



Fleeting cheer

Fiscal measures should ensure overall consumption demand does not weaken

The latest GDP estimates expectedly show that national output rebounded in Q1 of the current fiscal from the record contraction in April-June 2020, when the pandemic's onset and the lockdown gutted the economy. National Statistical Office data show GDP expanded 20.1% from a year earlier, as every one of the eight industries spanning the broad agriculture, manufacturing and services categories posted positive growth. And gross value added, which aggregates output from all the eight sectors, grew by 18.8%. The numbers, however, show a different picture when compared with either the preceding quarter or the pre-pandemic first quarter of fiscal 2019-20. GDP at constant prices was estimated at ₹32.38-lakh crore, a 16.9% contraction from January-March's ₹38.96-lakh crore and more than 9% shy of the ₹35.66-lakh crore in April-June 2019. That the second COVID-19 wave extracted a significant toll is evident. With the exceptions of electricity and other utility services and the non-contact intensive services grouping of financial, real estate and professional services, all other six industries posted double-digit quarter-on-quarter contractions. On the expenditures front, private consumption spending flattered to deceive, posting year-on-year growth of 19.3% but still shrinking by 17.4% from the preceding three months. And most disconcertingly, government consumption expenditure, which has invariably in the past helped shore up the economy, contracted 4.8% from a year earlier and 7.6% from the previous quarter.

Looking ahead rather than in the rear-view mirror, there have been signs of some traction in the current quarter as most States have gradually eased their localised second wave restrictions. Exports have been one of the bright spots as the U.S. and other western economies have ramped up vaccinations and posted economic recoveries that have underpinned demand for goods and services from India. And manufacturing has surged almost 50% year-on-year to be just under ₹24,000 crore short of the April-June 2019 output level. A fact borne out by the Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index from IHS Markit, whose August release shows the sector experienced a second straight month of increase in production, albeit at a slower pace than July. Still, the same PMI survey also points to the challenges ahead. Rising raw material costs have been forcing manufacturers to either absorb the impact or raise prices, as several automakers have done, risking the prospect of dampening the already tenuous demand. And lingering uncertainty has led companies to yet again freeze hiring, according to IHS Markit. With monsoon rains in deficit, agricultural output and wider rural consumption also face a likely downturn. Policy makers must remain laser focused on expediting vaccination coverage and taking fiscal measures to ensure overall consumption demand does not weaken any further.

For a bona fide press

HC order for weeding out 'fake journalists' is well-intentioned, but needs wide consultation

Directing the State government to establish a 'Press Council of Tamil Nadu' within three months, the Madras High Court has come close to formulating policy and legislation. Its direction amounts to creating a body and clothing it with powers and functions, something that is normally done by law and after wider consultations. There is no doubt that it is a well-intentioned order that seeks to address problems arising from the dubious activities of 'fake journalists'. In fact, the directives may constitute a remedy to the maladies highlighted by the Division Bench in its recent verdict, but it is quite surprising that such a far-reaching measure has sought to be created by judicial direction while disposing of public interest litigation somewhat unrelated to the case at hand. The original case initiated by a man claiming to be a journalist contained some allegations against the special team investigating theft of idols from various temples. It was disposed of with a direction to the Idol Wing CID to proceed with the investigation in accordance with the law. As there was suspicion over the petitioner's credentials, the Bench has proceeded to address the larger problem of imposters masquerading as journalists for personal enrichment.

The issues highlighted by the Bench are quite real and need remedial measures. Some people claiming to be journalists do run letter-pad publications, or even print some copies of obscure journals, but devote much of their time to using "connections" to wangle benefits and gifts, try and swing transfers and postings; or be fronts for vested interests. Broadly, the court wants a State-level 'Press Council' to weed out 'fake journalists', regulate the distribution of identity and accreditation cards and the recognition of media bodies, besides receiving and disposing of complaints about the media. As of now, the Press Council of India performs the watchdog role about public complaints, but without any substantive enforcement powers. Accreditation and dealing with journalist bodies are now the functions of the respective governments. A powerful body that will identify and accredit journalists, decide their entitlements to bus and rail passes and welfare measures, as well as act as a complaints authority will surely need a statutory framework. Besides, a separate body created by executive order may act over-zealously and end up eliminating bona fide journalists. As 'newspapers, books and printing presses' are in the Concurrent List, the State government needs to examine if the field is occupied by central legislation, and whether it can create a watchdog body, as suggested by the court, encompassing all forms of media. It may have to weigh its options carefully, including an appeal.

