

‘The opposite is also true’

The quarterly numbers on gross domestic product (GDP) have added fuel and revived the debate on *notebandi*. The results of the state elections, due next Saturday, will doubtless provide fuel of another kind. For the moment, critics and others have been befuddled by the flattering numbers on economic growth (no apparent change from the pre-*notebandi* assessment for the October-December quarter), while the government understandably has used them to stick it into its critics’ eyes. That’s fair enough, given that the charge of “organised loot and legalised plunder” was always over the top. Still, it is not yet time for a final assessment of *notebandi*.

The reasons should be obvious: We do not as yet have some of the key numbers. On the numbers that we do have, there is room for puzzlement: Consumption is supposed to have grown smartly last quarter while companies like Godrej and Dabur were reporting a slump in sales. On the other hand, while the headline growth number for the year may be unchanged, the detailed numbers do show some real cost. Net of agriculture (which is on the rebound) and the government sector (which is proving to be anything but “minimum”), economic growth has actually dropped in the third quarter to as low as 5.8 per cent and is forecast for the fourth quarter to be only 6 per cent. That is a clear step down from 6.9 per cent in the first half of the financial year. To this cost must be added the human consequences of the operational failures: General inconvenience, dislocation and worse in the initial weeks.

As for the benefits of demonetisation, little is known. No numbers have been disclosed on how much of the demonetised currency notes have come back to the Reserve Bank. Bear in mind that the government’s assessment, conveyed to the Supreme Court, was that between a quarter and a third of the demonetised currency notes would not surface. That assessment was almost certainly wrong. The explanation for silence on the actual numbers is that counting is still going on; more than two months after the last day for handing in old notes, this is hard to swallow. Nevertheless, one positive outcome is already clear: Only about 60 per cent of the demonetised notes have been replaced, yet there is no currency shortage being experienced any more. In other words, the system is making do with much less cash than previously, and the cash-to-GDP ratio (which had been climbing quite rapidly) has seen a significant drop. If this means that the role of cash in the system has reduced, that must count as a benefit.

Second, we do not know how much black money has been unearthed, how much counterfeit currency (remember that one of the stated goals was to disrupt funding of terrorists with bogus notes shipped from across the border), and how much the quick conversion of a demonetisation scheme into a voluntary disclosure scheme will yield as additional tax revenue. We do know that roughly two-thirds of the 1.8 million people/entities who handed in cash of at least ₹5 lakh each have not responded to tax enquiries, but it will be a while yet before even a preliminary assessment can be made about the tax intake flowing from *notebandi*. If, say, ₹1,50,000 crore of previously undisclosed income is eventually paid as tax, and the cash-to-GDP ratio drops by 20-30 per cent, I would say that demonetisation has delivered.

That said, the numbers as they emerge do make one thing obvious: Beware of simplistic conclusions about the economy, because the data are so often contradictory. If there was a slowdown, why were tax revenues up? If many people in the unorganised sector had lost their jobs and gone home to villages, why did the survey numbers put together by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy report contrary numbers on unemployment? The old Joan Robinson wisecrack comes to mind: Whatever you may say of India, the opposite is also true.

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



Desperation and aspiration in UP’s east

What Eastern UP’s people want most of all is to get the hell out of their sub-Saharan trap. Politicians, including the PM, don’t get it

Badlands is one of those familiar Americanisms, like ballpark, Wild West and gentrification that feature in our usage more as malapropisms. In Uttar Pradesh (UP), many zones vie for that description. Barren, eroded valleys along the Yamuna and Chambal in Bundelkhand and Etawah would match it literally and also in the more popularly understood sense of lawless zones.

Further east, landscape is more lush, fed by more orderly and normal water-courses, with fertile banks. But rule of law can decline as fast as quality of life. Open, overflowing drains, sewers, lose wires overhead, permanent stink in the air, potholes, encroachments, stunted children, sunken-cheeked adults, hundreds killed each year by some scourge labelled Japanese Encephalitis. Whatever goes for sidewalks paved comprehensively with garbage, given a kind of durability because of the amount of plastic waste mixed in it, bottles, plates, bags, wrappers. Except late night, when—at least in and around the more “posh” parts of Gorakhpur, where the new shopping malls, restaurants and the odd spa are to be found—it is swept and piled, neatly, in the middle of the road.

