



## Net freedom

SC constraints on govt actions are welcome

In a major pronouncement, the Supreme Court has declared that any action by an official of the state that shuts down the internet in any part of India must be temporary, and adhere to the doctrine of proportionality. In Anuradha Bhasin vs Union of India, the apex court last week noted that freedom of speech and the right to carry on trade or business were provided protection by Article 19(1) of the Constitution, and that the internet was a crucial method by which these rights were exercised. In the past, the Kerala High Court had also declared that access to the internet was necessary to exercise the right to education and the right to privacy. In other words, there is now ample judicial precedent to indicate that cutting off access to the internet is effectively prohibiting the exercise of fundamental rights and, therefore, is subject to the same stringent limits of state power. In India, such rights are not absolute, but can only be curtailed within strict constitutional parameters.

The context for the court's action is the months-long shutdown by the state of telecommunications networks in Kashmir, particularly access to the mobile internet. This has effectively rendered the erstwhile state incommunicado, cutting off individuals from their livelihoods and family members from each other. This shutdown followed the revocation of Article 370 and the bifurcation of the state, which happened alongside the detention of a large number of mainstream political leaders. The court has, unfortunately, not acted speedily enough to address the Union government's actions in Kashmir, and even now it has not given full relief to the people of the Valley, who have been denied their rights since August 4 of last year. However, it has at least opened the door for a review of this specific shutdown and made future shutdowns more difficult. It has also said that the competent authority under the 2017 IT Rules is the Union home secretary and, thus, unless confirmed by this authority any orders for a shutdown will cease to apply in 24 hours. The court's views are welcome because there have been multiple internet shutdowns in various parts of India, and the number and duration of these have been growing. India is among the jurisdictions with the highest number of such shutdowns, according to international researchers.

Unfortunately, local authorities have decided that part of their powers under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code is the ability to turn off the mobile internet in their areas. In many places, questions about the reasoning behind this decision have been brushed off with the standard "national security" or "law and order" argument. The court has said that challenges to shutdowns have suffered because the authorities have failed to provide proper transparency regarding those decisions. This has meant that the test of proportionality is impossible to apply, which is a violation of the Indians' fundamental rights. It has thus ordered that their reasoning be made public, be subject to proper review, and be re-examined every seven days. The court could perhaps have gone further and ensured the review committee, as in many other democracies, is composed of members of other branches of government and not just bureaucrats representing the executive.

## Brexit: Miles to go

The harder part of the negotiations begins

The global media's obsession with a crisis in that redundant and dysfunctional institution called the British royal family has obscured a far more consequential development for that country and the future of Europe. On the day the headlines reverberated with two marginal royals declaring independence from the House of Windsor, the newly elected House of Commons approved, almost unnoticed, Boris Johnson's version of the Brexit withdrawal deal. Bar unanticipated objections from the House of Lords, the United Kingdom will leave the European Union (EU) on January 31. Now, the more challenging part of the negotiations begins — the nitty gritty of the UK's future relationship with the EU. Apart from new trade arrangements, these talks will include agreements on security and data sharing; aviation standards; supplies of electricity; and regulation of medicines. Under the timetable, all of this has to be agreed upon by December 31. In February, EU ministers will meet in Brussels to agree to a negotiating agenda, implying that EU-UK talks will begin early March. In June, another summit is expected to decide to finalise the new trade relationship by 2020-end and November is the last possible date for this agreement. Considering that it has taken three and a half years and two governments just to get an agreement on the terms on which the EU and UK will part, a nine-month timetable to finalise a far more consequential deal looks unrealistic. Given the implications for its own future, the EU is unlikely to be inclined to hasten matters either.

During this transition period, the UK will exist in limbo: EU laws will continue to apply to the UK; citizens and businesses will experience no change; the UK will lose its voting rights in Brussels but will be free to negotiate trade deals with other countries. This is hardly helpful for businesses. According to Bloomberg Economics, Brexit has cost the UK \$170 billion and economic growth has halved to 1 per cent. Continuing uncertainty is unlikely to reverse this trend, especially with global growth expected to stay sluggish. Accelerating the economy is not the only issue confronting Prime Minister Boris Johnson as he gets down to governing after securing a commanding 80-seat majority in Parliament. Stiff political challenges too lie ahead, not least of which is ensuring the unity of the UK.

