



## Climate pledge

Nations must realise they are not in a competitive race but trying to outrun the clock

In a surprise move at COP26 in Glasgow, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that India will commit to ambitious, enhanced climate targets and cuts in carbon emissions in its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). There were promises to increase non-fossil fuel energy capacity to 500 GW, meet 50% energy from renewable energy, reduce emissions by one billion tonnes, and bring down the economy's carbon intensity below 45%, all by 2030. Finally, the PM made the much-awaited declaration: to reach Net Zero emissions by 2070. The announcement came as a surprise given that India had given no assurances to visiting western climate negotiators before the conference, and had not filed updated NDCs by the deadline last month. Earlier, the G20 summit in Rome ended without any new commitments on climate change, and India's G20 Sherpa and Minister Piyush Goyal had said that India could not "identify a year" for ending net carbon emissions (ensuring carbon dioxide emissions are absorbed by the use of technology and lowering output), unless the developed world committed to funding India's energy transition and enabled clean technology transfers on a much higher scale. Mr. Goyal even suggested that India could not switch to non-fossil fuel and end coal-based thermal plants unless it was made a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, where it is being blocked by China and a number of other countries.

Mr. Modi's pledges in 2021 will require an almost immediate shift in the Government's priorities if it wishes to meet its first few goals in just eight years. According to one estimate (the Centre for Science and Environment), the promise to reduce emissions by one billion tonnes would need a reduction in India's carbon output by a massive 22% by 2030. On Net Zero, the target of 2070 is two decades after the global goal at mid-century, and would require the world's other growing economies including China to peak emissions, preferably by 2030 itself. India meets about 12% of its electricity needs through renewable energy, and ramping that up to 50% by 2030 will be a tall ask too. If the Government realises Mr. Modi's promises in Glasgow, India will be a global beacon in fighting climate change and ensuring sustainable development. At the least, it is hoped the commitments will inspire other countries to keep their word, particularly the developed world that has lagged behind in fulfilling combined promises of billions of dollars to fund emerging economies, LDCs and the most climate vulnerable countries in the global South. When it comes to climate change, countries must remember they are not in competition with one another, but trying together to outrun the clock.

## Quota without data

States should base reservation policies on data, not political expediency

An exclusive internal quota for a single caste group was always fraught with the danger of judicial invalidation. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Madras High Court has struck down the Tamil Nadu law that earmarked 10.5% of seats in educational institutions and jobs for the Vanniyakula Kshatriya community and its sub-castes. The court's foremost reason is that the State Assembly lacked the legislative competence to enact the law in February 2021, at a time when the Constitution 102nd Amendment, conferring exclusive power to identify backward classes on the President, was in force. That the Constitution 105th Amendment subsequently restored the States' powers to identify backward classes was not deemed relevant as, on the date of the enactment, the Assembly had been denuded of such power. The Bench of Justices M. Duraishwamy and K. Murali Shankar, also ruled that identifying one caste as a separate group for creating an exclusive quota, without any quantifiable data on its backwardness relative to others, amounted to giving reservation solely on the basis of caste and, therefore, impermissible under the Constitution. Further, it noted that the remaining 115 castes under the 'MBC and De-notified Communities' category were forced to share the remaining 9.5% (in two groups with 2.5% and 7%, respectively) of what used to be a 20% MBC/DNC quota. This amounted to discrimination.

The court also rejected the comparison with the sub-quotas enjoyed without hindrance by Backward Class Muslims and Arundhatiyars, a Scheduled Caste, noting that these two measures were backed by Census data and valid recommendations. What may cause some concern is that the court has said changes in the existing 69% quota classification cannot be made without amending the State's 1994 reservation protection law, which received the President's assent and was also included in the Ninth Schedule to put it beyond judicial review. This legal position may pose problems for the BC (Muslim) and SC (Arundhatiyar) quota too, as these were introduced through stand-alone laws that received only the Governor's assent without any amendment to the 1994 Act. That an impending agitation by the PMK, a restive ally of the then ruling AIADMK, was behind the Vanniyar quota law is known. The Government did not wait for the report of a commission it had appointed earlier to gather quantifiable data to justify the State's 69% total reservation. The present DMK regime also backed the exclusive Vanniyar quota in court, and is likely to go on appeal. The Supreme Court has been asking governments to justify their reservation levels through quantifiable data. Instead of looking for shortcuts to popularity, regimes in all States should focus on compiling credible data both on the backwardness of sections of society and their level of representation in public services and educational opportunities.

