



WORDLY WISE
 WE HAVE TO BUILD THE NOBLE MANSION OF FREE INDIA WHERE ALL HER CHILDREN MAY DWELL.
 — JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

In need of repair

Governance of hollow slogans and divisiveness has reversed gains of past. It is time to undo the damage



SONIA GANDHI

INDEPENDENCE DAY THIS year marks the beginning of India's 75th year as a free nation. It is an occasion for proud celebration, deep reflection and renewed commitments. It is an occasion to recall the sacrifices of those who laid the foundations of modern India and who boldly envisioned a prosperous, harmonious, inclusive, democratic nation — united by our diversity, inspired by our rich history, and seeking our rightful place in destiny.

We honour the contributions of our nation's founders: Mahatma Gandhi's unflinching moral leadership and his dedication to truth, non-violence, communal harmony and *antiyodaya*; Jawaharlal Nehru's untiring efforts to build our democracy, economy, public institutions and whose idealism earned India a respected place on the world stage; Sardar Patel's steely resolve to forge a nation-state by unifying more than 560 princely states; Subhas Chandra Bose's leadership of the National Planning Committee and his emphasis on military strength; Babasaheb Ambedkar's crafting of our Constitution committed to justice, liberty and emancipation of the oppressed classes.

Over three-quarters of a century, we have nurtured a vibrant democracy with deep roots. We have achieved self-sufficiency in food production. We have created one of the world's largest economies and lifted the greatest number of people in the world out of poverty and disease through democratic means. We have built one of the largest, strongest military forces and a pioneering space mission. Yet, as we celebrate our successes, we also realise how much further we still have to go. Unfortunately, recent years have seen a reversal of our nation's progress on multiple fronts.

The recently concluded Monsoon Session of Parliament displayed the disdain of the Narendra Modi government towards parliamentary processes and building consensus. The Opposition was repeatedly denied an opportunity to raise issues of national importance — destructive farm laws, the use of military-grade software to hack into devices belonging to constitutional figures, political opponents, journalists and activists, runaway inflation and unemployment. Increasingly over the past seven years, laws have been passed without debate in the House or scrutiny by a committee, effectively turning Parliament into a rubber stamp. Democratically elected state governments have been toppled, disrespecting people's mandates. The media has been systematically intimidated and arm-twisted into forgetting its responsibility to speak truth to power. Institutions that were carefully built and nurtured to provide the structure of true democracy have been systematically degenerated or destroyed, eroding the values that give substance to the inalienable right of our people to equality, justice and individual freedom.

Sadly, we have been witness to the worst sustained economic decline in these past 75

years. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic hit India, the momentum built up in recent years was dissipated through ill-advised initiatives that had no economic rationale. The economic slowdown has come with terrible consequences for our most vulnerable families, for the self-employed, for small and medium enterprises, for farmers, for the youth seeking employment, and for millions of our countrymen and women who are described as migrant labour but are a vital part of our society and production processes. The fast-growing middle-classes have suffered as unemployment, poverty and malnutrition have worsened. Entrepreneurs of all strata, with the exception of a favoured few, are in distress. But the government refuses to heed the signs, to consult or to kickstart the economy by transferring money directly to the people. From high taxes on all forms of fuel to the widespread loss of income, the burdens are increasing by the day.

Decades of progress in improving healthcare have been reversed by the mismanagement of the pandemic. Lives and livelihoods have been devastated as a result of hubris and bad planning. We legitimately take pride in being the world's largest producer of vaccines. Yet, the percentage of our population that is fully vaccinated is very low due to an inordinate delay in placing orders, leaving us vulnerable to future waves at a time when our people are struggling to return to some semblance of normalcy. Even our children's education has been disrupted with profound long-term consequences.

Our farmers, who spearheaded the success of the Green Revolution, have been protesting for many months. But the government has refused to heed their legitimate concerns. It is imperative that the government reach out and address their demands. We must ensure that those who feed us do not starve themselves. We have to make agriculture more sustainable, economically and ecologically.

