

TELLING NUMBERS

Enrolment and claims in flagship life, accident insurance schemes

AS OF March 31 this year, the number of individuals enrolled in the government's flagship accident insurance scheme, Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY), was 15.47 crore, Lok Sabha was informed on Monday. The number of individuals enrolled in the life insurance scheme, Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY), was 5.91 crore, the government said, quoting information furnished by banks.

A total 1,35,212 claims amounting to Rs 2,704.24 crore had been settled under PMJJBY, and 32,176 claims amounting to Rs 643.52 crore had been settled under PMSBY at the end of the last financial year, the government said.

The PMSBY offers insurance cover of Rs 2 lakh for accidental death or total permanent disability to people in the age group 18 to 70 years. The PMJJBY offers life insurance of Rs 2 lakh in case of death due to any reason to people in the age group of 18-50.

GROSSENROLMENTS

State	PMSBY	PMJJBY	Total
Andhra Pradesh*	2,76,32,231	1,83,84,214	4,60,16,445
Bihar	58,29,559	16,48,757	74,78,316
Chhattisgarh	52,99,788	12,91,366	65,91,154
Gujarat	60,99,823	25,62,854	86,62,677
Jharkhand	22,44,237	5,99,262	28,43,499
Karnataka	79,09,701	34,55,273	1,13,64,974
Madhya Pradesh	87,86,945	22,37,052	1,10,23,997
Maharashtra	97,01,319	40,21,981	1,37,23,300
Odisha	45,15,671	12,59,527	57,75,198
Punjab	40,09,575	7,27,495	47,37,070
Rajasthan	60,56,922	18,20,827	78,77,749
Tamil Nadu	83,40,290	27,79,983	1,11,20,273
Telangana	63,33,999	21,77,346	85,11,345
Uttar Pradesh	1,59,84,910	39,90,315	1,99,75,225
West Bengal	74,60,614	16,39,458	91,00,072
Total	15,47,17,823	5,91,09,302	21,38,27,125

*Andhra Pradesh figures include 1.65 crore and 1.99 crore beneficiaries converged from Aam Admi Bima Yojana (AABY) to PMJJBY and PMSBY respectively.

**Total includes all states and Union Territories, as well as beneficiaries of erstwhile insurance schemes in some government departments, and urban cooperative bank subscribers who were not migrated to the CBS system (non-CBS enrolments).

CLAIM AMOUNTS PAID (IN Rs CRORE)

State	PMJJBY	PMSBY	Total
Andhra Pradesh	213.30	45.76	259.06
Bihar	56.76	9.42	66.18
Chhattisgarh	110.12	35.40	145.52
Gujarat	222.08	45.30	267.38
Jharkhand	31.28	6.38	37.66
Karnataka	241.44	39.74	281.18
Madhya Pradesh	191.04	69.80	260.84
Maharashtra	227.72	53.34	281.06
Odisha	82.90	17.96	100.86
Punjab	43.62	21.66	65.28
Rajasthan	164.12	46.40	210.52
Tamil Nadu	136.86	43.24	180.10
Telangana	238.92	41.54	280.46
Uttar Pradesh	346.64	65.56	412.20
West Bengal	85.98	16.74	102.72
Total	2,704.24	643.52	3,347.76

*Total includes all states and Union Territories

Source: Answer to Lok Sabha question, quoting data uploaded by banks and insurance companies on Jansuraksha portal. Data as on March 31, 2019

TIP FOR READING LIST

A SUPERSTAR MEMOIR

THE BRITISH tabloid *Daily Mail* called it “the rock memoir of the decade”, and those who have followed the life of Elton John will expect nothing less from *Me*. It is also a hugely informative memoir — the review in *The New York Times* described *Me* as a “very crowded book by a man who’s kept a lot to himself until now”.

The film *Rocketman*, the review said, while succeeding in telling a competent



basic story, “barely scratched the surface of what’s in this memoir”, and while “the lurid parts will get all the headlines”, it is Elton John’s “hard-won self-knowledge” that the book is really about. The superstar describes himself as a sexual voyeur, and talks frankly about his cocaine addiction, and his bout of prostate cancer and the use of adult diapers. “The latter”, *The NYT* review said, “may be a first in the genre”.

HARISH DAMODARAN

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 9

THE EXISTING 1966 law already provides for regulation of the quality of seeds. What does the new Bill seek to change?

The current Act only covers “notified kinds or varieties of seeds”. Thus, regulation of quality, too, is limited to the seeds of varieties that have been officially notified.

Such varieties would be mostly those that are bred by public sector institutions — the likes of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and the state agricultural universities (SAUs) — and officially “released” for cultivation after multi-location trials, over three years or more, to evaluate their yield performance, disease and pest resistance, quality, and other desired traits.

Release is a precondition for notification. And the provisions of The Seeds Act, 1966, apply only to certified seeds produced of notified varieties.

The new Seeds Bill, 2019 provides for compulsory registration of “any kind or variety of seeds” that are sought to be sold. According to Section 14 of the draft Bill, “no seed of any kind or variety... shall, for the purpose of sowing or planting by any person, be sold unless such kind or variety is registered”.

In other words, even hybrids/varieties of private companies will need to be registered, and their seeds would have to meet the minimum prescribed standards relating to germination, physical and genetic purity, etc. Breeders would be required to disclose the “expected performance” of their registered varieties “under given conditions”.

If the seed of such registered kind or variety “fails to provide the expected performance under such given conditions”, the farmer “may claim compensation from the producer, dealer, distributor or vendor under The Consumer Protection Act, 1986”.

What is the context for bringing the Bill?

The 1966 legislation was enacted at the time of the Green Revolution, when the country hardly had any private seed industry. The high-yielding wheat and paddy varieties, which made India self-reliant in cereals by the 1980s, were developed by the various ICAR institutes and SAUs.

These public sector institutions have retained their dominance in breeding of wheat, paddy (including basmati), sugarcane, pulses,



A hybrid seeds store in Nabarangpur, Odisha. Harish Damodaran

soyabean, groundnut, mustard, potato, onion and other crops, where farmers largely grow open-pollinated varieties (OPV) whose grain can be saved as seed for re-planting.

