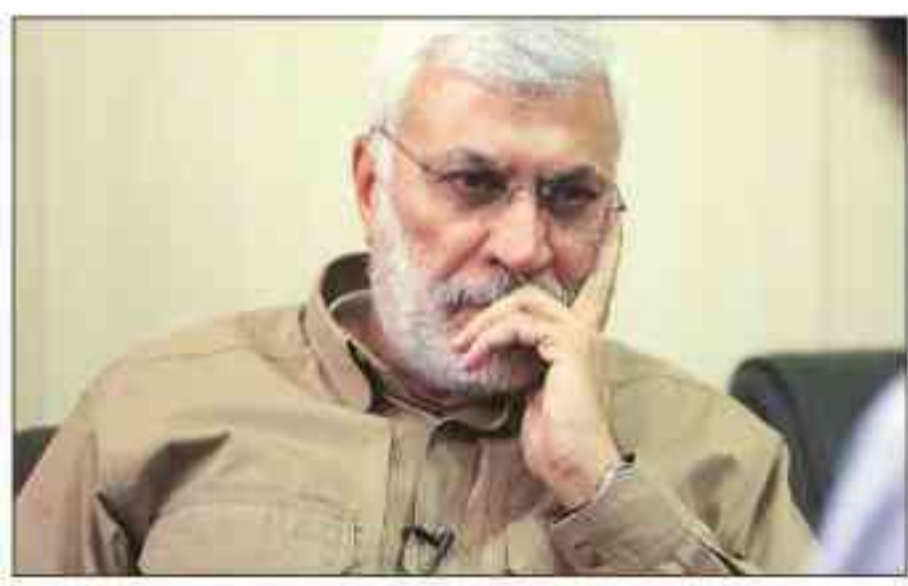


FACT CHECK, GROUND REALITY

WHO WAS AL-MUHANDIS, IRAQI MILITIA LEADER KILLED WITH SOLEIMANI?



Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in 2016. AP/File

THE PROFILE of Iran's Major General Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a US airstrike in Baghdad on Friday, overshadowed the death of another victim, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. The latter was an Iraqi militia leader, one of Iran's top lieutenants in Iraq and a veteran of battles against the United States and the Islamic State. According to *The New York Times*, the death of al-Muhandis alone would have sent shock waves through Iraq, even if Soleimani had not died with him.

Al-Muhandis, who was in his mid-60s, was born Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim. He was the deputy commander of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, an umbrella body of paramilitary groups. It is a loose coalition, which initially came up to help Iraq defeat the Islamic State, but which has since become an extremely powerful group with its members often operating on behalf of Iran. Al-Muhandis was also a founder of the militia involved in conflict with the US over the last one week, including an attack on the US Embassy in Baghdad.

The fact that he helped hold together so many disparate groups underlines his importance. Fluent in Persian and close to

Iran's Soleimani, al-Muhandis was also the latter's key aide in Iraq. They were alike in some ways, with both men preferring to remain inconspicuous in public and yet becoming famous with their leadership in covert military operations. When Iraqi militias fought against the Islamic State, al-Muhandis thanked Iran and Soleimani for their support. In 2009, the US identified as an adviser to Soleimani.

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, al-Muhandis hoped to turn Iraq too into a Shia state, and joined the Islamic Daw'a party. When Saddam Hussein rose to power and tried to crush the Daw'a party, al-Muhandis fled Iraq along with other Shia leaders. Many returned after the US invasion in 2003, and al-Muhandis briefly served in Iraq's Parliament. He also helped found Kataib Hezbollah, which American officials have blamed for a rocket attack that killed an American contractor last week.

When the Islamic State from Syria had invaded Iraq, al-Muhandis's militia was fighting against the same enemy as Iran and the United States. After the Islamic State was driven out of Iraqi territories, the cooperation with the US ended.

SIMPLY PUT

Reading the new Forest Report

State of Forest Report 2019 has shown a 1,275 sq km gain in very dense forest, but what this statistic masks is the fact that the country continues to lose its best natural forests. A look at what was gained and lost.

JAY MAZOOMDAAR
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 5

INDIA'S FOREST cover has increased by 3,976 sq km or 0.56% since 2017. For the second successive time since 2007, the biennial State of Forest Report (SFR) recorded a gain — an impressive 1,275 sq km — in dense forest (including Very Dense Forest with a canopy density of over 70%, and Moderately Dense Forest with a canopy density of 40-70%). Given the pressure on forest land and natural resources, these figures have made happy headlines. But they do not tell how India continues to lose some of its best natural forests — a reality documented in the SFR itself.

Balance sheet

■ SFR data show 2,145 sq km of dense forests became non-forests since 2017. A dense forest can deteriorate into an open forest (10-40% canopy density) but conversion to non-forest signifies total destruction. This means India has lost dense forests one-and-a-half times Delhi's expanse in just two years.

■ Since 2017, plantations with high canopy density have added 2,441 sq km to the dense forest category, while 1,858 sq km of non-forests have become dense forests. These are plantations of fast-growing species since natural forests rarely grow so fast.

■ Since 2003 when data on "change matrix" were first made available, 18,065 sq km — more than one-third of Punjab's landmass — of dense forests have become non-forests in the country, nearly half of this (8,552 sq km) in the last four years.

■ Making up for much of this destruction of quality natural forests, 10,227 sq km of non-forests (read plantations) became dense forests in successive two-year windows since 2003, over half of this (5,458 sq km) since 2015.

■ While hill forests have gained in quality, large tracts of tropical forests have fallen off the "dense" category since 2017. The biggest loss — 23,550 sq km — is under the tropical semi-evergreen head in SFR 2019. In India, tropical semi-evergreen forests are found along the western coast, lower slopes of the eastern Himalayas, Odisha and Andamans.

■ Of India's 7.12 lakh sq km forest cover, 52,000 sq km is plantations that, in any case, cannot substitute natural forests in biodiversity or ecological services.

■ Of 7,28,520 sq km recorded forest area from digitised data and the Survey of India's topographic maps of greenwash areas (forestland), 2,15,084 sq km (nearly 30%) recorded no forest cover in SFR 2019. In other words, forestland roughly the combined area of Tamil Nadu and West Bengal holds no forests.

