CHATTERBOX

Smoke without fire

Is Margaret Alva joining the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)? It does demand suspension of belief but newspaper reports have come out saying that she, along with her second son Nivedit, is proposing to dump the Congress party and join the BJP. However, denials followed almost instantly, so this might be a case of smoke without fire.

Alva, who has been a union cabinet minister and governor in various Congress regimes, has never had any charges of corruption against her, has been an adoring follower of Indira Gandhi and a colleague of Rajiv Gandhi. Her other son Nikhil, is one of Rahul Gandhi's closest advisors and obviously this information has been floated with Nikhil Alva as the target, not Mrs Alva, who, from all accounts, is leading a quiet retired life. However, she has hit back with aplomb. "I have had no 'negotiations' or intention of leaving the party, least of all joining the BJP to which many politicians have migrated to protect themselves. Each party has its identity and ideology. I cannot under any circumstances exchange mine for that of the BJP," she tweeted, earlier this week.

No more than two

A two child norm is likely to be the next initiative of the BJP, making it statutory for all candidates who want to hold government jobs, including public office at any level, to have a maximum of two children. The idea has already been rolled out by the Assam government led by the BJP for applicants for government jobs after 2021. Assam is also the progenitor of the National Register of Citizens idea.

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?

"The observance of Diwali is an important reminder of the significance of one of our Nation's core tenets – religious liberty. My administration will continue to defend the rights enshrined in our Constitution that enable people of all faiths to worship according to their beliefs and conscience"

US President Donald Trump post Diwali celebrations at his Oval office, Friday, October 25

CHECKLIST
WHY WE LOST: WHAT LEADERS SAID ABOUT HARYANA, MAHA BYPOLLS

- Kailash Vijayavargiya, BJP General Secretary: "I can clearly see the shortcomings in our management of the Haryana elections. The BJP rebels fought elections and we failed to persuade them (to pull out)…"
- Bhupinder Singh Hooda, former chief minister Congress, Haryana: "We would have won a full majority if we had more time."
- Congress leader, Ghulam Nabi Azad: "The Congress would have performed much better if Mr Hooda had been in action six months earlier"
- Chief Minister of Punjab and Congress leader, Amrinder Singh: " We really won the show, with a little more effort we would have won."
- Eknath Khadse, BJP leader: "I retained the seat in hostile conditions for several years, but the party lost it despite the situation being favourable. We will find out the reasons behind the defeat...I am unhappy that the BJP could not get desired results in North Maharashtra in the elections."
- Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)'s in-charge of Maharashtra Ashok Siddharth: "Suresh Sakre contested assembly polls from Nagpur (North) against the wishes of the party and did not campaign for other candidates. He was defeated and the party too suffered"
- Congress leader Sanjay Nirupam: "Accountability needs to be fixed in the party. Who finalised the candidates for the seats in Mumbai and what efforts were taken to get them elected?"
- Maharashtra Chief Minister, Devendra Fadnavis: "The two seats we regret losing are Satara and Parli. We were confident that Pankaja Munde would win. Some of our Ministers have also lost and we will analyse this in due course. We think the rebellion has cost us and we will also look into that."

OPINION
RAVI BATRA

America's primary foreign goal is a terror-free world

Permit me a brief relevant sentence about me: I am a New Yorker, having left India when I was 7 years old, and on 9/11 I tasted the dust of WTC. Since then, I see serving the "best interests" of the United States in first eradicating terror — as there are no rights and no law, if terror reigns. I am bold enough to assert that that ought to be America's Primary Foreign Policy goal: a Terror-Free World. While the title of today's Hearing is "Human Rights in South Asia," its been truncated by some to be the "Kashmir Hearing." To them, I say, why not call it "Can We Let Terror Reign?," or better yet, "Let's Forget History & Public Safety." The world is changing, and so is terror. It used to be that an "insult" could trigger a lone-wolf terrorist. After the demented massacre of peaceful worshipers in Christ Church, a Billionaire's adult kids blew themselves up on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka, thereby trying to make it a Holy War — a war we must not permit to even get started. Terror is bad enough; we need not drag Religion into it. This begs the question of "sequencing," for as we put our socks on before our shoes, we must first eradicate terror and protect public safety, so law and order may govern society, and any violation of rights — be they constitutional, statutory, contractual or human rights — the courts can fashion a just remedy one-case at a time.

