

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

comment

## Can India ride out an Irma?

Coastal cities must have viable blueprints to tackle such storms

**T**he battering Hurricane Irma has been giving to the US, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Martin, Anguilla, Turks and Caicos, The Bahamas and Cuba should be a wake-up call for India. This is because the country has too much to lose if an Irma-type storm hits

the 7,517 km-long densely populated coastline. Along with the human cost

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of such a catastrophe (remember the cyclones in Odisha, cyclone Hudhud and the tsunami?), the coastline also houses a web of infrastructure, including transport and freight networks, road and rail corridors, industrial zones and parks, maritime and port facilities, petroleum industries and refineries. Then there are new projects such as the Sagarmala Programme. Under the programme, there will be an investment of ₹8 lakh-crore in 415 projects, which includes several ports. The Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has also extreme weather events would hit coastal life and property even harder when their impacts get combined with the sea level rise that climate change is causing.

To save lives and infrastructure, Indian cities have to build resilience so that they can withstand such natural shocks, which, as several studies have pointed out, are expected to increase, thanks to frequent and intense heavy precipitation over most regions. According to Teri, the main challenges for incorporating climate resilience into coastal infrastructure starts with the non-availability of fine-resolution data such as sea level measurement and variation in precipitation. Such location-specific information can help planners and administrators to build in climate resilience.

Planning for climate resilience would need to start from the time of locating the infrastructure facilities. For instance, it would mean ensuring water supply channels have back-ups for extreme weather events. Critically, building climate resilience also requires buy-in from the political class. But unfortunately very few politicians are losing their sleep over the challenge of climate-protecting their constituents.

## A conspiracy of silence encourages violence

Women assault victims in India are 40 times more likely to die than in the US

**A** study published in the British Medical Journal's BMJ Global Health reveals that women who are victims of assault in India are 40 times more likely to die than in the US. The study that compared more than 25,000 trauma cases in the two countries found that while women in the US had five times better odds of surviving road accidents and falls as compared to Indian women, largely due to better available medical care; the numbers were really skewed when it came to assault. The paper cites several studies that show that only about "one in four women in India seeks care services related to experiencing intimate partner violence."

This is a worrying trend and reflects a much larger social problem within the family system. It cannot be denied that the twin problems of blaming and shaming victims of assault are deeply entrenched in the traditional conservative family set-up in which women are actively encouraged to 'adjust' to almost anything. Most hidden instances of assault and abuse arise as a direct result of the 'honour' argument. The victim is seen as a culprit for having maligned the honour of the family by revealing the abuse she has been subjected to; instead of looking at it as dishonourable to subject a person to abuse and assault. It is this deep seated patriarchal mindset that must first change for there to be adequate rehabilitation for those who have suffered assault at the hands of an intimate partner or someone from the immediate family. The slow process of the law is another impediment when it comes to victims reporting instances of such violence.

India needs a better system of legal help and social support in order for victims to not only be able to report physical abuse but also to escape it. The legal system will have to take the lead in encouraging more reporting of violence; but the social and family systems must undergo a major overhaul in order to prevent such abuse and help victims.

democracywall

HARSH MANDER



## A move that has fostered disquiet

Jharkhand's anti-conversion bill goes against the religious freedoms granted in the Constitution

**I**t is a difficult time to be a part of the minority community in India today with threats of various sorts coming from different quarters. But a new assault on them is the approval by the Jharkhand Cabinet of a stringent anti-conversion law, titled in characteristic double-speak, as the Religious Freedom Bill, 2017. It contains stiff jail sentences and fines for converting people through "allurement" or "coercion".

A day before this Cabinet decision, residents of Jharkhand awoke to front-page advertisements with pictures of Mahatma Gandhi, and a toxic quote attributed to him attacking conversions by Christian missionaries. As a columnist wrote in an online publication, the words were pulled out of context and distorted. Gandhi must not be appropriated by an ideology that is violently opposed to all he stood for: An India with full religious freedom and equal rights. And it is intensely worrying that taxpayers' money is used to foment hatred against a segment of people of the state.

Christians constitute a small 4.3% of the population of Jharkhand. The same tribal family may have adherents of the animist Sarna faith (comprising nearly 13% of the population), Christians and persons who identify themselves as Hindus. Left to themselves,

tribal families and communities live with peace with this diversity of faith practices. But the propaganda of the Right-wing, now backed by the state government, aggravated by the draconian anti-conversion law, will tear apart these families and communities.

The proposed anti-conversion law in Jharkhand has fostered enormous disquiet among Christians everywhere in India. The ultra Right-wing regards Islam and Christianity to be a "foreign" religion, and therefore requires its adherents to respect "Hindu" culture and practices. But to advance its political juggernaut objectives, it has built alliances with Christian community leaders in some parts of India, such as Kerala and north-eastern states. However, particularly in large tribal states of central India like Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhattisgarh, the political strategy of choice has been to target, defame and intimidate Christians, with violence against their shrines, priests, nuns and women, and with laws that criminalise conversions to Christianity.