Gorakhpur is pretty much the capital of eastern and most hopeless zone of UP. There’s the open border with Nepal on the north, rougher eastern districts (including Kushinagar, among the most important Buddhist sites) bordering western Bihar, and even more messed up districts of Deoria, Azamgarh, Ballia, Jaunpur, etc. in the south. We have long accepted that the Northeast is India’s forgotten zone, out of sight, out of mind. You can also come to Eastern Uttar Pradesh, especially Gorakhpur for that experience.

You can have two views of Gorakhpur, depending on where you look, downwards or up. If under your feet there’s just muck, up there, left, right and front at road-junctions, is wherever taken to get away from it all. *Writings On The Wall* have taken note of the boom in private sector higher education, English-medium schools and coaching centres in the heartland for 15 years now. Education emerged as the most popular consumer prod-

uct in small-town India, post-1991 reform. In Eastern UP or Purvanchal it has gone to a completely different, unreal level. Hoardings, some the size of Tollywood cinema in Hyderabad, stand wall-to-wall, offering a ticket to a job far away from here.

On a late night walk in and around Civil Lines area, I counted 200 hoardings of all kinds. A little over 170 of these were about education, training, coaching for competitive examinations, spoken English classes. One mocks you in bold Hindi letters: *Kya aap samajhte hain aapko angrezi ki zaroorat nahin hai* (do you really think you don’t need English skills?). Another presents to you Dr Rahul Roy, whose PMT coaching has “already produced 1,012 doctors from Purvanchal in 18 years”, a kind of medical equivalent of Patna’s famed engineering Super 30. There is

nothing the young Purvanchali wants more desperately than to escape to a place with less hopelessness, and some opportunity. A few may crack a coveted competition, rest fill up our rotting Metro suburbs and slums, pulling rickshaws, providing labour at construction sites, selling fruit and vegetables on hand-carts, running tiny *chai*-shops. No film-maker would even bother to flatter this forgotten zone of more than 60 million Indians with something like “*Uda Purvanchal*” although its young people mostly have one aspiration: To fly away.

To call Prime Minister Narendra Modi a brilliant orator does not justice to his phenomenal talent at engaging with his audience. He knows what they want to hear, when, and in what tone. Add to this his gift of timing, pauses, body language with arms waving in a wide arc, a reversed palm slapping the other when he thinks he has made a good point. You are surprised, therefore, to make that rare discovery: Of a false note in his near-perfect campaign script in Deoria, about 60 km away.

More ironically, it is an error of understanding we have noted Rahul Gandhi making in past campaigns. Like him in the 2012 state election, Modi also spoke of economic migration as the region’s curse. “Don’t all of you young people want jobs within your own *janpads*



WRITINGS ON THE UP WALL-II

SHEKHAR GUPTA

Mean machines



VIEWPOINT
DEVANGSHU DATTA

The industrial revolution has been work in progress ever since the latter half of the 18th century. First, it was mechanised agricultural tools and textile machinery. Then it was mechanised transport. Each innovation brought vast economic changes and massive labour churn. Certain skills disappeared or became quaint anachronisms, while new ones became highly prized. For example, very few people can operate a handloom anymore. There are 150 qualified drivers for every person who has ever sat on a horse.

Anybody who has ever handled a horse and a car (or a cow and a motorcycle)

would testify that horse management is more difficult. It takes a year to produce a new horse and four years for the animal to reach maturity. It takes two more years to train that animal.

Auto manufacturers churn out 10,000 vehicles a day. When it comes to repair and maintenance, vets also require far more time to train than mechanics. Most new cars are plug-and-play—the vehicle can diagnose and predict emerging problems.

These changes happened relatively slowly. Labour could shift focus and re-skill as required. The pace of change intensified with the personal computer (PC). Allied to the communication revolution, the PC altered the services workplace. Side by side, advances in industrial robotics changed manufacturing.

The smartphone put inexpensive, lightweight computing power into every pocket and let that be shared and pooled via fast mobile networks. Search engines got smarter and pools of digital information got larger.

More skills are becoming obsolete at an increasing pace. Industrial tasks like cutting, welding, soldering, etc., are much more efficiently accomplished by machines. Power grids are managed by smart programs. Financial trading is done

by algorithms.

The common householder doesn’t need to know how to repair and maintain an air conditioner, defrost a fridge, set up a home theatre system, change tyres, or engine oil, or hook up an inverter. You could look up any of these processes and watch a five-minute video for instant expertise.

The pace of change is accelerating as I write. Location based on GPS is commonplace and apps built on that are proliferating. The Internet of Things is embedded into every sort of new artefact, from houses to kids’ toys. Soon, the smart house will repair itself and maintain the AC, home theatre, pay the bills, etc.

