



Optimistic assessment

RBI should avoid having to choose between taming inflation and pushing for growth

Less than a fortnight after the RBI announced its latest monetary policy, a team of its officials has provided an optimistic assessment of the 'State of the Economy' in the August issue of the central bank's monthly bulletin. Pivoting from what the bank posited on August 6 when it said, "the outlook for aggregate demand is improving, but still weak and overcast by the pandemic", the officials led by Deputy Governor Michael D. Patra asserted that aggregate demand conditions had been buoyed by pent-up demand released by unlocking and vaccination. And, evidence that the economy was gaining traction could be seen in "manufacturing activity gradually turning around even as the contraction in services had moderated", they wrote. The authors of the article have arrayed several high-frequency indicators including E-way bills, toll collections, fuel consumption, automobile dispatches and registrations, and rail freight volumes to buttress their view that demand is regaining momentum. The team has also pointed to a private forecaster's data showing a sizeable sequential decline in the unemployment rate last month – to 6.95% from 9.17% in June, and that with a pronounced rural bias – to posit that this reflects the "resilience of the rural sector on brightened agricultural prospects". But the authors elide over the fact that the CMIE, whose survey-based unemployment rate they have cited, is far less sanguine about the addition of approximately 16 million jobs in July.

CMIE MD Mahesh Vyas contends in an analysis that "all the additional employment provided by India in July was of poor quality" while better quality salaried jobs shrank by 3.2 million, noting that the bulk of the rural jobs added were of temporary farm labour linked to delayed *kharif* sowing. The RBI officials also throw no additional light on the concerns that earlier this month prompted the central bank's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) to cut its own June forecast for GDP growth in the second, third and fourth fiscal quarters by between 0.5 and 0.9 percentage points. On inflation too, the article's authors have pitched an upbeat prognosis citing July's 70 basis points month-on-month deceleration in retail price gains to 5.6% as "reinforcing the view that the recent upsurge has peaked and the worst would be behind us". However, official food price data for the August 1-12 period reveals an uptick in cereal prices, while edible oils continue to see price pressures after July's 32.5% inflation rate for oils and fats, belying the authors' optimism. The RBI Deputy Governor overseeing monetary policy admits the internal dilemma at the MPC observing that ultimately the policy decision was "a judgment call" as any move to tame inflation by one percentage point would mean 'sacrificing' 1.5-2 percentage points of GDP growth. In postulating an either-or trade-off, monetary authorities risk achieving neither goal and sending the economy into a harder to redress state of 'stagflation'.

Arms and the women

Gender parity in the Army is happening at a slow pace, and is mostly led by the courts

Women have been fighting a tough and uphill battle for equal opportunities in the Indian Army. In a landmark judgment in February 2020, the Supreme Court asked the Government to abide by its own policy and grant permanent commission to women in the Short Service Commission and give them command postings in all services other than combat. In *The Secretary, Ministry of Defence vs Babita Puniya & Others*, the top court pointed out that women had played a "significant role" in the army since their induction in 1992 and extending permanent commission to women SSC officers "is a step forward in recognising and realising the right of women to equality of opportunity in the Army". Despite the stringent verdict, systemic issues remain in the Army, and women have gone back to court to sort out the issues. Another step towards ensuring that women get an equal opportunity, as laid down by the Constitution, has been taken on Wednesday, when the Court passed an interim order allowing women to appear for the National Defence Academy entrance exam on September 5. Till now, women could join the Army through the Indian Military Academy and the Officers Training Academy. The directive allows girls who clear the exam to study at the NDA and then at the IMA or the naval and air force academies and become commissioned officers.

The directive is subject to further orders from the Court, and the case has been posted for hearing again on September 8. When Additional Solicitor-General Aishwarya Bhati, appearing for the Government and the Indian Army, told the Court that it was a policy decision not to allow women to take the NDA exam, the Bench, of Justices Sanjay Kishan Kaul and Hrishikesh Roy, said it was based on "gender discrimination", directing the Centre and the Army to take a constructive view. The Bench pointed out that closing a route of entry for women to join the Army was discriminatory. The ruling came on a writ petition filed by Kush Kalra seeking permission for women to sit for the NDA entrance exam. Mr. Kalra argued that Articles 14, 15, 16 and 19 of the Constitution, which uphold the values of equality and allow equal, non-discriminatory opportunities at work, were being violated by denying eligible women the opportunity. Though the legal route has helped overcome some of the hurdles, it will be a long haul before gender parity is fully achieved in the Army. In that context, the Prime Minister's Independence Day announcement that girls will be granted admission in the Sainik Schools is a welcome move towards preparing them for an equal role and life in the military.