Since Independence, federalism has been a defining feature of our democratic republic. The federal spirit we have nurtured has been accommodative and cooperative, respectful of diversity and regional aspirations. The establishment of the Goods and Services Tax regime was the culmination of decades of effort and reflected the trust that our states reposed in the Union government. Yet, in recent years, states are being deprived of their rightful share of overall revenues through the increasing use of non-shareable cesses. Short-changing states is short-sighted policy, which hollows out our federal structure and hampers implementation of various programmes and schemes.

Another recent dangerous trend is the misuse of laws and government agencies. Laws that were used against our freedom fighters by the British and laws that are specifically targeted at terrorists are being misused against anyone who dares to question the Prime Minister and his government. Doctored videos, planted evidence,

and fake toolkits are all becoming weapons of intimidation and disinformation to suppress dissent. Government agencies are routinely let loose on political opponents. Such moves are aimed at instilling fear and hackaway at the very foundations of democratic freedoms.

After decades of progress towards an India of our dreams, why is our democracy in danger? It is because tangible achievements have been substituted by hollow slogans, event management and brand-building only to benefit those in power — at the expense of governance. It is because symbolism has triumphed over meaningful action. It is because democracy is sought to be replaced by an autocracy. Today's symbolism and reality is that Parliament House is being turned into a museum.

As we begin independent India's 75th year, we owe it to our freedom fighters to undo this damage to our Republic. We must fight to preserve and strengthen the freedoms that they sacrificed so much for. We need to imbibe their compassion to help crores of our compatriots overcome challenges of poverty, discrimination and disease so they can live fuller, fulfilled lives. We need to draw courage from them to take on those who would replace their inclusive, liberating idealism with a narrow, sectarian, worldview overflowing with prejudice and discrimination. We must not be swayed by hollow attempts to appropriate our icons by those who made no contribution to our struggle for independence. They may borrow Gandhiji's spectacles but their vision for our country remains Godse's. Our founders rejected that divisive ideology 74 years ago, and we must reject it once again.

A united, harmonious, strong India has a larger role to play on the global stage. In his momentous "Trust with destiny" speech, Nehru underlined that the world cannot be split into isolated fragments, and that peace is indivisible, and so are freedom, prosperity and also disaster. In a world affected by Covid-19 and climate change, India's response to these challenges will be crucial to the world.

Going forward, let us renew our commitment to embrace our inclusive civilisational ethos and our founders' dedication to justice and equity. This is our strength that enabled us to overcome tremendous odds to create a transformative future for our people. India must continue to demonstrate to the world how a country with innumerable languages, religions, cultures and ethnicities can thrive while celebrating diversity. India must be a beacon to other countries with our record of building and sustaining a vibrant democracy. India must showcase our success in creating one of the world's leading economies that balances growth with equity. India must show that it is possible to translate idealistic visions into lived realities.

The writer is interim president, Indian National Congress

INDIA'S ROAD AHEAD: THE CHALLENGE & COMPASS

Prime Minister's urgency for marking the way forward is insistent and striking. It calls for, as he said, 'sabka prayas' — but it needs to underline and acknowledge the 'sabka'

IF THERE WAS a theme to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's nearly 90-minute Independence Day address from Red Fort, it was this: The nation cannot wait any longer. *Yahi samay hai, sahi samay hai*, this is the time, this is the right time, was the refrain, in a sprawling speech that urged a pause in the nation's *vikas yatra* (journey of progress) for a rededication and renewal — of *sankalp, parishram, parakram*, resolve, hard work and valour. And he set urgent timelines. The nation was entering an "Amrit Kaal" of 25 years at the end of which it would complete a hundred years of Independence, and it had already embarked upon a 75-week "Amrit Mahotsav" or commemoration of 75 years as an independent nation, till August 15, 2023. But, he said, we must not wait even that long, because we don't have a moment to lose, "*ab ham zyada intezaar nahin kar sakte*". This, Modi's eighth I-Day speech as prime minister, was marked by an urgency that was insistent and striking.

