



Carnage in Vegas

The 'mass shooting' must awaken the U.S. to the dangers of lax gun ownership regulation

The famous Las Vegas Strip became the scene of a bloody gun rampage when a shooter fired high-powered automatic rounds into dense crowds at a music concert, killing at least 59 people and injuring more than 500. This is the worst mass shooting in modern American history, although the June 2016 shooting at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida, came close with 49 people dead. Perched high on the 32nd floor of a nearby hotel, 64-year-old Stephen Paddock sat in a virtual sniper's nest, armed with a collection of 23 rifles, some of them automatic ones. And some of the semi-automatic rifles were boosted to automatic-speed firing using "bump stocks". He was subsequently found dead in the room from a self-inflicted injury. Initially, confusion prevailed over whether this attack was linked to the Islamic State. Speculation mounted further after its Amaq news agency reportedly claimed credit for the attack. However, with the authorities saying there was no evidence of a connection between Paddock and such terror groups, the authenticity of Amaq's claim has been questioned by several experts. Whether Paddock had links to the IS or not, the Las Vegas shooting once again puts the spotlight on a painful and oft-debated policy issue in the United States – that of gun control reform.

Despite authoring 15 attempts to bring common-sense gun control regulations to the floor of the U.S. Congress, former President Barack Obama had in the last days of his administration launched one final attempt to close loopholes in gun laws through executive action. These aimed at expanding background checks for gun ownership, boosting funding for federal agencies enforcing the laws, and improving treatment of mental health conditions nationwide. Earlier, his most ambitious push to tighten the lax regulation of gun proliferation, floated in 2013 in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, was speedily shut down by hostile conservative lawmakers. At the heart of the U.S. Congress's reluctance to take steps to address the regular occurrence of gun rampages in public spaces is the insidious lobbying on Capitol Hill by the deep-pocketed National Rifle Association and a myriad of gun manufacturers. After several mass shootings, NRA spokespersons have claimed that the only answer to gun deaths is more guns. In President Donald Trump, they may have found their strongest ally yet. Although he described the Las Vegas shooting as an "act of pure evil", during the 2016 campaign he had pandered to the gun lobby's interest on occasion, particularly through fear-mongering that if the Democratic agenda succeeded, "Pretty soon, you won't be able to get guns." The gun lobby's multi-generational success in this regard is built upon a cultural proclivity for gun ownership rooted in the Second Amendment of the constitution. Until Americans apply reasonable, if not stringent, restrictions to gun ownership, they are unlikely to escape the regular visitation of such mass tragedies.

The cold facts

It's vital that India scales up surveillance to track various influenza viruses

Ever since the influenza virus known as H1N1 landed on Indian shores during the 2009 pandemic, outbreaks have been an annual occurrence. The worst was in 2015, when 2,990 people succumbed to it. This year the virus has been particularly active; mortality, at 1,873 by the last week of September, is quickly catching up with the 2015 toll. In comparison, official figures show 2016 to be a relatively benign year, with an H1N1 death toll of 265. The problem with these official figures, however, is that they only capture H1N1 numbers, a practice that has been adopted in response to the severity of the 2009 pandemic. But influenza was present in India even before 2009 in the form of H3N2 and Influenza B virus types. Out of these, H3N2 is capable of causing outbreaks as big as H1N1, and yet India does not track H3N2 cases as extensively as it does H1N1. This means that seemingly benign years such as 2016 may probably not be benign at all. Data from outside government surveillance systems are making this fact apparent. For example, a surveillance project for acute febrile illnesses, anchored at the Manipal Centre for Virus Research in Karnataka, has found that influenza accounts for nearly 20% of fevers across rural areas in 10 Indian States – fevers that are often undiagnosed and classified as "mystery fevers". During the years when the H1N1 burden is low in these regions, H3N2 and Influenza B circulation tends to spike.

All this indicates that India's surveillance systems are still poor and underestimate the influenza burden substantially. If numbers are unsatisfactorily tracked, so are changes in the viral genome. As a 2015 commentary by a pair of researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology pointed out, India submits a woefully small number of H1N1 genetic sequences to global open-access databases for a country of its size and population. Sequencing is important because it can detect mutations in genetic material that help the virus evade human immune systems, making it more deadly. Because India does not sequence a large enough sample of viral genomes, it would be missing mutations that could explain changes in the lethality of the virus. Put together, the numbers data and sequence data will enable sensible vaccination decisions. Vaccination is the best weapon that India has against this menace, because Oseltamivir, the antiviral commonly deployed against flu, is of doubtful efficacy unless administered early enough. Yet, India has thus far stayed away from vaccinating even high-risk groups such as pregnant women and diabetics, because influenza is thought to be a more manageable public health challenge compared to mammoths such as tuberculosis. Better surveillance of influenza will possibly change this perception by revealing the true scale of this public health issue.