Machine Learning, Artificial Intelligence, and Big Data are also cutting into high-end white-collar work. Machines sort spending patterns and predict what you will buy next. Health care is now delivered by smart machines rather than traditional paramedics. Insurance is calculated online by robots. Super computers are better at cancer diagnosis than human oncologists. Computers are better paralegals than law school graduates. Robots edit and translate most content better than traditional journalists.

Smart driverless cars are already on the roads. Supertankers carrying two million barrels of crude oil have six-person crews, largely on board just to satisfy statutory insurer requirement. Smart drones and

“big-dog” style robots wage war effectively by remote control.

Professional drivers will experience obsolescence as smart cars take over. So will a vast number of mid-level white-collar workers with many different skill sets. Ditto for a large number of semi-skilled blue-collar workers. Some people will be reskilled to handle new machines. Some smart people will learn how to design even smarter machines and invent systems to control those.

The social impact of a huge chunk of the global workforce being rendered redundant over the next decade is impossible to calculate. There have been periods of high unemployment before and there have been periods of churn.

But, it has never happened in such a compressed time period and there has never been a time where such a large proportion of workforce became unemployable practically overnight. How does someone feel when he or she realises that a machine can do everything better?

Will society suffer mass depression and psychological collapse as this truth sinks in? Coping with the social impact will be one of the biggest challenges of the next decade. In fact, coping with the social impact might itself be a source of employment. Unless, of course, the robot psychiatrists do it better!

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Kolkata wetlands an endangered species



OFFBEAT
SUBIR ROY

The east Kolkata wetlands, the biggest ecological asset of the city and a Ramsar Site, are on their deathbed. A political heavyweight has been appointed as de facto undertaker to do the last rites, so to speak.

A Ramsar Site is a wetland (shallow waters) which is designated to be of international importance under the Convention on Wetlands, an intergovernmental environmental treaty established nearly 50 years ago (1971) by Unesco. (It came into force in 1975 and takes its name from Ramsar, the Iranian city where the convention was adopted.) A city should consider itself lucky to have such a natural asset next to itself.

The east Kolkata wetlands are a fascinating natural resource to which tremendous value has been added by traditional knowledge. The wetlands have been historically created by a natural shift of the Bidyadhari, a tributary of the Ganga. As the land on which Kolkata is built slopes to the east, the British who built the city created canals to take out the city’s waste water, which ends up in the wetlands.

What happens to this waste water is where traditional knowledge comes in. For around a century, raw sewage has been first fed into settling ponds where biodegradation of organic components takes place. Then the nutrient-rich sewage is transferred into a fish pond where, in sunlight, there is formation of algal bloom and reduction in biochemical oxygen demand (BOD), indicating improvement in the organic quality of the water. Fish is grown in this pond and the used water is transferred to fields to irrigate crop.

The wetlands are not all wet. In the currently designated 12,500 hectares of wetlands, water bodies account for almost half (46 per cent), agricultural land takes up

39 per cent, garbage landfills nearly 5 per cent and urban and rural settlements over 10 per cent. The wetlands grow 10,500 tonnes of fish per year and 150 tonnes of vegetables per day, providing livelihood for over 50,000 people. The solid waste brought to the landfills is composted in pits in the usual manner and used for growing paddy and vegetables. Around 680 million litres of sewage is “treated” at the wetlands, not just saving ₹500 crore annually in treatment costs, but also helping grow fish and vegetables.

The “undertaker” mentioned above is Sovan Chatterjee (ironically the state’s environment minister and the city’s mayor to boot) who was last month made chairman of the East Kolkata Wetlands Management Authority, replacing the state’s chief secretary. The state government obviously has designs on the wetlands as Chatterjee wants “proper utilisation” of the land currently lying barren there, say news reports. Bare land along the EM Bypass, a key arterial road and growth corridor of the city, should be properly utilised “without losing crucial balance in ecology”. He has further assured that he “will not allow

anyone to fill up a single pond or water body”.

What will he do with his new responsibility? Hundreds of illegal construction has taken place for which ownership title could not be recorded and property taxes collected. Other than raising taxes what else will he do? Build a park that will combine Singapore’s Jurong Bird Park and Bangkok’s Safari World.