And audacious. After all, this speech was set against a much darker backdrop of distress and decline. The Covid pandemic has set the country back in ways that are still being mapped and measured, causing a nation to hunker down behind masks and closed doors, while coping with loss and death. It has hurt an economy that was already on a downward slide, exacerbating the vulnerability and economic precarity of vast numbers of Indians without safety nets. This has also been a time when the government was seen to fumble and flounder the most, especially as the brutal second wave of infections heaved and rose.

A government that prides itself on summoning political will and deploying technology for the targeting and delivery of goods and services, from subsidised gas cylinders to zero-balance bank accounts, failed to prevent the terrible shortage of oxygen cylinders and hospital beds for its citizens even though red flags had been raised between Covid's first and second waves. In this dismal setting, it was audacious and ambitious — or perhaps strategic — for the prime minister to use the I-Day podium to talk about a makeover, frame the Big Idea, set a deadline.

OF BIG IDEAS, there were many. The PM spoke of a new marker of success of the governance scheme — *shat pratishat* hundred per cent delivery to the *labharthi* or beneficiaries. A *sarv sparshi vikas*, that touches all, would require handholding of some sections, he said, among which he emphasised the OBC. The underlining of his government's commitment to the OBCs was also a political statement with an eye on impending assembly elections — the PM pointed to the recent extension of the OBC quota in the all-India seats of medical colleges, passing of the bill to give states the power to frame their own OBC lists, and earlier, to give constitutional status to the National Commission for Backward Castes.

The PM spoke of recognising cooperative-ism alongside socialism and capitalism. He spoke of the *gati shakti yojana*, a master plan for a renewed push for employment and holistic infrastructure creation, which would reach into Tier 2 and 3 towns to tap the start-ups and unicorns, the new wealth creators. And the need to get the government to roll back unnecessary interference in citizens' affairs. There was a time, he said, when the government sat itself down on the driving seat, and it was also the need of the hour. But that period is over and it is the moment now to move ahead without the burden of outdated laws and a million compliances. There was a time, too, he said, when primacy was given to the rights of citizens — now they need to prioritise duties. To his earlier slogan of *sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas*, he added: *Sabka prayas* (everyone's effort).

IN ALL THIS, PM Modi struck more than one jarring note. The attempt to turn the spotlight to citizens' duties at a time when the country is still in the throes of a pandemic and economic recovery is uncertain, seemed too much like an abdication of government's own responsibilities. "*Sabka... prayas*" sounds good and alliterative, but it also looks like a negation of the PM's own ideas of re-energising administration and delivery, in order to pass the burden of recovery and revival on to the people amid a public health emergency. In any case, even as the PM extends the slogan, the "*sabka*" part remains underdeveloped, in idea and practice, under his government's watch.

"*Sabka...*" implies inclusiveness, and equal participation of all in the nation's journey. It calls for listening to the dissenter and political opponent, including and especially inside Parliament, which was adjourned too early a few days ago, because the government couldn't find the language or tools to engage the Opposition. And because it stonewalled demands to discuss allegations of using sophisticated spyware for targeting politicians, activists, journalists and others for snooping. The promise of "*sabka...*" requires outreach to, and handholding of, the poor and vulnerable who include OBCs, but also the minority community made more insecure by decisions and moves such as the discriminatory amendments to the law that make religion a criterion of citizenship.

The framing context for the PM's speech on August 15 was also provided by his government's announcement the previous day, of marking every August 14 as Partition Horrors Remembrance Day. The PM has a point: It is necessary to remember in order to break free of the past. But his own party's chorus in the wake of the announcement, heavy with references to "appeasement", sends disheartening signals about its real intent.

It was a speech, then, that sought to rise, to soar even. In many ways, in a dispiriting time, it did achieve its ambition, in parts. A fuller lift-off, however, will require much harder labour on the ground. Indeed, it will need *sabka prayas* — with *sab* getting their voice heard.

VACCINE EXAMPLE FOR MEDICINES

India needs processes to identify, support research in drug development



BALAJI VEERAGHAVAN, KAMINI WALIA

INDIA HAS ONE of the highest levels of antibiotic resistance, which complicates not only the treatment of life-threatening infections but also endangers outcomes in routine hospital procedures. The benefits gained through medical advances are also put in peril when patients contract drug-resistant bacterial infections. The situation has been further complicated by the pandemic, with 3-4 per cent Covid patients acquiring secondary bacterial infections. A recent ICMR study reported a disturbingly high mortality rate of 56 per cent among Covid patients infected with resistant bacterial infections.

