



## No clean sweep

Transforming urban India calls for community-based moves towards a circular economy

Seven years after launching his government's marquee programme, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has announced the second phase of Swachh Bharat Mission-Urban (SBM-U) and the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), with a fresh promise to make India's cities clean. For all the attention it has received, the goal of scientific waste management and full sanitation that Mahatma Gandhi emphasised even a century ago remains largely aspirational today, and the recent lament of Principal Economic Adviser Sanjeev Sanyal on dirty, dysfunctional cities drives home the point. That urban India, in his view, is unable to match cities in Vietnam that has a comparable per capita income is a telling commentary on a lack of urban management capacities in spite of the Swachh Bharat programme enjoying tremendous support. SBM-U 2.0, with a ₹1.41-lakh crore outlay, aims to focus on garbage-free cities and urban grey and black water management in places not covered by AMRUT. In its first phase, the Mission had an outstanding balance of ₹3,532 crore, since the total allocation was ₹14,622 crore while cumulative releases came to ₹11,090 crore. The issue of capability and governance underscores the challenge – of being able to process only about one lakh tonnes of solid waste per day against 1.4 lakh tonnes generated – to transition to a circular economy that treats solid and liquid waste as a resource.

Raising community involvement in resource recovery, which the rules governing municipal, plastic and electronic waste provide for, calls for a partnership that gives a tangible incentive to households. The current model of issuing mega contracts to big corporations – as opposed to decentralised community-level operations for instance – has left segregation of waste at source a non-starter. In the absence of a scaling up of operations, which can provide large-scale employment, and creation of matching facilities for material recovery, SBM-U 2.0 cannot keep pace with the tide of waste in a growing economy. On sanitation, the impressive claim of exceeding the targets for household, community and public toilets thus far obscures the reality that without water connections, many of them are unusable, and in public places, left in decrepitude. State and municipal governments, which do the heavy lifting on waste and sanitation issues, should work to increase community ownership of the system. As things stand, it is a long road to Open Defecation Free plus (ODF+) status for urban India, since that requires no recorded case of open defecation and for all public toilets to be maintained and functioning. Equally, the high ambition of achieving 100% tap water supply in about 4,700 urban local bodies and sewerage and septage in 500 AMRUT cities depends crucially on making at least good public rental housing accessible to millions of people.

## Crime and the pandemic

The lockdown had a bearing on the patterns of crimes that were registered in 2020

The annual report, 'Crime in India', released by the National Crime Records Bureau in mid-September this year needs to be carefully parsed before gleaming insights or making State-wise comparisons. The reason is the significant variances in case registration across States and Union Territories, especially serious crimes pertaining to rape and violence against women. States/UTs such as Tamil Nadu with 1808.8, Kerala (1568.4) and Delhi (1309.6) recorded the highest crime rate (crimes per one lakh people) overall. But it is difficult not to see these numbers as a reflection of better reporting and police registration of cases in these States and the capital city, respectively. On the other hand, while there was an 8.3% decline in registered cases of crimes against women in 2020 (of which the bulk of them, 30.2%, were of the category "Cruelty by husband or his relatives"), this number has to be assessed along with the fact that the year saw prolonged lockdowns during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic (between late March and May 2021 in particular). This period coincided with a high number of complaints of domestic violence – the number of complaints received by National Commission for Women registered a 10-year high as of June 2020. The seeming mismatch between the NCW and NCRB data must be studied and can only be explained by a lack of registration of cases in some States where crime reporting remains sluggish either due to a fear of doing so or a lackadaisical approach to such cases by law enforcement. On the other hand, the lockdown also led to an overall fall in crime related to theft, burglary and dacoity.

The COVID-19 related disruption also led to a greater registration of cases overall (a 28% increase in 2020 compared to 2019) largely due to a 21-fold increase in cases related to disobedience to the order duly promulgated by a public servant and over four times in cases involving violations of other State local laws. This is not surprising either. India had one of the most stringent lockdowns and law enforcement spared little in enforcing strictures on physical distancing. The question of registration does not apply to some types of cases such as murders – which showed only a marginal increase of 1% compared to 2019. Worryingly, while there was a reduction in the registered number of economic offences (by 12% since 2019), cybercrimes recorded an increase of 11.8%. The increase in cybercrimes is cause for concern as this requires sharper law enforcement as seen even in highly developed societies. While cases related to sedition declined from 93 in 2019 to 73 last year, Manipur and Assam led with 15 and 12 cases each. Sedition has increasingly been used as a weapon to stifle dissent and this trend needs to be reversed urgently.

