



## Recognising altruism

Good Samaritans can help reduce accident deaths, but road safety needs more work

The initiative of the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways to award Good Samaritans who save lives of road accident victims with a cash prize is a welcome attempt to reduce India's staggering annual death toll from mishaps. Ranking third among 20 nations that have the highest number of accidents, India fares far worse on an important metric – cases to fatalities ratio – compared to the U.S. and Japan, which have more recorded crashes but fewer deaths. During 2020, even with severely disrupted mobility due to COVID-19, National Crime Records Bureau data show 1,33,715 lives were lost in 1,20,716 cases attributed to negligence relating to road accidents. Under the Motor Vehicles law, a Good Samaritan voluntarily helps an accident victim with no expectation of payment or reward, and has no legal obligation to record his involvement or aid the investigation in the case. In spite of an entire chapter being added to the Motor Vehicles Act last year to sensitise police forces and hospitals on this, altruism is affected by the perception of harassment and legal complications. The Ministry's latest move seeks to overcome reticence by rewarding socially minded individuals who offer immediate assistance and rush a victim with certain kinds of injuries to hospital, with ₹5,000 and a certificate of recognition for saving a life. State governments are responsible for the plan, with the Centre providing an initial grant, but the Union Transport Ministry will give its own award of ₹1 lakh each to the 10 best Good Samaritans in a year.

Achieving a reduction in mortality on India's largely lawless roads warrants determined action on several factors, beginning with scientific road design and standards, and zero tolerance enforcement. It was only on September 3 that the Centre notified the long-pending National Road Safety Board, with a mandate to formulate standards on, among other things, safety and trauma management, to build capacity among traffic police, and put crash investigation on a scientific footing. Yet, on enforcement, State police forces generally appear to favour a populist approach of least engagement; regional transport bureaucracies – compared by Union Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari in 2015 to looting Chambal dacoits – can also benefit from a shake-up. As a steadily motorising country, the goal must be to reduce accidents and the ratio of deaths and injuries to cases. The Good Samaritan plan can work well if District Committees tasked with awarding these individuals readily recognise their contribution, aided by the police, hospitals and RTOs. Many more people will continue to be impelled by sheer altruism to help road users involved in a crash, and governments should get bureaucratic barriers out of their way.

## Sensing heat

Genetic mutations in cellular mechanism of temperature, pain sensation are insightful

This year's Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine – awarded to the researchers, David Julius and Ardem Patapoutian from the University of California, San Francisco and Scripps Research in La Jolla, California, respectively – recognises their seminal work in identifying the gene and understanding the mechanism through which our body perceives temperature and pressure. Our ability to sense touch and temperature – particularly noxious temperature – is essential for our survival and determines how we interact with our internal and external environment; chronic pain results when the pain response goes awry. Dr. Julius utilised capsaicin, a key ingredient in hot chilli peppers that induces a burning sensation, to identify a sensor in the nerve endings of the skin and the cellular mechanism that responds to uncomfortably hot temperatures. The receptor for heat gets activated only above 40° C, which is close to the psychophysical threshold for thermal pain, thus allowing us to react to external heat. In 2002, five years after the heat sensor was discovered, the two laureates, and independently, used menthol to discover the receptor that senses cold temperatures. Recent studies have found that discrimination between warm and cool temperatures is possible only through simultaneous activation of warmth-sensing nerve fibres and inhibition of cold-sensing nerve fibres. Using pressure-sensitive cells, Dr. Patapoutian discovered a novel class of mechanical sensors that responds to pressure on the skin and internal organs, and the perception of touch and proprioception – the ability to feel the position and movement of our body parts. The cellular mechanism that senses touch also regulates important physiological processes. Besides laboratory work, insights have been gained by studying people carrying genetic mutations in the cellular mechanism of temperature, pain, touch and pressure sensation.

The discovery of pain receptors and the cellular mechanism have attracted pharmaceutical companies as these could be targets for novel medicines. Though there are challenges to be addressed before such drugs can be clinically meaningful, the hope is that newer approaches may one day bypass the hurdles. Further research will help in understanding the functions of the receptors in a “variety of physiological processes and to develop treatments for a wide range of disease conditions”. This year's Prize once again underscores the great contributions refugees fleeing war-torn countries can make to science and other fields. Dr. Patapoutian, who is of Armenian origin, grew up in Lebanon during the country's prolonged civil war and fled to the U.S. in 1986 as an 18-year-old. From being blissfully unaware about science as a career in Lebanon, he not only “fell in love doing basic research”, but has also excelled in it to produce path-breaking discoveries in medicine.

