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International

How A Saudi-Russia Tussle Tanked Oil Prices

- Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates announced they would raise crude oil output by the equivalent of 3.6% of global supplies, adding 3.6 million barrels per day (bpd) to a market that is already massively oversupplied. Saudi Aramco, Saudi Arabia's national petroleum and natural gas company, said that it would boost output to 12.3 million barrels per day (bpd) from the current 9.8 million bpd from April 1. Soon afterward, Abu Dhabi's oil and gas company ADNOC said it was boosting output by 25% to 4 million bpd. This extraordinary flooding of the market will take place at a time when the coronavirus outbreak has severely impacted businesses and travel, and global demand is predicted to shrink for the first time in nearly 10 years. Brent crude was trading at around \$36 on Wednesday, up from the week's low of about \$31, but still some 45% lower since the beginning of 2020. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have taken a united stand in their ongoing battle with Moscow, which last week rejected a demand by Riyadh that the **OPEC+, an informal alliance of OPEC and Russia**, should cut production sharply to arrest crashing prices. In retaliation, the Gulf allies have decided to scrap all limits on production. At the meeting of the **Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries — a cartel of 14 oil producers** led by Saudi Arabia — in **Vienna**, Riyadh proposed that OPEC+ should pump about 1 million bpd less, with Russia cutting 500,000 bpd, so that revenue streams do not narrow further for oil export-dependent economies. The crippling of industrial production in China and other Asian countries such as South Korea has resulted in a sharp reduction in their import of crude oil. But **Moscow argued that production should not be cut until the full impact of the COVID-19 outbreak is assessed in greater detail, and that any attempt to shore up prices would only benefit the costlier US shale industry**, which has raised production to levels higher than both Saudi Arabia's and Russia's. It did offer to continue talking, but Riyadh said there was no point — and announced on Tuesday plans to boost production by 300,000 barrels beyond Aramco's current maximum sustained capacity. The Wall Street Journal reported that Russia too, was ready to raise production. **The Saudi-Russian fight signals an end, at least temporarily, to the truce between these two large oil producers that had brought Moscow a seat at the OPEC high table, and held off a potential price war for more than three years now.** Russia had benefitted from the deal not only in terms of oil revenues and expanding business networks, but also in foreign policy — improving relations with **Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, has given President Vladimir Putin greater influence over developments in countries like Syria, Iraq, and Libya.** However, the OPEC+ deal to control production also helped the American frackers. To many Russian economic nationalists, the rise of shale at the cost of **state-controlled energy giant Gazprom and Russia's biggest oil company Rosneft** was difficult to accept. Analysts have said that in walking out of its marriage of convenience with OPEC and the Saudis now, Moscow may be trying to drive prices below the break-even point of shale oil production. "Of course, to upset Saudi Arabia could be a risky thing, but this is Russia's strategy at the moment — flexible geometry of interests." **Nord Stream 2 is a**



Gazprom-owned pipeline to supply Russian gas to Germany, whose completion has been stalled due to US sanctions.

A Dam of Contention in Africa

→ As the July deadline draws closer for the **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)** on the river **Nile** to become functional, the **dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt, with Sudan caught in between**, has escalated into a diplomatic stand-off. Differences were laid bare recently when Ethiopia skipped the latest round of tripartite negotiations with Egypt and Sudan in Washington, being mediated by the U.S. and the World Bank. The Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, who won the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, even said last October that “no force could stop Ethiopia from building a dam,” though he stressed that war was not a solution, echoing similar rhetoric from Cairo. **The Arab League earlier this month underscored Egypt’s historical and civilizational links to the river region and opposed any unilateral action by Ethiopia.** The contentious issue around the GERD, **Africa’s biggest hydropower project, concerns control of the flow of water in the world’s longest river among the riparian states.** Ethiopia, Africa’s second-most populated country and a manufacturing hub, views the mega dam as a symbol of its sovereignty. **It began construction on the Blue Nile (a tributary) in 2011 at a cost of \$4 billion. The government wants to extend power supply to some 60% of the country’s population and bridge the infrastructure gap.** Addis Ababa is hence impatient to fill the gigantic reservoir within six years, and generate 6,000 MW of electricity.





Cairo's Reservations

But the GERD's storage capacity of 74 billion cubic meters of water has raised hackles in Egypt. Cairo, which relies on the Nile for 90% of its freshwater supply, is apprehensive that a rapid filling of the reservoir in upstream Ethiopia would cause a drastic reduction in supplies. President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has insisted on a staggered approach to fill the reservoir, say, between 10 and 21 years, and for the release of a minimum of 40 billion cubic metres annually. No less is the risk Egypt perceives from the diversion of waters to its own High Aswan Dam. Conversely, Addis Ababa is concerned that a long delay in filling the reservoir would jeopardise returns on its investments and hamper the prospects for overall growth. The GERD is said to have been financed almost entirely from domestic resources, in part due to the resistance mounted by Egypt against global funding for the project. There is in addition the element of national pride in the timely completion of the GERD, as Ethiopia's recent economic resurgence has revived the old vision of Great Ethiopia. There is also a lot at stake for the government of Mr. Ahmed, who faces a difficult general election this year after the euphoria of the 2018 peace process with Eritrea has largely faded.

History and Geopolitics

Cairo's strong reservations over the GERD are also rooted in history and geopolitics. Under the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement, the two downstream riparian states Egypt and Sudan, respectively, were allocated 55.5 billion cubic metres and 18.5 billion cubic metres of Nile water annually. That settlement reduced Cairo's control of the waters, compared to the virtual veto over utilisation it was granted under a 1929 treaty. Ethiopia was outside the purview of the 1959 treaty, as also other upstream states including Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda. But Addis Ababa's assertion of its rights for an equitable share of the Blue Nile flows from the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) signed by some of the 10 Nile Basin Initiative nations (under the initiative, Eritrea participates as an observer). The establishment of the Nile River Basin Commission mandated by the CFA has not materialised so far. The challenges for the fair utilisation of waters among the riparian states have only been compounded by the pressures of population growth and the effects of global warming. While the parties have sought international mediation from the U.S. and South Africa, that is no substitute for regional cooperation among the parties.

Foreign Affairs

Reading the Criticism from Iran

- Iran criticised India twice on the Delhi riots. On March 2, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, highly respected in international diplomatic circles and known for his calibrated choice of words, tweeted about "the wave of organized violence against Indian Muslims" and urged India to "not let senseless thuggery prevail". The next day, India summoned the Iranian Ambassador in New Delhi, Ali Chegeni, and lodged a "strong protest". Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Raveesh Kumar said it was conveyed to the Ambassador that "selective and tendentious characterisation of recent events in Delhi are not acceptable". On March 5, it was Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who criticised India. "The hearts of Muslims all over the world are grieving over the massacre of Muslims in India. The govt of



India should confront extremist Hindus & their parties & stop the massacre of Muslims in order to prevent India's isolation from the world of Islam," he tweeted, with the hashtag #IndianMuslimsInDanger. There has been no official response from the Indian government to this tweet. However, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said, "We are getting to know who our friends really are." There were two other occasions — in 1992 and 2002 — when Iran's response to events in India is worth recalling.

1992 Demolition and After

On December 7, 1992, the day after the Babri Masjid was demolished, the Iranian government summoned then Indian Ambassador Hamid Ansari, later India's Vice President. The Iranian Foreign Ministry issued a *démarche*, made a public statement, and conveyed the concerns of Supreme Leader Khamenei to Ansari "behind closed doors". Outside the Indian embassy in Tehran, there were protests including reports of stones being pelted, said Prof A K Pasha who teaches West Asia in JNU, although an Indian diplomat who had served in Tehran in 1992 didn't corroborate this. Tehran radio quoted Khamenei as saying the destruction of the mosque was "not just a local issue". He said: "It is the duty of the Muslims of India not to tolerate such attitudes of the enemy." Tehran radio said he asked Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati to convey to New Delhi that Muslims around the world "expected the rights of Muslims in India to be respected". Hamid Ansari gave an interview to Iranian TV where he articulated the Indian government's position that the "wrong will be corrected" and the "mosque will be rebuilt", to which the Iranian side had "expressed satisfaction", a former diplomat recalled. Despite this, Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao visited Iran in September 1993 — the first Indian PM to do so since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. In March 1994, Iran came to India's rescue at the UN Human Rights Commission by blocking a consensus on Kashmir. But months later, Iran accused India of reneging on its promise to let a delegation of Organisation of Islamic Conference ambassadors into Kashmir. In August 1994, Hassan Rouhani — then secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (effectively National Security Advisor) and deputy Speaker, and now President — visited India, and poured water on a year-long process of strengthening ties. He spoke of the treatment of minorities — some accounts say he talked about "persecution" — in the wake of the mosque demolition. He also recognised the importance of the Hurriyat Conference as "true representatives" of the people of Kashmir. His comments were followed by the cancellation of a visit by Iran President Ali Akbar Hashmi Rafsanjani in October 1994. The official reason given was the Surat plague. In less than a year, relations improved again, possibly prompted by the Pakistan ISI's power play in Afghanistan, where Taliban became the dominant force. In April 1995, Rafsanjani finally arrived in New Delhi, welcomed by Prime Minister Rao himself at the airport. In the first visit by an Iranian head of state since the Islamic Revolution, Rafsanjani made amends for Rouhani's comments. His address to the joint session of Parliament received an ovation, described as "unprecedented" by then MP and former Foreign Minister I K Gujral. Rafsanjani gave an endorsement to India's secularism at the Imambara in Lucknow. At his press conference in the capital, he put down a Pakistan journalist who raised questions about the Babri Masjid. He went ahead to praise India's "serious will" on Kashmir while dismissing Pakistan's call for American mediation. In his one-on-one talks with Rao, he was at pains to stress Iran's virtual neutrality on the Kashmir issue, said one account.



2002 Gujarat Riots

The next test of the relationship came when the Gujarat riots took place during February-March 2002. The Iranian government conveyed its concerns to the Indian government, recalled Prof Pasha. Then Indian Ambassador, Paripuran Singh Haer, was the recipient of the message in Tehran. Old-timers, however, recalled that the message was “very, very subdued”. “This was the Mohd Khatami era, and they were very well-disposed towards India. While they did convey their concerns, they also told us that they do not wish to get into India’s internal affairs,” said an Indian diplomat who has served in Iran. Khatami visited India as the Chief Guest at the Republic Day Parade in 2003, but did not once raise Gujarat with PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Khatami faced criticism back home.

Why 2020 Is Different

What possibly sets apart Iran’s reaction now from that on previous occasions is the intensity of Khamenei’s words. Iran-watchers say that the tough language, that too after India had summoned the Iranian envoy, was Khamenei’s way of “underlining” the importance Iran attaches to the issue. While Khamenei has spoken out about Indian Muslims on the said occasions, he has often raised the issue of Kashmir, most recently after the revocation of Kashmir’s special status in August last year. On August 21, Khamenei pinned his tweet: “We have good relations with India, but we expect the Indian government to adopt a just policy towards the noble people of Kashmir and prevent the oppression & bullying of Muslims in this region.” Before that, Khamenei had raised Kashmir in 2017, and in July and November 2010, when he stressed the need for the Muslim community to support the “struggle” in Kashmir. This was in the backdrop of Iranian concerns over the Indo-US civil nuclear deal; in 2008 and 2009, India had voted against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The Context Today

Iran has been upset over India’s decision to stop buying its oil, under threat of sanctions from the US. Between 2013 and 2014, amid sanctions, India imported only 11 million tonnes of crude from Iran. In 2018-2019, during sanctions relief, it bought almost 24 million tonnes. It is important to note that China has become Iran’s biggest economic partner, and Beijing’s influence is visible in its foreign policy actions. While India strengthens its ties with the US, Iran knows that New Delhi needs Tehran for access to Afghanistan and Central Asia through the strategically-located Chabahar port. And while it has got a waiver for Chabahar, there is a view in New Delhi that Tehran may want India to intercede with the US for more India-specific waivers on the energy front. Tehran is also aware of its importance in New Delhi’s calculus after the recent US-Taliban agreement, and that South Block needs Iran on its side as Taliban’s influence — and the Pakistan military’s influence — is on the rise in Afghanistan. Iran is also positioning to play the leadership role in the Islamic world, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE perceived to be close to the US.

The Message

From a country that has sought to improve ties with India since the 1990s, Iran’s latest statements are a strong signal. The Delhi violence has clearly tainted the Indian government’s secular image in the Islamic world. After Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s efforts over five-and-half years to build relationships from Saudi Arabia to Iran, UAE to Indonesia, the remarks by Iran in particular and some other Muslim-majority countries will



be seen as a weakening of India's diplomatic clout. South Block will have to work on relationships with all these countries, else risk losing its hard-earned diplomatic gains.

Fail-Safe Exit for America, But A Worry for India (Happymon Jacob - Teacher of National Security at The Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)

- The recently negotiated peace deal between the United States and the Taliban is unlikely to bring peace to Afghanistan, is geopolitically disadvantageous for India, and has serious implications for our national security. The terms of the deal, the manner in which it was negotiated as well as the geopolitical context in which it was stitched up indicate that it was more about providing an honourable exit route for the U.S.'s Trump administration from its military campaign in Afghanistan than about ending violence in the country. Within 24 hours of the much-publicised deal, violence and major disagreements about the deal began erupting in Afghanistan. Given that the Taliban negotiated from a position of strength, the Trump administration from weakness and little political will, and that the Ashraf Ghani administration in Afghanistan was by and large a clueless bystander in all of this, means that the country is perhaps on the verge of yet another long-drawn out and internecine battle.

Geopolitical Futures

When the Taliban came to power in the mid-1990s in Kabul, it had few backers in the world, nor was it seen as a useful commodity by the great powers or the states in the region, except for Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. And the international community was almost united in offering a normative pushback against the violent outfit. As a result, the Taliban was at best reluctantly tolerated until it messed up towards the end of its regime in Kabul. The Northern Alliance, supported by countries such as Russia and India, kept up its military pressure against the Taliban while it was in power. The situation today, at least for the moment, is perhaps the exact opposite of what was the case then. The Taliban today is also more worldly-wise and might have learned, during its exile, to deal with the international system and play the game of balance of power. More so, it may not necessarily be a puppet of the Pakistani deep state once it returns to power. Given the war fatigue and the geopolitical stakes in Afghanistan, most of the key players in the region and otherwise have been in negotiations with the Taliban one way or another, and for one reason or another, lending the terror group certain legitimacy in the process. Today, the Taliban is the flavour of the season — anyone desirous of a stake in Afghanistan or does not want its domestic turmoil to spill over into their country would want to keep the Taliban in good humour. There is another reason why the Taliban has many suitors — because the U.S. withdrawal by and large suits everyone, be it China, Pakistan, Iran, or Russia. Suddenly, the Taliban appears to have been forgiven for its sordid past and unforgivable sins because for most of these countries, the U.S. is the bigger challenge than the Taliban.

India's Afghan Puritanism

The only state that seems to be on the losing end, unfortunately, of this unfolding game of chess and patience in Afghanistan is India. It did not have to be this way: if the earlier Taliban regime was anti-India, it was also because India had militarily supported the Northern Alliance that kept up the military pressure against the Taliban. Today's Taliban does not share the same animus for New Delhi. New Delhi, therefore, could have rejigged its approach to



Taliban this time around. However, it put all its eggs in the Ashraf Ghani basket, even on the eve of the signing of the peace deal in **Doha**. New Delhi also, for most intents and objectives, adopted a puritanical approach to the Taliban, neither reaching out to the Taliban nor exploiting the fissures within it; one, because it did not want to irk the elected government in Kabul and two, because it adopts a moralistic approach to dealing with extremist groups in general — not a smart diplomatic strategy. This moralistic attitude, also a diplomatically lazy one, I would say, that be it Pakistan or Afghanistan, India would only talk to the legitimate government in that country, is a self-defeating position. The world is not that perfect, nor are states all that uniform, created in the shape and image of the Westphalian forefather. Smart statecraft, therefore, is dealing with what you have and making the best of it. As a result, India's relations with Afghanistan will take a hit in the immediate aftermath of the deal. Here is why. With China, India's strategic adversary, deeply involved in the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the region, including in Afghanistan, India's traditional ability to influence the region's political and security outcomes will be severely limited. This will be further exacerbated by the withdrawal of the U.S., India's closest friend, from the region. Other regional actors in Afghanistan are also less friendly towards India than ever before: Iran feels let down by India given how the latter has behaved towards it at the behest of the Americans; for Russia, India is only one of the many friends in the region — the exclusivity of Russia-India relations is a thing of the past — and Pakistan would consider targeting India a fair game. Unless New Delhi carefully envisages a counter strategy, these factors will increasingly push India into a geopolitical tough spot in the region. It should worry us that our political class is focused on domestic politics while the region is becoming ever more uncertain and evidently unfavourable to us.

Taliban And Kashmir Angle

While the direct physical impact of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan on Kashmir will be negligible, this will not be without serious implications for the unfolding situation in Kashmir's restive regions. The most important impact is going to be psychological. Disenchanted Kashmiri youngsters, and there are a lot of them, will interpret the events in Afghanistan as follows: "If the mighty superpower USA could be defeated by the Taliban in Afghanistan with help from the Pakistan army, defeating Indian forces in Kashmir won't be impossible after all." This enthusiasm is completely misplaced, but that is not the point. That the Kashmiri youth might pick up guns drawing inspiration from the situation in Afghanistan is indeed the point. Second, the U.S.-Taliban deal cannot survive without Pakistan's assistance towards ensuring its success, and the U.S. and its allies recognise that. Such a recognition of Pakistan's utility provides the country with an ability, as and when it wishes to, to up the ante in Kashmir. Third, New Delhi's official statement which describes Afghanistan as a "contiguous neighbour" — meaning that India considers Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) a part of its sovereign territory — will make Pakistan and China sit up and take notice. Recall that India also made a similar claim about Aksai Chin in the wake of its August decision on Kashmir. Erstwhile rhetorical claims on PoK and Aksai Chin have suddenly assumed lot more geopolitical significance today making conciliatory approaches to conflict resolution ever more difficult.

Victory of Fundamentalism

The return of the Taliban, however unavoidable that may be, signals a victory of religious fundamentalism in the region and it will have serious implications for the region as a whole.



Not only is the Taliban's return a victory for a puritanical religious outfit, it is also an act in legitimising it. More so, given that a new Taliban-led dispensation in Afghanistan will be far more accepted by the international community than the last time around (1996 to 2001) also means increased acceptability for such regimes in general, either out of necessity or as a function of geopolitical calculations. That the Taliban mass-murdered its opponents into statehood in the 21st century and that this might provide potential inspiration to other outfits in the region and outside should indeed worry us.