# Reading Gandhi as a lesson of political maturity

His appeal to conscientious politics and nobility of spirit continues to be a strong ethical response to political issues



RAMIN JAHANGBEGLOO

Nearly 74 years after his death, Gandhi remains the most widely known political leader of modern India. Gandhi's stature as a major historical figure was confirmed by his successful non-violent movement against British rule in India. Yet, what makes Gandhi so relevant and meaningful for our world is that his political legacy and his philosophical significance continue to inspire millions of people around the globe – to fight against inequality, injustice and historical wrongs.

### An imperative

Accordingly, what distinguishes Gandhi from all politicians in today's world is not only his simplicity and honesty – which have become rare characteristics for many men and women who pretend to represent our wills and wishes around the globe – but also his belief in the moral growth of humanity. In a world such as ours which suffers from an immaturity of politics and politicians, either in tyrannical situations such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, Syria, etc. or in democracies such as the United States, Spain, Poland, India, etc. reading Gandhi as a lesson of political maturity is an ethical imperative. As such, and not strangely, Gandhi believed in no divorce between politics and ethics.

For Gandhi, politics was essentially an ethical mode of conduct.

He never pretended to be a teacher of truth. However, others took him to be a guru, and there is no doubt that his attempts to encourage people to experiment with the truth were both philosophical and pedagogical.

### Culture of patience

Therefore, as a practitioner of empathetic humanism and a pluralist thinker, Gandhi was an exemplar of a lifelong process of listening and learning. He actually played the role of an exemplar in prescribing "patience" as a means to understand and approach the other. The dialogical nature of Gandhi's culture of patience finds its roots in the idea of epistemic humility as a necessary methodology in approaching and understanding other cultures and religions. As such, the entire Gandhian thought in the realm of religion and politics revolves around this concept of epistemic humility. That is why Gandhi had a profoundly ethical view of religions.

In other words, he recognised neither the infallible authority of prophetic texts nor the sanctity of religious traditions. At the same time, he was the foremost critic of the epistemological arrogance of modern rationality and its authoritarian practices in terms of colonial thinking and imperialistic domination. It is on account of his overriding concern for the self-respect of individuals and nations that Gandhi joined the two notions of truth and non-violence to that of the term Swaraj.

Gandhi believed that all individuals irrespective of their religion, race and culture had the right to self-governance. Accordingly, what we can call the Gandhian moment of Swaraj was actually for



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him a constant experimentation with modes of cross-cultural and inter-faith understanding and dialogue.

In other words, the capacity to engage constructively with conflicting values was an essential component of Gandhi's practical wisdom and empathetic pluralism. As a matter of fact, Swaraj as a space of self-realisation was where the ethical and the political joined in the Gandhian political philosophy. For Gandhi, politics, like spirituality, was a space to examine and experience Truth, which he considered not as a given process, but as an effort of re-evaluation and reformulation of reality.

### A self-transcendence

In this sense, Gandhi did not consider freedom as a mere political act, but he defined it primarily as an ethical enterprise. That is why Gandhi argued, "I am but a seeker after Truth. I claim to have found a way to it. I claim to be making a ceaseless effort to find it. But I admit that I have not yet found it. To find Truth completely is to realize oneself and one's destiny, i.e., to become perfect. I am painfully conscious of my imperfections, and therein lies all the strength I possess, because it is a rare thing

for a man to know his own limitations." We have here a process of individual self-transcendence that Gandhi also applied to the idea of civilisation, since he considered civilisation as an exercise of human maturity.

Gandhi firmly believed that the anthropological and ethical origins of such a state of maturity resided in the spiritual capacity of human beings. But he also underlined this move towards maturity as a process of learning to be responsible towards oneself and the others. As a result, everything Gandhi did and wrote during his lifetime was an attempt to bring into the open his own journey of intellectual and political maturity. He, therefore, used the concept of maturity not only in the social context, but also as an expression of character building which he distinguished from literary training.

As he asserted, "Literary training by itself adds not an inch to one's moral height and character-building is independent of literary training." Therefore, according to Gandhi, character-building was an art of developing a sense of autonomy and having authority over one's self.

In other words, maturity for Gandhi was a state of mind and a mode of being, where one had the capacity to form one's life in a social sphere. It was on the basis of this act of maturity that Gandhi established his political anthropology and pedagogical premises. He believed that an autonomy formed by a mature judgment prepared a life according to morality. Gandhi, therefore, approached pragmatic politics as a form of character-building and not necessarily a struggle for getting elected or grasping power.

Gandhi's acknowledgment of the moral imperative of maturity and his devotion to democratic transparency continues to distinguish his political psychology from most of the other discourses in Indian and world politics. As such, Gandhi's suggestion to us in relation to moral excellence and spiritual maturity presents itself at the same time as an invitation to self-respect and self-restraint.