# Trade and climate, the pivot for India-U.S. ties

The two areas are interrelated and will lend additional strength to the foundation of a true partnership



MARK LINSOTT & IRFAN NOORUDDIN

When the history of the 21st century is written, India and the United States and the strategic alliance they forge should play starring roles. Granted, it is far too early to predict how successful their joint efforts will be in creating a free and open Indo-Pacific — one that advances democratic values and confronts autocracies globally and locally. As 2021 closes, with COVID-19 still a present danger and China, the emerging superpower on the global stage, viewed by both as a strategic competitor, India and the U.S. have a long way to go before they can inspire confidence that this blossoming alliance will endure for the long term.

### Areas of convergence

We believe that the fate of the grand strategic ambitions of the relationship may in fact depend substantially on how well they collaborate in two areas to which their joint attention is only belatedly turning — climate and trade. The first presents an existential threat while the second is too often dismissed as a secondary consideration, even dispensable in the name of pursuing larger strategic interests. Such thinking ignores

the lessons of history: strategic partnerships capable of re-shaping the international global order cannot be based simply on a negative agenda. Shared concerns about China provide the U.S.-India partnership a much-needed impetus to overcome the awkward efforts for deeper collaboration that have characterised the past few decades. What risks being lost is a reckoning with how interrelated climate and trade are to securing U.S.-India leadership globally, and how their strategic efforts can flounder without sincere commitment to a robust bilateral agenda on both fronts.

### Some encouraging signs

There has been progress. The U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, has visited India twice already, and India and the U.S. are collaborating under the Climate and Clean Energy Agenda Partnership. In parallel, there are hopeful signs that they are now prioritising the bilateral trade relationship by rechartering the Trade Policy Forum. Both countries are also taking leading roles, articulating their climate concerns and commitments. However, early signs suggest we might be headed for a replay of previous show-downs at COP26 in Glasgow: while India just announced a net zero goal for 2070 — a welcome development even if well after catastrophic climate scenarios may be baked in — it has called for western countries to commit to negative emissions targets. India's rhetoric of climate justice is likely to be received poorly by U.S. negotiators,



particularly if it aligns with China's messaging and obstructs efforts to reach concrete results. Likewise, the failure of the U.S. and India to articulate a shared vision for a comprehensive trade relationship raises doubts about how serious they are when each spends more time and effort negotiating with other trading partners. Protectionist tendencies infect the politics of both countries these days, and, with a contentious U.S. mid-term election a year away, the political window for achieving problem-solving outcomes and setting a vision on trade for the future is closing fast.

### The interlinks

Climate and trade are interrelated in many ways, from commercial dissemination of cutting-edge carbon mitigation and adaptation products and technologies to the carbon emissions that come with the transport of goods and humans from one country to another. If governments, such as India and the U.S., coordinate policies to incentivise sharing of climate-re-

lated technologies and align approaches for reducing emissions associated with trade, the climate-trade inter-relationship can be a net positive one.

### Work on early solutions

For example, India and the U.S. could find opportunities to align their climate and trade approaches better, starting with a resolution of their disputes in the World Trade Organization (WTO) on solar panels. As they have dithered in pursuing cases in the WTO and settling them, China has effectively captured the global market, leaving each dependent on a source they view as a threat. The two countries could also chart a path that allows trade to flow for transitional energy sources, such as fuel ethanol. India currently bans imports of fuel ethanol even as it seeks to ramp up its own ethanol blend mandates and build a domestic sector that can join the U.S. and Brazil in exporting to the world. Left unaddressed, this will be another missed opportunity for the two economies to work to mutual benefit.

Shared strategic interests will be undermined if India and the U.S. cannot jointly map coordinated policies on climate and trade. The most immediate threat could be the possibility of new climate and trade tensions were India to insist that technology is transferred in ways that undermine incentives for innovation in both countries or if the U.S. decides that imports from India be subject to increased tariffs in the form of carbon border adjustment mechan-

isms or "CBAMs". Climate-inspired trade tensions that might even lead to new trade wars can hardly bolster the strategic partnership.

### A point to ponder over

Diplomats on both sides have worked hard over the past few years to paper over such differences so that they do not distract from the efforts to lay the foundations for a closer strategic partnership, but the fissures have not disappeared and ignoring them will not make them go away. Rather, the danger is that they will widen and deepen and come to undermine shared longer-term goals. A mutual failure to confront these issues and present a united front in relations with other countries will surely have strategic consequences.

So, even as they continue to embrace warmly in various strategic settings, U.S. President Joe Biden and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi might want to ask how this partnership is clearly falling short of its potential, and why. Concerted action on both the climate and trade fronts is mutually beneficial and will lend additional strength to the foundation of a true partnership for the coming century.

