

The good side of bad

How well-prepared is the world to contain and hopefully, cure, a new disease? NCoV will be a test case



QUANTUM LEAP
DEVANGSHU DATTA

On December 31, 2019, China informed the World Health Organization that a new coronavirus was infecting people in Wuhan city (population 11 million), the capital of Hubei Province. The first case had been identified on December 8. Till date, the new virus has infected at least 8,000 people, caused at least 156 deaths and spread to multiple countries.

This is despite desperate attempts to quarantine Wuhan and other Chinese cities. The disease has arrived in India, courtesy a native of Kerala who was a student at Wuhan University. An estimated 40 million people are in a "no-travel" zone in China. Many commercial flights into China have been cancelled. The UK is insisting on two weeks quarantine for any traveller out of China. India has also imposed quarantine.

This is a zoonotic coronavirus, a virus which can mutate to be transmitted from animals and birds to human beings. For example, SARS, which also started in China is believed to have leapt species from bats and civet cats, to humans. It is assumed the Wuhan virus (now called the Novel Coronavirus or NCoV) also leapt from an animal or bird to a human host and human-to-human transmissions are now occurring.

While the disease has flu-like symptoms, there may be a period of several days, when an infected person could display no symptoms. The spread of infectious diseases depends on many factors. One is, ironically, good infrastructure. In the 21st century, infectious cases can travel across the planet in a few hours. China with its excellent infrastructure can therefore, "export" a disease more easily than say, West Africa. We've already seen this with SARS in 2003.

Medical statisticians judge how infectious a disease is, by calculating a Basic Reproduction Number (RO or R-nought in the jargon). This RO indicates the average number of people, one infected person may infect before he or she is cured (or dies). The higher the RO, the more infectious the disease.

If the RO is less than 1, the disease is self-limiting. It will gradually die out. If the num-

ber is higher than 1, the disease will spread unless patients are isolated. This RO number can vary widely. Influenza for example, has a RO of 2-3, while measles has an RO of 12-18. This means that a single measles case could lead to 18 more infections. A highly infectious virus (like the common cold) could be non-fatal, and therefore, not so scary. But an infectious disease, with a high fatality rate like say, Ebola, is really frightening.

As of now, there isn't enough data to judge either the RO, or the fatality rate of NCoV with much accuracy. But researchers are making preliminary estimates. Two papers with multiple authors have been released (neither is peer-reviewed yet).

One of these, (<https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.01.23.916395v2>) from a team of Hong Kong academics says "We estimated that the

mean RO ranges from 2.24 (95 per cent CI: 1.96-2.55) to 3.58 (95 per cent CI: 2.89-4.39) associated with 8-fold to 2-fold increase in the reporting rate." Even the lower estimate of 2.2 implies the disease is likely to spread rapidly.

The other paper, (<https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.01.25.919787v1>), authored by a team from the Guangdong Provincial Center for Disease Control and Prevention says, "The average incubation duration of 2019-nCoV infection was 4.8 days. The average period from onset of symptoms to isolation of 2019-nCoV and SARS cases were 2.9 and 4.2 days, respectively." It continues "The 2019-nCoV may have a higher pandemic risk than SARS. The implemented public-health efforts have significantly decreased the pandemic risk. However, more rigorous control and prevention strategies and measures are needed to contain its further spread."

Chinese scientists have done a pretty good job of getting data to the global scientific community. By January 10, China had sequenced and released the NCoV genome (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>)

nucore/MN908947). This allows patients with flu-like symptoms to rapidly tested and diagnosed.

Genome sequencing is the first step in trying to generate a vaccine. The genome has now been sequenced from multiple patients (including patients in Thailand). Genomes from later infections can be compared to early ones to judge mutations.

The rate of mutation can tell us how long the virus has been in the "wild", and where it originated. The genome of the Wuhan virus is 29,903 bases long, and of very recent origin, because it has low mutations. Scientists estimate that it's likely to have originated in bats, jumped to some animal commonly consumed in Wuhan, and then to humans. The human version is believed to have "first appeared no earlier than October 30, 2019, and no later than November 29".

There have been terrific developments in genetic research in the last decade with new tools like CRISPR being discovered and deployed. How well-prepared is the world now to contain and hopefully, cure, a new disease? NCoV will be a test case.