The Ambit and The Limits Of 'Diaspora Diplomacy'

→ Joint rallies by U.S. President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Ahmedabad last month and at Houston last September were unique for their concept and for their crowd sizes, but also for the promise they held out to the leaders themselves: of audiences that would blend support for Mr. Trump with that for Mr. Modi politically. As a result, speaking beyond bilateral relations, both leaders paid tribute to the three million people of Indian origin who are American citizens, who will vote in elections this year. In Ahmedabad, Mr. Trump referred to Indian Americans as "truly spectacular people". In Houston, Mr. Modi said the 2016 election of Mr. Trump, who had used the slogan "Abki Baar Trump Sarkar" during his campaign, had "lit up millions of faces with joy". Mr. Modi's recall of the slogan sent a not-so-subtle message ahead of the upcoming U.S. presidential poll, where Mr. Trump is seeking re-election. The result of both rallies and the speeches was a heady concoction for both politicians, seeing the Indian diaspora not just as a part of India's "soft power", but a fully transferable political vote bank as well.

Pitching to Both Audiences

Mr. Modi has also brought this dual effect into play in several diaspora rallies worldwide. At each of them, he has spoken of initiatives taken by his government for Indians, and also those for the diaspora, pitching to both audiences at one time. In Israel, for example, Mr. Modi spent much of his speech on talking about his agricultural programmes, which was meant for domestic audiences watching his speech on television, and then announced the start of a direct Air India flight to Tel Aviv, to big cheers from his live audience. The government has also frequently blurred the line between Indian expatriates and Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) in describing India's strength abroad. In March 2017, the Ministry of External Affairs raised the issue of attacks on Indians strongly with the U.S. government, after three incidents of suspected hate crimes. Only one of the three was an Indian citizen, the rest were Americans of Indian extraction. This is an important distinction from the past.

Transferability of Votes

India has the world's largest diaspora, about 17.5 million and receives the highest remittance of \$78.6 billion from Indians living abroad (Global Migration Report 2020). Members of the diaspora, often seen as more "successful" and therefore more influential, can have a big impact on their relatives back home, and this makes for a potent combination for any politician. Mr. Modi's joint rallies with former U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron, former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu all included this promise, and saw those leaders make campaign pitches to the Indian community that Mr. Modi had gathered, even as Mr. Modi's popularity with his voters back



home benefited from their presence at his rallies. However, the promise of the diaspora's dual power is based on certain faulty premises, and it is necessary and timely that the government re-analyses the benefits accrued from the diaspora's political presence through a more realistic lens. To start with, the transferability of votes has not yet been proven conclusively. Six months after the April 2015 rally, Mr. Harper lost general elections in Canada. Mr. Cameron lost the referendum on Brexit and resigned seven months after the November 2015 rally, and Mr. Netanyahu has had to face re-elections after failing to secure a majority in any of the three polls that followed his July 2017 joint rally with Mr. Modi in Tel Aviv. One obvious reason is that the Indian community isn't large enough to make a difference in the voting patterns in any of these countries. The second is that the population that comes out for the rallies doesn't represent the entire diaspora. Take the case of U.K. general elections last December, where the Boris Johnson-led Conservative party sought to wrest the support of the traditionally Labour-leaning British-Indian community, and even featured Mr. Modi in its campaign advertisements. The results, which gave the Conservatives a massive win, didn't however make the case for transfer of votes. A report on the 30 constituencies in the U.K. where 'Asians' (a majority of whom are of Indian origin) constitute more than a quarter of the voting population showed that Labour won 29 of the 30 seats, the same that it had also won in 2017 elections, and while its vote share dropped, that mirrored its average losses across the U.K. In the upcoming U.S. election, it remains to be seen whether the Trump outreaches at Houston and Ahmedabad bring in a haul of new Indian-American voters, but the statistics are daunting. In the 2016 election, 77% of Indian Americans voted for Hillary Clinton while just 16% voted for Mr. Trump. The second issue is that politically active members of the Indian diaspora don't necessarily support the Indian government's actions, and often, because they are of Indian origin, hold the government in New Delhi to higher standards than they do others. The U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairperson for Asia, Ami Bera, voiced his concerns quite plainly about Kashmir and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) during a visit to India last month, for example, saying that the India that he "loved" was "democratic and secular". The sponsor of the U.S. House resolution on Kashmir (HR745) Pramila Jayapal; co-chair of U.S. Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders's campaign Ro Khanna; and former presidential contender Kamala Harris, have all been openly critical of the government's actions. The conclusion for the government is that it cannot own only that part of the diaspora that supports its decisions, and must celebrate the fact that members of the Indian diaspora, from both sides of the political divide, are successful and influential.

Interest And 'Interference'

Third, the government must ensure that its focus on the diaspora doesn't become a factor in its bilateral relations. While it is perfectly legitimate and laudable to ensure the safety and well-being of Indian citizens in different parts of the world, as the Modi government has done, it must tread more lightly on issues that concern foreign citizens of Indian origin. Addressing the Lok Sabha in 1957, former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said about the diaspora, "We want to have no vested interests at the expense of the population of those countries...if they adopt the nationality of that country, we have no concern with them. There may be sentimental concerns but politically they cease to be Indian nationals." (A reply to debate on foreign policy in Lok Sabha; September 2, 1957). Subsequent governments have distanced themselves from this rather cold-blooded view and warmed up to the diaspora, but none have raised the concerns of the diaspora with foreign governments, on visas and



other issues, like the present one has. The introduction of India's internal politics into this equation is another new angle, one that led the British Foreign Office to remonstrate with India about interference last December. A tweet, subsequently deleted by an office bearer of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party last month, that threatened to "play a role" in U.S. elections in response to criticism from Mr. Sanders, was also a troubling symptom of this. Politically affiliated Indian diaspora chapters are now also playing old India-Pakistan fault-lines amongst immigrants, which in the past were fuelled by Pakistani agencies. In California primaries this month, local "Hindu-American" groups protested against Democratic candidates like Ro Khanna for joining the Congressional Pakistan caucus and for criticising New Delhi's actions. (Mr. Khanna won the primary). Finally, the government must consider the impact that policies conflating the PIOs with Indian citizens could have on the diaspora itself. Most immigrant Indian communities have been marked by their ability to assimilate into the countries they now live in. Much of that comes from a desire to be treated as equal citizens, not as immigrants, while a few also have bad memories of anti-immigrant sentiments in the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and the U.S., when they were targeted and accused of "divided loyalties". Laying claim to their kinship and culture and taking pride in their success is one thing. It would be a mistake to lay claim to their politics, however.

Nation

Ruling Against Judicial Transparency (Prashant Reddy T. - An Advocate)

- In its recent decision, in the Chief Information Commissioner v. High Court of Gujarat case, the Supreme Court, regrettably, barred citizens from securing access to court records under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. Instead, the court held that such records can be accessed only through the rules laid down by each High Court under Article 225 of the Constitution. The Registry of the Supreme Court was litigating a similar case (Registrar, Supreme Court of India v. R.S. Misra) before the Delhi High Court for several years after the CIC had ordered it to provide copies of pleadings filed in a case, under the RTI Act, rather than insisting on litigants filing an application under the Supreme Court Rules. Though the particular decision taken earlier this month does not preclude the application of the RTI Act to the administrative side of the court, it does firmly slam the door shut on accessing, under the RTI Act, the millions of court records filed on the judicial side.

Importance of Sharing Records

Before explaining the faults and the consequences with this decision of the Supreme Court, it is necessary to understand the importance of court records to public discourse in India. A significant number of decisions taken by the courts influence our daily life. Every prosecution before a criminal court is essentially an opportunity to hold the police accountable just as every writ petition is an opportunity to hold the government accountable. Similarly, a significant number of commercial lawsuits are opportunities to learn more about corporations and the manner in which commercial transactions are executed in the country. In all of these cases, the pleadings filed by either party contain reams of information that are useful to a range of stakeholders such as citizens, journalists, academics, shareholders, etc., who can better inform the public discourse on the ramifications of these decisions. This is



especially true in cases of public interest litigation, where the courts indulge in policymaking on the basis of the report of an amicus curia or an expert committee set up by judges. The reports of these committees are not accessible to third parties, though they may be impacted by these decisions, because they form part of the court record and are hence outside the purview of the RTI Act. There is no question of arguing for the confidentiality of these records because it is by now a well-recognised principle that all judicial proceedings must take place in open court, unless prohibited by law for reasonable purposes. But, while it is completely legal for anyone to sit in court and take notes while a lawyer narrates the content of pleadings, the courts make it as difficult as possible to access the pleadings in a simple manner. That said, for those with deeper pockets, it is only a matter of paying out a bribe to get copies of pleadings “informally”.

The Overriding Section

The Supreme Court’s verdict in this case hinged on Section 22 of the RTI Act which states that the RTI Act shall override any other law to the extent that the latter is inconsistent with the former. The Section states: “Act to have an overriding effect — The provisions of this Act shall have effect notwithstanding anything inconsistent therewith contained in the Official Secrets Act, 1923 (19 of 1923), and any other law for the time being in force or in any instrument having effect by virtue of any law other than this Act.” The wording of the provision reveals that **the drafters of the RTI Act were clearly aware that it may conflict with other laws and wanted to ensure that the procedure under the Act overruled the procedure in existing legislation.** Despite this crystal-clear wording of Section 22, the Supreme Court and, on previous occasions, the High Courts, have concluded exactly the opposite. In this particular judgment, the apex court cited an obscure service law precedent to claim that a general law with a non-obstante clause (such as Section 22) cannot overrule a special law. What appears to have missed the court’s attention is that the wording of the non-obstante clause in the precedent was completely different from Section 22 and hence the precedent itself was not applicable to the facts of this case. Further, not satisfied with citing an obscure precedent, the court also proceeded to speculate that Section 22 could not be interpreted in a manner that implied repeal of other laws since the RTI Act was clear that it was repealing only the earlier Freedom to Information Act, 2002. This is bewildering reasoning because the entire point of non-obstante clauses like Section 22 is to save the legislature the job of identifying each and every conflict between different laws. The reason that the Freedom to Information Act had to be specifically repealed was because it was on exactly the same issue as the RTI Act. **From a citizen’s perspective, this decision is problematic for two reasons. One, most High Court Rules allow only parties to a legal proceeding to access the records of a case. Some High Courts may allow third parties to access court records if they can justify their request. This is entirely unlike the RTI Act, where no reasons are required to be provided thereby vastly reducing the possibility of administrative discretion.**

Logistical Difficulties

The second reason this judgment spells bad news is that unlike the RTI Act, the procedure under the Rules of most High Courts is challenging from a logistical perspective, apart from lacking in any significant safeguards. An application under the RTI Act can be made by post, with the fee being deposited through a postal order. The procedure is simple enough to enable most citizens file RTI applications by themselves. Not so for the procedure under the High Court Rules. Most High Courts and the Supreme Court require physical filing of an



application with the Registry, and a hearing before a judge to determine whether records should be given. In an atmosphere where it is becoming increasingly difficult for ordinary litigants to even enter court premises because of thoughtless measures in the name of security, it becomes a logistical nightmare for citizens to file an application with the Registry. **The Supreme Court fails to understand that the judiciary's track record of transparency is vastly inferior when compared to other arms of the state. In today's world where every public institution is striving to become more transparent, the continued resistance from the judiciary to making itself transparent in a meaningful manner will have an eroding effect on its legitimacy.**

Dominion Over Territory

→ The verdict by a Division Bench of the Madras High Court on the respective roles of the elected regime in Puducherry and the Administrator appointed by the President underscores both the inherent potential for conflict in the governance scheme for Union Territories and the manner in which it can be resolved. The Bench has done well to say that its role is not to lay down who has residual control — whether it is the Council of Ministers or the Administrator — but to highlight the existing legal framework under which their powers are defined. **The Bench has set aside a single judge's 2019 order that the Lieutenant-Governor should not interfere in the day-to-day administration of Puducherry.** To this extent, it is a shot in the arm for L-G Kiran Bedi, but **it also contains a note of caution against the Centre going beyond its constitutional limitations.** An interesting facet of the case is that both last year's judgment by Justice R. Mahadevan, and the one overruling it by a Bench comprising Chief Justice A.P. Sahi and Justice Subramonium Prasad, rely on the exposition of the law by the Supreme Court in relation to the National Capital Territory of Delhi. The apex court had emphasised on the need for constitutional morality and constitutional trust among high dignitaries, implying that Lt. Governors and Chief Ministers must work in unison as far as possible. In the event of an unresolved difference of opinion, the L-G should refer it to the President for a decision. The main ground on which the single judge's verdict has been set aside is that it was based on an inappropriate parallel sought to be drawn between a 'Union Territory' and a 'State'. If the matter goes on appeal to the Supreme Court, it may be worth examining whether the single judge relied solely on this parallel. Much of his verdict drew upon the spirit of the Supreme Court's views on the conflict between the Chief Minister and L-G of Delhi. Whether the precedent on the limits of the Delhi L-G's powers would apply to the Puducherry Administrator was a question that was raised even then. After all, it is acknowledged that the status of NCT is sui generis. However, the elements of conflict and discord are common to Union Territories with elected legislatures. Hence, the principle that constitutional functionaries should avoid daily clashes, with the Centre using its primacy to resolve disputes, does commend itself. In that sense, the single judge was not wrong in holding that the Administrator is bound by the "aid and advice" clause, and that the power to refer any matter to the President should not mean "every matter". The main issue remains whether the notion of representative government should get greater credence even in a territory designated as belonging to the Union.

For A Level Playing Field

→ Even as electoral democracy has taken strong root in India, there is no gainsaying the fact that some unhealthy patterns have emerged. While voter electoral participation has



remained robust, with the poor voting in large numbers, candidates and winners in Assembly and Lok Sabha polls have largely been from affluent sections — some even with several criminal cases against them. **With elections becoming expensive, most parties have sought to field richer candidates irrespective of their merit in representing public interest.** Current campaign finance regulations by the Election Commission of India that seek transparency on expenses by party and candidate, and prescribe limits on a candidate's expenditure, have not been sufficient deterrents. Poll results have tended to be a function of either party or leader preference by the voter rather than a statement on the capability of the candidate. In many cases, capable candidates stand no chance against the money power of more affluent candidates. **News that the ECI is considering tightening ways to cap the expenditure of parties is therefore quite welcome, as it should provide a more level playing field.** But even this can be meaningful only if there is more transparency in campaign finance which suggests that the **electoral bonds system**, as it is in place now, is untenable. **The ECI has also suggested bringing social media and print media under the "silent period" ambit after campaigning ends.** Regulating social media will be difficult and it remains to be seen how the ECI will implement this. The ECI's plans to introduce new "safe and secure" voting methods, however, need thorough scrutiny. The use now of the EVM as a standalone, one-time programmable chip-based system, along with administrative safeguards renders it a safe mechanism that is not vulnerable to hacking. Any other "online" form of voting that is based on networked systems should be avoided. The idea of an Aadhaar-linked remote voting system that is sought to be built as a prototype could be problematic considering how the unique identity card has excluded genuine beneficiaries when used in welfare schemes, not to mention the inherent vulnerabilities in its recognition mechanisms. Two key measures are missing from the recommendations — the need for more teeth for the ECI in its fight against "vote buying" and hate speech. Increasingly, parties have resorted to bribing voters in the form of money and other commodities in return for votes, and while the ECI has tried to warn outfits or in some cases postponed polls, these have not deterred them. In times when hate speech is used during elections, the ECI has only managed to rap the offending candidates or party spokespersons on the knuckles but stricter norms including disqualification of the candidate would be needed for true deterrence.

[For A Universal Status of Personhood \(Suhrit Parthasarathy - Advocate Practising at The Madras High Court\)](#)

- ➔ A series of judgments delivered by the Gauhati High Court over the course of the last few weeks has brought into sharp focus the utter brutality of the regime governing the Foreigners' Tribunals in Assam. These verdicts entrench the establishment of an unreasonable burden on people declared as deemed foreigners by seeking from them a standard of proof that is wholly incommensurate with the consequences that befall the ultimate finding — in many cases, consignment to detention camps and a pronouncement of a condition of statelessness. From a reading of the judgments, the standard, as it were, is so disproportionate that it is virtually impossible to glean what a petitioner actually has to do to succeed. Indeed, the chances of success are so negligible that, an analysis of 787 orders and judgments of the High Court between 2010 and 2019, by Leah Varghese and Shruthi Naik of Daksh India, shows us that in 97% of the cases, the petitioner before the court was confirmed as a foreigner. This statistic is scarcely surprising given the list of documents deemed inadequate for the purposes of establishing a person's citizenship. Consider the



following: electoral photo identity cards, voters' lists bearing petitioners' names, land revenue receipts, certificates issued by the local panchayat, bank passbooks, permanent account number (PAN) cards and ration cards. Each of these has been variously rejected as proof of citizenship. What is more, according to the court, not only must a petitioner adduce documentary evidence, whatever that might actually be, establishing that their parents or ancestors were present on Indian soil prior to March 25, 1971 — a cut-off date distinct to Assam — but they must also independently validate those documents by securing the testimony of their issuing authorities. For example, if a petitioner produces a certificate of her marriage in an attempt to establish her lineage, and should that document be accepted by the Tribunal, the petitioner will still have to lead evidence through the authority that was responsible for dispensing the certificate. Is there, we might want to ask ourselves, a more noxiously labyrinthine exercise than this?

Assam And Tribunals

The Foreigners' Tribunals (FT), which work as quasi-judicial bodies, were originally created through an executive order made by the Union government in 1964. Their task was to furnish opinions on whether persons referred to them were "foreigners" or not within the meaning ascribed to the term under the Foreigners Act, 1946. This legislation, which was enacted by the colonial government with a view to regulating migration into India, defines a foreigner as any person who is not a citizen of India. It also accords to the government a wide-ranging power to control the entry, exit and movement of foreigners to and within the territory of the country. In Assam, the FTs have played a role unique to the State's history. Typically, the tribunals there have seen two kinds of cases: those concerning persons against whom a reference has been made by the border police and those whose names in the electoral roll has a "D", or "doubtful", marked against them. The references made to the FTs in the State have arisen out of a mandate contained in the 1985 Assam Accord. The agreement was a product of a student-driven movement against, among other things, immigration into the State following the declaration of Bangladesh's independence on March 26, 1971. It made a number of stipulations, including a direction to government to identify and have declared as foreigners any person who entered Assam between January 1, 1966 and March 24, 1971—the names of the persons so identified, the accord says, ought to be deleted from the electoral rolls. What is more, the pact also demanded that the government identify those who came into Assam on or after March 25 of that year and have them deleted and expelled. It was to this end that in 1997 the electoral rolls were revised in the State and more than three lakh individuals were marked as doubtful voters. This revision was made without any prior and independent verification. Out of those left out, nearly two lakh people have already been referred to the FTs.

