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BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Milestone Maharashtra



ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY

Political power is bringing about an ideological re-orientation in the players which may or may not endure

DON'T CRY FOR ONIONS

Avoid knee-jerk reactions to temporary shortage-induced price spikes. Government must focus on deeper problems

ONIONS CONTINUE to burn consumer pockets, notwithstanding several firefighting measures deployed by the Narendra Modi government. Since September-end, exports (annually worth almost \$500 million) have been banned, stock limits imposed on the trade (wholesalers cannot keep more than 25 tonnes and retailers 5 tonnes), the state-owned MMTC Ltd ordered to import one lakh tonnes (lt) and the requirement of fumigation against pest and disease at the country of exports relaxed. If all these actions — the income tax department is even conducting nationwide raids on traders to probe any holding of unaccounted stocks — haven't stopped retail onion prices from doubling to Rs 100-per-kg levels in the last two months, the primary culprit is clearly not “hoarding”, but production. Kharif onion sowings were, this time, affected by deficient monsoon rainfall till late-July. Even the crop that was planted suffered damage from excess rains, especially after September and extending to November. As a result, the total kharif and late-kharif onion output is officially down nearly 18 lt or 26 per cent; the actual decline could be more.

But it isn't just onions. This year's unusual combination of early-season drought and prolonged unseasonal rains around the time of harvesting has taken a toll on most kharif crops. Pulses, soyabean and maize, among others, are trading significantly higher than last year. Dairies, too, are procuring less, even as the cost of milk has gone up. While some of that is due to a slow start to the “flush” season — animals generally produce more after October, which again has been disrupted by an extended monsoon — there might be structural reasons as well. Low milk realisations of the past 3-4 years have forced many farmers to reduce herd sizes and underfeed their cattle, particularly calves and pregnant/non-lactating females. Its effects are showing now, with skimmed milk powder rates crossing Rs 300 per kg, from Rs 140-150 a year ago. Simply put, the period of low consumer food inflation — an average of 1.38 per cent year-on-year from September 2016 to August 2019, unprecedented in India — is over.

That, however, isn't necessarily bad news. Ultra-low inflation isn't sustainable or even in consumer interest, if it disincentivises producers. The current price increases, after discounting for weather aberrations or factors specific to onion, are more of a correction. Price recovery, combined with the best monsoon rains in 25 years that have filled up all major reservoirs and substantially recharged groundwater tables, will spur ongoing rabi plantings. That would, in all likelihood, yield a bumper harvest and more than compensate for any kharif shortfalls. There can be nothing better for the economy today than rural incomes bouncing back. And there can be nothing worse than knee-jerk policy reactions to temporary shortage-induced price spikes. The Modi government should focus on problems that shall not pass as easily as onions.

SMALL AND INCLUSIVE

New approach to granting licences to small finance and payment banks is welcome, will make sector more competitive

INDIA'S CENTRAL BANK has often been criticised for being too conservative when it comes to lifting the entry barriers for new players in the banking sector. Three years after the RBI approved licences to 10 small finance banks, the regulator has now issued the final guidelines for licensing such banks throughout the year or on tap, encouraged presumably by the performance of some of these entities. The bar has been raised for new entrants in terms of higher capital requirements — Rs 200 crore now from Rs 100 crore earlier — besides stiffer prudential norms on a continuing basis and a mandatory requirement to list after three years when the net worth tops Rs 500 crore. The new approach to granting differentiated licences to small finance banks and payment banks is welcome, especially given the current context where the established full service large banks are scaling back their franchises to reduce expenditure and in light of the collateral impact of the planned mergers of some of the state-owned banks.

Small finance banks have the potential to provide an alternative to some of the existing institutions with their mandated focus on small and medium businesses, the informal sector, small and marginal farmers and thus on increasing financial inclusion and serving a variety of unserved clients in the hinterland and tier three and four cities and towns. The RBI itself has said that a review of the performance of small finance banks shows that they have achieved their priority sector targets and attained the mandate for furthering financial inclusion, building a strong case for the entry of more players. Early reports, too, indicate that though these banks account for less than 0.5 per cent of total deposits and less than a per cent of total advances, many of them have been growing their loan book at a good clip. But where these new institutions — quite a few of which are former MFIs — are going to be tested is not just in building a brand franchise but also in ensuring relatively low-cost operations by diversifying their loan portfolios and lowering the old legacy loan stock and wholesale deposits, which can be costly and putting in place robust technology platforms and modern risk management systems.

