

## Localise & Contain Dokalam Dispute

India, China have many other irons in the fire National Security Advisor Ajit Doval's visit to Beijing has not resulted in any immediate resolution to the standoff with China at Doklam. But this does not mean that his trip was entirely fruitless. Apart from his formal meetings with his counterparts from Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa to generate understanding on greater coordination on combating terror, Doval has also carried out several meetings with senior functionaries in the Chinese power hierarchy. It is to be hoped that the Chinese have a better understanding of India's concerns and sensitivities on the subject, and that this would help prevent further escalation of the dispute and lead to an eventual resolution.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has reportedly asked senior civilian and military leaders to tone down the rhetoric on China, ahead of his visit to Beijing in September for this year's BRICS summit. This is entirely the right approach to the problem on hand. Even as sections of the Chinese media wax militant against India in relation to Doklam, reports keep flowing of rising Chinese commercial interest and engagement with India. India's growing and maturing market for telecom, cars, ecommerce and construction is of vital interest to a variety of Chinese companies and there is no let-up in their preparations for acquiring a respectable market share in India. This duality of perspectives, hostility on the part of sections of the official media and eager-beaver commerce on the part of Chinese businesses and investors, shows the way forward. India, too, must localise the problem as something restricted to a minor part of the extensive and multi-pronged engagement with China, one that does not necessarily obstruct sustained growth in engagement, provided China, too, seeks to limit rather than escalate the dispute.

For India, what is at stake in Doklam is credibility in the eyes of the Bhutan government and pre-emption of a logistical advantage for China that could potentially cut off the Northeast from the rest of India. China should be persuaded its own concerns are less pressing, by far.

## Combating Menace of Malign Fake News

Fake news is a threat to democracy in a way more perverse than most people appreciate. In these times of easy access to the ability to crunch large amounts of data, unstructured and in real time, it is possible for political parties or, more realistically, specialist troops employed by them, to profile individual voters and flood them with news, fake and real, that would accentuate perceived favourable political propensities or neutralise perceived hostile inclinations. Political campaigning has progressed from mere appeals in the name of identity or loyalty or tall promises to something akin to psychological warfare. Parties that master the tools of such psych ops have a distinct edge over those stuck in the traditional mud.

Fake news spreads on social media. Twitter, Facebook and Google have belatedly woken up to their responsibility, as platforms used to purvey the bulk of fake news, to play a role in limiting their spread. News being spread using chatbots and other automated pieces of software should automatically be selected for special screening. Ordinary consumers of news can play a big role by, first, waking up to the reality that all they read on WhatsApp and Twitter is not the gospel truth, and then, by refusing to pass on what they cannot independently verify with other sources. Websites that mimic well-known, credible media outlets in their name should be exposed with the vigour with which jokes are shared on social media.

A more proactive measure would be to prosecute those who incite hatred and violence by spreading fake news and fake images. Traditional media has a big stake in discrediting purveyors of material that is not editorially validated. Fake news can harm both democracy and the media business. Eternal vigilance against it is, indeed, the price of liberty.

Cakes can't hold a candle to railway blankets when it comes to germ transfer

## What A Germ Of An Idea. Sirjee

For many people who espy germs lurking behind everything, in the manner portrayed in classic toilet cleaner advertisements, the light has gone out of birthday parties — or at least birthday cakes. News that a killjoy professor has discovered that blowing out candles infests the surface of cakes with large amounts of bacteria — 1,400 times above normal in some cases — will probably impact that crucial component of the confectionery business. Or at the very least, there may be a fall in birthday candle sales as germaphobes figure out how to save the tradition while combating this newly discovered danger. As it is the alarm has been sounded on double dipping chips and crackers, which apparently cause bacterial levels to rise by as much as 1000% if it's a salsa, although it is less in cheesy or chocolatey dips. It does seem as if parties are veritable carnival grounds for free-wheeling germs. But it must be remembered that all bacteria — and their transfers — are not harmful otherwise certain other common human practices would have caused considerable harm.

However, the reported move by the Indian Railways to declare a wrap on the distribution of blankets on trains is a good move to improve hygiene. Unfortunately, the bacterial levels in their upholstery, curtains (where applicable) and food trays would make up for any microbial shortfall.

Tracking popular response to Modi's class-plus-social approach will reveal BJP's electoral trends

## Sweet Pangs of Growing Up



Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay

The BJP's studied attempts to expand its social base and solicit support of non-dominant sections of Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs) have been paid close attention by adversaries and analysts. However, little notice has been taken of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's unyielding bid to force a dramatic transformation of the party's urban class base.