The silent pandemic of antimicrobial resistance does not draw the required level of attention and resources. This omission has impacted new drug development — research has stagnated with all major pharma companies exiting the arena. The reasons range from poor return on investment, the complexity of discovering novel antibiotics for multidrug-resistant pathogens, the high cost of bringing a novel antibiotic to the market, and irrational use that renders drugs ineffective and contributes to their

short market-life. Worse, antibiotics, recently discovered and developed in the West, do not find their way to India in a timely manner. It took about five to six years for novel antibiotics such as daptomycin and ceftaroline to be introduced in India after their initial launch in the US. Antibiotics such as imipenem/relebactam, and meropenem/vaborbactam, available in the US and EU for more than two years now, are yet to be introduced in India.

The development of the Covid vaccine in India was made possible by the timely infusion of funds as a result of advance purchase payments to companies involved in production. The Covid vaccine story needs to be replicated to support the country's antibiotic needs.

The bulk of initial drug development happens in small and medium-sized entities and academic institutions that are dependent on external funding and development partnerships. India needs to put together a plan for developing new antimicrobials. As a first step, the government needs to recognise the snags and deficiencies in the production pipeline. Efforts should be

initiated to consolidate the country's existing strengths in pharmaceuticals by engaging relevant actors. Independent studies demonstrating the therapeutic value of novel drugs could contribute to identifying drugs whose development can be undertaken.

Despite constraints, the antibiotic space in India has seen a few successes. The novel combination cefepime-zidebactam discovered in the country, and highly effective against multidrug-resistant pathogens in animal studies and early human studies, has come under the ambit of the US FDA's QIDP scheme to promote development of antibacterial drugs. It is time that such valuable leads from Indian laboratories mature into ready-to-use drugs for the country's patients. That will provide a strong impetus to making the country atmanirbhar in healthcare.

Veeraghavan is Hilda Lazarus Core Research Chair, CMCH, Vellore; Walia is Scientist, Division of Epidemiology and Communicable Diseases, Antimicrobial Resistance Surveillance and Research Network, ICMR

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AUGUST 16, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

PM'S WARNING

THE PRIME MINISTER has warned that measures would be taken to curb anti-social and anti-national practices like hoarding, profiteering and black marketing. Speaking on the 54th anniversary of Independence, Mrs Gandhi asserted that the people asked for stern measures against anti-social elements but when such measures were introduced, some others came out protesting against them. Nevertheless, the government was determined to deal strictly with anti-social elements. "We have a good harvest at the moment," Mrs Gandhi said and went on to pose the question, why there should

be food imports. Imports had been ordered to counteract the moves of those who were planning to hoard stocks to jack up prices.

MONSOON SESSION

DESPITE THE OPPOSITION having failed to chalk up a strategy, the Monsoon Session of Parliament beginning on August 16 is bound to be a stormy one. Its numerical superiority notwithstanding, the ruling party seems to be in for a tough time, especially because of the government's failure on the price front. In the absence of a joint opposition programme, however, it's tough to

predict what issues will dominate the session.

ASSAM BANDH

THERE WAS A partial to near complete response in Assam to the 24-hour bandh called by the AASU and the AACSP on August 15, which passed off peacefully. Barring stray clashes between Congress(I) workers and agitators in Upper Assam, a few incidents of picketing where the police intervened and an explosion at a railway track in Maligaon near Guwahati, no untoward incident was reported. About 50 people have been taken into custody.