Burden of Proof

Ordinarily, under the Indian Evidence Act of 1872, the burden of proof in any court of law lies on the person who seeks to make a claim or assert a fact. This would mean that before the FTs, it is the government, which avers that a person is a foreigner, on whom the burden ought to lie. But Section 9 of the Foreigners Act reverses this burden. It places the responsibility on every person referred to an FT by the State to establish before the Tribunal that he or she is, in fact, a citizen of India. In 1983, the Union government, sensing the oppressive nature of the burden placed, introduced the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act. This law, which overrode the Foreigners Act, subtly shifted the onus to prove citizenship from the



individual to the government. But, in July 2005, the Supreme Court, in *Sarbananda Sonowal vs Union of India*, declared the legislation unconstitutional. The Court found, through an almost cavalier consideration of history and facts, that migration into Assam constituted “external aggression” against the State, and, therefore, that the Central government had violated Article 355 of the Constitution. Given this, the burden to establish citizenship, the Court held, ought to always rest on the individual. It is this judgment in *Sarbananda Sonowal* that has since served as the fundamental premise on which the Gauhati High Court has ruled on various petitions made against the verdicts of the FTs. But even assuming the burden ought to lie on the individual to establish her citizenship, these rulings could still benefit, as Madhav Khosla recently pointed out, by the outlining of a sensible test on what degree or level of proof ought to be sufficient to discharge the burden. However, by holding, for example, that persons suspected of being foreigners ought to not only provide documentary evidence but also have those documents attested by the authority that issued them, the Court has foisted on the petitioners a standard that is virtually impossible to meet. Perhaps, the solution lies, as Gautam Bhatia has written, in an approach taken by the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights. That is that the burden to establish citizenship might well lie on the individual, as the Foreigners Act stipulates, but once he or she has produced a basic set of documents that, on the face of things, make out a plausible claim, the onus ought to then shift to the State to rebut the evidence provided. Ultimately, as the Gauhati High Court has itself held, individuals are not expected to establish “beyond reasonable doubt” that they are citizens of India. What is expected of them is to show on a balance of probabilities that they are not foreigners. In such circumstances, the rational answer would be to allow the onus to shift to the State once the individual has met a basic threshold of proof. This approach is, no doubt, far from perfect. In a country like ours, where the weakest and poorest among us are often denied access to basic goods, requiring individuals to produce documents to establish citizenship can by itself represent an onerous demand. We often see rights as universal, but as political philosopher Hannah Arendt pointed out in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, to truly possess rights, individuals often need to belong to a political community. In other words, “the right to have rights” is seen as contingent on citizenship. In instilling a regime where a presumption against citizenship operates, the Foreigners Act denies to the weakest among us this right to have rights. It treats them as less equal beings. To reverse this damage, we must do as Seyla Benhabib has suggested. We must recognise a universal status of personhood of every human being independent of their nationality.

As Delhi Burned, Institutions Looked Away (Harsh Mander - Human Rights Activist and Writer)

- Children watch with frightened eyes as distraught mothers lament and mourn before people with cameras and notebooks. Proud working people are forced to depend on the charity of strangers who open their homes to them in kindness because the state refuses to create for them places of safety. The horror does not abate: fathers scour morgues for their missing sons, and mothers await with dread as bodies are dredged out of the putrid nallah. I have never witnessed such an abysmal low in the trust of the citizen in her government. Muslim victims with bullet wounds lodged in their bodies or with many broken bones say they would rather die than go to a government hospital because of the contempt and neglect that they expect to encounter there. Victims turn away officials filling death and property



compensation forms because they suspect the officials are secretly filling forms of the National Population Register to disenfranchise them.

Failure of The Political Class

Among the many public betrayals of the unfortunate survivors of the carnage, take first almost the entire political class. The ruling establishment criminally stoked and fuelled the hatred over the past several weeks, with venomous hate speech led from the top. Their political project was apparent — to crush the resistance to the citizenship project and the unprecedented display of unity and solidarity across religious identities of people in this movement across the country. The communal carnage was waiting to happen. But the remainder of the political class, who could have led the resistance to halt their tracks, did nothing to fight back. They abjectly lack the political conviction, the moral courage, and the cadres on the ground to resist in any way. Delhi has the largest police force in any State or Union Territory outside Jammu and Kashmir. If it had the will, it could have prevented this violence or crushed it in a few hours after it broke out. The stark and frightening truth is that the communal carnage unfolded in Delhi because our elected representatives wanted it and the police allowed it. Even with a police force which is a small fraction of what is stationed in Delhi, no riot can continue for more than a few hours unless the state wishes it to.

Police Response

There are many police images of this pogrom which should long rankle our conscience. Of thousands of desperate rescue calls made to the police going unanswered, as people were slaughtered and homes set alight. Of the police refusing to allow safe passage of ambulances ferrying the injured to hospitals, unlike even during a war between enemy countries. Of policepersons compelling a patient with bullet wounds to open his bandage four times at four different checkpoints to prove that he was actually injured even after the Delhi High Court in a midnight order directed the police to ensure safe passage and emergency treatment for those injured in the violence. Of policepersons standing by as mobs ravaged homes and shops of people of one religious' identity, and sometimes a few even joining in. Of policepersons in riot gear tormenting a group of unarmed Muslim men, forcing them to sing the national anthem as they beat them with batons. The national anthem has become an icon of the protests against the citizenship law, so clearly the police were punishing them for the protests. Later, after one of these men died from police beating, the national anthem has become for me not just a song of love, but also of pain. The midnight intervention by Delhi High Court Justice S. Muralidhar (who was later transferred) to order safe passage of ambulances, and his directions for considering immediate registration of FIRs against senior BJP leaders for hate speech, are a reminder of what role a conscientious constitutional court can play in a moment like this. Our citizen group had established a 24X7 control room to respond to distress calls. As the night progressed, the calls got more desperate and the police more criminally unresponsive. Gravely injured and lying in a small private hospital, 22 persons needed to be moved urgently to bigger hospitals, but mobs would not allow this, and the police refused protection. Two of them died. It was a midnight knock at the judge's door which ensured not just the saving of the remaining lives, but of many more that terrifying night. The next day he gave police 24 hours to consider arresting all those who incited hatred. But after the court changed, this urgency evaporated. The intensely communalised actions of the medical establishment raise equally troubling questions.



Allegations of wanton obscuring of evidence in post-mortem reports require the entire medical fraternity to reflect on what has gone so worryingly wrong in injecting the poison of communal hatred in a profession of care and healing.

Nowhere in The Picture

We have reached a point almost of amnesia about institutions like the National Human Rights Commission, the National Commission for Minorities, and the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights. Each is mandated to step in during moments like this when vulnerable minorities suffer discrimination and violence at the hands of the executive. But all of them are missing in action as Delhi burns and writhes in torment. There is also a great deal that the State administration should have done. The rescue control room should have been set up and run by the state from the first night of the riots. The entire health machinery should have been mobilised, and the best medical treatment to victims assured. Large relief camps should have been established overnight as places of safety. To lose in a few fevered nightmarish hours your loved ones, home, small business, and life's belongings and savings is enough to ravage any of us. How much darker must be that desolation if you know that the violence was enabled by those duty-bound to protect you, and that among those who led the mob to your door were your own neighbours? The carnage which engulfed the narrow lanes of working-class settlements of Delhi for three days signals the disgraceful and comprehensive collapse of every institution of the Indian state without any exception. If not urgently addressed and mended, this comprehensive cessation of a constitutional state will destroy hope, peace, social trust, development, the economy; and ultimately the possibilities of our becoming one day a country of kindness and justice.

The Message from Delhi (Satish Deshpande - Teacher of Sociology at Delhi University)

- Despite surface similarities, what happened in Delhi last week was not a "riot", at least not what we used to mean by that term. Nor is it accurately described by other old-fashioned terms such as "communal violence" or "pogrom". The truth is that we do not have a single word or phrase yet that can name this phenomenon, because it is really the newest stage of an ongoing project rather than a stand-alone event. Before discussing this project, it may be helpful to note some of the reasons why older descriptions do not fit.

Graphic Depictions

If the 2002 riots of Gujarat were our first in the age of the mobile phone, the rampaging mobs of Delhi have scripted India's first encounter with public violence in the era of the smart phone. Despite the inevitable risk of fakery, this is undoubtedly the first time that copious audio-visual documentation of wholesale violence has emerged almost immediately. Video clips of horrific acts of wanton cruelty are criss-crossing social media, speaking eloquently of the unspeakable. Deeply shocking as these images are, their effect is even more stunning. Graphic depictions of inhumanity have not elicited remorse or changed minds; rather, they have deepened biases and hardened stances. At least this is how it seems a week later. One explanation for this is the media, particularly television and digital platforms. **Our society has never been as media saturated, nor have our media been as blatantly one-sided as they are now. The bulk of the electronic media are strongly and blindly supportive of the ruling party**



and the government, and they fawn on the Prime Minister, who can do no wrong in their eyes. Even when confronted with damning evidence, the so called 'godli' (or lapdog) media finds ways to defend the indefensible, the more aggressive elements even going on the offensive with "alternative facts". But the major part of the explanation lies elsewhere, and is far more important. The Delhi violence and its aftermath point to the truth that, today, a large mass of people have been injected with hate and inoculated against all antidotes. Such people are convinced that they already have all the facts they need. They are programmed to regard arguments against their worldview as proof of a conspiracy against it. Their staunch beliefs are not random perversions, or a legacy from the past. They are the fruit of long and painstaking ideological work at the grass roots. How to counter this work and undo its effects is the central question of our time.

The Shaheen Bagh Model

Another striking difference from the major riots of the past is the absence of a clear and commensurable provocation; 1984 had the assassination of a Prime Minister by her Sikh bodyguards as the trigger, while 2002 had the Godhra train deaths attributed to Muslims. The year 2020 has nothing comparable, except the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, or the CAA, and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) iconised by Shaheen Bagh. More an inspiring model than a place, Shaheen Bagh is quite exceptional as a provocation for unrestrained brutality and killings. It is a peaceful protest led by women of all ages including the elderly; it constantly invokes nationalist symbols, speaks a non-sectarian language, and adopts the Preamble to the Constitution as its manifesto. Spreading quickly (albeit unevenly) across much of the country, the Shaheen Bagh model of protest is the first significant political challenge faced by the Modi-Shah duo since their rise to power in 2014. No matter how annoying these protests were to daily commuters, and regardless of the local conflicts between rival groups of activists, there was nothing here to justify the organised looting, arson and murder that ensued. The argument that this was Delhi's "punishment" for rejecting the ruling party in the recent Delhi Assembly election is an inadequate explanation because the loss did not matter a great deal in the larger scheme of things. The acts of omission and commission of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) both before and specially after the violence point to another major truth about contemporary politics. **It is one of the most significant achievements of the Modi-Shah project that no major party is willing to take even the slightest risk of appearing to be pro-Muslim today.**

Game-Changing Point

This argument can be taken further. The Delhi violence may mark a decisive turning point in the post-2019 phase of the Modi-Shah project when the nationalist-cum-anti-Muslim agenda has generated enough momentum to break free of electoral compulsions. If true, this is a momentous event. It implies that the Hindu-majoritarian agenda has won the political battle so decisively that it can even afford to lose elections. In other words, **elections will be won or lost on "lesser" local or current issues, but both winners and losers will support Hindu-majoritarianism.** Seen from the reverse angle, this means that challenges to Hindu-majoritarianism can only be staged outside of electoral politics. But the Modi-Shah project is more than and different from a Hindu-majoritarian agenda. This distinction is vital because it is the only ray of hope for those who oppose both. Put simply, the Modi-Shah project is a deeply authoritarian two-man bid for capturing and retaining power that is **riding two horses**



simultaneously, namely **crony corporatism and Hindu-majoritarianism**. Only after its second consecutive landslide win in 2019 has the Modi-Shah duo acquired enough leverage to become the dominant partner vis-à-vis its allies, but it still needs both. Sites of probable friction between the dynamic duo and each of their two allies, or between the allies themselves, are the most productive sites for mounting a challenge to the Modi-Shah project itself. The daunting but urgent task is to begin mapping these sites in concrete political terms. Frankly, this is uncharted territory, and the success of the Modi-Shah project has transformed the landscape. Challengers must contend with the almost complete subversion of all the institutions that are constitutionally designed to protect and nurture precisely this kind of democratic contestation, including the judiciary, the police, the bureaucracy, the media, universities, and even data-gathering organisations.

Looking Inwards

In the last analysis, Delhi 2020 is different from earlier instances of “communal violence” for two main reasons. First because it marks the launching of a sophisticated campaign to “Dalitise” Muslims, a story that cannot be told here. Second, because it identifies a turning point in contemporary Indian politics. The clearest signs that we may have arrived at this point came not during but after the violence. A message was hidden in the decided lack of regret and in the shocking continuity of the same voices shouting the same slogans (including “goli maaro”), now calling it a “peace march”. In the language of map apps, this message said that the mindset called “Hindu Rashtra” may no longer be our destination — it may have become our current location. There is a crucial question that we Indians should be asking ourselves before it is too late, particularly the vast majority who identify, or are identified by others, as Hindus. Is this really what we want?

House Matters

- The government’s stubborn refusal to allow an immediate discussion on Delhi’s communal conflagration, in February, as demanded by the Opposition, has brought Parliament to a gridlock. The violence, that claimed more than 50 lives, took place when the Budget session was on a 15-day recess. The altercation over a suitable timing for a discussion on the issue has heightened the hostility between the treasury benches and the Opposition. The government took the position that the discussion could be allowed only after the situation calms down further. Outnumbered and denied a hearing, Congress members resorted to disruptive tactics which led to the suspension of seven of them for the rest of the session. The punishment is perhaps too harsh — in the puzzling parallel drawn by the party leader, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, like sending a pickpocket to the gallows. Speaker Om Birla has stayed away for three days, upset over the behaviour of MPs and also over the hurried decision in his absence to suspend the seven. A discussion will take place this week, and an all-party committee announced on Friday might help resolve the logjam. But a country that is facing many challenges and which requires all hands-on deck can ill-afford such disruptions and suspensions. Elected to Parliament in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had genuflected at its gate as a mark of respect, and termed it the temple of democracy. His government’s approach towards the Opposition and parliamentary proceedings has not been in the best spirit of democracy, however. The BJP has a track record of disrupting Parliament when it was in the opposition, but in power, it has taken an unyielding approach towards demands from across the aisle. Its unassailable Lok Sabha majority has been turned



into a defence of majoritarian instincts. The Congress has been denied the post of Leader of the Opposition on a technical ground. The Rajya Sabha, where it has no majority of its own, has been often bypassed by arbitrarily labelling legislation as finance bills, which constitutionally do not require its approval. Debates on far-reaching legislation such as amendments to the constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir have been hurried. While the PM and Home Minister Amit Shah took charge in persuading friendly Opposition parties on crucial RS votes, there is an evident and troubling disinclination to engage the Opposition on matters of national importance as a regular practice. The Parliamentary Affairs portfolio that used to be handled by a political heavyweight engaging all parties is now reduced in stature. The Speaker's traditional non-partisan role in ironing out conflicts with the Opposition is also being undermined by the combative troops on the treasury benches. **The Deputy Speaker's post, which usually goes to the main Opposition party, is vacant.** The government must make amends and restore the democratic majesty of Parliament.

RS Nod for Vivad Se Vishwas Bill

- The Parliament approved the Direct Tax Vivad Se Vishwas Bill, 2020, which will give taxpayers a **chance to settle tax disputes by paying their dues without any interest or penalty till March 31.** The Bill, which had been passed by the Lok Sabha on March 4, was approved by the Rajya Sabha on Friday by a voice vote. **The Vivad Se Vishwas scheme waives off interest and penalty on pending tax if paid by March 31. For payments made after March 31 and till June 30, a 10% penalty would be charged.** In her response to the discussion on the Bill in the Upper House, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the scheme was **not giving amnesty** and that **those already being prosecuted under the Income Tax Act would be excluded from it.** Replying to questions raised by MPs during the discussion, she said the 75% tax on undisclosed cash deposited at the time of demonetisation would still apply. She said a cap of ₹5 crore in dues had been included in the scheme in order to prevent large-scale evasion or fraud-related cases trying to take advantage of the scheme. Earlier in the day, **DMK MPs P. Wilson and Tiruchi Siva raised concerns about the name of the Bill including Hindi words.** Ms. Sitharaman said: "I do understand the importance of mother tongue and regional languages." "In this case, I yield by saying, I give an assurance that we will have circulars going to all the regions to highlight each of the points in this scheme in the respective regional languages," she added.

Centre Announces Common Eligibility Test

- Applicants for jobs in railways, banks and lower levels of Central government will now write a **common eligibility test (CET) from 2021,** Minister for Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions Jitendra Singh told journalists on Friday. In a bid to streamline the hiring process for government agencies as well as the 2.5 crore candidates who apply each year, the Centre will set up an autonomous **National Recruitment Agency (NRA)** to conduct this online test. "This is not merely an administrative reform, but a huge socio-economic reform as well. It aims at providing a level playing field for all candidates by removing the obstacles involved in appearing for multiple examinations," said Dr. Singh. NRA proposal, which had been in the works for about six months and was announced in the 2020 budget speech, would soon go for Cabinet approval. The CET will replace the first level tests conducted by the Staff Selection Commission (SSC), the Railway Recruitment Board (RRB) and the Institute of Banking Personnel Selection (IBPS).



U.P. Clears Ordinance for Recovery of Damages

→ The Yogi Adityanath-led Uttar Pradesh government gave its approval to an **Ordinance for the recovery of damage to public and private property during protests**. U.P. Finance Minister Suresh Khanna announced the decision of the State Cabinet, which gave its consent to the U.P. **Recovery of Damage to Public and Private Property Ordinance, 2020**. The government decision came a day after the **Supreme Court did not stay the Allahabad High Court order to the Lucknow administration to “forthwith” remove roadside hoardings displaying the personal details of persons accused of vandalism and arson during the protest against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act last December**. During the hearing of the Vacation Bench, one of the judges had orally remarked that the U.P. government’s action was not “covered in law”. The U.P. government had issued recovery notices to at least 500 persons in the State for damage to property during the protests in December. Mr. Khanna said the Ordinance would arrange for the recovery of damage to public and private property during any protest, movement or demonstration. Without giving any further details, Mr. Khanna said the specifics would be known when the “niyamawali” or manual of rules for it is released. Sidharth Nath Singh, U.P. government spokesperson, said the State had brought the Ordinance in compliance with the Supreme Court’s observations. “We are honouring the court. The court said there must be an Act on this,” he said, adding that earlier recovery of damages was covered under a government order but now it would be under a law. Mr. Khanna said the **Ordinance was based on the 2007 order by the apex court in criminal writ petitions 73 and 77 that a “strong law” was needed to deal with the damage to public and private property during political protests and demonstrations**. The State government’s decision comes at a time when it has — in a controversial move — put up several hoardings in Lucknow identifying those accused of violence during the protests against the CAA in December last.

