



## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

### WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Leadership vacuum at the top is hurting Congress even in strongholds, may weaken fightback of national Opposition

THE CONGRESS FOOTPRINT has shrunk and the grand old party now has chief ministers in only three states — Punjab, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. A revival of the party's electoral prospects is contingent on its guarding the fortresses while rallying troops in other states. By all accounts, however, that seems a tall challenge for the party, as infighting grows louder and the high command is unable to keep the peace. In Punjab, it woke up late to a simmering rebellion against Chief Minister Amarinder Singh and tried to resolve the crisis by appointing Navjot Singh Sidhu as the PCC chief, but the dissenters have now demanded that a new leader be the face of the party's campaign for assembly elections due in about six months. In Chhattisgarh, the differences between CM Bhupesh Baghel and senior minister T S Singh Deo forced Rahul Gandhi to intervene, but there is no sign that the two leaders have buried their differences. The factional feud in Rajasthan that nearly cost the Congress its government last year could revive at any time. The picture that emerges is of a party with no captain at the helm, or a high command unable to draw red lines in a crisis.

Factional feuds have been intrinsic to the Congress since its formation, and splits have not been uncommon either. But those were caused more by ideological differences. Subsequently, leaders driven by personal ambitions have moved out not just to form their own outfits but also to join or ally with ideological opponents — former Congress leaders head governments in West Bengal, Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. In recent times, the dots can be connected with a visibly deepening leadership crisis — the Congress has been without a full-time president since Rahul Gandhi quit after the 2019 election debacle. Sonia Gandhi has since taken over as interim president, but that has not helped to stanch the bleeding. In states where the rebels are leaders who command support at the grassroots, the high command seems unable to enforce its writ or discipline. And the leadership vacuum has emboldened warring factions to ignore the directives from the indeterminate top to reconcile their differences. Central emissaries — senior leaders like Mallikarjun Kharge and Harish Rawat — have failed to get the dissenters to fall in line or make state satraps deliver on their promises, mainly because the high command has lost authority. The absence of a fleet-footed and decisive central leadership helped the BJP outsmart the Congress in Goa and Manipur in 2017, and led to the collapse of the Kamal Nath government in Madhya Pradesh and the JD(S)-Congress alliance in Karnataka in 2020.

A rudderless Congress is bad for itself, and it is also likely to hurt the prospects of the Opposition, which seems to sense an opening in the government's management of the pandemic. The Congress continues to be in a pole position in the opposition space. But the party needs to urgently set its house in order if it wants to assume leadership.

### THE INDORE TEST

Mob assault on bangle-seller, political silence in aftermath, challenge CM Chouhan's record as leader and administrator

THE ATTACK ON a Muslim bangle-seller in an Indore neighbourhood is another example of a Hindutva mob targeting a citizen for his religion, on the pretext of "protecting Hindu women". The Madhya Pradesh government's response to the violence has been to let the communal pot simmer. While the police arrested four men for abusing and thrashing Tasleem Ali for daring to step into a "Hindu area", Home Minister Narottam Mishra appeared to condone the violence, alleging that Ali had used a "Hindu name" and owned two Aadhaar cards. Subsequently, Ali has been booked and arrested on charges, among others, of forgery and attempting to harass the minor daughter of one of the men accused of assault. Meanwhile, organisations that claim to "protect Hindu rights" have taken out rallies in the city, ratcheting up the divisive rhetoric. The attack on Ali follows a few communally sensitive incidents in Indore.

The apparent silence and inaction of Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, who is best placed to calm tensions and defuse provocative situations, is, therefore, all the more disturbing. The communal belligerence on public display was, by and large, absent in his earlier three terms as chief minister. Within the BJP, Chouhan had earned himself a reputation for being a leader with an instinct for moderation and consensus. In his fourth term as chief minister — in which power has been wrested not by mandate, but by the fall of the Congress government — he appears to be on visibly unsure ground, as ministers more adept at rabble-raising are increasingly seen and heard. Signs of him shedding a moderate persona came in January this year, when he threatened a law against "stone-pelters" as unrest in the Malwa region followed an aggressive fund collection drive for the Ram temple in Ayodhya. The state government also followed the UP example by endorsing the paranoia over "love jihad" with an anti-conversion bill against inter-faith marriage.