CHINESE WHISPERS

Not Bihar, says Gadkari



Highway Minister Nitin Gadkari (pictured) at a recent press meet was applauded for the remarkable job done by his department in Haryana. But guests at the event were left scratching their heads because of a comment he made later during the event. When the minister was asked whether his ministry could replicate its efforts in Bihar also, Gadkari replied in his characteristic impishness: "No, I don't have the capability to do it." What was he implying? That his ministry didn't have the wherewithal to continue the great work, or did he simply take a swipe at the Bihar government? With Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar being a Bharatiya Janata Party ally, a majority of those gathered were willing to rule out the second possibility.

Azad-Adhir synergy

Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad is the leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha while Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury is the party's leader in the Lok Sabha, and recognised as the legislative leader of the principal Opposition party. Azad lives at 5, South Avenue Lane, in New Delhi. Until recently, Chowdhury lived in Humayun Road, which is a little over 5 km from South Avenue. At times, people in the Congress wish their Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha strategies could do with greater synergy. This could be on the mend. According to sources, Chowdhury is set to shift to a bungalow across the lane where Azad lives and the two neighbours could get more opportunities to exchange notes on the party's parliamentary strategy.

Fewer 'Modi jackets'

The government on Thursday held the customary all-party meeting that takes place before the start of a Parliament session. The Budget session begins on Friday. Representatives, 34 in number and from nearly all political parties, attended the meeting, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi chairing it. MPs and officials who have tracked these meetings over the past few years observed that the number of MPs wearing "Modi jackets" used to be nearly a dozen until recently, including those from some of the regional parties that were not allies of the Bharatiya Janata Party. At Thursday's meeting, apart from the PM, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi and a YSR Congress MP were seen wearing the jacket. Some attributed this to the Delhi cold — which meant MPs wore clothing that covered their arms instead of a sleeveless "Modi jacket".

Bracing against Brent

It is time for India to be imaginative about its energy strategy



JAY CHEEMA & FAIZA KHAN

up for rest of the imports. Indian oil refiners preferred West Asia crude as it was more cost effective; however, India stopped import of crude oil from Iran in May 2019 after the expiry of the waiver granted by the US.

The US started supplying crude oil to India in 2017, and has become a major source since then. In FY 2018-19, import from the US increased more than four-fold to 6.4 million tonne. There was a further increase of more than 72 per cent from April to August 2019 as the US supplied 4.5 million tonne compared to the 2.6 million tonne in the same period in the preceding year.

Recent US sanctions have cut off Iran from the international financial system and devalued its currency, decreased the Iranian oil exports to almost nil, scared off international banks and suppliers even in sectors like food and medicine and caused a decrease in foreign investment in energy, financial and shipping sectors.

Contrary to expectations, India remained largely unaffected by the cancellation of the exemption granted by the US to its sanctions. To meet its oil requirements, India increased imports from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Venezuela and US.

Once the US imposed sanctions on Venezuela's production and the sale of crude oil, India had to stop oil imports from that country. According to the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, crude imports from the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) decreased to 78 per cent of the total imports during the

first four months of FY2019 compared to 83.2 per cent during the corresponding period a year ago. On the other hand, India has increased its oil import from the US.

It is interesting that the theatre of the current West Asia crisis is Iraq which is another major supplier to India. The US sanctions and air strikes are being seen in some quarters as a strategic manoeuvre by the country to establish itself as global supplier of crude oil and natural gas. With Iran already closeted, there would be an increase in the demand of oil which would lead to an increase in prices.

While Brent crude prices shot up to around \$70 a barrel due to the prevailing hostilities, since the beginning of January, it has come down somewhat. But if the prices shoot up again, there is likely to be a heavy impact on India's economy and energy security. A spike in prices may also require a reconsideration of oil supply agreements.

Any increase in the price of crude oil has a significant impact on inflation as it drives monetary policy decisions. Retail inflation rose to an over three-year-high of 5.5 per cent in November 2019, triggered by a rise in prices of food items. Any increase in the price of crude oil would impact the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) inflation number commensurately. The government could consider reducing the burden of taxes like excise duty by the Centre and value added tax (VAT) by the states on fuels. However, this would dent revenues and widen the fiscal deficit of the exchequer.

