

For nutrition security

India remains lacking in the commitment to tackle undernourishment

The UN's State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World report for 2017 has important pointers to achieve nutrition policy reform. At the global level, the five agencies that together produced the assessment found that the gains achieved on food security and better nutrition since the turn of the century may be at risk. Although absolute numbers of people facing hunger and poor nutrition have always been high, there was a reduction in the rate of undernourishment since the year 2000. That has slowed from 2013, registering a worrying increase in 2016. The estimate of 815 million people enduring chronic food deprivation in 2016, compared to 775 million in 2014, is depressing in itself, but more important is the finding that the deprivation is even greater among people who live in regions affected by conflict and the extreme effects of climate change. In a confounding finding, though, the report says that child undernutrition rates continue to drop, although one in four children is still affected by stunting. These are averages and do not reflect the disparities among regions, within countries and between States. Yet, the impact of the economic downturn, many violent conflicts, fall in commodity export revenues, and failure of agriculture owing to drought and floods are all making food scarce and expensive for many. They represent a setback to all countries trying to meet the Sustainable Development Goal on ending hunger and achieving food security and improved nutrition.

India's efforts at improving access to food and good nutrition are led by the National Food Security Act. There are special nutritional schemes for women and children operated through the States. In spite of such interventions, 14.5% of the population suffers from undernourishment, going by the UN's assessment for 2014-16. At the national level, 53% of women are anaemic, Health Ministry data show. What is more, the Centre recently said it had received only 3,888 complaints on the public distribution system (PDS) over a five-year period. All this shows that the Centre and State governments are woefully short on the commitment to end undernourishment. Institutions such as the State Food Commissions have not made a big difference either. Distributing nutritious food as a public health measure is still not a political imperative, while ill-conceived policies are making it difficult for many to do this. The report on nutritional deficiency should serve as an opportunity to evaluate the role played by the PDS in bringing about dietary diversity for those relying on subsidised food. In a report issued two years ago on the role played by rations in shaping household and nutritional security, the NITI Aayog found that families below the poverty line consumed more cereals and less milk compared to the affluent. Complementing rice and wheat with more nutritious food items should be the goal.

Sketchy deal

As Saudi Arabia drives an OPEC agreement to increase oil output, the real impact is unclear

Then it comes to crude oil prices, politics dwarfs everything else. The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) on Friday agreed to increase its daily output to address the problem of rising crude oil prices. Saudi Arabia's Energy Minister Khalid al Falih announced that the cartel's output would be increased by about a million barrels a day beginning in July. The official statement released by the group, however, failed to mention any solid numbers regarding the planned increase in production. It simply stated that OPEC countries would "strive" to adjust production levels in order to conform to the terms of the production cut deal reached in 2016. Unsurprisingly, in the absence of any clear intent on the part of OPEC to guide prices lower, the price of the benchmark WTI crude increased by as much as 5% after Friday's announcement of a production increase. OPEC members had in late 2016, it is worth noting, agreed to a historic deal to cut output by 1.2 million barrels a day in order to end a supply glut and raise the price of oil. Since then, the cartel has in fact managed to overshoot its production cut target following unexpected outages in countries such as Venezuela and Libya, contributing to the steep rise in oil prices. In May, for instance, OPEC overshot its production cut target by 624,000 barrels a day. The lack of any clear commitment from OPEC to raise production suggests that the threat of a supply shock still looms over the global economy. But, for now, the deal allows stakeholders in the energy market to

The pressure on Saudi Arabia, the de facto leader of OPEC, to be seen as doing something to tackle rising oil prices was clear, going into the meeting on Friday. U.S. President Donald Trump has been vocal in recent months about the need to bring down rising oil prices that threaten to put the global economy under stress. Other oil-importing economies, especially emerging markets such as India that have been affected by the rising cost of oil imports, have also been exerting pressure. The present deal could help the Saudis appease major oil consumers to some extent. Meanwhile, Iran, which has been opposed to raising OPEC output as it would lower prices, is set to suffer a marginal loss as it lacks spare capacity to ramp up production. This works in favour of its rival, Saudi Arabia, which can recover from the impact of lower prices by capturing market share. The deal, however, still allows Iran to save face by projecting the proposed output increase simply as a return to the original OPEC agreement framed in 2016. Whether all this politicking will bring a stable reduction in global oil prices remains to be seen.