The prognosis for school reopenings

A model shows that a rise in cases in children could occur, but in-person schooling can proceed with caution

BRIAN WAHL, SANDEEP KRISHNA & GAUTAM I. MENON

Schools began opening in a phased manner across several Indian States on September 1. These include the States of Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. Schools for senior students have already been open for the past few weeks in a few States.

Debates around when to open schools in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic have been divisive, and not just in India. These have focused on the balance between minimising the risk of disease for children and their family members, and maximising in-person schooling. The arguments have largely reflected the biases of those with strongly held points of view on both sides.

Mathematical models

With schools opening across India, will we observe an increase in cases in school children? Could this lead to another peak in overall cases as children bring infections back home? We addressed these questions using a mathematical model, presenting our findings (the meeting was in-camera) to an expert group of the World Health Organization this week.

How did our model address this question? Our model describes schools embedded within communities, that comprised families of different sizes. If schools are open, children move between their homes and schools. Children stay at home if schools are closed. Adults go to work at assigned workplaces or stay at home. The distribution of ages in the community is based on the age structure of the population in a typical mid-sized Indian city.

We describe the spread of COVID-19 from person to person, ac-

counting for reductions in this rate from non-pharmaceutical interventions including masking. We account for a level of prior infection in the community, as measured by serological surveys that look for antibodies for COVID-19. Our model accounts for the possibilities of asymptomatic, mild and severe disease, as well as hospitalisations and deaths. These vary across different age groups. We allow two doses of vaccinations, separated by 90 days, as well as the possibility of breakthrough infections, where the immunity granted by vaccines is breached. We incorporate what is currently known about the protection provided by vaccines against mild and severe disease. Our model reflects the current state of the epidemic in India at the moment. We start with children at home and then study how cases spread in children and in adults when schools open.

Findings of the model

Based on our model, an increase in cases in children is expected as schools are opened, relative to keeping them closed. However, this does not lead to a new wave under the current epidemic conditions in India. Specifically, in regions with the levels of seroprevalence expected across much of north India, we expect this increase in cases to be marginal. Children are at lower risk of severe disease associated with COVID-19 — very few of these infections are likely to lead to complications.

We can further restrict any increase in infections among children by ramping up immunisation in older age groups and by continuing non-pharmaceutical interventions, including requiring face masks, improving ventilation, shifting more activities to outdoor



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venues, and increasing the number of students attending school slowly over a period of several weeks. Such interventions should be continued until we achieve an overall seroprevalence of 75%-80%, adding numbers from recent infections and from vaccinations. Beyond this point, we find that these measures make little difference. We found that opening schools was not likely to contribute to an increase in cases among older individuals.

A typical Indian community considering whether to open schools should be on the downswing of the pandemic or past it in terms of having sufficient numbers of those who are — at least for the time being — relatively immune to the disease since they have been recently infected. Roughly speaking, this corresponds to about 45% seropositivity to begin, in the absence of vaccinations. Adding vaccinations on top of that cushions any sharp rise in cases, especially if combined with COVID-19 non-pharmaceutical interventions.

Interpreting the results

Much of India has encountered COVID-19, particularly the Delta variant. Some have been reinfected by it. Seropositivity levels in children are comparable to those in adults — keeping children at home has not served the purpose of keeping them from becoming infected. This is a point whose im-

portance has been insufficiently stressed: if children are as likely to pick up an infection from the community while staying at home, there is little reason to keep them out of school.

More than 60% of the vulnerable population have been given one dose of vaccine; in some cases, two doses. There is a case for prioritising the vaccination of family members, especially elderly ones, of school-going children as well as of teachers and other school staff. We see the advantages of this in our model simulations.

We stress that a rise in cases could occur once schools are opened. Indeed, children who show symptoms after testing positive should be screened for potentially more severe versions of the disease. However, the number of severe cases in children is very small since children are better protected against disease than adults.

With COVID-19 and schools, the trade-off is between the long-term consequences of disruptions in learning and socialisation in children and the short-term possibility of their contracting an infection. Finding the right balance between these two factors is crucial. Given the state of the Indian epidemic as well as the likely possibility that COVID-19 will transition into endemicity, there seems to be little reason to continue to have schools closed. This should be true especially in States and communities where seropositivity is in excess of 80%.

State-specific approach

For low seropositivity States such as Kerala and Maharashtra, a better understanding of the current fraction of the population that has antibodies, either from prior infection or from vaccination, would help. Once this crosses the 80% le-

vel, we see no reason why they should not also reopen. It remains important to continue studying the spread of COVID-19 over the next six months to understand how quickly immunity due to prior infection wanes over time.