### A continuing relevance

As he argued, "Where there is egotism, we shall find incivility and arrogance. Where it is absent, we shall find a sense of self-respect together with civility... He who holds his self-respect dear acts towards everyone in a spirit of friendship, for he values others' self-respect as much as he values his own. He sees himself in all and everyone else in himself, puts himself in line with others. The egotist keeps aloof from others and, believing himself superior to the rest of the world, he takes [it] upon himself to judge everyone and in the result enables the world to have the measure of his smallness."

Therefore, it goes without saying that by reading Gandhi closely and correctly, we can get to the conclusion that, despite all his shortcomings, his appeal to mature and conscientious politics and nobility of spirit continues to be a strong ethical response to the political issues and challenges of our time. Maybe, that is why, Gandhi remains our contemporary, while he belongs to our future.

Ramin Jahangbegloo is Director of the Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Non-Violence and Peace Studies at the O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana

# Time to sound the bell with class doors reopening

Learning recovery and safety should be top priorities as schools begin to open again across India



YASMIN ALI HAQUE

The sight of children going to school evokes normalcy and hope. Our children's lives are centred around schools, and the learning, the routine, and fun that come with it.

But for nearly a year-and-a-half since the novel coronavirus pandemic in 2020, schools had to shut their doors, and shift to remote learning. Children could not meet their friends, or eat hot school meals. Some suffered mental distress. Many faced violence. Millions of children missed critical developmental milestones.

What started off as a health crisis fast turned into an acute child rights crisis. Learning loss was a big fallout of the pandemic.

### The gaps in online learning

While remote, online learning is the only resort to connect students with teachers. It is a pale substitute for in-person learning. Many children have been excluded

from online classes, due to the digital divide. There is also grave concern over the learning outcome for children who can connect. Eight out of 10 parents of students aged between five to 13 years are of the opinion that their children were learning less or significantly less remotely compared to when in school. More than nine of every 10 children in Classes 2 to 6 have lost at least one specific ability in language from the previous year.

Across India, States have started reopening schools as COVID-19 cases plateau. Large numbers are now vaccinated, and it is steadily moving up. The government prioritisation of teachers for vaccination is very reassuring.

Back at school

However, the decision to reopen schools is fraught with emotions, fears, and heated debates. The questions being raised by parents need to be addressed. Schools must put in place and implement all safety protocols.

An online survey conducted by UNICEF reached nearly 11,000 respondents (parents, teachers, and students). By and large, all 6,157 responding parents felt that being vaccinated is the most important

safety measure for children to return to school. While parents (55%) said they were not keen on sending their child to school yet, parents (60%) did not feel confident that their child's school and staff are ready for safe reopening.

Out of 4,451 teachers who responded to the survey; 65% said they have been provided support and guidance on how to work safely in schools as they reopen. While 93% said school staff should be fully vaccinated before classes resumed. Out of 366 student respondents, 71% were excited to go back to school.

Schools can focus on getting back younger children first, as primary and pre-primary-school age children are the least likely to be infected. Children are mostly



asymptomatic and are less likely to spread the virus when compared to adults.

We have evidence to show that schools are not the main drivers of community transmission and that children are more likely to get the virus outside of school settings. In fact, keeping schools closed for more than a year did not prevent the raging second wave of the pandemic. With measures firmly in place, schools can be safer environments for children than other places.

Teachers have shown remarkable courage and commitment across India. They stepped up to support online and offline learning across high tech, low tech and no tech settings. And used various other platforms for learning and even did door-to-door visits with students.

Learning now and solutions

The novel coronavirus pandemic has paved the way for a blended teaching-learning approach combining online and offline lessons. Teachers may assess the levels of progress in students in remote learning and plan for lessons based on these levels. Parents, teachers, students and school managements need to work to-

gether to find solutions. Positive examples have emerged from different States such as open-air classes under trees.

Despite doubts, there is no better alternative to the safe reopening of schools. The longer children are out of schools, the more difficult it would be for them to return and learn. The social and economic costs of children continuing to be out of school have become too high.

Here is an example of a student's reaction: "When schools were closed, it did not feel right, I got bored and missed my friends. Schools have now opened, we are again meeting every day, playing with friends. We show others how to follow COVID appropriate behaviours in and outside of school. We request our teachers and friends to always wear masks. And that is how we keep everyone safe."

Many children are finding rhythm and normalcy in going to schools, like Anshu Kumari, a Class eight student of Jay Mangal School in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, said.

In India, equity must guide how children return to school, and continue to learn and grow.