The tools for counting

It's time to debate the modalities of the next Census, given the earlier confusion over caste data



SONALDE DESAI

s the 2011 Census approached, demands for inclusion of data on caste in Census reached a crescendo. P. Chidambaram, the Union Home Minister at the time, was opposed to collecting caste data and blocked it by claiming that it was logistically impossible for the Census, but caste information could be collected via the planned Below Poverty Line (BPL) Census, later renamed the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC). Hasty inclusion of the caste question in the SECC has resulted in largely unusable data. The government tasked former NITI Aayog chairman Arvind Panagariya to look into this, but the effort has stalled. Consequently, if we want information regarding the size and characteristics of various castes in India, we must continue to look to the Census of 1931.

It is hard to imagine that the 2021 Census will not face another slew of demands for collection of caste data. It also seems likely that once again we will be unprepared for a full caste census. If we really want to collect data on caste in India and not let the discourse about Indian society be shaped by the political exigencies of colonial India, the time to plan is now.

An ongoing argument

Should we collect data on caste? Some would argue that the simple act of asking about caste creates a chasm within society. Part of this resistance comes from reaction to

the preoccupation of colonial administrators-turned-arm-chair anthropologists who saw caste as the defining feature of Indian society. Colonial Censuses, beginning with the first Census in 1871, included questions about caste and used these data to divide and conquer India by first privileging Brahmins as interpreters of Indian culture and then targeting them as the roots of caste-based oppression and inequality.

G.S. Ghurye, the early 20th century pioneer of Indian sociology, reacted sharply by identifying this passion for classification as the source of anti-Brahmin movements. Veena Das, doyenne of modern Indian anthropology, also notes that the colonial Censuses via the process of recording caste generated a conception of community as a homogeneous and classifiable community and thereby influenced the processes of political representation. Consequently, post-Independence Censuses have shied away from including questions about caste.

The challenge for modern India lies in figuring out whether castebased political mobilisation and strong sentiments for or against reservations would disappear just because we choose not to collect statistics about caste. Patels, Gujjars, Jats and Marathas do not seem to care about the lack of Census data as they demand reservations. Nor has the caste cauldron of Karnataka elections calmed because we can only roughly estimate the size of the Lingayat and Vokkaliga communities.

What is at stake?

Our political systems, civil society and courts continue to assume that broad caste-based social categories – Dalits, Adivasis, Other

Backward Classes (OBCs) and upper castes – defined largely using data from 1931 Census and a few special purpose surveys continue to shape economic conditions in 21st century India. Without accurate data at a granular level for each of these categories consisting of thousands of jatis (castes) and upjatis (subcastes), we have no way of knowing whether this is correct.

Indian society has undergone a tremendous transformation since 1931. Land ownership that bolstered the power of upper castes has lost its hold. Land fragmentation and decades of agricultural stagnation have turned many upper caste landowners into marginal farmers barely eking out a subsistence. While landlessness, once the bane of Dalit existence, has left the landless better poised to take advantage of rising rural wages, particularly construction wages. Consequently, while at a broad brushstroke the National Sample Survey (NSS) shows that mean consumption expenditure of forward castes is higher than that of Dalits, clusters of poverty persist among forward castes. According to NSS data, the bottom fourth of forward castes are poorer than the top half of Dalits. India Human De-

velopment Survey shows that 56% of Dalit children ages 8-11 cannot read but neither can 32% of forward caste and 47% of OBC children.

Economic growth of the past century, combined with strong affirmation action undertaken by successive governments of the independent nation, may have changed relative fortunes of various groups. Some jatis may have managed to pull themselves out poverty and marginalisation, while others may have sunk into it. Hence, it is time to collect data that reflects the current situation.

Collection of caste data is not easy. The SECC asked interviewers to write down the name of the caste exactly as articulated by the respondent. By some reports, it has revealed as many as 46 lakh castes. Sometimes the same caste is spelt in different ways, at other times some individuals report their jati and others upjati making it difficult to create mutually exclusive categories. One cannot help but sympathise with the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation which were asked to tack on a question about caste at the eleventh hour in the SECC without any preparation.

However, we have nearly three years before the Census of 2021 and are fortunate to have data from the SECC and technologies rooted in machine learning at our disposal. It would be possible to set up an expert group that uses the SECC data in conjunction with other data sources such as matrimonial advertisements and Statespecific Scheduled Castes/OBC lists to make a comprehensive list of castes and condense them into meaningful categories via machine learning tools. These catego-

ries could then be validated by domain experts from the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) institutions in various States to come up with a district specific list of castes that would cover more than 90% of individuals in any given district. Interviewers could use this precoded list to allow respondents to selfclassify with a small residual group's responses being recorded verbatim and categorised later. This is very similar to the technique through which occupational and industrial classification systems are created.