Missing at Birth

→ Few things cast a long shadow on human failing as much as sex selection does. To choose on the basis of gender and eliminate new life if the gender is not ‘favourable’ can easily be among humanity’s worst moments. Last week’s case of infanticide in Tamil Nadu’s Usilampatti, historically notorious for its crude methods of killing female babies, sent a chill down the spine of the country. Years after it was believed that awareness generation and targeted behaviour change communication had led to people giving up the inhuman practice of feeding female infants with the toxic milk of a local herb, the news that a couple had reportedly used the same method to kill their second girl child, just a month old, had child rights activists wringing their hands in frustration. Chekkanoorani, a suburb near Usilampatti, in Madurai district, was the scene of the crime, where police arrested a young couple and the paternal grandfather of the child for having fed the 31-day-old with the toxic juice, killing her. This is no isolated case in a nation of missing girls. Data on sex ratio at birth (SRB) culled from the Civil Registration System, show an alarming fall over the years. **From 903 girls for every 1,000 boys in 2007, it dropped to 877 in 2016. Four States have an SRB equal to or below 840: Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan (806), Bihar (837), Uttarakhand (825) and Tamil Nadu (840)**. Activists point out that while infanticide may have come down, sex selective abortion at scan centres continues as the preferred vehicle for parents (and grandparents) obsessed with son preference. This despite the fact that the **Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal**



Diagnostic Techniques Act was enacted and amended to arm the state to wage a war against this pernicious practice. The Centre's 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' campaign aimed at saving girl children has a huge unfinished task in front of it. Tamil Nadu, at one stage under the leadership of former Chief Minister Jayalalithaa, effectively employed the **Cradle Baby Scheme** to counter infanticide, along with effective awareness campaigns. The cradles are still there, and the babies are coming too, but the SRB has been steadily dropping since 2011. It is time again for the government to ramp up awareness building exercises, and this time use technology to monitor every single pregnant woman right down to taluk levels until at least one year after birth. While punitive aspects might offer a measure of deterrence, true change can only be brought about by a change in attitude. As Amartya Sen argued: while at birth boys outnumber girls, 'after conception, biology seems on the whole to favour women'. The weapon that the government needs to use now is one that will be powerful enough to eliminate the perversion of son preference from people's minds.

[The Legacy of Childhood Trauma \(Mathangi Swaminathan - Alumna of The Harvard Kennedy School of Government and A Foster America Fellow Working in The Child Protection System in The U.S.\)](#)

- Everyone who knew Rakesh said he was a monster. He could not handle conflicts at home and often resorted to yelling to get his point across. He would discipline his children by being physically violent. His idea of showing love for his partner was through physical violence and threats. Where did Rakesh learn to be the man he was? Perhaps from his childhood. Rakesh's story is all too frequent in India.

Impact on Children

One in three women faces intimate partner violence, according to the World Health Organization. Each successive government has tried to put in place legal and judicial recourses for these women, but has left children unprotected and exposed. Witnessing such widespread violence at home affects children seriously. First, there are recorded physiological effects of trauma on the brain. CT scans show that **children who have been exposed to trauma develop smaller corpus callosum and smaller hippocampus regions, which means that their learning, cognitive abilities and emotional regulation are affected.** Second, inter-generational transmission of violence is a disturbing consequence of violence in families. Dr. Byron Egeland, a widely published researcher in the areas of child maltreatment and developmental psychopathology, showed **a history of abuse to be a major risk factor for abusing the next generation.** Researchers have estimated an **average inter-generational transmission rate of 40%.** This means that for every 100 persons who were abused as children, 40 transmit this violence to the next generation. Rakesh's own history shows that he was a victim of violence. Rakesh had been a witness to violence between his parents at home every day until he turned 20. He saw his mother being slapped, and learnt to create cover-up stories for the frequent injuries that appeared on his and his mother's bodies. By the time he was five, he had learnt that violence was an acceptable means to deal with conflict, and that it was important for the man to dominate through power-assertive violence. To cope with the trauma at home, he had also learnt to quickly suppress his childhood fear and deep insecurity. How else could he deal with the complexity of it? The trauma left physical effects on his brain, leading to poor emotional regulation. According to Dr. John Bowlby, a renowned psychiatrist known for his pioneering work in developing



attachment theory, the “internal working model” of a child is developed based on familial patterns of showing love and resolving conflicts. Rakesh’s internal working model had been developed based on behaviours between his caregivers in the first two years of his life. How can we teach our children other ways of healthy relationships between partners if this is all they have witnessed all their lives? It is important to note that not all victims of domestic violence become aggressors. We must not victimise young survivors of violence. Declaring that some of these victimised children will end up being violent themselves can, in fact, make it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet, it is crucial in a country that faces a massive crisis of violence against women to understand that a history of abuse is often a risk factor that points to a likelihood of perpetrating inter-generational abuse.

Dealing with Childhood Trauma

India puts in place reactive policies every time a new case of violence comes to the fore. The country’s domestic violence policies have ranged from declaring certain offences against women as criminal offences, to setting up all-women police stations, to capital punishment for fatal rape cases. These policies have ignored the effect of trauma on children and the concept of inter-generational transmission of violence. As a 2016 report by the U.S. Children’s Bureau explains, “violence and abuse produce trauma symptoms which when left unresolved, increase the likelihood that the individual will engage in violent behaviour as an adult.” We need to provide spaces for children to resolve these symptoms of childhood trauma. India has become serious about mental health beginning with the **Mental Healthcare Act, 2017**, but it needs to do more. Policymakers need to link the provision of professional mental health services to families recovering from domestic violence. A prospective policy, working with families to actively provide trauma-informed mental health care, needs to be in place. But for this to happen, India needs more mental health practitioners. It needs accredited systems to train and track the quality of mental health trauma-care providers. Connecting such a network to peer-supportive groups can help survivors integrate their experiences into their lives and finally heal.

Temples of Critical Thinking and Debate (Sreeram Chaulia - Professor at O.P. Jindal Global University, Which Was Named as an ‘Institute of Eminence’)

- In the recent subject-wise ranking of world universities by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Indian institutions improved with 26 departments or schools placed in the top 100 of their respective disciplines. Science, technology and business studies were the fields in which our universities showed their mettle. While this is a reason to celebrate, **not even a single Indian university features in the QS ranking of the world’s top 150 in overall parameters**. The Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) of Bombay and Delhi are at the 152nd and 182nd places in the overall rankings, while IISc Bangalore appears at the 184th position. There is much for India to learn from those who are miles ahead of us. **QS’s top 10 in overall terms include five American universities (MIT, Stanford, Harvard, Caltech and Chicago), four British universities (Oxford, Cambridge, UCL and Imperial College) and one Swiss university (ETH Zurich)**. All the five American names in this list are private universities, while the British and Swiss institutions are public universities which have nonetheless enjoyed significant autonomy from governmental control over decades. One common factor behind the success of the topmost universities is the freedom with which they operate. They have been major centres of innovation in teaching and research thanks to independence from bureaucratic or corporate



meddling and political intervention by parties of the day. They could remain centres of extraordinary excellence in a sustained way by according primacy to matters of the mind, i.e. intellectual ideas and solutions to problems, and avoiding becoming hostage to dogmatic thought.

Pluralistic Centres

All the great universities of the world are ideologically pluralistic, with a mix of right, left and centre among their faculty and students. There is no institutional line or official position on any issue. Professors and students are free to choose whatever opinion they prefer. No one is penalised for holding a pro- or anti- view on social, economic, political, cultural or scientific matters. The top universities are also excellent at attracting and retaining talent. They hire professors very selectively, based on outstanding scholarly abilities. They reject a large number of candidates for admission as students, and admit only the brightest and the most meritorious. This ruthless streak comes at the expense of social inclusion and access considerations, but some institutions must be allowed to generate knowledge as an end in itself so that they reach the summit of intellectual endeavour. Top universities incentivise publication and citation of research in an unforgivingly rigorous way. Big universities also inculcate critical thinking, debating and writing abilities in their students. They encourage students to look at issues through interdisciplinary lenses and to challenge their own professors. This type of interactive pedagogy produces champion graduates who have a reputation for cutting-edge skills and knowledge in the job market. The world's best universities are known for involving their own alumni in governance and reforms. Top global universities are also super-smart financial managers. Many of them, especially the U.S. universities, have sophisticated alumni offices through which they raise funding, which can exceed the revenue from student tuition fees. By 2019, the total endowment of Harvard was worth \$40 billion, which is made up of over 13,000 individual funds. Since the top Anglo-American universities go back centuries, it is arguable whether such type of elite institutions can be quickly and easily replicated outside the U.S. and the U.K. These big universities are products of historical circumstances which relied on private philanthropy, colonial plunder or governmental subsidies to reach the level they are at today.

The China Example

Still, a muscular push from the government of China with massive state funding has propelled Chinese universities into the top tiers in barely two decades. In the QS world rankings on overall basis, Tsinghua University is ranked number 16, Peking University is at 22, Fudan University is at 40, and Zhejiang University is at 54. This is a miraculous leap forward. In India, as the government is cash-strapped and lacks the kind of resources which the Chinese state deployed to pump-prime Chinese universities, our only viable path to world class universities are in the form of enlightened private philanthropy and borrowing best practices from established iconic universities. Avoiding politicisation, ideological rigidity and nepotism, and freeing our universities from excessive interference and over-regulation, are prerequisites for success. Most importantly, our universities must have the drive to excel and compete with Chinese or Western universities. Insularity and self-congratulatory frog-in-the-well attitudes have held us back for long. The government's decision to identify 20 Institutes of Eminence (IOEs) which will get maximum autonomy from bureaucracy in order to climb up the world rankings is a step in the right direction. The selected IOEs must innovate with



new degree programmes, expanded variety of faculty members and digital learning platforms. India has miles to go in higher education. Unlike in authoritarian and top-down China, there is little likelihood of a meteoric breakout of multiple Indian universities into the top 100 of the world at a rapid clip. India's democratic and contested character renders change evolutionary and cumulative. Still, with long-term vision and selfless leadership, our universities can eventually make it.

[Dark Tales in Andhra Pradesh's IIT Success Story \(Rashmi Sharma - Senior Visiting Fellow, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations \(ICRIER\) And A Former Indian Administrative Service Officer\)](#)

→ As the examination season rolls in, nearly 1.5 crore students in India prepare to sit for the board examinations. They are more fortunate than nearly half their cohorts, who will never get to that stage. Among the happiest students will be those who will get admission to the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), and among the States, the largest number will be from Andhra Pradesh (AP). Subsequently, many will earn the kind of money that they, and their families, may not even be aware of. But underlying these grand successes is an ugly story, which emerged during a study on secondary education I conducted in AP in 2018-19. The State owes its distinction in producing the largest number of IIT entrants to two major chains of 'corporate schools', which focus on preparing students for the IIT, and failing that, other engineering colleges. These schools had initially been established for Classes XI and XII, but now cover the whole school cycle. Many are residential schools. Ignoring the children's learning stages, the schools have distorted the curriculum. A principal of a corporate school revealed that coaching for the IIT examination began as early as Class VI. The school focused on physics, math and chemistry, while the mother tongue and social sciences were side-lined. Further, as the school had to 'complete' the syllabus prescribed by the State government along with IIT coaching, the syllabi for Classes XI and XII was taught from Class VI onwards too, with 10% of the syllabus being 'covered' each year. During interviews, government officials and teachers said that students in such schools did little or no physical or extracurricular activities, and got little rest. The pressure on students was enormous. As per the principal, students were divided into three 'levels' according to ability, and taught separately. There were fortnightly exams and cumulative exams every month, and students were re-allotted to different levels after the latter. The atmosphere was very competitive. The school hours stretched up to nine hours or more, and there were few holidays. There were several cases of student suicides each year, usually following a demotion in the 'level'. As per the principal, around 20% students were placed at the top level, and of them 15-20% were likely to get admission to the IITs. In other words, after a high level of stress and sacrificing a well-rounded education, 3-4% of the total students got into IITs. How many would have got admission to the IITs with a proper education too, is a matter of conjecture.

[A Childhood Lost](#)

All the students in such schools lost the chance to be children, explore and grow, develop their special talents, and form their unique identity. But for those who did not get admission to engineering colleges, the loss was manifold. They got little support in the school, as the best teachers were deployed to teach the top-level students. **Reportedly, the students in the bottom layer were pejoratively called 'patrons' by the management, as their parents paid**



high fees, while their chances of getting into an engineering college were negligible. Behind this story of lost childhoods, and for many students, lost career opportunities too, lay corporate greed and state failure. Corporate greed was visible in aggressive campaigns to enrol students. Teachers at a government school said private school representatives came to the school in January, made lists of good students, contacted parents, and encouraged students to join. An individual who once worked in a corporate school reported that teachers were given targets to enrol students and collect fees, and their salary was withheld if they did not meet them. Norms regarding minimum infrastructure, such as space, sanitation, play-grounds, fire safety etc. were flouted. The maximum fees a school was allowed to charge was ₹4,000 per year, but corporate schools charged extra as coaching fees and for facilities, adjusting the fees to the paying capacity of the area.

In Cahoots with Government

Government officials, teacher educators, and even panchayat representatives interviewed were aware that the educational practices of corporate schools were questionable, and that they fooled and exploited students and parents. However, regulating such schools was beyond the capacity of the government system. One, at inter-college, or the Classes XI and XII stage, where corporate schools first began, the number of government educational institutions was inadequate. Two, the manpower available for regulation was deficient. At the district level, the senior-most principal of government inter colleges was designated the Regional Inspection Officer (RIO), and was responsible for regulating private schools, in addition to his existing duties. Moreover, because of a lack of manpower, some RIOs had charge of more than one inter-college. For Classes IX and X, education officials remained busy with government schools, and had little time to inspect private schools. Three, the corporate school management exercised considerable influence at the very top levels of government. They were reported to contribute funds during elections, and some had begun political careers themselves. Officials described several instances of political pressure to prevent action against corporate schools. So much so that representatives of small private schools complained that the government favoured corporate schools and discriminated against them. Not surprisingly, little effort had been made to inform people about the problems with corporate schools. **This nasty tale of state collusion with uncaring profit-makers remains hidden as the faces of successful entrants of IITs stare at us from newspaper advertisements every year.**

Danger Ahead

→ Union Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari has expressed optimism that the significant amendments made to the Motor Vehicles Act have begun reducing the terrible death toll due to accidents on India's roads. As the prime mover of these changes, he finds the reported reduction in crashes, notably in Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Manipur, Jammu and Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra, proof of the law's beneficial impact. Any reduction in road safety incidents in a rapidly motorising country is encouraging, but the cold reality is that data on those who lose their lives or are incapacitated do not reflect a marked decline. In fact, they underscore the culture of indifference among States. Unlike acute crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has sent governments scrambling to save lives and stop economic derailment, a chronic malaise such as deadly road accidents begets only token measures. What else could explain policymakers tolerating the **loss of about 1.5 lakh lives**



each year since 2015, with the graph rising from 80,888 fatalities in 2001? Small reductions in this infamous tally, which Mr. Gadkari took note of at a transporters' summit, have little meaning, since they do not represent a trend of targeted reductions. The new Motor Vehicles law does have more muscle in being able to levy stringent penalties for road rule violations — some States are using it — but that is not the same as saying that India has moved to a scientific road system marked by **good engineering, sound enforcement, appropriate technology use and respect for all road users**. In fact, a World Bank 'Delivering Road Safety in India' report is apprehensive that rapid motorisation and more high-speed road infrastructure have raised the risks for road users. **The transition to a professional road environment requires implementation of first-tier reforms that deal with quality of road infrastructure, facilities for vulnerable users and zero-tolerance enforcement of rules by a trained, professional and empowered machinery**. A key mechanism of change are District Road Safety Committees, which were enabled even by the 1988 Act, but remain obscure. A mandatory monthly public hearing of such committees involving local communities can highlight safety concerns, and their follow-up action can then be supervised by the Members of Parliaments' Road Safety Committees, created last year. Here, it is essential to make the Collector, local body and police accountable. Making dashboard cameras mandatory, with the video evidence accepted in investigation, would protect rule-abiding motorists and aid enforcement. **To save lives on highways, quality trauma care at the district level holds the key. In the absence of good hospitals and cashless free treatment, no significant improvement is possible in the quest to save life and limb.**

The Demolition of Reason (Rajeev Bhargava - Professor, CSDS, Delhi)

- Witnessing a group of British journalists picking holes in the argument of the far-right UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, exposing obvious inconsistencies and throwing widely known facts at him to show that he was a liar, the Turkish writer Ece Temelkuran likened this effort to playing chess with a pigeon who knocks over the pieces and shits on the chess board. Then, "the pigeon departs, proudly claiming victory, and leaving behind a mess for you to clean up". How does one engage and find common ground with those who make disruption and ignorance their primary values and are guided by them? Ms. Temelkuran describes the impossibility of having a proper political discussion with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's supporters. Talking to them is "like making a milkshake without the lid on," she says. Reason is utterly helpless when people choose to defy it.

Rounds of Whataboutery

One of the most troubling features of current debates on television is that every substantive discussion of an important public issue is instantly replaced by an avoidable, unreasonable slanging match between the BJP and the Congress, **as if all Indians are supporters of either the BJP or the Congress**. More importantly, **attention is diverted to real or imagined wrongs committed in the past by the Congress which helps evade fixing responsibility and accountability for wrongs committed in the present**. For example, the recent horrific killings in Delhi cannot be discussed because "how dare those responsible for the 1984 pogrom against the Sikhs bring up Delhi 2020"? Likewise, a complaint about the muzzling of the press or about the fear experienced by ordinary citizens to speak out against the current regime simply has to be upstaged by a passionate denunciation of Indira Gandhi's Emergency. But why does the failure of one party to give us some good (say, freedom) erase the failure of



another party to do the same? Why can't people complain against both? Consider this: forty years ago, a man was caught stealing red-handed and punished. Today he himself is robbed and goes to the police to report the crime. But the police ask, "Aren't you the same man who committed a theft in 1980? You have no right to lodge a complaint". This is absurd. Does a man forfeit his right to complain or protest merely because he once committed a wrong? What kind of an argument is this? Admittedly, some arguments have relevance and validity in the immediate aftermath of a crime. But they lose force as time passes and circumstances change. It might be valid to speak in the 1940s of the responsibility of Nazi Germany for the mayhem it caused by starting the Second World War but farcical to keep carping about it in the 21st century. The crime has long been acknowledged, punishment has been meted out, and Germans, even those who had morally disassociated from it much earlier, have apologised in word and deed. They have even institutionalised the remembrance of wrongdoing in memorials. This renders redundant any further reprimand of the Germans. What use is bringing it up now especially by those who are destroying liberty today? The Emergency was a horrific event, a permanent blot on Indian democracy and we must remember it continuously to ensure that it does not recur. But it would be ludicrous to ask the Congress, the leading Opposition party, to shut up if it protested against the imposition of Emergency-like measures and crazy to order ordinary citizens, who first suffered in the 1970s and might suffer again, to stop being "selective" when protesting against an assault on free speech, the suspension of habeas corpus or the mauling of an independent judiciary. **To compel anyone to speak about every single past violation of rights in the same breath as current violations is a devious way to bully everyone into silence.** Let us return to the present. We know that a slogan raised by some BJP leaders was an unambiguous incitement to violence. They were caught on video, reported to the Election Commission, and suspended from campaigning. This is an incontrovertible fact. Soon enough, horrific violence engulfed the national capital where the slogan was first raised. When a public interest litigation was brought to the court pleading that an FIR be registered about the culprits, their defence pleaded that unless all such hate speeches are examined, nothing should happen. As if this was not perplexing enough, another ridiculous feature entered the discourse. The speech of a Congress leader, which was not found to be inflammatory earlier, was pushed into the media and played out as a war cry by those who know its legal insignificance. Why then did they do so? To confuse and mislead people and to vitiate discourse. Is it not excellent ammunition for a new round of whataboutery?