Chouhan's record of providing a stable government, his recent stand against the real estate mafia, and Indore's reputation as a city where civic governance has benefited ordinary people are all put at risk if communal antagonisms are allowed to play out unchecked. In many parts of the country, majoritarian mobilisation has licensed violence against ordinary Muslims, threatening to divide cities and villages into spaces for "us" and "them", and reduce citizens to their religious identities. Down this road lie social disharmony and more violence. The Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister must end this sense of drift, and arrest this politics of unreason.

### WHAT XI THINKS TODAY

Chinese president's thoughts are now part of school curriculum. But can he bank on deference of a captive audience?

XI JINPING IS living the patriarch's dream. Like men of a certain age and type on every family WhatsApp group, he has "thoughts" on morality, politics, nationalism, character, everything. The only difference is that Xi is arguably the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao Zedong and he has a captive audience of a billion. So, in schools and colleges across China, students will now have to sit through lectures on Xi's "fundamental principles" to "cultivate the builders and successors of socialism with an all-round moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetic grounding".

China's suprema is hardly the only political leader to want what's on his mind to be the talk of the classroom and the nation. Or, have an inflated sense of self-importance. Since there is no opposition in a one-party state — when it raises its head, it is instantly criminalised — the Great Leader can perhaps be forgiven for insisting that an entire generation imbibe, as dogma, his version of Marxism along with his plans for an ancient civilisation. But what the man on the pulpit often forgets is that these top-down lectures can be counterproductive.

As anyone who has sat through an interminable school assembly will attest, students are not swayed by the high-minded tripe that emanates from old men in power. In fact, even the most well-meaning lecture by a school or college principal is instantly satirised by the "back-benchers". For years, educators as well as parents and grandparents have tried to instil *sanskrit* in their wards. They have never quite succeeded. What "strong leaders", in China and beyond, must be wary of is the subdued sniggering in the back of the room. And the young men and women, who may one day point out that the fine fabric they weave with their words is, in fact, see-through.

## Connect with Kabul

Why, on Afghanistan, India must not send message of wait and watch, or of retreat



RADHA KUMAR

ON THURSDAY, EXTERNAL Affairs Minister S Jaishankar briefed the Opposition parties on India's Afghanistan policy in the wake of the Taliban takeover. The main focus of his briefing was on India's evacuation effort, but he also added that the Indian government's policy is to wait and watch.

The briefing appears to leave as much unsaid as said. On evacuation, the Modi administration has prioritised safe passage for our citizens and minorities of Indian origin over our Afghan allies. Indeed, the Home Ministry has gone even further: It now says that any Afghans wishing to evacuate to India must apply for e-visas, and all other existing visas will not be honoured. This is a breathtaking demand to make of people in hiding, many without internet access. Are we simply abandoning the Afghans who worked for our embassy and consulates, students on Indian scholarships, human rights defenders, MPs and officials who might be under threat? One Afghan MP, who flew to Delhi from Istanbul to see her doctor, has already been turned back, to our eternal shame.

The urgency to leave is as great, if not greater, for Afghans. The Taliban oppose the flight of Afghans and have already started turning them away from the airport road. While the US and UK have prioritised evacuation of their citizens, as have other countries, they have also transported out thousands of Afghans who worked with them.

By contrast, the number of potentially at-risk Afghans that we have evacuated number a few dozen, including Hindu and Sikh minorities. The recent evacuation on August 24 of 78 people, including Indian nationals and members of minorities, suggests that our planes might be flying half-empty. Given the Taliban's ban on evacuating Afghans, it is now vital for our government to seek to negotiate their travel to India, either on its own or in tandem with those G-7 countries that pledged they would negotiate safe passage for both foreigners and Afghans who wish to exit, beyond the August 31 deadline. When it comes to students, especially, our case should be strong. They are not seeking to flee the coun-

try; they are availing of educational opportunities that will enable them to contribute to Afghanistan's development.