Over the last three decades or more, however, private companies and multinationals have made significant inroads, particularly into crops that are amenable to hybridisation (their seeds are first-generation hybrids produced by crossing two genetically diverse plants, and whose yields tend to be higher than that of either of the parents; the grains from these, even if saved as re-used as seed, will not give the same “F1” vigour).

Today, the size of the private hybrid seeds industry is estimated at about Rs 15,000 crore. That includes cotton (Rs 4,000 crore), vegetables (Rs 3,500 crore), corn/maize (Rs 1,500 crore), paddy (Rs 1,000 crore), pearl millet/*bajra* (Rs 300 crore) and sorghum/*jowar* (Rs 200 crore). Hybrid seed adoption rates are reported to be 7-8% in paddy, 60-70% in corn, 90% in *jowar* and *bajra*, 95% in cotton, and 80%-plus in major vegetables such as okra, tomato, chilli, capsicum, cauliflower, gourds, cucumber, cabbage, melons, brinjal, carrot and radish. Even in banana, the real production increase after the

1990s has come from tissue-culture micro-propagation planting technology commercialised by private players like Jain Irrigation.

So, are privately-bred hybrids not covered under any regulation?

The current Seeds Act, as already noted, applies only to notified varieties. Also, unless a variety or hybrid is notified, its seeds cannot be certified. Most of the private hybrids marketed in India, by virtue of not being officially “released”, are neither “notified” nor “certified”.

Instead, they are “truthful labeled”. The companies selling them simply state that the seeds inside the packets have a minimum germination (if 100 are sown, at least 75-80, say, will produce plants), genetic purity (percentage of “true-to-type” plants and non-contamination by genetic material of other varieties/species), and physical purity (proportion of non-contamination by other crop/weed seeds or inert matter).

How does the proposed Seeds Bill, 2019 address the above lacuna?

It does away with the concept of “notified” variety. By providing for compulsory

registration of “any kind or variety of seeds”, private hybrids — whether officially “released” or “truthful labeled” — will automatically be brought under regulatory purview.

It must be mentioned here that the Seeds (Control) Amendment Order of 2006 under the Essential Commodities Act mandates dealers to ensure minimum standards of germination, purity, and other quality parameters even in respect of “other than notified kind or variety of seeds”. Enforcing mandatory registration under a new Seed Act, encompassing all varieties and hybrids, is expected to bring greater accountability from the industry, even while rendering the Seeds Control Order redundant.

How has been the private seed industry responded to the proposed Bill?

Seed companies have welcomed the provision of compulsory registration of all varieties/hybrids, based on the results of multi-location trials for a prescribed period to establish their performance *vis-à-vis* the claims of the breeders concerned. This should help minimise the risk of farmers being sold seeds of low-quality genetics, especially by fly-by-night operators taking undue advantage of the “truthful labeling” and “self-certification” processes.

The industry, however, wants the process of registration to be time-bound. Given the lack of manpower and infrastructure within the government system, the registration may be granted or refused on the basis of multi-location trials carried out by the breeder/applicant itself.

But the industry’s main reservation is the provision for regulation of sale price “in emergent situations like scarcity of seeds, abnormal rise in prices, monopolistic pricing or profiteering”. The fact that this power of fixing sale price of seed has been given both to the Centre and state governments has added to their nervousness. Their contention is that seed accounts for not even a tenth of the total operational costs in most crops, despite the genetic information contained in it being the main determinant of grain yield and quality.

When is the Bill likely to become law?

Despite the buzz, the chances of it being introduced in the current session of Parliament are remote — it is not listed in the legislative business expected to be taken up. Incidentally, an earlier version of the Bill had lapsed after being introduced in 2004.

What case will Suu Kyi plead in The Hague?

Myanmar of genocide, which is the most serious of all international crimes. The Gambia is backed by the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

At the time of filing the case, Abubaccr Marie Tambadou, the Justice Minister and Attorney General of The Gambia, had told The Associated Press that his country wanted to “send a clear message to Myanmar and to the rest of the international community that the world must not stand by and do nothing in the face of terrible atrocities that are occurring around us. It is a shame for our generation that we do nothing while genocide is unfolding right before our own eyes”.

The case, ‘Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Gambia v. Myanmar)’, seeking the “indication of provisional measures”, will be heard by United Nations judges at the Peace Palace in The Hague. Both The Gambia and Myanmar will have the opportunity to present two rounds of oral arguments before the court. The hearings will be streamed live on the ICJ website.

What position has Myanmar taken?

Myanmar has long denied the allegations of mass rape, killings, and arson made by the Rohingya against its army. Myanmar says its



Aung San Suu Kyi is greeted by a Myanmar official in Rotterdam on Sunday. Office of the Myanmar State Counsellor via AP

soldiers only carried out legitimate counter-terrorism operations against Rohingya militants. It vowed last week “to defend Myanmar’s national interest”, even as it rejected a decision by the International Criminal Court to allow an investigation into crimes committed against the Rohingya.

According to Myanmar, the International Criminal Court, which too, is based in The Hague, has no jurisdiction over it, since Myanmar was not a party to the agreement that established the court. While the ICJ, which

was established in 1945, mostly deals with disputes between nations, the International Criminal Court, which began functioning in 2002, prosecutes individuals for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Some 7.4 lakh Rohingyas have fled Myanmar’s Rakhine state to Bangladesh, where they have been living in refugee camps.

What will happen after the hearings?

The court is likely to decide the plea on provisional measures fairly soon — possibly within weeks. Hearings on the main allegations of genocide could begin next year. However, cases at the ICJ often drag on for years, and no quick closure is expected.

Also, the legal bar for handing out a conviction for genocide is high. Since World War II, only three cases of genocide have been recognised internationally: Cambodia (late 1970s), Rwanda (1994), and Srebrenica (1995). “Proving genocide has been difficult because of the high bar set by its ‘intent requirement’ — that is showing the genocidal acts, say killings, were carried out with the specific intent to eliminate a people on the basis of their ethnicity,” a Reuters report quoted Richard Dicker, head of the international justice programme at New York-based Human Rights Watch, as saying.