■ There has been no recovery since 2017 as forest cover on forestland has shrunk by 330 sq km in the last two years.

5:00,000 scale now scans patches as small as 1 hectare, and any unit that shows a 10% tree canopy density is considered "forest".

While the SFR never segregated natural forests from thickets of weeds such as juliflora or lantana, and commercial monocultures such as palm, coconut, rubber etc. it has the capacity to identify plantations. That is how it classified over 52,000 sq km of "forests" as plantations while recording "Forest Type and Density-wise Carbon Stock" across the country.

FSI director-general Dr Subhash Ashutosh acknowledged that fast-growing species such as bamboo, rubber, coconut etc. contributed to rapid change in canopy density converting no-forest areas to dense forests. "No forest types are assigned to monocultures since these are not natural. We need more time and resources if we are to identify and classify plantations through ground truthing," he said.

While accepting that the gain in forest cover is outside forestland, Dr Ashutosh said it would not be "practical" to share the raw data. "I have proposed to make the maps available for free. Even now the fees are nominal. A proposal to continue with the biennial reports while conducting a more comprehensive study maybe every five years is in place," he said.

Meanwhile, the FSI may start reporting India's green cover under more explicit categories, including plantations, and make the forest grid data public for anyone to visit a green patch and check what stands in the name of forest.

Finer detail than before

The Forest Survey of India (FSI) uses satellite images to identify greenery as forest cover. In the 1980s, satellite imagery mapped forests on a scale of 1:1 million, and missed details of land units smaller than 4 sq km. The

DENSE FOREST (VDF + MDF, in sq km)

FOREST TYPE	2019	2017	CHANGE
Tropical wet evergreen	17,217	17,783	-566
Tropical dry evergreen	565	633	-68
Tropical semi-evergreen	39,596	63,146	-23,350
Tropical moist deciduous	91,399	96,894	-5,495
Tropical thorn	3,765	3,877	-112
Tropical dry deciduous	150,854	146,396	2,458
Littoral and swamp	3,230	4,242	-1,012
Subtropical pine	10,457	11,977	-1,520
Himalayan moist temperature	19,914	21,856	-1,942
Subtropical broad-leaved hill	22,050	10,538	11,512
Subtropical dry evergreen	69	68	1
Montane wet temperature	18,425	3,554	14,871
Himalayan dry temperate	4,077	3,520	557
Sub-alpine	9,740	8,407	1,333
Moist alpine scrub	919	625	294
Dry alpine scrub	712	639	73
Plantation	14,762	12,321	2,441
Total dense forests	407,751	406,476	1,275

Source: Forest Survey of India



West Bengal Forest Department

QUESTION & ANSWER

What carbon numbers mean for climate target

AMITABH SINHA
PUNE, JANUARY 5

THE STATE of Forest Report (SFR) 2019, while showing an increase in the carbon stock trapped in Indian forests in the last two years, also shows why it is going to be an uphill task for India in meeting one of its international obligations on climate change. India, as part of its contribution to the global fight against climate change, has committed itself to creating an "additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent" by 2030.

That is one of the three targets India has set for itself in its climate action plan, called Nationally Determined Contributions, or NDCs, that every country has to submit under the 2015 Paris Agreement. The other two relate to an improvement in emissions intensity, and an increase in renewable energy deployment. India has said it would reduce its emissions intensity (emissions per unit of GDP) by 33% to 35% by 2030 compared to 2005. It has also promised to ensure that at least 40% of its cumulative electricity generation in 2030 would be done through renewable energy.

What is the relationship between forests and carbon?

Forests, by absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere for the process of photosynthesis, act as a natural sink of carbon. Together with oceans, forests absorb nearly half of global annual carbon dioxide emissions. In fact, the carbon currently stored in the forests exceeds all the carbon emitted in the atmosphere since the start of the industrial age. An increase in the forest area is thus one of the most effective ways of reducing the emissions that accumulate in the atmosphere every year.

How do the latest forest data translate into carbon equivalent?

The latest forest survey shows that the carbon stock in India's forests (not including tree cover outside of forest areas) have increased from 7.08 billion tonnes in 2017, when the last such exercise had been done, to 7.124 billion tonnes now. This translates into 26.14 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent as of now.

It is estimated that India's tree cover outside of forests would contribute another couple of billion of tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent.

How challenging does this make it for India in meeting its target?

An assessment by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) last year had projected that, by 2030, the carbon stock in forests as well as tree cover was likely to reach 31.87 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent in the business as usual scenario. An additional 2.5

CARBON STOCK IN INDIAN FORESTS (not including tree cover)

Year	Carbon stock (in mn tonnes)
2005	6,621.5
2013	6,941
2017	7,082
2019	7,124

Source: State of Forest Report, 2019; Biennial Update Report, 2018

to 3 billion tonnes of sink, as India has promised to do, would mean taking the size of the sink close to 35 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent.

Considering the rate of growth of the carbon sink in the last few years, that is quite a stiff target India has set for itself. In the last two years, the carbon sink has grown by just about 0.6%. Even compared to 2005, the size of carbon sink has increased by barely 7.5%. To meet its NDC target, even with most optimistic estimates of carbon stock trapped in trees outside of forest areas, the sink has to grow by at least 15% to 20% over the next ten-year period.

So, what is the way forward?

There are two key decisions to be made in this regard — selection of the baseline year, and addition of the contribution of the agriculture sector to carbon sink.

The baseline year can impact the business-as-usual projections for 2030. BAU projections are obtained using policies that existed in the baseline year. Now, there has been a far greater effort in recent years to increase the country's forest cover. So a 2015 baseline would lead to a higher BAU estimate for 2030 compared to a 2005 baseline when less efforts were being made to add or regenerate forests. The FSI projections made last year used a 2015 baseline. If 2005 baseline is used, India's targets can be achieved relatively easily.

India's emissions intensity target uses a 2005 baseline, so there is an argument that the forest target should also have the same baseline. But there is a strong demand for a 2015 baseline as well, so that it results in some concrete progress in adding new forest cover. When India announced its NDC in 2015, it did not mention the baseline year. It has to decide on it before it reconfirms its NDC targets ahead of the next climate change meeting in Glasgow towards the end of the year.

