickelson that took place a few months back. That pay-per-view event was stitched together by GolfTV—Discovery Inc's OTT channel and app—that's positioned as a one-stop platform for golf programming from around the world. 'The Challenge,' which will be played on October 21, is the channel's latest salvo to push its offerings and drive viewership.

According to a report in Associated Press, 'The Challenge,' will have a total purse of \$350,000; most holes will be worth \$10,000 or \$20,000 while the 18th hole will be worth \$100,000. Now, by no means is that a lot of money for the dramatis personae on this stage: Woods, McIlroy, Maruyama, and Day play for way more than that, week-in and -out on the PGA Tour. For Woods though, the participation is likely part of the 12-year, \$2 billion deal that he inked with GolfTV last year that involves the golfer contributing exclusive content to the channel that's broadcast to over 220 countries around the world. The icing on the cake, for the PGA Tour at least, is that all four golfers will headline the Tour's first event in Japan—the ZOZO Championship—that will be held at the same venue as 'The Challenge'—the Accordia



Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy will be joined by Hideki Matsuyama and Jason Day for an old-fashioned 'Skins' event in Japan

Golf Narashino Country Club in Chiba, Japan, the following week.

Woods hasn't teed it up since the BMW Championship last month, and not played in Japan since 2006. "I haven't played a skins format in quite some time, so it will be fun to try something a little different and add a few strategic elements as we compete," Woods quoted in a press release. "There has always been some friendly banter between us, and that will continue until we get to the first tee." McIlroy, the reigning FedEx Champion, who edged out Brooks Koepka last week to win the PGA Tour Player of the Year, will be making his debut in a televised exhibition match. "There are so many fun elements to the challenge that will have me wanting to take home that title—playing with Hideki on his home turf, Tiger coming back to Japan with a green jacket," said the Ulsterman. "The motivation is certainly there for me, and I'm a huge fan of the skins format. I love the way it rewards attacking play and think it suits my game quite well."

In addition to the Skins, the 18-hole event—that is expected to finish under floodlights—will also feature 'special in-match challenges.' "This is our opportunity to think outside the box," said Alex Kaplan, president and general manager of Discovery Golf. "We'll put guys in different situations, and it will be a surprise to them what they are. There's going to be some fun tweaks these guys aren't used to." McIlroy, for one, is relishing the challenge. "There are so many fun elements to 'The Chal-

lenge' that will have me wanting to take home that title—playing with Hideki on his home turf, Tiger coming back to Japan with a green jacket—the motivation is certainly there for me," said the four-time major winner McIlroy.

There's no doubt that the format suits McIlroy's aggressive go-for-broke style of play. "I'm a huge fan of the skins format. I love the way it rewards attacking play and think it suits my game quite well. Anytime I can go directly at pins to try and make birdies and eagles, I think it puts me at an advantage. The other fun thing about skins is how you find yourself rooting for the other guys if you're not in a position to win the hole. You're hoping they can tie with someone else so you can play for that skin on the next hole. With the skins format, you're always in it until the end." But the real edge, or pressure, depending on how he responds to the challenge, will be on Matsuyama. The prospect of a Japanese winner, besting three of the best players on the planet, on home ground, is likely to draw huge galleries for the exhibition match. "I'll be grateful for all the support from the fans in Japan, but with the popularity of Tiger, Rory and Jason, I know they'll also be strongly supported wherever they play. It's amazing to have these great champions playing in Japan," Matsuyama said with typical grace—a cardinal rule of social etiquette in Japan. It'll be great to watch them too.

A golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game

DALITALITY

Putting Dalit life, culture, world at centre



SURAJ YENGDE

THIS IS our time. I want us to believe in the fate of history and its important effort in shaping our lives.

Lend an ear and pay attention to the musical whispers of those people who are warned not to cross the lines and remain in one's place like a permanently fixed graveyard.

It is not a call to charitable everybody. It is an invocation rooted in provocation of the masses that are most causal and yet deliberately manhandled by the feared oppressor — the privileged.

The child who is unaware about the totems of society yearns for the impossible and holds on to the curiosity deeply held within her bloodstream, inherited from her heroic ancestors.

her elder brother of two, Vaibhav, were burnt to ashes by the cowardly hyenas of the Rajput community in Ballabhgarh

We will take on these issues and many others, that is hoped will set alight the fire of humanitarianism fazed in the oppression of everyone.

Through this fortnightly column we aim to achieve what our ancestors so honestly bequeathed — to be brutally honest in truth-telling.

Taking a stab at his first ever journalistic piece, Babasaheb Ambedkar lamented the recklessness of newspapers in handling Dalit issues.

We would like to sit in the same tradition and contribute excellence to demonstrate the gifted abilities we hold together as a proud community.

Since caste relies on pollution, we would like to walk into hackneyed spaces dominated by mono-castes and exhale a breath of fresh air, eliminating the odour of casteism.

The Dalits are ready and, armed with sophistication, they will grant life to the

dying art of journalism.

Everyone coming under this shield will be granted life-long worth of work commitment towards emancipation from our despicable selves.

This column hopes to be the voice of the unheard, unfused to the candour of appropriation. It will use this space to critically look at the grammars of the oppressive caste world.

In the times when media has crossed the morals of ethical businessmanship — if there exists such — we aim to create a launching pad to direct the attack at the same institutions which thrive on mediocre savarna merit.

Either way, the conservative and progressive individuals in the media empire find Dalits an issue of mild concern, tossing Dalits into a limited enigma of Dalit death reports.

Dalit assassination.

DALIT FREEDOM MOVEMENT

The Dalit Freedom Movement is to materialise emotions of freedom into concrete action. We need to acknowledge the quality and temerity of the Dalit freedom fighters who are fighting a battle against casteism, capitalism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and all forms of structural inequalities.

In the Dalit Freedom Movement, Dalit art and Dalit culture sit at the foundation of dismantling hierarchy. Art provides a space to challenge and nurture humanity valued through one's existence.

We will put Dalit life, Dalit culture and Dalit world right at the centre, as all the savarna minorities flaunt it with pride. Based on the principle of equality and fairness, the readers will get equal opportunity to dive into the lives of Dalits and get educated.

