



Shoots take root

The rate increase by the Fed indicates that the world's largest economy has gained traction

The biggest takeaway from the U.S. Federal Reserve's decision to raise the federal funds rate, for a third time in six months, is its assertion that growth in the world's largest economy has gained traction and is on course to warrant further "gradual" rate increases. Fed Chair Janet Yellen emphasised the factors underpinning this rebound in economic activity – an "ongoing improvement in the job market and relatively high levels of consumer sentiment and wealth" that have spurred household spending, an expansion in business investment, and most significantly, a global pickup in demand. This offers more reassurance that the global economy may have finally re-emerged from the post-financial crisis doldrums. It is also noteworthy that the economic revival has been happening amid heightened policy uncertainty worldwide, especially in key areas like trade, as political tumult continues to roil the U.S. under the Donald Trump administration and, more recently, the U.K. as well. And while Ms. Yellen reiterated that the American central bank remained on alert in monitoring inflation developments, given a recent softening in price gains, the Fed's decision to announce the contours of a programme to gradually pare the size of its \$4.5 trillion balance sheet is another sign that the U.S. economic engine is warming up. India's exporters can take heart that demand in one of the largest markets for their goods and services is likely to continue to strengthen in the coming months. The Fed also bumped up the median projection for U.S. economic growth in 2017 to 2.2%, from 2.1% forecast in March.

Ms. Yellen and her colleagues on the Federal Open Market Committee have also done well to ward off a 2013 'taper tantrum'-like scenario by flagging the projected path of balance sheet normalisation – a deliberate and clearly calibrated set of reductions that increase over time – without detailing a schedule for the start of the process. Clearly spelling out that the plan to decrease reinvestment of principal payments from asset-backed and Treasury securities is conditional on the economy staying its anticipated course, the Fed has earmarked this year as the broad time frame for its start. India's monetary authorities can derive some reassurance that they are not alone in adopting a policy stance that seems counter-intuitive to some in the light of slowing inflation in their respective economies. While the Fed describes its stance as "accommodative" to spur further strengthening in labour market conditions and a sustained return to 2% inflation, the Reserve Bank of India has said that its "neutral" poise is intended to continue support for economic expansion while ensuring price stability. The common theme is the welcome emphasis on consistency and stability in the messaging.

No time to work

With ratification of conventions on child labour, we must have assessment of violations

In a welcome move this week, India has ratified two key global conventions meant to keep children away from work, decades since they were originally adopted by the International Labour Organisation. Nonetheless, the scepticism aroused by the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016 over the government's commitment towards complete abolition of child labour will persist. The ILO treaties are about the minimum age at which a person may begin work and the hazardous industries where she may not. Crucially, conventions 138 and 182 of the United Nations body leave it to the member-states to determine what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable work for children at different ages. Such flexibility has given the Indian government wiggle room in adopting the international standards in question, even though the 2016 legislation falls several notches below a comprehensive prohibition of child labour. The Act contains the controversial provision that condones the employment of children below 14 years under the rubric of family enterprises and the declassification of several industries as hazardous occupations. The detrimental effects on the ground from these dilutions of the original 1986 Act could be widespread. With roughly 90% of the workforce continuing to remain outside the ambit of the organised sector, protecting vulnerable children from exploitation is difficult. The rules notified by the Ministry of Labour and Employment for the enforcement of the 2016 amendment include some small concessions. Under these stipulations, children may work in domestic enterprises only for three hours after school, and not between 7 p.m. and 8 a.m. These restrictions are intended to ensure attendance at school. But given the sensitivities involved in monitoring activities within traditional households, effective enforcement will pose a challenge, and the rescue of vulnerable children will remain an uncertain proposition.

India's ratification of the two conventions, after more than 165 countries have legally bound themselves to their obligations, is itself a sad commentary on the priorities of successive governments, cutting across party lines. The ILO's Minimum Age Convention of 1973 entered into force in 1976 – and the instrument pertaining to the elimination of the worst forms of child labour in 2000. While policymakers are no doubt alert to the inequities that perennially plague Indian society, the practical realities are too painful for the millions who languish on the margins. Any genuine enforcement of a minimum age at work will elude governments so long as a universal minimum wage of subsistence for the adult workforce is not implemented scrupulously. On this score, the record of different States is at best patchy. This scenario is unlikely to improve in the absence of a vibrant mechanism of collective bargaining among stakeholders. Without this, the total elimination of child labour will remain a difficult task.

