



Trail of destruction

The extent of damage caused by Cyclone Gaja is much worse than what was believed earlier

It is now becoming clear that Cyclone Gaja is a major disaster, and its economic impact in Tamil Nadu is comparable to that of the tsunami of 2004. The devastation suffered by tens of thousands of people in several districts of the State has been severe, going well beyond the annual storm season losses. In the initial days after November 16, when the cyclone struck, the State heaved a sigh of relief since the death toll was relatively low. But it is now clear that the suffering, the loss, and the displacement in large parts of Tiruvavur, Nagapattinam, Thanjavur and Pudukkottai districts is of an enormous magnitude. Communities in the affected areas are distraught as houses have collapsed, farms lie ruined, water sources are contaminated and electricity supply remains disrupted. Many areas remain inaccessible because fallen trees have blocked roads. In its report to the Centre, the Tamil Nadu government has estimated the number of people rendered homeless at 3.7 lakh, and houses destroyed at 3.4 lakh. The cyclone has crippled agriculture and livelihoods in a fertile region, felling thousands of productive trees and killing livestock. Between 60% and 80% of the coconut trees in the region have fallen, hobbling Tamil Nadu's farmers, who contribute a quarter of India's coconuts with the highest unit yield. Unlike paddy or many other crops, bringing coconut plantations back to life will take years.

The top priority for the Tamil Nadu government should be to restore administrative systems and service delivery in the affected areas. Only with physical access, electricity connections and public health facilities can effective relief work be undertaken. Solar power can get public facilities running overnight. It is equally important to assure the large number of stricken farmers that there will be a moratorium on any agricultural loans that they have taken, while a fair compensation scheme is prepared. Many of them have invested in trees and livestock expecting long-term returns, but have been rendered paupers overnight. The Tamil Nadu government has given the Centre a memorandum seeking nearly ₹15,000 crore for restoration, rehabilitation and mitigation, besides ₹1,431 crore for immediate relief work. The State's requirements should be met in full. It is also worth pointing out that farm insurance under the Centre's Fasal Bima Yojana covers only food crops, oilseeds and annual horticultural crops, making extraordinary compensation for farmers important. The average citizen is also keen on contributing money and material to the relief effort, as the experience with the Kerala floods shows. What she wants to see is administrative efficiency in rebuilding the shattered districts. Officials should not wait for people to launch protests before coming up with a response. Cyclone Gaja has wrought terrible devastation, and the relief programme must match it in scale.

Breathing space

Fall in oil prices gives the rupee and the Indian economy a much-needed boost

After falling consistently against the U.S. dollar for most of this year, the rupee has managed to gain some ground over the last few weeks. It has gained almost 5% from its lowest levels reached in October. The fortunes of the rupee, which even after the recent appreciation is down about 11% since the beginning of the year, have been tightly linked to the price of crude oil in the global markets. This is no surprise since imported oil meets about 80% of India's total demand. The value of the rupee tanked amid the uptrend in oil prices this year which lasted till early October. Since then, the rupee has gained against the dollar in tandem with the fall in global crude prices. Brent Crude has dropped by a massive 30% since early October, when a barrel cost around \$86, to around \$60 today. This sharp fall has been the result of a dramatic change in mood in the oil market. Investors until a few weeks ago were worried about the lack of sufficient supply in the market due to disruptions in arrivals from major producers such as Iran and Venezuela. Now, however, the markets are worried about possible oversupply as the U.S. has softened its stance against Iran and turned into the largest crude oil producer in the world with the boom in shale production. Worries about a drop in global demand due to faltering growth in major economies like China may have also contributed to the fall in prices.

The fall in global crude oil prices comes as a big relief to the Central government, which has faced increasing macroeconomic and political pressure due to rising prices. According to UBS, a drop of \$10 in the price of oil can improve India's current account and fiscal deficits by 0.5% and 0.1% of GDP, respectively. The ruling party may be pleased with falling oil prices in the run-up to the general elections next year. Fuel prices across major Indian cities have fallen significantly in the last few weeks. The Reserve Bank of India will be relieved as it will have to worry less about the rupee and oil-induced inflation. Foreign investors, who have been net sellers this year, have turned net buyers this month. This points to an increase in investor confidence in the economy as the fundamentals improve. But amid rising global uncertainties, it may not be so easy to map what lies ahead for global crude oil prices and the rupee. The December 6 meeting of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries will make clear the response of oil producers to the sharp fall in prices. Shale companies are also likely to respond to falling prices by cutting production; the profit break-even point for shale producers, however, is anyone's guess. India should capitalise on the relief offered by the fall in oil prices to improve its preparedness for any future jump in oil prices.