AJIT RANADE

When a person decides to buy a flat, it reflects his or her optimism about the future. There is confidence that one will have enough income flowing in, to pay for the monthly instalments. This optimism is not because of job security, but because of the belief that one will get a new job, even if one becomes unemployed. The same is true for an entrepreneur setting up a new factory or new business. It's called risk taking, but that is not to imply reckless gambling. It reflects the investor's confidence about the future returns on the investment. If that confidence starts to wane, then potential home buyers refrain or postpone their decisions. Investors adopt a wait-and-watch attitude. If everyone in the economy starts becoming extra-cautious, the decline in confidence and economic activity becomes self-filling. As the economy slows down, people say, "See I told you so! It was wise to not invest and take unnecessary risk now."

This decline can happen even if the economy is fundamentally sound. What causes investor or home buyer confidence to wane? It could be anecdotes, actual economic evidence, broken trust in government or socio-political developments. Not to overstate this, but there is an element of psychology that keeps the economy chugging. The government's role is as much to provide the right policy environment, as to provide a psy-



chological atmosphere that is conducive to risk taking about the future, and inspire confidence in the people.

The Keynesian solution

John Maynard Keynes called these the "animal spirits" which guide buyer and investor behaviour. When those spirits are in a downward spiral, the end result could be recession, if not outright depression. His remedy was to suggest countercyclical policy, which has become the hallmark of Keynesianism. This includes an injection of both fiscal and monetary stimulus. This involves increasing government spending or cutting taxes, or both, and decreasing interest rates. Despite many attempts at discrediting the efficacy of Keynesian remedies, to this day policymakers continue to repose faith in them. Sure, the effects could last only for a short term, but if that helps the economy into a higher gear, or break out of the "pessimism spiral", it would have served its purpose.

We are not quite in a recession, nor are we anywhere remotely near a depression. But the fact is

The short point is that investor enthusiasm is lacking, especially from the private sector. Added to their lack of demand is the reluctance of supply of investible funds.

Cautious banks
Banks, despite being flush with deposits (partly thanks to demonetisation), are in no mood to extend new credit. This is because of the increasing burden of bad loans (called non-performing assets, or NPAs). The ratio of NPAs has been continuously going up for five years. Either you have to write-off the loans and book losses, or ask shareholders to bring more equity capital. The new bankruptcy code and procedure is promising, but is as yet untested for timeliness and effectiveness. There is also a suggestion to collect all the bad loans (that is, toxic waste) from the various banks and move them to a freshly capitalised bank, the so-called "bad bank". The bad bank would focus solely on liquidating the collateral, bringing in fresh owners and managers to run distressed companies. Once freed from NPAs, the existing banks can resume lending to the healthy sectors. This is a promising idea as well and worth pursuing. The government must shy away from funding the rescue of India's banking. It has to provide capital to the new "bad bank" or to recapitalise the beleaguered public sector banks, where most of the NPAs reside.

This is where the Keynesian wisdom of stimulus is worth recalling. All four drivers of economic growth are sputtering. While reviving exports may need boosts like a weaker rupee or more export-linked incentives, consumption and investment sentiment can certainly be boosted by conventional

Keynesian tools. Corporate income tax can be reduced to 25% as promised two years ago. Excise taxes on petrol and diesel need to be reduced. These are indirect taxes, hurt the poor more, are regressive and feed into general inflation through logistics and energy costs.

Four steps
On the spending side, the government can focus on the following four areas. First, provide fresh capital either to existing banks or the new "bad bank". Second, provide some version of a wage subsidy as an incentive to labour intensive sectors. A version of this was offered to the textile and garment sectors last year, but can be improvised and extended. The successful model of Odisha in the garment sector can be replicated. Third, give a big boost to affordable housing, by funding land acquisition for the builder, and interest rate subvention for the home owner. The States of Kerala and Maharashtra have interesting and replicable models. Fourth, keep a big focus on exporters, especially in labour intensive sectors, including agriculture. This includes a weaker exchange rate, quicker refund of GST credit and expanding the scope of the Merchandise Export from India Scheme and Service Exports from India Scheme.

All of these are short-term economic stimuli, but can also provide a psychological boost to the animal spirits. Of course, consumer and investor confidence can return and sustain only when the Keynesian boost is buttressed by credibility of implementing longer-term reforms.