At that time, India would also have to specify whether it wants to count the carbon sink in the agriculture sector in its target. The NDC specifically mentions that and "additional" 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon sink would be created through "additional forest and tree cover by 2030", but Environment Ministry officials insist that tree cover outside forest areas must include agriculture as well.

THIS WORD MEANS

PROTECTING POWER

Why Tehran chose the Swiss Embassy to register its protest against the US over Soleimani killing

FOLLOWING THE killing of Iranian military and intelligence commander Major General Qassem Soleimani in a US airstrike in Baghdad on Friday, the Iranian government registered its protest with the Swiss Embassy in Tehran. "The chargé d'affaires (for Switzerland in Iran) was informed of Iran's position and in turn delivered the message of the United States," Reuters quoted Switzerland's Foreign Affairs Ministry as saying.

Switzerland represents the interests of the US in Iran. This is because the US itself does not have an embassy there. Iran's interests in the United States, on the other hand, are represented by the Pakistan Embassy in Washington.

In an arrangement such as this, Switzerland is the "Protecting Power" of the United States in Iran. The instrument of Protecting Powers is provided for under the 1961 and 1963 Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic Relations. "If diplomatic relations are broken off between two States, or if a mission is permanently or temporarily recalled... the sending State may entrust the protection of its interests and those of its nationals to a third State acceptable to the receiving State," the 1961 Vienna Convention states. And the 1963 Convention reiterates: "A

sending State may with the prior consent of a receiving State, and at the request of a third State not represented in the receiving State, undertake the temporary protection of the interests of the third State and of its nationals."

The Swiss Foreign Affairs Ministry spells out its role on its website: "In the absence of diplomatic and consular relations of the United States of America with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Swiss government, acting through its Embassy in Tehran, serves as the Protecting Power of the USA in Iran since 21 May 1980. The Swiss Embassy's Foreign Interests Section provides consular services to US citizens living in or travelling to Iran." The United States government describes the same role on a web page on the "US Virtual Embassy" in Iran. At the time Switzerland took over this role, a hostage crisis was playing out in Tehran with students having taken over the then US Embassy; the crisis lasted 444 days.

Why Switzerland? It has historically represented a number of countries in territories where they have no diplomatic mission. The news and analysis website Swissinfo says Switzerland represented 35 countries during the Second World War and had over 200 specific mandates, and between 1946 and 1964 had 46 mandates.

Soleimani killing: why few expect full-blown war but no one rules it out

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 5

SINCE THE killing of Iran's Major General Qassem Soleimani in a US airstrike in Baghdad on Friday, the question being asked across the world is: how far will this escalation go, and will it eventually lead to war? Analysts appear to be generally agreed that while Iran will be forced to retaliate, likely against US installations, both sides will be wary of declaring outright war.

How it reached this stage

The US and Iran have already been in confrontation for over a week, with each attack

leading to a counterattack. On December 27, more than 30 rockets were launched at an Iraqi military base, killing an American contractor. The US responded on December 29 with airstrikes on sites in Iraq and Syria, killing 24 members of an Iranian-backed militia. On December 31, pro-Iranian militia members laid siege to the US Embassy in Baghdad, trapping American diplomats for more than 24 hours. Then came the US drone strike that killed Soleimani and others.

Retaliation inevitable

The killing forced Iran's hand, and Tehran immediately warned of retaliation. In fact, on Saturday itself, two rockets hit Iraq's Al-Balad air base where US troops are stationed,

while two mortars hit Baghdad's Green Zone that houses the US embassy, the AFP news agency reported. Such a backlash was being anticipated in US installations in Iraq.

While the US has sought to justify the killing of Soleimani by citing the role the general and his Quds Force played in the deaths of Americans over the years, including the death in the December 27 strike, the fact is that neither side has managed to calibrate its attacks in a way that would have forced the other to back down. Each strike has led to a more severe retaliation.

Also, by clearing the killing of Soleimani, President Donald Trump has taken a step his predecessors had avoided. Soleimani had been in the cross-hairs of the US for

decades, but neither President George W. Bush nor President Barack Obama went so far. According to *The New York Times*, both Presidents had reasoned that killing Soleimani would only risk a wider war with the country, undermining the US in a region that had already cost plenty of lives.

What kind of escalation

For Iran, the stakes are high, but so are the risks. What kind of balance will Tehran look for?

"It will likely aim for counterattacks damaging enough to convince the United States that killing (Soleimani) was not worth it — a high bar, given his value and the United States' far superior strength —

but not so damaging as to trigger further conflict," according to *The Interpreter* columnist in *The New York Times*.

What that could mean is small, disjointed attacks on the installations of the US or allies in the Middle East. Saturday's attacks fall under that strategy. But analysts believe Iran will also be conscious that it is more vulnerable than the US, with all the conflict likely to be in the Middle East itself, including within Iran.

That said, Iran's military capabilities are higher than those of others in its neighbourhood. The US might be wary of that. At the same time, analysts believe Iran would require time to put together a working nuclear warhead. That possibility would end if the US

chooses to strike Iran's nuclear installations.

Can it be war?

A lot will depend on how provocative Iran's inevitable retaliation turns out to be. If these provoke the US into a direct strike on Iran, it can potentially open up the threat of a sustained war.

"While the possibility of an unintended slide to war is impossible to rule out, fears of World War Three — a phrase that trended overnight on social media — are overblown. Russia and China might strenuously object to American attacks, but they are no more likely to join the fight than they were when the United States invaded Iraq or helped to topple Libya's government," *The Interpreter* noted.



The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Secularism's Brexit moment



RAMESH VENKATARAMAN

India needs its secularists to engage in open and self-critical debate — rather than polarising polemic

INDIA'S CONSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT to secularism is under serious threat. This is not just because the BJP government, riding its strong electoral mandate, appears determined to undermine India's secular ethos. More fundamentally, it is because popular scepticism of secularism has grown substantially in the last few years.