While India is becoming increas-



If the Brent crude prices shoot up again, there will be a huge impact on India's economy and energy security

ingly more reliant on US for meeting its energy requirements, there is a need to diversify its portfolio of energy suppliers, and reconfigure its supplier network. India also needs to bear in mind the tendency of US to impose restrictions in the form of sanctions against the actions of the countries that it perceives as hostile to its interests. That said, Iran's Ambassador to India, Ali Chegeni, welcomed peace initiatives from India to de-escalate the tumultuous situation in West Asia. India should look towards balancing its interests as any escalation may jeopardise its investments in Iran (such as the Chabahar Port), and any

adversity of ties between India and Iran may also hamper India's future energy security and investments in the future.

India and the US are two vibrant democracies. Relying on historical kinship with Iran and shared democratic values with the US, India could help build a consanguine entente between the two. The proponents of the nation-first theory need to be imaginative about the opportunities that can be fashioned for trade, commerce, human advancement, and peace.

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BUSINESS LIFE

How Indian food can predict vote choice

Questions about food, travel and the kinds of sports people engage in can be used as an index of someone's local versus cosmopolitan orientation

LYNN VAURECK

Sometimes, seemingly nonpolitical topics can shed light on people's political choices, even after accounting for things like partisanship, education, geography and ideology. It's as if the answers to these questions help account for some of what traditional political measures leave unexplained.

When was the last time you had *vindaloo* or *tandoori chicken*? Chances are if you're a Democrat in Iowa supporting Joe Biden, it has been a while.

The latest *New York Times*/Siena College poll asked 584 possible Iowa Democratic caucusgoers lots of typical political questions, like whether they were Democrats or Republicans, and whether they planned to vote. But it also asked a few less obviously political ones, like if they'd been out for Indian food or how important it is to buy organic food.

Questions about food, travel and the kinds of sports people engage in can be used as an index of someone's local versus cosmopolitan orientation. In polling during the 2008 Democratic primary, such questions helped differentiate voters who chose Barack Obama in the 2008 Democratic primary from those who chose Hillary Clinton. The more likely that people were to experience other cultures probably unfamiliar to them — through travel or food — the more likely they were to vote for Obama, even controlling for things like income, education, personality, racial attitudes and city living.

This orientation toward the world also helped differentiate people who supported Donald J Trump from those who supported any of the 16 other candidates in the Republican primary in 2016. Voters who had been to Europe,



Australia, Canada or Mexico or had eaten at an Indian restaurant were less likely to choose Mr. Trump by 10 to 12 percentage points beyond the differences explained by other factors like the ones mentioned above.

In a recent paper, David Brookman, Gregory Ferenstein and Neil Malhotra returned to a workplace setting and showed that these orientations also separated technology entrepreneurs from other economic elites in terms of their attitudes toward economic and social policy. (Tech entrepreneurs are more cosmopolitan than other economic elites, and the authors think the rise of tech could therefore help to reduce economic inequality and other social and political inequalities, as these cosmopolitans start influencing politics and policy.)

In Iowa this year, a similar theme is emerging among possible Democratic caucusgoers. The *Times*/Siena poll revealed the same descriptive differences across the candidates' supporters on basic demographics like age, education and race, and on political characteristics like whether they describe themselves as ideologically moderate or very liberal. For example, Bernie

Sanders's supporters tend to be younger and more liberal; Biden's are older and more likely to be nonwhite.

There were no discernible differences on most of the nonpolitical questions across the candidates' supporters in Iowa, such as on buying organic foods (most supporters of all the candidates think it's important), using Twitter to read political news (most don't) or watching television shows on premium outlets (also uncommon). Accounting for things like age and education soaked up most of the differences that appeared at first glance.

But, as has also been true in past contests, Indian food was a distinguishing characteristic. In Iowa, supporters of Sanders are its biggest fans: 71 per cent of them report going to an Indian restaurant sometime in the last 10 years. Biden's supporters are less likely to have done so by about 30 points. This makes sense. Sanders's supporters are younger and perhaps more likely to live in the college towns or in major metropolitan areas.

Of course, it's not that eating Indian food leads a person to support one Democratic candidate over another — that's silly. (And there are voters for whom Indian food is the taste of home.) But a voter's orientation toward the world is related to candidate choice, and it turns out that eating in restaurants that celebrate less familiar cultures is one way to measure where people think they are more connected: To those around them locally or to people farther afield.

Which Democrats will prevail this primary season — the cosmopolitans or the local-focussed? Something to consider the next time you eat out.