FREEZE FRAME

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9 THE IDEAS PAGE

Learning from China

Beijing's experience in liberating agri-markets, investing in education and skill development holds important lessons for India



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI AND RITIKA JUNEJA

AS INDIANS, WE feel proud of our independence not just on August 15, but every day of the year. After centuries of subjugation, when Indians finally breathed the air of freedom on August 15, 1947, our leaders pledged to shape the country's destiny. We have achieved several milestones, from reducing poverty to improving literacy to increasing life expectancy to modernising the economy and equipping the nation with space and digital technologies. Amongst the most important technologies was, perhaps, the one that enabled India to feed its population — the "miracle seeds" that unleashed the Green Revolution. Those seeds of change came from outside. They were adapted to the country's climatic conditions by Indian scientists, and today, India is the largest exporter of rice in the world. Grain stocks in the government's godowns are overflowing, exceeding 100 million tonnes.

But as we look back on our own journey and feel proud of our achievements, wisdom lies in also looking around to evaluate how other nations have performed, especially those which started with a similar base or even worse conditions than us. If some countries have done better than us, we should not hesitate to learn from them.

To start with, let us look at our immediate neighbours who were part of pre-independent India, namely Pakistan and Bangladesh. It is gratifying to see that independent India has done better than Pakistan if measured on a per capita income basis: India's per capita income stood at \$1,960 (in current PPP terms, it was \$6,460) in 2020, as per the IMF estimates, while Pakistan's per capita income was just \$1,260 (in PPP terms \$5,150). But Bangladesh, whose journey as an independent nation began in 1971, had a per capita income of \$2,000 (though \$5,310 in PPP terms), marginally higher than India, and certainly much higher than Pakistan in 2020.

But the real comparison of India should be with China, given the size of population of the two countries and the fact that both countries started their journey in the late 1940s. India adopted a socialist strategy while China took to communism to provide people food, good health, education and prosperity. It is ironic to note that China, during the peak of its communist era — The Great Leap Forward, 1958-61 — lost 30 million lives due to starvation. India, in contrast, managed to escape such horror with support from the USA through PL 480 grain imports.

China, having performed dismally on the economic front from 1949 to 1977, started changing track to more market-oriented policies, beginning with agriculture. Economic reforms that included the Household Responsibility System and liberation of agri-markets led to an annual av-



CR Sasikumar

erage agri-GDP growth of 7.1 per cent during 1978-1984. Farmers' real incomes increased by almost 14 per cent per annum during this period. This gave not only political legitimacy to carry out reforms in the non-agriculture sector, but also created a huge demand for manufactured products, triggering a manufacturing revolution in China's town and village enterprises. The rest is history.

By 2020, China's overall GDP was \$14.7 trillion (\$24.1 trillion in current PPP terms), competing with the USA at \$20.9 trillion. India, however, lags way behind with its overall GDP at \$2.7 trillion (\$8.9 trillion in PPP terms). The quality of life, however, depends on per capita income in PPP terms, with the USA at \$63,420, China at \$17,190 and India at \$6,460. No wonder, this is even reflected in China's rise as a sporting nation. In the recently concluded Tokyo Olympics, China won the second highest number of medals — 88 (38 gold) after USA's 113 medals (39 gold). India was at 48th position with a total of 7 medals (1 gold).

India's sluggish performance when compared to China raises doubts about its flawed democratic structure that makes economic reforms and implementation of policy changes more challenging, unlike China. We feel that India is yet to grow as a mature democracy, where differences of opinions amongst different political parties are respected. But we have to move fast. Else, we will be left far behind China, and without economic prosperity, even defending our borders and sovereignty could prove difficult.

It will take many decades for India to catch up with American standards. But if

In China, economic reforms led to an annual average agri-GDP growth of 7.1 percent during 1978-1984. Farmers' real incomes increased by almost 14 per cent per annum. This gave not only political legitimacy to carry out reforms in the non-agriculture sector but also created a huge demand for manufactured products, triggering a manufacturing revolution in China's town and village enterprises. The rest is history.

we target the Chinese standards over the next decade or two, India can perhaps do better. Remember, China's reforms started with agriculture, and India till date had been avoiding agriculture reforms. Even for manufacturing to grow on a sustainable basis, we have to increase the purchasing power of people in rural areas. This has to be done by raising their productivity and not by distributing freebies. It requires investments in education, skills, health and physical infrastructure, besides much higher R&D in agriculture, both by the government as well as by the private sector. This requires a different institutional set-up than the one we currently have. Liberating agri-markets is part of the reform package that China followed. That's the first lesson.