If the negotiations with the EU are postponed past the December 31 deadline — and the rules allow only one postponement — the UK will see for the first time in centuries a border between Britain and Northern Ireland, which will remain in the EU regulatory system just like its southern neighbour, the Republic of Ireland. Apart from the complex procedures and paperwork this will entail for corporations with operations in both Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, the withdrawal deal offers encouragement to long dormant impulses for Irish union — which, ironically, UK entry into the EU had suppressed. The centrifugal forces are already in evidence, especially in Scotland, a staunch Remainer bloc, where a nationalist party made major gains in December's elections. The prospects of multiple independence referendums in both these territories remain high, therefore, unless Mr Johnson is able to achieve a deal on time and to everyone's satisfaction. The stakes for the UK just got immeasurably higher.

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY



## Worry about the trend, not the cycle

Our institutional capacity to support trend growth has not stayed the pace

It is useful to decompose macroeconomic outcomes into long-term trends vs. short-term business cycle fluctuations. In the Indian story, there was a decline in trend growth in about 2011-12. Layered on top of this, we have had a decline in business cycle conditions. These two phenomena are playing out together today. The conventional tools of macroeconomic policy are feeble in India, in the best of times, and cannot make a difference to the decline in trend growth. The most important question in Indian economics is that of understanding, and reversing, the decline in trend growth.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measurement in India has many problems. We can learn a lot from firm data. The CMIE database now sees about 50,000 firms, and this portrays a good slice of the modern sector. We focus on the most important component of the economy, the private non-financial firms. There was a period of high trend growth from 1990-91 to 2011-12, and after that the trend growth rate went down.

Let's start at sales growth. For the period from 1990-91 to 2011-12, sales growth averaged 16.4 per cent (nominal) per year. In the following seven years, growth dropped to 10.5 per cent (nominal) per year. Turning to investment, the good measure is the percentage growth of net fixed assets. This had an average growth rate of 17.4 per cent (nominal) for the period from 1990-91 to 2011-12, and a lower growth rate of 10.3 per cent (nominal) in the following seven years. This is an important change

in trend growth.

Layered on top of long-term trend growth is the phenomenon of business cycle fluctuations. These are short booms and busts, the perennial cycle of fluctuations of inventory-investment-profitability that blow through the firms. Our here-and-now problem is the decline in business cycle conditions that began in late 2018.

Business cycle fluctuations can be tamed to some extent through traditional tools of macroeconomic policy, i.e. fiscal and monetary policy. Many of us are brought up on international textbooks of macroeconomics, and we tend to jump to the conclusion that the tools of macroeconomics are available and effective in fighting business cycle fluctuations.

However, in the Indian situation, we should be more limited in our aspirations. In India, fiscal policy is not organised in a way that helps in stabilisation. With the emergence of inflation targeting in 2015, for the first time, monetary policy has started becoming useful in business cycle stabilisation. When the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) pursues the objective of a 4 per cent CPI (consumer price index) inflation rate, this will, in and of itself, generate increases and decreases of the policy rate in a way that counteracts business cycle fluctuations. At the same time, we have an underdeveloped financial system, so the RBI's potency is limited.

We should do inflation-targeting right, but we should know that its potency in India is limited,



SNAKES & LADDERS

AJAY SHAH

## Migration is the issue here

It is not possible to be neutral in these times. I believe the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019, which fast-tracks Indian citizenship to immigrants of certain religions, is deeply flawed. Not only is it against the secular nature of the country, it completely misses addressing the massive issue of human migration. Migration is not just about foreigners entering India illegally; not even just about Indians immigrating — often illegally. It is also about internal migration.

When people move to cities and countries, there is tension between "insiders" and "outsiders". We need a response to this. The CAA takes all this and makes it into a simple issue of providing citizenship based on religion to fix the historical injustice of partition — creation of India and Pakistan and Bangladesh on the basis of religion. It is selective, parochial, and unjust. Worse, it will divide us along "insider" and "outsider" lines and spread hatred. The question is: When will this end? Or will it only grow and spread like cancer?

It should not surprise anyone that in Assam — where more of these people are expected to gain citizenship in the immediate future — the anger is not about the selective nature of the CAA. In Assam, people do not want outsiders — Hindu, Muslim, or Jain — because they will take away their lands and their livelihoods, and threaten their cultural identity. Their fight is for their already scarce and contested resources. But it is also about their identity. This is where the issue becomes so complex.