This column is a modest start, yet unbridled by its audacity to hope more. We want to be ruthless in our criticisms of a system that should have gone by now. We want to be militant in our thoughts and in moral action, that warrants an immediate fixture of the problems that are heaped on our generations.

The conversation began a year and a half ago. We discussed about the various

possibilities to make it work. After a series of discussions, I asked for a page in the newspaper that would account for Dalit and Adivasi stories (a quarter of the Indian population). I was told in a mild tone, "Let's begin with a column first and then expand".

I accepted with a determination to make it grow.

Let this space be a cultural outpost for bringing high-brow interactions and unrecognised but equally powerful metaphors of a rich culture. Arts, education, literature, academic, and modern forms of nu-genes that Dalits are inventing, in the urban shanties of overcrowded smoky cities to rural segregated huts.

This space is aimed at philosophising the ontological and epistemological concerns of the Dalit stream. The origin of one's cry is to inject the warranted claims of human dignity. I want to create a new generation of writers and encourage the existing ones to risk breaking the barriers and to take a leap of faith in their own qualities.

Suraj Yengde, author of bestseller Caste Matters, is a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard Kennedy School and a recipient of the 'Rohith Vemula Memorial Scholar Award'

Yengde will curate the fortnightly 'Dalitality' column, starting today. He is available on @surajyengde

FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

Sanitation is a human right

LAST WEEK I was reminded of the reason why I endorsed Narendra Modi in this column when he first became prime minister in 2014. I believed then that he had been unjustly maligned in the mainstream (read liberal, Leftist) media as the 'Butcher of Gujarat' for something that has happened under other chief ministers who have totally escaped censure.

Now they are at it again. Next week Modi is due to be honoured in New York by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation with the Goalkeepers Global Goals Award. In an interview to The Hindustan Times recently, Gates explained that it was because of the Swachh Bharat campaign's success in building the infrastructure of sanitation across rural India that Modi was receiving the award.

It is because we in India did not want to talk about it that until the Swachh Bharat campaign Indians continued to 'defecate everywhere'. When Vidya Naipaul pointed this out in An Area of Darkness, he was reviled for being 'anti-India'.

The 'liberals' campaigning to get the Gates Foundation to cancel Modi's award could not care less. A group that calls itself 'Stop Genocide' delivered a petition with more than 100,000 signatures at the headquarters of the Gates Foundation in Seattle some days ago demanding that the award be rescinded.

Let me clarify here that I disapprove of petty officials deciding who is a citizen and who is not. It is not as if millions of people are flocking to India's penurious shores in search of a better life. Those who come are only the most wretched and desperate people on the planet, and if they find hope in India, we should be happy.

Let me also say that my support for Modi in this column has never been blind. I have been so critical of him on so many issues that when I last ran into him at the Independence Day party in Rashtrapati Bhawan, he gave me an icy stare and was warm and friendly to the other journalists who greeted him.

It is my view that sanitation should be considered a fundamental human right. And, if the Swachh Bharat movement wants to prove that it deserves this award then it should immediately start a campaign to end manual scavenging and send to jail municipal contractors who exploit destitute, desperate people to clean city sewers by hand.

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Follow Tavleen Singh on Twitter @tavleen\_singh

Annihilation of nature

GAINED IN TRANSLATION



G MADHUSOODANAN

ജി മധുസൂദനൻ

THE KERALA Sahitya Akademi published its first ever, comprehensive, environmental history in October 2017, that I wrote on the Akademi's request. A month later, the first cyclone in the history of modern Kerala was reported.

It shook my belief that Kerala was safe from natural tragedies. For days, I investigated if anything unusual was being reported from the Arabian Sea. Some research revealed that surface temperature of the Arabian Sea had been rising since 1997 due to carbon emissions, turning the sea restive.

An extremely severe cyclonic storm, Nilofar, had prevailed in the Arabian Sea between October 25 and 31 in 2014. In 2015, two more extremely severe cyclonic storms were reported. In October 2018, Cyclone Luban originated in the Arabian Sea and Cyclone Titli in the Bay of Bengal. It was the second time in history that cyclones formed in both the seas at the same time.

The increase in sea surface temperature in the Arabian Sea would spell trouble for India's western coast. Not to mention that high-intensity rains cause floods. In 2018, the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology and IIT Gandhinagar published research studies substantiating the claim that the increase of temperature in the Arabian Sea has been causing high-intensity rains in different parts of India.

The impact of climate change started making minor appearances in the country around 2005 and majorly around 2017. When we get ready to take on these changes, we would know how nature took a beating during the previous two centuries

and consider corrective steps.

India's natural wealth didn't suffer much till the advent of colonisation. Richard Grove has argued that the age of colonialism was also the period of Green Imperialism. Starting the beginning of the 19th century, the British cleared forests in areas that today come under states such as Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Assam and West Bengal, for commercial plantations.

According to a 2018 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), world nations have time till 2030 to hold global warming level to 1.5 degrees Centigrade. If carbon emission continues at the current level, warming may exceed 1.5 degrees. To hold it at 1.5 degree C, greenhouse gas emissions should be reduced from 5,200 tonnes to 2,500 tonnes — a decline of nearly 45 per cent.

According to IPCC findings, high-intensity rainfall is the key result of climate change in India. It says that India's annual temperature may rise (compared to 1970) by 1.7 to 2.2 degrees C by 2030. It will lead to drastic increase in high-intensity rainfall during monsoons as well as cyclones, floods and drought. However, the IPCC did not foresee the rise of surface sea temperature of the Arabian Sea, that we mentioned.

Between 2003 and 2017, India witnessed 22 cyclones that claimed over 700 lives. However, the country witnessed the severe impact of climate change in 2018 when between April and June, over 50 cyclones hit 16 states, killing over 1,000 people and destroying crops.

We cannot do much to avoid recurrence of such incidents but we can focus on climate adaptation or climate proofing activities. In the building of new India, we should try and restore the lost peculiarities of nature. Environmental restoration should be a key factor in future development.

Madhusoodanan (G M Pillai) is an IAS officer and director general, World Institute of Sustainable Energy

Translated from Malayalam by Yamini Nair

SHE SAID

Many moons, much maths ago



SHALINI LANGER

A COUPLE of days is all it took for us to move on from talking about trajectory, deceleration, orbits and Moon terrain, to tying ourselves up in knots asking, by way of gravity, what's maths got to do with economics.