The experience of the last two decades has shown that a competitive banking system can help foster a more inclusive financial sector. Small finance banks could well occupy the space being gradually vacated by some of the bigger banks and complement them too in segments such as micro and small businesses and the informal sector. Their success will, however, be contingent on asset quality, the trust they are able to build progressively, the level and standards of governance and regulatory oversight.

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



THE RECENT political events in Maharashtra have received extensive commentary. The degree of attention reflects two different dimensions, which need to be highlighted.

The first is the towering significance of the state. After the break-up of Bihar into two units in 2000, Maharashtra has not only become the second most populous state of the country, but its capital, the city of Mumbai, continues to be the greatest contributor to political finance. We cannot prove the latter with statistical exactitude, but no observer of Indian politics can deny it.

Compared to their past, Delhi and Bangalore have become many times richer over the last three decades, but they still can't match the wealth of Mumbai. So long as politics and business remain deeply intertwined, as they do in India, to rule Maharashtra is to have an enormous hold over Mumbai's financial clout. The BJP's unseemly midnight power grab reflected this reality. New York city, to which Mumbai is compared in many quarters, does not play the same role in the US, though it to some extent did during America's Gilded Age (1865-1900), a period associated with the nation's enormous economic rise.

It is the second dimension of the Maharashtra developments, which calls for greater reflection. Just what does the break-up of the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance, lasting for three decades, and the emergence of a Shiv Sena-Congress alliance, signify? Note that I have left out the NCP from a fuller consideration. The NCP could have gone either way. It represents a regionalist sentiment. Beyond that, it has no great ideological core. It can justify any alliance on the argument that Maharashtra's interests require such a move.

In contrast, the Shiv Sena is strongly ideological, associated with an anti-Muslim stance since the late 1980s, and the Congress, though not as ideologically resolute as in the past, is irreducibly multireligious. The Congress has, of late, gravitated towards a greater show of Hindu religiosity, but it finds it hard to, or cannot, break its reliance on Muslims. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, it received 38 per cent of the Muslim vote, larger than its share of any other social category. The alliance of an anti-Muslim Shiv Sena and a pro-Muslim

In every state election between 1990 and 2004, the Sena won more seats than the BJP; in 2009, both were roughly equal; but after Modi's rise, the BJP has completely dwarfed the Sena. In 2014 and 2019, the BJP won 122 and 105 seats respectively, as against Sena's 63 and 56. The basic political message is clear. The alliance has been a bigger boon to the BJP than to the Sena, and it is impossible to match Modi's Hindutva credentials. For the sake of future growth and political power, the Sena needs another re-incarnation.



SONAL GUPTA

“NOBODY EXISTS ON purpose. Nobody belongs anywhere. We're all going to die. Come watch TV,” says a dejected Morty to his sister, in the animated series, *Rick and Morty*, on Netflix. The popularity of the show, currently in its fourth season, has much to do with its protagonists who travel through the multiverse looking for adventures. Rick Sanchez is an alcoholic misanthrope whose unswerving faith in science and staunch denial of a higher being reminds you of Nietzsche's often-quoted phrase — “God is dead.”

Existentialists realise that though individuals recognise the insignificance of existence, they still search for meaning in their life. Albert Camus would call this the “absurd” — comparing humanity's quest for “purpose” to the myth of Sisyphus, who is cursed to roll a boulder up the mountain, only to have it roll back down, unto infinity.

This philosophy spread after the end of the world wars. As young men turned into murdering soldiers and the atomic bomb destroyed cities, people were left questioning the sanctity of human life, which could be so easily annihilated. The individual in advanced industrial, urban societies felt a deep sense of alienation. While the horrors of mass murder could explain the descent of humanity into an “existential crisis”, the recent rise of existentialism in millennial culture — through shows or memes, points to a contemporary “tragedy of our times”.

Perhaps, the tragedy lies in what Aru-

MILLENNIAL ANGST

We are in an existential crisis. We are also reclaiming a sense of purpose



The world we inhabit is dying. The polar ice caps are melting, global debt is at its highest and countries are beset with violence. Right-wing exponents, the preservers of ‘convention’, are gaining popularity. No wonder, ‘Ok boomer’ became the millennial turn of phrase.