The fact is immigrants are already defining politics

in most parts of the world. In Europe, there is the image of the invasion of hordes of "boat people"; in the US, President Donald Trump has made the "wall" his mission to keep out outsiders. In these insecure times, such anger and fear are growing and fuelling hateful, polarised politics.

And this, when, according to the World Migration Report 2020 — published by the Geneva-based International Organization for Migration (IOM) — only some 3.5 per cent of the world's population migrated from one country to another in 2019. But

this is growing faster than anticipated. This is because in the past two years, the report notes, there have been major migration and displacement events. The violent conflict from Syria to South Sudan has driven people out of their countries, looking for refuge and safety. Then there is extreme violence or there is severe economic and political instability, and now there is the added push because climate change is increasing natural disasters and forcing people to leave their homes permanently. All this means that 272 million people globally joined the ranks of international migrants, two-thirds of whom were migrant labourers.

According to this assessment, India has the world's largest number of migrants living abroad — some 17.5 million. The IOM does not account for internal migration. Add this and you know Indians are moving from village to city and to a new country only for work and livelihood. People are leaving because there is no option or they want more options. In June last year, when six-year-old Gurupreet Kaur died of heat stroke and dehydration in the Arizona desert, her parents



DOWN TO EARTH

SUNITA NARAIN

## Ascent of a techno-sceptic



### BOOK REVIEW

LAUREN OYLER

At first, I didn't understand why I was asked to review *Uncanny Valley*. Anna Wiener's memoir about working for Bay Area start-ups in the 2010s. Ms Wiener reports on technology for *The New Yorker*; I've only written about technology to say that I think social media is very bad. I'm much more interested in metafiction than metadata, not least because I'm confident I can explain what metafiction is.

But when I started reading, I realised that former liberal arts majors who halfheartedly resist the app-enabled future are the

intended audience for this book. Ms Wiener was, and maybe still is, one of us; far from seeking to disabuse civic-minded techno-sceptics of our views, she is here to fill out our worst-case scenarios with shrewd insight and literary detail. It isn't that those of us with skill sets as soft as our hearts don't need to know what's going on in "the ecosystem," as those "high on the fumes of world-historical potential" call Silicon Valley. It's more that everything over there is as absurdly wrong as we imagine. "Tone = DOOM," I wrote in the margins, and that was before an up-and-coming CEO introduces Ms Wiener, a new hire, to his favourite dictatorially motivational phrase: "Down for the Cause" (DFTC).

Is it weird that a CEO can be considered up-and-coming? Yes, but of course everything about the new nearly normal is weird, and Ms Wiener is a droll yet gentle guide. *Uncanny Valley* begins across the country, where 25-year-old Ms Wiener is a low-paid assistant at a small New York

literary agency, "oblivious to Silicon Valley, and contentedly so." "I did not know that it was nearly impossible to use the internet at all without enriching the online superstore or its founder," she writes. "I only knew that I was expected to loathe both, and I did — loudly, at any opportunity, and with righteous indignation."

She comes across an article about an e-reading start-up promising "to bring a revolution to book publishing" — one of several proposed "Netflix for books" projects that have thankfully failed to achieve Netflix-level success. Despite suspecting "a lot of fine print," she finds herself intrigued as much by the possibility of a not-so-bleak future for the publishing industry as by the prospect of making more than \$30,000 a

year (no benefits). After a "series of ambiguous and casual interviews," she accepts a three-month trial position, to the consternation of her publishing friends, who see the e-book start-up as the enemy.

Ms Wiener frequently emphasises that, at the time, she didn't realise all these buoyant 25-year-olds in performance outerwear were leading mankind down a treacherous path.

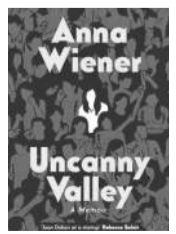
### UNCANNY VALLEY

A Memoir

Author: Anna Wiener

Publisher: MCD/Farrar, Straus & Giroux

Price: \$27



was easier," she writes, "to fabricate a romantic narrative than admit I was ambitious — that I wanted my life to pick up momentum, go faster." Event two-thirds of the way through the book, when Ms Wiener, by now established in San Francisco, is poised to "scale" by taking a customer-support job at a cutely branded "open source start-up" she hasn't yet realised

her "personal pathology" is a widespread affliction. An "entire culture had been seduced" by "ambitious, aggressive, arrogant young men from America's soft suburbs."