However, who are we kidding? That Friday/Saturday at ISRO, where women acted as mission directors, men cried in public, and prime ministers were both broad-chested and large-hearted, was a blip. In the days preceding and that followed, our higher education institutes fell further down global rankings; the CBSE put in place a system to have two kinds of maths at school so as to check depressing failure rates; a TV anchor passed off a vinyl night-suit, a scooter helmet and socks for gloves as clothes one would need "in case of a colony on Moon"; more than one of them equated India's Moon mission with stripping "chaand"/"Islam's noon" off Pakistan's flag; one anchor threatened that India's next launch would be to Lahore; and a minister drew a much-too-pat equation to explain declining car sales.

And yet, ISRO, blocking all the noise, did almost get the job done. Vikram and Pragyan may be lost, frozen in what must be an awkward tilted position for eternity, but that part of the Moon will indeed forever remain Indian.

To us of a certain vintage, what can be more fitting? Whether nights slept on terrace, hide-and-seek games during power cuts, shimmer on the water on rare ocean-side vacations, the promise of a flirtation, or the declaration of a love — the Moon frames so many of our growing-up memories.

To most of us, Moon was also our window into space — the most magical thing in the sky that hinted at the mystery of that expanse, without any of the terrors of it. It also seemed almost at hand, not just because Neil Armstrong had been there, but also because of the many stories and lullabies of childhood, and songs of Bollywood, in which it figured.

Then one day father got a glossy picture book on astronomy, a rare acquisition in those times, made possible by



Illustration: Suvagit Dey

erstwhile Soviet Union's largesse of subsidised literature. Space became even more magical, about and beyond both Newton's discovery of gravity (yes, we couldn't have gone to Moon without doing this maths) and Einstein's expansion on it (or hoped to land without working out this equation). So many stars, planets, moons, asteroids, comets, debris, artificial satellites, held together as well as kept apart by gravity — which had found its perfect balance at just the required moment to sustain life on Earth. Chaos or intelligent design, science or God, who could deny that was a miracle?

I decided then that I would be an astronomer, a dream that lasted well into learning about Kepler's Law (more maths). For a while the favourite game of my sister and me was sitting atop a pile of quilts, and imagining it was our spaceship which required us to do everything from cooking to sleeping to bathing in that small square. Visiting friends joined us, and it required every bit of ingenuity to fit us all in (for, a = fm, or increasing acceleration so as to lift off our "rocket" meant either increasing force or decreasing mass — maths again).

Still, it was an interest difficult to sustain through the tedium and amount of science at school. The spark lit by India's first man in space in 1984, an event generating as much national pride as now, even on TV with graying black and white images (point to be noted), had got snuffed much, much earlier. Over the years, Hollywood turned space into mostly aliens, alien attacks, and Interstellar's mind-bending, time-altering, joy-killing physics.

Then came Chandrayaan-2, India's

first venture to Moon's surface. As the excitement built up, I tried to join in. However, it was not just the passing years or the blinding lights on Earth now that dimmed Moon's shimmer. Nor was it the disillusionment wrought by the media spectacle. It was also what that Moon's shimmer hid. In a touching book I had read, Maggot Moon, a regime fakes a Moon expedition to hide its excesses. In another, The Book Thief, a second regime's victim sneaks up from his hiding place on lucky nights to catch a brief slice of the sky. As the country gazed in (quite valid) admiration at its screens that Friday night, I couldn't shake off those two stories from my mind, and wonder: does the Moon shine as brightly for us all? That is the cost of growing up, I guess.

But growing up also helps one spot the hope in the hype, and on two aspects, the ISRO mission did shine a light: in showcasing the power of will and that of forgiveness. On that mission floor, we saw that superwomen come in all forms — most often in saris and salwar-kameez. And 'supermen'? They may have learnt that, in these muscular times, tears, hugs and forgiveness could be superpowers too.

As for Pragyan and Vikram, so long. Slip into that lunar night with the thought that we will remember, maybe even serenade you with that song Moon River, about wanderlust, about "Two drifters off to see the world... There's such a lot of world to see..."

National Editor Shalini Langer will curate the fortnightly 'She Said' column, starting today shalini.langer@expressindia.com

OUT OF MY MIND



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**Power crisis**

Has a power crisis broken out in the top leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Bihar? This seems to be the only reason for Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Modi's strong and unequivocal statement that there is no question of changing the "captain" of the NDA in Bihar (that is, Nitish Kumar) and he would continue to remain the "captain in 2020".

Unfortunately, Sushil Modi's statement has riled many in his own party who believe that he is trying to rob them of the chance to become chief minister by ensuring there is no vacancy for the position. They could be right. Sushil Modi is an intelligent and thoughtful leader but he is not the first choice of many in his own party. Some of these leaders, including C P Thakur, reacting to his tweet, said the next CM candidate would be decided by the party leadership and it was not a prerogative of Sushil Modi. Others have reacted slightly differently. They want Nitish Kumar to be kicked upstairs to the Centre. These include Union minister Giriraj Singh, former Union minister and influential Bhumihar Brahmin voice, prominent Dalit voice and party MLC Sanjay Paswan and state vice president Mithilesh Tiwari. Apart from them, several young party leaders and functionaries, too, have called for having a BJP Chief Minister through opinion pieces published in the media and tweets tagging the top party leadership.

Though it has almost been more than a week since these state leaders have publicly placed their demands, the BJP central leadership has not intervened. Meanwhile, Nitish Kumar himself, is watching from the sidelines.

**DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?**

**"A lot of efforts are being taken from across the border to spread unrest and disbelief and foment violence in Jammu and Kashmir... We have to create a new paradise (in Kashmir)... We hug each Kashmiri... The youth, mothers and sisters in Jammu and Kashmir want development and new job opportunities"**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi launching the BJP's poll campaign for Maharashtra Assembly elections, September 19

**CHECKLIST THE HINDI CONUNDRUM**

■ Home Minister Amit Shah: "India is a country of different languages and every language has its own importance but it is very important to have a language of the whole country which should become the identity of India globally. Today, if one language can do the work of uniting the country, then it is the most spoken language, Hindi."

■ Congress leader, Anand Sharma: "The Home Minister of India should know that Hindi has been declared as the official language long back. We should not stir up controversies on emotive and sensitive issues which have been settled by the maturity of India's Constitution-makers and the prime minister after Independence, especially I am referring to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru."