# A strategy for India in a world that is adrift

The country's path to power will be affected by the geopolitical and economic centres of gravity now shifting to Asia



SHIVSHANKAR MENON

New situations require fresh thinking. A few of us – Yamini Aiyar, Sunil Khilnani, Prakash Menon, Nitin Pai, Ajit Ranade, Srinath Raghavan, and Shyam Saran – some of whom were authors a decade ago of Non-Alignment 2.0, were prompted by the tectonic shifts in India's internal and external environment to take another look at India's path to power in a world between orders. The outcome of our conversations is a discussion paper hosted on the Centre for Policy Research and Takshashila Institute websites called “India's Path to Power; Strategy in a World Adrift”. It is our hope that we will receive comments, suggestions and criticism of the paper and that it will contribute to the national debate on our country's course.

### Many power centres

The world is today adrift. We are neither in a bipolar Cold War nor in a multipolar world, though perhaps tending towards a world of several power centres. We are in a world between orders. The lack of a coherent international response to the COVID-19 pandemic is proof of an absence of international order and of the ineffectiveness of multilateral institutions. So is the ineffective international response to climate change and other transnational threats.

Secular stagnation in the global and Indian economies and a re-

treat from globalisation, the regionalisation of trade, a shifting balance of power, the rise of China and others, and structural China-United States strategic rivalry have shifted the geopolitical and economic centres of gravity from the Atlantic to Asia. Inequality between and within states has bred a narrow nationalism and parochialism. We are entering a new polarised information age, and face ecological crises of the Anthropocene, making climate change an existential threat. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated some of these changes and transformed others. All in all, we can no longer take the success of our development model for granted.

### Asia as the nucleus

Over the next decade we expect Asia to remain the cockpit of geopolitical rivalries, and that the U.S. remains the most formidable power, though its relative power is declining. China sees a window of opportunity but acts in a hurry, suggesting that she believes that window may close or is already closing due to pushback from the West and others. China's crowded geography constrains her both on land and at sea. We see a slim prospect of Chinese hegemony in Asia, but expect her profile and power to continue expanding, particularly in our periphery. The result is likely continued friction, some cooperation, and quasi-adversarial relations between India and China, which others will take advantage of. As neighbours and in the present situation, a mix of confrontation and cooperation is likely to continue to mark India's relations with China.

Overall, we do not expect con-



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ventional conflict between the great powers in Asia, though other forms and levels of violence and contention in the international system will rise, with Taiwan a special case.

### Challenges, opportunities

The uncertainty and changing geopolitical environment clearly pose considerable challenges to Indian policy but also throw up certain opportunities, enhancing our strategic options and diplomatic space, if we adjust policies internally and externally, particularly in the subcontinent. Increasing security congruence with the U.S. could enable growing cooperation in fields significant for India's transformation: energy, trade, investment, education and health. Other areas in which India and the U.S. could increase cooperation are: climate change and energy, on tech solutions for renewable energy, and on digital cooperation. Several middle powers are now India's natural partners. There is also an increasing possibility of working with partners in the developing world building broader coalitions on issues of common interest. This time of transition between orders is also when new standards and norms are being developed, particularly in the digital space. India can and must be pre-

# The Hindu vote, an emerging ethnocracy

The BJP's success in this is being emulated by its political rivals, as developments in Uttar Pradesh show



INDRAJIT ROY

The forthcoming Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh have seen growing competition over the Hindu vote. Political parties across the spectrum are engaging in competitive Hindutva. Not only are the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party competing with the Bharatiya Janata Party to woo the Hindu vote, but even parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party, whose claim to fame has been in advancing the politics of social justice, are appealing to Hindu sentiments. BSP supremo Mayawati was recently filmed carrying a trishul. The SP, whose founder-patron Mulayam Singh Yadav enjoyed the epithet “Mullah Yam Singh Yadav”, has been promising to build temples to Parshuram, to Vishnu and other divinities. Such appeals demonstrate India's transition away from a democracy to an ethnocracy. Even as the BJP clamps down on Opposition parties supportive of the farmers' movements, we must not lose sight of our country's transition to

an ethnocracy. What is an ethnocracy? Israeli sociologist Oren Yiftachel defines ethnocracy as the specific expression of nationalism “where a dominant ethnos [people] gains political control and uses the state apparatus to ethnicise the territory and society in question”. Ethnocracies – think about Israel, Sri Lanka and Malaysia – rigidify distinctions between people considered the core of the nation and others considered peripheral and external to the nation. To be sure, the dominant groups in ethnocracies value democracy (at least for themselves) and often take pride in their democratic institutions. But a polity based on the structural exclusion of a section of its population cannot reasonably be said to qualify as a democracy.