Back in New York, when her trial period at the e-book start-up ends, she's not asked to continue. Nevertheless, her bosses help her find a new job out West, on the customer support team of a data-analytics start-up funded by college dropouts that is hyped in tech-world parlance as "a rocket ship" and "the next unicorn." She finds the analytics start-up's bizarre interview questions infuriating ("How would you describe the internet to a medieval farmer?" asked the sales engineer, opening and closing the pearl snaps on his shirt, sticking his hand thoughtfully down the back of his own waistband").

Yet for every "rationalist" she also meets an earnest, talented person who is almost certainly not evil, maybe. On "a microblogging platform," she picks a fight with a start-up founder whom she sees arguing that books should be shorter so people can learn faster; in response, he invites her to lunch. They become unlikely friends, and he becomes "one of the youngest self-made billionaires." Another

and we should know that fiscal policy in India is not participating in macroeconomic stabilisation. As a consequence, stabilisation through macro policy, as it happens in textbooks, does not particularly happen in India. We need not despair. The nice thing about every business cycle downturn is that left to itself, it will heal. The long history of business cycle fluctuations in India is reassuring in this respect; downturns of the past healed even though macro policy was ineffective and confused.

The bigger problem that we should worry about is the decline in trend growth. The most important question in Indian economics is: Why did we get high trend growth from 1990 to 2011? Why did trend growth go down after 2011? To the extent that we are able to understand this problem, and change course based on a sound intellectual understanding, this could be rather important.

In this, we should resist simplistic notions of cause and effect. There is the danger of giving credit to the July 1991 Budget speech for the boom that began in 1990-91, and there is the danger of burdening Pranab Mukherjee for the end of this boom in 2011-12. But social phenomena of this scale resist simple explanations. Changes in trend growth come about through the cumulation of historical forces and human actions over many years.

The foundations of the 1991-2011 boom were laid, in many ways, from the change in course of economic policy, away from Indian socialism, which began in 1977, when the Janata Party took charge. A large number of actions took place from 1977 to 1991, and the July 1991 Budget speech was the final trigger for the dramatic change in trend growth.

In similar fashion, the end of this growth episode did not happen through actions in 2011-12. Once Indian GDP enlarged greatly, the institutions were inadequate in dealing with a bigger and more complex economy. A sophisticated private economy requires capabilities in the criminal justice system, dispute resolution, the judiciary, economic regulation, and the tax system. It requires an ethos of public policy that is defined around economic freedom and political freedom. However, we limped to a \$2-trillion GDP in 2014, holding an institutional capacity that was frankly designed for the \$0.2 trillion GDP of 1982.

Over the years, the mismatch between the requirements of the private sector versus the capabilities of the institutions got steadily worse. This growing mismatch added up to the demise of that growth episode in 2011-12.

There was a tension between hope and experience in the eyes of private persons through this growth episode. There were many, many infirmities in the working of the institutions in that period. Private persons were, however, willing to suspend their disbelief, and were caught up with the idea that while things are bad today, they are moving in the right direction, and occasionally when the government springs a disaster, there will be recourse and problems will be solved. This package of beliefs added up to the decision to commit to India, to build a business in India, to invest financial capital in India. What changed by 2011-12 was the loss of this optimism.

The writer is a professor at National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, New Delhi

left Punjab and were making their way as illegal migrants to the US. There is no war in Punjab that would drive them to take this extreme step. But Gurupreet's parents told the media they were "desperate" — they wanted a better life for themselves and for their children.

Now with climate change, the number of distressed and displaced will increase. The IOM classifies this migration as "new displacement" — over 60 per cent of these were triggered by weather-related disasters — from storms to floods and droughts. In the Horn of Africa, there were close to 800,000 people displaced by drought. In 2018, the Philippines had the largest number of new disaster displacement — intensification of tropical cyclones.

And remember, climate-change impacts are the tipping points as the poor are already living on the margins. Increased inequality is adding to stress; rural economies are dying. Weather-related events will drive people to the point of no return — they will join the hordes of migrants. We know this from the number of illegal settlements in our cities today.

So, what then should be done? First, it is clear that we need strategies to build local economies so that people do not have to leave. In the famine of the 1970s in Maharashtra, a unique but forgotten man, V S Page, came up with an employment-guarantee scheme. Professionals in Mumbai paid a tax to provide a floor to poverty in rural areas. Surely, we can do much more today.