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LETTERS

Unfortunate move



This refers to the editorial "Air India's new deal" (January 28). One of the major components of neo-liberal policies, popularly known as "LPG" (liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation) policies, is privatisation. This privatisation can be of public enterprises, public resources and public services. The process in our country was initiated under the Congress regime in 1991 and this has gained momentum since the Bharatiya Janata Party came to power. Dismantling the public sector means handing over our national assets, our national wealth to the corporates, domestic and foreign, on a silver platter. The fact is that the huge accumulated loss of Air India, which was a profit making company till 2007, was the result of bungling and misgovernance by successive governments. Selling it is nothing but frittering away national assets for the benefit of private airlines, domestic and foreign.

Bhupender Ranga Panipat

One wonders if the airline (IndiGo) would have shown the same level of alacrity in slapping a three-month flying ban on stand-up comic Kunal Kamra (pictured) had he targeted the likes of Ravish Kumar of NDTV or Rajdeep Sardesai of India Today instead of "heckling" TV anchor Arnab Goswami. This is not to defend or condone the uncivilised behaviour of this comedian on board the flight. However, imposition of a ban for three months is in flagrant violation of the rules framed by the Ministry of Civil Aviation under which a person can be placed on a "no-fly list" by an

S K Khosla Chandigarh

Sale unavoidable, but...

After an unsuccessful attempt to sell its stake in Air India, the government is going to make another attempt. The airline, which is in debt, has been suffering for a long time now. Therefore, the government is adopting the path of disinvestment or pri-

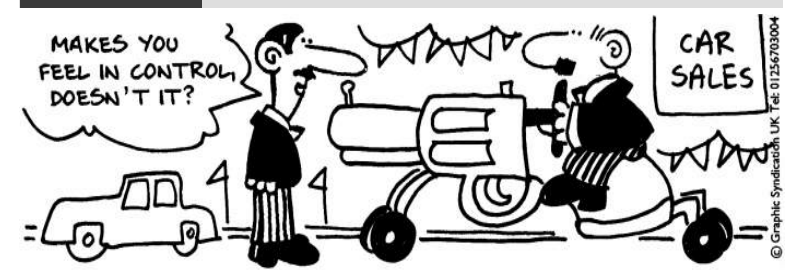
vatation. Those who were brought back to Air India in February 2019 to smoothly execute the process remained unsuccessful. Now whether this second attempt will be successful or not, remains a question. Despite the deterioration of Air India, some companies are showing interest because Air India has extensive domestic and international network, traffic rights in important airports such as London and Dubai. But there is a catch. Air India has a debt of thousands of crores of rupees. This includes long-term debt for the purchase of aircraft. The national carrier is currently incurring a daily loss of around ₹20-25 crore and has a debt of ₹5,000 crore.

Bhupender Ranga Panipat

Undue haste

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HAMBONE



Kamra from flying amounts to poking his nose in a matter falling entirely within the domain of airline's internal committee. The ban should be put on hold pending the recommendation of internal committee. After all, the right to travel is a basic one which can be curtailed only after observing the due process of law.

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Protecting bankers

Govt should not lose sight of wider reforms in PSBs

Bankers in the public sector have been reluctant to take lending decisions due to the fear of investigative agencies in case loans turn non-performing. The government has finally walked the talk on protecting bankers from harassment. This is a welcome move because an atmosphere of fear has affected the flow of credit to the productive sectors of the economy with bankers functioning on the understanding that the best safeguard against investigation is inaction. The government announced this week that the Prevention of Corruption Act had been modified and permission would be required for initiating action against public servants. It has also modified the 2015 framework on large-value frauds. As a result, managing directors and chief executive officers in public sector banks (PSBs) will not be personally responsible for compliance with different timelines.

The government has empowered the boards of PSBs to put in place a mechanism for compliance with various timelines placed by circulars of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and Central Vigilance Commission. Further, an Advisory Board for Banking and Financial Frauds has been set up to examine suspected frauds of more than ₹50 crore, which involves people of the rank of general manager and above. The board would examine cases before investigation starts. Also, the government has asked banks to set up a committee of senior officials to monitor disciplinary action and internal vigilance cases. Delays in addressing such cases tend to affect the internal environment of banks and result in inefficiency.