Genie's out already

Collection of data on castes is inherently risky. Politicians have long realised the advantages and disadvantages of capitalising on the sense of relative deprivation among various groups. A caste Census could easily roil the waters in ways that are hard to predict. However, once the SECC was conducted, the genie was out of the bottle. Demands are already rife for the release of these data. Conceding that these data are flawed and looking for better ways of collecting data on caste may be a way of calming the waters before the 2019 election.

It will take courage for a future government to collect data on caste and to use it to rationalise reservation policies. However, without better and more current data, our discourse on caste and affirmative action remains dominated by decisions made by the colonial administration.

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A new vulnerability

The objective of cow vigilante groups is clearly to target particular communities



SHAIKH MUJIBUR REHMAN

cow vigilante groups have emerged as the most prominent non-state actors in India in terms of their capacity to unleash violence. They strike at will even in regions not governed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Given the shoddy nature of the allegations levelled by these groups, the objective seems more to target Muslim traders and citizens than rescuing cows. The brutal attack on two Muslims last week in Hapur, Uttar Pradesh is the latest instance of this pernicious trend. Hence, it would be more appropriate to call these groups as Muslim vigilante groups.

The cow protection movement has a long history that goes back to the colonial days. Gandhiji wrote: "But, just as I respect the cow, so do I respect my fellow-men. A man is just as useful as a cow no matter whether he be a Mahomedan or a Hindu. Am I, then, to fight with or kill a Mahomedan in order to save a cow? In doing so, I would become an enemy of the Mahomedan as well as of the cow. There-

fore, the only method I know of protecting the cow is that I should approach my Mahomedan brother and urge him for the sake of the country to join me in protecting her." (Hind Swaraj, chapter 10). Had Gandhi been alive today, he would have protested the Dadri lynching with a fast unto death. Like Nayantara Sahgal, Gandhi would have wanted a ban on man slaughter. But Gandhians like Anna Hazare are silent. While Gandhiji urged for persuasive approach, the Hindu right believes in creating a climate of fear and intimidation.

For decades the Hindu right has campaigned for cow protection as a Hindu-Muslim issue, as if Muslims took to beef eating only to humiliate Hindus. No definitive theory exists of how Muslims took to beef eating; but none approves the humiliation of Hindus as the reason for Muslims to resorting to beef eating. As Dalits too eat beef, this is a Dalit issue as well. As a cause, cow slaughter is limited to the upper castes.

A churning

A comparison of the protests triggered by the Dadri lynching in 2015 and the Una flogging in 2016 sheds crucial insights into the political churning taking place in both communities. In the first instance, artists and intellectuals, and not

Muslim organisations, led the

protests. Despite vigilante violence, Muslims have conducted themselves with remarkable dignity, showing their unwavering trust in India's constitutional polity.

No doubt the cow protection movement has struck a chord with many Hindu conservatives, most of whom constituted various levels of leadership of the Congress and non-Congress parties under whose patronage anti-cow slaughter laws were passed in various States long before the BJP came into existence. The difference between the Hindu right and Hindu conservatives is their position on vigilante violence, which a majority of Hindu conservatives do not approve of. What political colour their silence takes in the future will determine the future of Hindu-Muslim relations.

Dalits, on the other hand, came

together in massive protest after the Una flogging, forcing the Prime Minister to make a statement on August 6, 2016. Their protest is said to have been a maior reason why Anandiben Patel resigned as Chief Minister of Gujarat a few days before this. Interestingly, the name of Dadri victim, Mohammad Akhlaq, that parliamentarian Sugato Bose described as "a beautiful name" in a parliamentary debate in 2015, has yet to be acknowledged by the Prime Mi-

Differences and the state

When Mohammad Ali Jinnah campaigned for Pakistan, Muslim settlement in "geographically contiguous areas" was a favourable factor for Muslim separatists to argue for their cause. But B.R. Ambedkar could not make a similar case for a Dalit homeland because he did not have the argument of "geographically areas". Hence, he upheld the message, "educate, organise and agitate". The Dalit uprising post-Una is a glorious tribute to that message of Ambedkar.

That Muslim food habits, particularly beef eating, could be a major impediment to harmonious life in a free India was foreseen by Muslim separatists, Jinnah made a categorical argument that a separate homeland was necessary on

account of Muslim food habits, among others. Unconvinced by the claim that Indian Muslims as a religious minority would be granted all the freedom that they could possibly enjoy in future Pakistan, he gave a new twist to his campaign at Lahore in 1940. He argued by saying, "Mussalmans are a nation according to any definition of a nation, and they must have their homelands, their territory, and their state", and opposed the tag of Muslims as religious minorities. It would undermine Indian democracy if the vigilante violence against Muslims serves to project those fears of Jinnah and other Muslim separatists as legitimate.