In my recent travels across India, covering places as diverse as Amritsar and Goa, Ladakh and Hyderabad, and Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai, I have been struck by the fact that the recent flurry of perceived anti-Muslim measures — revoking Article 370 and downgrading Kashmir to a Union Territory, the triple talaq ban, the Supreme Court verdict on Ayodhya, and now the CAA/NRC — are seen as a good thing not only by Hindutva diehards but increasingly by the "moderate middle".

This large constituency is made up of thoughtful, not particularly religious, and broadly liberal-leaning Hindus who are not reflexively anti-Muslim. Most in this segment find the crude bigotry and dog whistle politics of Messrs Modi and Shah distasteful and are far from signing up to a "Hindu rashtra". However, many now buy in to the Sangh Parivar's critique of secularism. It is no longer taboo to raise questions that were formerly the preserve of the right-wing fringe about Muslim special privileges, personal law, or patriotism, and correspondingly allege a neglect of Hindu concerns. Indeed, I have heard more from mainstream Hindus on the "Muslim question" over the last few months than collectively over the past four decades.

This sort of open airing of views reminds me of the time when the Emergency caused Indians of all stripes to seriously examine their commitment to democracy. Many will recall the arguments from the 1970s and early 1980s about whether poor, diverse, and divided India could only progress under a dictator — or at least a powerful, directly-elected, executive president.

Those debates were a good thing. An unexamined Constitution is not a sustainable one. India's Constitution was "given" to the country top-down by the Constituent Assembly. Even though nearly three-quarters of the members of that body were indirectly elected, the franchise was limited. People at large did not have much of a say in shaping our Constitution. Today, thanks to the

Emergency and its aftermath, democracy is taken for granted amongst Indians. No one — left, right, or centre — seriously challenges our parliamentary system and federal form of government. Secularism must attain a similar status.

Over the last few years, the relentless drum beat of anti-"sickular" rhetoric from the Sangh Parivar has prompted many mainstream Hindus to reconsider how the Muslim minority is treated. Ideally, this should provide the setting for robust and clarifying exchanges on why the Constitution's endorsement of secularism still makes eminent sense. The problem is that those who are passionate about protecting India's secular fabric have not shown up at this debate.

Rather than make the case for secularism and answer doubters, its champions indulge in rhetorical name-calling, citing the likes of Nathuram Godse to tarnish and shut down critics. Secularists take for granted that secularism is self-evidently right for the country. They cite the Constitution in support, as many anti-CAA protesters are doing, without realising that it is this very document's secular thrust that has become suspect and in desperate need of re-legitimation.

The approach of self-righteously throwing the Constitution at anyone who supports the Modi regime's agenda and demonising them as "bhakts", "Sanghis", or "chaddiwallahs" reminds me of how Britain's liberal elite lost the Brexit battle. They assumed away the obvious correctness of their cosmopolitan worldview and sanctimoniously labelled those who voted to leave the EU as misled racists and "little Englanders". A similarly patronising attitude towards Donald Trump supporters may well stymie the Democrats' efforts to regain the US presidency this year.

India's secularists must wake up to the fact that the discourse on the ground has profoundly altered. More and more, mainstream Hindus feel that they are being taken for a ride under the banner of secularism.

Preserving the country's secular fabric in this changed environment will require secularism's advocates to urgently and respectfully engage with the "moderate middle". They must make the case for secularism anew, on principled (individual equality and freedom of conscience and personal habits) and practical grounds (no country can flourish

by degrading one-seventh of its citizens). They also have to create a compelling counter to the majoritarian "India-is-a-Hindu-country" narrative by underlining Hinduism's plurality and rooting secularism firmly in its "live and let live" culture, syncretic traditions, and long history of respect and accommodation of difference.

But most important, hardline secularists need to show some humility. It is not a betrayal of ideals to admit that at least some of the right-wing accusations of "pseudo secularism" are well-founded even if couched in chauvinistic bombast. For instance, no objective observer can seriously deny that the Congress and other left-leaning parties have exploited Muslims as a "vote bank" without doing much to improve their lot. Equally, much evidence points to politically-sponsored illegal migration changing the demographics of some border areas in favour of Muslims. Also, defending Muslim personal laws as that community's prerogative rather than campaigning for a progressive uniform civil code, flies in the face of allegiance to individual rights and equality across citizens.

In short, it is not anti-Muslim to accept where secularism has been compromised in practice. Rather, openness to fair-minded criticism will allow secularists to make their positive case more credibly.

Red lights are flashing over India's future. The ongoing protests against the CAA notwithstanding, there is a very real possibility that if the "moderate middle" lose faith in secularism, the BJP will be further emboldened to pursue Hindutva. Even if non-BJP governments eventually regain power, they will struggle to roll back anti-Muslim legislation, systemic biases, and bigoted attitudes that are creeping into the educational system, police, and civil service and could soon become widespread across society.

In this anxious hour, India needs its secularists to engage in open and self-critical debate — rather than polarising polemic. This is the only way secularism, like democracy after the Emergency, can be re-founded as an unchallenged constitutional tenet that is "above politics" and second nature to our republic.

The writer is a private equity investor and former McKinsey partner

REBOOTING THE ECONOMY

The prospect of food and fuel inflation makes it necessary for the government to initiate structural reforms

H EIGHTENED UNCERTAINTY IN West Asia following the US airstrike killing Iran's top military commander has thrown the spotlight again on oil. In the last three months, Brent crude prices have risen from about \$ 58 to almost \$ 69 per barrel. It is true that the US and Russia have displaced Saudi Arabia as the world's largest crude producers today, with the former's output especially more than doubling from roughly 5.5 million to 12.9 million barrels per day in the last decade. As a result, the Persian Gulf region's control over global supplies isn't as much as during the 2003 or 1991 Iraq War. But that's hardly any consolation for India, which cannot, for purely geographical reasons, source crude beyond a point from the likes of the US, Venezuela and Russia. The Narendra Modi government's first term was marked by falling international oil prices. It did not, wisely, pass these on fully to consumers and, instead, netted a yearly revenue windfall of some Rs 150,000 crore by raising excise duties on petrol and diesel.