The reality is that the wetlands are slowly and steadily disappearing and if past trend is anything to go by, there will not be much left of them in time. How bad is the vanishing act? According to one study, satellite imagery indicates that in one mouza (administrative area), Bhagabanpur, a part of the wetlands, water bodies have shrunk from 77 per cent to 14 per cent of the area since 2002. This is corroborated by census data which says that during the 2001-11 decade, there was a fourfold rise in the number of houses and population density in the area. Another study says that during 1996-2016, the number of large *bheris* (water bodies devoted to growing fish) in the area went down from 47 to 10. There is no dispute that encroachments in the wetlands began dur-

ing the Left Front rule but have been picking up speed over time.

Land sharks with links to the local politically powerful and administration explain the disappearing wetlands but that is not the sole danger. The nature of the liquid waste coming to the wetlands from the city is changing. The presence of non-biodegradable chemicals is increasing as income and lifestyle in the city change. The chemicals to watch out for are lead and mercury used for the manufacture of batteries, paint and glass. Hence, measuring the presence of these in the water and the fish regularly is vital.

This will ring a timely warning bell but eventually the kind of waste water that has been good for fish cultivation for most of the last century will not be there. So the city will have to forget about relishing the fish and vegetables that come out of the wetlands.

But even after the waste water is no longer what it used to be, one key use of the wetlands will remain—be a home for migratory birds. For this you don’t need to build amusement parks using a lot of bricks and mortar but simply let the wetlands be what they are, the less untouched by human hands the better.

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(taluka) so you don’t have to go far away? Which young person doesn’t want to live close to his old parents?” He asked these questions, looking for response. If he was surprised by how muted it was, he also doesn’t understand the flight-not-flight desperation of Purvanchalis.

The issue here isn’t just education or jobs, but the suboptimal quality of life you are condemned to, way below your means, however modest. Open drains become canals in the monsoon, you endlessly swallow an air laden with dust and so many mosquitoes that you might swallow a few if you talk on the phone while walking. The PM also read out a passage from UP government’s own website admitting that parts of the state had below sub-Saharan social indicators. It could have been talking about Purvanchal.

Some of the region’s curse lies in its geography. Gorakhpur is too far from just about anywhere, and doesn’t fall on any of the trunk rail or highway grids in the country. Until not too long ago, it was still in the metre-gauge zone. Its people were always talented, hardy and rebellious. The midway stop between Gorakhpur and Deoria is Chauri Chaura, where a mob burnt the police station killing 23 policemen in February 1922 and jolted Mahatma Gandhi into calling off his first non-cooperation movement and go on a fast in penance. The British declared martial law, and let loose a reign of reprisals and terror. Nehru came to protest, was arrested here, and you wonder how he would have made it to a place so distant now, 94 years later. In Gorakhpur jail, famous revolutionary Ram Prasad Bismil was hanged. But the region was still too far.

Revolutionaries have now been succeeded by mafiosi. Harishankar Tiwari and Virendra Pratap Shahi, who ran storied, brutal and blood-feuding Brahmin and Rajput mafias are no more. But there are any number of smaller gangs and any time a *supari* killing takes place in far cities you’d find some usual suspects from hereabouts. Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Ishqiya* captured this in an unforgettable dialogue between Naseeruddin Shah and Arshad Warsi, who play a felonious uncle-nephew duo on the run, hiding around Gorakhpur. “Let’s get our backsides out of here, *maamu* (uncle),” says Mr Warsi. “In our Bhopal, only Shias and Sunnis fight. Here Brahmins, Thakurs, Yadavs, Jats all have *senas* (private armies).” This is how Purvanchal also passes the test of the popular meaning of the epithet badlands.

The reigning sovereign of Gorakhpur isn’t a feudal or conventional mafioso. It’s a well-muscled, articulate, saffron-clad *baba*, Yogi Adityanath, hereditary chief of the powerful Gorakhnath *mutt* (which gives Gorakhpur its name). He’s been elected from here five times and is expected to deliver BJP bulk of the district’s seats. His temple and *mutt* is the most prominent landmark of the region, and also the cleanest. He gives us an audience in a hall lined with portraits of his ancestors with description of which deity or godly trait each one personified. Why has BJP not fielded any Muslims in this election? Winability counts, he says, and so what if there are no Muslims in BJP list, because there are never any communal riots here. Why so, we ask. “Because of our fair governance and fear (*bhay*),” he says. Why fear, and whose fear, we ask. The question is ignored.

His eyes light up when the idea of splitting UP into smaller states comes up. One of these would be Purvanchal. This election isn’t the time for this, he says, but makes it evident he looks forward to it later and sees himself as its natural chief minister. With such prospects written on the wall, who wouldn’t listen to Mr Warsi’s advice. And get his backside out of here.