But it must be stressed that Jharkhand will not be the first government to pass an anti-conversion law if this is voted for by the state assembly. Anti-conversion laws were passed in Orissa in 1967 under a Swatantra Party government; in Madhya Pradesh in 1968 under the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal coalition (which



Jharkhand chief minister Raghubar Das, Ranchi, September 7

included the Jan Sangh); and in Gujarat in 2003 and Chhattisgarh in 2006 under BJP governments. The Jayalalitha government in Tamil Nadu passed the law in 2002 but repealed it in two years after its passage in 2004. The only Congress government to pass such a law was in Himachal Pradesh in 2006. Rajasthan passed an anti-conversion law in 2006, but the governor refused to sign the law. Arunachal Pradesh passed such a law in 1978 under the People's Party of Arunachal, but it was never enforced as rules have not been

framed to date.

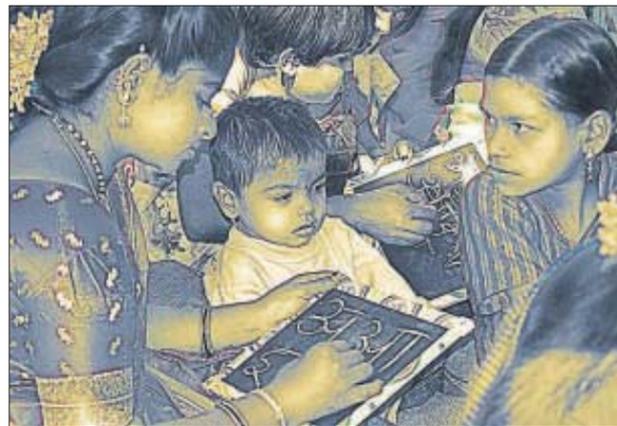
Members of the Constituent Assembly took great care to uphold the freedom of religious belief in India's Constitution. After extended debate, it decided that this freedom should not just be to practise and profess one's faith, but also to propagate it. KM Munshi declared that "under freedom of speech which the Constitution guarantees, it will be open to any religious community to persuade other people to join their faith".

However, organisations like the RSS never reconciled to this fundamental guarantee of the Constitution. They rail against the "menace" of Christian conversions allegedly funded by big foreign money. It matters little that the facts don't bear out their claims. Christians constituted 2.5% of India's population in 1981, and 2.3% in 1991, 2001 and 2011. If large-scale conversions were indeed occurring, their numbers would have swelled. This sustained misinformation has resulted in profound and sometimes violent schisms between Christian and other tribal people.

In this divisive competition for the religious allegiance of India's poorest and most vulnerable people, marked by stridency and hate, it is important to recall the gentle counsel of one of the world's tallest public figures, the Dalai Lama: "It does not matter which God you worship, or even if you worship no God. What is important is to be a compassionate human being".

Harsh Mander is author, *Looking Away: Inequality, Prejudice and Indifference in New India*. The views expressed are personal

SKILL GAP



The literacy rate, as we measure it, is a poor indicator of Indians' ability to read. It only indicates how many people self-reported as 'literate'

## Why India must improve its 'ability-to-read' rate

Studies show many 'literate' citizens cannot understand simple texts. This could hit the NDA's Digital India dream



BRIJ KOTHARI

**M**inister for human resource development Prakash Javadekar recently summed up India's state of literacy, and made a prediction: "There was a literacy rate of 18% in the post-Independence era. Today it has gone up to 80% and I guarantee that within next five years, it will be 100%." Does this imply that 80% today, and everyone in five years, will be able to read and understand simple texts? Not really. Several studies suggest that more than half of India's so-called "literate" cannot read simple texts. The literacy rate, as we measure it, is a poor indicator of Indians' "ability to read." It only indicates how many people self-reported as "literate." Generally, anyone who has attended one or two years of school, and can sound a few letters or sign one's name, understandably, self-reports as "literate."

In addition to asking people "Are you literate?" the Census should follow it up with a specific question: "Can you read a newspaper?" to measure the population's ability to read. We have found that people who say they can read a newspaper are indeed able to, when tested. Importantly for the Census, the question itself is sufficient and testing, unnecessary, making it a viable proposition.

India's ability-to-read rate is not measured, hence, remains under the radar. Yet, it is an indicator of greater relevance to Digital India's readiness, than the literacy rate.

Digital India requires both hard and soft infrastructure. A billion phone subscriptions and rapidly growing digital access on inexpensive smartphones, are signs of India's laudable advance in hard infrastructure. The market forces underpinning Digital India are on course to achieving 'hard' digital access for all. Soft access is another story.

A smart phone with broadband connectivity and data access to the world's information has limited meaning for the non-reader. The ability-to-read rate would capture the soft infrastructure on which we are building our educational system, our information and knowledge society, and the promise of a Digital India. Policy makers could start seeing quality reading skills as an important component of India's soft infrastructure.

Long after India achieves "100% literacy," most Indians will not be able to read. Digital India requires sustained commitment, investments and strategies to upskill lifelong, the reading skills of an estimated 700 million weak-readers.