Lessons from a tragedy

The indigenous communities and settlers in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands must be equal stakeholders in a common future



VISHVAJIT PANDYA & MADHUMITA MAZUMDAR

The tragic death of a young American adventurer in the protected "tribal reserve" of North Sentinel Island in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands archipelago has triggered global media interest in the region once again. Much of the debates on the alleged killing of John Allen Chau by "hostile" islanders remains focused on the intent, circumstances and tragic upshot of his misadventure, while others raise larger and more disturbing questions about the North Sentinel tribal community at large and the efficacy of the Indian government's tribal welfare policies. The first set of debates regarding Chau's evangelical calling and his almost willing surrender to the hazards it entailed are not of interest to us at this moment nor are the details of the investigations that are being carried out by the local police and administration.

Understanding 'hostility'

What is of greater significance is the commentary on the "hostility" of the Sentinel islanders and the many experiences of heroic "contact" by visiting anthropologists and government officials. The broader media interest is in the peculiar and almost brutal hostility displayed by the Sentinel islanders towards the outsider. Some see it

as signs of a pathological "primitivity" and the result of "complete isolation" from "civilisation" while others interpret it as an effect of the historical memory of colonial brutality. Given the fact that we do not know their language nor have had any opportunity to understand their varied gestures of hostility, it's hard to come to any definitive answer.

But it is the question of "isolation" that demands more critical attention. We are not entirely sure if it can be established that the Sentinelese, or the "Sentinel Jarawas" as they were classified in colonial records, were or are completely isolated. Both colonial records and Census reports up to 1931 reveal that officials did set foot on the islands and were able to walk through it to collect information. The Government of India's own official "contact" photographs from the 1970s onwards reveal interesting signs that question the "complete isolation" thesis.

If we carefully analyse this visual record, we can see how the shape of Sentinelese outrigger canoes has changed and how they continue to use large quantities of iron to make adze blades and arrowheads. We also notice small glass bead necklaces around their necks. Where are these glass beads, trinkets, large tarpaulin sheets and ready supplies of iron coming from?

Different images

Images of angry Sentinelese pointing at or shooting arrows at a passing helicopter or at the sight of an incoming boat abound in the me-



AFP

dia. Yet while these images remain in constant circulation, there are other images of them receiving coconuts, bananas and other gifts from government contact parties. Out of the Anthropological Survey of India's recorded 26 visits to the islands, it is stated that seven were met with overt hostility. In other words, the argument that the hostility of the Sentinelese is chronic or pathological needs to be seen in perspective. Evidently the Sentinel Islanders decide what kind of visitations pose a threat to their survival or dignity and what are "safe" or "useful". Their hostility towards the outsider is then to be regarded as "strategic" and deliberate and therefore key to their survival.

Some have asked why the Indian state cannot devise a method by which the Sentinelese could be "pacified" and brought under the welfare net. It goes to the credit of the Indian government that unlike its colonial predecessors it has completely abjured all kinds of coercion against the indigenous communities of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Colonial punitive expeditions, kidnappings, forced confinements that devastated the

Andamanese populations at large are a thing of the past. Tribal welfare policy in the islands remains committed to protection and clearly "pacification" via coercion is no option. The policy today is to ensure "protection" but also to accept their right to self-determination.

Nuancing 'protection'

Yet here's where the problem begins. Policies of "protection" demand strong surveillance infrastructures, empowered staff, coordination among police, forest and welfare agencies and, more importantly, investment in projects of sensitisation. The settler population on the islands clearly remains conflicted. There is an understanding that the islands' indigenous communities are sources of tourist interest and potential revenue churners, yet the fact that public monies are invested to sustain them in their habitats remain a source of discomfort. Apart from a small segment of progressive citizens, there are clear marks of stress in settler-indigene relations on the islands.