Congress simply could not have been predicted. Why have they come together?

Let us start historically. The Shiv Sena, in its early days, was ideologically multidimensional. In their published works, Dipankar Gupta, Ram Joshi, Mary Katzenstein and Usha Thakkar have demonstrated that the Shiv Sena's original ideological framework, constructed by Bal Thackeray in the late 1960s, comprised at least three planks: Jobs for Maharashtrians in Mumbai, anti-Communism and opposition to Muslims. It rose to prominence in Mumbai on the basis of the first two, and the anti-Muslim plank was a distinct third. The Shiv Sena's original targets were the South Indians, who had captured jobs due to their superior skills, and the Marxist labour unions, which dominated Bombay's industrial landscape.

By the mid-1980s, the party needed an ideological rebalancing. Leftist labour unions had declined and South Indians were only significant in Bombay, whereas the Shiv Sena wanted power at the state level, not simply in the Bombay Municipal Corporation. As the Sena hitched its fortunes with the BJP-led Ayodhya movement in the late 1980s, what was distinctly third became primary, bringing it eventually to power at the state level in an alliance with the BJP.

It is this second phase of the party's evolution that appears to have come to an end. In every state election between 1990 and 2004, the Sena won more seats than the BJP; in 2009, both were roughly equal; but after Modi's rise, the BJP has dwarfed the Sena. In 2014 and 2019, the BJP won 122 and 105 seats, as against Sena's 63 and 56. The basic political message is clear. The alliance has been a bigger boon to the BJP than to the Sena, and it is impossible to match Modi's Hindutva credentials. For the sake of future growth and political power, the Sena needs another re-incarnation.

In the Sena's ideological arsenal, regionalism was already present. It used to be said that Mumbai was in Maharashtra, but Maharashtra was not in Mumbai, reflecting the paradox between Mumbai's regional location and its all-India migrant labour force. The Sena can now say that Maharashtra is also not in Maharashtra, for the employment cri-

sis of the Modi era is bound to hurt Maharashtrians more, given the customary educational lead of the migrants over the locals. The idea of 80 per cent jobs for Maharashtrians is a statewide reinvention of the Sena's 1960s' battle cry. The demand, then, was for 80 per cent of Bombay jobs.

A second ideological platform also needs invigoration. The Sena can't grow if it only remains, or is viewed as, an urban party. It needs an agrarian programme, which the NCP can easily add to its pool, and for which the ongoing agrarian crisis provides an opening.

In short, the disintegration of the BJP-Sena alliance is driven by two characteristics of the Modi era. First, having two champions of the anti-Muslim platform has run into decreasing returns for the Sena, while hugely benefiting the BJP. Second, the economic crisis, which the Modi government continues to deny, is beginning to provide anti-BJP opportunities, at least at the state level.

The challenge for the Congress was, of course, more existential. Its two awful and successive national defeats have had a hugely demoralising effect, creating a profound organisational crisis. But the logic of Modi's politics has also provided an unexpected opening in a hugely important state, which it would be foolish to let go. It is unclear at this point that the Sena will fully abandon Hindutva. Normally, it takes time to reorient politics. The Republican Party was a party of African Americans for decades after the American Civil War. It is now a predominantly White party. The transformation took very long.

The key question is: How badly does the Sena want power? If it wishes to remain in power for the foreseeable future, it can't return to full-blooded Hindutva, or it will be a junior partner in a BJP-based alliance. Political power has a way of bringing about ideological reorientation. This proposition will now be tested in Maharashtra.

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any succour, for the moment at least. A dysfunctional economic system makes it hard to find jobs that do not exploit or undermine our skills. Long working hours and disproportionately low wages keep pushing us towards a start-up culture, the stability of which remains debatable. Instability in life leads to disruptions in relationships. More so for non-heteronormatives, who must fight for their identities as well. Stress, anxiety and depression have entered our daily vocabulary.

Our generation is often, and if I might add, unfairly, construed as entitled and lazy. However, university students and young adults around the world are out on the streets fighting for what they believe in, their endeavours accelerated by social media. Hong Kong is witnessing a siege against the Chinese “occupation” and university students have been active participants. In Chile, students led the strike against an increase in subway fares, and, closer to home, we are fighting the fee hike in JNU for affordable education in public universities.