These are all steps in the right direction and should help allay fears among public sector bankers. To be sure, it is often not easy to differentiate between lending decisions taken in good faith or with mala fide intent. It is possible that lending decisions can go wrong even after following all due processes. Therefore, an initial examination before the investigation is launched should help bankers. However, it is difficult to argue that these steps will be enough. Legal safeguards, in general, do not always prohibit investigating agencies from launching probes, or even making arrests.

Besides, the government should not lose sight of the broader picture. Frauds and non-performing assets (NPAs) in PSBs are not always a result of corruption. As the RBI's latest *Report on Trend and Progress of Banking in India* showed, PSBs accounted for over 90 per cent of the amount involved in fraud during 2018-19, "... mainly reflecting the lack of adequate internal processes, people and systems to tackle operational risks". This clearly indicates that PSBs need wider reforms to build capacity in evaluating risks associated with lending. In the absence of reforms, PSBs will remain vulnerable to frauds and the fear of investigation, despite the safeguards put in place by the government. Since PSBs dominate the banking system, their inability to extend credit directly affects economic activity, although they are losing market share rapidly, both in terms of lending and deposits. There are a number of reasons for the government to implement wider governance reforms in PSBs because — aside from growth concerns — frauds, NPAs, and loss of market share have fiscal implications. The government is not in a position to continuously infuse capital into PSBs.

Sub-par performance

Central e-NAM law should override state marketing laws

The official data presented at a recent workshop on electronic National Agriculture Market (e-NAM) revealed that farm produce worth only about ₹91,000 crore had been traded through it since its inception in 2016. This is just a minor fraction of the country's agricultural trade and indicates an unimpressive showing of this highly vaunted agri-marketing initiative. Though e-NAM links as many as 585 *mandis* operated by the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMCs) in 16 states, just about 14 per cent of farmers in the country are registered with it to sell their produce. What is worse, most of the business transacted through this portal comprises the deals within the same *mandi* or the *mandis* in the same state. Instances have also come to light where the business is conducted as usual but the data is uploaded on e-NAM's portal at the end of the day. Inter-state dealings, for which e-NAM was primarily set up, have been very few — totalling just 136 till now. Most of these transactions, too, have been between the adjoining states like Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, and Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh. Only 21 *mandis* in eight states have so far acquired the facilities needed for inter-state trade in farm goods.

Thus, e-NAM has so far failed to serve its prime objective of letting the farmers sell their produce in the country to any buyer who offers the best price. The reasons for the sub-par performance are many and fairly apparent too. Most of the essential preconditions for the success of a seamless common agricultural market for the country as a whole have yet to be fulfilled. These include a single trading licence valid across the country; uniform *mandi* levies in all states payable at a single point; hassle-free inter-state movements of traded goods; standardised quality parameters for agri-commodities; and credible assaying facilities in all the participating *mandis*.

The Small Farmers' Agribusiness Consortium, which oversees the functioning of e-NAM, has recently introduced several novel features to woo traders and farmers, particularly the Farmers Producers Organisations (FPOs). These include farm-gate and warehouse-based trading for the farmers and FPOs and the systems like shopping carts, bunching of invoices and part-payment facilities for the convenience of traders. However, these amenities and services are also likely to end up facilitating only intra-state, not inter-state, business unless the farm marketing laws of states are aligned with the model APMC legislation drafted by the Centre. This requires cooperation from the states, which is not forthcoming in full measures. Though many states have amended their APMC Acts, most of the modified statutes are not strictly on the lines suggested by the Centre through the model Bill. If the government is serious about the success of e-NAM — which it should be, given the benefits of a wider market for the farmers — it should consider the idea mooted in the Economic Survey (2014-15) to enact Central e-NAM legislation overriding the state marketing laws. This is allowed under List III of the Seventh Schedule (Concurrent List) of the Indian Constitution. The state laws could continue to govern spot physical trading at the local level. No doubt, the states would resist such a move, but there seems hardly any alternative to it.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Towards a new 'road to serfdom'?

The classical liberal order is under threat from 'woke' progressives

After the Second World War, Fredrich Hayek, a young professor at the London School of Economics wrote a book, *The Road to Serfdom*, which pilloried the growing acceptance of socialism in the UK, and made the case for a return to classical liberalism. He also set up an academy of classical liberal scholars — the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) — in 1947 to discuss the ideals and ideas of economic and political liberty as a counter to the existing collectivist socialist dogmas, which he described as the "Road to Serfdom". The MPS held its latest meeting this month at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. A major theme was the threats to the classical liberal order, which had seemingly triumphed worldwide since the end of the "evil empire".