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Misogyny unplugged

EYE CULTURE

SHUMA RAHA

Misogyny is so embedded in our society that a fresh manifestation of it ought not to surprise anybody. But when a 20-year-old college student receives an avalanche of hate simply because she voiced an opinion or two, one has to marvel at the virulence of the reaction. And shudder at the gleeful alacrity with which everyone—from politicians to celebrities to anonymous online trolls—jumped into the fray to land a punch on the girl.

The girl in question is Gurmehar Kaur, a first-year student at Delhi’s Lady Shri Ram College, and the daughter of a soldier who died fighting for the country in the Kargil war. Last week she started a social media campaign against the violence unleashed at Ramjas College, allegedly by activists of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the youth wing of RSS. “I am a student from Delhi University. I am not afraid of ABVP,” she said, and was immediately targeted by online trolls, who tumble out of their caves at the slightest hint of criticism against the government, or groups close to it.

They dug up a Facebook post by her from last year where she had said: “Pakistan did not kill my Dad. War killed him.” It was a message of peace, but it quickly became the excuse to go to war against a 20-year-old. She was slammed as an anti-national and pounded with vicious online abuse, rape threats, mockery and patronisation. “Who’s polluting this young girl’s mind,” tweeted Minister of State for Home Kiren Rijiju—no doubt because he believes that a young woman is incapable of any agency or opinion of her own.

A high-pitched debate over nationalism is of course the bread and butter of right wing groups, which project themselves as keepers of the nationalistic flame. What fuelled it in the case of Ms Kaur, however, was the simple fact that she was a woman. A woman who had had the temerity to exercise her freedom of expression and take a stand not just on violence on campus, but also on war.

It was enough to get patriarchy’s knickers in a twist. Those who did not patronise her (as Mr Rijiju or actor Randeep Hooda did) mocked her cruelty (as cricketer icon Virender Sehwa did). Others demonised her. BJP MP Prathap Simha compared her to Dawood Ibrahim; wrestler Yogeshwar Dutt likened her to Hitler and Osama Bin Laden. Coupled with the rape and death threats—the stock-in-trade of online misogyny—it’s finally driven Ms Kaur off her campaign.

In recent weeks, the Central Board of Film Certification, led by the redoubtable *sanskaar* Pahlaj Nihalani, has also done its bit to show women their place. *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, a film that has won several international awards, was denied a release in India because the Censor Board found it “lady-oriented, their fantasy above life”.

The hilarious lingo delivers a deeply unfunny message—CBFC blocked the film because it is women-centric and depicts their sexual fantasies. Evidently, in the medieval, anti-women worldview of Mr Nihalani and his flock, few things are more outrageous than the idea of a woman as a sexual being, one who enacts sexual fantasies of her own instead of serving as the object of such fantasies for men.

Mr Nihalani got his share of social media ridicule for his *nyet* to *Lipstick Under My Burkha*. But why blame him alone? Or, for that matter, the muck that came Ms Kaur’s way? All our institutions—from family to academia, from religion to the police to the courts—are complicit in the effort to keep women cowed and afraid. We are constantly instructed in the dangers of stepping out of line, of not dressing, talking, behaving or loving in a certain way. If we are raped, someone (usually a near-dertal masquerading as a politician) will pipe up and say it was our fault. Slut-shaming is often the reward for exercising our freedom of choice, a torrent of abuse often the blowback for our stab at free speech.

Of course, misogyny is hardly the prerogative of Indian patriarchy. It’s a global scourge, and ironically, it is the internet, and the anonymity and freedom of expression it affords, that’s led the latest charge of anti-women vitriol. Worldwide, online hate is mostly directed at women. Mostly, it’s men who direct it.

Leslie Jones, a black actress who starred in last year’s all-women remake of the 80s comedy *Ghostbusters*, was forced to go off Twitter after suffering a horrendous onslaught of sexist and racist abuse. Ashley Judd, another Hollywood actress who routinely faces rape threats on social media, said in a TED talk recently, “Online misogyny is a global gender rights tragedy and it is imperative that it ends.”

This week a few of Ms Kaur’s online critics such as Mr Sehwa seemed to want to end it, saying that she had a right to her views. But the pivot came after she fell silent and left Delhi fearing for her safety. Clearly, the bullies have won the day for now.

But there’s hope yet. With each tussle women push ahead a little more. The fight to wrest women’s rightful space in society—a space of respect and inalienable freedoms—carries on apace.