Lessons from India's all-cause mortality data

Data suggest there were 3.5 million to 3.7 million 'excess deaths' nationwide, from April 2020 to June 2021



MURAD BANAJI & AASHISH GUPTA

The scale of devastation caused by India's COVID-19 epidemic is gradually becoming clearer. This is thanks to the efforts of journalists, *The Hindu* included, who have been gathering all-cause mortality data from around the country.

The mortality data, from State and city civil registration systems, paint a grim picture of a major increase in deaths across the country during the novel coronavirus pandemic. Very few of these additional deaths have been recorded as COVID-19 deaths.

Cautious estimate

We can try to understand the scale of the tragedy via a simple question. How many extra deaths have occurred, over and above those expected in normal times? The data suggest an approximate answer: during 15 months from April 2020 to June 2021, there were 3.5 million-3.7 million "excess deaths" nationwide. This amounts to 35% more deaths than expected.

This estimate is cautious, and likely to increase as more data come in. Data for June and beyond are very limited, and so the story is incomplete.

Before we examine the numbers it is important to understand the context. There are several reasons why estimating a surge in mortality is difficult. We need to know how many deaths have occurred during the pandemic, and how many to "expect" in normal times. The idea is to carefully reconstruct these numbers from death registrations and survey-

based estimates of pre-pandemic mortality.

Data in the pandemic period

But death registration data for the pandemic period are limited. It is unavailable for some States, and incomplete in others, for example coming from online systems which do not log all death registrations. Some data are organised according to date of death, and some by date of registration. Moreover, there are uncertainties about death registration prior to the pandemic. In some States, official estimates of levels of registration, which we use, appear to be overestimated.

Compounding the difficulties, registered deaths show complex trends in some States – for example, gradually increasing prior to the pandemic, but dropping sharply around the time of the national lockdown before the pandemic deaths start to show.

To arrive at the estimates here, we examined data from 12 States where partial or complete civil registration data are available for at least January 2018 to May 2021: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. These States comprise roughly 60% of the national population.

During April 2020-May 2021 we found six million death registrations in the data; that is 1.3 million more than expected from 2019 data. If we assume – perhaps optimistically – that the deaths which were not captured in these registration systems, including unregistered deaths, rose proportionately, we arrive at an estimate of around 1.7 million excess deaths in these States up to May.

If these 12 States reflect the national picture, then India saw around 2.8 million excess deaths nationwide during April 2020-May



2021. This is 8.5 times the official COVID-19 death toll of 3,32,000 over the same period.

Global comparison

Using limited data for June (currently available only for Andhra Pradesh and Punjab), or assuming that the ratio of excess deaths to official COVID-19 deaths does not change rapidly, we estimate 3.5 million-3.7 million excess deaths nationwide by the end of June. Over a 15 month period, for every three expected deaths, there was a further "pandemic death".

This places India among the harder hit countries in the world. It would mean that relative to baseline, India's surge in mortality is lower than that of Mexico, similar to that of Brazil and South Africa, and considerably higher than in the United States, the United Kingdom and most of western Europe.

Moreover, the estimates here are conservative. More up-to-date data will push up the numbers. There are also hints that disruption may have prevented – and not merely delayed – many death registrations. For instance, we see significant drops in birth registrations during 2020 in some States where this data are available, most noticeably in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. Moreover, there are good reasons to believe the mortality surge may have been greatest in marginalised communities where death registration is weaker.

We cannot be sure how many of India's excess deaths were from COVID-19. According to the latest national serosurvey, around 60%

70% of people in India may have been infected with the virus by June. If so, international data on fatality rates suggest we should expect two million to four million COVID-19 deaths. So, it is quite plausible that the majority of India's excess deaths have been from COVID-19. But we cannot rule out a significant surge in non-COVID deaths too.

Individual States

In individual States, all-cause mortality data paint diverse pictures. Kerala, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh stand out for having somewhat lower excess mortality than expected, even after we adjust for possible disruptions to registration. Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, on the other hand, saw considerably more deaths than expected.

Overall, around two-thirds of the excess deaths took place during a shocking mortality spike around May 2021. But the time-course varies in different States. Madhya Pradesh's explosive second wave accounted for 80-90% of its excess deaths. By contrast, Maharashtra saw more even surges, with over 40% of its excess deaths during its first wave.

There are striking variations in the ratio of excess deaths to recorded COVID-19 deaths. In Maharashtra excess deaths up to May 2021 are roughly four times recorded COVID-19 deaths, or less if we factor in reconciliations of COVID-19 deaths during June and July. By contrast, in Madhya Pradesh, excess deaths are an astonishing 25-30 times recorded COVID-19 deaths.

Exploring the stories behind these variations is important for understanding the pandemic and disease surveillance in India.