How Kerala’s ‘own bank’ changes the cooperative sector — and road ahead

SHAJU PHILIP

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, DECEMBER 9

KERALA BANK, an entity created by the merger of 13 district co-operative banks (DCBs) in Kerala, was officially launched on Friday — the first state-owned bank in the cooperative sector.

Kerala Bank brings the state’s co-operative banking sector together under a single roof, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said; it is envisaged as a people-owned and people-managed modern bank with a significant share of the banking sector.

All DCBs except the one in Malappuram district, which is controlled by the opposition Congress-led UDF, have been amalgamated into Kerala Bank. At the launch ceremony, the Chief Minister invited the outlier bank to come on board, and invited it for talks with the government.

Idea and evolution

Kerala’s “own bank” had been a promise of the CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) for the 2016 Assembly elections. After coming to power, Vijayan’s government appointed a committee to study the idea of creating a Kerala Bank by amalgamating the entire co-operative banking sector into a single entity.

The demand for the Kerala Bank gained momentum after the State Bank of Travancore (SBT) was merged with the State Bank of India (SBI) on March 31, 2017. The SBT, which was headquartered in Thiruvananthapuram, had been handling a major part of the government’s transactions, and was seen as Kerala’s own bank.

In October, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) accorded final approval for the creation of the unified bank, subject to certain conditions — the Chief Minister said these would be met, and a compliance report

would be submitted to the central bank before March 31, 2020.

The new bank combines 13 DCBs with the Kerala State Cooperative Bank. The formation of Kerala Bank has reduced the earlier three-tier structure of co-operative banking in the state to a two-tier one.

Size and position

Kerala Bank has the second largest banking footprint in the state. Its network of 995 branches is second only to the SBI’s, which has 1,215 branches across the state. While the SBI has a deposit base of Rs 1.53 lakh crore in the state, Kerala Bank would have a base of Rs 65,000 crore. Unlike the state co-operative bank and district co-operative banks, Kerala Bank can, in the future, accept NRI deposits, which will lead to an expansion of its deposit base. As part of Kerala Bank, the DCBs will get the status of a scheduled bank, which they have been lacking

until now. The co-operative banking system in Kerala has about 30 per cent market share in deposits and loans, but this may significantly increase after Kerala Bank begins to accept NRI deposits.

Governance structure

At present, senior bureaucrats in the Co-operative Department are naming Kerala Bank, which will get a CEO next month. Ultimately, however, Kerala Bank will have a democratically elected body, in tune with the tradition in the cooperative sector. It will have a board of directors with representatives from the primary cooperative societies, the secretary of the state Cooperative Department, four *ex-officio* members, a nominee from NABARD, and two independent professional directors. The nominees of the primary societies would have adequate representation for SCs/STs and women.

would harm the sector. How depositors react to being brought into an ecosystem of greater accountability, including income-tax scrutiny and compliance, remains to be seen.

Challenges ahead

The state government will have the task of taking the new entity out of the shadow of politics that frequently falls on the cooperative sector, and of infusing professionalism in operations. Besides the commitment to submit a compliance report by the end of March, Kerala Bank will have to keep a sharp eye on non-performing assets at a time when the state cooperative bank is running at a loss.

The 2016 demonetisation exercise, and the economic slump in the wake of two bouts of heavy floods in the state, have adversely affected the district and primary co-operative societies. Defaults in farm loans have been growing, leading to the accumulation of non-performing assets (NPAs).





The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

PUT OUT THE FIRE

Anaj Mandi tragedy is reminder of urgency of creating safer working conditions in unregulated industry hubs

A CHARRED FIVE-STOREY building in Anaj Mandi in the periphery of Delhi's walled city area bears testimony to one of the city's worst fire accidents since the Uphaar tragedy of 1997. In the early hours of Sunday, a fire swept through the residential building that housed several manufacturing units, asphyxiating 43 workers, at least five of them minors. The 600-square-yard building is a typical example of a manufacturing units cluster, operating without permits, from cramped residential quarters. It had just one exit that could be used — the second exit was blocked by piles of goods, many of them combustible. This, and the fact that the five floors of the building had barely any ventilation, meant that the workers, most of them immigrants, had very little chance to escape. The owners of the building had reportedly not applied for a no-objection certificate from the fire safety department before converting their premises into manufacturing units. In fact, less than 24 hours before Sunday's blaze, the area had seen two other factory fires, which were doused before there they could cause any harm.

Union Urban Affairs Minister Hardeep Singh Puri has laid the blame on the doors of the Delhi Fire Safety (DFS) department. The DFS has thrown up its hands, claiming that it has little enforcement powers, which, it says "is the prerogative of the city's municipal authorities". Delhi is not new to such blame games — the last round happened in February, when a fire swept through a hotel in northwest Delhi, killing at least 17 people. But questions raised in the aftermath of such episodes have never moved municipal and fire safety authorities to take concerted action to plug the loopholes in the city's accident preparedness. This has meant that Part Four of the National Building Code, which has detailed instructions on fire safety, and Delhi's own fire safety rules have remained, for the most part, dead letters.

In the post-liberalisation era, unregulated manufacturing units have mushroomed in several lower-middle class residential areas, unauthorised colonies and slum clusters of the capital. Anaj Mandi is a good example of the liberalised economy's underbelly. Once a flourishing wholesale grain market, its traders have now moved to bigger markets. In the mandi's serpentine lanes, units producing school bags, garments and toy factories and printing units exist cheek-by-jowl with residential quarters. These, as Sunday's accident shows, are tinderboxes. The Delhi municipality's standard response after such accidents has been to crack the whip on individual offenders. The government has, at times, tried to move some of these unregulated units to new industrial hubs such as Bawana and Narela. But by all accounts, these plans have not succeeded because the owners and workers of these factories found relocation uneconomical. Shouldn't the government, which swears by small-scale industry, attempt a more creative solution that enables safer working conditions without stifling entrepreneurship?