In view of the above, whether we can call waiting and watching a policy option is debatable; arguably, it is more akin to abnegation of responsibility. Indeed, it is not clear that the Modi administration is waiting and watching. Indian diplomats have already begun to focus international attention on the threat of terrorist revival following the Taliban takeover, as have several other countries. Terrorism has been India's chief focus since assuming the presidency of the UN Security Council. In other words, we will wait and watch when it comes to the fast-changing events in Afghanistan but will warn proactively against the potential revival of terrorist threats.

Few will deny that there is such a potential threat, despite the Taliban's assurance to the contrary. Indeed, threats have already begun to escalate at the Kabul airport. But to focus solely on this issue, disregarding not only our obligations to the thousands of Afghans whom we worked with and the infrastructure that we built, but also other key threats due to the rapidly changing geopolitics of our region, displays fatalism. Most of our neighbours and the great and middle powers are engaging with the Taliban; not only to pursue their own interests but also to create mechanisms to hold the Taliban to their stated commitments, for example on human and women's rights.

At the recently concluded session of the UN Human Rights Council, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, called for a monitoring mission on human rights in Afghanistan, but the council voted in a watered-down resolution asking Bachelet to report on the situation at its next session. Reportedly, the Indian representative did not refer to the resolution at all, though he stressed the need for humanitarian assistance, an inclusive government and no sanctuaries for the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed.

The G-7 similarly watered down calls for sanctions if the Taliban do not honour pledges on girls' education — to demand a commitment to education for girls only up to the age

of 18. In effect, the resolution accepted the Taliban's decree in Herat that co-education is not acceptable, even at the post-graduate level. While this may permit all-girls' schools to continue, the same degree of demand is unlikely at the post-graduate level, unless the Taliban actively encourage the setting up of all-girls' colleges, something the international community is yet to seek.

Several EU member-states are already calling for firmer action on human rights. This demand does not conflict with other demands that the Taliban appear to be trying to fulfil and that have widespread international support, for example, continuing negotiations with former President Hamid Karzai, head of peace negotiations Dr Abdullah and the Panjshiri resistance, with whom they are reportedly trying to agree a ceasefire.

From the Indian statement at the UN Human Rights Council, it appears that the Modi administration might contribute to humanitarian aid for Afghanistan under Taliban rule, so long as the Taliban adhere to the red line on anti-India terrorist groups. The same levers — aid, the chair of the UN sanctions committee and support for an inclusive Afghan government — can also be used for evacuation, pressure on human rights and, down the line, trade access to Central Asia. Wait and watch cannot, surely, entail losing the gains made with Central Asia through common concerns over Afghan security and the stability and economic growth of its neighbours. At present, the message we are sending out to these countries is one of retreat. This is not a message we can afford to send, when China and Pakistan are cementing their power in the region, along with their alliance against India. Nor can we afford to alienate the Taliban to the point that they afford sanctuary to anti-India groups. Engage and expand your leverage is more practical than retreat and let China and Pakistan gain ground (aka wait and watch to many).

Kumar is a writer and policy analyst. Her latest book is *Paradise at War: A Political History of Kashmir*

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AMITABH KUNDU

A BANGLE-SELLER, whom Sarojini Naidu would have described as selling "lustrous tokens of radiant lives", was beaten up for carrying out his business under an assumed Hindu name. This is not an isolated incident nor is it specific to the BJP era of governance. Several Muslims, including celebrities, have accepted Hindu or secular identities just to have greater acceptability in the public domain. Incidents of such violence are also not uncommon. One had only hoped that communal prejudices would disappear or get less severe over time but that, unfortunately, does not seem to be happening. While one may accept or debate the issues of state protection for cows, "love jihad" and disincentives to persons for having many children, these being used as an alibi for harassing ordinary citizens must not be tolerated.