Evaluating Political Actions

Recently I got talking with a taxi driver about the National Register of Citizens in Assam. I said that I was sorry to hear about the fate of the officer in charge of the survey, whose professional integrity was redoubtable earlier but who now has five FIRs registered against him. His crime? He had discovered large numbers of Hindus without documents to prove their citizenship, now declared to be illegal immigrants. Unfazed, he said: "But Sir, such a man would have been shot dead in Pakistan", implying that India is tolerant compared with Pakistan. After all, India only paralyses people with false cases, whereas in Pakistan, the same conduct is rewarded with death penalty! This is whataboutery gone mad! Political actions in India today are evaluated by two standards. **First, the worst practices of the Congress and second, the repressive acts, real or imaginary, of a 'rogue' state across the border.** The political class and all those mesmerised by it have simply sidestepped constitutional principles and political morality.



A Plural Legacy More Vital Than Ever (Mahesh Rangarajan - Teacher of History and Environmental Studies at Ashoka University)

→ We live in an avowedly post Nehru age. Few if any ills that afflict India today are not laid at his door. Debate and dialogue are more than welcome. To his credit as much as to other founders, India is a vibrant and live electoral democracy. But there is more to his legacy than this alone. The coming of Independence to India in August 1947 and the formation of a democratic republic three years hence was no doubt a moment of historic import for the world at large. India like the United States was not a direct battle ground for the most part, save for Nagaland and Manipur in the course of the Second World War. But this was a country deeply involved in the great contest for world domination between the Axis and Allied powers. At the heart of this war to end all wars were two critical ideas: whether a people had the right to rule themselves or not and also what mode of rule was best for the world.

How India Chose It to Be

It is a testament to history that India chose to follow the democratic path and while there were inclinations to socialism, these were strictly to be along lines of a plural democracy, allowing for checks and balances unknown in the only one-party socialist state that then existed, the Soviet Union. But India was more than a country emerging from the shadow of British imperial rule: its path would be one of a plural democracy. That differences could exist at the very apex of the leadership but be settled via dialogue, debate and consensus had long been clear. Speaking on January 25, 1942, Gandhiji had remarked that (though) Nehru had been resisting him ever since they had met, they stood as one in the face of odds. Dividing them was like dividing water by striking with a stick. In his perhaps most clear endorsement of the man who he had mentored for more than two decades he said, "When I am gone, he will do what I am doing now. Then he will speak my language too." His reference was to the steadfastness of principle but also to the willingness to compromise. The leader had to bind over and rule, not divide and reign. We do not know if this was on the mind of the Mahatma when he broke his last fast on January 18, 1948. His last message to the Prime Minister was on a post card. "Apna upvass chod do. Bharat ke Jawahar bane raho," it said. "End your fast. May you remain the jewel of India." This was sent from Birla House where the fast for peace in the capital of the new India had brought together the very groups at the forefront of the riots. Unknown to most in India or the world at large, Nehru too was on fast in sympathy with his leader. At stake were the life and liberty of Delhi's own inhabitants, most so Muslims who had opted to stay on after Partition. Twelve days later the assassin struck. As Sardar Patel wrote in the Abhinandan Granth of October 1949, it was the untimely death of "the Great Master" that evoked in his associates a deeper sense of unity. Reminiscing about his long association with Nehru, Patel was warm, appreciative, and open in his affections. Their very intimacy and closeness as co-workers made it, "difficult for me to sum him up for public appreciation."

The Idea of a Nation

There was and is more to democracy than the peaceful passage of power via the ballot box. Equally audacious was the idea of nation where all would be equal as citizens. **This was all the more so given the rise of fascism in the 1930s. The idea of a superior ruling race had been explicit in the case of the Axis powers. Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, and the violent**

Shatabdi Tower, Sakchi, Jamshedpur



campaigns of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan left scars among conquered peoples that were known to the world. But even the most powerful of the Allies, the United States under Franklin Delano Roosevelt still practised segregation on a third of its territory. The Soviet Union, committed to working class unity, acted like any imperial power in using the Red Army to impose its preferred regimes in much of east central Europe. The idea of India was at odds with such notions of legally sanctioned inequality at home or colonialism abroad. Much more than that when Gandhiji spoke of "his language" it was one of the coexistence of faiths and cultures seeking peace and harmony. No book illustrated this as well as one written during Nehru's longest ever jail term. He had been taken into custody on August 9, 1942 and stepped out of gaol on June 15, 1945. This over 1,000-day-long prison term had enabled him to write a treatise of India's past and future, *The Discovery of India*. The most recent edition runs to 642 pages but the original was longer still, written in long hand by a political prisoner on that most precious of rationed goods in war time: paper. It was here that Nehru wrote of India as akin to a palimpsest where one layer of new comers could join another. Each layer was added to the older one. This process had frictions, a fact he freely acknowledged, but the result was the composite fabric that was India. India's democratic sensibilities ran deeper than the Constitution. It was in contrast with Ceylon which after an election based on universal suffrage in 1948 stripped the Indian Tamil plantation workers of citizenship. Nor was it like Burma where Indians who had lived there for generations fled the advance of the Japanese armies, never to return. India was envisaged as inclusive, plural and democratic. The roots of this lay in the freedom struggle but was a conviction deepened by the years of the Second World War. This was as much the case with Nehru as his fellow inmates in Ahmednagar in the long night of 1942-45: Narendra Dev, Maulana Azad or Govind Ballabh Pant. There is no doubt much of this dream was shaken to the core by Partition. But it did not lead India to ape other states narrowly based on faith, clan, lineage or language. The record was far from faultless but there is no doubt of the effort to move on. **There was and is much to dispute about Nehru's record and legacy. But it is astonishing how easy it is to take it for granted. A commitment to liberal democracy and a plural society was exceptional among Asia's leaders. He stood out in a continent where rival ideas of rule by one party or one ethnies were vying for power.** This was a man with wider horizons but a deep sense of India's history, culture and context. In his testament he wrote of the Ganga as living entity. The river connects us to, "a memory of the past of India, running into the present, and flowing on to the ocean of the future". A plural society has much to learn from Nehru's record. Critical engagement with his record is a must. An India sans Nehru's legacy of democratic values stands to lose far more than it will gain.

Why Tax on Disability Pension Upsets Veterans

- The government has withdrawn a circular of February 20 that had directed banks to deduct income tax on pension and disability benefits provided to disabled retired military personnel. This was based on a letter dated June 24, 2019, through which the income tax was levied. Although the letter provided exemption to those invalidated from service due to bodily disabilities, the sudden deduction of tax liabilities by the banks led to a public outrage, forcing the government to keep the decision in abeyance. **The defence accounts department has been directed by the government to withdraw the circular of February 20.**

The entire pension and disability element of pension in all the categories is exempt from payment of income tax. But the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) notification of June 2019 had said that tax exemption on disability pension would be available only to personnel who



had been invalidated from service and not to personnel who had retired otherwise. This has been challenged in the Supreme Court which, in an order dated August 30, 2019, directed all parties to maintain 'status quo' on the matter.

The Principal Controller of Defence Accounts, Allahabad issued a circular on February 20, for "necessary action" on the June 2019 CBDT notification to deduct income tax from pensions of disabled soldiers. The State Bank of India then started debiting tax at source for the entire financial year 2019-20 from the February pension of retired military personnel who were receiving disability pension. This led to several pensioners receiving as little as Rs 1000 in their accounts.

War Heroes Who Resisted Portuguese

- On March 26, the big-budget film **Marakkar: Arabikadalinte Simham (Marakkar: The Lion of the Arabian Sea)** will release in Kerala and elsewhere. Directed by Priyadarshan, it features the popular actor Mohanlal and was reportedly made on a budget of ₹100 crore, making it the most expensive Malayalam film ever. Last month, a petition was filed in the Kerala High Court against the film, alleging 'distortion of history' and demanding a stay on the release. The court declined.

What Is the Film About?

It is a war film depicting the heroics of the Marakkar clan, whose leaders were naval chieftains of the **Zamorin of Calicut** during the 16th and 17th centuries. The Zamorin, Samoothiri in Malayalam, was the title given to rulers of the Calicut kingdom on the Malabar coast. The Marakkars fought against Portuguese invaders for nearly a century.

Who Were the Marakkars?

By some accounts, they were of Arab origin and had migrated from Tunisia to Panthalayani near Koyilandy in present-day Kozhikode, and later moved to the region around present-day Kottakkal and Thikkodi near Payyoli. By other accounts, the Marakkars were descendants of affluent businessman from the Cochin kingdom who migrated later to Calicut. Historian M G S Narayanan said the name 'Marakkar' could have originated from maram or marakkalam, meaning ship, as these families lived along the coast and used ships. Alternatively, it could have originated from the Arabic word markaba, meaning those who migrated via ships. "The Marakkars were mostly Muslims, but in some parts, they have been found to be Hindus as well," Narayanan said.

What Was the War Against the Portuguese About?

Faced with invading Portuguese ships, the Zamorin reached out to the Marakkars to defend the coast. They were led in succession by four Marakkars, chief admirals who were appointed by the Zamorin with the title of Kunjali. Related by bloodline, they were Kuttlyali Marakkar (Kunjali Marakkar I, appointed in 1507), Kuttly Pokker (Kunjali Marakkar II), Pathu Marakkar (Kunjali Marakkar III) and Muhammad Ali Marakkar (Kunjali Marakkar IV, appointed in 1595). "Their strategy was similar to guerrilla warfare. The Portuguese had massive ships which could not make easy manoeuvres in the sea. The Marakkars used small ships which could easily surround the Portuguese ships, enabling the fighters to attack at will," Narayanan said. In the span of 100 years, the exploits of the Kunjali Marakkars are said to have improved the



naval fleet of Calicut as well as other kingdoms, stretching from Saurashtra to Ceylon along the Indian coast. War technologies and ammunition greatly improved as well.

Who Is The 'Lion of The Arabian Sea' Depicted in The Film?

Mohanlal plays Kunjali Marakkar IV, who earned his reputation with his fierce onslaught on Portuguese ships, the favours he gave those who fought against the Portuguese, and his efforts to strengthen the fort at Kottakkal. When he took charge in 1595, relations between the Zamorin and the Marakkars were deteriorating. The Zamorin was feeling threatened by Kunjali Marakkar IV's popularity, and by reports (said to be spread by the Portuguese) that he was planning to create a Muslim empire. In 1597, the Zamorin signed a peace treaty with the Portuguese and attacked Kottakkal fort. For months, the Marakkars resisted the attack by the Zamorin's Nair soldiers and the Portuguese fleet. Eventually, as Portugal sent more forces and the Zamorin mounted his effort, Marakkar surrendered to the Zamorin on the assurance that their lives would be spared. But the Portuguese violated the terms, arrested him, took him to Goa and beheaded him.

Why Was A Petition Filed Against the Film in The High Court?

Mufeeda Arafath Marakkar of Koyilandy, who identified herself as a descendant of the Marakkar clan, argued that the film's version of events could mislead students and researchers. Among the contentions is that Kunjali Marakkar IV is shown to have romantic interests when there is no such evidence in history. He is shown sporting a picture of Lord Ganesh on his turban; the petition contends that he was actually a pious Muslim who did not display Hindu imagery. The High Court declined to impose a stay and asked the film certification Board if it had handed over the complaint to the Centre. The Board conveyed that the subject deals with art and that it cannot interfere in the freedom of expression of the filmmakers.

Having an Ear to Adivasi Ground (Kumar Rana and Manabesh Sarkar Work with The Pratichi Institute, Pratichi (India) Trust)

- The uncertainty of Adivasi life has a strong connection with the 'mainstream' view about them. In popular discourse, the socio-economic disadvantages of the Adivasis as compared with the rest of the population are often seen through a lens of benevolence. The views about the 'underdevelopment' of the Adivasis typically subscribes to this section of the population being the 'takers/receivers' of governmental benefits. Policies and practices rooted in this approach, fail, in most cases, to accommodate the question of the participation of the Adivasis in the ongoing processes of the nation as co-citizens. This in turn not only deprives the Adivasis of the socioeconomic progress they are capable of but also results in a loss to the rest of the nation. The rich moral, cultural and social values, and linguistic and other practice-acquired developments that the Adivasis have been nurturing throughout history could have added immensely toward strengthening our democracy. Mutual co-operation, decision making through discussion, peaceful co-habitation with others and with nature, age-old and time-tested practices of environmental protection, and other such high civic qualities observed by them could have added to the country's "democratic curriculum". However, the politics of dominance, economics of immediate gain, and a social outlook of separateness have charted a very different path for the Adivasis.



Study Finds A Knowledge Gap

We were part of a study conducted by the Asiatic Society and the Pratchi Institute among 1,000 households across West Bengal (“Living World of the Adivasis of West Bengal: An Ethnographic Exploration” — <https://bit.ly/39yWWUb>). The study found that there exists, both in the public and academic domains, a wide gap in knowledge about this selectively forgotten and pragmatically remembered population. Who they are, where they live, what they do, what their socio-economic status is, what their cultural and linguistic practices are, are all questions to which the prevailing answers are fragmented and vague? For example, in West Bengal, there are 40 Adivasi groups notified by the government as Scheduled Tribes (STs), but most people use the terms Adivasi and Santal interchangeably. Santal in fact, is but one of the 40 notified tribes forming 47% of the total ST population. This knowledge gap leads to democratic denial for the Adivasis. The imposed superiority of the outside world has resulted in the Adivasis considering themselves as inferior, primitive and even taking a fatalistic view of their subjugated life. This pushes them to the margins, even making them abandon some of their socially unifying customs and cultural practices — particularly democratic norms and human values that have evolved through a protracted journey of collective living and struggles for existence. One outcome of this is the erosion of their great linguistic heritage (in some sections). However, Adivasi acceptance of the ‘imposed modern’ does not guarantee their inclusion in the apparent mainstream. Rather, the opposite happens. They are often reminded of their primitive roots and kept alienated. Again, pushed to the side by exploitation and oppression, marginalisation and subjugation, Adivasis, in many cases, cling to oppressive behaviours such as witchcraft which only make the label of them being primitive even more indelible. The vicious cycle of political-economic deprivation and social alienation continues to keep them subjugated to the ruling modern. A situation where they are a source of cheap labour and live lives where they are half-fed with no opportunities to flourish and develop their human capabilities seems unalterable. Therefore, it is important to go beyond the administrative convention of bracketing Adivasis into a single category. Rather, policy framing requires mandatory recognition of their wide diversity so as to address the different problems faced by different groups — by community as well as by region. It is also important to abide by the general constitutional rules which are often violated by the state. In other words, the very common instances of violations of the Forest Rights Act, the Right to Education Act, and the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act — which affect them — have to be eliminated. The possibility of fair implementation of public programmes, however, is contingent to an agentic involvement of the communities concerned. Instead of being considered to be mere passive recipients, Adivasis must be respected as active agents of change and involved in all spheres of policy, from planning to implementation. It is imperative that the entire outlook on the Adivasi question is reversed. Instead of considering Adivasis to be a problem, the entire country can benefit a great deal by considering them as co-citizens and sharing their historically constructed cultural values which often manifest the best forms of democracy and uphold the notions of higher levels of justice, fairness, and equality — better than those prevalent in seemingly mainstream societies. By ensuring their right to live their own lives, the country can in fact guarantee itself a flourishing democracy.



Though Hunters Lose Interest in Red Panda, Traps Still Snare Endangered Mammal

→ The iconic and endangered Red Panda (*ailurus fulgens*) has fewer hunters because the younger generations of people across its Himalayan habitat are losing interest in animal products, a new study by wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC has found. However, the reddish-brown arboreal mammal, not closely related to the iconic black-and-white giant panda, is falling to traps laid for other animals, such as the musk deer and wild pigs, the report said. "The news is both good and bad for the red panda, whose survival is crucial for the eastern and north-eastern Himalayan subalpine conifer forests and the eastern Himalayan broadleaf forests," Saket Badola, the head of TRAFFIC's India office, told The Hindu on Sunday. **The only living member of the genus Ailurus, the Red Panda is listed as 'endangered' on the IUCN Red List of threatened species.** The animal has been hunted for meat and fur, besides illegal capture for the pet trade. An estimated 14,500 animals are left in the wild across Nepal, Bhutan, India, China and Myanmar. The report titled "Assessment of illegal trade-related threats to Red Panda in India and selected neighbouring range countries" has looked at a ten-year period from July 2010 to June 2019, and analysed poaching and illegal trade of the species. In addition to looking at seizures, the researchers carried out market surveys, surveys of e-commerce websites and village-level surveys, where they spoke to hundreds of people in the Indian habitat of the Red Panda. **About 5,000-6,000 red pandas are estimated to be present in four Indian states – Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Sikkim and West Bengal.** This is the second-largest population after China (6,000-7,000). Nepal accounts for 580 animals, while Bhutan and Myanmar have no estimate of the animal's population. Red pandas have been reported from 11 districts of Arunachal Pradesh, which is presumed to hold the largest red panda population in the country. The researchers found that neither India nor Bhutan had reported any incidences of poaching or illegal trade in Red Pandas in the study period. "This may indicate that traditional demand for such products has reduced over time and might be indicative of the success of awareness campaigns undertaken in the areas," the report said, indicating that younger people were not keen on using the pelt or meat of the animal. The TRAFFIC study surveyed 38 village markets in Arunachal Pradesh, covering six markets in Tawang and at least one market in each of 19 other districts. "None of the markets had any parts or products made of parts of the red panda for sale," the survey said. "Consultations with experts revealed a similar low-level incidence of Red Panda trade in Bhutan and India with one case of accidental trapping of a Red Panda in a snare in Jigme Dorjee National Park from Bhutan and six incidents of poaching accounting for six individual animals in India, aside from a 1999 case involving more than 20 pelts," the study said. In contrast, experts from Nepal reported about 25 incidences of Red Panda poaching, involving approximately 55 animals, and also claimed to have witnessed and/or confirmed reports related to poaching on six occasions involving 15 animals. Mr Badola emphasised the need for community-based conservation and protection for the species as its habitat stretches across remote areas. The report also recommended trans-boundary law enforcement co-operation through the use of multi-government platforms like **SAWEN (South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Network)**. Dr Badola also added that diminishing habitat is a major threat to the species which is a **very selective feeder and survives on selected species of bamboos**. "In addition to these threats if there is a threat of poaching that makes things more difficult for the survival of the species," he added.