Perhaps the recent protests, pride-walks and climate change demonstrations signify the millennials' reclamation of “purpose” in life after all, as they seek to upset, if not overturn, the conventional order of things.

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DECEMBER 9, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

SANJAY FACTOR

DESPITE REPEATED ASSERTIONS by Indira Gandhi about her son's non-interference in the affairs of her party, the “Sanjay factor” is reportedly influencing the selection of Congress (I) candidates significantly. Three of the remaining four party candidates from Delhi, whose names were announced on December 8, are understood to be nominees of Mrs Gandhi's son. Jagdish Tytler, who has been selected for a Sadar seat and Sajjan Kumar, who has been named for Outer Delhi were among the Youth Congress volunteers in the forefront for implementation of Sanjay's five-point programme during the Emergency. Dharm Das Shastri, who has

been selected for the Karol Bagh reserved seat is also a staunch supporter and was also active during the Emergency.

PRESIDENT'S RULE

ASSAM IS LIKELY to be brought under President's Rule. The governor for Northeastern states, LP Singh, is understood to have informed New Delhi of the ministerial crisis created by the decision of the 22-member Congress Legislative Party and the six-member CPI parliamentary group to withdraw support to the Assam Janata Dal ministry, which has reduced it to a minority government. The governor has viewed with concern the virtual collapse of the state ad-

ministrative machinery as a result of the series of bandhs and the picketing by satyagrahis to press for postponement of elections till the names of “foreign nationals” are deleted from the electoral rolls.

CARTER CAUTIOUS

PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER told families of American hostages held in Iran that “I am not going to take any military action that would cause bloodshed or rouse the unstable captors of our hostages to attack them or to punish them. It is going to be very moderate, very cautious. Our purpose is to get the hostages home and get them safe. That is our total commitment”.



First Pawar test

Maharashtra's farmers need a new deal. A task force must be set up under the NCP chief