Quality reading skills are at the core of India's social infrastructure. Overcoming decades of neglect requires the unleashing of creative and proven solutions, both, in and out of school, and originating within and outside policy.

Brij Kothari is with IIM-Ahmedabad, founder, PlanetRead. The views expressed are personal

## Stunted children: Blame it on indoor air pollution

Ventilation can considerably mitigate the negative impact of solid fuel smoke exposure on children



ANCA BALIOTTI  
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**W**orldwide, as many as 4.3 million people die each year due to indoor air pollution. The conversation on air quality, however, has been focused largely on outdoor air pollution. As researchers at Evidence for Policy Design, we conducted an analysis of 2005-2006 National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) data and found strong evidence that the exposure to indoor air pollution from burning solid fuels increases the probability of stunting among Indian children.

A child is regarded as stunted if her height-for-age is below certain thresholds set as per the World Health Organization Child Growth Standards.

Stunted children tend to have both physical and cognitive developmental delays, including delayed walking, impeded speech development, and diminished school performance. They also experience higher rates of mortality and morbidity, including diabetes and hypertension.

According to NFHS-3 data, as many as 43% of Indian children under the age of five were stunted, as of 2006. Despite high economic growth during the last few decades, India still has the highest prevalence of stunting among all South Asian economies with the exception of war-stricken Afghanistan. The sheer magnitude of the problem is apparent in the fact that India has 61 million stunted children, more than any other country.

While stunting is most commonly associated with poor nutrition, there is an emerging body of research that links exposure to poor air quality to stunting. In many households in India, solid fuels — such as coal, wood, crop residue and dung — are used for cooking. These fuels release particulate matter, carbon monoxide, formaldehyde and other toxins, at a much higher rate

**DESPITE HIGH ECONOMIC GROWTH IN THE LAST FEW DECADES, INDIA STILL HAS THE HIGHEST PREVALENCE OF STUNTING AMONG ALL SOUTH ASIAN ECONOMIES WITH THE EXCEPTION OF AFGHANISTAN.**

than non-solid fuels such as kerosene and LPG. Children's lungs are still developing and are therefore particularly susceptible to irritation and contamination from the fumes of solid cooking fuels; when children's bodies must repeatedly fight off the respiratory infections these fumes provoke, their growth suffers.

We analysed NFHS-3 data to identify the main drivers of stunting among Indian children. Controlling for nutrition, recent illnesses, and other socio-economic factors, living in a household that burns solid fuels is associated with 6.5% of stunting cases in Indian children below three years old. In fact, in our analysis, fuel type comes out to be almost half as influential as malnutrition in terms of impact on stunting.

In May 2016, the Indian government began providing below-poverty-line households with LPG connections. At the same time, many NGOs and local institutions are working to replace traditional cooking stoves with more efficient ones, which would reduce the total quantity of fuel consumed and emissions produced per hour of usage.

Although a transition to cleaner fuels and technology is perhaps the only long-term solution that addresses the indoor air pollution problem at its roots, there is a second option that has the potential to tackle stunting. Having appropriate ventilation mechanisms can considerably mitigate the negative impact of solid fuel smoke exposure on child stunting. The simple presence of a window in households burning solid fuels is associated with a 3.4% lower prevalence of stunting. Having separate kitchen and living areas reduces the chance of stunting by 4%. As the data capture only whether households possess the different ventilation options and not their actual usage, so the benefits of using ventilation consistently and strategically are probably greater.

In order to be free of the health risks associated with air pollution, citizens need clean air both at home and in their communities. A permanent transition to cleaner fuels is perhaps the only solution that will improve India's air quality — both indoors and outdoors. In the meantime, low-cost ventilation solutions have the potential to mitigate the impact of solid fuel burning on stunting, and should be integrated into health promotion campaigns.

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FREE THE HEART FROM  
NEGATIVE THOUGHTS TO  
CHERISH GOD'S GRACE

Ashutosh Varshney

The word "grace" literally means "favour", and if it comes from god it transforms life.

For miracles to happen in life, one must know the mechanism behind grace. Grace is positive energy that can be received with the right intention and unquestioned faith, irrespective of where it is received from.

To receive anything, we need an empty container. If the container is full, then it is not possible to add anything further in it. God's grace leads to miracles, for which

one has to store His grace in the heart. Unfortunately most of the time out hearts, which is the container, is filled with doubts.

We can think of the rain as god's grace pouring over us so torrentially that we can't round up enough containers to hold it. If the container of our mind is filled with negative thoughts and the heart is tainted by evil desires, even when grace is showered upon us, we will complain.

For example, if your guru gives you a mantra, and you completely follow his guidance without allowing your mind and rea-

soning to wander or probe elsewhere, then your mind becomes so engrossed in that mantra that it ultimately gives you success and you get cut off from your worries.

Once the mind gets well attached to these mantras and the heart believes and supports it, then in due course, we begin to remain unaffected by the affairs and relations in this world. Life and all we achieve in it will then be cherished.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers. The views expressed are personal)

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