Business & Economics

No Green Shoots of a Revival in Sight as Yet (R. Nagaraj - Currently with The Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai)

→ On February 28, as per its release calendar, the National Statistical Office (NSO) put out the third quarter gross domestic product (GDP) estimates, that is, for October-December 2019. It showed that domestic output grew at 4.7% at constant prices (that is, net of inflation), compared to the same period the previous year. As the third quarter GDP was marginally higher than the second quarter (July-September 2019) figure of 4.5% (as reported in the earlier data released), experts in the media were quick to infer that the economy is turning around. This was also in line with expectations of many forecasters. Hence, many concluded that the economic slowdown witnessed during the last six quarters has “bottomed out”; government spokespersons endorsed the view. However, a closer reading reveals that the latest data release has revised the estimates of the first two quarters of the current year (2019-2020) upwards to 5.6% and 5.1%, from the earlier figures of 5% and 4.5%, respectively. The upward revisions have, perhaps unwittingly, changed the interpretation of the current year’s Q3 estimate: the slowdown has continued, not bottomed out; hence, there is no economic revival in sight as of now. Thus, we have competing views of what the third quarter performance really means for the economy, giving rise to the suspicion of the integrity of the latest revision. The question therefore is why did the current year’s Q1 and Q2 GDP estimates get revised upwards? The answer is this was simply because the corresponding figures for the previous year (2018-2019) got revised downwards. Many viewed the revision of last year’s estimates as evidence of lack of credibility of the NSO’s revision process. Such doubts are well taken, given the long-standing debate and unresolved disputes on the veracity of GDP figures put out since 2015, when the statistical office released the new series of National Accounts with 2011-2012 as base year.

Constant Revisions

We will explain why the annual GDP estimates undergo revisions, and how quarterly output estimation is related to the annual figures. GDP is a statistical construct — unlike the temperature on a thermometer — prepared using many bits of quantitative information on an economy’s production, consumption and incomes. Many statistical models and methods are used following standardised analytical procedures in line with the international guideline called the UN System of National Accounts (UNSNA). The GDP revision followed the latest (2008) edition of UNSNA. **As there are lags and unanticipated delays in obtaining the primary data, the GDP estimates undergo several revisions everywhere (except in China). GDP estimates are revised five times in India over nearly three years. The initial two rounds, the advanced estimates, are prepared mainly using high-frequency proxy indicators (which probably contain more noise than information), followed by three rounds based on data obtained from various sectors.**

More Based on Projections

Since 1999, quarterly GDP estimates are being prepared, as per the International Monetary Fund (IMF)’s data dissemination standards. Their quality is subpar as the primary data needed quarterly are mostly lacking. For example, nearly one-half of India’s GDP originates



in the unorganised sector (including agriculture), whose output is not easily amenable to direct estimation every quarter, given the informal nature of production and employment. Hence, the estimates are obtained as ratios, proportions and projections of the annual GDP estimates. The National Accounts Statistics (NAS)-Sources and Methods 2012, the official guide for national accounts estimation, states it as follows: "The production approach is used for compiling the QGDP estimates, in terms of gross value added (GVA) and is broadly based on the benchmark-indicator method. In this method, for each of the industry-groups... a key indicator or a set of key indicators for which data in volume or quantity terms is available on a quarterly basis are used to extrapolate the value of output/value-added estimates of the previous year... In general terms, quarterly estimates of GDP are extrapolations of annual series of GDP. The estimates of GVA by industry are compiled by extrapolating value of output or value-added with relevant indicators." The NSO continues to follow these practices. So, what can we make of the disagreements over the quarterly GDP growth estimates for 2019-2020? The revisions were probably in line with the latest changes in the annual estimates (second advance estimates). The press release stated: "Quarterly estimates of the previous years along with the first and second quarterly estimates of 2019-20 released earlier have undergone revision in accordance with the revision policy of National Accounts." True, there were considerable variations at the sectoral estimates after the revision, which probably contained more noise than information. For now, there is little ground to question the revised estimates based on the publicly available information.

Undeniable Decline

However, if we accept the latest data, it is clear, though in an alarming way, that there has been an undeniable decline in the GDP growth rate over seven consecutive quarters, from 7.1% in Q1 of 2018-2019 to 4.7% in Q3 of 2019-2020. Considering that physical indicators of production, such as the official index of infrastructure output, or monthly automotive sales, continue to show an unambiguous deceleration, the economic slowdown has apparently not bottomed-out as the government would like to believe. More seriously, the quarterly GDP deceleration comes over and above the annual GDP growth slowdown for four years now: from 8.3% in 2016-17 to 5% in 2019-20 (as per the second advance estimate). Further, it bears repetition that many have questioned the entire GDP revision since 2015 to the new base-year for possible over-estimation of output growth. If the validation exercises of former Chief Economic Advisor Arvind Subramanian and others have merit, the actual GDP growth rate during much of the 2010s may have been lower than the official annual estimates by 2-2.5 percentage points. To conclude, India's quarterly GDP estimates have limited primary information in them. Their revisions are largely extrapolations and projections of the annual figures. Hence, one should be cautious in reading too much into the specific numbers. They are helpful to discern the broad trends in economic activity, which appear grave at the moment. Economic growth continues to drift downwards, from a peak of 7.1% in the first quarter of 2018-19 to 4.7% in the third quarter of the current year. It probably suggests more pain ahead, as the green shoots of economic revival seem nowhere in sight.

Economic Uncertainty Rises (Arun Kumar - Malcolm Adiseshiah Chair Professor, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi)

- Stock markets globally have declined since the big drop this 'Manic Monday'. They are reacting to the expected slowdown in the world economy due to the rapid spread of the



SARS-CoV-2 virus to more than 100 countries. Crude oil prices also began dropping due to fears of global recession and drop in demand for energy. With increasing uncertainty, there is even a possibility now that the Olympics to be held in Japan this summer may be postponed. Travel and trade have been severely affected in large parts of the world, with restrictions on movement and cancellations of visa, etc. In recent times, China, the epicentre of the outbreak and the largest **supplier of many basic and intermediate goods, has come to dominate the supply chain of production of a large number of final goods**. So, multiple industries have been impacted due to the spread of the virus. For instance, India has come to depend on China for supply of inputs in the areas of electronics, medicines, automobile parts and components used by small and cottage sectors. **The Chinese juggernaut has been supplying even Indian cultural symbols like pichkaris for Holi and idols of Indian gods**. China produces multiple items cheaply on a scale that other countries cannot match. **Despite the low wages in India and the additional transport costs of getting these items from China, the Chinese goods have displaced a big portion of Indian manufacturing.**

How Far Can Domestic Production Help?

The current supply chain disruption requires that either Indian production is ramped up where possible, or alternative sources of supply abroad are found. But, given the fact that much of the alternative production possibilities have been disrupted in the last 20 years by cheap Chinese goods, finding producers who can quickly ramp up production is not easy. Even if alternative sources of supply are found within India, their prices will be higher, so inflation will go up. This inflationary tendency will be countered by the global decline in demand and a fall in commodity prices, similar to what is being witnessed in the case of energy. In a recessionary scenario, there is a fall in incomes and reduction in demand in spite of a decline in inflation. Expenditures on health and disease control will rise but not enough to counter the slowdown. The impact on the small producers is likely to be sharper due to the fact that they have small working capital. As demand declines, they are left holding inventory and also have to pay wages; this exhausts their working capital. If their units shut down for even a few months, it becomes difficult to bring them back to life. The financial sector is not very much attuned to catering to their demand and, hence, they have to depend on the more expensive source of private funds. Also, as the economy declines, the already substantial non-performing assets (NPAs) of banks and the non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) will increase in India. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has already reported falling business and consumer confidence and a decline in capacity utilisation in the organised sectors of the economy. These factors are being aggravated by the virus-related impact, further denting investment.

Boosting Demand and Investment

Consumer confidence will remain low for a while even after the intensity of the spread of the virus declines with the onset of summer. But there is no certainty about this since the World Health Organization (WHO) says that not enough is known about this virus. People the world over are scared and anticipate trouble ahead, so they are unlikely to resume buying discretionary items. Car sales in China have plummeted and are unlikely to revive soon. **People save more when the future is uncertain; hence, demand is not likely to increase immediately.** Due to fear of lockdown and shortages, it is likely that people will hold more cash and essential items at their homes. Central banks will have to be prepared to issue more currency. They have reduced interest rates but this will have little impact since the primary



reason for the global downturn and stock market volatility is decline in sentiment following the spread of the virus. It is not a cyclical downturn. In brief, the problem is not fully understood but fears of a big impact have grown. **Supply shocks emanating from China have spread and due to impact on production, incomes are declining, leading to a fall in demand and threat of global recession.** The poor are likely to be impacted more in India. At present only the short run can be anticipated but since uncertainty has increased, governments will have to take fiscal steps anticipating the worst in the long run.

On Dividend Distribution Tax (R. Anand - Chartered Accountant)

→ As a concept, 'dividend' has been in existence since the inception of the Income Tax Act. Any shareholder in a company is entitled to dividend as a return on investment. Dividend covers various elements of pay-outs from a company and seeks to tax those at some stage. The question is: at what point should the dividend be taxed and how? The matter assumes significance since corporates pay tax on their profits and any tax on the distribution of post-tax profits amounts to double taxation. The Finance Bill, 2020 has reverted to the classical system of taxing dividends (in the hands of the shareholders). The Bill seeks to withdraw the dividend distribution tax (DDT) payable by the company. This move has created ripples since high-net-worth individuals never expected a full tax in their hands, which is being sought to be achieved by the proposal.

Three Methods of Taxing Dividend

The three methods of taxing dividend are the **classical system**; the **simplistic system or DDT regime**; and the **imputation system**. The classical system was in vogue till 1997-98. According to this system, the dividend was taxable in the hands of the shareholder, subject to the then available deduction under Section 80L for a maximum of ₹12,000. This was a progressive system. The Finance Act of 1997 analysed the merits and demerits of the classical system and embarked on the route of the simplistic system of taxing dividend in the hands of the distributing company. In the process, millions of shareholders were spared the burden of offering dividends as tax in their hands. **The DDT system replaced the classical system from 1997-98.** The rate of DDT **started at about 10% and climbed to 20.56%.** The advantage of DDT was that tracking of dividend in the hands of the company became easier and collecting the tax on dividend was a painless process. The main drawback was that the treaty agreements with countries like the U.S. did not permit the set-off of the DDT paid against the tax liability of the shareholder. **DDT was simple but inequitable since it made no distinction between a low taxpayer and a high taxpayer.** With India registering substantial growth between 1997 and 2020, corporate performances also registered progress and dividend pay-outs increased. The income tax payer came under the radar of the IT department. This development made tracking of the shareholder much easier. The withdrawal of DDT came as a relief to the corporate sector which has wanted DDT to be removed and the effective corporate tax rate in India to be reduced. Corporates are also required to conserve cash for further growth. This largely prompted the government to revert to the classical system for taxing dividend.

Maximum Tax Rate

However, this means that the starting rate of tax works out to 10% and the highest rate works out to, say, 43%. Tax paid in dividend is out of money earned and received and more often



than not represents holding of shares passed on by generations without any cost incurred. On this score, discharging tax at the maximum marginal rate more than justifies the principle of equity and sharing with the government in the overall developmental agenda. Shareholders in other countries with a protective treaty regime can receive dividend attracting tax rates as low as 5%. The distortion in the current regime viz. the foreign shareholder being taxed at a much lower rate than the Indian counterpart is obvious. This would require some correction. The main contention of the high-net-worth individual is that while the classical system is acceptable as a concept, the maximum tax rate is an unexpected extra burden. **Some countries follow the imputation system. The dividend is taxed in the hands of the shareholders but they are also allowed a set-off of a portion of the corporate tax discharged by the company.** In many ways, the imputation credit resembles an underlying tax credit granted to non-residents under certain treaties entered into by India. While there are complexities in that system, it mitigates the hardships caused by the double taxation impact of dividend distribution. Indian promoter groups control a majority of shareholding in Indian companies. For them, the wealth is largely represented by the value of shares and the dividends received over a period of time. These have been passed on to successive generations. These shares can be held by individuals, HUFs, family companies, or family trusts. Any decision to declare dividend is analysed from the standpoint of the company and the standpoint of the entity receiving the dividends. As long as dividends were received tax-free, the structure was irrelevant. But with the current proposal even family trusts can be taxed at the maximum rate. This blow is bound to force companies to revisit their strategy of paying dividends. The move to the classical system is not only well-conceived but also tilted towards the appropriate progressive system of taxation.

The Public Unravelling of Yes Bank (Puja Mehra - Delhi-Based Journalist)

- The Enforcement Directorate (ED) arrested Yes Bank's swashbuckling co-promoter Rana Kapoor, accusing him and his family of using shell companies to receive kickbacks from the bank's corporate borrowers. On March 5, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had used its powers to supersede the bank's board and impose restrictions on its operations. The bank's depositors cannot withdraw more than ₹ 50,000 for the next four weeks at least. Predictably, the State Bank of India (SBI) has emerged as Yes Bank's knight in shining armour. Surprisingly, though, it is crowd-sourcing the rescue plan.

Balance Sheet Scam

The manner in which the Yes Bank collapse has unravelled raises several questions. The full extent of its troubles spilled into the public domain two years ago, when, in September 2018, the RBI had declined to extend Mr. Kapoor's term as managing director and chief executive officer by three years. It directed the bank to end his tenure by January 31, 2019. The scam on the bank's balance sheets must have been visible to the RBI as far back as in 2015. The RBI's asset quality review (AQR) had forced Yes Bank, as it had several other banks, to report transparently their previously unstated non-performing assets (NPAs). Before the AQR in 2015, bankers avoided recognising bad loans on their books. They did this **by restructuring the loans susceptible to defaults or by extending new loans**, called **evergreening**, to keep the stressed borrowers afloat. Thus, while the borrowers were able to avoid defaults on repayments, the lenders managed to show low NPAs. The RBI found that for the year ended March 2016, Yes Bank had classified loans worth ₹749 crore as gross NPAs, understating the



figure by a whopping ₹4,176.70 crore. It directed Yes Bank to reclassify more loans as NPAs. Disclosing this to the stock exchanges in May 2017, Yes Bank assured investors that the higher NPAs would not have further ramifications as it had already taken remedial action. However, just five months later, in October 2017, the bank disclosed, once again, that the RBI had discovered more underreported gross NPAs on its books. For the year ended March 2017, the under reporting was of the tune of ₹6,355 crore. Why has the ED then swung into action so late, giving Mr. Kapoor 18 months to cover his tracks and potentially remove all the money he can from the bank in this period? If the RBI's inspections of the bank's books left it with no confidence in Mr. Kapoor, surely then that ought to have been a smoking gun to suspect if not investigate his role in Yes Bank's serial under-reporting of NPAs. Also, Yes Bank was looking for investors for the last few months. The moratorium and the investigation against Mr. Kapoor seem to have been triggered by the failure to find investors. This suggests that had investors been found, Mr. Kapoor may have escaped action. After all the RBI's discomfort with him was known even back in 2018. Why didn't the ED take action at that time? In December 2018, barely two months after Mr. Kapoor's extension was rejected, former RBI Governor Urjit Patel resigned from the central bank. Did the RBI and other authorities go soft on Yes Bank after that? Its transgressions continued even after the RBI fined the bank and forced changes in its management. For the year ended March 2019, the RBI discovered underreported NPAs worth ₹2,299 crore. Incidentally, around the time the moratorium was announced, news broke of another resignation at the RBI. This time of its well-regarded Deputy Governor N.S. Viswanathan, a specialist in regulation, supervision of banks and non-banking finance companies. The exit follows a four-decade career at the RBI and just three months ahead of his retirement in June. Was it prompted by the health issues cited or a protest against the RBI's stance on policy matters such as handling of Yes Bank?

Shareholders' Role

And what of the bank's shareholders? Why did they ratify remuneration hikes and a renewal of tenure for Mr. Kapoor despite public information of the serial underreporting of NPAs? The regulators must ensure now that all current equity held by Yes Bank holders should get wiped out since it represents a pure risk capital. If this is not done, any investment by Yes Bank's saviour, the SBI, will be a subsidy to them. Let us not forget that barely two years ago, the SBI and its associate banks received ₹8,800 crore in recapitalisation from the Central government. Other public banks received more. How credible can the rescue be when barely three months ago the SBI had disclosed that the RBI has discovered under-reported NPAs — of ₹11,932 crore for the year ended March 2019 — on its books? Most importantly, why are public comments being sought on the restructuring scheme for Yes Bank? This is unfair to the SBI. The restructuring scheme is no one's business other than the SBI's. After this precedent, next time a bank, say a Kotak Mahindra Bank or HDFC Bank, is to get an investment from a new investor, will that scheme also be put up for public comments? If this were a commercial decision taken by the SBI, and not capitulation before the government of the day, it would have put greater financial might and a well-crafted plan behind the rescue. Finally, what other options were considered by the RBI? Did they include a market-based solution? DBS Bank has just turned into a wholly-owned subsidiary of its Singaporean parent. Could Yes Bank's network of branches have been of interest to it? Ideally, the moratorium ought to have been announced, together with the scheme for restructuring, over a weekend. That would have made it less disruptive, the limit of ₹50,000 on withdrawals by depositors would not have been needed, and the RBI's credibility would not have suffered as much.



→ The lender has substantial exposure to several troubled borrowers including the Anil Ambani-led Reliance group, Dewan Housing Finance Corporation Ltd (DHFL) and IL&FS. This resulted in the RBI refusing to grant its then Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer Rana Kapoor — also the bank's co-founder — another three-year term after his tenure ended in August 2018. The RBI did not make public the reason for its decision to not extend Mr. Kapoor's term. Finally, he was given an extension till end-January 2019. The tipping point probably came earlier this year when one of the bank's independent directors and chairman of the board's audit committee, Uttam Prakash Agarwal, resigned from the board in January citing governance issues. The RBI, meanwhile, had been taking stock of the developments at the bank on a regular basis for the last few months.

What Will Be the Likely Impact on Depositors?

While deposit withdrawals have been capped at ₹50,000, there are exceptions under which a higher amount can be withdrawn, with the permission of the RBI. The RBI can allow a customer to withdraw more than ₹50,000 under the following conditions: (i) in connection with the medical treatment of the depositor or any person actually dependent on the depositor; (ii) towards the cost of higher education of the depositor or any person actually dependent on him for education in India or outside India; (iii) to pay obligatory expenses in connection with marriage or other ceremonies of the depositor or his/her children or of any other person actually dependent upon depositor; (iv) or any other unavoidable emergency. The total withdrawal should, however, not exceed ₹5 lakh or the actual balance in the account, whichever is lower.

What About Deposit Insurance?

In case Yes Bank goes belly up for any reason, depositors will not lose all their money since **deposits up to ₹5 lakh are covered under deposit insurance**. While the deposit insurance cover was ₹1 lakh till recently, this was increased to ₹5 lakh in the aftermath of the crisis at the Punjab and Maharashtra Cooperative (PMC) Bank Limited where caps too were set on deposit withdrawals. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the increase in deposit insurance in the Budget.

Will the Developments at Yes Bank Pose A Systemic Risk?

While the government and the regulator have asserted that the problem is solely related to this particular bank, ratings agency Fitch Ratings said the latest developments spotlight the governance risks in India's banking sector. It said, "There is a risk that the already poor operating environment for the banking sector could suffer further impairment if the government's efforts to tackle problems in the bank fail to provide reassurance to depositors and investors," while also assigning a negative outlook to India's banking sector.

What Is the Way Forward?

The RBI has come up with a draft reconstruction plan for Yes Bank which proposes that depositors' funds would be protected. The employees would also have the same service conditions, including remuneration, at least for one year. However, in the case of key managerial personnel, the new board would be empowered to take a call. **The SBI, which has received board approval to invest in Yes Bank, will have to pick up to 49% stake, according to the scheme, at a price that is not less than ₹10 for each share having a face value of ₹2.** The



investor bank (SBI) also cannot reduce its holding below 26% before the completion of three years from the date of infusion of the capital.