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI AND SHYMA JOSE

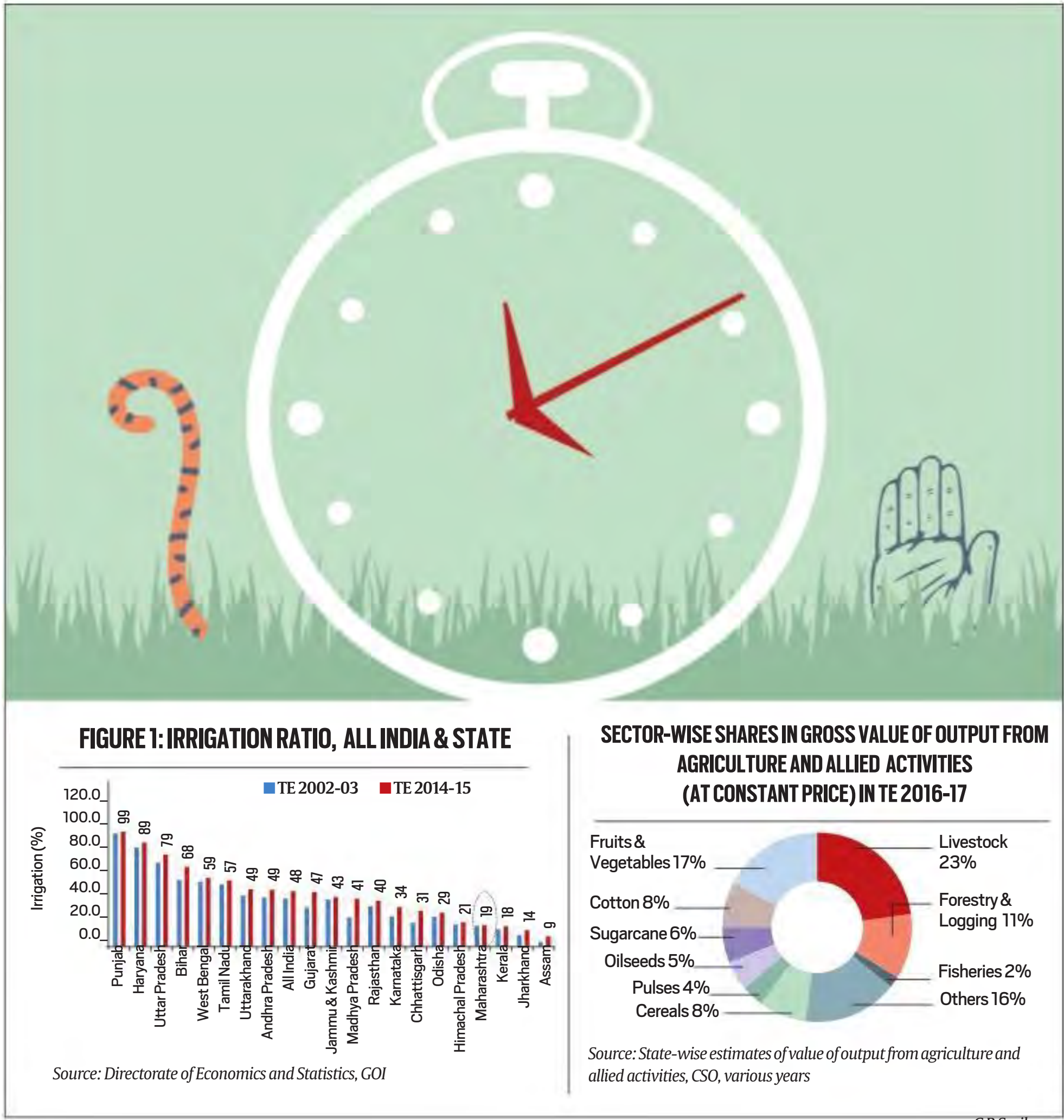
FROM THE TUMULTUOUS developments that took place in Maharashtra's politics over the past three weeks, one thing came out clearly: Everyone swears they want to help farmers first. Devendra Fadnis's 80-hour government sanctioned Rs 5,830 crore from the Maharashtra Contingency Fund to give relief to farmers affected by unseasonal rains. One wonders what happened to the crop insurance scheme if the money had to finally come from the state exchequer. The Shiv Sena-NCP-Congress coalition has declared that it wants to announce something bigger for farmers very soon. But before doing that, it wants to first map and assess the various schemes linked to farmers. That's a wise decision. And given that Sharad Pawar is the senior-most leader of the ruling alliance, it is a golden chance for Maharashtra to frame an agricultural policy that can serve as a lighthouse for many other states.

Maharashtra's peasants have been in the news quite often for the wrong reasons: The high incidence of farmers' suicides. While a little less than 10 per cent of India's population resides in Maharashtra, it accounted for 41 per cent of farmers' suicides in the country as per the latest 2016 data. Although suicides are a complex sociological phenomenon, yet it perhaps reflects the high levels of stress in agriculture. Early action is needed on two fronts. First, on the issues of irrigation and water use management, and second, building globally competitive value chains for major agricultural commodities of the state, from farm to fork.

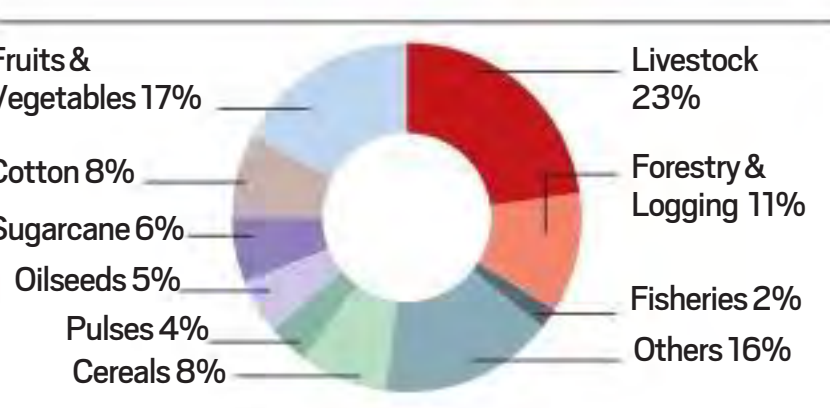
One of the key problems in Maharashtra's agriculture is the low irrigation ratio. It stood at just 19 per cent for the triennium average ending (TE) 2014-15, as compared to 48 per cent at the all-India level (Figure 1). Ironically, during TE 2002-03 to TE 2014-15, the irrigation ratio increased only by one percentage point.