Considerable gaps remain. Some civil registration data are available for Uttar Pradesh up to April 2021, and these appear to

show a major surge in mortality; but there are huge fluctuations in registrations, and unexplained discrepancies with historical data which make it hard to use this data with any confidence. Where civil registration data are of poor quality or unavailable, large-scale mortality surveying could help to fill the gaps.

A perspective

Could the sharp rise in death registrations reflect not a surge in mortality but improvements in death registration? This claim has been made, but is not credible for several reasons. If we accept the estimate that 92% of deaths were registered in 2019, higher registration coverage could not cause a 35% surge in death registrations.

In fact there is little evidence for improving death registration during the pandemic. During the relatively quiet period between the two COVID-19 waves (January-March 2021), we see death registrations return close to 2019 baseline levels. And throughout the pandemic period, we see a very strong association between monthly excess deaths and official COVID-19 deaths, strongly suggesting these are pandemic-related excess deaths, and not a reflection of underlying trends in registration.

There are no easy ways to explain away or deny the scale of the catastrophe. Yes, there are uncertainties, and details will change as more data become available. Most likely, the numbers will increase. One thing is clear: during the COVID-19 pandemic, India has witnessed a surge in mortality on a scale not seen since Independence.

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The Abraham Accords as India's West Asia bridge

The signing of the Accords has helped remove strategic obstacles for New Delhi and aided defence cooperation



KABIR TANEJA

The recent visit by the Indian Air Force chief, Air Chief Marshal R.K. Bhadauria, to Israel offers a window to study how New Delhi is taking advantage of the Abraham Accords deal signed between Israel and a consortium of Arab States led by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2020 (<https://bit.ly/3yWHOHY>). According to reports, an Indian contingent of the Indian Air Force (IAF) will now visit Israel in October to take part in multilateral military exercises.

Deepening cooperation

In the same week as ACM Bhadauria's visit, India also conducted the 'Zayed Talwar' naval exercises with the UAE off the coast of Abu Dhabi, further deepening the fast-developing strategic cooperation between the two countries. In December 2020, Indian Army chief, General M.M. Naravane, visited the UAE and Saudi Arabia, becoming the first chief of the Indian Army to do so. The foundation for

these visits was set by the (now former) chief of the Indian Navy, Admiral Sunil Lanba, in 2017, who visited the UAE and Oman, the latter being home to Duqm Port where New Delhi signed a deal with Muscat for access to the facility, including dry dock use by the Indian Navy. The above examples show the pacy developments on the defence front between India and the West Asian region. The signing of the Accords has removed a significant strategic obstacle for New Delhi – that of a trapeze wire delicate balancing act India has had to play out between the Arab Gulf and Israel over the decades. This status quo is now witnessing a change, with Israel inaugurating its first diplomatic mission in Abu Dhabi and direct flights, business and tourism picking up between the two countries over the past few months. New Delhi had welcomed the Accords, highlighting its support for mechanisms that offer peace and stability in the region.

The thread

India's trajectory towards an increased strategic footprint in West Asia has been in development for some time now. Starting from the relatively low-key staging visit to Saudi Arabia conducted by the IAF in 2015, to hosting visiting Iranian



naval warships in 2018, defence of the critical waterways in and around the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea and the extended Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has taken a driving seat in Indian strategic thinking.

Recently, as tensions between Iran, Israel and the United States flared up in the Persian Gulf, the Indian Navy orchestrated Operation Sankalp, which saw Indian warships escort on an average 16 Indian-flagged vessels a day. This comes as covert attacks on merchant vessels in the region expand, with tensions between Iran and Israel spilling across the region. Till a certain extent, the Accords, from the UAE's perspective, were to make sure the emirate along with its international centres of trade such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi do not become targets between Jerusalem and Tehran. However, not all Arab States have been on board with the geopolitical shifts the Accords have pushed through. Despite a lot of effort from Israel, under the (now form-

er) Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Saudi Arabia has maintained a distance from this arrangement. More recently, Riyadh has praised the Accords, but said that the resolution of the Palestinian State remains at the forefront of its requirements.