America is, and must remain, a force for good, and our precious freedoms, which we all take for granted — the very nectar of American Exceptionalism born of our cherished separated powers regime — is why the good folks around the world love us. But freedoms require, as we well know thanks to Abraham Lincoln, sometimes even a Civil War, with suspension of habeas corpus, to first keep the nation united, restore public safety, and only then, can a government "of, by and for" the people govern justly. The United States has two co-equal political branches. A fact often not well comprehended by nations around the world. Yet, to them, we, the United States, the Executive and the Congress — have to make clear that we are a friend of South Asia in general, and the Sub-Continent in particular. India is why Columbus discovered the Americas in 1492, and hence, India can claim to be America's birth mother. The Indian Constitution was drafted by a Columbia Law School graduate, Dr B R Ambedkar, who liberally took our Constitution and Supreme Court precedents and wrote India's Constitution. It is this singular fact that we can root our relationship in, and with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's promise of "indivisibility" made in his Joint Address to Congress, let freedom ring all over South Asia. Pakistan's celebrity PM Imran Khan is a man I respect and have much hope in, for he knows what a rules-based order is, given his super-star status of a cricketer. He knows that Terrorists have taken residence in his country, and are a threat to our service members, as well as his neighbors in Afghanistan and India. That nations use Terror as part of statecraft cannot be permitted. I'd argue even more: counterbalance is a failed pillar of statecraft, and ought to be abandoned.

Afghanistan

It is clear to me for some time that we must maintain our military base in Afghanistan permanently, even before I visited Tajikistan in May 2019, where I had candid discussions with Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin, and then spoke at the High Level joint conference on Counter-Terrorism convened by Tajikistan and UN-OCT. We have remained in Germany and Japan for 70 years. If we are to contain Terror successfully in South Asia by "nipping it in the bud," and not wait for another attack in Times Square, we must be close enough to act.

Kashmir

Watching Brexit is torture. The Partition of 1947 was much worse, and Lord Mountbatten, and his erstwhile Major Brown, played fast, loose and dirty. I wrote an OpEd that was published in various papers, entitled: "Kashmir - Heaven on Earth; Only If Your Remember Louisiana and Alaska." A simple point worth making: Kashmir was attached to India by a legal Decree duly signed by its then-Hindu ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, several months after the needlessly bloody Partition when tens of millions were killed. Like our acquisition of Louisiana from Napoleon, and Alaska from the Czar of Russia, no then resident of Louisiana or Alaska could force us, the United States, to hold an election so the residents could become an independent nation. Their choice was to "love us," or "leave us." Same applied to India in 1947. What has transpired, to be kind, is nothing short of malpractice of relevant leaders, well recorded in history, with ordinary people who just want their version of the "American Dream" paying a heavy price.

Like Lincoln, PM Modi took extraordinary steps: first, legal amendments to have legal authority, and then, second, installing a massive force to prevent fatalities in Kashmir from motivated fire-fights by cross-border or home-grown Terrorists. He said he did this to bring the promise of equal rights and freedoms to all Indians. His actions on August 5, 2019 were judicious, as they were careful. No war broke out. Terrorists were immobilized, as communications and internet were cut off. India, it seems, learned from her Mumbai Terror attack. Indeed, landing at JFK airport, when standing in line for immigration inspection, there is no phone service or internet connection. Safety matters. Indeed, I owe India an apology, as when she suffered her Mumbai Terror attack on November 26, 2008, when Jews and Americans were singled out for death by Pakistan-based Terrorists, I joined in arguing for "restraint." I was wrong. Terror needs to be eradicated, so our rights and freedoms mean something.

Edited excerpts from a testimony by Ravi Batra, Chair, National Advisory Council for South Asian Affairs in Washington to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and Nonproliferation on: "Human Rights in South Asia: Views from the State Department and the Region" 22 October

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

Mohammed Yousuf Tarigami, 72, a four-time legislator of the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly and a member of the central committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) was recently in Delhi for a check-up at AIIMS. In an interview to **Archis Mohan**, Tarigami talks about the situation in Kashmir and how it needs to be addressed. Edited excerpts.

'Kashmiris have been humiliated'

With the date (October 31) when Jammu and Kashmir loses its statehood and gets bifurcated approaching, what is the situation on the ground?