That windfall could come under threat if crude prices go up with increased US-Iran geopolitical tensions and the Modi government — unwisely, if at all — cuts duties or forces oil companies to absorb part of the burden. Rising oil prices can also impact India's balance of payments and the rupee (the domestic currency shed 44 paise against the dollar on Friday), further adding to inflationary pressures. But it's not just oil and rupee. There is a third component that contributed to benign inflation during the Modi government's first term: Low food prices. Annual consumer food inflation crossed single digits in November, which was for the first time in nearly six years. Many commodities — from onion, potato, pulses and milk to maize and soyabean — have seen prices rising or at least correcting from lows. The reasons for it are partly weather-induced (excess rains during September-October) and partly structural (farmers reducing production in response to the earlier sustained low realisations). Either way, benign food and fuel inflation can no longer be taken for granted.

All this, of course, makes the job of growth and investment revival that much tougher. The return of inflation, on top of pressure on government revenues, leaves very little space for both monetary and fiscal policy. The focus has to necessarily shift to structural reforms that have been put off for too long. The existing system of open-ended procurement of wheat and paddy at minimum support prices has to go. So must super-subsidised physical sales of grain or urea. These should be replaced by direct cash transfers targeting vulnerable consumers and smallholder farmers. The resources thus freed, along with those raised through privatisation (inclusive of excess land parcels held by government departments/enterprises), can fund much-needed public investment without creating fiscal or inflationary pressures.

TABLEAUX OF EXCLUSION

Republic Day parade has become yet another front in the battle between the Centre and states

IT IS A sign of the fraught and polarised times we live in that even the Republic Day parade has been dragged into the over-politicised conversation that now stands in for meaningful public discourse. The tableaux that form an integral part of the parade — highlighting the culture of various states, union territories and even the mandate of Union ministries — are now a front in the battle between the Centre and non-BJP ruled states. Maharashtra, Kerala, West Bengal and Bihar are among the states that have been excluded from the parade, and are crying foul. The governments of both West Bengal and Kerala have drawn a connection between their rejection of the CAA-NRC and exclusion from the parade.

The selection of tableaux is done by a committee under the Union Ministry of Defence. Only 16 states have been selected for the parade, and government and BJP spokespersons insist that there is no political bias at play in the selection. They have also cited the fact that in the past, tableaux have been rejected when there were Congress governments both at the Centre and in the states concerned. It is by the same process that the current selection has been made. This is essentially a procedural justification for what has become a political issue, and, therefore, is unlikely to cut ice with the aggrieved states. Arguably, more than any other government in recent times, the Narendra Modi-led government is acutely aware of the potency of political symbolism and optics. To be seen as excluding entire states whose elected governments have stood in opposition to the NRC and CAA will certainly strain already fraying Centre-state relations. "Just because West Bengal has been opposing anti-people policies of the BJP government (like the CAA-NRC), step-motherly treatment is being meted out to the state," West Bengal's Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs Tapas Roy said. And Kerala minister A K Balan asked if the Centre was "against the Malayali people".

It is certainly possible, as the Ministry of Defence insists, that the exclusions are purely procedural. The current climate of division and suspicion makes it incumbent on the Centre to not conform to its image as being overbearing on the back of its majority in Parliament. The Republic Day parade in India has always been much more than a celebration of masculine nationalism and militarism — it bears testimony to the diversity of India. The way to rescue it now might be to practice that once-much-vaunted slogan — cooperative federalism.



DEBSMITA CHOWDHURY

WHY I REFUSE TO ACCEPT CAA

Recent legislation threatens the very idea of India. We must raise our voices

"THE GIRL WHO went viral by tearing a copy of CAA" is the statement frequently used by the media to introduce me. The fact that the media has to describe me in this manner is probably because they have not found any trace of political participation in my past — quite antithetical to the international relations course in which I had been enrolled in for the past five years. I think this particular aspect — my complete absence from any affiliated political fronts or activities — has sent shockwaves among my fellow classmates, juniors, seniors, faculty and, especially, family and friends over my action.

The recent spate of legislation by the present political establishment in Delhi has pushed many to the edge, including people like me — we are now left with no choice but to raise our voices for the voiceless. It is not that other political parties and government dispensations in the past have been an absolute delight to watch. But this government has acted entirely in opposition to the founding ideals of our nation, something we — the unbiased citizens — cannot accept.

Abraham Lincoln had said: "We are the rightful masters of both Congress and the courts, not to overthrow the Constitution but to overthrow the men in power who pervert the Constitution". As a student, I understand the necessity of the Constitution



ONE OF
800
MILLION
A VOICE, UNDER 35

The recent spate of legislation by the present political establishment in Delhi has pushed everyone to the edge, including people like me — we are now left with no choice but to raise our voices for the voiceless.

as a guiding mechanism to guarantee law and order and for the continuance of liberty, equality and fraternity amongst all. I completely uphold the sanctity of the Indian Constitution, and stand by my duty to abide by it. Therefore, what I did has been my individual form of protest in a desperate, non-violent attempt to save the basic fabric of our nation, woven painstakingly by our forefathers. I have always been quite an introvert from my childhood — with the completion of my post-graduation, I had intended to continue my research, focusing on my PhD proposal.

I had no intention to engage in any sort of action on the dais on the day of my convocation, but the brutal state crackdown on unarmed students of Jamia Millia Islamia, AMU, and now on innocent civilians has left no rational person unmoved. If this is the situation in my country where protestors, demonstrators or civilians face such serious repression — despite us not being under a dictatorial regime — I have to say that we are not free. We are living in dark times under the garb of democracy.

People may call me anti-national, the now commonly-used word for anyone who dissents against the dominant political discourse, but I would like to reiterate that I am a proud, responsible Indian because I can see

the grave national and international implications of the recent non-secular legislation on citizenship.

What do the youth of this great nation actually want? We want dialogue, employment, a thriving economy, people's welfare, non-interference in one's food habits or religion, and to get this country onto a much better developmental arc. We would all love to witness India's spectacular inclusive growth.

Dialogue is the basis of Indian culture. We cannot remain mute witnesses to the actions of this government. We have to rightfully accept responsibility for our future because politics and governance is not a game. It is serious business and we — and all future generations — cannot bear the burden of the whims and fancies of a reckless power.