With the start of the pandemic in March 2020, there were rumours of certain social groups being super-spreaders. These got linked with social media messages urging people to boycott purchase of commodities and services marketed by the groups. These were noted but mostly downplayed by political leaders, civil society and media. The question is: Did they affect labour market outcomes differently for different communities?

The recent Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2019-20 brings out the changes in the employment structure and earnings of workers of different communities in rural and urban areas during April-June 2020 (pandemic quarter) compared to the preceding quarter, Jan-March 2020 (pre-pandemic quarter) or the corresponding quarter in the previous year (April-June 2019). This suggests that the dif-

## AN UNEVEN BURDEN

Pandemic may not have class or community bias. Its economic fallout does

ferential impact of the pandemic on the labour market, captured through changes in the first two quarters of 2020, has not been inconsequential. The deficits in the pandemic quarter compared to the corresponding quarter in the preceding year across communities shows a similar pattern, and hence have been excluded here for the sake of brevity.

The self-employed had to bear the brunt of the onslaught of the pandemic. The percentage of people who did not work (reporting no work during the reference week) went up from 6.1 per cent in rural and 7.6 per cent in urban areas in the pre-pandemic quarter to 15.6 per cent and 29.9 per cent, respectively, in the pandemic quarter. The rise was extremely uneven across communities and gender.

In rural areas, the percentage of persons with no work among the self-employed among the SC/ST population, Muslims and others (non-SC/ST and non-Muslim) increased from 6.9 per cent, 8.6 per cent and 5.5 per cent, respectively, to 15.1 per cent, 27.5 per cent and 13.7 per cent, respectively. Clearly the impact was starker for Muslims, followed by the SC/STs. A similar story emerges in urban areas, but the impact here is far more severe (due to higher compliance of lockdown restrictions) but not as differentiated across communities as in rural areas. People with no work formed 7.7 per cent, 11 per cent and 7.1 per cent of SC/STs, Muslims and others, respectively, and these went up to 39.2 per cent, 42.6 per cent and 39.3 per cent, respectively. Muslims stand out with the highest rate of unemployment. The unemployment rate also went up sharply for women from 6.3 per cent

to 44 per cent over this period, the corresponding figures for men being 7.8 per cent and 39.0 per cent respectively.

The fall in average earnings follows a similar pattern. In rural areas, monthly earnings during the Covid quarter were 9 per cent less than the average for the year 2019-20. The deficit, however, is 21 per cent in urban areas. Muslims, in rural areas, recorded the maximum decline of 13 per cent, while for the others, it was close to the average. SC/STs suffered the least damage, possibly due to the indispensable nature of their services. The gap for both men and women turned out to be about 9 per cent, similar to the average in rural areas.

In urban areas, the fall in earnings during the pandemic quarter is very high. The maximum loss suffered — 27 per cent — is by the SC/ST community. For the Muslims and the others, the corresponding figure was 20 per cent. The earning loss for Muslims is less than their employment loss. This suggests that their job losses have been more at the lower level. In the case of the SC/ST population, earning losses have been across the board, resulting in higher earning deficits than the Muslims. The deficit is marginally higher for women than men, despite a high deficit in employment. This again can be explained in terms of greater loss of jobs for women at the lower level.

The pandemic may not have a class or community bias, but its economic fallout certainly seems to have it.

The writer is research advisor, Oxfam India. Assistance of K Varghese, JNU, in data analysis is acknowledged



## AUGUST 27, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

### MIRAGE DEAL

FRANCE IS EXPECTED to sign a deal with India for the supply of the latest version of the multipurpose Mirage jets, according to French sources. When the negotiations are completed, India, will, for the present, receive 150 aircraft of which 40 will be built in France, 65 in India, and 45 partly in France and India. The value of the contract is not known. But the *Times of London* has said that preliminary arrangements had been made, running into about 900 million pounds. The mode of payment is yet to be negotiated. A draft of the agreement will be drawn when an Indian military mission visits Paris next

month. The final agreement may be signed within two months.