One major worry expressed was the growing number of the young in both the UK and the US who proclaimed themselves as socialists, advocating the dirigiste panaceas that had failed worldwide in the past. Thus, in the UK, a 2017 survey found 70 per cent of university students planning to vote for Jeremy Corbyn's far left Labour party. In the US, young Americans aged 18-29 surveyed in 2018 said they were more positive about socialism (51 per cent) than capitalism (45 per cent).

Various explanations have been provided for this turn of the young to socialism: The domination by left wing professors of the academy, the laziness of the "snowflake" generation, and the capture by the left of the cultural narrative as advocated by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. But none of these are persuasive. The academy has been left wing in both the UK and the US since I joined it in the mid-1960s. The young have always been dismissed as lazy by the old, and I doubt if the US and UK millennials have even heard of, let alone been influenced by Gramsci. A

more cogent explanation is provided by their experience during the Great Recession.

This is best exemplified by the leading charismatic tribune of the US left, the 29-year-old Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC). (See Prachi Gupta: *AOC*, Workman, NY 2019). She was born in Puerto Rico but her parents moved to the Bronx in New York soon afterwards, where her father had a small business. As the Bronx had the highest school dropout rate of any county in the state, her father pooled money from relatives to buy a modest house in Yorktown Heights in affluent Westchester county, where his two young children could have access to better public schools. AOC did well in school, and by age 17 was set to pursue a science-based career at Boston University. Then



DEEPAK LAL

tragedy struck, when in 2008 her 48-year-old father died of lung cancer. This destabilised the family. Her mother barely stayed off foreclosure and eviction. AOC realising that her chosen medical career would take over 10 years to fructify switched to economics and international relations, in which she graduated cum laude in 2011 but with "thousands of dollars in student debt, adding to her financial burden". Throughout college, AOC "had witnessed the corporate greed that fuelled the financial crisis and watched taxpayers bail out Wall Street executives who faced virtually no consequences. This recession deepened wealth inequality and it was the middle and lower classes, disproportionately communities of colour like hers, that suffered most" (p.17). This and the public activism she had shown since high school radicalised her.

Professor Edward Glaeser in *Boomer Socialism* led to Bernie Sanders (WSJ, Jan 18, 2020) also argues that young people have been radicalised because the economy isn't working that well for them. "Many public

India's fraying ties on the global stage

Economically, socially and politically India must put its house in order if it wants to enhance its regional and world standing in 2020. Two domestic developments that are quite different from one another — India's economic decline and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) — have adversely affected its Asian and global stature. They have raised questions about its ties even with friendly countries including the US, Japan, Asean nations, Bangladesh, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and even the European Parliament.

India and its mercurial American strategic superpower partner are challenged by their ascending rival, China. Simultaneously, India must advance progress to improve the life chances of its citizens. The CAA, which would make religion a test for Indian citizenship, will not empower India to cope with a technologically advancing world, if only because the Act highlights the extent to which New Delhi is marching backwards into its own atavistic version of the past to create a Hindu-majoritarian state in the 21st century.

For some years after 2004, India was one of the world's fastest growing economies. Today, it is not even one of the top 40. And it is unable to modernise its armed forces and defend its position in the Indian Ocean without the help of the US.

In the 21st century, maritime power is a determinant of "great power". China's economically and strategically important Belt-and-Road Initiative displays its increased naval presence in the international waters of the Indian Ocean and has received the support of Russia and Iran. They are countries that New Delhi views as India's friends. But both have far stronger trade and investment ties with China than with India.

The foreign policies of countries are shaped by complex factors and the strategic partnership between China and Russia reflects their wish to challenge global primacy of the US. That is why they are expanding

their presence in the Indian Ocean. In November 2019, Russia held naval exercises with China and South Africa off the strategically important Cape of Good Hope. On December 27, it conducted naval drills with China and Iran in the Strait of Hormuz, through which one-fifth of the world's oil is transported. Sanctions-hit Iran can now claim that it has two powerful suitors in the Indian Ocean; Russia can play the lead actor in West Asia; China can show off its global naval power. Meanwhile, India's last-minute decision to stay out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership — after taking part in several years of negotiations — did not burnish its image in Southeast and East Asia. Absent from Asia's multilateral trade agreements, how much will India contribute to the region's economic



ANITA INDER SINGH

future? And with its slowing economy, always straggling behind that of Asean, Japan and South Korea, India can hardly be perceived as the Asian counterpoise to rising China.