Actions called for

Our simulations do not include testing and tracing, although this is one way of keeping any increase in cases in check; nor does it include the possibility of new variants. The possibility of random testing of schoolchildren at regular intervals has been raised. We favour, instead, local decisions to close schools if test positivity in the community exceeds a preset bound, since children seem to be acquiring the infection in their communities at the same rate at which adults acquire them.

While models are imperfect guides to the future, especially because they must make assumptions about human and virus behaviour, they often provide useful intuition. Comparisons to other countries are not particularly helpful, since each country's situation with respect to the disease is different. The recent uptick in vaccination numbers is encouraging and should hopefully be sustained in the coming weeks. This will help in ensuring that children can return to school. For this, we need not wait until vaccines for children are available.

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Where liberalism and nationalism are placed in Asia

India and China have used the present world system to fashion their rise, with no alternative based on Asian nationalism



KRISHNAN SRINIVASAN

Liberalism and nationalism mean different things to different people, and the two concepts are often considered mutually exclusive. Over 70 years after Indian independence, it is worth recalling that the British claimed that their empire rested on liberal foundations and the transfer of power to nationalists evidenced this claim. But liberalism often clashed with anti-colonial nationalism; the greatest material support to anti-colonial movements during the Cold War came from the illiberal Soviet Union.

A 'cause' of war

After the rise of the nation state, wars were attributed to the power and expansionist policies of nations. In Europe, nations were in almost constant conflict, and Japanese nationalism led to wars, particularly with China. In the early period of the last century, nationalism was regarded as the root cause of war, but this was an oversimplification, since many, especially Marxists, would argue that capitalism, which led to colonialism, was equally if not mainly res-

ponsible. In Europe, as the national idea spread, it became ethnic-oriented and increasingly illiberal, with an exception being Giuseppe Mazzini's nationalist activism.

The early decades

Before Indian independence, nationalism was regarded with suspicion; Rabindranath Tagore had considered it a malign ideology, making a subtle distinction between the Nation of the West, which he critiqued as a mechanical and soulless, and the Spirit of the West representing Enlightenment values of internationalism and universalism. There were alternative strands of thinking; Vinayak Damodar Savarkar contrasted his espousal of Hinduva nationalism with Buddha's universalism, the latter's non-violence being regarded by him as weakening Indian patriotism, since "Buddhism had its centre of gravity nowhere".

Jawaharlal Nehru saw merit in nationalism as the focus of the Independence movement. In 1950, he asserted that "the strongest urge in Asia...is the anti-colonial urge and the positive side of it is nationalism", and in 1953, "nationalism has been and is a very good thing. It has been a great liberating force in certain stages of a country's history". Yet, he feared that extreme nationalism among colonised peoples could degenerate into fascism and expansionism.



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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party's dogma harks back to the thinking of Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar, representing Indian cultural nationalism and attempting an impossible balance between the projection of hard power and promotion of peace. Nationalism may take various forms but essentially, it is about collective identity, whereas liberalism implies the defence of individual freedom and self-determination, the state's role being to protect the private sphere. In practice, liberalism has advantages and disadvantages; it can underpin universal rights and Adam Smith's natural laws of economics, but its appeal is mainly to the professional educated class, and lacks nationalism's emotional appeal.

Asian democracy

Asian politics are politically conservative when the economy is booming, shown by lengthy autocratic governments in China, Singapore and Vietnam, whereas the Asian financial crisis of 1997 led to a democratic impulse in Taiwan,

Indonesia, South Korea, and intermittently in Thailand. Democracy in Asia is not shaped by the liberalism of the West; the centrality of civil and political rights is less dogmatic and a degree of state intervention considered acceptable when it comes to individual autonomy.

The liberal tradition contributes the ideas underlying the post-Second World War international system, embracing democracy, free trade, international law, multilateralism, environmental protection and human rights. Problems arise when such ideas become a doctrine for nation-building irrespective of context, with western intervention in the developing world and its consequences of turmoil and Islamist extremism and terror. The current example of Afghanistan is a case in point.