### MINISTER FACES FLAK

THE COMMUNICATIONS MINISTER C M Stephens faces a breach of privilege charge for interception of letters addressed to members of Parliament. The Rajya Sabha secretariat is considering a notice sent by L K Advani, leader of the BJP in the House. Advani has condemned Stephens's statement that interception of mail was permitted by law. He said the India Post Office Act was enacted in 1898 by imperialists and used against people whose public activities were suspected.

### ZAIL SINGH BYPASSED

MAJOR ADMINISTRATIVE DECISIONS under the purview of the Home Ministry are being taken by the Prime Minister's Secretariat and the Home Minister Zail Singh is just informed about them. P C Alexander, Principal Secretary to the PM, and Krishnaswami Rao Sahib, Cabinet Secretary, mostly attend to these matters.

### ANGOLA THREAT

ANGOLA HAS THREATENED to send in Cuban troops to repulse a blitzkrieg-style invasion by South African forces.



C.R. Sasikumar

# Memories have many faces

1947 did not only involve violence by 'them' on 'us'. Remembering its savagery must begin with recognising our complicity — and finding a way to heal and move on



URVASHI BUTALIA

LONG YEARS AGO, in a crowded market in Amritsar, Mangal Singh, a Partition refugee, recounted his story to me. Together with two of his brothers, Mangal Singh had killed — he said martyred — 18 members of his own family, mostly women and children, because of the fear that they could be raped, abducted, impregnated and, if that happened, the "honour" of the *quam* would be compromised.

He was not alone in this, over the years as researched Partition, this narrative would appear again and again — in Delhi, in Alwar, in Thoha Khalsa, in Thamlai, men killed women of their own families ostensibly to "protect" them. Today, because of the work of Partition scholars, this violence is known, but, at the time, the narrative of Partition violence was so overwhelmingly one where the killers were the "others" that such accounts had no place in them. We could not admit that we had been violent too.

At the time, I asked Mangal Singh how he had dealt with the knowledge and the grief of what he had done, how he had lived with those terrible memories of, yes, mass murder. He said, "Look around you at this land of the Punjab. We call it *sone di chhria*, we have put all our forgetting into this land, we have irrigated it with our tears."

Later, he took me to the Golden Temple where, engraved in the walls, were the names of the entire lost family. Every year, on the anniversary of their death, Mangal Singh came to the gurdwara and prayed for peace and forgiveness.

The stories of men killing the "weak" in their own families were not the only ones that emerged. Close on their heels came the stories of women, their mass abduction and rape, the mutilation of their bodies, the ways in which they were treated as property.

This, too, wasn't something we could only

lay at the door of the "other" for plenty of men of our "own" did this to our "own" women (Current histories of political violence have shown how practised we are at sexually assaulting our "own" women). And yet, here too the overwhelming narrative was that "our" women were violated by "their" men, and the "we" and "they" were defined quite unproblematically in terms of religion.

In theory, Partition was done and dusted in 1947. But the memories do not end there. Nor can they only be set at the door of "madness" or *junoon*. Take until recently the relatively unknown history of Marichjhapi, where lower-caste "untouchable" refugees, who were not welcome in the eyes of the state, were sent after being moved from place to place and were then forcefully evicted in the late 1970s by the Left Front government in Bengal. This, too, is a shameful Partition history that we cannot lay at someone else's door.

One summer, my travels took me to Ramallah in Palestine. We entered the town on the memorial day for Al Nakba, the catastrophic moment in 1948 when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were expelled from their land. I wondered how this day would be marked: Whether there would be anger, fiery speeches, hatred. Indeed, on the borders of the town, violence had erupted, but inside, where the ceremonies were taking place, there was quiet. And a firm resolve to never forget.

Traumatic memories have many faces. They are, like life itself, complicated and are often caught in battles over the politics of remembering. For the Palestinians, remembering the catastrophe is a way of keeping alive the battle for justice, the battle for recognition that the land in which they have become refugees is theirs. In this way, their battle is similar to that of the women of Kashmir mourning the disappearance of their men, and their resolve to never forget: That memory is their weapon in the fight for justice.