■ West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee: "people should respect all languages and

cultures equally but not at the cost of their mother tongue".

■ Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam leader M K Stalin: "Prime Minister Narendra Modi should issue a clarification on Amit Shah's statement. Else, the DMK will prepare itself for another language protest. Is it India or Hindi—a? India stands for unity in diversity. The BJP-led government is trying to destroy this and go against it. The home minister should withdraw his statement."

■ All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam leader, M K Pandian: "If the Centre imposes Hindi unilaterally, there will only be (adverse) reaction and no support, not only in Tamil Nadu but also in states like Bengal, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Only about 45% of the people speak Hindi and even today it is not spoken by a majority of the people."

**OPINION**

SHAKTIKANTA DAS

**Steps being taken to create a conducive climate for exports**

Looking ahead, several initiatives have been put in place and others are being launched on an ongoing basis to enable export industries to regain productivity and cutting edge competitiveness. They include upgradation of export facilities, integration of Indian farmers and their products with global value chains, and trade facilitation measures. More recently, efforts are going into reimbursement of taxes and duties, including electronic refund of input tax credits in GST. An action plan for 12 'champion' services sectors, including IT, tourism and hospitality, and medical services has been developed since February 2018. The Reserve Bank of India and the government are actively engaged in the promotion of e-commerce platforms that will boost the exports of both merchandise and services. All these steps seek to create a more conducive climate for exports.

**Capital flows**

With regard to capital flows, India has adopted an approach marked by progressive liberalisation but calibrated to the realities of the domestic situation, including the evolution of financial markets. India's hierarchical policy approach — preferring equity flows over debt flows, and preferring foreign direct investment (FDI) flows over portfolio flows within equity flows and long-term debt flows over short-term flows within total debt flows — has influenced the composition of capital flows.

Turning to equity flows, FDI policy has been liberalised across various sectors to make India an attractive investment destination. Sectors that have been opened up in recent years include defence, construction development, trading, pharmaceuticals, power exchanges, insurance, pensions, financial services, asset reconstruction, broadcasting and civil aviation. 100 per cent FDI has also been allowed in insurance intermediaries. In August 2019, FDI norms in single-brand retail trade have been further liberalised. FDI up to 100 per cent has been permitted under the automatic route in contract manufacturing and coal mining.

With regard to foreign portfolio investment (FPI), several measures have been undertaken to create an investor-friendly regime and to put in place a more predictable policy environment. FPI has been allowed in municipal bonds within the limits set for State Development Loans (SDLs). Greater operational flexibility has been granted to FPIs under a Voluntary Retention Route (VRR) which facilitates investment in G-secs, SDLs, treasury bills and corporate bonds while allowing investors to dynamically manage their currency and interest rate risks. The initial response to the VRR scheme has been encouraging. The Union Budget 2019-20 proposed to ease KYC norms for FPIs and also merge the NRI portfolio route with the FPI route for seamless investment in stock markets. Outward direct and portfolio investment have also been liberalised to give Indian entities a global scan and presence.

External borrowing norms have also been simplified under two tracks: foreign currency denominated ECBs; and rupee denominated ECBs. The list of eligible borrowers has been expanded to include all entities eligible to receive FDI, registered entities engaged in microfinance activities, registered societies/trusts/cooperatives and non-government organisations. Rupee denominated bonds or Masala bonds under the ECB route offer an opportunity to domestic firms to borrow from international markets without the need for hedging exchange rate risk. ECBs up to US\$ 750 million or equivalent per financial year are permitted under the automatic route. The mandatory hedging requirement had earlier been reduced from 100 per cent to 70 per cent for ECBs with minimum average maturity period between three and five years in the infrastructure space. Net disbursement of ECBs rose to US\$ 7.7 billion in April-July 2019, as against net repayments of US\$ 0.8 billion in the corresponding period of 2018-19.

**Exchange rate**

Over the last couple of years, the exchange rate has seen large two-way movements with considerable volatility imparted mainly by global spillovers. During 2019-20 so far, the rupee has traded in a narrow range, with modest appreciation in Q1 giving way to some depreciation in August and the first half of September, accentuated by drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities on September 14, 2019. In its External Sector Report of July 2019, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had employed a suite of models to assess the alignment of currencies with their fundamentals. For the rupee, the IMF estimates the REER gap to be zero, implying that the currency is fairly valued and broadly in line with fundamentals. India's exchange rate regime is flexible and market-driven, with the exchange rate being determined by the forces of demand and supply. The RBI has no target or band for the level of the exchange rate. Interventions are intended to manage undue volatility. This is reflected in the two-sided interventions conducted during the past two years.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the outlook for India's external sector is one of cautious optimism, albeit with some downside risks accentuated at this juncture. Among them, deepening of the global slowdown and escalation of trade and geopolitical tensions appear to be the most significant. Volatile international crude prices also continue to pose potential risks. Yet, there are underlying strengths that can be built upon to buffer the external sector from these risks. The search for new export markets and new niches must go on. Indian IT companies need to accelerate market diversification and invest in new skills and technologies to hone their comparative advantage. Remittances and non-resident deposits are likely to remain shock-absorbers. The overarching objective should be to keep the current account deficit within sustainable limits and financed by a prudent mix of debt and equity flows.

Edited excerpts from an address by RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das, September 19, at the Bloomberg India Economic Forum 2019 in Mumbai



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

The Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog or National Cow Commission, was constituted in February 2019. Chairperson Vallabh Kathiria tells Basker Tripathi, the commission will review state laws related to the protection of cows and ensure that all cow slaughter is stopped, including in states where it is still legal. Edited excerpts:

**'We'll review all state laws for gau-raksha'**

**What is the role of the new Aayog? Will it function as a think-tank or as an implementing authority?**

The Aayog has a huge mandate. It is an apex body which will not only advise the government on policies but also be involved in the implementation of some of them. The Rashtriya Gokul Mission (a mission to improve bovine breeding technology and increase their productivity) will now be an integral part of the Aayog.

We will also focus on gau-raksha (cow protection) by reviewing all state laws. We will also ensure that in states where cow slaughter is still legal, (it will be) shut down. We will issue guidelines for this and also monitor (the situation).