The second lesson is a bit controversial: China adopted the one-child norm from 1979-2015. As a result, its per capita income grew much faster. India's attempts to control its population succeeded only partially and very slowly. Poor education, especially that of the girl child, is at the core of this failure. Compulsory enforcement of population control measures could boomerang politically. The population control bill drafted by the UP Law Commission has attracted much controversy. But given that UP's average family size is six — the largest in the country (2011 census) — compared to just three in China, increasing household income is a big challenge. We feel the focus of economic policy has to be on quality education, skill development, and agriculture reforms. Can India do that? Only time will tell.

Gulati is Infosys Chair professor and Juneja is consultant at ICRIER

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The international community must send a strong message to the Taliban: when they do take Kabul, if their country is used to host transnational terrorists, there will be consequences." — DAWN

The promise of August 15, 1947

The liberties Independence promised are under threat, a new freedom struggle is needed to protect them



D RAJA

ON AUGUST 15, seventy-four years ago, our nation began her tryst with destiny. The political independence achieved in 1947 was the result of decades of peoples' struggles. Recognising the exploitative nature of British rule, people had started resisting the colonial masters much before organised platforms and political parties came to lead them. These spontaneous uprisings were ruthlessly suppressed, leaving an indelible print on the collective memory of the people.

The struggles were multifaceted: There was no singular method nor one universal demand. Freedom meant different things for different sections of society. For women, it was liberation from patriarchal subjugation. For Dalits and Shudras, it meant liberation from the hegemony of Brahmanism. For Adivasis, it was the freedom to reclaim forest land, from the constant fear of displacement in the name of development. For religious minorities, it was freedom from potential subjugation by majoritarian communalism and the right to practice their faith. Common to all of this was the clear understanding that colonial rule was draining the country of its resources.

In the initial decades of the 20th century, when the liberation movement was bringing communities closer, we saw Mohammed Ali Jinnah defending Tilak in a sedition case and Bhagat Singh arguing against communalism. Babasaheb Ambedkar was trying to make his struggle for liberation from caste-based exploitation inclusive of women's liberation and against feudal economic exploitation. In the anti-feudal struggles that Ambedkar led, the exploited among the upper castes participated in large numbers. All these contributed to the freedom movement along with mass movements led by Gandhi and the Congress and the militant class struggles led by a nascent communist movement and other radical revolutionary organisations.

Freedom fighters understood independence from British rule as freedom from all forms of exploitation and oppression, which was deeply embedded in the social structures indigenous to India. The orthodox and obscurantist sections of the society in coalition with organised institutions of power like zamindars, feudal principalities or *ryasats*, and the newly emerging affluent in colonial India resisted the progressive impulses of the freedom movement. One thing common to these forces was their allegiance to the British. The RSS, born in 1925, consolidated the communal Manuvadi tendencies.

During debates in the Constituent Assembly, there was constant pressure from Hindutva forces to get India declared as a Hindu state. Examples from Ireland and other countries were constantly cited in sup-

port. Ambedkar stood like a rock against it. He rejected theocracy and warned that if at all Hindu Rashtra becomes a reality, it will be calamitous for the nation. The assassination of Gandhi by Nathuram Godse, who had links with RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha, marked the beginning of a consolidated and organised assault on secular values.

Ambedkar framed the Constitution in such a way that the values of freedom struggle were enshrined in all its parts. The Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy protected citizens from arbitrary state action. The Constitution makes it mandatory for the Indian state to be secular and build a welfare state. Ambedkar outlined a path to development that was inclusive and in line with social justice and socialism.

On August 15, 1947, the power to administer areas under direct British rule alone was transferred. A significant part of India was under 500-plus native rulers then, among them the Nizam of Hyderabad and Hari Singh who ruled Kashmir. From 1947 to 1950, the founding leaders were occupied with the twin tasks of bringing all these into the new country besides preparing a Constitution for it. The Constituent Assembly of India was elected by the provincial legislatures. The then largely underground Communist Party was unrepresented in the CA, but the militant mass struggles organised by the Communists influenced its agenda. Also, it left the princes, rajas and nawabs with little option but to accede to the Indian Union.