In its fight against radical Islam, the Indian state has launched preventive arrests; often, innocent Muslim youths become its tragic victims. No such effort is seen with regard to the vigilante groups, though the Prime Minister has declared that most gau rakshaks have a criminal background. Gandhiji understood that India has enormous potential for violence, which is why he chose the path of nonviolence, according to Paul Brass. The continuation of vigilante violence would only make India even more vulnerable to violence.

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$LETTERS\ TO\ THE\ EDITOR\ \ \ \text{Letters\ emailed\ to\ letters\@thehindu.co.in\ must\ carry\ the\ full\ postal\ address\ and\ the\ full\ name\ or\ the\ name\ with\ initials.}$

Maharashtra's lead

At a time when concerns about the issue of plastic waste getting out of hand are not misplaced, Mumbai's crackdown on plastic use needs to be welcomed in a big way ("Plastic ban kicks off in Mumbai, but penalties off till Monday", June 24). There may be some economic and commercial losses but the move will soon have an impact. GUNASEKAR T.,

- Considering the inestimable damage plastic pollution causes, the difficulties that the common man and vendors claim they will face are just a speck. The bold act by Maharashtra needs to be emulated without hesitation across the country. The striking picture on the first page (June 24) speaks a thousand words. AYYASSERI RAVEENDRANATH,
- There will be many teething troubles and

hardships when any policy or programme is implemented, but people have to extend a helping hand. Going forward, there will be great employment potential for cloth manufacturers and allied industries. Banks should extend loans to this sector. If India leads the way in eliminating plastic use, many smaller countries are bound to follow suit. S. ARJUN PRASANNA,

■ Given the challenges in achieving the goal, one hopes that all stakeholders come together to ensure that the ban is not flouted. The problems caused by plastic are universal. Therefore it was disconcerting to read a report on the 'Business' page ("India targets plastic exports worth \$10.6 billion in FY19", June 24). In the past there have been several reports about hazardous waste being dumped in India, especially in places such as Alang in Gujarat.

When India raises a hue and

cry about dark means adopted by other countries, it needs to rethink its policies on plastics. P. PRASAND THAMPY,

No abrupt changes can be

effective in a country with a

huge population such as India's that has accepted plastic as a daily need. A viable solution would be to target the young population such as students. For example, most of them have no idea how many pens end up in landfills. Switching over to ink pens is profitable in terms of being environment-friendly and money spent. Garbage management also holds the key to managing plastic waste. Creating awareness among home makers will have dramatic results. If the government imposes stiff penalties for every tonne of garbage disposed of at landfills by large industries, the polluters will be forced to look for green remedies. Z. KHALIDHA BANU,

Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

- I belong to a generation that went shopping with cloth or jute bags and bamboo baskets. We even used paper bags or tongas. But we now live in an advanced and fast-paced age As bio-remedial measures are well advanced in many fields, my suggestion would be for India to take up research in biodegradation, especially in areas that involve plastic use. As Indians are talented, and innovative, we should be able to find answers. There has to be political will to encourage change. B.R. SANT,
- The blanket ban on plastic seems a bit unrealistic as the move does not seem to offer people eco-friendly alternatives. Thousands of plastic product factories are bound to face problems now. which in turn may affect their workers. Technology to make biodegradable alternatives to plastic should have been offered to these factories. It is flawed to roll

out a policy and then try to cover the emerging gaps. K.V. SATYAMURTY,

IV for infested banyan

It was very interesting to read about how a 700-yearold banvan tree in Mahbubnagar, Telangana, has been given another lease of life after being "savaged by termites" ('Framed' page - "A tree in intensive", June 24). Everyone involved in the operation deserves compliments for attempting to keep alive the ancient tree. *The Hindu*'s photographer has brought alive the scale of what is involved by skilfully using his camera lens. J.P. REDDY,

Belgium at FIFA Belgium's clinical demolition

of Tunisia was a class act ('Sport' page, June 24). . Striker Romelu Lukaku did the star turn for the victors, an extraordinary feat that makes him draw even-steven with the great Cristiano Ronaldo at the top of the goalscoring charts. Belgium's second victory on the trot catapults it to the top of the group table and into the round of 16 and it would come as no surprise if the team gives English footballers a run for their money in their final group clash.

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:

N.J. RAVI CHANDER,

Bengaluru

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the report headlined "Kudankulam unit-2 reactor to restart power generation" (June 22, 2018, some editions), the second deck should read as: "It was shut down on February 19, 2018 for spent fuel outage". It had erroneously said "last year" instead of

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, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No persona visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com