Yasmin Ali Haque is UNICEF Representative in India

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Party matters

The reports in *The Hindu* over the past two days, and on page 1, show the glory of a once Grand Old Party under the stewardship of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi has faded. There is no doubt that the Gandhis – Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra – are most certainly damaging the party. There is absolutely no value for talented Congressmen; for that matter, even the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is no different. If the reins of the Congress are with the Gandhis, the BJP is in the pincer-like grip of two men! There are many of us who despair the absence of a strong Opposition party to keep the government of the day under check especially as it [the Government] seems to be drifting away from the democratic way of functioning.

BARU RAJENDRA PRASAD, Hyderabad

It has become fashionable for many in politics (the G-23 cohorts are among them) and commentators to lay the

blame at the door of the Congress leadership for everything. They criticise and find fault with the Gandhis for the 'absence of a strong Opposition' to take on the BJP and the Narendra Modi government. It does not occur to them that if the BJP is strong today, it is not because of the Gandhis, but despite them. The problem is deeper than most people assume, diagnose or hesitate to state openly for whatever reason. A party's strength is relative to its support among the people. Fighting the BJP with its USP of a Hindutva narrative is no easy task. Sensitising the masses about the bread-and-butter issues of politics and weaning them away from the BJP requires a lot of work.

G. DAVID MILTON, Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

It is time the decision-making authority within the party is revamped to be in sync with the realities of Indian politics. All decisions made by the party are those of the Gandhis; and most of them are absolute failures. There are many who

still desire that the Grand Old Party should be revived and function as an effective Opposition, as there is no other party that has a national outlook. The first thing the Congress should do now is to decide its leaders through a democratic process of elections, right from the bottom-most level to the AICC.

P.R.V. RAJA, Pandalam, Kerala

When Congress chief spokesman Randeep Surjewala says the CWC meeting would be convened 'very soon', one wonders how 'soon' means given the party's tendency to procrastinate over normal issues such as electing a regular chief while relegating urgent things to the backburner. The reactions to well-meaning concerns – such as those by G-23 – show the reluctance for course correction. The placards with the 'Get well soon' messages, which Congress protesters displayed outside Kapil Sibal's house, should have been turned inward.

AYYASSERI RAVEENDRANATH, Aranmula, Kerala

There are many who would echo what Kanhaiya Kumar said while joining the Congress – that the party is not simply a political institution but rather an idea and philosophy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi must be basking in comfort that it is a case of TINA – There Is No Alternative. With the general election still far away, the Congress can set its house in order.

D. NAGARJUNA, Hyderabad

Apathy, sycophancy and a coterie are weakening the Grand Old Party. Despite crises and numerous defeats, the party is not addressing the root cause – strengthening the party from the grassroots. Rahul Gandhi's propensity for foot in the mouth comments has only worsened the situation. Allowing sane voices to deliberate, discuss and debate matters should be the "Panchsheel" of the party.

P.S.S. MURTHY, Hyderabad

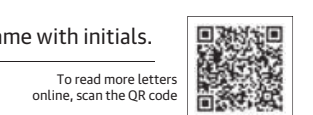
Why is so much newsprint being wasted on the internal matters of a party that is

being managed by one of the most incompetent set of leaders it has ever had? It is also amusing that there are many readers close to grief, as can be seen in the 'Letters to the Editor' column in the daily. A party leadership that fails to capitalise on so many burning issues – and being handed to it on a platter – deserves to sink.

G. NARASIMHAN, Bengaluru

### The Quad and China

It is baffling that the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, has now said that "China can join Quad initiatives" (October 1), in effect massively diluting the Quad's unstated objective of "encircling" China in different ways, to stop it from becoming the undisputed hegemon of Asia. So what happens to the many declarations made at the in-person summit in the United States? The U.S.'s statements on AUKUS will have a psychological and strategic impact on Japan and India, as it is clear that both nations will not be a part of this 'Anglo-Saxon formation'. The net result is



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that the Indo-Pacific region is ready to bubble over.

ADI BALSARA, Mumbai

### New species

A group of us, Santoshkumar Abujam, Arup Nama Das, Budhin Gogoi, D.N. Das, S.P. Biswas and Heiko Bleher – researchers from the Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh, the University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya and Dibrugarh University, Assam – have discovered a new small-sized fish of the genus *Esomus* in Dima Hasao district, Assam. The species has the taxonomic designation, *Esomus nimasowi*, and we describe it in *Aqua, International Journal of Ichthyology* (September 2021). The genus *Esomus* includes a total of nine valid species found around the globe and spread across South-East Asia. So far, only three species occur in India – *Esomus danrica*, *Esomus thermoicos* and *Esomus bengalensis*.

ARUP NAMA DAS, Ri-Bhoi, Meghalaya