The situation is very painful. It is unbelievable for those who have not experienced it before. It is a terrible period for Kashmiris. It could have serious implications on the future of our country, its polity and ethos. It's been 80-days (since the clampdown). Life has been paralysed. Schools, colleges and universities are open but without teachers and students. We have seen turmoil earlier as well. For the past 30 years, since 1989, there is virtually bloodbath going on, lots of violence and destruction. But the shock and distrust that our population is facing now is unprecedented.

The entire community of the people of Kashmir, irrespective of earlier divides, like mainstream and separatist, this or that group, strongly feels that we have been humiliated. Those who have stood for the country's unity, who have sacrificed, faced bullets, as also the common people, feel betrayed today. Here lies the danger ahead. It needs to be taken care of urgently.

But isn't lack of protests in Kashmir a sign of normalcy?

How many times have you seen protests inside the Tihar jail? Come visit Kashmir and see for yourself. I am not cooking up stories. I am a responsible citizen.

A basic principle of democracy is to make the government accountable. In our case, Article 370 has been abrogated arbitrarily. The Constitution in J&K has been dismantled, the state itself bifurcated but they claim they are integrating the people of J&K with the rest of the country. Is this integration? I do not know my fate when I return to Kashmir. Many of my comrades are either in detention camps or under house arrest. Young boys are languishing in jails and their parents have no idea about their whereabouts. At least provisions of the Constitution of India, fundamental rights should have worked in J&K. Shouldn't I have the freedom to express my pain, know the reasons for my detention? The Constitution of India is non-existent in J&K today because of the whims of the leaders ruling the country today. They talk as if the people are willing to suffer. If that is true, then let people in Delhi experience life without internet for a week.

The government claims there is normalcy since there is no bloodshed. Yes, there is silence in the graveyards. Don't make my Kashmir, our Kashmir a graveyard.

How is the political situation?

Only one political party is functioning. Rest of the political parties have to fold their hands and sit. It is like martial law. We appeal to the people of this country, those parties committed to some sort of secular democratic ethos, please come out of your slumber before it is too late. There is disappointment with the democratic forces in the rest of the country. But the decision of August will have to be taken back. This is our resolve. When it will happen, how it will happen, the judge of our case are the people of this country. We are hopeful of getting justice from this highest of all courts.

Our disappointment is that Parliament should have at least had a proper debate on Articles 370 and 35A. If you had to sever ties with us at least you should have asked us our views. This relation is mutual. We were not informed, instead put in jails. There slogan is sabka saath, sabka vikas and sabka vishwas. Kashmir is the new laboratory of vishwas. Let them hold Assembly polls in Kashmir if they think they can form a government there.

How has the livelihood been affected in the last 80-days?

You can well imagine. We have three main sectors. Carpet weaving is our traditional craft and business. There is no work for the weavers. No raw material is available. Lakhs earn their livelihood through carpet weaving and trade. There is no internet so they cannot sell to buyers abroad. The story of pashmina shawls is the same. Our second sector is tourism. In the run up to August 5, Amarnath yatris were asked to leave (by the local administration). Tourists were dragged out of the hotels and forced to leave. It was said there was a terrorist threat. Then much of our apple crop rotted as it could not be transported out of Kashmir. Daily wagers have no work. Public transport is not plying. Shops are open but barely for a couple of hours each day. The view of streets deserted for most part of the day differ strikingly from those shown on television in the rest of the country. Those TV visuals portray as if there is a traffic jam akin to Delhi's Chandni Chowk here.

There are now concerns in Jammu and Ladakh about outsiders taking up jobs and buying land.

The Ladakh MP (Jamyang Tsering Namgyal of the BJP) recently said in his speech in Leh about the region's unique culture, and the need to save it. Now he remembers culture when Articles 370 and 35A, which guaranteed protection of this uniqueness, have been removed. The Kashmiri Pandits, since they were educated and concerned at people from Punjab buying land and taking up jobs in J&K in those days, launched an agitation during the regime of Maharaja Hari Singh. A law was implemented, which was the origin for Article 35A.

People of Jammu have for years been told that the Kashmiris eat up a lion's share of the resources. But have the people of Jammu got with this? The same questions, that of protection of their lands and jobs, confront them. Moreover, there can be differences between people of J&K, of Leh and Kargil, but we want to live together and sort out our problems together. We are hopeful of the future. The problem is complex, but if the government believes that there is silence, and silence is a sign of acceptance, they would be hugely mistaken.

What about the question of Kashmiri Pandits and their return?