The Aayog will also promote successful cow rearing practices (along) with agriculture to increase the income of our marginal farmers, so that our prime minister's goal of doubling farm income by 2022 is ensured. We will ensure that farmers in the country get good prices from the milk they sell in the market.

A cow provides five major products called 'panchagavya' — milk, curd, ghee, dung and urine. We plan to promote start-ups that will

produce and popularise these products among the youth. We will also promote cow-based start-ups under the ministry of micro, small and medium enterprises to manufacture bio-fertilisers and bio-pesticides. Cow urine and dung can be used to make phenyl, soaps and other such products. Large corporates can also come into this.

Because of its importance in environment protection, a cow, in India, is referred to as 'mother'. But as we progressed as a society, we forgot its importance. Earlier people would coat their floors and walls with cow dung because it has antibacterial properties, but now you rarely see that happening. Reminding, informing and educating people about these benefits is something we will focus on. We will bring science and spirituality together to make cow a necessary tool for social transformation, poverty alleviation and to fight climate change.

**At 199 million, India has 14.5 per cent of the world's cattle population but it also has the lowest average milk production rate. Over three decades to 2012, the average**

**productivity of Indian cattle grew from 1.9 kg to 3.9 kg per day but this compared poorly with the 2012 figures from the UK, US and Israel — 25.6 kg, 32.8 kg and 38.6 kg respectively. How will the Aayog fix this?**

We will prepare indigenous bulls of breeds known for their high milk productivity, for example Tharparkar, Sahiwal, Ongole and Ganga-tiri. Their semen will be used on low-productivity indigenous cows and the female calves they give birth to will then become high-milk yielding cows. We will also breed and prepare bulls with good genetics and distribute them in villages.

But despite its agenda of improving and conserving indigenous cattle breeds, the BJP-led government has not been allocating sufficient funds to the cause. In its first stint, the government was supposed to spend ₹2,000 crore by 2019-20 on its flagship scheme, the National Gokul Mission, started in 2014. But it did not. Even now the Aayog has been allocated only ₹500 crore. Will this change?

In this term, cow welfare will remain a priority for the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) government. The budget will not be a constraint because we will work towards aligning state budgets with the priorities of the national government. We will invite non-profits to join the public-private partnership (PPP) model. There are many religious organisations in the country working on breed improvement — we will get them to work with the government. This is how we will get everyone together and create a network of like-minded institutions to protect and improve cow breeds in their own states.

**The Aayog has proposed the setting up of "cow tourism centres" with "an initial investment of around ₹2 crore per centre with public-private partnership", across India, said a Scroll.in report. How do you plan to attract private investment, and who are your potential tourists?**

All the locations in the country with good cowsheds operated by temples, laboratories working on cattle research, panchagavya production units and market centres, etc will be put on a map to form a cow-tourism circuit. For example, when people go to Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat, they don't even know that a state-of-the-art cow-breeding centre known for its work on the Gir variety exists there. So when we put all of these centres on a map it will not only create awareness for tourists, but also compel those living near them to visit. This will also create a marketing opportunity for people selling cow products at these centres. We will also develop these centres as model cow-sheds. We will invite private players interested in investing in these centres or setting up related industries nearby.

This will change people's perception about cow and cow-based industries. It is one of the most viable social business models in the country where you can earn money by taking care of gaudmata (cow mother). We are already in conversations with private players who are ready not only to come in tourism but are also interested in setting up bio-fertiliser (units), biogas plants, labs



VALLABH KATHIRIA

Chairperson, National Cow Commission

for genetic research and marketing A2 milk (a variety of cow's milk lacking A1 casein proteins that some believe is bad for health, a theory has been generally discredited by scientists).

**Will the Aayog also play a role in informing the NDA government's new push for natural farming? The government proposed this as a strategy to double farmer incomes by 2022. At its core is 'jeevamrut', a pesticide mixture of urine and dung from indigenous cows.**

One of our mandates is to reduce the cost of farming. If a farmer is rearing two cows, he can make fertiliser from the dung, the urine can be used to make pesticide for at least two-five acres of land. The farmer will not have to buy chemical fertilisers. His input cost will be cut

drastically and the milk from the cow will ensure additional income for the family. In the longer term, if we can convince enough farmers to take up zero-budget farming (wherein there is no spending on inputs and thus no need for credit), it will help us cut down India's fertiliser imports.

After the ban on cow slaughter, there has been a rise in bovine-related hate crime. The cattle economy has faced losses

in many states, as per news reports. Stray cattle are invading farms and causing losses. What role will the Aayog play in easing this situation?

I do not agree with this. This is absolutely wrong. There must have been one or two incidents of lynching.

Gau rakshaks (cow defenders) help in legal transactions of cows—from the seller's home to the buyer's. Mob-lynching took place only in cases where cows were being transported illegally. But even these two-three incidents should not have happened. We will prevent these incidents by training and sensitizing gau rakshaks so that they also gradually become cow rearers.

What do you propose for the aged cattle that poor farmers cannot afford to maintain?

The most important step is the establishing of shelter houses in large numbers. We have already started making these houses in Uttar Pradesh. Under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animal Act, 1960, all states have formed district SPCAs [Society For The Prevention Of Cruelty To Animals, animal welfare centres operated by non-profits in partnership with local administrations] headed by district magistrates. These will be given the mandate to gather stray cattle and put them in shelters. The government will initially provide them financial support.

Gradually, we are hoping that when these cattle are in good shape, people will come and adopt them. We will also experiment with the idea of making these shelters independent by using the available cow dung and urine available there. This will also bring awareness among people that even if a cow is not producing milk, it can help a family earn ₹400-500 through the sale of its products. This will change society's mindset towards stray cattle. It is a slow process and in the next five years we will try and achieve all this.

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**In Kharagpur, free aid finds a new platform**

A group of professionals has come together to give free treatment to the underprivileged through camps. But their choice of places is interesting, writes Thirumoy Banerjee

It's a Sunday morning, but Kharagpur Junction is bustling. The usual rush of office-goers is absent, but the urgency is palpable among passengers: weekday or not they have to reach their destinations. On time.