But secondly, and most importantly, we must not build a divisive agenda on migration. There will be no end once we start counting the outsider. The fact is that the same World Migration Report points out that in 2019, India received roughly \$80 billion as foreign remittance — the highest in the world. This is what we need to remember. Not numbers, but people.

The writer is at the Centre for Science and Environment [sunita@cseindia.org](mailto:sunita@cseindia.org) Twitter: @sunitanar



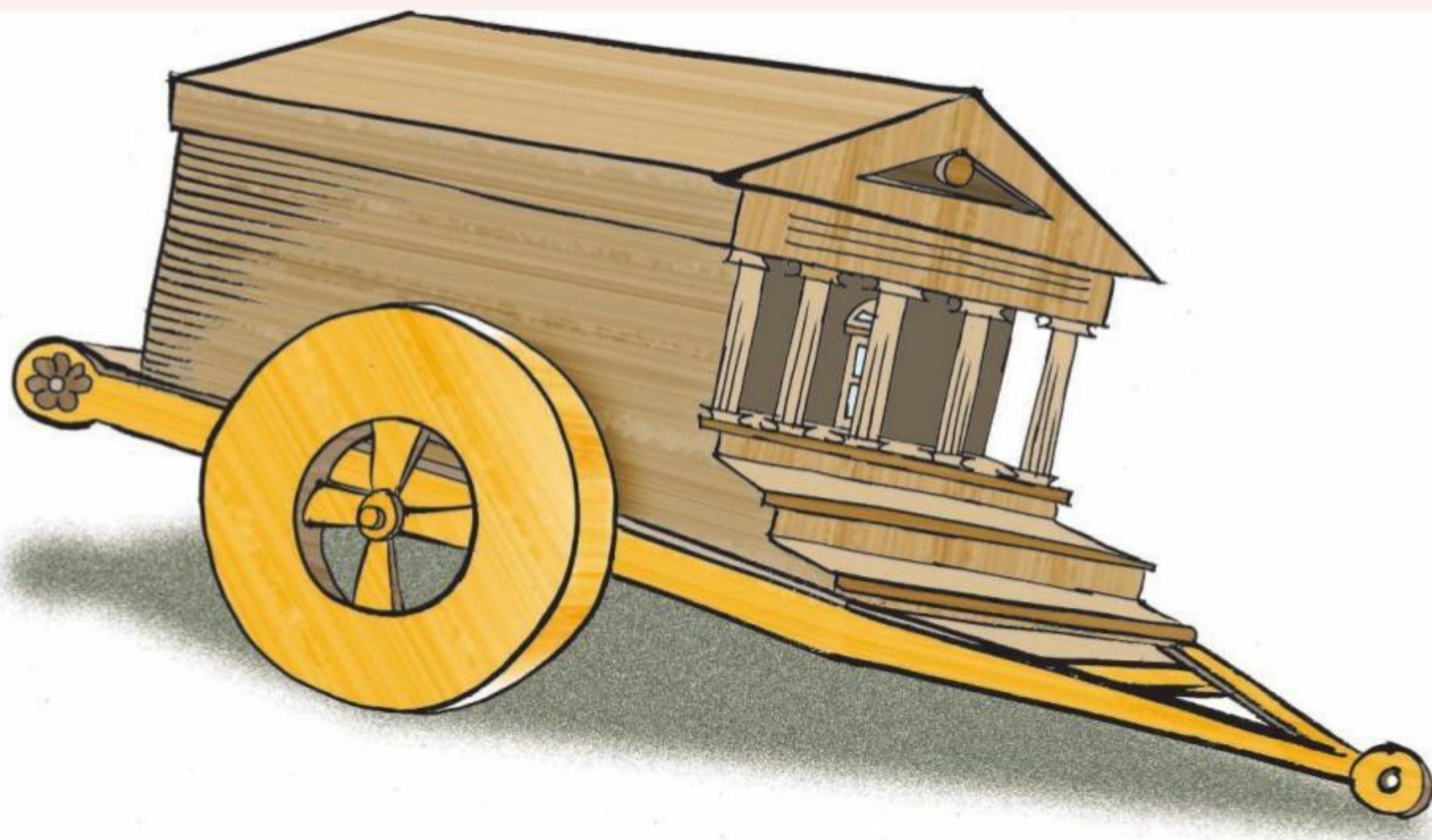


ILLUSTRATION: ROHNIT PHORE

**GURBACHAN SINGH**

Indian Statistical Institute,  
Delhi Centre

● CREDIT REPORT

# A crisis of recognition

The recapitalisation of PSBs hides or even prevents some significant signals that are otherwise associated with a banking crisis. Because the government recapitalises banks, there are hardly any bank runs. The underlying crisis very much exists