It is tensions like these that allow collusive breaches of the law and the undermining of the protective cover for the Sentinelese and other Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) like the Jarawas. What aggravates such tensions are the skewed developmental priorities that mainland India imposes on these islands.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands have historically been treated as *terra nullius*, or empty space, wherein mainland governments could inscribe their authority and

initiate projects of control. The British initiated these projects treating the islands first as a strategic outpost and then a penal colony. The Indian government gave it a free society but used it as a space to settle its "excess" population. Hence the refugee rehabilitation schemes in the post-Partition years. It is this resettlement of the islands in independent India that demanded a renegotiation of its relations with the Islands' indigenous communities. They had to be protected and cared for but moved out of their original forest habitats into newly designated "tribal reserves". As a result of continuous settlement and often ill-conceived developmental projects on the islands over the past six decades, these reserves have become increasingly vulnerable to the intrusions of poachers, encroachers and tourists.

Looking ahead

We hope that we will be able to draw a few lessons from the unfortunate death of John Allen Chau and question the ways in which mainland India views the islands from its distant perch in New Delhi. We can only hope that the Prime Minister's forthcoming visit to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the announcement of new projects for "holistic" development take a context-sensitive "island view" of development and recognise settlers and PVTGs as equal stakeholders in a common sustainable future.

Vishvajit Pandya, an anthropologist, and Madhumita Mazumdar, a historian, are based in Gandhinagar

A prescription for the future

While using cutting-edge technology, we need to find ways to continuously lower the cost of healthcare



SUNEETA REDDY

The world as we know it is changing so fast and so much. Global mega-trends only reinforce this fact. The Internet has taken over our lives, smartphone penetration is growing rapidly, demographics are evolving. For the first time, in 2019, millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), who feel fully at home in a digital world, will overtake the population of baby boomers. There are dramatic lifestyle and behavioural changes occurring every day, with strong implications for the future of our planet and its inhabitants.

Impactful changes

Healthcare is no stranger to change – in fact, the most impactful transformations in human life have happened in healthcare. *Time's* cover three years ago showed the picture of a child with the headline, "This baby could live to be 142 years old". That is the extent of the breakthrough in longevity that modern medicine has been able to achieve. Healthcare in India too has been transformed

over the last three decades, and as members of this industry, we can be proud of how far we've come in terms of improved indices on life expectancy, infant mortality, maternal deaths and quality of outcomes.

But we cannot rest on these achievements now, because the pace of change is still scorching, and is fundamentally altering disease patterns, patient risk profiles and their expectations. Information technology and biotechnology are twin engines, with immense potential to transform the mechanics of care delivery, the outcomes we can achieve and, above all, the lives we can touch and save.

There are several examples of the kinds of impact technology and biotechnology can make on healthcare. Telemedicine has already brought healthcare to the remotest corners of the country. The use of artificial intelligence for preventive and predictive health analytics can strongly support clinical diagnosis with evidence-based guidance, and also prevent disease. From the virtual reality (VR) of 3D-printing, we are now moving towards augmented reality (AR), by which, for example, every piece of node in a malignant melanoma can be completely removed, thereby eliminating the risk of the cancer spreading to any other part of the body. Biotechnol-



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK PHOTO

ogy, cell biology and genetics are opening up whole new paradigms of understanding of human life and disease, and have made personalised medicine a way of life.

Largest health scheme

So, the outlook is clear: those in healthcare who wish for status quo and for the comfort of the familiar run the risk of becoming irrelevant. And that goes for countries too. India needs to rapidly adapt to, embrace and drive change if it wishes to stay relevant in the global healthcare order.

India's change imperative has become even more pronounced with the launch of the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana Abhiyan, or National Health Protection Mission (NHPM), under the ambit of Ayushman Bharat. This major shift in approach to public health addresses the healthcare needs of over 500 million Indians in the

first stage through what is probably the world's largest public health-for-all insurance scheme. The vast scale of the programme requires reimagining an innovative model which will transform healthcare delivery in the country. By leapfrogging through smart adoption of technology and using emerging platforms such as Blockchain, significant improvements are possible in healthcare operations and costs.

The private health sector is committed to support this programme, and ensure its success, because we are beneficiaries of society's social licence to operate, and it is our responsibility to make sure this programme reaches the most vulnerable and the underprivileged, for whom it is intended. At the same time, we have a solemn responsibility to ensure that the sector is sustainable in the long term. For India to grow, healthcare as an engine of the economy needs to flourish. And the private sector, which has contributed over 80% of the bed additions in the last decade, needs to earn healthy rates of return on investment to continue capital investment in infrastructure, technology upgrades, and to have the ability to acquire top clinical talent, which can lead to differentiated outcomes. In our quest to achieve low-cost healthcare, we must not inhibit our potential for

growth, nor isolate ourselves from exciting global developments.