### A transition, since 2014

An ethnocracy has taken root in India since 2014, with Hindus established as the dominant people. Soon after the BJP stormed to power that year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took the unprecedented step of celebrating his victory on the banks of the Ganga in the holy town of Varanasi. Varanasi was the parliamentary constituency that elected him, so it was to be expected that he would thank his voters. However, the spectacle of the Prime Minister, accompanied by

senior colleagues who would go on to assume key cabinet portfolios, flaunting his Hindu nationalist credentials was a clear break with the past.

To be sure, India's heads of government – even when personally agnostic – have frequented places of worship on key occasions and regularly greeted the country on religious occasions. But Mr. Modi's political association with religion as an inaugural act was rare. The links were made even more clear when a few weeks further, addressing India's Parliament for the first time, Mr. Modi referred to “1200 years of servitude” that Indians had suffered. This was a not-so-subtle reference to the presence of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent and associated accounts of conquest, plunder, and domination by invaders of the Islamic faith. Mr. Modi's early actions offered a glimpse into his future years in office, in which Hindus would come to be considered the core of the Indian nation.

The principle that a dominant

Hindu ethnos can rule the country and marginalise others has firmly established itself. Images of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal reciting the Hanuman Chalisa, Congress scion Rahul Gandhi emphasising his roots as a *janeu-dhari* Brahmin, and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, reciting the Chandipath as public declarations of their Hinduness suggest that such a principle is being established well beyond the BJP and the Prime Minister.

Indeed, the BJP has been so successful in creating an ethnocracy in India that its rivals are increasingly emulating it. A recent report of tourism development schemes in Uttar Pradesh suggested that an overwhelming majority of legislators from the Opposition SP and BSP, both torchbearers of secularism and social justice in the 1990s, preferred Hindu religious sites over sites of other or no religion. Such performance of Hindu rituals is barely matched by performance of practices associated with other communities.

### Fulfilment of imagination

Such developments resonate with the ideological vision of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological fountainhead of the BJP. Established in 1925, the RSS strives to organise society in accordance with and ensure the

destroying local industry in the northeast. While lessening dependence on China, and seeking external balancing, our primary effort has to concentrate on self-strengthening. If there is one country which in terms of its size, population, economic potential, scientific and technological capabilities can match or even surpass China, it is India.

### Self-strength is key

Our paper also suggests several steps that we can take in India to ensure that India's role and influence abroad continue to serve the task of transforming India. Economic policy must match political and strategic engagement. Globalisation has been central to India's growth. A more active regional and international role for India is incompatible with a position on the margins of the global economy. Self-reliance in today's world and technologies can only be realised as part of the global economy. We should not imitate China's claims to being a civilisational state and its adoption of victimhood. Instead we should affirm our own strength and historic national identity.

In sum, we see self-strengthening as an absolutely essential precondition as also safeguarding the foundational sources of India's international influence. We cannot separate our domestic trajectory from the external course we need to pursue to transform India into a strong, secure and prosperous country.

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protection of the Hindu *dharma*, or way of life. The RSS's commitment to Hindutva, or ‘Hindu-ness’ at the expense of religious minorities is clear from a reading of its “vision and mission statement” that is publicly available on its website. Invoking the words of its founder Keshav Baliram Hedge-war, the statement declares: “The Hindu culture is the life-breath of Hindusthan. It is therefore clear that if Hindusthan is to be protected, we should first nourish the Hindu culture. If the Hindu culture perishes in Hindusthan itself, and if the Hindu society ceases to exist, it will hardly be appropriate to refer to the mere geographical entity that remains as Hindusthan. Mere geographical lumps do not make a nation. The entire society should be in such a vigilant and organized condition that no one would dare to cast an evil eye on any of our points of honour.” 22-Oct-2012, RSS