As of June 2017, the irrigation potential created (IPC) by Maharashtra's Water Resource Department (WRD) stood at 50.4 lakh hectares, while the irrigation potential utilised (IPU) was only 39.5 lakh hectares, or 78.4 per cent (Economic Survey of Maharashtra, 2018-19). Massive public investments are needed to decrease the IPC-IPU gap, but that seems like a distant goal given the high leakages in the irrigation projects. The NABARD-ICRIER study on "Getting More from Less" by Gulati and others (2019) has estimated that the capital cost of major and medium irrigation (MMI) schemes in Maharashtra was the highest in the country at Rs 13.5 lakh/hectare of IPC compared to the all-India average cost of Rs 4.5 lakh/hectare. The cost per hectare of IPU is even higher at Rs 20.4 lakh/hectare. Given the alarmingly high capital cost in public irrigation, it is important to ensure transparency and accountability before any more money is put in public irrigation, else that money will also disappear as water disappears in sand.

Ensuring better use of irrigation water is perhaps even more important than investing more in MMI schemes. Water guzzling crops like sugarcane (remember one kg of sugar needs 2,300 litres of water), which occupy less than 4 per cent of cropped area, are entirely irrigated and take away 65 per cent of the irrigation water of the state. On the other



SECTOR-WISE SHARES IN GROSS VALUE OF OUTPUT FROM AGRICULTURE AND ALLIED ACTIVITIES (AT CONSTANT PRICE) IN TE 2016-17



C R Sasikumar

Onion, which is on the boil today, also deserves investment in modern storage and processing de-hydrated flakes, which can reduce wastage. Maharashtra is the largest producer of onions, with a third of India's production.

Maharashtra has already opened up private mandis to ensure competition and fair trade, but more needs to be done for building efficient commodity-specific value-chains that connect FPOs to best markets — be it organised retailers, food processors or exporters. The state needs to embark on a special drive to promote contract farming, and the opening up of land-leasing markets.

The livestock sector also deserves more processing plants for value added products that will help farmers realise better prices for their produce. Value addition in more organised value-chains could be the mantra for the agricultural transformation of the state.

The common minimum programme worked out between the Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress has lifted hopes that the farming community in the state may get a better deal. But, to realise these hopes, one needs a good strategy that recognises constraints on the supply side (especially water) but also taps into the potential on the demand side through FPOs run specific commodity value-chains. Maybe setting up a high-level special task force under Sharad Pawar's direction could see this potential actually realised for peasants.

Gulati is Infosys chair professor for agriculture and Jose is research associate at ICRIER

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Without common interests, NATO is destined to fail. It would be a serious blunder to regard the China topic as a ventilator for NATO to survive."
— GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

What JNU represents

It is a one-of-a-kind post-graduate university. That is also why it is being targeted



SUBHASHIS BANERJEE

RECENTLY, THE EXTENT of subsidies in publicly funded universities has received quite a bit of attention. Not only did JNU propose to roughly double the fees for its PhD and masters students, but even the IIT Council, while doing away with the stipend scheme, has tentatively decided to increase the MTech fees by nearly 10 times. While, the IIT step is ostensibly motivated towards deterring unviable legacy masters programmes of little interest to the industry and move towards more attractive industry sponsored programmes, understanding the provocations at JNU has not been easy.

It is well understood that the burden of high loans limits the choices of graduating students, and narrows the spaces for their intellectual explorations. This, in turn, hurts the society. Post-graduate research is usually fully supported everywhere in the world. Boarding and lodging charges are either directly subsidised, or are factored into the stipend or assistantship. At a stipend of Rs 8,000 per month, which most of the post-graduate scholars at JNU receive, the proposed increases are bound to pinch.

Post-graduate research, especially PhD research, cannot be self-financed anywhere because that will necessitate subsequent remuneration with high salaries, forcing research to be entirely market driven and killing the spirit of free enquiry. Parents supporting post-graduate studies is also a bad idea. One needs independence at that age for any kind of free thinking to be possible. Post-graduate research must be supported by research grants, whenever feasible, either from public or private sources, as is common in the sciences, engineering, economics or finance.