Crypto Relief

- On March 4, a three-judge Bench of the Supreme Court of India struck down a 2018 circular of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), which sought to prevent banks and institutions from dealing in “virtual currencies” — also referred to as **cryptocurrencies**, an example being **Bitcoin** — and providing services to those engaged in trading in such currencies. The Court order comes seven months after an inter-ministerial committee recommended that cryptocurrencies be banned, proposing instead that an official digital currency be launched in the country.

Why Did the Case Land in Court?

It has its origins in the writ petitions filed by the industry body, the Internet and Mobile Association of India, and several crypto exchanges, their shareholders, and traders. They challenged the RBI circular on many counts. Through that circular, the RBI had forbidden banks from extending a range of services to facilitate individuals and entities in dealing with cryptocurrencies. The list of such services included “maintaining accounts, registering, trading, settling, clearing, giving loans against virtual tokens, accepting them as collateral, opening accounts of exchanges dealing with them and transfer/receipt of money in accounts relating to purchase/sale of VCs [or virtual currencies].” The petitioners gave instances of virtual currency exchanges shutting down as a result of this circular. There was also a mention of how money lying in the account of one of the exchanges got frozen. The petitioners questioned the RBI’s power in prohibiting trading in virtual currencies; they wondered how the RBI could propose an outright ban when all other stakeholders such as the Department of Economic Affairs, the Securities and Exchange Board of India, Central Board of Direct Taxes, among others, had batted for a regulatory regime; they also challenged the circular on the grounds of lack of proportionality (the idea that regulatory action shouldn’t be disproportionate to the goals such action seeks to achieve).

Why Does the Central Banker Find Virtual Currencies Problematic?

This can be understood by how the RBI defined virtual currencies in 2013, which the Court said was perhaps the first time it took note of “technology risks in changing business environment”. The RBI defined such currency, the Court order notes, “as a type of unregulated digital money, issued and controlled by its developers and used and accepted by the members of a specific virtual community”. The absence of a centralised authority running it, seen as a plus by those who back cryptocurrencies, is viewed as a drawback by official monetary systems. There are other factors too. The value of such currencies has been driven purely by speculative impulses, and they have had a volatile journey all along. The anonymity that the system ensures has also been misused in the past, with cryptocurrencies said to enable funding of terrorist operations. There is also fear that it could undermine the monetary system and render policies ineffective. And all these fears are shared by the global financial system.



Why Did the Court Rule in Favour of The Petitioners?

Justices Rohinton Nariman, Aniruddha Bose and V. Ramasubramanian set aside the RBI circular of 2018, saying, "It is not possible for us to hold that the impugned measure is proportionate." Their reasoning was based on the fact that the RBI had not found that the activities of virtual currency exchanges had adversely affected the entities it regulated. This, even as virtual currencies have not been banned in the country. "But the trading in VCs and the functioning of VC exchanges are sent to comatose by the impugned circular by disconnecting their lifeline namely, the interface with the regular banking sector," the order said. **But while doing so, they have indicated quite strongly that the central bank has the requisite power to regulate or prohibit virtual currencies.** They have noted that: "Anything that may pose a threat to or have an impact on the financial system of the country, can be regulated or prohibited by RBI, despite the said activity not forming part of the credit system or payment system."

Will Relief for The Cryptocurrency Ecosystem Be Short-lived?

Quite likely. The inter-Ministerial committee had recommended an outright ban on crypto currencies. A draft law was also put in place. This verdict may not have changed the direction in which our policymakers want to go with respect to cryptocurrencies. The Economic Times has reported that the RBI is planning to file a review petition in the Supreme Court.

Life & Science

The Sun Brings Out A Fresh Batch of Sunspots

- **Sunspots are relatively cooler spots on the Sun's surface.** Their number waxes and wanes in cycles that last **11 years approximately.** **We are currently at the minimum of one such cycle.** Amidst claims that the Sun would "go silent" and not give out sunspots for an extended period, a group from IISER Kolkata has shown that the next sunspot cycle has begun and the Sun has indeed spoken. Their results were published in Research Notes of the American Astronomical Society. **From our safe distance of about 148 million km, the Sun appears to be sedate and constant.** However, **huge solar flares and coronal mass ejections spew material from its surface into outer space.** They **originate from sunspots,** an important phenomenon that people have been following for hundreds of years. Sunspots occur in pairs, with a leader and a follower. They originate deep within the Sun and become visible when they pop out. **Their number is not constant but shows a minimum and then rises up to a maximum and then falls again in what is called the solar cycle. So far, astronomers have documented 24 such cycles, the last one ended in 2019.**

Start of Cycle 25

Following a weakening trend in activity over the last few cycles, there were predictions that the Sun would go silent into a grand minimum in activity, with the disappearance of cycles. However, a team from IISER Kolkata has shown that there are signs that cycle 25 has just begun. **They used the data from the instrument Helioseismic and Magnetic Imager aboard NASA's space-based Solar Dynamics Observatory for their calculations.** "Our findings



indicate that sunspot cycle 25 fields have already started appearing, implying that we are going to have a solar cycle. Speculation and predictions of a grand minimum are unfounded.”

Maunder Minimum

Why is this so important to us on earth? After all the sunspots look small and are hardly even visible to us. Contrary to this, sunspot activity may be correlated with climate on earth. **In the period between 1645 and 1715, sunspot activity had come to a halt on the Sun – a phenomenon referred to as the *Maunder minimum*. This coincided with extremely cold weather globally.** So, sunspots may have a relevance to climate on earth. Such links are tenuous, but definitely solar activity affects space weather, which **can have an impact on space-based satellites, GPS, power grids and so on.**

Solar Dynamo

Given the high temperatures in the Sun, matter exists there in the form of plasma, where the electrons are stripped away from the nuclei. The Sun is made of hot ionised plasma whose motions generate magnetic fields in the solar interior by harnessing the energy of the plasma flows. This mechanism is known as the solar dynamo mechanism (or magnetohydrodynamic dynamo mechanism). “Simply stated, it is a process by which kinetic energy of plasma motions is converted to magnetic energy, which generates the magnetised sunspots, giving rise to the solar cycle,” explains Prof. Nandi. Because of the nature of the solar dynamo, the part of its magnetic field that gives rise to sunspots reverses direction when it moves from one solar cycle to another. This can be inferred by observing when the relative orientation of the sunspot pairs flip. Studying 74 such pairs of magnetic regions, the researchers find that in 41 the orientation corresponds to cycle 24, and in 33 the orientation corresponds to cycle 25. Thus, they conclude that the Sunspot cycle 25 is brewing within the solar interior.

Doctors’ Forum Dispels Beliefs on Commercial Cord Blood Banking

- Poona Citizen Doctor Forum (PCDF), a body that aims to rebuild trust among citizens and doctors, and promote ethical rational medical practice, has come forward to bust the aggressively promoted concept of **cord blood banking**. In a video released by the forum, gynaecologist and activist Dr. Arun Gadre warns to-be parents against falling prey to the **emotional marketing tactics by stem cell banking companies**. “Over the past decade, stem cell banking has been aggressively marketed even as **its use is still in experimental stages**. But these companies charge enormous fees from parents to preserve cells,” said Dr. Gadre, adding it is merely by emotional marketing that companies convince parents to bank the cells for several years **promising future therapeutic use**. Cord blood banking involves taking the **umbilical cord blood, which is a rich source of stem cells**, and preserving it for future use. Private companies who have forayed into this field offer packages anywhere between ₹50,000 and ₹1 lakh to store and preserve the cells in right conditions. However, the **Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) does not recommend commercial stem cell banking**. It says so far there is no scientific basis for preservation of cord blood for future self use and this practice therefore raises ethical and social concerns. “Private **storage of the cord blood is advisable when there is an elder child in the family with a condition treatable with these cells and the mother is expecting the next baby. In other situations, parents should be educated about the limitations of banking at this point of time.**” Despite such guidelines, a **nexus of doctors and stem cell banking companies** thrives and these companies get access



to data of to-be parents. "Globally, cord blood banking is recommended as a source of hematopoietic stem cell (derived from bone marrow, peripheral blood, or umbilical cord blood) transplantation for haematological cancers and disorders where its use is recommended. For all other conditions, the use of cord blood as a source of stem cells is not yet established," ICMR's deputy director general Dr. Geeta Jotwani said.

How Wounded Plants Heal, Survive

- Its hard life being a plant! From pathogens and herbivores to unfavourable weather, they are constantly injured or wounded and their sessile lifestyle only adds to the trouble. Despite all this, they heal and survive. How did they evolve such a great repair mechanism? What are the molecules and proteins aiding it? These were some of the questions an international team of researchers set out to answer and have now found some interesting mechanisms.

Ability to Repair

A paper recently published in *Development* shows that a protein named *PLETHORA (PLT)*, which encodes stem cell promoting factors, helps in the regeneration of the vascular system at the site of injury. *This protein binds to and activates the expression of another gene (CUC2)*. These two together increase the production of a plant growth hormone called auxin at the wound site. The combination of these proteins and hormones gives the plant the ability to repair wounds.

Regenerating Veins

It was seen that the injury healed not just at the surface but the veins regenerated too. "There was proliferation of the epithelial cells to seal the wounds and also functional restoration of tissue cells. The vein regeneration is very essential as transport of food, hormone, water, happens through it and any disruption may further hinder the plant growth," explains Dhanya Radhakrishnan, PhD scholar and first author of the paper from IISER-Tvm. **Another interesting find was that these two proteins did not play any role in the general development of vascular system but stepped into action only during its injury.** "We were able to set up a mathematical model that gave us guidance that as the size of the wound changes the nature of the repair changes. The numerical simulations showed that after a particular size injury, the plant will be unable to regenerate or heal," adds Anil Shaji from the Department of Physics at IISER-Tvm. The researchers hope that in the future these genes can be produced in surplus to create plants that can withstand insect attack and other injuries.

Evidence of A Social Network in Early Animals

- Some of the first animals on Earth were connected by networks of thread-like filaments, the earliest evidence yet found of life being connected in this way. Scientists from the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford discovered the fossilised threads -- some **as long as four metres** -- connecting organisms known as **rangeomorphs**, which dominated Earth's oceans half a billion years ago. The team found these filament networks -- which may have been used for nutrition, communication or reproduction -in seven species across nearly 40 different fossil sites in Newfoundland, Canada. Their results are reported in the journal *Current Biology*. **Towards the end of the Ediacaran period, between 571 and 541 million years ago, the first diverse communities of large and complex organisms began to appear: prior to this, almost**



all life on Earth had been microscopic in size. Fern-like rangeomorphs were some of the most successful life forms during this period, growing up to two metres in height and colonising large areas of the sea floor. Rangeomorphs may have been some of the first animals to exist, although their strange anatomies have puzzled palaeontologists for years; these organisms do not appear to have had mouths, organs or means of moving. One suggestion is that they absorbed nutrients from the water around them. Since rangeomorphs could not move and are preserved where they lived, it is possible to analyse whole populations from the fossil record. Earlier studies of rangeomorphs have looked at how these organisms managed to reproduce and be so successful in their time.

CORONA

Can You Tell Coronavirus Infection from Common Flu?

→ The short answer is that there is no way to tell a coronavirus infection apart from the common flu. In both circumstances the symptoms that the patient shows would be cough, cold, fever, body ache etc. That is why in public health parlance the term influenza-like illnesses are used. Both common flu and coronavirus infection would come in that spectrum. Dr P Ravindran, director, Emergency Medical Response at the Health Ministry who has dealt with many outbreaks including swine flu, bird flu and Nipah, said, "In initial presentation there is no difference in influenza or coronavirus or adenovirus. All of them qualify as influenza-like diseases. It is the surveillance case definition — in this case given that most cases have come from outside, it would mean answers to questions like what symptoms do you have and where have you travelled — that can guide a surveillance person to the right conclusions. That is why different protocols are put in place for different stages of transmission. Even in the advanced stages of the disease, symptomatically you cannot tell between the different diseases." There are, however, crucial differences in both the prevention and the prognosis of the two diseases. For one, there is a seasonal flu vaccine that can be annually taken. A vaccine for coronavirus is still in the works, with the most promising one being an mRNA vaccine being developed by Moderna Biotech whose phase I trials will be carried out by the National Institutes of Health in the USA soon. While the mortality rate of coronavirus infection, at a little over 3%, is far lower than that for, say, swine flu, it is way higher than seasonal influenza or common flu — a mere 0.1%.

What Is A Pandemic?

→ The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic.

What Is A Pandemic?

Simply put, a pandemic is a measure of the spread of a disease. When a new disease spreads over a vast geographical area covering several countries and continents, and most people do not have immunity against it, the outbreak is termed a pandemic. It implies a higher level of concern than an epidemic, which the US Centres of Disease and Control Prevention (CDC) defines as the spread of a disease in a localised area or country. There is no fixed number of cases or deaths that determine when an outbreak becomes a pandemic. The Ebola virus, which killed thousands in West Africa, is an epidemic as it is yet to mark its presence on other continents. Other outbreaks caused by coronaviruses such as MERS (2012) and SARS (2002),



which spread to 27 and 26 countries respectively, were not labelled pandemics because they were eventually contained.

Which Outbreaks Have Been Declared Pandemics in The Past?

A major example is the **Spanish flu outbreak of 1918**, which killed between 20-50 million. **Cholera pandemics** have been declared multiple times between **1817** and **1975**. In 1968, a pandemic was declared for H3N2 that caused about a million deaths. **The last pandemic declared by the WHO was in 2009, for H1N1.**

Why Has WHO Declared A Pandemic For COVID-19?

China announced the outbreak on December 31 and declared a public health emergency on January 30. The WHO waited for 72 days before declaring it a pandemic. The outbreak was so far mostly limited to China, which has taken stringent countermeasures. In the last two weeks, cases outside China increased thirteen-fold and countries infected have tripled. Italy, for instance, had 888 cases on February 29 which rose to 4,636 in a week.

Does the Declaration Change the Approach to The Disease?

"Describing the situation as pandemic does not change **WHO's assessment of the death risk posed by the virus**, it **does not change what WHO is doing**, and it **doesn't change what countries do**," WHO said. There is a view among many experts, however, that the categorisation as a pandemic can lead to more government attention. "The categorisation by WHO indicates the risk of disease for countries to take preventive measures. It will help improve funding by international organisations to combat coronavirus. In India, we are already doing all that is possible and more government funding is not needed at this point." said Dr Balram Bhargava, director of Indian Council of Medical Research.

How Home Quarantine Works

- In India's fight against the novel coronavirus disease (COVID 2019), the Union Health Ministry has issued elaborate guidelines on how to enforce "home quarantine" for a fortnight. While less stringent than being quarantined in an Army or paramilitary facility, home quarantine comes with its own set of restrictions. Here is all you need to know about such a regime, and why it is important.

What Is Home Quarantine?

Quarantine, like isolation, separates some people from others during the outbreak of a contagious disease. While **isolation** separates sick people from people who are not sick, quarantine separates those who were exposed to a contagious disease, and who are then observed to see if they too become sick. Home quarantine means being quarantined at home.

How Is Home Quarantine to Be Done?

Home quarantine means that a person is confined to a well-ventilated single-room, preferably with an attached/separate toilet, in his or her own home. If another family member needs to stay in the same room, the two need to maintain a distance of at least 1 metre between each other. Given the enhanced risks for some people, the person needs to



stay away from elderly people, pregnant women, children and persons with co-morbidities within the household. **In the coronavirus outbreak, children have so far been less affected than others — in China only 2% of the patients have been below age 20.** However, given the fact that this virus is essentially an unknown organism, the government's home quarantine guidelines highlight the need for a contact to stay away from children as well. All social or religious gatherings have to be avoided during the 14-day period. The person should not share any items such as dishes, drinking glasses, cups, eating utensils, towels, bedding, etc with other people at home and should wear a mask at all times. "Masks used by patients / care givers/ close contacts during home care should be disinfected using ordinary bleach solution (5%) or sodium hypochlorite solution (1%) and then disposed of either by burning or deep burial," read the guidelines prepared by the directorate general of health services.

Is Home Quarantine Known to Control Spread of a Disease?

Officials associated with the detection and surveillance of COVID-19 say that home quarantine has so far turned out to be a very effective means of infection control. "To tell a person that the consequences of any laxity in observation of the quarantine protocol would mean his or her being the means of infection of a family member is usually the most effective means of ensuring compliance. People are extra careful," an official said. However, here's the catch. If a person has successfully completes the 14-day quarantine without contracting the disease, resumes normal life and comes in contact once more with a COVID-2019 patient, there will then arise the need to follow another fortnight of home quarantine, said Dr R R Gangakhedkar, head of the division of epidemiology and communicable diseases, Indian Council of Medical Research.

Who Needs to Be in Home Quarantine?

Every person who has come in contact with a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-2019 needs to be in home quarantine. This is not only because the disease is highly contagious but also because the **virus has an incubation period of 14 days** during which **a person may stay asymptomatic and yet be capable of spreading the virus.**

A contact of a COVID-2019 patient is defined as:

- ❖ A person living in the same household as a COVID-19 case;
- ❖ A person having had direct physical contact with a COVID-19 case or his/her infectious secretions without recommended personal protective equipment (PPE) or with a possible breach of PPE
- ❖ A person who was in a closed environment or had face to face contact with a COVID-19 case at a distance of within 1 metre including air travel.

What Precautions Are Necessary For Family Members Of A Person In Home Quarantine?

To minimise the number of people in a family who come in contact with a person with possible-COVID 2019 exposure, only one designated family member, who needs to wear a mask and gloves at all times, should be the caregiver. All physical contact should be scrupulously avoided, including sharing of linen. Visitors are not to be allowed. "In case the person being quarantined becomes symptomatic, all his/her close contacts will be home quarantined (for 14 days) and followed up for an additional 14 days or till the report of such case turns out negative on lab testing," say the guidelines. **A very important aspect of the**



process of home quarantine is disinfection and cleaning of all surfaces possibly contacted by the person with 1% sodium hypochlorite solution. Toilet surfaces have to be cleaned with phenolic disinfectants or other household bleaching solutions. Clothes have to be washed separately.

How Is All This Less Restrictive Than Being Put in Quarantine In An Army Facility?

Being quarantined in one's own home is always better than staying with strangers at an Army or paramilitary facility. Besides the daily medical examinations, there are also other restrictions. Apart from playing games, watching TV and having meals together within a barrack, no one is allowed to interact with the members of another barrack and definitely not another sector for fear of infection. As one person who had come out of one of the facilities had said, it is like being in the Big Boss House.

The Hunt for Corona Treatment

- Even the most optimistic timelines don't see a line of treatment or vaccine arriving before next year. Meanwhile, a global effort is on to collect and analyse the genetic composition of the new virus, which would be key to developing a cure and a vaccine.

What Kind of Genetic Information Is Being Studied?