First of all a tragedy is a tragedy. The Kashmiri Pandits have experienced a big tragedy, there is no doubt about it. And they are part of the bigger tragedy of Kashmir itself. Kashmiri Pandits should return to their homeland and their homes. But this atmosphere that the Centre is creating is further widening the divide. The day when the return to Kashmir, that day will be Eid for us, Diwali, for us, the day when those separated for years will embrace each other. Some people have erred and we believe the Kashmiri Pandits have suffered hugely.

Do you fear Kashmir will escalate into more violence?

We cannot be sure about the future, but the youth is in deep distress. We are worried and appeal to the people of Kashmir, particularly the youth, that whatever provocation there is from authorities, whatever the wrongs of the government of India — the constitutional fraud, the betrayal — violence is not an option for the people of Kashmir. We appeal to them to not fall in the trap of those who want us isolated and defeated. Our real strength lies in our unity, in the solidarity of other democratic sections in the rest of the country. Our real strength lies in democratic peaceful protest and violence in every form must be and has to be unacceptable to all the shades of opinion.

Q&A
MOHAMMAD YOUSUF TARIGAMI
Former legislator of J&K Assembly and Member, Communist Party of India (Marxist)

Matchmakers for NGOs & volunteers

Founded in 2017, Those In Need is trying to bridge the gap between volunteers scouting for work in the development sector and NGOs looking for the right candidates for the job, writes **Sneha Bhattacharjee**

Abhishek Saini worked as a senior analyst with a mobile marketing company. His penchant for volunteering made him realise the dearth of opportunities in the social sector. As he began his hunt for the right kind of service, he homed in on the gap that existed between professionals who couldn't volunteer because searching for an NGO based on their skillsets was cumbersome.

Not that the NGOs could connect with the volunteers easily. Precisely why Saini decided to team up with his former colleague Shreya Bhatia to co-found organisation, Those In Need, in March 2017. This New Delhi-based organisation acts like a matchmaking platform for the NGOs and volunteers leveraging on artificial intelligence to do the job. "We provide a common platform to NGOs, civil societies, volunteers, educational institutions and corporates to establish a network and maximise their social outreach efforts," says Saini.

Saini conducted an online survey of 500 students and professionals between the ages of 18 and 30 to understand what difficulties they face in looking for NGOs. More than 70 per cent of the people said they searched online, 18 per cent preferred offline sources, and the rest opted for word-of-mouth references. Eighty per cent of professionals said they wanted part-time volunteer work they could engage in over weekends, or at irregular intervals. On the other hand, various NGOs opined that most people are aware of the organisations that publicised themselves, thereby making the search for volunteers with appropriate skills a difficult and expensive task.

Both Saini and Bhatia hold degrees in Economics and have been active in the development sector. Reminiscing his journey of establishing Those In Need, Saini says "At the outset, organisations were solving the challenge that we aimed to in a traditional way. However, we were keen on leveraging tech to solve the challenge for NGOs and volunteers efficiently and effectively."

Having no tech background, Saini learnt about WordPress with the help of online videos and launched their first WordPress website. Bhatia, the other co-founder, helped with onboarding new NGOs and volunteers. Together the two have helped the organisation build a strong network of 160+ NGOs and societies, and 6,000+ individuals.

It surely wasn't as easy a ride as Saini describes his journey. From being told that their idea lacked merit, to finding it challenging to explain the potential of their idea to their family and friends, to not finding funding – they have faced it all. "Convincing parents to leave a well settled job was the biggest task. But our belief in the idea helped us sail past all the negativity," says Saini adding "we pooled our savings from our Provident Fund."

So how does Those In Need work? The platform allows NGOs to create events for their ongoing projects. Volunteers choose the NGO they wish to support and participate in their events. Once volunteers participate in an event, they receive TINstones, which helps establish their credibility. In addition, the organisation has also started a social rewards point system which not only incentivises volunteers for social work, but also helps brands to connect with their target audience by promoting volunteer work. "As of now, we provide gift vouchers from PayTM, Flipkart, Amazon as incentives to the volunteers," says Saini pointing that a small incentive in social work goes long way in attracting the right talent and people to do the work.

The team has also designed several awareness campaigns to bring in more volunteers. From animal rights to LGBTQ, the campaigns span 120 cities. The team is now also looking at spreading volunteering work across the world. One project underway is in South Africa. "We realised there are a lot of people who had the right set of skills to work however, had no opportunities there," says Saini. With their eyes on the world, the organisation is looking to make a social impact through quantifiable results.