In this venture, Modi has initiated policies to woo classes that either never voted for the BJP (from the formation of the Jan Sangh onward) or were, at best, transitory supporters. Reaching out for the first time to people at the bottom of the economic ladder — paradoxically, alongside those at the top — Modi has embarked on an audacious attempt to force India's economic middle to turn over a new leaf by adhering to 'honest' trade and business practices.

The move poses a grave risk. His policies have already unnerved sections of the Sangh Parivar's traditional backers — traders, petty service providers, proprietorships and small businesses. It is also not certain that the gamble will pay off and manage to draw the masses to his fold. Its success, however, coupled with the party's pronounced majoritarian socio-political outlook, will create an invincible electoral base.

In December last, when Indians were still coping with demonetisation-in-

duced distress, Union labour minister Bandaru Dattatreya announced, without any fanfare, two amnesty schemes for small and middle firms, enabling them to come under the umbrella of the Employees State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) and, more importantly, the Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO). Like all schemes providing reprieve to firms, GoI offered erring businesses an opportunity to come clean without penalties.

This declaration must be assessed in conjunction with the stated objectives of demonetisation: targeting corruption and black money, minimising cash transactions and transiting to digital payments to ensure tax compliance. Simultaneously, the government also pressed the accelerator on ushering in the goods and services tax (GST) regime. Collectively these measures are aimed at forcing small and middle businesses, among others, to minimise unrecorded transactions.

### Honesty in Businesses

Although leakages persist, and the government is desperately trying to keep up with new forms of evasion, 'honesty' in businesses is GoI's new credo. Despite high urban visibility, the middle-tier group of businesses is neither demographically influential like the masses nor economically dominant as corporate houses. Consequently, their choices are limited: remain in the game by complying with regulations, or shut shop.

As the Uttar Pradesh verdict demonstrated, Modi secured popular endorsement for demonetisation by convincing the masses that demonetisation targeted unscrupulous traders and businesses, and corrupt officers. In popular culture, traders and money lenders typify the corrupt and the exploiter. Workers, especially in the informal sector, see employers as



Time to try out the chest expansion technique

'class enemies', hand-in-glove with politicians and officials.

Either through stated anti-corruption measures, or with amnesty schemes that bring employees in the social security net, Modi is seeking to politically enlist the working class in the informal sector, too. In this project, Modi has the Sangh Parivar's backing. Not just the BJP and its morchas and cells, but also several RSS affiliates have been conducting workshops to preach on the necessity and essentials of GST.

### Workers' Rights

The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, the country's largest trade union, is taking up workers' rights in the unorganised sector. Modi has backing for his efforts to formalise the informal. The Laghu Udyog Bharti, an RSS-connected national confederation of MSME (micro, small and medium enterprise) units, has been on overdrive. It is not restricting activities to lobbying for policies favourable to the sector, but it also engages with members to comply with laws and legitimise businesses.

Undoubtedly, dissatisfaction is breeding among individuals and small and medium businesses at the government's enthusiasm to force the formalisation of the entire economy. But the EPFO amnesty, extended on March 31 for another three months at the end of the first window, yielded unexpected results.

Dattatreya disclosed in Rajya Sabha last week that more than 1 crore employees previously unreported were enrolled under the EPFO as part of the scheme. While this is reason for elation, it is more significant that these workers were enrolled by 20 lakh firms, evidence that some businesses are falling in line and legalising operations.

For workers enrolled in the EPFO, or securing entitlements under the ESIC, the gains may not be substantial enough to enable a sense of 'delivery' from the prime minister. But it would add to their perception that his government forces accountability on employers and provide facilities hitherto denied to workers.

While the BJP's plan to offset possible losses among the mid-economic band with gains from the masses has potential in urban areas, in rural India, the BJP is yet to devise an economic plan. It has little, except to showcase universal schemes like providing LPG connections under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, soil health cards and rural electrification.

Because rural India has never been a traditional BJP bastion, its strategies remain tentative there. No effort has been made yet to prise open class divisions. Despite evidence of growing unease in rural India, Modi will hope that farmers continue voting as 'communities', and not as economic classes or 'farmers'.

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### HEALTHCARE

## How to Make TB Not to Be



Amir Ullah Khan

Nothing describes India's health sector's frustrations better than the sordid case of tuberculosis (TB). The Directly Observed Treatment Short-Course (DOTS) programme was launched in the 1970s in Africa and India, followed by the Revised National Tuberculosis Control Program (RNTCP) in 1997.

More than 80 million people have been tested since then, 15 million TB patients have been detected and treated, and several lives have been saved. However, despite all these steps, India remains the TB capital of the world, still bearing a quarter of the global burden. The WHO's Global TB Report 2016 has estimated that there were 28 lakh new TB cases and 4.8 lakh deaths due to the disease in 2015.