important, panic, etc. However, it is significant to note the following. First, Hal S Scott in his 2016 book *Connectedness and Contagion* made an important distinction between the two terms. Even though there is little contagion here, there have been serious adverse effects of the difficulties in the banking sector on the economy due to connectedness between the two (due to 'fundamentals' in the economy). Second, despite the significant improvements in the bankruptcy proceedings due to the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) that was brought in in May, 2016, the process to resolve the NPA cases is still slow. Furthermore, and more important, it has been reported that "for every one case resolved, four cases end up in liquidation, where the recovery falls down sharply to 15-25% of the book"

Given that PSBs are inefficient and at the end of the day loss-making in the aggregate (though not always for any fault of their own), the competition for private sector banks and foreign banks is rather weak. The result is that these banks make good profits year after year. Now, high profits are usually associated with efficiency, innovation, risk-taking, creative destruction, and so on. Also, high bank profits are usually associated with the absence, and not the presence, of a banking crisis. However, in the context of banking in India, it is possible for private Indian banks and foreign banks to make good profits year after year even if they are not great banks, thanks to the continued protection for the PSBs. The sustained high profits and impressive growth of a section of banks and NBFCs in part, if not entirely, a perverse and counter-intuitive outcome of, what is and has been for a while, a situation of a banking crisis in India!

Given that an Asset Quality Review (AQR) has been carried out for commercial banks and not for cooperative banks, the data for NPAs in the latter category of banks may not be reliable. But indicators suggest that NPAs there may be high too. The case of bad assets in Punjab and Maharashtra Cooperative (PMC) Bank is not an isolated one. There have been over 400 cases of cooperative banks over the period 2009-10 to 2018-19 with the Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation (DICGC).

AQR has also not been carried out for non-banking financial companies (NBFCs). So, again, it is hard to rely on the usual data on NPAs in such financial intermediaries. But there are reasons to believe that the problem is serious. The IL&FS case came to the surface in September 2018. But there can be many more NBFCs that have serious NPAs. It is

also reflected in the credit spread in debt instruments that have been issued by NBFCs (even if we leave aside the panic that gripped the debt markets for a while in India). It is well known that there are serious difficulties in the residential segment. There is a huge number of projects that are stuck, and there is a very big pile of unsold inventories in finished projects (estimated at ₹8 lakh crore for top-8 cities as compared to sales of about ₹2 lakh crore). It is, however, interesting that despite all this, so far average prices have not fallen much, if at all. This situation may continue. Alternatively, at some stage in future, prices may drop significantly. In that case, builders and investors may have serious difficulties in repaying or rolling over their debts. This will lead to another round of large NPAs; this is particularly true for housing finance companies (HFCs). The NPA problem does not stop here. NPAs are expected in Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY). MK Jain, Deputy Governor of the RBI on November 27, 2019, highlighted this issue. It is true that there is no conclusive evidence at this stage that we have huge NPAs in cooperative banks and NBFCs, and in real estate loans (such evidence exists for commercial banks only). However, I would like to make two observations here. First, the lack of transparency itself suggests a serious weakness there. Second, in any case, there is a serious enough problem in commercial banks which still dominate the financial intermediation business.

There have been sizeable withdrawals by banks and mutual funds from short-term funding at NBFCs in a small span of time. This has, in turn, affected lending by such NBFCs. This alongside the slowdown in credit from PSBs to the industry is, in fact, an important reason for the recent recession in the economy in recent quarters. The degree of the credit slowdown in the Indian economy is mind boggling. From April-September, 2018 to April-September, 2019, the flow of funds from financial institutions to the commercial sector has collapsed from plus ₹1,85,083 crore to minus ₹1,28,760 crore. To come to the main point now, all the above facts and arguments imply that we can indeed label the current situation in banking as one of a banking crisis. This is, in fact, very much in line with the notion of a banking crisis in the well known book *"This Time is Different"*; published soon after the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) by Carmen M Reinhart and Kenneth S Rogoff. The banking crisis is very much here. It is time we recognised this. The recognition will pave the way for appropriate long-term policy changes.

change is a different story; the focus is on the recognition of a banking crisis.