Laboratories in various countries have been isolating and sharing the genome sequences of the virus on an international platform. Whole genome sequencing is the process of determining the complete DNA sequence of an organism's genome at a single time. **Genome sequence is the unique code of genetic material of any organism, and determines the characteristic of any organism.** The gene composition of novel coronavirus, for instance, is different from that of the influenza virus. Every organism has a unique genome sequence. So far, 326 sets of data have been shared. India has so far reported two sets of genome sequences, both of which are very similar to the original sequences collected from patients in Wuhan. Scientists say this is expected since the sequences were extracted from the first positive cases in Kerala, who had returned from Wuhan. China has contributed 120 sequences.

So, Why Are So Many Genome Sequences Being Isolated?

When viruses multiply, or reproduce, there is a copying mechanism that transfers the gene information to the next generation. However, no copying mechanism is perfect. When the virus multiplies, there will be small changes, which are called **mutations**. These mutations accumulate over time, and after prolonged periods, are responsible for evolution into new organisms. Within a single reproduction, the changes are extremely minor. More than 95 per cent of the gene structure remains the same. However, the small changes that occur are crucial to understanding the nature and behaviour of the organism. In this case, for example, the small changes could provide scientists with information about the origin, transmission, and impact of the virus on the patient. It could also hold clues to the differing effects the virus could have on patients with different health parameters.



What Explains the Huge Difference Between the Number of Genome Sequences Contributed By China (120) And India (2)?

India has far fewer positive cases compared to China, South Korea, Iran, Italy, or even the United States. Every day, about 20-30 genome sequences are being shared from different laboratories across the world. Patients who have been infected with the virus in similar conditions are unlikely to show any significant changes in the genome sequences. For example, the positive cases in a group of 40 from Maharashtra, who visited Dubai last month, are likely to have similar genome sequences, and therefore, one or two representative sequencing could be adequate from the group. Patients with existing medical conditions could be other candidates from where genome sequences of this virus could be isolated. This could help scientists to look for clues to possible impact of virus amidst those existing medical conditions. Some countries have been reporting genome sequences much faster than others. China has contributed 120 sequences so far, but has not been sharing any more for the last few days. The US has shared 43 genome sequences, while the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have contributed 25 each. Scientists say new technological tools have made it easier to isolate full genome sequences. Traditional techniques used to take weeks for the extraction, but new machines are able to do it within two to three days. The two Indian sequences have both come from patients who had returned from Wuhan where the outbreak began in December last year.

Currently, What Is the Most Effective Medication?

As of now, scientists do not know. The ideal way of testing a drug to show that it is effective is to compare no-treatment to new-treatment in a clinical trial. Using a drug or drugs in one or two persons provides anecdotal evidence. In trials, data is accumulated from many people. Although several efforts to develop drugs are going on, scientists say success is unlikely to come immediately. Right now, drugs are being repurposed, meaning old drugs for similar diseases are being checked for their efficacy against COVID-19. These drugs, if they work, will require clinical trials, and then can be made widely available for people. In most cases, symptomatic treatment for fever, body ache, and cough will be sufficient. More severe cases will require oxygen and respiratory support.

India Needs All Hands-on Deck

- ➔ On February 6, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognised the Pune-based National Institute of Virology (NIV) as one of the 15 laboratories that would provide reference testing support for the novel coronavirus. The number of COVID-19 cases remained constant at three for nearly a month in India, but now it is going up steadily. Anticipating such a scenario, more labs are screening COVID-19 samples now. Besides the 52 labs belonging to the Viral Research and Diagnostic Laboratories network of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), 10 labs under the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) have been included for testing COVID-19 samples. Till recently, all the 52 labs were allowed to only screen samples; only NIV was authorised to confirm positive cases. With more suspected cases piling up, a long delay in confirming positive test results would have become inevitable for NIV. So, in a welcome move, ICMR has pre-empted such a scenario. "With the 10 labs under the NCDC regularly confirming positive H1N1 cases, we can expect these labs to be authorised to also confirm positive COVID-19 cases. Unfortunately, several national labs have not been brought up to speed to perform other vital functions during an outbreak.



Sequencing the Genome

NIV is the only lab in India which has a bio-safety level-4 (BSL-4) facility to culture pathogenic, novel viruses, study the origin of such viruses and provide a comprehensive characterisation of them by sequencing the entire viral genome. NIV has sequenced the SARS-CoV-2 genome collected from two patients in Kerala. **When the entire genome is sequenced it helps researchers understand the arrangement of the four chemical entities or bases that make up the DNA or RNA.** The differences in the arrangement of the bases make organisms different from one another. **Sequencing the genome of SARS-CoV-2 will help us understand where the virus came from and how it spread.** In the last decade or so, many national laboratories have developed the expertise to sequence the entire genome of viruses and bacteria using the latest equipment (next-generation sequencing, or NGS). About a dozen labs have a BSL-3 facility to inactivate the virus and sequence the genome using advanced equipment. They also have the expertise to undertake such work. It is therefore puzzling why India relies solely on NIV for undertaking genome sequencing. If there's a compelling need to have all hands-on deck to sequence the genome, it is now. While NIV sequenced two of the three COVID-19 samples collected from Kerala in late January-early February, it is not clear if more samples have been sequenced. Contrast this with how other countries have responded. Many of the 263 sequences shared with the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID), a public platform started by the WHO in 2008 for countries to share genome sequences, are by universities and hospitals. In mainland China, many of the sequences are shared by the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, which is present in all the 31 provinces. At 90, China has posted the most sequence data on GISAID. This is followed by the U.S. (37).

Unutilised Expertise in India

During the 2018 Nipah virus outbreak in Kerala, a lab outside NIV, the Manipal Centre for Virus Research, successfully proved that given an opportunity it could not only diagnose the novel virus but also partially sequence it. The Manipal Centre confirmed the Nipah virus in 17 of the 24 samples it received from Kerala. Unfortunately, since April 2019, the Manipal Centre has been directed to restrict itself to processing the samples of pathogens specific to the BSL-2 facility. It is not even one of the designated labs to test for the novel coronavirus. Virologist Professor Gagandeep Kang, executive director of the Translational Health Science and Technology Institute, however feels that given that the number of COVID-19 cases in India is still under 60, NIV does not feel overwhelmed. While agreeing that many labs/institutions in India have the ability to sequence the viral genome, Professor Kang emphasises that **sequencing is useful to know where the virus strain came from and to check if the strain is evolving, but does not inform us of the immediate strategy to control the outbreak or its spread.** With the latest sequencing equipment widely available in many research labs and the cost of sequencing falling, researchers are using genome sequences for genomic epidemiology. This becomes possible as scientists already know the number of mutations that arise on an average in a month in the case of COVID-19, its incubation period, and the average time between cases in a chain transmission (serial interval). Using this data, it has become possible to identify the index case even when the source of infection is not known, and find the link between two seemingly unconnected outbreaks.



How China Built Capacity

China was completely unprepared when the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) struck in 2002-2003. The outbreak infected over 8,000 people globally and killed nearly 800. The bird flu (H5N1) outbreak that followed in 2003 underscored the need for influenza detection and response in China. This led to a collaboration between the Chinese National Influenza Centre and the Atlanta-based Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in 2004 to build capacity in influenza surveillance in China. For the next 10 years the collaboration worked in many ways: it led to developed human technical expertise in virology and epidemiology, a comprehensive influenza surveillance system, strengthened analysis, the dissemination of surveillance data, and improved early response to influenza viruses with pandemic potential. By 2014, the national influenza surveillance and response system included 408 labs and 554 sentinel hospitals. Today, there is a Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in each of the 31 provinces in mainland China. The infrastructure and capacity-building that was put in place by China for influenza surveillance stood in good stead when the H1N1 pandemic struck in 2009.

Should You Swim, Or Play Sport with Body Contact?

- When Bhuvneshwar Kumar was asked whether Indian pacers would limit the use of spit on the ball, he said the team would follow doctors' instructions. Amid the coronavirus outbreak, many are asking whether to pursue a sport that perhaps requires physical contact, and even recreational swimmers are wondering whether they should stay away from the pool. In an advisory on March 5, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre of Ireland said that **if recommended chlorination standards are maintained, then swimming pools are safe.** "I cannot say whether chlorination is effective in killing the virus because this is a new virus. However, for most respiratory illnesses and influenza, swimming is not a primary source of infection. You have to understand that except in old people with co-morbidities, the individual's risk of getting an infection is quite low." Dr Krishnan said 60 cases in a country of 135 crore is a clear indication that the actual risk of infection is low unless one has come in contact with a person who is unwell or has travelled to one of the areas where the infection is rampant. Skipping sports is not necessary either. That three young students from Kerala, who were evacuated from Wuhan, recovered and went home, showed that being young and fit is an advantage in the battle against coronavirus. "The bottom-line is that anyone with symptoms of the disease should isolate himself or herself. They should be in home isolation. If you do that no matter what you do, the disease won't spread," Dr Krishnan said. Obviously, regular handwashing/sanitisation precautions would also apply to locker rooms and doorknobs for swimmers and sportspersons. The disease may not come from the pool, but lowering your guard once out of it isn't advisable.

How Safe Is Public Transport?

The confirmation of coronavirus cases from Maharashtra has raised concerns about using public transport, particularly in Mumbai where huge numbers travel by local trains daily. In an interview earlier this week, Union Health Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan had told that public transport is an area of concern. The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has issued an advisory asking that all necessary steps be taken in public transport vehicles to ensure sanitation of seats, handles & bars. As India has recorded community transmission, the time will soon come to include railway compartments in this list. Since the feasibility of this step



in Mumbai locals is untested, for an individual, handwashing/sanitisation before touching the face, and coughing/sneezing etiquette remain the best weapons against COVID-19.

The Cost of Opacity

→ China's initial cover-up of the novel coronavirus outbreak for nearly a month invited worldwide condemnation. Similarly, there were concerns when the U.S. was reported to be barring leading scientist, Anthony Fauci, from speaking publicly about the COVID-19 outbreak without approval. Dr. Fauci has been the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984 and has helped combat many novel viruses including SARS, H1N1, MERS and Ebola. Therefore, it is troubling that instead of advocating transparency during a pandemic, the Indian Medical Association (IMA), representing over 3,25,000 doctors, has said that India should adopt the same opaque manner of functioning while dealing with the outbreak. The World Health Organization (WHO) holds a daily press briefing on COVID-19. It shares data on the number of cases and deaths country-wise every day. The Union Health Minister and the Kerala Health Minister also share data daily, which is commendable. **But the IMA does not want the government to share data with the public daily as it says people are "clueless as to what is expected of them" and the release of data daily has "created panic". However, ironically, it also says that "awareness, self-precautions, contact tracing and self-isolation are the public health measures required".** Secretary General Dr. R.V. Asokan said to The Hindu that the government should consider releasing data "once in three or seven days". It should not mention the numbers of those infected, but use terms such as 'low', 'moderate' or 'high' to give a sense of the spread, he said. "Why should people know the numbers? This pandemic will escalate and people will scrutinise the numbers minutely," he said

Maintaining Trust

While dealing with a public health crisis, especially a pandemic, complete transparency is paramount. It is information that helps build trust in society and puts people at ease. How does the IMA expect people to cooperate, practise self-isolation, and take basic precautions when they are not taken into confidence? As Dr. Anant Bhan, a researcher in global health and bioethics, says, "When the government is transparent, it gives people the confidence that it is in control and is taking all the necessary steps to control the outbreak. The trust factor should not be broken."

Responses Across the World

Many countries responded quickly to the unfolding pandemic. South Korea shared data on the number of cases and deaths even as the numbers steadily increased. On March 5, the U.K. added COVID-19 to the list of notifiable diseases and added SARS-CoV-2 to the list of notifiable causative agents. As a result, doctors are now legally bound to report all cases to Public Health England. The Indian government has made some efforts to this end but can do much more. It could take a leaf out of Taiwan's book, for instance. In Taiwan, the public were kept informed about COVID-19 every hour through television and radio programmes. They were informed about how SARS-CoV-2 spreads, the importance of washing hands with soap, when to wear a mask, etc. They learnt about the symptoms and spread of the disease. This helped Taiwan trace contacts easily. People also cooperated in cutting the transmission chain — for instance, parents checked their children for a fever before sending them to school.



The Right Approach

This is not the first time that the IMA has made an embarrassing statement. Some time ago, it admonished The Lancet for the journal's stand on the dilution of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. Its dangerous advice at a time like this raises questions about whether the IMA and its office bearers are aware of the best public health practices during a disease outbreak, particularly a pandemic. It is not transparency and data, but opacity and lack of public awareness that cause panic. The right approach would be for the government to constantly educate the public on various aspects of SARS-CoV-2 and the precautions to be taken.

Can Pets or Stray Animals Spread Coronavirus Infection?

- There is no evidence, either from the history of COVID-19 cases around the world or from the genetic evolution history of the virus itself, that there is any scope of pets (or even stray animals) contracting or transmitting the virus to humans. Here's what the World Health Organization says on this: "At present, there is no evidence that companion animals/pets such as dogs or cats can be infected with the new coronavirus. However, it is always a good idea to wash your hands with soap and water after contact with pets. This protects you against various common bacteria such as E. coli and Salmonella that can pass between pets and humans." **There was a lone case in Hong Kong where a pet dog tested positive. Experts think the dog's "weak positive" was actually a case of human-to-animal transmission, and say dogs should be kept away from those suffering from COVID-19.** Following this case, the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) came out with a statement. "The current spread of COVID-19 is a result of human-to-human transmission. To date, there is no evidence that companion animals can spread the disease. Therefore, there is no justification in taking measures against companion animals which may compromise their welfare. The National Veterinary Services of Hong Kong reported to OIE evidence that a dog had tested positive to the COVID-19 virus following close exposure to its owners who were sick with COVID-19," the statement said. ... The dog was not showing any clinical signs of the disease. There is no evidence that dogs play a role in the spread of this human disease or that they become sick. Further studies are needed to understand if and how different animals could be affected by COVID-19 virus," it said. "What we know for certain now is that it is a zoonotic infection, that is it came from animals to humans. It seems that the intermediate source is the bat but our knowledge about the virus is evolving so this might change tomorrow. That is why what we are saying is that do not go near wild animals. There is not problem with pets and we are not advising staying away from them," said Dr S Chatterjee, consultant, department of medicine, Indraprastha Apollo Hospital.

For How Long Is The Virus Alive And Active On An Infected Surface?

Normally for coronaviruses, at a temperature that is conducive for their survival, they can stay active/alive on an infected surface for up to nine hours, said top scientists at the National Centre for Disease Control. However, in case of COVID-2019, the "novelty" of the virus means that we actually know very little about it. "See, **generally for coronavirus on a hard surface, it stays alive for about nine hours; on a soft surface it may survive even longer.** It also depends on the heat, temperature and humidity. But the longevity of viruses is very variable, **some can live up to nine days.** That is why whenever we suspect contamination, we disinfect with **sodium hypochlorite** and close the place down for four to six hours. We do not 'fumigate', we disinfect," said a senior official in the country's apex disease control institute.



How Is India Containing COVID-19?

→ What Do We Know About the Virus?

Little is known about the novel coronavirus (SARS-Cov-2), which currently has no vaccine and has the potential to cause severe illnesses and pneumonia, according to senior health officials in the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). **It primarily spreads through the respiratory droplets of infected people.** If a person touches a surface or object that has been infected by the virus and then touches his own mouth, nose, or eyes, he may get infected. **Symptoms of COVID-19 appear within two to 14 days after exposure and include fever, cough, a runny nose and difficulty in breathing.**

Where Is Screening Being Done?

As preventive measures, the Health Ministry has recommended universal screening of all international flights, cancellation of biometric attendance for all ministries till March 31, advised against mass gatherings. The Indian Army is now establishing additional quarantine facilities for 1,500 personnel (total) which will be activated at locations as part of the overall effort. The tentative locations identified are at Jaisalmer (Rajasthan), Suratgarh (Rajasthan), Secunderabad (Telangana), Chennai (Tamil Nadu) and Kolkata (West Bengal). The Ministry has also suggested augmenting isolation facilities in hospitals across India besides ensuring adequate supply of protective gear, medicines and other essential services.

What Is the Process?

Universal screening for coronavirus is being done at 30 airports having international operations. A total of 7,26,122 passengers have been screened so far from 7,108 flights (as on March 7). Airlines have been instructed to make in-flight announcements about COVID-19 and all international passengers are being asked to fill the 'Self Reporting Form' in duplicate. Those picked out through thermal screening are sent for further tests and isolation and treatment if necessary, to designated hospitals including Ram Manohar Lohia and Safdarjung Hospital (both in Delhi). The government has adopted these measures such as universal screening of passengers, filling up self-declaration forms, surveillance of those who have come in contact with infected persons to contain the spread.

What Happens If A Person Tested Has Fever?

Points of entry such as airports, sea ports, borders have set up a protocol of **thermal screening, which means anyone with fever will be picked out.** All passengers coming into India are being screened. In case a passenger has a temperature, he is referred for further tests at designated hospitals where COVID-19 symptoms are matched, the country he comes from is looked into, exposure is checked and samples are collected for testing. Isolation (home/hospital) is advised for a period of 14 to 21 days when the case samples of the suspected person are sent for testing. **If he tests positive, he is sent for treatment and all his contacts are then traced.** The test results for COVID-19 are obtained in four to five hours. The virus has an **incubation period of about 14 days.** According to health officials, India is following WHO-prescribed guidelines to detect, treat and contain the virus.



How Is the Infection Being Treated?

Majority of patients with COVID-19 are adults and most patients (80%) experienced mild illness. Approximately 14% experienced severe disease and 5% were critically ill worldwide. In India, a senior health official said WHO-prescribed patient management guidance was being followed, which included interim clinical care guidance for hospitalised patients and home care guidance for those with a milder infection which may be treated at home in isolation when the health system is strained.

When Should A Person Get Tested?

Giving details of who should be considered for COVID-19 testing, the Minister said this would include people who are symptomatic (that is if they have fever, sore throat, running nose, dyspnoea, etc), especially individuals who have returned from affected countries (China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Iran, Italy etc.), or have had close contact with confirmed positive cases of COVID-19. The types of samples being taken include throat and nasal swabs.

Is India Ready with Lab Requirements, Medicines?

An ICMR release said testing laboratories have been supplied with the primers, probes, PCR reagents, positive and negative controls, and standard operating procedure (SOP) by the National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune. Further, NIV is also undertaking quality control activities. It maintains an inventory of reagents for itself and testing labs. Currently, NIV has sufficient reagents for facilitating testing in the entire network, the release pointed out. Chemicals and Fertilizers Minister D.V. Sadananda Gowda said India has sufficient stocks of active pharmaceutical ingredients — the raw materials needed to make medicines — to last the next three months. The statement comes amid reports of disrupted supply chains for active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) from China due to the outbreak. He said, "The export ban on 26 APIs for common medicines was imposed to ensure that there is no domestic shortage due to the coronavirus outbreak."

What Are Health Officials Advising?

Health officials said hands must be regularly and thoroughly cleaned with an alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water. A distance of at least 1 metre (3 feet) must be maintained from a person coughing or sneezing. If a person has fever, cough and experiences difficulty breathing, medical attention must be sought. The officials said there is no need to panic and start buying masks.