The Communists were the first to raise the demand for "complete Independence", which radicalised the freedom struggle. Hasrat Mohani, chairman of the reception committee of the first CPI conference in Kanpur, raised the demand for complete independence in a Congress session. He also coined the inspirational slogan, *Inquilab Zindabad*. An early communist, M N Roy, was the first to demand a Constituent Assembly.

Freedom from British colonialism didn't mean the end of capitalist interests. After World War II ended, a new phase of imperialist onslaught on India began, in collaboration with right-wing forces. The imperial support for right-wing forces has enabled them to widen the fault lines of our society.

In the last three decades, we have seen a process of privatisation, commercialisation and liberalisation of labour and capital markets. The RSS-BJP combine is pushing for complete corporatisation, including in agriculture, education and health. It is forcing India into an irreversible strategic partnership with America, thus killing everything progressive and democratic in our foreign policy.

We see chaos and an all-pervasive crisis around us as we approach the 75th anniversary of our independence. The state is eating away our freedoms, the Pegasus incident being a recent example. The current regime has done so much to undermine our precious independence and values attached with it that a new freedom struggle to take back our freedoms from the RSS and its Hindutva agenda has to start. It has to be waged from the grassroots to Parliament.

The writer is general secretary, CPI

Treating the invisible pandemic

Dealing with Covid-related trauma calls for sustained mental health interventions



HARISH SHETTY

INDIA RESPONDS TO visible injuries following disasters reasonably well. There are many examples of the same, including building homes after the earthquakes in Latur in 1993 and Gujarat in 2001. To the bureaucrat and the politician, rehabilitation only means providing houses, foodgrains or compensation. Though these are no doubt important, the invisible injuries to the psyche remain unfathomable to policymakers. In this pandemic, we have given lip service to mental health by merely starting a few helplines and framing protocols. That's inadequate to address the mental health pandemic currently taking shape — a fact underlined by the WHO and many other agencies.

Since the Bangalore Circus fire of 1981, disasters in India have been evaluated for their mental health consequences. Earthquakes, the Bhopal Gas tragedy, bomb blasts, and many other tragedies have been studied in detail by mental health professionals. Unfortunately, this has not led to meaningful mental health interventions largely because of poor awareness among administrators, the stigma associated with mental health issues and the lack of professionals.

Can we face the challenge in India? Yes, we can. Should we lament that we do not have enough mental health professionals? No. Mental health intervention is not rocket science. A compassionate ear, support, reassurance, and tools for tackling grief can be taught to mental health soldiers. Working in pairs prevents burnout. Experts can supervise the entire process and are useful during emergencies, to treat disorders and serious

illnesses after a catastrophe.

Every disaster may or may not have a pre-impact phase but it always has an impact phase, a post-impact phase, and a late post-impact phase. The pandemic is unique as the impact phase has been in a continuum for 14 months affecting billions across the world. Surveys and studies across the world reveal an increased prevalence of emotional disturbances and mental disorders during this outbreak.

A report released by the Ministry of Health and ICMR in December 2019 just before the pandemic stated that one out of seven Indians is mentally ill, and approximately 20 crore people in India need treatment. A National Crime Records Bureau study of 2019 also mentions that one out of three people who take their own lives are torn apart by family problems. Nearly a fourth of those who lose their lives after inflicting self-damage are daily wage labourers. The relationship between poverty and emotional disturbances is also well known. Mental health is also related to food and nutrition.

Covid-19 has exacerbated such vulnerabilities. Unresolved grief can erupt in the years to come. Six vulnerable groups need immediate mental health intervention. Families who have lost their dear ones to Covid. Those who have the infection or have recovered from it, as well as their families. Healthcare workers and those involved in emergency services. Those who have lost jobs and incurred financial losses. Those with pre-existing mental or physical illnesses. Children, marginalised groups and elders.