We have had NPAs that stood at 14.6% in public sector banks (PSBs) as of March, 2018. To put this in context, considering the capital that banks hold, the PSBs as a whole had become bankrupt (and several PSBs were indeed individually bankrupt). The reason these banks survived lies in recapitalisation to the extent of ₹2.5 lakh crore over the last five years. This does not include recapitalisation that happened earlier and it, of course, does not include recapitalisation that is likely to be required in the future, if there is no major change in policy!

The recapitalisation of PSBs hides or even prevents some significant signals that are otherwise associated with a banking crisis. Because the government recapitalises banks, there are hardly any bank runs. But the underlying crisis very much exists.

Also, given that recapitalisation of banks happens sooner or later, there is little contagion from one bank to another or from the PSBs to other parts of the financial intermediation business due to

**B**RANDING IS A COMPLEX process. It is a tough job for marketer to personify a product or a service into an image, that is either liked or not liked. Marketers keep juggling with branding strategies. To introduce one new product and build a brand out of it is a very intimidating task. With a plethora of brands in the portfolio can suffocate the basket of products. This concept of launching and managing a plethora of brands by one company is considered as Brand Proliferation. Brand proliferation is the opposite of brand extension. While in brand extension, new items are added using an existing brand name and several products are offered under the same brand name, in brand proliferation, more items are added to the product line with different brand names. In other words, the firm has several brands in the same product line or product category. It means that the list of independent brands increases. For instance, HUL has more than 20 brands of soaps; this produces diversity for the firm, enables it to capture its sizable portion into various market segments. However, it can also lead to money-spinning because of too many products, efforts and economic resources being wasted. Consumers get confused and make mistakes while purchasing products. Each brand requires a different treatment, each brand is a unique identity, and each brand needs unique handling; the very

## Brand conscious

Does brand proliferation lead brand cannibalisation?

**VIDYA HATTANGADI**

Management thinker and blogger



dynamism of product proliferation makes it hard to manage the brand. Complexities multiply by an ever-changing landscape of customers who demand and companies' attempts to meet that demand with the formation of products and more product variations. Brand proliferation also leads to brand cannibalisation—each brand eating into the market share of another product from the same basket. ITC's soap portfolio consists of a product line with Essenza Di Wills at the top end, followed by Fiamma Di Wills in the premium segment, Vivel in mid-segment and Superia at the entry-level. ITC seems to have segmented the market fittingly and has different products to cater to different segments. Moreover,

Vivel is targeting young consumers who are ready to flirt with new brands.

On the negative side, when a firm introduces several brands in the same product line with an amount of parity among them, the danger of cannibalisation is high; the share of individual brands can come down because of sibling brands. Another disadvantage is that the company may disperse its resources over several brands, which may not guarantee proportionate returns, nurturing just a few brands to a highly profitable level often proves to be a wiser option. Having mid-brands with distinctive positioning is, strategically, the best way of minimising cannibalisation. If different brands are designed to deliver different benefits to dif-



ferent segments of markets, it can restrict competition among brands. To avoid cannibalisation entirely is often impossible. It is not essential either, but one has to be sure whether a net incremental benefit that justifies the additional cost, also, complexity accrues by adding one more brand. When differentiation is not sensibly done the entire strategy can retort back.

Companies in their struggle to compete with other brands and the compulsions of growth often do not have kind of definite time at their disposal and time is the essence. They find takeover, acquisition and buyout of ongoing brands as an easy way out. For example, while entering India, Pepsi wanted to enlarge its brand portfolio and to ensure it

without much gestation, it went in for out of some ongoing brands. Pepsi acquired the 105-year-old Duke's and gained two powerful brands, Duke's Soda and Mangola overnight. It gained a strong position in the Mumbai market which has dominated traditionally by Duke in the relevant categories. Similarly, Godrej acquired Transelectra, the company which revolutionised the Indian home insecticides market with many successful brands like Good Knight, Hit, Jet and Banish; it is an excellent example of acquisition of brands. The acquisition was part of Godrej's long-term strategy to become a substantial player in the growing home insecticides product market.