The way forward

The prescription is clear. We need to achieve a balance between staying at the cutting edge of clinical protocols, technology and innovation and continue to deliver world-class care, while finding increasingly efficient ways of operating to continuously lower the cost of care and bring it within the reach of those who cannot afford it. This is a difficult balance to achieve, but not impossible. And when accomplished, India would have found an answer that can be an example for the rest of the world to emulate.

With clarity and focus, we can create a blueprint for the legacy we wish to build and set the trajectory for Indian healthcare for the next several decades. The decisions we make today are decisions we make for our children, a future we will create for them. Will they lead healthier lives than we do? Will they approve of our choices and actions? Are we building an inclusive and sustainable world for them? We have it in our hands to shape the winds of change we face today into the aero-dynamics that will definitively propel our collective destinies forward.

Suneeta Reddy is Managing Director, Apollo Hospitals Group

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-Pakistan ties

Two news stories on the front page ("Kartarpur corridor can build bridges: Venkaiah" and "26/11 plotters roam freely in Pakistan: India", Nov. 27) truly represent the relationship that India and Pakistan share. Although the Kartarpur corridor proposal is a welcome development, India needs to tread with caution given the bitter lessons that it has learnt in the past from Pakistan. It is unfortunate that even as steps are being taken to improve bilateral ties, Pakistan continues to aid and abet cross-border terrorism, as is evident from the recent terror attacks in Punjab.

B. SURESH KUMAR,
Palakkad

Temple pitch

The BJP is simply being true to form ("Temple timing", Nov. 27). On the one hand, it says the party will wait

for the Supreme Court verdict; on the other, it is putting pressure on the various stakeholders in the case. This is to run with the hare and hunt with the hound. The BJP is attempting to gloss over its inability to live up to the grandiose promises it made in 2014 and is now assuming that voters are gullible. This insidious plan is bound to boomerang as it will no longer resonate with the common man who is struggling to make both ends meet.

DEEPAK SINGHAL,
Noida

The sudden but not unexpected mobilisation of people on the streets of Ayodhya is unfortunate. The BJP government, both at the Centre and in Uttar Pradesh, should prevent those attempting to stir the communal cauldron instead of supporting them to gain electoral mileage. This

development does not portend well for a secular democracy that is governed by the rule of law. The BJP fought the 2014 Lok Sabha poll on the plank of development and promised a corruption-free government. But going by the rhetoric of its leaders on the Ayodhya issue, it looks as though this is going to be among the strongest poll planks for 2019.

M. JEYARAM,
Sholavandan, Madurai

To view the revival of the Ram temple movement solely through the prism of electoral politics is to ignore the immediate trigger, which is judicial delay. Why has the Supreme Court postponed the hearing in the case yet again, this time to January 2019? True, nobody can dictate to the court how and when it should adjudicate on issues of national importance, but

isn't the judiciary also expected to be alive to the need for urgency in hearing a case that has a bearing on the nation's harmony? Postponing the hearing without any reason has sent out a wrong signal that the judiciary feels accountable to no one but itself. The court must speed up hearing and if there is no legal panacea, it must facilitate an out-of-court settlement among all the parties.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

Statue politics

Different States seem to be competing with one another to build taller and taller statues ("Cartoon," November 27). Why do we need statues that cost thousands of crores of rupees when the money is so badly needed for welfare projects? This is nothing but politics to impress voters before the Lok Sabha

election. But how far the people will accept such wasteful expenditure remains to be seen.

C.V. VENUGOPALAN,
Palakkad

The U.P. government's recent proposal is nothing but a mockery of the poor. The basic needs of this nation are being compromised with every new proposal of a statue.

NAYANTHARA DAMODARAN,
Kozhikode

Superwoman

Mary Kom has fought against all odds to reach this pinnacle of success

"Magnificent Mary", Nov. 27). She has emerged as a true ambassador of the Northeast. And she continues to achieve so much at the age of 35 and as a mother of three! This only shows her mental strength and resilience. We are certain that this victory will only make her resolve to win a gold in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics stronger. Mary Kom has done the nation proud and we wish her all the best for all her matches and the Olympics.

R.D. SINGH,
Ambala

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:
www.hindu.com/opinion/letters/

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: >>The headline of a report on the letter from the Ministry of Home Affairs to A.G. Perarivalan – one of the life convicts in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case – (Nov. 27, 2018, some editions) was incorrect. It should have been: Remission rules not framed by Centre, MHA tells Perarivalan.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail:readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturji Buildings, 855 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com