For women victims and survivors of rape and abduction, memory is messy — betrayed by their families, often coercively relocated by the state, sold into slavery by their abductors, sometimes coercively married. How can this be remembered? And yet, how must it be remembered? Clearly, there's nothing simple about memorialising traumatic histories. Many countries have put in place important experiments with memory, always with the end goal of healing, reconciling, acknowledging, learning from our mistakes. Despite many moments of terrible violence in their histories, India and Pakistan have made no such attempts.

Clearly, there's nothing simple about memorialising traumatic histories. Across the world, we have many examples of nations/countries that have put in place important experiments with memory, always with the end goal of healing, reconciling, acknowledging, learning from our mistakes and moving on.

Despite many moments of terrible violence in their histories, India and Pakistan have made no such attempts. If and when we do, the work of memory has to be approached with caution, with humility and with the openness to accept uncomfortable truths.

During Partition, for example, there were no clear perpetrators or victims. Remembering Partition violence then begins with recognising our complicity, our participation in it. It begins with going beyond the violence perpetrated by the other and turning the mirror on ourselves. Have we silenced histories of family violence? Why? Because they relate to women and women are dispensable? These are not easy questions.

Perhaps, the biggest challenge to memory is this: Can peoples, nations, remember together? Seventy-five years after Partition, can India and Pakistan come together to share memories of this defining moment in their histories?

In 1947, two men, a Sikh and a Muslim, an Indian and a Pakistani, both refugees of Partition, built a friendship with each other on the basis of letters they wrote. "I write to you," Harkishan Das Bedi wrote from Jalandhar to Chaudhry Latif in Lahore, "as a human being. ... We are human beings first and Hindu and Muslim only after that."

The two men's friendship enabled them to talk of everything, to share sorrow, despair, loss, and to begin healing. Is it too much to hope, to imagine that one day, in the not-too-distant future, India and Pakistan may mark a Partition remembrance day together, that they may share not only the horrors but also the stories of friendship and love? Is 75 years not enough to turn hate into its opposite?

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ROHIT WANCHOO

# The mentor and his institution

Historian David Baker was a teacher and friend at St Stephen's College

THE PASSING away of David Baker marks the end of an era. He will be remembered with much affection by all those he came in contact with — students, staff, *karamcharis* and alumni. He joined St Stephen's College in 1969 and for five decades was an integral part of its life. He was an excellent teacher, mentor, author and historian and his life is an example of simple living and high thinking.

A demanding teacher, Baker insisted on getting his tutorial assignments on time. They were graded meticulously and returned with extensive comments. Erring students were summoned, and they complied quickly. Even though he could have moved into a college house soon after he began teaching, he lived in the two-room set for tutors. His block was the quietest and much sought after by the students who wanted to study, sleep before midnight or escape ragging.

Although he was strict about tutorials, the dress code in the dining hall, decorum in the main building or noise in the residence blocks, Baker was popular with students. Always ready to speak up for them, he befriended and mentored generations of students. He organised tea and sandwiches for

his block students, listened to their problems and went out for dinners with them. Many of the students he befriended and mentored over the years are in touch with him today.

In many ways, Baker lived according to the norms of Oxbridge dons — combining a commitment to undergraduate teaching with academic research. In 1979, 1993 and 2007, Oxford University Press in Delhi published three of his books on central India — the focus area of his research. The first dealt with political history, the second with features of colonialism and the third explored the relation between region and nation in Central India. His commitment to research was lifelong and he visited the archives at least once every week, for many years, long after his retirement. While many academics — retired or serving — would prefer more fashionable places like the India International Centre or the Habitat Centre, Baker was a regular at the National Archives of India.

After years of diligent research, he accumulated a large number of index cards, recording notes about the history of St Stephen's College and its relationship with the city in which it is located. He painstakingly collected details about the city of Delhi, the students who came to the college and the men who taught and worked in it. All Stephanians love their alma mater but David Baker's whole life was devoted to the college. He completed the book before his death and it is his final tribute to the institution he loved so much.