Let us not forget the beautiful words penned down by Saadat Hasan Manto: "Hindustan had become free. Pakistan had become independent soon after its inception but man was still slave in both these countries — slave of prejudice... slave of religious fanaticism... slave of barbarity and inhumanity".

The writer is an independent researcher. She did her Masters in International Relations from Jadavpur University, Kolkata

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



JANUARY 6, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO

BAGHPAT REPOLL
CHIEF ELECTION COMMISSIONER S L Shakhder ordered repoll in one booth of the Baghpat parliamentary constituency from where Prime Minister Charan Singh is seeking reelection to the Lok Sabha. Shakhder said the repoll had been ordered in Garhi Dulla polling station in the Barnawa assembly segment because some Harijans had removed ballot boxes from there. He said he had summoned the district magistrate of Meerut to his office and asked all five observers in the constituency to give a report on the conduct of the poll. He was informed that "nothing unfair" had happened in the constituency except in the Garhi Dulla booth.

SOVIETS IN KABUL
SOVIET FORCES APPEAR to control all of Afghanistan's major towns and military bases, and face little more than token resistance in the populous areas, diplomatic sources in Delhi said, reports AP. According to sources, reports from Kabul spoke of occasional sniper attacks on small groups of Soviet troops. Leaflets calling for demonstrations against the Soviet-backed coup d'etat were distributed in Kabul one night this week, but no demonstrations took place. There was no clear reading of the situation in the mountainous countryside where nationalistic rebels have been fighting the succession of Marxist-leaning regimes in Afghanistan.

ASSAM UNREST
THE SO FAR peaceful and orderly four-month-old mass agitation against "aliens" in Assam is taking an ugly turn. The movement, jointly sponsored by the All Assam Students Union and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad — with the avowed objective "of securing detection of foreign nationals, deletion of their names from electoral rolls and their deportation" — is unfortunately taking on a communal, linguistic and parochial colour. The campaign has succeeded beyond the expectations of its organisers in focussing the nation's attention on the dangers to national security by the unabated influx of foreign nationals from Bangladesh and Nepal.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The new Indian army chief might want to get a full briefing on the Balakot misadventure before issuing any more provocative and irresponsible statements."
— DAWN

Farewell, year of darkness

Gandhi's dreams for the nation were dented in 2019. The new year offers hope



AVIJIT PATHAK

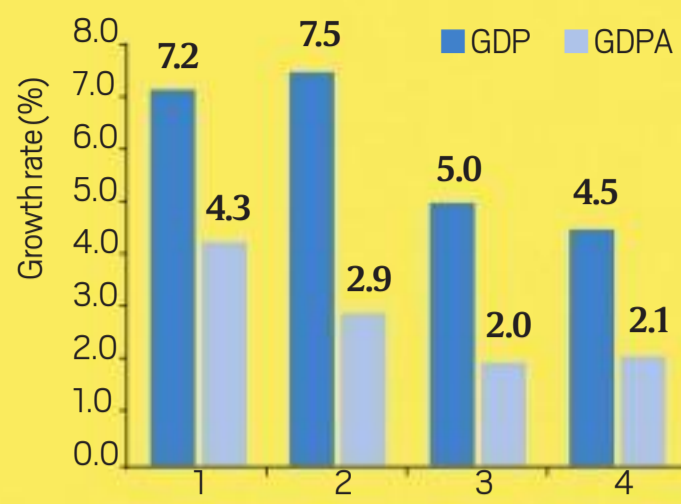
I KNOW that at this moment, soon after the entertainment industry seduced us to celebrate the new year with dance, music and food, it is not "cool" to speak of what Antonio Gramsci would have regarded as the "pessimism of the intellect". Yet, I cannot escape the psychic trauma associated with the year 2019. As I write this piece, I recall a tragic moment in our history: Nathuram Godse's bullets penetrating into Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's chest on January 30, 1948. It was an attempt to kill a dream, a possibility: An imagination of India tormented by the wound of Partition; yet, filled with the spirit of religious pluralism, cultural syncretism and egalitarianism. However, as I look back at 2019 and see, for instance, the loud assertion of the likes of Pragya Thakur (an inevitable consequence of majoritarian Hindutva), I experience with utter despair the merger of 2019 and 1948. Possibly, one day some of our sensible social historians would depict 2019 as a year that brought Godse alive, and sought to kill all that Gandhi stood for.

Can 2019 be seen as a distinctive marker of the age of darkness? Because of fragmentation, directionlessness and ideological impoverishment, the Opposition parties failed miserably to defeat Hindutva — a hyper-masculine doctrine of Hindu nationalism symbolised by "brand" Narendra Modi, and disseminated through a massive organisational network led by "loyal soldiers" of "Bharat Mata". Despite the devastating consequences of demonetisation and GST, the spectacular electoral victory in the 2019 parliamentary elections further enhanced the narcissism of the ruling regime. As the might of majoritarianism destroyed the art of listening and negotiation, nothing could be done to resist the stigmatisation of minorities. Be it the abrogation of Article 370, or the CAA/NRC, the minorities were led to believe that Gandhi was no more, and they must know their "locations" — similar to how Savarkar and Golwalkar saw them as "alien invaders".

Another manifestation of the dark in 2019 was the normalisation and celebration of violence. From mob lynching to the cacophony of "Jai Shri Ram", from the cult of narcissistic/authoritarian personalities to the militarisation of the consciousness (imagine the army general's critique of the anti-CAA protest), and from the gestures the all-powerful home minister emits for the people in the Kashmir Valley to the use of the metaphor of "surgical strike" in every sphere of life — we breathe violence. From Unnao to Hyderabad, rape victims were killed or allowed to die. The celebration of "encounter killings" revealed the hypnotising power of brute force in diminishing our moral sensibilities. Neither the presence of state-sponsored celebrity babas like Sadhguru or Ramdev, nor Modi's dramatur-