Comotion on railway stations as busy as the one in Kharagpur is common, but something looks amiss on platform number 2, where a crowd starts gathering. Ajit Das, a Kharagpur resident, on his way to Howrah, had complained of chest pain and almost collapsed. As fellow passengers insist that he return home, Das, 50, says he has urgent work.

People start shooting videos of the incident as a young man emerges from the group and asks Das to come with him. The crowd disperses. The man takes Das to one side of the platform, where a group of doctors is sitting. They tell Das that he might be suffering from heart blockage and give him first-aid. Eventually, Das leaves for Kolkata, with the promise that he will undergo some tests on his return.

Some professionals — from engineers to doctors, and from government servants to dentists — have come together to start a free medical camp, on what is one of the third longest railway platforms in Asia. The group, 'Born 2 help', which came into being in 2016, and now regularly conducts medical camps, awareness campaigns, and art and craft ses-

sions for slum children in different parts of the country, including Kharagpur, Jamshedpur, Bengaluru, and Kolkata, started the camp at Kharagpur on July 14 this year.

"We chose to start the medical camp at the station as there are many slums nearby. It is not always possible to visit each slum, but as the word about the camp spread, people started flocking in large numbers. Many workers and sweepers at the railway station visit us too," says Barun Paul, an engineer, and founder of the "volunteer-based group".

A seven-year-old boy is standing at the camp — christened 'Arogya' — and Paul politely scolds him, after doctors say something. The medics have found that he consumes denrite, because of which he has developed a severe whooping cough.

Dr Saikat Sheet, an oncologist, and a faculty at Midnapore Medical College, tells Business Standard that addiction to substances is common among slum children in the area. "We can find this out from the smell in the mouth. Because some of the kids are so young, they cannot lie about their habits, and they get caught. At such a young age, such addiction can be life-threatening," he says.

Dr Depayan Bishal and Dr Pritha Chaudhuri, a dentist, tend to the kid and give him medicines, before Puja Singh, 11, the



**The group, 'Born 2 help', holds a free medical camp on platform number 2 of Kharagpur railway station on every second and fourth Sunday**

boy's neighbour, takes him home.

"We do not give free medicines to everyone. There are passengers, like Das, who come to us in cases of emergency. In most cases, we give them advice and ask them to undergo tests and buy medicines from outside. But these children and some people from the slums are very poor. They would never undergo any test, or buy pills. So, we give them medicines, otherwise this camp

will have no meaning," says 32-year-old Sheet.

Paul clarifies that 'Born 2 help' is not an NGO, and it does not receive funds. "We have been asking people on various platforms to donate medicines. Our Facebook page has a large number of followers. We are thankful that many people have come forward to help us," Paul says.

But there were roadblocks. "It was not easy to set up everything. We needed volunteers to join us, and required clearances from the authorities (in this case, the Indian Railways). From adopting the extremely backward Belajhuri in Jhargram — a former Maoist hotbed — to addressing hooch addiction in many villages in the hinterlands, we have managed to cover some distance," Paul says.

Kharagpur Station Director Sonali Sahoo says that the group obtained permission to conduct the camp on the platform from the commercial department. "They hold it (the camp) from 9.30 am to 12.30 pm on second and fourth Sundays each month, and 50-70 people come here for treatment each day. There were no objections, since this was for a noble cause," Sahoo says.

Around 12.30 pm, as they wrap up the camp, volunteers — most of whom work six days a week — reflect on their "holiday". "We work five to six days a week, but this is our favourite day. A healthy smile on the faces of these children is all we can ask for. It is worth the effort," Paul smiles.

## No-biryani blues

Pakistan's coach is on point on dietary restrictions

Pakistan's poor performance at the cricket World Cup this June, when some cricketers looked distinctly unfit and overweight, has prompted the new head coach-cum-chief selector, Misbah-ul-Haq, to impose a ban on *biryani* and junk food at the national camp. He has issued orders that only barbeque items and pasta with lots of fruit should be on the menu for all teams in the domestic season while the same diet plan would be followed in the national camps. No surprise, the announcement has generated consternation and outrage in equal measure. Haq may

have attracted reproach from the players but he must be praised for doing his duty and introducing modern techniques to the team's training routine. Globally, top sportspeople — including chess players — follow strict dietary regimens as a matter of routine. A typical footballer's intake, for instance, consists of 65 per cent carbohydrate, 20 per cent fat, and 15 per cent lean protein.

With minor variations, this is par for the course for most field sports (cricketers may need more lean protein for explosive power and endurance). Alcohol is severely

restricted to a glass of wine or two bottles of beer a day, though most top sportspeople eschew alcohol altogether (notice how Formula 1 champions spray the winning champagne magnum with gay abandon but rarely take more than a small sip). Sweets and pastries are out of the question. Martina Navratilova, whose awesome fitness had her winning tournaments into her forties, allowed herself a sliver of cake if she won a tournament. Deep fried foods, similarly, are a no-no. *Biryani* and snacks such as *samosas*, *pakoras* and the like, would all fall in this category.

Is Haq overdoing things? As many, including cricketers themselves, have argued, some of the subcontinent's greatest cricketers — Pakistani, Indian, or Sri Lankan — have been notoriously gluttonous and big drinkers with no noticeable diminution

in the quality of their game. This is a problematic argument to make in the 21st century sports business. The manic fan following in the subcontinent masks the fact that cricket has been (and remains) a marginal game in the global context, and, until recently, involved far less money than football, tennis, golf, or even rugby and basketball. Till the 2000s, cricketers also played fewer matches, which allowed many top performers to get away with that extra bit of weight or a less rigorous lifestyle. The expansion of the World Cup venues outside England after 1983 marked the start of the sport's super-popularity, a trend that accelerated with the T20 format, which has generated enormous wealth. With the growing frequency of matches and owing to the fact that players play in three formats, the reflexes required in batting and fielding mean

that the sport now demands superior levels of fitness, of which diet is an integral subset.

Virat Kohli, unquestionably a world-class batsman and fielder, backs his punishing training regimen with rigorous diet control. It is worth noting that Australia, whose cricket team brought a whole new dynamic of fitness to the sport — including dietary controls — have won five of the 12 World Cup tournaments so far. Pakistan's talented cricketers would do well to follow the dietary restrictions set out by their coach if they want to become the world-class team they once were in a new and demanding environment. As for *biryani*, India's highest-ranked women's tennis player, Sania Mirza, often comically rued her inability to eschew the dish. Had she done so, she may have done far better than a career-best ranking of 27.