MOMENT OF RECKONING

Suu Kyi's refusal to speak for Rohingya is controversial. Her decision to defend army at ICJ sets off ripples beyond Myanmar

AUNG SAN SUU Kyi's decision to appear before the International Court of Justice to defend Myanmar from charges of genocide against Rohingya Muslims is a gambit. It is based on her international stature built over two decades of being a prisoner of conscience, detained by the Myanmar junta, and the knowledge that defending her country can only bolster her nationalistic credentials at home and even strengthen her standing vis a vis the all-powerful military. No serving head of state has appeared before the ICJ. Suu Kyi, who holds the formal designation of State Counsellor to the government, but is de facto civilian leader of Myanmar, possibly believes that her defending her country's actions against the Rohingya would carry credibility in the court. Her decision to travel to The Hague has triggered an outpouring of support for her among Myanmar's majority Buddhist communities. Myanmar's anti-Rohingya actions, for which it is being pulled up before the international court, enjoy much domestic support as the Rohingya are not considered "indigenous" to Myanmar, and do not have citizenship. It is ironic that Suu Kyi, who had only some years ago, rallied international opinion against the army, will now appear in its support. She may have sensed that it might provide her a more equal footing with the country's most powerful institution, which is also the biggest obstacle to constitutional reform.

It is ironic, too, that while the most powerful countries seemed powerless in the face of Myanmar's actions against the Rohingya community, it was a small country like Gambia, backed by the Organisation for Islamic Co-operation, that has taken it to the ICJ on charges of violating the UN convention of prevention of genocide. Gambia's lawsuit is based on a 2018 UN report that accused Myanmar of "genocidal intent", and its Army of murder, rape and a host of other charges. Suu Kyi's staunch refusal to take the side of the Rohingya has disappointed all those who saw her as an icon of freedom and democracy. Her defence in court is likely to be what it has been elsewhere: That military operations against the Rohingya in the Rakhine were actions against terrorism.

The outflow of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar has impacted several of its neighbours, particularly Bangladesh, which now hosts the largest Rohingya refugee camp in the world, as well as Thailand and other countries in south east Asia, where thousands from the community have fled to escape persecution. In India, too, the presence of the Rohingya has added to the polarising debate on the religion of refugees. This case at the ICJ is sure to have ramifications beyond the borders of Myanmar.

JUST EAT IT

A banana that took the art world by storm has been consumed. The episode is filled with symbolic meaning

HERE'S THE MOST charitable explanation of Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan's "Comedian". The work of art is not one that requires great skill to produce — it is a banana duck-taped to a wall. But it can be seen, perhaps, as a joke on the entire self-important and rarefied world of high art. At \$1,20,00 or Rs 85,34,280, that's a pricey punchline. And, on Saturday, someone ate the punchline. Performance artist David Datuna consumed the profound, if slightly putrefied fruit, at the Art Basel festival in Miami, US. He did so, he says, for the most fundamental of reasons — hunger.

The now-digested banana, of course, will be replaced and the publicity will only drive up the value of the "Comedian". What the consumption of the work has done, though, is settle the debate about the usefulness of art. As much as talent, creating something from nothing is about intelligence and context. In the sparse, sanitised, "do not touch" environment of the gallery and the museum, a simple perishable object certainly makes a statement — both about the ephemeral nature of the work and the pomposity of those who run such spaces. The price is part of the joke on that world, and if Cattelan can get rich off it, kudos to him.

In fact, "Comedian" scores over most other contemporary works on one important score. It isn't useless, in the most basic sense. A banana is a nutritious fruit. In addition, it has great value in its symbolism: Slipping on its peel is the most basic joke, and it is rife with social and political meaning (think banana republic). But, most important of all, Cattelan's joke should finally silence both the elite gatekeepers of high culture, and those on the other end of the spectrum, who believe that literal meaning is the only kind that matters. The former can pay Rs 85 lakh for a banana (and a strip of tape), the latter can eat it.



ARVIND SUBRAMANIAN AND JOSH FELMAN

AS THE GOVERNMENT responds to the challenges posed by the economic slowdown, there's an ignored area of reform, where simple measures could have potentially big pay-offs. This area relates to data, specifically the process of generating and disseminating reliable data.

Reliable data is important for several reasons. For some time, we have known that confidence — in the economy and government — is critical in shaping private actions. Keynes himself stressed the importance of "animal spirits" in getting entrepreneurs to invest. Others have stressed the importance of consumer confidence in getting households to spend on durable goods such as cars. There is something of a bootstrap effect at work: Confidence can change behaviour, which changes reality, and hence confidence.

Accurate data is arguably even more important for guiding government actions. Consider the following policy questions facing India today: Does the economy require little support, a reasonable amount, or urgent and massive measures? Is there really an employment problem? Has poverty come down or gone up? Do poor government revenues simply reflect a deep economic downturn — or serious collection problems, requiring urgent measures to improve tax administration? Is there no room, a little room or considerable room for expansionary fiscal policy? Has the financial system turned the corner — or are stressed assets actually rising?

All these are serious questions confronting policymakers right now. Yet the data are simply not reliable or incontrovertible enough to allow them to be answered with any degree of certainty. And that makes it difficult to formulate policy responses. In some cases, we don't even know whether a response is needed.

Accordingly, the government's immediate task is to re-boot the data systems in three sectors: Real, fiscal and financial.

On the real sector, measurement of GDP, employment, and consumption have all

Serious questions confront policymakers. Yet data are not reliable enough for them to be answered

Once a sound budgetary accounting system is created, it needs to be institutionalised. Perhaps the best way to do this is by creating a Fiscal Council, as proposed unanimously by the NK Singh FRBM Review Committee. Such a council could help ensure that the accounting framework is being followed and the budget projections are realistic, based on reasonable forecasts for GDP and tax buoyancy. Of course, the Council needs to be designed so that it does not undermine the sovereignty of the executive and legislature. This could be done in several ways.

proved problematic. To remedy this, the government should set up a committee, perhaps under the leadership of Nobel Prize winner Professor Abhijit Banerjee, who knows and cares deeply about these issues. This committee could be asked to address two sets of problems. Its forward-looking task would be to propose improvements to data collection and statistical methodology, which could be implemented in conjunction with the planned updating of the base year. To do this, its backward-looking task would be to identify the problems in the GDP estimates and the PLFS/NSSO surveys. This difficult task will require the assistance of the professional economic community, which in turn means that the unreleased surveys should be published.