Power hierarchy

Liberalism is now attacked in the West by both the far-right populism illustrated by former U.S. President Donald Trump, and the left represented by such as Senator Bernie Sanders who regard the global situation as the neo-liberal preserve of the rich and powerful. Despite American diplomatic rhetoric, there never has been a community of mutually supportive liberal democracies. International relations are conducted at the axial point of an egalitarian order of law and a hierarchical order of power: the United Nations repre-

sents this tension in the differing principles on which the Security Council and General Assembly are based. This is why the reform of the UN to include India, Japan, Germany and a few others as permanent members of the Security Council proves so difficult to achieve.

In a future Asia

How will nationalism and liberalism be reflected in a future Asia? Both India and China were at the receiving end of western imperialism and emerged as supporters of principles of international society reflected in the Panchsheel, namely sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference. This implies rejection of western efforts to qualify sovereignty by making it dependent on human rights protection. The Non-Aligned Movement and Afro-Asianism were efforts to project a soft power model, but soon China, India and Pakistan joined the nuclear weapons club of hard power. The two leading Asian nations, India and China, used the present world system to fashion their rise while protesting against the control of the United Nations and world financial institutions but have not formulated any alternative based on Asian nationalism. Their current rivalry makes such a desirable outcome a remote prospect.

Krishnan Srinivasan is a former Foreign Secretary

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Vaccination drive

The Editorial, "The virtue of consistency" (August 31), on India's vaccination coverage, has justifiably emphasised the point about maintaining consistency rather than going to town with the achievement of a 'momentous feat'. There is also another issue: scepticism about these numbers, as the 'cooking up of data' is well known. My recent experience with a well-publicised house-to-house survey and affixing vaccination-completion stickers — undertaken by the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation — shows that the reported vaccination coverage is not completely correct. I was surprised to see one such label on the gate of my house without anyone having made an enquiry with any member of the

household. I was shocked to see a sticker on the locked gate of my neighbour, when his mother and him did not receive even a single dose. It is no wonder then that despite claims of more than half the eligible population having been vaccinated, some States continue to record high cases.

K. VIJAYARAGHAVAN, Hyderabad

■ The vaccination drive may be reaching a certain milestone, but we must not let our guard down. We must understand that while vaccination can reduce the severity of COVID-19, it cannot protect us from being infected. It is getting hard to be patient but venting frustration by neglecting safety measures is only going to extend this pandemic. Let us not forget the deep losses we incurred during the

second COVID-19 wave.

HARSHITHA GADDE, Hosur, Tamil Nadu

Notes on schooling

It is imperative that schools should open and physical classes are conducted. All parents and guardians do agree that children need school for more than one reason. However, one major question remains: how prepared are schools? And how hygienic and clean are they? Teachers more often than not cannot control children beyond a certain level. As a guardian of young children, I have visited a few of the so-called better schools only to find many amenities in a sorry state. The facilities provided are not in consonance with the fees collected. From now on, teaching methods, examination patterns and pedagogy skills have to be of a different

quality. Just being exam oriented and pushing the idea of getting students to the next grade cannot and should not be the criteria.

JAYA, Secunderabad

Is this restoration?

The government of the day should not forget that Jallianwala Bagh is a place of mourning and of deep, abiding grief. The starkness of the Bagh itself is a reminder of what happened there. To make structural modifications by calling it a 'revamp' is baffling and destroys a very sombre and moving place of memory (Inside pages, "This is renovation, not restoration", August 31). What a shame.

BIDYUT KUMAR CHATTERJEE, Faridabad, Haryana

■ The history and events at Jallianwala Bagh still send shivers down one's spine.

Flawed decisions such as carving murals on the narrow entrance and covering the well into which victims jumped with a transparent barrier sheet, only highlight carelessness and ignorant behaviour. These have only ended up erasing history. A visitor must experience grief, but this will not be the case now.

SUKHJEET KAUR, Hyderabad

■ If what historians say is true, then it is unfortunate that the new-look Jallianwala Bagh memorial now presents a distortion of history. A place where innocent Indians were murdered cannot be made to resemble an amusement park. Future generations that visit the historic place will not have the faintest idea now of how the place looked like in 1919. Jallianwala Bagh is no Eiffel Tower or the Niagara Falls.

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Every single historic site must be preserved and care taken without the minutest misrepresentation of what it is known for.

SANATH KUMAR T.S., Thrissur, Kerala

Inclusive travel

The point in the report, "Accessibility in public transport still elusive for disabled persons" (Chennai, September 1), is right; that the focus should be on inclusivity right from the design stages. Does this endeavour have to be a battle though? Senior employees of the transport corporations and political leaders should try to use transport, perhaps in wheelchairs, to understand first hand what the problems are. It is, after all, public transport.

RENU WEISS, Chennai