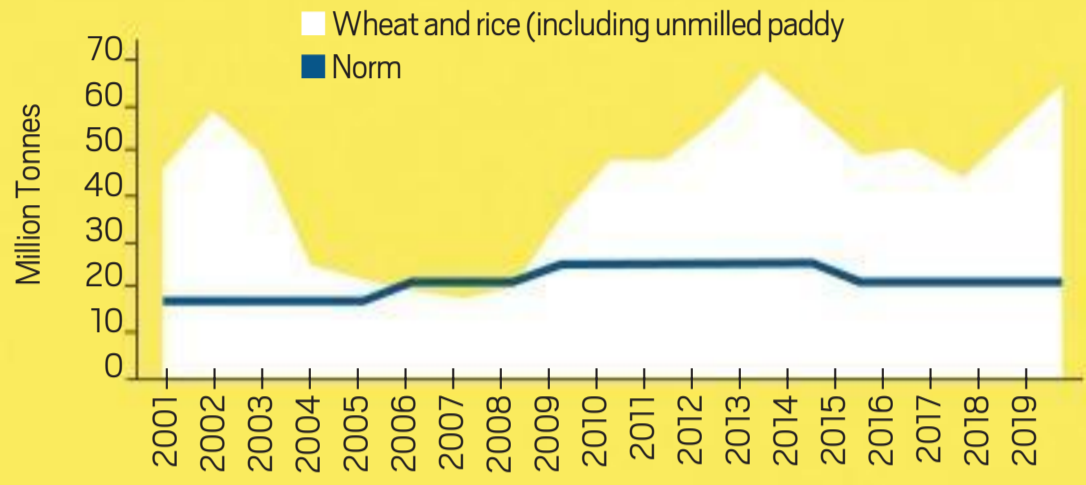
The writer is professor of sociology at JNU

FIGURE-1: GROWTH RATES IN OVERALL GDP AND AGRI-GDP (GDPA)



Source: MOPDI for basic data

FIGURE-2: ACTUAL GRAIN (WHEAT PLUS RICE) STOCKS WITH FCI VIS-A-VIS BUFFER STOCK NORMS (MILLION TONNES) AS ON JANUARY 1ST, FROM 2001 ONWARDS



Source: Food Corporation of India

CR Sasikumar

Lifting growth, containing inflation

Reform of grain management system could free up resources for infrastructure investment



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH BY ASHOK GULATI

WITH GDP GROWTH rate plummeting to 4.5 per cent and with the agriculture GDP (GDPA) growth at 2.1 per cent in the second quarter of this fiscal year, everyone concerned with the economy is anxious. The question being asked is whether the Indian economy can be put back on the 7-8 per cent growth trajectory and can agri-GDP grow at least at 4 per cent.

It may be noted that in UPA 2 and Modi 1.0, while the average GDP growth rate was 7.2 and 7.5 per cent respectively, agri-GDP (GDPA) growth slowed in the Modi period to 2.9 per cent, far below the 4.3 per cent rate achieved during UPA 2. And now, when the quarterly growth in GDPA is hovering at around 2 per cent, it is a cause for great concern (Figure-1). Agriculture still engages about 44 per cent of India's workforce. If the masses do not gain from the growth process, their incomes remain subdued, then the demand for manufactured goods, housing and other goods will remain low. Low demand in the economy is one of the main reasons behind India's great slowdown today.

Interestingly, it is during this slowdown that inflation has started to surge after a long period of low inflation under Modi 1.0. Inflation is led by different components of the food segment — cereals, pulses, and vegetables — in the consumer price index (CPI).

Everyone is waiting to see how Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman can prop up the economy by boosting demand without causing undue inflation (beyond the threshold level of 6 per cent to be maintained by the

RBI). Also, there is the challenge of not slipping on the fiscal deficit target of 3.3 per cent, although the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has already indicated that the real fiscal deficit of the country is much more if one accounts for the loans taken by many public sector undertakings (PSUs).

Sitharaman has already announced an investment package for infrastructure of about Rs 102 lakh crore over the next five years, which implies more than doubling the growth in infra-investments from their current levels. The legitimate question being asked is: Where will the resources come from? The announcement does not unveil any clear strategy on the resource mobilisation front.

Here are my two cents to raise (save) Rs 50,000 crore per annum to finance infrastructure projects without causing high inflation or without breaching the fiscal deficit target. The prime minister and the finance minister should take a look at the massive inefficiency in the grain management system under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) to find the required resources.

The NFSA gives certain quantities of wheat and rice to 67 per cent of the population at Rs 2/kg and Rs 3/kg respectively, while the economic cost of these to the Food Corporation of India is Rs 25/kg and Rs 35/kg respectively. This led to a provision of Rs 1.84 lakh crore for food subsidy in the last Union budget. Not many people know that the FCI had pending bills of Rs 1.86 lakh crore that have not been cleared by the government, and that it has been asked to borrow more and more to finance its operations. The grain stocks with the FCI are far more than double the buffer stock norms as on January 1, every year.

The massive accumulation of grain stocks is the result of a deeply inefficient strategy for food management wherein the procurement for wheat and rice (paddy) remains open-ended, but the disbursal of those stocks remains largely restricted to the public distribution system (PDS). The open market operations (OMO) are much less compared to what is needed to liquidate the excessive

stocks. We don't have a clear strategy. And now, if the rabi procurement is good, FCI may not have the storage space to accommodate it. The money locked in these excessive stocks (beyond the buffer norm) is more than Rs 1 lakh crore. Even if the government decides to liquidate half of it, it can garner Rs 50,000 crore to finance at least half of its infrastructure projects. We need bold moves to reform our grain management system. There is no need to set up another expert committee for this. The blueprint for reforming the grain management system was presented to the PM by the Shanta Kumar panel. The report is on the FCI website.

Only three points need reiteration: First, while the poor under the Antyodaya category should keep getting the maximum food subsidy, for others, the issue price should be fixed at, say, 50 per cent of the procurement price (as was done under Atal Bihari Vajpayee for the BPL category). Second, limit subsidised grain distribution under NFSA to 40 per cent of the population rather than the current 67 per cent. After all, we must ask: What proportion of the poor cannot afford even the basic rations? The Indian government has not given any number for poverty since 2011 — it was 21 per cent as per the Tendulkar poverty line. It is time for the Modi government to tell the nation what is the level of extreme poverty in India. Third, limit the procurement of rice particularly in the north-western states of Punjab and Haryana where the groundwater table is depleting fast, and invite private sector participation in grain management.