Many who have been affected by an overdose of negative stories, and exposed to distress also need support.

Governments, both at the state and Centre, fall back on their own institutions for massive programmes. This is not always pragmatic as they need to take care of their own hospital load. More than 80 per cent of mental healthcare in India happens outside these institutions. Altruism and seva are hallmarks of Indian culture. Psychologists, psychiatrists, medical social workers, counsellors, ASHA workers, NGOs and emotional aid workers can be easily enrolled for this humane task. Many are willing but they would require a structured approach to providing grief counselling. The effort should be coordinated by state governments and the module can be adapted to the needs, resources available, and the cultural contexts of a region.

Counselling has to be entirely voluntary, preferably in groups, largely online, and in the local language. Every district can have two coordinators from the mental health field. A protocol can be evolved by a core team — a multidisciplinary mental health taskforce — after detailed discussions. Protocols should include tools for screening, counselling, and an algorithm for referrals. It should also have processes for directing emergency treatment of those with serious symptoms — these interventions should be documented. All teams need to undergo orientation for at least 18 hours initially and periodically for two hours every 15 days so that standardisation in interventions can be assured. There should be scope for individual

innovations within this framework. The outcome of the interventions needs to be measurable and built into the treatment process. The intervention period may be six months or as long as required by the pandemic survivor. The process should be secular and free from any religious or political ideology. Monthly meetings of the team leaders are necessary for troubleshooting, course correction, and continuous capacity building. District coordinators need to meet once a week to negotiate difficulties, smoothen rough edges and assist the smooth transaction of the therapeutic process. As the epidemic abates, "live" interventions may also be possible.

After screening, the team will categorise survivors into groups based on requirements — counselling, medication, or both, hospitalisation, simple advice and information. They will be assessed by simple psychological instruments every two weeks. These instruments will be decided during the meetings to finalise the entire protocol. The entire process will be pro bono for the survivor. Similarly, the participation by the mental health professionals from the private sector will also be voluntary and pro bono.

In certain areas, physical access may be the only method to provide such treatment. Adequate safety measures need to be taken during such visits.

It's often said that time is the best healer. That unfortunately is not always so. Mental health intervention completes the rehabilitation cycle and makes it robust and holistic.

The writer is a Mumbai-based psychiatrist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

OPEN OUR DOORS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Return of a spectre' (IE, August 14). The displacement and persecution of Afghan citizens who refuse to toe the Taliban's line will feed into a new refugee crisis. Though India is not a signatory to either the UN Convention on Refugees 1951 or its 1967 Protocol, Article 21 of our Constitution provides for the fundamental right to life to all, and not just citizens of India. The principle of non-refoulement, which requires each nation to not return a people forcefully back to the nation where they are threatened with such persecution, is implicit in the fundamental Right to Life. A dedicated refugee law should be enacted by the Parliament to deal with such crises. Above all, India, as a crucible of civilisations, has always been welcoming of all those seeking asylum.

Vinay Saroha, Delhi

AT A CROSSROADS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The 1947 we choose' (IE, August 14). While the idea of India as imagined by our leaders endures even in these trying times, the parallels to the 1930s are sobering. A deep-seated unease with our diversity and the poison of communalism have unleashed horrors. As we stand at the crossroads, we must stay true to the ideals of our Constitution.

Ila Raikar, Mumbai

PEOPLE'S HOUSE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'India misses its House' (IE, August 14). Parliament is a fountainhead of free-

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thinking, a bastion of universal human values and ethics and represents every citizen. It is not a bailiwick of a particular party to promote its own or its ideological mentor's self-serving agenda. The NDA government has, therefore, undermined it by ordering marshals to evict from the House Opposition leaders asking it to come clean on sensitive matters agitating the whole nation.

Tarsem Singh, Mahilpur

CREDIBILITY NEEDED

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Crime and politics' (IE, August 13). Political parties need to make a paradigm shift — the criterion for approval of a candidate shouldn't be winnability but credibility and legitimacy. The onus of electing a criminally charged candidate can never entirely lie on voters. It is distributed among three pillars of democracy.

Melvin Thomas, Bhopal