It is worth noting that most organisa-

tions do not go into the depth of examining their brand portfolios from time to time; this examination is essential to check if they are prone to sell too many brands, identify the weaker brands, and discontinue the loss-making brands or the unprofitable ones. When organisations tend to ignore loss-making brands and merge them with healthy brands instead of selling them off, or drop them, they choke the healthy brands. Furthermore, the startling truth is that most brands don't make money for companies. The 80-20 thumb rule is a reality that organisations make 80% of profits from 20% of their products from a small number of brands. Unilever had 1,600 brands in its portfolio in 1999, its business spread over in some 150 countries. More than 90% of its profits came from 400 brands. Most of the other 1,200 brands made losses, or they earned marginal profits.

Another example is Nestlé. In 1996 it marketed more than 8,000 brands in 190 countries, 55 were global brands, 140-odd were regional brands, and the remaining 7,800 or so were local brands. The bulk of the company's profits came from around 200 brands or 2.5% of the portfolio.

If only corporations realise that they slot several brands into the same category, they incur hidden costs because multi-brand strategies and the decisions lead to a partial treatment to healthier brands. And, that brand proliferation strategy increases inter-brand rivalry.

● TECHNOLOGY

## Banking upon mobile tech

**KUSHANKUR DEY**

Assistant Professor, IIM Lucknow.  
Views are personal



AI & ML can do a lot for financial services penetration in the hinterlands

**B**RANCHLESS BANKING, EITHER through agent or mobile route, is claimed to be instrumental in driving financial inclusion. Safaricom's M-PESA (a subsidiary of Vodafone) in Kenya unleashed the utility of agent or mobile banking in 2007-08. A similar sort of business model has been adopted by many developing and least-developed countries. India is no exception.

As per Micro Save 2019, mobile banking penetration—recorded in terms of the number of transactions—was 513 million followed by agent banking, and bankATMs (80 million) and bank branches (28 million) between 2005-18.

The departure from a 'brick-and-mortar' structure to branchless banking (agent & mobile) can be attributed to ICT adoption by users. This has led to a structural and technical reform in the financial services landscape in the last decade—by partnering the mobile network operators with financial services providers—which has allowed adoption of low-cost solutions to deliver a slew of financial services to the unbanked.

It is well-known that e-commerce has impacted the quality of financial services and expanded the scope for scalability and increased operating efficiency. Nonetheless, inclusiveness in institutional finance access remains an area of concern as about 54% of population is yet to be the fold of formal financial institutions (NABARD, 2018). RBI (2013) reported that 90% of small businesses have no links with formal financial institutions and 60% of the rural and urban population do not even have a functional bank account.

While (bank) account opening by a percentage of population is a yardstick to measure the degree of financial inclusion, access to financial institutions and appropriate use of bank accounts for accessing various financial products or services,

namely saving, credit, investment, insurance, etc. ascertain the extent of financial inclusion in true sense. Nachiket Mor Committee (2010) appointed by the Reserve Bank of India suggested a differentiated banking structure (vertical and horizontal) to meet up the demand for financial services. A financial inclusion measuring scale known as 'global index' developed by the World Bank in 2010 and revised in 2015 has

already been replicated by many scholars in India. Their findings suggest that the determinants of borrowing like formal education, gender, age, demography can affect the extent of financial inclusion and can be strengthened through branchless banking. In such scenario, bank could appoint individual agents or organisations (for example, FINO fintech foundation) as business correspondents (BC). To prop up the extent of financial inclusion, the penetration and success of agent banking is counted on trust fostering and customer relationship, quality of service delivery, customer protection (data security and localisation), and cash availability.

Two mobile or digital banking models have evolved to drive financial inclusion.

**Model I:** Financial service providers, say micro-finance-NBFCs are tying with mobile; network operators for rendering mobile financial services; for example, Musoni is the first completely cashless microfinance institution in the world wherein customers receive and repay their loans via Safaricom's M-PESA system.

**Model II:** Financial service providers are partnering with payment banks to leverage branch or access points. Aadhaar-enabled payment system (AePS) supported by the unified payment interface plays a pivotal role.

The success of mobile or agent banking to financial inclusion depends on the level of financial literacy. This can improve risk-sharing among rural communities and increase their demand for financial services, reduce economic volatility, improve intermediation, and fructify overall financial development.

Digital payment and credit system will drive financial inclusion and make new business model scalable, robust, and secure. Machine learning and artificial intelligence can do a lot for financial services penetration in the hinterlands and extend the drive of banking the unbanked.