For a country that has abysmally low levels of investment in public health and sanitation, and where most cities suffer from high pollution levels, India's high TB prevalence has far-

reaching effects not only on individuals and families, but also on communities and nations. The economic burden of TB has been suspected to be upwards of ₹340 billion in 2006-2014. At least 170 million man-days are lost to the disease every year. It is but obvious that investing in TB control is crucial not only from a health standpoint, but also from an economic one.

TB is a contagious airborne disease that cuts across social classes. But it is five times more common among the economically deprived sections. TB treatment and care can further perpetuate the cycle of poverty. In families classified as below poverty line (BPL), these expenses are nothing short of catastrophic. While TB care in the public sector is available free of cost, patients tend to visit private facilities to seek care. However, several studies have pointed out the sub-standard treatment being provided in private sector facilities. So, engagement with the private sector to ensure standardised treatment was recognised as a key strategy to solving India's TB epidemic.

Innovative private sector engagement programmes were introduced by the government in 2014 to engage effectively with private providers, including formal and informal providers, diagnostic facilities and che-



No longer looking through things

mists. These pilot programmes, operating in Mumbai, Nagpur, Mehsana and Patna, have created a network of providers, linked through an information and communication technology (ICT) system.

These have led to an exponential increase in TB case notifications from the private sector, and has provided GoI with a more accurate estimate of the true TB burden in India. These interventions, if integrated into the public health system across the country, can transform TB control by reaching every TB patient.

GoI's new 'National Strategic Plan to Eliminate TB by 2025' has a proposed budgetary requirement of ₹16,649 crore for the next three years, a near five-fold increase compared with the previous Plan. Providing free-of-cost diagnosis and treatment services to

privately treated patients is one of the pillars of the new plan. Also, there is a comprehensive patient support system that incorporates direct benefit transfers (DBTs) and social protection schemes. It is crucial that these proposed interventions are adopted in its totality.

It is now time that the government and political class prioritise TB financing to strengthen and extend TB services to all patients, regardless of where they seek care. What is worrisome is that the number of deaths has gone up. The previous estimates were too low, and we realised in 2015 that it is not 220,000 but 480,000 people who die of TB annually. We also realised that 79,000 people suffered from multi-drug-resistant TB in 2015, 11% more than in the previous year.

TB treatment reaches only 59% of patients in India. While the government programme does relatively better than elsewhere, it just doesn't cover as many as it should. That is why if GoI indeed wants to reach the target of 50% reduction in TB and 75% reduction in mortality, it must invest in better monitoring, data collection, modelling and very simply in ramping up the government machinery.

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### NEUTRON TO NYLON

## The Mystery of the Killer Litchi



Debkumar Mitra

Has the litchi been exonerated? Eating litchis on an empty stomach did not trigger encephalitis-like symptoms in hundreds of malnourished children in Muzaffarpur, Bihar in 2014, resulting in deaths. So, a January paper in Lancet Global Health (Association of Acute Toxic Encephalopathy with Litchi Consumption in an Outbreak in Muzaffarpur, India, 2014: A Case-Control Study) (goo.gl/2Z93Ha) that pointed to a naturally occurring toxin in the fruit as the prima facie cause for death has been proved wrong.

New research from Bangladesh, published in the July 2017 edition of The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene ('Outbreak of Sudden Death with Acute Encephalitis Syndrome (AES) Among Children Associated with Exposure to Lychee Orchards in Northern Bangladesh, 2012', goo.gl/d5iesv), has proved that it is not the fruit but a banned pesticide that is the actual culprit. It may appear as though the last word on the issue has been spoken. But that is not the case.

In fact, the latest scientific paper on the issue lays bare the very process of scientific progress. In a recent public talk, astrophysicist and science TV host Neil deGrasse Tyson told the audience that scientists can think up of a lot of stuff, even publish them in research journals. But much of it is 'wrong'. Modern science discovers 'truths' through a simple process — float a hypothesis and wait for someone to confirm or prove it wrong. Falsification is the cornerstone of science through which truth emerges.

To understand the nature of the debate, let us first focus on the Lancet paper, published by an Indo-US team of scientists from the National Centre for Disease Control in India (NCDC) and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (USCDC). Acute neurological illness had been reported from Muzaffarpur, a region famous for its litchi

crop, for more than 20 years.

The illness peaked during the litchi season among children of people closely connected to the cultivation of the fruit crop. In 2014, there were 122 deaths. Hypotheses, death from Japanese encephalitis virus to pesticides, have been floated.