Baker came to St Stephen's College in 1969 as a young Australian academic and eventually settled in India. He was in touch with his family members in Australia till the very end but made India his home. Annual excursions to several historical sites with students and regular visits to friends during the summer vacation brought him closer to Indian culture. On college trips, he would not allow students to carry his luggage because he did not approve of this aspect of Indian culture. Once when I offered to help him with his bag when he was in his late seventies, he firmly refused. It was his will power and a fierce spirit of self-reliance that kept him going in later life. If Baker remained active and fit, despite eating mess food regularly for most of his adult life, it was because of his habits and self-discipline. Stephanians who almost invariably grumble about the

mess food should take note.

A devout Christian, Baker said his prayers every day without fail. In fair weather or foul, he walked across the Ridge to church every Sunday. When that became difficult, he travelled by taxi. He had a humane and catholic outlook, participated wholeheartedly in the social and cultural life of the college and generously helped several students and *karamcharis*. Every year, he visited faculty members on the campus during Holi and Diwali and enjoyed Eid and Onam lunch as much as anyone else. He belonged to a generation for whom the college played a central role in the life of both staff and students and there was greater informal interaction between them. It is from icons like Baker that Stephanians have learned a lot both within and outside the classroom.

I will miss the note in my pigeon-hole in the staff room or a call from him asking me if he could come over for a brief visit. My wife and I will miss the pleasant conversation over a cup of tea with Baker and his genteel personality.

The writer teaches history at St Stephen's College

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"THE troubling issue of forced conversions continues to be viewed largely through a majoritarian lens. Such an approach will further demoralise and alienate non-Muslims in the country and lead Pakistan further adrift from its international obligations." — DAWN

# The long road to recovery

Several indicators are being used to show a strong rebound in economy. The data should be interpreted with caution, and some scepticism



MADAN SABNAVIS

HOW IS one to judge the state of the economy? GDP growth estimates range from a high of 11 per cent, as per the government, to 9.5 per cent as per RBI, while private forecasts could go lower. CARE Ratings' forecast is 8.8-9 per cent. The variation is stark. A ridiculously priced stock market and high corporate profits have been used to vindicate the view that the economy is on the high growth path. Can one take a dispassionate view?

Three things should be kept in mind when evaluating the state of the economy. First, since the economy contracted by 7.3 per cent in 2020-21, all numbers will be exaggerated in the upward direction. Hence beware of any big growth number being interpreted as indicating a recovery.

Second, because of the lockdowns this year for two months, June is bound to be better than May and July better than June and so on. Thus, beware of interpretations based on single-month data. Cumulative numbers are better at times, but can be misleading too.

Third, what is more important is how things will play out during September-December as this is the festival-cum-harvest season which engenders spending normally.

And last, one should sift through the noise in the media, where the optimistic stance that the pandemic is behind us and there is acceleration in the economy can tend to be overstated. Often policies announced are interpreted as having already led to results. A classic example is the Production Linked Incentive scheme, which is a great policy but will work only after three years as those are the terms of engagement. Speeches and presentations made on this subject tend to be biased in a positive direction. Ask the question — are jobs being created and are people spending more?

Several indicators are used as leading signals of the economy. But here, too, we need to be careful. PMIs for manufacturing and services tell us if we are better off than the previous month. But that is not how data is normally presented as we usually talk of year-on-year growth. But it is an early signal for sure. The IIP and core sector numbers will be influenced by base numbers and come with a lag. Exports have been touted as being a driver of the economy. But remember exports fell by around 17 per cent last year. GST collections are a good indicator of consumption but tend to be volatile. Besides, the Centre has estimated already that it will have to borrow Rs 1.5 lakh crore to compensate states this year, which means that there will be shortfalls again. We need to look at the bigger picture

and not get swayed by headlines stating that we have clocked over Rs 1 lakh crore collections for the "nth" month.