On the fiscal accounts, the government should use the next budget as an opportunity to present a revised and cleaned-up set of fiscal accounts, allowing it to put behind the problems of the last budget. The aim should be to clean up not just the flow (deficit) numbers but also the stock (debt) numbers. Particular attention should be paid to identifying — and paying — arrears to suppliers.

In this effort, the government could build on some work already done. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) in its recent report set out a rigorous accounting methodology, especially for taking off-balance sheet transactions into account. The previous secretary of the Department of Economic Affairs, Subhash Garg, has also made some very useful suggestions in this regard.

Once a sound budgetary accounting system is created, it needs to be institutionalised. Perhaps the best way to do this is by creating a Fiscal Council, as proposed unanimously by the NK Singh FRBM Review Committee. Such a council could help ensure that the accounting framework is being followed and the budget projections are realistic, based on reasonable forecasts for GDP and tax buoyancy. Of course, the Council needs to be designed so that it does not undermine the sovereignty of the executive and

legislature. This could be done in several ways, for example, by ensuring that its members include the chairman of the Finance Commission, a representative of the CAG, and a representative of the GST Council, such as a finance minister from one of the Opposition states, as well as respected experts outside government.

On the financial sector, given the recent credit bubble and the series of problems, involving so many financial institutions, the time is ripe for a second Asset Quality Review (AQR). A regulatory system that failed to spot, let alone head off, the spate of problems from Nirav Modi to Punjab and Maharashtra Cooperative Bank to Dewan Housing and NBFC financing of real estate, and, above all, the behemoth that we have now discovered IL&FS to be, has to work extra hard to regain trust, and transparency about stressed assets will be an essential pre-requisite for that effort.

A new AQR — perhaps even led by a former RBI Governor — will allow the government and the RBI to assess the precise magnitude and sectoral nature of the problem, thereby facilitating better-tailored and better-designed policies to solve the problem. It should cover not just the NBFCs but also the banks, which are experiencing renewed stress from the real estate, steel, power and telecom sectors.

Driving a car requires considerable information: A good speedometer, data on whether the fuel tank is empty or full, gauges of tire pressure etc. Running an economy, especially one that is in a predicament such as India's today, is infinitely more complicated and the data demands are hence commensurately greater. A Data Big Bang effort along the lines proposed here would make that difficult task less challenging.

Subramanian is former Chief Economic Adviser to the Government of India and Felman is former IMF Resident Representative to India



RUKMINI BANERJI

LITTLE DID we know when we embarked together on a journey 20 years ago, that the path from Mumbai's municipal schools would eventually lead to Stockholm and a Nobel prize. A tall, thin economics professor from MIT and his youthful looking colleague showed up one day in our cramped office near Grant Road in Mumbai. This is the first time we met Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo. They were interested in the education programme that we were doing at the time in with municipal schools in Mumbai, especially in how we were helping children learn to read and do simple arithmetic.

Even as early as 1999, the problem was quite visible. School enrollment levels were high and large cohorts moved each year from one grade to the next. However, despite being in school for several years, many children were well below what was expected of them at their grade. Many could not read a simple text fluently or do basic math operations. Without these foundational skills, it was difficult for a child to engage with her class-level curriculum or make meaningful progress in the school system.

The "balsakhi" programme conducted by Pratham in Mumbai municipal schools from 1998 onwards was perhaps India's first in-school large-scale remedial program. A volunteer from the neighbourhood worked with children from Class 3 and 4 for a few hours a day in "pull out" classes. Abhijit and Esther studied this programme by randomly allocating the intervention to Class 3 classes in some schools and to Class 4 in others. "Treatment" groups were compared with "control" groups.

CLASSROOM TO STOCKHOLM

Glimpses of Pratham's 20-year partnership with Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo

It was our first first-hand experience of a randomised control trial (RCT) as well as our first external impact evaluation. At the end of two years of research, it was clear that the "catch up" effort carried out by the volunteers was working: There was a significant improvement in children's ability to read and to do arithmetic in the treatment schools as compared to those where the intervention had not taken place. The balsakhi study paved the way for larger scale programmes to address the issue of "catch up" and it led to an ongoing, vibrant collaboration between Pratham and the researchers.

In 2006, the all-India ASER exercise provided data on the status of schooling and learning for every rural district in the country. It became evident that the learning crisis was widespread. The ASER data clearly showed that in every grade, there was a wide range of learning levels. For instance, in reading, about half of all children enrolled in Class 5 could read fluently at a Class 2 level and may be could read at higher levels too. But in the other half, some children were still struggling to recognise letters, others could just about read simple words and the remainder were reading simple sentences but unable to handle long texts even at the Class 2 level. As Abhijit often puts it, this situation is at least partly because the school system in India is geared to teach to the "top of the class".

In developing an approach to enable children to "catch up", for some time in the school day and for some time in the school year, Pratham groups children, especially those in Class 3, 4 and 5, by their current learning level

rather than by their grade. Using methods and materials appropriate for each group, instructors or teachers work with the full big group, then with small groups and with individual children to help them acquire literacy and numeracy skills. In a short period of time — as little as 50 or 60 days — most children begin to read fluently and are able to do basic arithmetic comfortably.

Pratham's decade-long efforts in improving the effectiveness of this approach and in improving delivery on scale has been accompanied by a series of RCTs in different parts of the country. Under Abhijit and Esther's leadership, their group of researchers at the Abdul Jamil Poverty Action Lab (JPAL) have carried out studies in Jaunpur (UP) in 2006, West Champaran (Bihar) and Dehradun (Uttarakhand) 2008-2010, Kurukshetra and Mahendragarh (Haryana) 2012 and Unnao and Sitapur (UP) in 2013. It is unusual even in the world of research to have a series of studies that look at the evolution of an instructional approach over time and study it in different implementation contexts.

As the news about Abhijit and Esther's Nobel Prize spread, there was tremendous excitement across all the locations — urban communities and rural areas where they have worked with us. Over two decades, we have together learned how hard work on the ground and rigorous research can help to evolve solid solutions to one of the big problems facing primary education in India today.