However, it is hard to envisage industry funding research in areas not directly of interest to them, for example, in philosophy, particle physics, topology or geometry or even in climate change, pollution, poverty mapping, history, gender studies or socio-economic understanding of public health, except as philanthropy in a limited way. Developing understanding in topics such as these is crucial for society and humanity, and it is therefore essential to internally support them to the extent possible by publicly funded universities.

This is where JNU plays a crucial role, especially in the areas of social and political sciences. It is a one-of-a-kind post-graduate university in the country that has promoted inter-disciplinary research and a vibrant culture of free enquiry, where learning outside the classroom has been as important as inside, and where it has been possible to challenge every doctrine and discuss it democratically. Moreover, JNU has set exemplary standards for an inclusive admission policy that extends beyond the mandatory reservations to affirmative action for gender and other marginalised categories, including for backward regions. The resulting diversity is enriching and must be celebrated rather than attacked.

Students from JNU have not only moved

to conventional careers in the civil services, armed forces, academics and in journalism, but some have also opted for active politics and other forms of activism. JNU can boast of producing a significant number of educated politicians, and there are at least two even in the current central cabinet of ministers. There can be no doubt that there is scope for improvement, including in research, but the same can be said about most other things. It certainly is not the case that JNU is the most broken thing in the country that requires urgent and violent fixing. Fees and stipends require periodic adjustments in any university. But the sudden raising of fees without adequate consultations, and the continual unduly combative posture of the administration is more indicative of waging a war on what JNU represents, rather than nurturing and shaping it with sagacious insight. The unusual belligerence may have something to do with the unfortunate tax-payers' perception of JNU as a den of "useless sociologists", "leftists" and even "anti-nationals". Such simplistic and illogical calumny is all the more reason for supporting more such publicly funded centres of liberal education and research.

In contrast, the IITs have turned to seek their relevance from university rankings rather than from original impactful contributions in engineering, sciences, public policy and education. Projecting wonderfully multidimensional entities like universities onto straight lines to enforce linear ordering is conceptually flawed, and is a fundamentally mistaken way of seeking excellence that leads to faulty reward models and bio-data engineering.

The IIT system has produced some top-class academics, researchers and students, and they have indeed made sporadic outstanding contributions of both fundamental and applied nature. However, sustained high quality response, either to fundamental questions, or to societal imperatives such as climate change, public health, clean water, pollution, digitisation and society, have, at best, been muted. This is mainly because of faulty metrics and failure to define collective priorities and action groups.

While industry-sponsored research in public universities is crucial, not all research and higher education can be market driven. Publicly-funded universities also have the responsibility to train people to ask fundamental questions not of immediate interest to the industry, but to identify and conduct independent enquiry of societal problems, provide directions, and, if required, raise voices of dissent if policies go awry. Public funding of higher education is thus crucial for any society. And, ultimately, education needs to be free and equitable for all, even if not subsidised.

Of course, the requirements of higher education need to be balanced against the even more fundamental demands of primary and general college education for all. This is where prioritisation and policy making becomes crucial, and the strategic response and guidance from our academic leadership — both in our universities, and in our policy making bodies — need to become more thoughtful. And the education budget, still amongst the lowest in the world (as a percentage of the GDP) needs to go up significantly.

The writer is associated with the computer science and engineering department and the school of public policy, IIT Delhi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SENA'S CHALLENGE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Sena on test' (IE, December 5). Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray's announcement to review several big ticket infrastructure projects is wholly unwarranted. It is the prerogative of every government to review all schemes pursued by its predecessor government in pursuance of public interest. But no such reasoning have been given by the Maharashtra CM. The Sena was party to such decisions as an ally of BJP in the previous government.

Ravi Mathur Ghaziabad

LINKED HISTORIES

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A Mughal prince and the pandits of Benares' (IE, December 5). It was heartening to read the story of Dara Shukoh who stands as a testimony to tolerance and pluralism in our increasingly polarised society. His stellar work *Sirr-i-Akbar* helped many Hindus access their own sacred texts and is a reminder that the histories of Hindus and Muslims are inextricably entwined.

Sangeeta Kampani, Delhi

GST WOES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Slowdown pain' (IE, December 5). With

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.

private expenditure and fresh capex investment coming to a halt, public expenditure is the saviour for the day. States are within their rights to seek compensation and one of them, Kerala has even threatened to go to the Supreme Court if the Centre does not pay up. Reducing the number of tax slabs and bringing down many items from highest slab will go a long way in fine tuning the GST process and may lead to an increase in GST collection as well. The GST council should streamline the filing process.