PIC COURTESY : THOSE IN NEED

A file photo of 'Run2Care – Delhi's shortest marathon organised by Those In Need to break the barriers and raise awareness about different forms of disabilities

THE OTHER INDIA

The quantum supremacy

The new result will accelerate investment in research

A large team of researchers drawn from from Google, Nasa's Ames Research Centre, the University of California, The Oak Ridge National Laboratory in the US and the Forschungszentrum Research Centre in Germany claims to have achieved "quantum supremacy." According to the paper published in *Nature*, the team conceptualised and completed a computational task, which the most powerful conventional supercomputer (the IBM-designed Summit at Oak Ridge) would take about 10,000 years to solve. This took 200 seconds on Google's Sycamore quantum chip. The results, generated by Sycamore, were being tested simultaneously by Summit, which was tackling the same problems until the complexity became too much for Summit.

This claim is being disputed by IBM, which says that the programmers did not program Summit efficiently. IBM has released a paper estimating that Summit could solve this within about 60 hours. However, as even IBM's rebuttal concedes, there is a vast difference between 200 seconds and 60 hours.

The problem itself was esoteric, consisting of the generation of random numbers, and testing to see if these are random. The team used the architecture of the 54-Qubit Sycamore to generate those random sequences, translated into random binary numbers. The solution has no apparent practical application beyond being complex enough to benchmark versus the fastest conventional super-computer.

This is the first demonstration that quantum machines can indeed perform tasks beyond the capacity of conventional machines. It is understandable that it has led to hyperbolic comparisons with the first powered flight. After all, the Wright brothers' Flyer stayed aloft only for 12 seconds on December 17, 1903, at Kittyhawk, North Carolina. The premise backing research in quantum computers is simple. A conventional bit is binary. It can be set to one, or zero, depending on whether there is a current flowing through or not. A quantum bit uses the phenomenon of superposition to be in both states, zero and one, at the same time. When you create a quantum machine with many qubits, it has the ability, in theory, to process exponentially greater information. Moreover, using entanglement, a property so strange that Einstein called it "spooky", a qubit influences the state of another qubit at a distance. That has other applications, including communication and cryptography.

The engineering and mathematical challenges in handling Q-chips are formidable. Q-chips have to be cooled to near absolute zero and kept in that state to function. They generate huge errors, which have to be catered for, and eliminated, to generate meaningful results, when the superpositions are collapsed. This means entirely new algorithms and error-correction codes must be written to handle quantum computing. The research team admits that this is a narrow result and Google is nowhere near solving these major problems yet.

But these are known unknowns. This result indicates that there are no unknown barriers to prevent quantum computing from scaling beyond conventional machines. That gives cause for optimism that quantum computers will be capable of tackling real-world problems, which conventional machines cannot.

Some obvious applications would include biological problems of genetic mapping, drug development, and protein folding. Google also cites the possibility that Q-machines could be used to design better batteries, or more efficient processes for manufacturing fertiliser (which contributes about 2 per cent of global carbon emission). The utility would also include cryptography. Quantum machines could conceivably break all current high-end encryption very quickly. They could also generate unbreakable codes that make it impossible to intercept, or tamper with messages, or to read a message without the key. This result is bound to lead to an acceleration of investment into research. Google has shared its data set and promised to offer time to independent programmers who can think up creative applications. It might take years but this could be the dawn of a new era.

Decoding randomised controlled trials

Poverty is a complex, multi-dimensional issue. Is it amenable to solutions that deploy RCT?

ATANU BISWAS

In his 2017 book, *Experimental Conversations: Perspectives on Randomised Trials in Development Economics*, Timothy Ogden, an expert on financial inclusion, was looking for credible assessments on "randomised controlled trials" (RCT) to know "how we learn about the world, what evidence is and means, and how policy should and shouldn't be formed" from the distinguished researchers who interact with RCT in every imaginable way.

Examples of RCT in real-life clinical trials can be traced back to the 16th century. Documented evidence of RCT in psychology and education in the late 19th century is available, and rigorous statistical formulation of RCT was done in the 1920s and 1930s. Later, in the second half of the 20th century, RCT became an essential tool — "rational therapeutics" — for clinical trials.