Banerji is with Pratham Education Foundation



DECEMBER 10, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

ASSAM RESIGNATIONS

ELEVEN MINISTERS AND two parliamentary secretaries in Assam submitted their resignations to Chief Minister Jogendra Nath Hazarika. The resignations came after the Hazarika ministry was reduced to a minority following withdrawal of support by the Congress and the CPI. The governor of the Northeastern states, L P Singh, has asked Hazarika to prove his majority in the Assembly.

NO ALLIANCE

PRIME MINISTER CHARAN Singh is likely to drop the two AIADMK ministers at the Centre, according to the state Lok Dal chief

M Santhosham. Talking to newsmen in Madras, he said he had told the Lok Dal president during his visit to the state on November 24 that the chances of an alliance between the Lok Dal and AIADMK were remote. The PM had replied that, "I am going to drop them." Santhosham said he would not be surprised if the PM decides to do so. He wondered how the two AIADMK ministers could continue in the cabinet after the AIADMK pledged to make Jagjivan Ram the next prime minister in its election manifesto.

PAKISTAN REPRESSION

GENERAL ZIA-UL-Haq's government had imprisoned at least 7,000 political opponents

in Pakistan by May this year, according to Amnesty International. Most of the prisoners are supporters of former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was executed in April, says Amnesty's report. The report says that about 800 people are executed in Pakistan every year.

CARTER ON IRAN CRISIS

PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER believes Iran's grievances against the deposed Shah and the United States can be dealt with — but only after the release of US hostages held in Teheran. The US is considering a range of fresh options aimed at winning freedom for the 50 hostages held at the US embassy.



Inequality and its discontents

The 2019 Human Development Report points to the limits of economic growth in lifting all boats. It also offers a way forward



SHOKO NODA

GRAPPLING WITH DELHI'S poor air quality for these last couple of months, I have become aware of a stark difference in the way I cope with air pollution, and the way many others do not — because they cannot. Despite the growing evidence detailing the catastrophic impact of air pollution on human health, only those privileged enough to have the knowledge and the means to protect themselves can take measures to do so. Many other people, most of whom provide essential services to the privileged, either lack the information on the level of threat they face, or the freedom to act on it. Unable to afford a day off, or an effective mask, let alone air purifiers, they are forced to subject themselves and their children to Delhi's toxic air. Consequently, they face a greater risk of respiratory disease and heart problems, and the children are deprived of a healthy childhood.

This is inequality at play in daily life. For me, it is a harsh reminder of pervasive and pernicious inequities that hit the poorest and most marginalised hardest. In that sense, air pollution is an apotheosis of 21st century challenges: The climate crisis, technological change and inequality. And India, home to nearly a fifth of the world's population, is at the frontline of these battles.

India has made so much progress over the past 30 years — and the improvements have been substantial. Yet, there are significant concerns today, borne out by data, that the dramatic strides made in reducing extreme poverty did not reduce inequality. In fact, inequality has widened. A flurry of recent estimates, ranging from income inequality data from the India Human Development Survey and wealth inequality numbers by Credit Suisse to distributional income accounts by economists Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty, indicate that economic disparities have grown along with the GDP. To put it simply, while the poor have indeed benefited from India's economic success, the rich have garnered a greater share of the spoils. Indeed, Oxfam's inequality estimates from earlier this year suggest the top 10 per cent of the Indian population holds 77 per cent of the total national wealth.

Inequality is not just about disparities in wealth distribution. A large number of Indians not only have very low income, but their opportunities for healthcare, education and social security are dreadfully inadequate. UNDP's 2019 Human Development Report (HDR) explores precisely these inequalities in human development, by going beyond income and identifying the deep-rooted systemic drivers of inequality. In so doing, the report reminds decision-makers of the importance of providing basic services to their people, and of equipping them to live with dignity. Further, the report underlines that poor people should be protected from the fallout of climate change and benefit from modern breakthroughs in artificial intelligence and robotics.

Today, the odds are clearly stacked, in a wide range of ways, along gender, linguistic, class and sexual orientation lines. The HDR finds, for instance, that in India the share of both men and women biased against gender



CR Sasikumar

equality has risen, indicating a backlash against women's empowerment. While traditionally vulnerable communities, such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, are catching up with the rest of society in primary education, they are falling further behind when it comes to advanced (12 years or more) education. Most now have access to mobiles but few have computers. And too many people are still just one illness away from poverty.

As the HDR argues, climate change will only exacerbate this inequality. The climate crisis is already hitting the poorest communities hardest and earliest. Millions of Indians in low-lying coastal areas are exposed to a rise in sea levels. Around two-fifths of the population subsist on agriculture that relies on increasingly erratic rainfall and fluctuating temperatures. A soon-to-be-released UNDP study on the impact of climate change on human development in India finds that across the country, from the hills of Uttarakhand to the coasts of Odisha, communities with greater power have, consciously or not, shifted some of the environmental consequences of their consumption onto poor and vulnerable people, onto marginalised groups, and onto future generations. We see this with air pollution, a problem to which the rich, with their carbon-intensive lifestyles, contribute more. However, they can secede from the consequences of that lifestyle — a choice not available to precisely the people who've done the least to create the problem.

With the scale and scope of the challenges mapped out, how should we respond? We don't have to look far for inspiration. India has already embraced policies that aim to transform social norms and eliminate discrimination through education, awareness and changing incentives. The 2019 Multidimensional Poverty Index — produced by UNDP and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative — finds that over 270

Today, the odds are clearly stacked, in a wide range of ways, along gender, linguistic, class and sexual orientation lines. The HDR finds, for instance, that in India the share of both men and women biased against gender equality has risen, indicating a backlash against women's empowerment. While traditionally vulnerable communities, such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, are catching up with the rest of society in primary education, they are falling further behind when it comes to advanced (12 years or more) education. Most now have access to mobiles but few have computers. And too many people are still just one illness away from poverty.

million Indians were taken out of multidimensional poverty in the decade between 2005-06 and 2015-16. Encouragingly, the territories that were lagging behind, notably Bihar and Jharkhand, were able to catch up quite significantly.