Mark Linscott is a former Assistant U.S. Trade Representative and is a Senior Fellow with The Atlantic Council's South Asia Center and a Senior Adviser with The Asia Group. Irfan Nooruddin is the Senior Director of the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center and Professor in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University

# COVID-19 as a tale of job hardship and marginalisation

The plight of Indian women migrant workers in West Asia highlights the lack of gender-centric, rights-based safeguards



GINU ZACHARIA OOMMEN & ANU ABRAHAM

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region — it is now known as the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf — that hosts about 23 million migrant workers (International Labour Organization, 2017) is riddled with problems that are particularly related to the discrimination of women migrant workers. Most of the migrant workforce which dominates the workspace of the GCC region — accounting for about three-quarters of the workforce of the region (ILO, 2017) — hails from the South Asian and South-east Asian countries, and are on temporary contracts and mostly engaged in low-wage occupations.

### A thread of vulnerability

Women account for 39% of migrant workers in the GCC (International Labour Organization, 2017) and the feminisation of the workforce across multiple sectors of the economy demonstrates a growing trend. Women migrants, who are in the skilled category are mainly nurses in the organised health industry; those in the semi-skilled or unskilled category are domestic workers, care workers, cleaning crew, manufacturing workers, salon staff and salespersons. These workers are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. For instance, domestic workers, who are mostly women, are greatly vulnerable to abuse owing to the very nature of their workspace.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vulner-

abilities of women migrant workers. For health workers it is more about the deterioration of their working conditions than the problem of losing their jobs. While interviewing women working across the broad spectrum of jobs, a senior nursing staff said, "The government wanted nurses to be deployed at the COVID centres, and all the hospitals under the Ministry were asked to send their staff. The private hospitals on the other hand were asked not to function. This drastically increased the burden on the government hospitals." As a result, private hospital staff were asked to go on unpaid leave during the lockdown and the Ministry staff could not even take leave as the situation was declared an emergency.

### Stress in the health sector

In many countries, the work hours of nurses in many countries were extended from eight hours to 12 hours without overtime remuneration — that too in challenging working conditions. A government nurse in Kuwait, recounted, "Initially, our doctor asked us not to use excess gloves and masks because of the fear of falling short of these supplies. So only the nurses at the point of care were allowed to wear a mask. But then the cases started to increase, and we were allowed to wear a mask."

Another one of them told us, I was assigned the triage area. The personal protective equipment (PPE) gown, mask, and face shield were there, but we were not using gloves; we were using sanitiser. I had to be there continuously every day for three months, from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m.; I had to stand continuously, taking temperature for each patient. This was stressful for my back; this was difficult work for me."

One of our respondents, work-



ing in Saudi Arabia, recounted, "The area where I stay was completely locked down due to a large number of cases, we had just one open road. Many hospitals gave leave to staff staying there, but my hospital asked us to continue to commute to work. It was stressful not knowing whether we would catch the infection, as we were also exposing our children and other family members." A staff working in Kuwait, shared her anxiety. "We used to wear two N95 masks, but there was no social distancing. The staff from different wards travelled together to and from work. This was very risky as workers with asthma and respiratory problems travelled by the same bus."

Even in January 2021, many of these nurses from different countries had not taken leave, including their annual leave, except if they were COVID-19 positive. Even those who could manage to get off days could not travel home, which added to the immense mental stress. Amidst all the pandemic chaos, our respondents sounded relieved that they somehow kept a job and monthly pay; many of their spouses had lost jobs and had families waiting for their monetary assistance in India.

### For semi-skilled workers

Many of the semi-skilled and unskilled workers found themselves in a bind when they lost their jobs, wages and their accommodation too. When we spoke to another

staff in early 2021, her visa was about to expire, and she was searching for a job. She worked in a salon in Kuwait owned by a local woman who had provided her with shared accommodation, salary and decent working hours. The salon had 30 married women workers from South and South-east Asia. The salon first closed temporarily in March 2020 and all the workers were given accommodation and food till October, which was deducted from their indemnity benefit. However, the salon soon went bankrupt in October and the workers had to vacate without benefits.

A social worker we spoke to described the situation of women working in vulnerable sectors during COVID-19. The vulnerability of the workers has worsened during COVID-19 because of the severe restrictions to mobility. "These exploited women include domestic workers, beauty parlour workers and cleaning crew in hospitals and big companies. Those staying in employer's premises, especially housemaids are more vulnerable. They did not know what was happening outside, about [the] corona situation. Many women working here, especially housemaids, do not have any medium for getting news about the current situation. Some do not even have [a] phone, while most have only basic phones." Their communication to the outside world including family is restricted and it is difficult for an outsider to reach them, a hard truth we learned while trying to contact these women for this article.