RCT has become an integral part of clinical trials due to the nature of the scientific question associated with the experiments. Suppose a new treatment/intervention is under experimentation for treating some unknown fever, and 80 of the 100 patients recover as a result of that treatment; can we safely conclude that the recovery rate of the treatment is 80 per cent? It is possible that a considerable proportion of patients recover even without any treatment.

Thus, to look at the true effect of the treatment, one needs an estimate of the recovery rate without "treatment", and this may become available through enrolling some more patients into the study and not giving them any treatment. Suppose 60 out of 100 such "controlled" patients recover, yielding an estimated recovery rate of 60 per cent. The estimated "treatment difference" is thus 20 per cent, which is an indicator of the advantage of using "treatment" over "control".

Now, the first 100 patients could be given the treatment, and the remaining 100 control, or vice versa. Any such prior knowledge of treatment assignment might induce "selection bias." To circumvent that, one needs to employ "randomisation" — a random mechanism like tossing a coin or drawing a random number from a computer — to allocate patients in the treatment under experimentation and the control group. The procedure will then become a RCT.

It has been almost an ideological war concerning RCT in development economics for the last two decades or so. One group, called "randomistas", considers RCT the holy grail of development economics, while the other, led by 2015 economics Nobel Prize winner Angus Deaton, has expressed reservations about RCT in terms of both philosophy and effectiveness. The future of development economics depends on who's going to win this war.

Interestingly, about three years back, Esther Duflo had commented while batting in favour of RCT: "I think it's been completely won in that I think it's just happening...I think it is now understood to be one of the tools." With this year's Nobel Prize for economics having been won by three proponents of RCT — Michael Kremer, who is generally given credit for launching the RCT movement in development economics, and Abhijit Banerjee and Duflo — has the war over RCT been now won by the randomistas?

What if randomisation is not done in economic experiments? Certainly, selection bias would prevail. But, will that be very serious, especially if there is apprehension of imperfect randomisation in many experiments? Moreover, randomisation facilitates "blinding", or masking of the identity of treatments from investigators, participants, and assessors in clinical trials, and thus reduces bias. It is impossible to ensure blinding in economic experiments, and proponents of RCT know that well.

Also, advanced randomisation techniques like "adaptive randomisation" use accumulated data within the experiment to fix several features, such as the allocation pattern, test statistics and monitoring time. These are also very difficult to employ in social experiments due to their very nature. However, randomisation helps in using probability theory and statistical techniques for making inferences and finding standard errors and their estimates.

Interestingly, statisticians are usually an integral part of the clinical trials team, and its framework, design, randomisation, implementation, and data analyses are generally statistically rigorous, correct and of the desirable quality. The food and drug administration of the country concerned acts as a watchdog in such clinical trials. These are billion-dollar experiments, having a trillion-dollar market, for the benefit of billions of people worldwide.

Hundreds of thousands of clinical trials have been documented so far (by contrast, the number of RCT in development economics is less than a few thousand), mostly owing to the business interests of the pharmaceutical giants. Yet nobody ever thought that a Nobel Prize in medicine could be awarded for conducting such statistically accurate and precise life-saving experiments through RCT, having tremendous business potential. It is a century-old technique in statistics. By contrast, it is a daunting task to conduct RCT in different aspects of poverty all over the world.

The scientific question behind clinical trials is often unidimensional — the effectiveness of a new drug for a disease. By contrast, philosophically, economists like Deaton and many others believe that poverty is a very big and complex issue, with many inter-related components and dimensions. Every single event might have numerous different kinds of important (often long-term) economic and social imports.

Now, in order to facilitate the use of RCT, poverty has been sliced and diced into numerous small parts by the randomistas. Thus, a complicated multivariate problem has been transformed into many univariate ones by ignoring the complexity defined by the inherent associations of these small parts. Are these univariate bits of "evidence" enough to solve the jigsaw puzzle of poverty? However, the randomistas never claim that they are out to solve the poverty problem completely; rather, they are interested to find evidence to eradicate some of those smaller parts.

The debate on RCT, and whether the future of economics is in good hands or in danger, will continue, with the randomistas in a more comfortable place since the announcement of this year's Nobel for economics.