Similarly, since the turn of the century, per capita income has nearly tripled; life expectancy at birth has increased by nearly seven years; and children are staying in school for at least two years longer. India has invested in important building blocks to equip its people to thrive rather than just survive. A focus on rights-based entitlements (for instance, work through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee) and technological innovations (such as to open bank accounts and facilitate digital payments to beneficiaries) has gone some way towards improving living standards. New insurance schemes for universal health coverage, crop-failure and accidents reflect a momentum for action to tackle inequality. These measures are absolutely crucial in reaching those left furthest behind.

Today, India is no longer a country languishing largely in extreme poverty. It is a country with pervasive inequality, pockets of deep deprivations and vulnerable populations. India is, of course, pivotal to the world's achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. To achieve the SDGs, we must recognise existing inequality and continuously eliminate the structural factors that create inequality. UNDP stands ready to support India to devise its own solutions to provide all its people — now and in the future — with a fair and dignified lot in life, powered by technology, shielded from prejudice and protected from an increasingly unforgiving climate.

The writer is the UNDP India Resident Representative

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“Pyongyang's truce with Washington could end with terrible results. To avoid that, international efforts — notably from the US — are needed.” — THE GUARDIAN

China at sea

With Beijing expanding strategic purpose of its marine research to Andamans, Delhi and its partners should coordinate maritime diplomacy



RAJA MANDALA

BY C RAJA MOHAN

RECENT REPORTS THAT the Indian Navy “chased out” a Chinese vessel — Shiyan 1 — from the Andaman Sea should draw Delhi's attention to Beijing's growing maritime scientific capabilities and its ambitious research agenda for distant waters. Shiyan 1 is operated by the Chinese Academy of Sciences and is part of Beijing's growing marine research fleet that now stands at about 50 vessels.

Beijing's expansive investment in marine scientific research is very much part of its rise as a great maritime power and dovetails into its regional strategies. After leveraging marine science diplomacy to good effect in the South China Sea over the last many years, China has begun to extend it to the Indian Ocean. Last year, Shiyan-3 invited Pakistan scientists to join a research expedition in the Arabian Sea. Delhi must expect to see more of this in the Indian Ocean littoral.

At his press conference last week, the Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Karambir Singh confirmed that Shiyan 1 was operating near Port Blair and had neither taken prior permission from India nor did it inform the relevant Indian authorities of its plans. Admiral Singh said “our stand is that if you have to do anything in our region, you notify us or take our permission”. Reacting to the Indian statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing said that China's research vessel Shiyan 1 was indeed “conducting acoustic propagation experiments and hydrologic environment measurements on the high seas of the Indian Ocean”.

But, Beijing insisted that Shiyan 1, “did not conduct any operations in the Indian EEZ (exclusive economic zone) during the whole process, and only sailed through the Indian EEZ on the way to and from the experimental area”. The foreign office in Beijing added that throughout the ship's voyage, the Indian navy aircraft followed it with warnings and its crew also replied in accordance with international practice.

The issue is not a technical one about the provisions of the law of the sea. It is about China's growing maritime scientific ambition. To be sure, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) favours freedom of marine scientific research. It also lets coastal states decide on granting permission for marine scientific research by other entities in their exclusive economic zones.

Beijing is not contesting that provision. It says it is merely asserting its rights. As the foreign ministry in Beijing put it, “China has always exercised the freedom of scientific research on the high seas in accordance with the law and fully respects the jurisdiction of relevant coastal states over their scientific research activities in the waters under their jurisdiction”. Beijing also expressed hope that Delhi will “take a correct view of China's marine scientific research activities and avoid disturbing normal and lawful maritime activities.”

There are many grey areas in the law of the sea, including on the conduct of mar-

itime scientific research in the waters that other states have sovereign control over. Great powers, rising or incumbent, tend to interpret international law to suit their interests and convenience. Weaker ones have no way of enforcing their rights under UNCLOS. More broadly, it is difficult to separate marine scientific research for peaceful and military purposes.

Shiyan 1 now operates as part of the so-called “national fleet” for marine scientific research. Earlier this decade, China brought together the marine research activities of multiple governmental agencies, ministries and commercial entities like oil companies under one administrative framework. The objective is to minimise duplication, enhance coordination and closely align research with larger maritime goals, civilian and military, set by the party-state.

In the past, China's marine science research was confined to near seas in the Western Pacific. It now extends to seas all around the world. About half of the marine scientific fleet is reportedly devoted to distant seas. Experts on the Chinese navy identify at least four broad objectives for the national science fleet.

First, to map the sea-bed resources of the world's oceans. China has internationally sanctioned licences to explore sea-bed mining in a few areas including in the South-western Indian Ocean. Second, to develop large ocean databases that facilitate Chinese naval operations by providing accurate maritime domain awareness. Third, to use its national fleet for science diplomacy that adds to the Chinese toolkit of building productive maritime and naval cooperation with coastal states across the world. It also lets China set the rules for global marine scientific research.

All major naval powers through history have sought to leverage marine scientific research to broader national objectives, both civilian and military. The Indian Navy too has modest marine scientific research capabilities and has deployed them for diplomatic purposes in the Indian Ocean.

Although, it was a late starter in the maritime domain, China now scores over the US, let alone India, in the scale, intensity, and strategic purpose of its marine scientific research programmes. For Delhi, the Shiyan incident is a useful reminder on the need to invest more in maritime scientific research.

While strengthening its own national capabilities, Delhi needs to deepen its scientific cooperation with its partners in the maritime domain. The annual summit with Japan later this week and the dialogue between the foreign and defence ministers of India and the US in Washington next week offer a good opportunity to put maritime scientific research high on the agenda.

While their national structures may not allow the kind of centralised strategic framework that China has put in place, India and its partners, including the US, Japan, Australia and France, should develop mechanisms for collaborative research in maritime scientific domain. India and its partners must also consider better coordination between their respective maritime science diplomacy initiatives in the region. Such partnerships would provide a sound basis for eventual engagement with China on marine scientific research.