If the government can implement just these three points, it can save another Rs 50,000 crore annually. On top of this, it will help the government to reduce its fiscal deficit. And if it liquidates stocks fast, it can contain inflation too. Can the Modi government focus on reforms and implement them? Only time will tell.

Gulati is Infosys Chair Professor for Agriculture at ICRISAR

The massive accumulation of grain stocks is the result of a very inefficient strategy for food management wherein the procurement for wheat and rice (paddy) remains open-ended, but the disbursal of those stocks remains largely restricted to public distribution system (PDS). The open market operations (OMO) are much less compared to what is needed to liquidate the excessive stocks. We don't have a clear strategy.

VIEW FROM THE NEIGHBOURHOOD



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

BELLICOSE INDIA

THE NEWSPAPERS across South Asia — like their counterparts the world over — commented on and analysed the consequences of the killing of Qasem Soleimani, in-charge of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. The killing has been, broadly, been condemned and its aftermath is awaited.

On January 3, though, the editorial in Dawn took umbrage to the fact that "India's new army chief Lt Gen M.M. Naravane has said that conducting pre-emptive strikes across the LoC remained an option for India". The editorial recalls many of General Bipin Rawat's statements that may politely be called bellicose. It also recalls the "Balakot misadventure". The Foreign Office has done well to remind the new Indian army chief that the last time India attempted "pre-emptive strikes" it lost two aircraft and one pilot. It also lost face. The pilot was returned in good faith by Pakistan. This good faith has not been reciprocated," the editorial says.

Its thrust is that increasingly, and towards the point of no return, the government and security establishment in New Delhi is becoming bellicose to appease a domestic constituency: "India is trapped in violent domestic convul-

sions that are creating dangerous fault lines within its society. The right-wing government of Narendra Modi is struggling to contain the fallout of its anti-Muslim policies. It may be tempted to embark on yet another misadventure across the LoC to divert attention from its domestic troubles." It asks the Pakistan government to be on alert for India to dial down its rhetoric.

NOT A NICE NEIGHBOUR

C R Abrar, an academic-activist in Bangladesh, writes in *The Daily Star* of the "fallacy of unsuspecting trust" that Bangladesh has developed vis-a-vis India. Abrar argues that the CAA and NRC have been a long time coming and the policies will seriously impact Bangladesh society. But, the elites and civil society at large did not see the writing on the wall.

The article recalls the many controversial, even abusive, statements by Amit Shah over the last few years with regards to Bangladeshi migrants and Muslims. It says: "Such persistent emission of anti-Bangladeshi vitriolic statements of the Indian ruling elite triggered little concern in Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh appeared to be oblivious to the

stirring up of anti-Bangladesh sentiments. Until quite recently, the statements of the ministers, advisers and senior functionaries gave the signal that the government was quite comfortable with the Indian assertion that the NRC was indeed an "internal matter" of that country."

But now, as Indians take to the streets against the NRC and CAA, Abrar says that the trust may have finally been broken: "The rolling out of the NRC and the application of CAA is likely to have grave consequences for Bangladesh. Even if India refrains from officially deporting those who would fail in the NRC test, millions of Muslims who would be unable to prove their claims to Indian citizenship and secure protection under the CAA in all likelihood will cross the border and seek shelter in Bangladesh. They would do so to avoid languishing in detention camps in atrocious conditions. The recent border crossings from the Indian side and the concomitant telecom network suspension in Bangladesh may signal the beginning of a difficult time for the country. It is time for those at the helm of the state to discard the rhetoric, take stock of these developments and collectively develop a national strategy to face the likely challenge."

CURBS IN NEPAL

Attempts to police the internet and free speech on social media seems to be a pan-South Asian phenomenon. Sushrey Nepal, a lawyer, writes in *The Kathmandu Post* about "another toxic layer of durability to the custom of state policing" being brought about in Nepal by the Information Technology Bill.

Using broad definitions of terms like "public order" and "decency", the article asserts that the Bill provides sweeping powers to the government to punish all forms of dissent, or even what it perceives to cause offence — from political speech to jokes.

In India, we have seen the dire consequences of such laws. The situation in Nepal, if the article is anything to go by, may not end up being any better: "This Information Technology Bill is a loud declaration by the government that it is coming for its citizens, and we cannot hide behind the shield of our right to privacy and freedom of speech. If a state is willing to incriminate its citizens for an internet post, one can only imagine what else it is hiding in its shadow."

Curated by Aakash Joshi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PM'S DOUBLESPEAK

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Cong, allies and their ecosystem rising against Parliament, silent on Pak: PM' (IE, January 3). The prime minister's argument is a strange one, given the long history of opposition parties, including the BJP, protesting against the central government of the day. Calling the protest against the CAA as "rising against Parliament" is misleading and veiled attempt to castigate the others as being against the nation. So far, the debate has been around religion but Narendra Modi has now added a caste dimension by invoking Dalits in Pakistan. This political posturing may prove counter-productive in the face of rising atrocities against Dalits since he came to office.

LR Murmu, via email

LET FAIZ BE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Who's afraid of a song?' (IE, January 3). Not one Indian university is among the top 100 universities in the world. The quality of public education is worsening year by year. It is in this scenario that the IIT-Kanpur administration launched a probe to find out the credentials of a song and its author, Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Is this what they should be focusing on?

Suchak D Patel, Ahmedabad

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Who's afraid of a song?' (IE, January 3). Like students at other universities across India, those at IIT Kanpur have the right

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.

to protest against the CAA or over other issue. And it is sad that a probe against them have been initiated. Faiz Ahmed Faiz wrote *Hum bhi dekhenge* after Zia-ul-Haq declared martial law. India, unlike Pakistan, remains a vibrant democracy. Protest should be allowed.

Bal Govind, Noida

TO SANGH'S BENEFIT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Why I protest as a Muslim' (IE, January 3). The author believes that in response to the saffronisation of Indian politics, Muslims have a right to use religion for political purposes. However, such a move could alienate secular Hindus. In the end, the Sangh Parivar will benefit.

Manisha Banerji, Mumbai