The best indicators on the state of the economy come from the financial sector. Bank credit is a good indicator of whether companies are producing more as all activity requires working capital. Here, the picture is not good as growth is (-)0.4 per cent as of July end, indicating that activity has not picked up yet. The SMEs, in particular, have been affected in the second round and will take time to recover. Several services like entertainment and retail malls have not yet commenced operations on a reasonable scale. Hotels and restaurants have just started commencing operations in some states. Therefore, credit growth is in the negative territory.

The debt market tells us if investment is on the cards. There has been a lot of talk on various schemes being implemented for re-viving investment. If this were happening, money must be raised. Debt issuances are lower in the first four months at around Rs 1.25 lakh crore, which is half of the Rs 2.57 lakh crore mobilised last year. Therefore, the investment scenario is still one where companies are watchful. There is surplus capacity in industry with utilisation rate being at 69.4 per cent in March 2021.

A pragmatic way to look at things is to observe the patterns in the coming months. Rural demand is an integral part of the story and presently progress on the kharif crop is satisfactory. There are concerns on cotton and oilseeds and September will be critical here to judge if the area under cultivation reaches normal levels. A good crop is also necessary to generate spending power besides augmenting supplies in the market as well as food processing industry. The second wave has pushed back rural households with more expenditure on health care. This can be reflected in lower spending post October.

Employment generation is a trigger for higher income and spending and while the battle between CMI and EPFO data remains unresolved, the market will finally reveal if people have more money. Inflation is high and though there is a view that it is transient, this may not be the case as several households, who are living on a fixed income have witnessed a double whammy in the form of lower returns on deposits (that's why everyone is flocking to the stock market), and cumulative inflation of 6 per cent last year, and a similar number this year. The pent-up demand story played out to an extent last year and expecting it to be replicated may be bordering on reckless optimism.

Investment will trail consumption and while the Centre has a good capex plan, it is only one piece in the overall puzzle. The private sector must get involved and with the banks being hesitant, the road can get longer.

The writer is Chief Economist, CARE Ratings and author of *Hits & Misses: The Indian Banking Story*. Views are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### PALM OIL PUSH

THIS REFERS TO the article 'Slipping on palm oil' (IE, August 26). The government's temptation to incentivise palm oil production is rooted in the fact that palm oil is a profitable crop. Much of it is commercialised and very little goes to waste. While the ecological concerns are more than valid and undertaking such levels of industrialisation in the Northeast or Andaman and Nicobar is not recommended, an initial push for palm oil is not an entirely bad idea. The crop, if planted, must be diversified with mixed cropping with pulses and like. The policy push shouldn't come at the cost of clearing forests or upsetting decades of socio-cultural balances of the locals. But India is an edible oil deficit country with 70 per cent of it being imported. A dramatic policy push is urgently needed to tip the scales.

Udit Sarkar, Kolkata

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Slipping on palm oil' (IE, August 26). While the government's efforts to boost palm oil production is well-intended, questions remain about ecological damage and land rights. Apart from stoking political tensions, it also disregards the unique topography and lifestyle of the people from the Northeast. The involvement of various communities in decision making would perhaps provide an effective solution.

Ila Railkar, Mumbai

### UGLY EPISODE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial 'State and Street' (IE, August 26). The sordid episode of the arrest of Narayan Rane and violence that followed suggests a dire need of

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maintaining restraint on the part of political leaders in their public outbursts against their political rivals. The arrest was better avoided. What was more outrageous was the violent drama enacted by the Shiv Sainiks on the streets of Mumbai in protest against his irresponsible utterances against Uddhav Thackeray.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

### DELHI'S VOICE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Safety first' (IE, August 26). G7 leaders emphasised that Afghanistan must never again become a safe haven for terrorism, nor a source of terrorist attacks on others. India is not only a non-permanent member of the UNSC but also chairs the Taliban Sanctions Committee in it. Delhi must raise its voice in shaping the international debate on the situation in Afghanistan.

SS Paul, Nadia