The writer is director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express



CHRISTINA DHANARAJ

Ambedkar and I

How Babasaheb helped me understand my identity as a Dalit-Christian

LIKE MANY OTHERS in India, my family chose to identify as “Indian Christian” to hide their Dalit identity. When a biology teacher at my school in Chennai asked me several times, if I really came under “open competition”, my father asked me to tell her, albeit proudly, that we were “Indian Christians”. It made no difference. The teacher, who also happened to attend the same church as mine, knew quite well, who we were and what our specific Dalit sub-caste was. I was a Christian on the outside, but on the inside, I was still a Parachi.

My paternal and maternal great-grand families converted into Christianity for both socio-economic and spiritual reasons. Becoming Christian meant that we could access mainstream places of worship, English education in missionary schools/colleges, and job opportunities in these establishments. My grandfather became a pastor for the Church of South India after being a teacher at a missionary school. My grandmother worked all her life as a teacher at Christian schools. I studied in a missionary school and a Christian college myself. In a way, Christianity was the ladder we climbed to escape caste.

Or so we thought. Over three generations and many years of socio-religious ostracisation, inside and outside the church, we have come to realise that the Christian identity in India is essentially a proxy for “low-caste”. No matter how well we hide it, caste markers

such as skin colour, dialect, the locality we live in, our economic status and our networks (or the lack of it) give it away. The biology teacher of my past, and modern-day twitter trolls, think the same thing — “rice-bag convert”.

For Dalit Christians in India (particularly those that are young), this can be extremely traumatic. The lack of politicisation keeps us confused, reducing our complex social experience to prosperity theology. We are conditioned to treat the church congregation as our primary community, which is apolitical at best and casteist at worst. We are made to pretend that we're just Christians, while having the lived experience of a Dalit. We grow up with no political tools or resources, and no intellectual ammunition to fight caste.

In retrospect, I believe I should have been more than just a Christian. I knew what my caste was, and felt deeply ashamed about it, but I didn't know I could identify as Dalit. I was almost 20 when I found a platform — the Student Christian Movement of India — that helped me unpack my caste location. I was much older when I finally found Ambedkar. My family didn't speak about him, and neither did my school nor my church. The friends I had then grimaced at the mere mention of his name. By the time he happened to me, I was in the thick of theorising Dalit politics, with fellow Dalits around me sporting the Ambedkarite identity. Between sly savarnas

who kept alluding to us as doing “hero-worship”, and social media posts that kept assessing who was more Ambedkarite than the other, I was left wondering, “What does it even mean to be an Ambedkarite?”

A year ago, in the midst of a brutal, polluted winter in Beijing, I found a small part of the answer. In an effort to understand Ambedkar better, I began listening to the audio book, “Ambedkar and Buddhism”, written by Urgyen Sangharakshita and read by Ratnadhya. For 11 hours and 29 minutes, I listened to Sangharakshita's description of Ambedkar's life, his thinking and his vision for my community. Many things appealed to me — Ambedkar's resilience, his dogged commitment towards his people, his confidence in his intellect, his love for discipline and his beautiful mind. No wonder my people emulate him, no wonder he is our role-model, I thought. But what took me by surprise was the way I reacted to Sangharakshita's recollection of Ambedkar's passing away.

B R Ambedkar died in his sleep on December 6, 1957, and close to 5,00,000 people had joined the two-mile long funeral procession. More than 1,00,000 had escorted Ambedkar's ashes back to “Rajagriha”. Although my connection to Ambedkarism was very new, my heart sunk and tears rolled down, as I imagined how it would have felt to lose a beloved leader, and how things would

have seemed so hopeless all of a sudden. What I felt then, closely resonated to what I went through when my father had passed away. In a way, it was similar: A community had lost their hero, like how I had lost mine.

It obviously takes more than just emotion to be an Ambedkarite. I'll probably be told to read more of him, to practice his philosophy, to spread his thoughts. I'll probably be asked how I can be a Christian and an Ambedkarite. I'll probably be trolled for being a novice, or worse, a fake. In any case, I wish I had known Ambedkar earlier than I did. Although politisation would not have made any of the discrimination less hurtful, I'm confident it would have given me the much-needed access to Ambedkar's political wisdom. Not being armed with Ambedkarite narratives meant that I had to internalise casteist violence and interpret it as something I deserved. Not having a rationalist understanding meant that I truly believed God was “punishing” me for my sins. Not knowing Ambedkar earlier meant that I had to wait for far too long before I could say I'm Dalit, not just Christian.

Ambedkar is for everybody, Ambedkarite or not.

The writer is advisor for Smashboard. She was formerly consultant for #dalitwomenfight and co-founder of Dalit History Month project. She works and lives in the Netherlands

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FAILING A VARSITY

THIS REFERS TO the article, “What JNU represents” (IE, December 09). It is apparent that right-wing forces represented by the RSS are trying to convert JNU into a bastion of their own conservative ideas and values to counter its message for an equal and free society. The BJP has an overwhelming presence in the entire country, while the fortunes of the Left parties are on the ebb. But the sectarian forces must remember that the JNU has withstood several challenges and narrow-minded thinking will not obliterate it easily.

Tarsem Singh, Mahilpur

UNDER FIRE

THIS REFERS TO the report, “Dawn fire kills 43 in Delhi factory” (IE, December 9). Most of the 43 victims of the massive fire in a factory in a congested Delhi market died of asphyxiation. The fire is the worse Delhi has seen since the Uphaar Cinema tragedy in 1997. In January last year, a similar fire broke out in an illegal fireworks factory in Northwest Delhi, killing 17 people and injuring two others. The National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) team found that some windows at the rear of the building were sealed shut, thereby trapping poisonous gases inside the already cramped and dimly-lit interiors. Many buildings in India do not adhere to the National Building Code and do

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

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

not have fire clearance certificates.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

NOT JUST SUBSIDIES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, “Don't cry for onions” (IE, December 9). Despite knowing that monsoons are always unpredictable, government agencies give short shrift to storing buffer stocks of onions. The country has witnessed two extremes in the price band of onions. As a result, the farmers are in a Catch 22 situation. The government's only recourse seems to be to dole out subsidies and freebies.

Deepak Singhal, Chennai