## Reaffirming Indo-US ties

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to America indicates that the India-US strategic relationship has the potential to become the defining partnership of this century

HARSH V PANT

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's six-day visit to the US (September 21-27) is likely to be an important marker in Indo-US ties. Bilateral ties between the world's oldest and largest democracies have been burgeoning but a section of the Indian commentariat has remained consumed by minor irritants. President Donald Trump's back-and-forth on Kashmir was analysed and over-analysed to see if there has been a shift in the American position on the issue. Trade disputes were elevated to a point where they seemed to be on the verge of derailing the entire edifice of Indo-US ties. The reality, however, has always been quite different. US-India relations have blossomed under Mr Trump and Mr Modi's substantive outreach to him has clearly paid dividends.

Prime Minister Modi and President Trump will be meeting twice in less than a week and Mr Trump will join Mr Modi in addressing the mega "Howdy Modi" rally to be attended by more than 50,000 Indian-Americans in Houston, Texas. This is expected to be one of the largest-ever events to welcome a foreign head of government in the history of the US. In Houston, Mr Modi will be participating in a round table meeting with the chief executive officers of energy companies. Energy will be an important driver of Indo-US ties in the coming years and Indo-US engagement on this issue will be reinforced by Mr Modi's outreach. India is working towards increasing imports from the US with a particular focus on oil.

At the United Nations (UN), Mr Modi will attend the UN climate meeting, apart from addressing a session on terrorism at the UN headquarters. He will deliver a special address at the UN General Assembly, but there are other events as well, especially the commemoration of the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, which will see the participation of several global leaders. Mr Modi's visit to the UN General Assembly comes against the backdrop of New Delhi's decision to abrogate Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. While India has found support in major world capitals and Pakistan's isolation is complete, Mr Modi's visit to the UN General Assembly would allow New Delhi to make its case to the wider international community more substantively.

Pakistan has tried to raise the bogey of nuclear weapons and created an impression of an impending conflict with India, but has failed to galvanise global opinion in its favour. Apart from China, no major country has come to Pakistan's support. Mr Trump's off-the-cuff remarks on Kashmir, where he seemingly invited India and Pakistan to consider his offer of mediation, was deemed a great victory by Islamabad, but soon it realised that there was no substance in it. In the presence of Mr Trump at their meeting in Biarritz, France, on the margins of the G-7 summit, Mr Modi categorically rejected any scope for third party mediation between India and Pakistan on Kashmir, saying the two countries can discuss and resolve all issues bilaterally, and "we don't want to trouble any third country."

India's outreach at the UN General Assembly this year has been described as "unprecedented" by India's Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Syed Akbaruddin, with a total of over 75 heads of State and foreign ministers meeting with Mr Modi, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan during the week, across various platforms. More importantly, Mr Modi's regular presence at the UN General Assembly special sessions is in line with his desire to project India's leadership cre-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi (left) with US President Donald Trump during a bilateral meeting at the G7 summit in Biarritz, France, at the end of August

dentials on the global stage. An India that wants to be a rule shaper, not merely a rule taker, should have a proactive approach to global governance. Mr Modi's speeches, which tend to ignore Pakistan and touch upon key global issues facing the international community, position India effectively as a global interlocutor.

At the bilateral Indo-US level, Mr Modi is trying to shrewdly demonstrate the potency of the Indian diaspora with his mega outreach event in Houston. He hopes to leverage this soft power of India in his dealings with Mr Trump. Mr Trump's presence at the event is an acknowledgement of this reality. A likely announcement on trade is on the cards. Both sides have been working on resolving trade issues.

The Trump Administration terminated India's designation as a beneficiary developing nation under the key GSP

trade programme in June this year, after determining that New Delhi has not assured the US that it will provide "equitable and reasonable access" to its markets. India imposed retaliatory tariffs on 28 US prod-

ucts — including almonds and apples — a year after announcing them, to counter the increase in steel and aluminium tariffs by the US and withdrawal of duty-free benefits to Indian exporters. But the two nations have engaged with each other throughout this challenging phase.

New Delhi also remains cognizant of the fact that it could benefit significantly from the ongoing US-China dispute if it takes appropriate policy measures. So, it would be important for Mr Modi to sell India as an investment destination to US investors, who would be keen to hear the Indian prime minister at a time when the global economy is slowing down. A number of measures announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman are aimed at reassuring the investor community that India remains open for business. And Mr Modi would be conveying a similar message to American investors.

But what this visit of Mr Modi to the US would underscore once again is that Indo-US ties remain robust and, in the words of India's ambassador to the US Harsh Vardhan Shringla, the India-US strategic relationship has the potential to become the "defining partnership" within this century. Given how far this relationship has travelled in the last few years, this clearly doesn't seem like an exaggeration.

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## Why more monetary easing is on the cards

ARINDAM GUPTA

Banks source about 1 per cent of their funds from the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) repo window and compensate the central bank by paying interest at the repo rate. This funding is normally required for seven to 14 days, when banks face a shortfall. But, a cut in lending rates should be related more to similar cuts in deposit rates than to a cut in the repo rate. The simple reason: Banks obtain almost 99 per cent of their lendable resources from public deposits.

Surprisingly, State Bank of India (SBI), the country's largest bank, decided to discontinue repo-rate lending rate (RLLR) on September 10, after having implemented it in July. This is more so as the RBI issued a circular on September 4, making it mandatory from October 1 for all banks to link their lending rates to one of three external benchmarks. These benchmarks comprise the repo rate, three-month or six-month treasury bill yields, and any benchmark suggested by Financial Benchmarks India, a private organisation that publishes debt market rates.

Bank of Baroda, the second-largest bank, however made the RLLR effective from August. All banks are required to migrate from the marginal cost of lending rate (MCLR), which has been there since April 1, 2016. Any change in the value of the new external benchmark will find expression in bank lending rates at a much quicker pace than now. Expectedly, such transmission will now take place on the first day of the following

**Any change in the value of the new external benchmark mandated by the RBI will find expression in bank lending rates far more quickly than has been happening until now**

month, whereas in the previous system it used to happen with a lag of three to four months. In this context, SBI's decision to stick to the MCLR is expected to last till the end of the current month only.