Bal Govind, Noida

VIEW FROM THE NEIGHBOURHOOD



A weekly look at the public conversations shaping ideas beyond borders — in the Subcontinent. Curated by Aakash Joshi

THE PALESTINE EXAMPLE

WHILE LAST MONTH, the focus in the Pakistan press was the proposed extension of Army Chief General Qamar Bajwa's tenure and its supreme court's ruling on the matter along with other domestic issues such as corruption, the spotlight seems to have shifted back to Kashmir to some extent.

In its December 8 editorial — "Relentless Tyranny" — Dawn marks four months since the communication blockade was imposed in Jammu and Kashmir. Much of the editorial is a repetition of the line espoused by the newspaper over the last four months: "...the people of the forsaken Valley suffocate under India's stifling restrictions"; "thousands remain incarcerated under flimsy pretences"; "Farooq Abdullah, Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti — all former chief ministers of the held region — remain in detention along with other lawmakers, demonstrating that the BJP clique in New Delhi doesn't even trust those that never tired of siding with India".

What is interesting is a direct analogy between the suffering inflicted by Israel on Palestinians over the years, which too shows no sign of relenting, and the situation in the Valley: "It would not be wrong

to compare the situation in occupied Kashmir to the miserable plight of the Palestinian enclave of Gaza, where similar restrictions on fundamental rights are enforced by the Israeli military machine. Perhaps this is not coincidental, as an Indian diplomat in the US was recently quoted as saying that his country should follow the 'Israeli model' in Kashmir; it is evident that quite a few of Tel Aviv's brutal tactics are being replicated by the Hinduva-infused government in New Delhi."

The statement by India's consul-general to the US, Sandeep Chakravorty, ("why don't we follow the Israel model") also provides fodder to the argument made by Moonis Ahmar in *The Express Tribune* on December 6. "For the first time a senior Indian diplomat has called for establishing Hindu enclaves," writes Ahmar, "similar to the illegal Jewish settlements in the Israel-occupied West Bank". Ahmar, an international and strategic affairs scholar, does provide something of a caveat: "Although his statement was heavily criticised in India and by the Pakistani Prime Minister, it reflects the prevailing mindset in the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) about the demographic transformation in the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley."

Ahmar then describes the modalities and immoralities of Israel's occupation and points out that many Kashmiri pandits too are against the "demographic change" that permitting all Indians to buy land in Kashmir would allow. He ends by pointing out that despite its efforts, Pakistan has been unable to change New Delhi's position on Kashmir, or have the latter face any serious consequences in international fora: "Pakistan is unable to effectively challenge New Delhi because of its fragile economy, political polarisation and gaps in policy and action. Pakistan should have hit when the iron was hot. Does it mean Pakistan has lost Kashmir for good?"

ONION WOES

THE ONLY COUNTRY suffering as much, if not more, than India from the soaring prices of onions is Nepal. In its December 7 editorial, *The Kathmandu Post* flags the tremendous shortage of onions, and analyses its causes and effects.

First, the cause: "When India faced an erratic and late monsoon, much like Nepal did, farmers lost a bulk of their onion crop. As prices for shallots, onions and other varieties rose, the Indian government put a

ban on the export of the vegetable on September 29 and has extended it to February 2020 at least. The current price hike and shortage Nepal feels is a direct effect of Delhi's export ban."

One reason for the onion becoming ubiquitous in Nepali cuisine — it was not always so — is changing food habits, new ways of cooking meat, etc. While in the short term, the country is trying to offset the shortage through imports from China, these varieties have few takers as Indian onions are largely preferred.

The editorial proposes a long-term solution to such crises as well: "The government must support the promotion of multiple import-export channels: the 2015 blockade, the sporadic Nepali ginger barriers and the current onion crisis show that New Delhi will not put its neighbour's need before its own. What it also shows is how Nepal is a hostage to a single trade partner. In the long run, Nepal must promote a diverse agriculture basket at home to sustain its food needs. Moreover, the diversity of local cuisine and the variety of regional ingredients must be celebrated. Not everyone needs to have rice as a staple, and neither does every Nepali require onions in their chicken."