The CAA has also had a bearing on India's ties with friendly countries. In December, the outbreak of violence in northeast India that followed the passing of the CAA prompted Shinzo Abe, the India-friendly Japanese premier, to cancel his annual summit with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

India's neighbour, Bangladesh, is offended by the CAA. New Delhi's reference to immigrants from Bangladesh as "termites" could only strain their ties. Bangladesh's foreign and home ministers recently cancelled their official trips to India. Foreign Minister A K Abdul Momen opined that the CAA "weakens India's historic character as a secular nation" and any "uncertainty" there could affect its neighbours.

Other friendly Muslim-majority countries are not backing India through thick and thin. Last October, New Delhi hailed Saudi Arabia as "a valued friend" for showing an interest in investing \$100 billion in India's energy sector. Now Riyadh has agreed to Islamabad's request to hold a special foreign ministers'

policies make it harder to get a job, save money or find an affordable home, leaving young idealists thinking, "Why not try socialism?" But Boris Johnson's victory in the recent UK election faced with similar youth support for Jeremy Corbyn shows the victory of socialism is not inevitable.

The second fear is of the undermining of the constitutional order of the US. The late Oxford political scientist Sam Finer in his magisterial 3 volume, *The History of Government*, summed up the legacy of the American revolution as embodied in the US constitution as "having shown how political power may be bridled; and it has stood for two centuries as the ultimate exercise in law-boundedness. This is a formidable achievement". As the Hon. Douglas Ginsberg, Chief Judge, US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit, explained in his paper for the MPS meeting, the major reason for this achievement is that the US has a written Constitution. "To be faithful to the written constitution a jurist must make it his goal to illuminate the meaning of the text as the Framers understood it". Despite some exceptions this was the norm till the Great Depression and Roosevelt's determination to pass his New Deal "put the Supreme Court's commitment to the Constitution as written under severe stress, and it was then that the wheels began to come off" with FDR's threat to pack the court (though voted down by the Senate) hanging like the sword of Damocles over the Court's "adherence to their announced understanding of the Constitution."

Since then there has been an ongoing battle between progressive jurists who believe in a "living" (hence changeable) constitution and traditionalists who believe in fidelity to the written constitution.

This debate has been overtaken, argues Christopher Caldwell in an important book (*The Age of Entitlement*, Simon and Schuster, 2020), by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which rightly banned racial discrimination but created a vast enforcement mechanism to monitor nearly every aspect of American life for the proper racial balance, acting against racism "even if there was no evidence of racist intent." Ordinary citizens were afraid to speak for fear of being called racist. "America had something it never had at the federal level. Something the overwhelming majority of its citizens would never have approved, an explicit system of racial preference".

This change in constitutional culture, argues Caldwell, was then extended to women's rights, sexual preference and recently to gender identity. "The new system for overthrowing the traditions that hindered black people became the model for overthrowing every tradition in American life." The civil rights revolution was not just a major new element in the Constitution. It was "a rival constitution, with which the original one was frequently incompatible". The disagreement over the two constitutions "the *de jure* constitution of 1788 with all the traditional forms of jurisprudential legitimacy and centuries of American culture behind it, or the *de facto* constitution of 1964, which lacks this traditional kind of legitimacy but commands the near unanimous endorsement of judicial elites and civic educators and the passionate allegiance of those who received it as a liberation" will continue to polarise the polity. Who wins in these disputes — the traditional constitutionalist or the "woke" progressives will determine whether the West is now on another road to serfdom.

meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to discuss Kashmir.

The US remains India's most important strategic partner. But with the slowing Indian economy unable to sustain the modernisation of India's military and with trade ties bogged down by what Washington brands as India's protectionist tariffs, a new take-off in Indo-US relationship seems unlikely. The official snub to Amazon's offer of investment has not enhanced India's reputation as business-friendly country. Additionally, India's stance on Kashmir and the CAA has adversely affected its image as a modern secular democracy among American and European lawmakers.

Generally, the practice of international power politics shows that talk of non-interference in domestic affairs is futile. Questions raised in the US Congress about India's democracy cannot be lightly dismissed. Congressmen can block arms sales to India, or pursue sanctions because India will buy the S-400 missile system from Russia. International history also reveals that a country's economic weakness and socio-political strife are exploited by foreign states.