The RSS's vision and mission statement endorse their founder's reference to India as “Hindusthan”, a cultural term to refer to the land of the Hindus. The competitive Hindutva on display in Uttar Pradesh has brought the RSS's vision and mission to fruition.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Lakhimpur Kheri

The Lakhimpur Kheri incident is reprehensible. At the same time, and undoubtedly, the Opposition parties are fishing in troubled waters. Most political leaders would be remotely empathetic and the issue could blow over with time. The irony is that the Yogi Adityanath does not exactly have respect for human rights. The Gandhi siblings are likely to vanish after the so-called clamour. The Opposition should not be selective but consistent (Page 1, “Opposition closes ranks in Lakhimpur Kheri aftermath”, October 6).

DEEPAK SINGHAL,  
Noida, Uttar Pradesh

### Rural credit

It is distressing to note that the interest rate charged to the ultimate beneficiary through micro finance institutions (MFI) lending ranges between 22% to 26%. The Reserve Bank of India needs to review the methodology presently

followed on the cost of funds (COF) for NBFCs and MFIs. The sole aim of providing credit to the rural population is defeated under the present COF technique. Small finance banks (SFBs), whose objective is to introduce banking activities to the unserved and underserved sections of the population, appear to be expanding their branches in urban and metro cities. Having tasted profits, a few SFBs have even planned to exit the niche banking model and embrace the universal banking model, thus defeating the very purpose for which they were formed. Till the early 2000s, all public sector banks had a differential rate of interest scheme to provide credits to poor families (belonging to the economically weaker sections) for productive endeavours; it had a maximum loan ceiling of ₹15,000 with 4% simple interest. This scheme was a boon for the rural poor. In

2012, the committee under the chairmanship of M.V. Nair, recommended doing away with the differential rate of interest scheme. The reasons: nil margin or thin spread available for banks, a disproportionate ratio between the loan quantum *vis-à-vis* inflationary trend, and the multiplicity of schemes such as the Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana. It is time that the credit policy of financing rural credit is strengthened and also regulates the role of private entities (Editorial page, “RBI microfinance proposals that are anti-poor”, October 6).

R.V. BASKARAN,  
Chennai

### Transfer of judges

The transfer of judges from one High Court to another has a debilitating effect. Lawyers accept judgeship on the assumption that they have been appointed to their respective High Courts and will remain and retire from that court. Initially,

when transfers were introduced, it was a great cultural shock to the judges so much so that one judge felt his pride was hurt and promptly resigned. Transfer to another High Court, which was an exception, has now become akin to a service condition of a government servant. Judges have a pride of place in the Constitution and judicial elevations are made from the local bar or from the subordinate judiciary which is very familiar with the local laws and, more importantly, the language of the Court and the local terrain. The elevation was also considered as recognition to the member of the Bar. Now, the present orders of transfer have totally undermined the concept of judges for the respective High Court with their recruitment from the local bar and the subordinate judiciary. With these unwelcome transfers, judges live in a state of uncertainty and fear, which certainly affects their

attitudes. A former judge of the Supreme Court of India, Justice Madan Lokur, recently said that transfers undermine the boldness and independence of the judiciary. A reading of Article 222 of the Constitution clearly explains how cautious, careful and rare the transfer of judges should be because of the different manifestations. The present transfer of judges is not only demoralising but will add to the pendency of cases. It is also experience that if a judge goes through the case files in the local language, there is effective delivery of justice.

N.G.R. PRASAD,  
Chennai

### Faltering campaign

Seven years ago, on October 2, 2014, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan was launched across the country amidst fanfare. But the cleanliness drive is faltering while crores have been poured down the drain, only promoting a

certain political figure and a political party. The drive to ensure cleanliness and sanitation has to be a people's movement and not a political one. Even in tiny Goa it has been a failure as garbage continues to pile up almost everywhere. The capital city Panaji is terrible. The crores squandered on a media blitz for this campaign would have brought smiles to the downtrodden had that money been spent for their uplift.

AIRES RODRIGUES,  
Ribandar, Goa

### Tiger MDT 23

The Chief Justice of the Madras High Court deserves praise for an animal-friendly decision (Page 1, “Tiger hunt: CJ tells Forest Dept, not to go for the kill”, October 6). Animal lovers salute him as thought has gone into the shaping of the order.

SAVITRI C.V.,  
Chennai