The writer is professor, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

> **Hundreds of thousands of clinical trials have been documented. Yet nobody ever thought that a Nobel Prize in medicine could be awarded for such statistically accurate and precise life-saving experiments**

The "randomista" trio who won the Nobel economics prize: Esther Duflo, Abhijit Banerjee and Michael Kremer

E-cigarettes cause more harm, not less

VINOD K PAUL & BALRAM BHARGAVA

The Union government recently banned ENDS (Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems), or e-cigarettes, as they are popularly known. E-cigarettes pose a serious health risk to users, who more often than not are adolescents and young adults. ENDS lead to devastating nicotine addiction and may serve as a gateway to conventional tobacco use throughout life. By banning e-cigarettes, India has saved generations of Indians from substance dependence and tobacco-related health hazards.

An e-cigarette is a battery-operated device that heats a nicotine-containing flavoured solution to create vapors that are inhaled (or "vaped"). Further, ENDS devices are also used to vape cannabis and other addictive substances. Young people find vaping stylish and "cool", ignoring its potential to trap them in a habit that they would find difficult to let go. Unsurprisingly, the use of e-cigarettes has spread rapidly. There were several alarming media reports of e-cigarette use among school students. Therefore, government action was timely. The health ministry decided to ban ENDS by ordinance, based on the recommendations of various expert committees, the Drugs Technical Advisory Board and the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

On the eve of "World No Tobacco Day" (May 31), this year, ICMR published a comprehensive white paper on ENDS, recommending a complete prohibition, in the larger interest of protecting public health. The white paper reported that use of ENDS is harmful to the cardiovascular system, respiratory system and many other body systems and poses a risk to fetal, infant, and child brain development. Studies have shown that vaping, like cigarette-smoking, impairs respiratory immune cell function and airways, resulting in severe respiratory diseases and increased susceptibility to infections. The possibility of cancer cannot be ruled out as well.

Vaping is also harmful to non-users and passive vapers. Passive exposure to vapours during pregnancy can severely affect the health of both the mother and fetus. There is also a potential risk of environmental hazards from the disposal of e-cigarette waste or ENDS devices, as well as their manufacture.

E-cigarette use by non-smokers can lead to nicotine addiction and thereby to regular smoking. A typical cartridge contains about as much nicotine as a pack of 20 regular cigarettes. Furthermore, the amount of nicotine and other chemicals in these products varies widely, and thus the consumer remains unaware of the actual contents of these products. Nicotine solvents release potential carcinogens like acetaldehyde, formaldehyde and acetone, depending on battery output voltage.

Liquid-vaporising solutions contain propylene glycol, vegetable glycerol, other toxic chemicals and metals that have been demonstrated to be responsible for several serious health effects, including cancers and diseases of the heart, lungs and brain. Moreover, the flavouring agents used in e-cigarettes can also adversely affect the consumer's health due to cytotoxic effects. A study on menthol and peppermint vapes revealed high concentrations of the carcinogenic additive "pulegone", which was recently banned by the US.

In many countries where ENDS were introduced, there has been an alarming increase in e-cigarette use among youth and adolescents, who are more susceptible to developing nicotine dependence than adults. E-cigarettes are the most commonly used nicotine products in the US, and their use is reported to be rising at an alarming rate. A US study in 2015 reported that 40 per cent of 18-24-year-olds who were e-cigarette users had never smoked conventional cigarettes. In 2018, another study suggested that about 21 per cent of high school students and 5 per cent of middle school students reported using e-cigarettes in the preceding 30 days. Public opinion is intensifying against ENDS in the US. San Francisco became the first city to ban e-cigarettes in January 2019, and a day before India's ban, New York outlawed flavoured e-cigarettes.

The tobacco industry's efforts at harm reduction globally are not a new tactic to find a convoluted way to promote their products. With similar claims, filtered cigarettes evolved decades ago, but the harm caused by tobacco did not decline, nor did the incidence of lung cancers related to tobacco use, across the world. On the contrary, filtered cigarettes with added flavours were increasingly perceived as safe, helping the industry grow. Filtered cigarettes still dominate the market, with their market share climbing from 0.5 per cent in 1950 to over 98 per cent today.

Since the emergence of e-cigarettes in the mid-2000s, the industry has promoted them as a safer alternative to conventional cigarettes and an effective way to stop smoking. The industry's claims are being endorsed by advocates of their products around the world, backed by homegrown and industry-funded research. However, such claims have been refuted by a majority of independent researchers around the world. Ultimately, e-cigarettes are about harm proliferation, not harm reduction.

Strengthening the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is an SDG-3 imperative worldwide. India's swift end to ENDS is a step in that direction and could be the beginning of the rollback of e-cigarettes worldwide. Given the high-profile pitch by the prime minister at the recent UN General Assembly event, the appreciation by WHO and others, it is very likely that India's decisive action will be emulated by many countries in the near future.