India's eroding economic cachet and polarised society will lead the US, Japan and Asean countries to question its capacity to become a major Asian power. A government enjoying a political majority is doing little to revive the economy and stabilise the socio-political situation. The backward-looking, strife-provoking CAA is simultaneously displeasing India's democratic friends like the US and Japan, while failing to win the support of authoritarian Saudi Arabia. Both democratic and autocratic friends are of economic import to India — the democratic US the most. The European Parliament's critique of the CAA will cast its shadow over the EU-India summit in March. Are New Delhi's economic ineptitude and socio-political truculence risking India's good ties with practically all of its friends?

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The evolution of the BJP



BOOK REVIEW

T C A SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

This book is a calm, unhurried and adjective-free narration of how and why an ideological alternative to the Left, represented by the Congress since 1937, has evolved in India. That's what's good about it.

What's bad is that Shantanu Gupta fails to explain when the flag bearer of that alternative, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), grown child of the Jana Sangh, turned left itself. Truth be told, today's BJP is almost exactly like the Congress of the 1970s except in the matter of how to treat India's 200

million Muslims.

Mr Gupta starts at the beginning but omits many details, perhaps because they are slight. But then, this is not intended to be a detailed history of the BJP but a sort of beginners' guide. It performs that role admirably.

The 20 chapters are designed to answer the sort of questions that the English-speaking middle class occasionally asks. The answer may not satisfy it but the facts are laid out succinctly.

Thus, to cite just three examples, there's a chapter called "Who Taught Muslim Appeasement to the Congress". There is another called "How the RSS Came Into Being" and a third called "The Advent of Deen Dayal Upadhyay and the Jana Sangh under Him".

Each chapter seeks to explain exactly what happened and what the context was for it. In that sense, the book seeks

to set the record straight and, for that reason, is a valuable contribution. It shows how, politically at least, India's greatness lay in allowing different ideologies to exist. Sadly, that is under serious threat now.

Mr Gupta has not seen it necessary to deal with this particular middle-class question about the threat to political pluralism. That weakens the book's appeal.

Muslim appeasement: So why did the Congress "appease" the Muslims? After a long and accurate narration of the events leading up to the Lucknow Pact of 1916 between the Congress and

the Muslim League, Mr Gupta doesn't offer what can be called a credible explanation.

But he is right in reminding us that the Congress gave Jinnah a disproportionate share of representation in the provincial legislatures. That gave Jinnah the first hint of Congress weakness, which he exploited when the Congress had to choose between political expediency and principle in 1946.

The odd thing is that in 1916 it chose to give in to Jinnah's demands for greater than justified representation in order to present a united face to the British. In 1947 it chose to give in to him for a disunited India. Only Gandhiji resisted.

In that sense, it wasn't really the

Muslims who were a problem. It was the Congress. That's why it is difficult to see why the BJP treats the two as being two sides of the same political problem.

After all, the greater damage has been done by Congress socialism than its assiduous wooing of the Muslims. Yet while the BJP has made the Muslims the "other" it has embraced Congress socialism.

Mr Gupta might like to explain this in the second edition.

Narendra Modi and Amit Shah: It is widely conceded that the BJP after 2014 is not the same BJP before that year. The two men who transformed it so completely are Narendra Modi as prime minister and Amit Shah as party president.

Yet the chapter on the post-2014 years is the weakest. It restricts itself to a justifiable narration of achievements. It also lists all the problems that the BJP as a party and the government that it led had to tackle. There's no question that after a decade of Sonia Gandhi rule these were difficult and several.

But what's lacking is a proper

discussion of the economy, which is in sharp contrast to the paragraphs on other topics such as foreign policy and internal security. There is only a passing mention of either demonetisation or the Goods and Services Tax, the twins that the critics accuse for the economy's downfall. This is one more thing for the second edition to tackle and it should explain the BJP's preference for a greater-than-warranted role for the state in economic activity.

Nor has Mr Gupta discussed the Modi-Shah duo's general hammer-and-tongs approach to governance, not least of which is the undisguised demonisation of Muslims and Marxists. This makes no sense except as a way of winning national elections.

Despite these shortcomings, this is one of the better books on the BJP that, the author says, with its nearly 90 million members, is now even bigger than the Communist Party of China. That being so, it is time the party adopted acceptable political tools than the ones it is currently using.