It is imperative to remember here that despite India's rare but arguable successes in a 'non-alignment' approach in West Asia, it has taken one-sided decisions in the past, such as training Iraqi Air Force cadets on MiG aircraft in Tikrit between 1958 and 1989, while also maintaining good relations with former President Saddam Hussein, seen as a critical part of India's energy security thinking. The rationale behind such thinking back then has not changed even in 2021, as India still imports more than 80% of its annual oil requirements, much of which still comes from suppliers such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

The Iran link

Iran, as part of India's 'West Asia' construct, will also play a significant part in India's outreach in the months to come as the crisis in Afghanistan deepens. The fact that New Delhi used Iranian airspace and facilities when evacuating its diplomatic staff from Kandahar in July showcases a level of strategic

commonality, interest and play on certain issues in the region. Keeping this in mind, connectivity projects such as Chabahar Port and Chabahar-Zahedan rail project (project discussions are still on) amongst others remain critical. Recent multiple visits by India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh followed by Iranian Defence Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami's visit to India highlight a revitalised strategic cooperation between the two countries despite multiple obstacles in the bilateral relations, led by U.S. sanctions against Tehran and the general tensions between Israel, the Gulf and Iran via proxy battles in theatres such as Yemen, Syria and beyond.

India's strategic play in West Asia will be reflective of its economic growth, and by association, an increasingly important place in the global order. From the UN Security Council to the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi will be expected to be more assertive, diplomatically and militarily, in its posturing and shed the cloaks of its foreign and strategic policies being conducted from a stage balanced on a fence.

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Afghan developments

With the Taliban clear that their so-called governance will be according to sharia law, India is in a tough predicament as religious dogmas can never contribute to the peace of any region (Page 1, August 19). The void the United States has created is being hurriedly filled by vested interests such as China and Pakistan. And Russia and Iran will in all likelihood follow suit. India needs to do a lot of tight-rope walking on the issue of Afghanistan so as not to be caught in the crossfire between the West and the new players warming up in Afghanistan for a new game.

S. SANJEEVI RAO,
Puducherry

■ In *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn says: "On the supposition that the Islamic militant

Osama Bin Laden was responsible for the September 11 attacks, and he was somewhere in Afghanistan, Bush ordered the bombing of Afghanistan... the full extent of the human catastrophe caused by the bombing of Afghanistan was not being conveyed to the Americans by the mainstream press..." The stated objective of the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan was the destruction of Islamic terrorism. But after 20 years, America has made a deal with the same terrorists and left stealthily. The statements of the Taliban, that there will be only Sharia law, make it clear that the fate of Afghanistan is bleak.

SUKUMARAN C.V.,
Palakkad, Kerala

■ There is every possibility that the return of the Taliban will be the rallying point for radicals to recall their

so-called glorious past and embolden them to radicalise the youth, intensifying the already volatile socio-political milieu of South Asia. Afghanistan has fallen apart because of the U.S. And to add insult to injury, U.S. President Joe Biden has said "Afghanistan was never about nation-building". He is right in his own way! America has allowed a nation to become a fertile ground for outmoded and medieval ideals to flourish.

SATYANARAN PADHEE,
Bargarh, Odisha

■ The precipitate ascension of the Taliban to the Kabul throne should take us back to Iraq engulfed by the geopolitics of the times. Iraq had long been a far more stable political entity with an envious history of culture and heritage. The Afghan tale is the opposite: every player was counting on a

perennial U.S. presence. Unlike Iraq, with an evolved polity, the myriad tribes of Afghanistan have never found a common and enduring command for centuries. Overnight, they have to find a unifying theme and a cause and the vitally needed sagacious leadership to organise effective domestic governance. It is a tall order for the Taliban that is steeped in radicalism and has counted on disruption for survival.

R. NARAYANAN,
Navi Mumbai

■ Western nations claim to be the torchbearers of democracy and human rights, but their interventions only leave behind a huge mess. It is high time that the affected countries drop this "white man's burden" and fix their own internal problems first.

ISHITA PHULORIA,
New Delhi

The forces and equity

Gender discrimination against women joining our armed forces is irrational and against the spirit of egalitarianism defined in the Constitution. While womenfolk can work efficiently alongside men in massive governmental institutions, obstacles before women when it comes to the Indian armed forces are questionable. Similarly, the current monopolistic system of admitting only women in the corps of Military Nursing Service is brazenly biased against men applicants.

CICILY THOMAS,
Muvattupuzha, Kerala

■ The interim measure, on women and the NDA exam (Page 1, August 19), is welcome but in a patriarchal and misogynist society it will hardly be an emollient. Why is the women's reservation Bill hanging fire? The defence forces are no big

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draw or the holy grail of the employment ecosystem unlike yesteryears. After globalisation, MNCs are attracting top talent, providing remunerative and gainful employment. The hierarchical working of the forces may not gel with the aspirations of millennials.

DEEPAK SINGHAL,
Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Entrance exam dates

Two national level entrance examinations to be written by Class 12 students – the JEE Main for admission to NIT/IIITs and CLAT for admission to 22 law universities – will fall on the same date in respect to certain candidates. CLAT is on July 23 and one session of the JEE is from July 20-25. The National Testing Agency has to take note of this.

B.S. WARRIER,
Kochi