Paul is member, NITI Aayog; Bhargava is secretary, Department of Health Research, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, and director general, ICMR
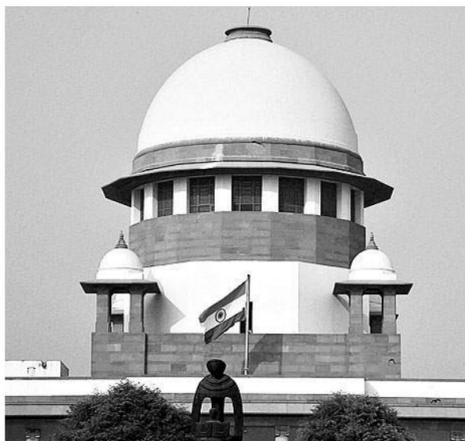
> **E-cigarettes pose a huge health risk to users, who more often than not are adolescents and young adults. They may lead to life-long nicotine addiction**

▶ OTHER VIEWS

India's overburdened legal system is unable to cope

Large number of pending cases raises questions of accountability to citizens

If delayed justice spells doom, then the most pressing question ought to be why is there a delay in the first place? Some answers seem to have been provided by a recent study commissioned by the Union law ministry and conducted by the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta. The findings are grim: on an average, it takes over two-and-a-half years for a litigant to get a judgment. Worse, only 41 per cent of this time involves the actual functioning of the court. The reasons unearthed for these dismal figures include, especially at the level of trial courts, the shortage and non-attendance of judges, arbitrary adjournments, the absence of lawyers and witnesses and prolonged legal arguments. None of these concerns is new. As the findings of the study indicate, none of the problems feeding this perception has been addressed.

The convoluted nature of the litigation process is another cause cited by the study for judicial delays. This inconveniences those seeking redress, given that significant sections of the litigants belong to marginalised communities with little access to education or the means to afford proper legal representation. The paucity of judges, it is believed, is a major factor in the pendency of cases. The increase in the number of judges must be accompanied by improved administrative infrastructure dedicated to curbing case-related delays. This can only be achieved with the help of judicial reform, which a democracy must undertake anyway as part of its overall development.

The Telegraph, October 25

Improved report card

States must now do their bit on EoDB

For an economy starved of good news, the news of a rise in India's ranking by 14 places to 63 in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business 2020 survey is a positive development. India also figures in the top ten most improved countries in the world for the third consecutive year. From being ranked 142 in 2014 to 63 in 2020, it has been a significant upward journey for the country in a rank list that is an important input in the plans of global investors. The latest improvement has come on the back of the implementation of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC). The reforms in trade procedures and paperwork as a result of India signing the Trade Facilitation Agreement at the World Trade Organisation are beginning to show. Interestingly, there has been improvement in a parameter that most industrialists would consider as a problem even now: "Dealing with construction permits".

The country lags in key metrics such as "Starting a business", "Enforcing contracts" and "Registering property". It should also be borne in mind that the rankings are based on samples and audits done in Mumbai and Delhi only (the World Bank has said it would be covering Bengaluru and Kolkata too from next year). The easier part is now done and rise in rankings from hereon will depend on how much the Centre is able to convince the states to reform their systems.

The Hindu, October 25

Opportunity for Congress

But it will need to mobilise the people

The Maharashtra and Haryana assembly election results offer the Opposition, especially the Congress, some reason to cheer. After the drubbing in the general election a few months ago, it has crawled back to relevance in both states. By all accounts, the Congress has been the indirect beneficiary of anti-incumbency in these states. In Haryana, the party has made considerable gains from 2014, but it may have more to do with it being the default option for voters angry with the Manohar Lal Khattar government. If it has been thinking organisationally, it has been missing in action politically, staying away from street mobilisations in the past five years despite the growing stress in the agriculture sector and disquiet among youth over joblessness.

In Maharashtra, the NCP has won more seats than its parent body and is poised to be the main Opposition party. Maharashtra was rocked by protests over farm distress, unemployment, social discrimination and so on in the past five years. Yet here too, the Congress was missing in action even as a large section of the population turned restive. The party will need to sort out leadership issues, revitalise its cadre, and voice public concerns by mobilising on the streets if it wishes to be in the reckoning more than it is at the moment.

The Indian Express, October 25