Ajit Ranade is an economist

A legacy of liberalisation

Before Sri Lanka ushers in new economic reforms, it must take a hard look at the story so far



B. SKANTHAKUMAR

The Sri Lankan government recently released its 'Vision 2025' manifesto, heralding a new wave of economic reforms. Its timing coincided with the 40th anniversary of the island's embrace of deregulation, trade liberalisation, and privatisation ahead of the rest of South Asia. While the current government seeks to revive neoliberal momentum, there is no assessment of the legacy of liberalisation even on narrow economic benchmarks.

Modest growth
Growth in gross domestic product has been modest. It averaged 4.8% between 1978 and 2009 compared to 3.5% between 1971 and 1976. Some of the initial expansion was from massive inflows of grants and soft loans, as Western donors and multilateral agencies rushed to reward a regime hailing the virtues of high growth, foreign investment, and free market capitalism.

Average household income has risen rapidly, but so has concentra-

tion of wealth. Inequality has deepened: the Gini coefficient, which was 0.35 in 1973, worsened to 0.48 by 2012-13. The richest 20% of households command 52.9% of income, or more than the rest combined; the poorest 20% muster only 4.5%. The bottom 40% of the population survive on under \$2.50 per day.

Inflation is often runaway into double digits, whereas before 1970 it was under 3%. Cost of living has spiralled and household debt escalated.

Manufactured goods have soared in share of exports from 13.4% in 1977 to 77% in 2016, but are dominated by ready-made apparels which have negligible local value addition.

Industries that profited from textile and clothing quotas, duty-free imports, tax holidays, free infrastructure, subsidised services and lax environmental and labour regulations still depend on imports of raw and semi-finished materials. This is a barrier to linkages in the local economy and gobbles up net foreign exchange earnings.

Export-oriented industrialisation is promoted as the cure-all for all ills. Its labour force is mostly of women in low-wage and highly exploitative conditions, and where unions are not allowed to organise inside and outside export-pro-



cessing zones. Employment in this sector has only reached over 470,000, or under 6% of the labour force. That's the same number as those who leave every two years for foreign employment. Liberalisation has failed to create decent and secure jobs.

Agriculture in decline
Agriculture has drastically declined in economic share to 7.1% in 2016 from 35.1% in 1970-71, and in export composition to 22.6% in 2016 from 94.6% in 1970-71. It is still important to livelihood as over 70% of the population is rural, and marginally more are employed in agriculture (27.1%) than in industry (26.4%).

There has been limited diversification as tea, rubber and coconut predominate, as before 1977. Revenues from tea, plucked mostly by

women, have slumped to third place in export income. However, migrant remittances of mainly women in domestic work in West Asia amounted to nearly \$7 billion last year, or almost equal to earnings from textiles, tourism and tea combined.

Women's work is the basis of the monetised and care economy, but their labour force participation rate has plateaued at under 36%, or less than half that of men.

Sri Lanka's main food imports of wheat flour, rice, sugar, milk and milk products, and fish and fish products are unchanged. Demand has risen along with population increase and household income but not purchasing power. The rupee is currently trading at 153 Sri Lankan rupees to the U.S. dollar whereas it was 8.60 SL rupees in 1977, but with no corresponding gain in export earnings. In 2015, income from exports only equalled 55% of the cost of imports, widening further the balance of payments deficit.

Chronic under-investment in food production has intensified dependence on imports and also insecurity as consumers are more exposed to world market price fluctuations. The withdrawal of state support in access to credit, inputs and extension services as well as in direct purchase, storage,

transport and distribution has abandoned producers to predatory middlemen, aggravating agrarian distress.

Mounting debt
All regimes have bridged the chasm between income and expenditure with loans. External debt has ballooned to \$46.6 billion (from under \$942 million in 1976), diverting resources from public spending to debt-servicing.

Foreign direct investment last year was only \$898 million, whereas foreign loans totalled \$1.287 billion. This has been the pattern despite generous incentives to private capital and wage repression in the export sector.

The war between 1983 and 2009 was disastrous but its economic impact was diffuse as export production of goods and crops was outside the conflict zone.

The promise of "inclusive and equitable growth and development" in Vision 2025 is deceitful, recycling as it does the market fundamentalism that brought prosperity only to the few in Sri Lanka.

B. Skanthakumar is with the Social Scientists' Association in Colombo and author of 'Growth with Inequality: The Political Economy of Neo-Liberalism in Sri Lanka'

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.