After maintaining a 6 per cent or above rate consistently until June 6, the RBI announced a record low repo rate of 5.75 per cent. Thereafter, the latest rate cut by 35 basis points (bps) on August 7 resulted in a cumulative back-to-back cut in the repo rate by 110 bps or 1.1 per cent this year. It is anticipated that there will be another rate cut by the RBI in its October policy by about 40 bps, to take it even below 5 per cent in the current fiscal year.

Non-bank finance companies (NBFCs) facing a cash crunch too are expected to benefit from the rate cut by utilising less costly funds from banks. NBFCs, engaged mostly in housing finance and going through a liquidity crisis in the recent past, would get a fresh lease of life by offering more funds for the real estate sector.

Year-on-year (YoY) growth in bank loans averaged 11.90 per cent between

2012 and 2019. Against this standard, 11.6 per cent, 12 per cent, and 12.2 per cent YoY growth in bank loans for the fortnightly period ended August 16, August 2, and July 19, respectively, do not denote any clear positive signal of rate cuts on bank lending. The only exception was after the 25-bps rate cut on February 7, when bank loans grew between 13 and 14.5 per cent between March and May.

Interest rates on deposits were also recently linked by SBI with the repo rate as an external benchmark. Effective May 1, SBI announced that its interest rate on savings bank accounts having balances above ₹1 lakh would be linked to the repo rate, and the rate of interest would be 2.75 percentage points less than the repo rate. SBI has reduced interest rates on its fixed deposits (FDs) on a few occasions, the last time on September 10 for a second time within 15 days. Other banks too have lowered interest rates on FDs in the last one month. Banks, which are paying lower interest than small savings schemes such as Public Provident Fund (PPF) and National Savings Certificates (NSC), should have refrained from further lowering the rate so as not to lose customers.

Cooperative banks and small finance banks have also been paying at least 150 bps more on FDs than what commercial banks pay.

If the interest rate on bank deposits is linked to any external benchmark, it would jeopardise the banks' fund-raising ability. Interest rates on small savings schemes are likely to be reduced very shortly, to maintain parity. The government has until now not announced any reduction of interest rates on senior citizens' savings schemes, ostensibly for political reasons. But, all these steps would indeed affect retired people, and particularly those dependent on interest income. Loan takers are seen to be benefitting at the cost of depositors.

The government says that subsequent rate cuts would propel economic growth with more liquidity at a cheaper cost. The government had to act proactively to boost a stagnating real-estate sector and a slowing auto sector with more public investment.

The repo rate cuts have had no visible effects on inflation. The consumer price inflation figure, at 3.21 per cent in August, has been the highest in 10 months, increasing from 3.15 per cent in July and 3.18 per cent in June. With inflation in check in accordance with the RBI's standards, the central bank could possibly resort to more monetary easing.

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### OTHER VIEWS

#### E-cigarette ban runs the risk of sending them underground

They should be regulated, heavily taxed and come with health warnings

Smoking is injurious to health, and the use of tobacco products has been linked to a host of diseases, including various cancers and cardiovascular ailments. "Vaping", or the use of e-cigarettes (called ENDS or Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems), has resulted so far in seven confirmed deaths in the US. Cigarettes, chewing tobacco and related products continue to be legal in India, and through being heavily taxed as well as via the government's stake in domestic tobacco giants, significantly add to the earnings of the exchequer. However, on Wednesday, the Union government announced an ordinance banning ENDS.

Meanwhile, the tobacco industry has welcomed the move and share prices of ITC and VST Industries registered a sharp increase in the wake of the ban. In the worst-case scenario, vaping will be as bad as smoking. And like cigarettes, ENDS must be regulated, come with health warnings, not be sold to minors, etc. Like other "sin goods", they can be taxed to the point of disincentivising their use. By banning ENDS and maintaining the status quo on tobacco products, the government is in danger of giving the impression that it is protecting the tobacco industry's interests against a disruptor in



that market. The e-cigarette ban is a symptom of a larger malaise — governing by the brute force of a hammer when the subtlety of a scalpel is required. Prohibition does not work. A conversation about the reasons for addiction just might.

The Indian Express, September 20

#### A tale of neglect

Small farmers need formal finance

A recent report by the Reserve Bank of India found that despite a plethora of schemes aimed at financial inclusion, only 40.9 per cent of small and marginal farmers have so far been covered by the banking system. The reasons are of course well-known. Banks do not want to give loans to citizens who have no adequate collaterals to offer. Hence loans for consumption and working capital are denied, reflecting prudent banking practice. The required loans are obtained from the informal sector.

Small and marginal farmers have continued to be a large category in India for decades. Their average uneconomical size of holdings is a mere 1.08 hectares. Hence, they remain vulnerable with

little hope of escaping the category, unless they decide to migrate out of the rural sector in search of greener pastures of urban locales and manufacturing jobs. However, with low skills of the migrants and a slowing down of industry, such jobs are alarmingly scarce. They have to fall back on rural sources of subsistence income to survive. The findings of the RBI report are, therefore, hardly surprising. Economists have stressed the importance of land reforms that give legal usufruct rights to tenants and sharecroppers. Such titles can be used as collaterals. Rural employment outside of agriculture proper is another important area which must be addressed urgently.

The Telegraph, September 20

#### Dirty Bharat

Govt must end manual scavenging

Even as the country gears up to celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, the Supreme Court has turned the spotlight on what the Father of the Nation called "a blot on humanity" — untouchability. The apex court lamented that caste discrimination existed even over 70 years after Independence, exemplified by the inhuman and life-endangering practices of manual scavenging and manhole cleaning. According to a conservative estimate by the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis, at least 50 persons died cleaning sewers in the first half of 2019. The actual nationwide toll would be far higher as the "official" figure pertains to only eight states — Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, Punjab, Gujarat,

Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu — and underreporting of the cases is widely prevalent. In the West, besides in Asian nations like Japan and Malaysia, mechanical and automated systems are used to clean sewers, minimising or entirely doing away with the need to send workers inside the "gas chambers".

October 2 will also mark five years of the launch of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, the government's grand cleanliness mission. A befitting tribute to Gandhi would be to ensure safe working conditions for the sewermen and empower them with sophisticated equipment to do their job professionally — with their dignity intact.

The Tribune, September 20