We spoke to a 60-year-old housemaid who had returned to India from the United Arab Emirates. She had health problems and her employer did not want to be saddled with her health problems during the pandemic. Her maid vi-

sa that had an insurance coverage of 600 dirhams, was just not enough to cover her health costs.

### Other cases

Some of the more vulnerable workers were the ones working 'illegally'. For example, there was a woman who had emigrated on a child-care visa, but lost her job as her former employers were concerned about the safety of their child during COVID-19. The woman then started working as a housemaid with very low wages but was reluctant to ask for a raise, as she feared being reported. There was also another woman who emigrated as a housemaid in 2008, received her last salary in March 2020, after which her employer gave her the option to work without pay or to return home. Some who found themselves in more challenging situations have quit their jobs and returned home penniless; some have had to borrow money for the air ticket home. Situations such as these have made women workers more vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation.

Whether professionally skilled or unskilled, migrant women workers have not had it easy in a foreign land where the discrimination and exploitation they faced were compounded by the novel coronavirus pandemic. This definitely focuses light on the lacunae persisting in the creation of women-centric, rights-based policies to safeguard migrants.

GINU ZACHARIA OOMMEN is currently Member of the Kerala Public Service Commission and formerly Visiting Professor at the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (FMSH), Paris, France. ANU ABRAHAM is PhD Scholar, IIT Madras and Assistant Professor at the School of Economics, NMIMS (deemed to be) University, Mumbai

## 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.

### India's green push

One believes that the Prime Minister was not carried away by the surcharged environment around the COP26 summit before committing to the year 2070 as the country's targeted date for achieving zero net emission (Page 1, November 2). There is no doubt that we need to pay heed to the stark warnings on the disaster that looms over the world community. In this, the developed nations should walk the talk. For India, the immediate priority should be to accomplish targets earmarked for renewable energy goals, electric vehicle change and increasing forest cover, to cite only a few examples.

Our dependence on coal-fired thermal power plants cannot be wished away in a day. New technologies in running these plants must be explored. The constitution of a task force to monitor progress at periodical intervals would help identify the grey areas that need attention.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,  
Chennai

India's target year is not a believable statement. Climate change is for real and is already in effect, Kerala, Uttarakhand and Mumbai being examples of drastic change. Coal consumption should be reduced. Green cover has to be restored, with stringent

targets set and reviewed every few months. Every single day is important in addressing the dangers of climate change and warming.

T. ANAND RAJ,  
Chennai

The world faces a cataclysmic future and has to act without any delay. Nations must now prepare for grassroots actions rather than make dubious commitments. After all, the earth is what all of us have in common.

ANURHAV NAUTYAL,  
Patiala, Punjab

It is high time the governments of the world stopped running after the notion of growth and development which is

unsustainable. In the name of 'ease of doing business', the Central and State governments of India are glossing over the necessary environmental checks. In Kerala for instance, the wrath of the elements does not seem to have created any awareness. Environmentally catastrophic projects such as the SilverLine high speed railway need to be shown the door. The proponents of unsustainable development should keep in mind what Clive Hamilton says in his ominous book, *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth about Climate Change*: "Humanity's determination to transform the planet for its own material benefit is now backfiring on us in the most spectacular way so that

the climate crisis is for the human species now an existential one."

SUKUMARAN C.V.,  
Kongad, Palakkad, Kerala

### On cryptocurrencies

The major objective of a monetary policy is to enable the stabilisation of prices and economic growth. India's central bank has done fairly well in this. When one comes to cryptocurrencies (OpEd page, "The crypto conundrum", November 1), there is need for regulation. To put it in simple words, the emergence of cryptocurrencies in the midst of economic upheavals is like playing an IPL cricket match when regular formats of the game of cricket are in place. When speculative

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tendencies exist there needs to be a framework of regulation.

T. CHANDRAMOULI,  
Chennai

### Team India

After a very disappointing performance that resulted in Pakistan inflicting a crushing defeat in the T20 World Cup match, the Indian team again put up an uninspiring display against New Zealand. There is probably much more than meets the eye. The BCCI, the coach and the captain, should make a sincere assessment. This is the least they owe to the ardent fans of Indian cricket.

S.N. SRINIVASAN,  
Bengaluru