Bloodshed in Vegas
The United States is one of the few countries in the world where people have unhindered access to firearms and unleash violence and bloodshed to the detriment of peace and tranquillity on the ground. That a lone wolf inflicted heavy human casualties is not only shocking but also bears testament to the failure of successive state and federal administrations in the U.S. to enforce curbs when it comes to the access and use of firearms by its citizens. The Second Amendment of the U.S. constitution, which protects the right of its citizens to bear arms, warrants an immediate review. A country which takes pride in its vibrant and liberal democratic framework cannot afford to remain a mute spectator to the scenario where the lives of its own citizens continue to remain stake owing to its liberal legal framework on the access and use of firearms.

M. JEYARAM,
Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

■ The most important takeaway from this horrific

incident is the necessity of adopting stricter measures to curb gun violence. The proliferation of firearms has made it too easy for individuals to obtain weapons. While it is impossible to stop all violent impulses, the government can and should make it much more difficult for people to act on them. Finally, the glorification of violence needs to stop. Most mass murderers gain infamy through round-the-clock media portrayals. This leads to a culture in which stories of mass shootings circulate and gain momentum, making further shootings a greater possibility.

ARUN ANAND,
Thiruvananthapuram

■ John Lennon, one of the world's leading musician activists, sang: "Imagine no possessions/I wonder if you can...." Unfortunately, he too was a victim of gun violence. The world is numb after the brutal attack in Las Vegas. But this is not an isolated incident as history will show. It is strange why America has such a soft policy on the buying and selling guns. President Donald Trump may have

called the massacre an "act of pure evil", but it is not enough unless he calls for a total ban on gun use.

NASIR SOOMRO,
Karachi, Pakistan

Saffron vs red
The right-wing's accusation that the CPI(M) has been siding with "jihadi elements" is not worth being taken seriously. Before accusing the Left of "murder politics", the right wing should introspect over how its cadres behave. During his yatra in Kerala, BJP president Amit Shah should "raise consciousness" on political violence against CPI(M) workers as much as against his party cadres for his 'mission' to be of some success ("Amit Shah to lead BJP march in Kerala", October 3).

When it comes to the cult of political violence, leaders must rise above partisanship. Kerala, a State famed for its communal harmony, has to now guard itself against attempts by the right wing to drive a wedge between communities. It is not easy to spread religious hatred and polarise people on

religious lines in the 'Left bastion'. The depiction of Kerala as a 'god-forsaken country' and as a 'hub of jihadists' does not go down nicely with the people of the State. The right wing may be inclined to think that it can tap religious identity for political gain in the State with high human development indices, but that might just be wishful thinking.

G. DAVID MILTON,
Maruthancode, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu

Omitted
That one of the wonders of the world, the Taj Mahal, did not feature in the tourism booklet issued by the Uttar Pradesh government is one more instance of the intent of the government to take its ideology to the next level ("Taj Mahal missing in U.P. govt brochure", October 3). There are some who continue to harp on the excesses committed by the Mughals, but one cannot ignore their rich contributions in the fields of art, literature, music, poetry and architecture. No purpose would be served in carrying forward 'grievances' over incidents

that occurred centuries ago. No development can take place in a fragmented society. The Prime Minister's message of taking pride in religious diversity should percolate to the cadres. The Taj Mahal is the pride of India irrespective of whoever built it and whatever it stands for.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

Losing out
The statistics ('Datapoint' - "Nobels for noble work", October 3) highlight the plight of Indian institutions in the field of research. Research in India has to be given the utmost priority at this point in time. It would be great if world-class research institutions are established in India. The zeal and the talent of ambitious Indians ought to be made use of. The modernisation of Indian institutes can be achieved by collaborating with foreign institutions. This would ensure that much sought-after technological benefits flow into and out of India.

ANJI NAIK MUDAVATH,
Kharagpur, West Bengal

The five-day game
Test cricket, the ultimate in the game of cricket, should continue to be played over five days ('Sport' page, 'Between wickets' - "Test cricket is irrational, let's leave it that way", September 27). Test cricket can be made more absorbing and interesting if the International Cricket Council can consider the following: the game should be restricted to a maximum of 400 overs. Each side should play a maximum of 100 overs per innings. Thus every Test match will become result-oriented. Spectators will also have the benefit of watching players adopt playing styles of T20 and one-day internationals. Teams struggle to bowl 90 overs in a day. Therefore, play should be restricted to 80 overs per day. As far as poor attendance at Test matches is concerned, I suggest that entry to stadiums be made free of cost, except for some enclosures. Players will have the benefit of playing before large crowds.

MOHAN THOMAS,
Chennai

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