Before the Lancet paper, the illness had a 'mystery' tag attached to it. Though immediately after its publication, a medical scientist from Vellore claimed that the central idea of linking a naturally occurring litchi toxin to encephalitis-like symptoms among the dead children from Muzaffarpur had already been published in the Indian journal, Current Science ('Acute Encephalitis Syndrome in Children in Muzaffarpur: Hypothesis', May 2014, goo.gl/Sb89JG). That 'plagiarism' charge is yet to be settled.

The Lancet paper researchers claim that they had done an exhaustive 'PubMed' search on all published papers linking 'hypoglycaemia or methylencyclopropylglycine (MCPG), naturally occurring fruit-based toxins [found in litchis] that cause hypoglycaemia and metabolic derangement' with the unexplained neurological illness that killed Muzaffarpur's children. And that they did not find any study with a strong link. Given the current state of science research publication, with incidents of misdemeanor popping up every now and then,

the charge needs to be investigated by the Lancet's editorial board.

While the controversy raged, the Bangladesh researchers claimed this month: 'Eating lychees was not associated with illness in the case-control study. The outbreak was linked to lychee orchard exposures where agrochemicals were routinely used, but not to consumption of lychees. Lack of acute specimens was a major limitation.'

The difference in location notwithstanding, it appears that the authors of the paper are negating the Lancet findings — or, those published in Current Science. If exposure to pesticides, such as the banned endosulfan, is indeed the cause of the deaths, then the Muzaffarpur case needs to be reopened.

Can there be a case that both pesticides and MCPG are the cause of the deaths? There is also a possibility that the killer in Bangladesh is not the same as that in Muzaffarpur. Or, that both hypotheses are wrong.

There are several positives for the management of AES that emerge from this apparent game of research one-upmanship — injecting glucose, control of banned pesticides, thorough washing of fruits, and a public policy to effectively control malnourishment and hunger. While science looks for more culprits in the litchi story, there is a question that begs an answer: why do only the poor and marginalised die of eating litchis?



## Power of The Subconscious

AVINASH K SAHAJ

Aham Brahmasmi means that the God within us. The Observer, the Consciousness, is Brahma, the Creator. It is through our own thoughts, the ultimate creator, that our everyday reality is created. According to one theory of creation, everything is created from the void. To manifest the powers of creation, we have to move from the same void every day.

For long, we've been made to believe that very few move to the void, and death is a necessary principle. However, it only requires a daring leap to know that one is God and behave accordingly. And it comes with practice. If we move to the void every day, we take in cosmic energy which causes the kundalini energy to rise, activating the upper four chakras, which are each associated with a gland. They secrete hormones which give us complete immunity.

Besides perfect immunity, there is a greater gain to be had from moving to the void every day. We use only 10% of our brain, the intellectual brain. The balance 90% at the back, the subconscious, lies unused. So, when we start tapping into this subconscious brain, we're accessing immense energy. The rising kundalini ionises the spinal fluid. This creates a powerful thrust, which opens the reticular formation at the base of the subconscious brain, which then becomes available to us. Unlike the intellectual brain, the subconscious brain operates in infinite dimensions creating new harmonies.

### Chat Room

## Pakistan SC's Bold Ruling

Apropos 'Pakistan Institutions Prove their Mettle' (July 28), The Pakistan Supreme Court's ruling to disqualify Nawaz Sharif from office on grounds of corruption is a bold one and lends hope to its citizens. At present, it is difficult to speculate the ramifications of the ruling, and whether it would have a bearing on Indo-Pak policy. But the court's verdict remains a testament to the fact that the truth can never be suppressed.

RAAJASH KULMI Ujjain

## Nitish's Masterstroke

This refers to 'The Coat That Nitish Turned' (July 29) by Abheek Barman. Nitish Kumar is undoubtedly a

shrewd politician waiting for the right chance to enhance his image. The Opposition alleges that he a master

betrayor for having snapped ties with the RJD. On the contrary, he understands the wisdom of political positioning ahead of the 2019 polls. Indeed, a better alignment with the Centre will help the cause of governance in one of India's poorest states.

ADITYA TRIVEDI Ujjain

## Judicial Overreach

The Madras High Court's ruling on the singing of 'Vande Mataram' has triggered a political slugfest. But there are pros and cons. In a mature democracy like ours, citizens cannot be coerced into a ritualised display of patriotism. While citizens in a democratic framework have the onus to accord respect to emblems and artefacts representing their nations, they should be given enough freedom to express their respect and admiration for their country in their own way. As the guardian of individual liberties, the judiciary should restrain itself from rulings such as these.

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