The anniversary of a divide

Fear, like an invisible fume that you do not see, surrounds us. And it can ignite in our face



GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI

This year, the 70th anniversary of India's independence is also the 70th anniversary of India's partitioning. The division was not neat. It was a giant, bloody mess. Uprooted from their homes, some 14.5 million human beings, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, left the new Pakistan for India, or India for the new Pakistan.

They left in terror, travelled trembling, and 'arrived' traumatised to a ramshackle refuge. A new and powerful word moved from the small print of the English lexicon to everyday Indian speech: refugee. The very rich and the ridiculously poor were refugees together. One had left a manor, another a hut. Both begged together for food, shelter, medicines, clothes – and dignity. All these took time coming. The only immediate relief was that the claws of abduction, loot and death were no longer upon them.

Rejoicing and mourning

Estimates vary but some of them tell us that at the lowest about 200,000 and the highest about 2,000,000 human beings were butchered in the process. The Government of India claimed that 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women had been abducted. The Government of Pakistan claimed that 50,000 Muslim women had been abducted.

Life stood divided, death stood partitioned.

Refugees seethed in rage. On this anniversary, we should remember that 1947 was one part independence, one part dismemberment, one part triumph, one part tragedy. Unimaginable, indescribable tragedy.

"Tomorrow we will be free from bondage to the British," said

Gandhi in Calcutta on the eve of the new dawn. "But from midnight to-night Hindustan will be broken into two pieces. So tomorrow will be both a day of rejoicing and of mourning." There was much celebration in the city, great camaraderie.

The euphoria was short-lived. Sixteen days into Independence, on August 31, at about 10 at night, a fuming mob of Hindu youths came to where he was staying in the Muslim quarter of Beliaghata, looking for his Muslim hosts to attack and perhaps kill them. It was Gandhi's day of silence.

He was unwell, tired and preparing to leave the next morning for Noakhali, by now in East Pakistan, to assuage Hindu families traumatised by the murderous attacks on them. The youths started breaking things, hurling stones at lamps and window panes.

They ran into the rooms looking for their 'targets'. "What is all this?" Gandhi asked the rampaging crowd, breaking his silence and walking into the mob. "Kill me, kill me, I say. Why don't you kill me?" A posse of military police arrived and dispersed the crowd. But riots flared in the city. The next day, Gandhi cancelled his Noakhali visit and went on a fast.

"For how many days?" Abha Gandhi asked. "Until peace is established I shall take nothing but water." By the fourth day of the fast, Calcutta was quiet again. Later that night some of the riot-instigators came and surrendered their weapons – rifles, cartridges, bombs.

In Delhi shortly thereafter, he saw the same mayhem again. Another fast ensued, another calm. In his prayer meeting on January 20, 1948, as he spoke, a small bomb – they later called it a gun-cotton slab – detonated. There was some commotion. "Sunno, sunno (listen, listen)," he said to the congregation, "kuchh nahin hua hai (nothing has happened)... agar sach kuchh ho jae to kya karoge (if something were to really happen, what will you do)?" And then asking the gathering to stay calm, he got his



associates to begin singing the Ramdhun. All India Radio has recorded the entire sequence, with the sound of the explosion distinctly audible.

The 'bomber' was 25-year-old Madanlal Pahwa, a refugee from West Punjab. He was spotted by a woman, appropriately named Sulochana (the good-eyed), and a police team soon arrived and took the young man into custody. When asked later if he thought Pahwa's was just "the harmless prank of an irresponsible youth", Gandhi said it was not.

"Don't you see there is a terrible and widespread conspiracy behind it?" He was right, Pahwa was integral to the conspiracy which was to hit its target 10 days later. That was the temper of the nation 70 years ago. Hate, brutality, violence both sudden and also calculated. It was the season of vengeance, of retribution. It was the season of dank suspicion, of hooded conspiracies.

So, does the 70th anniversary of the birth of independent India which is the 70th anniversary of the death of undivided India as well, admit of any celebration?

Of course it does, for ridding ourselves of the yoke of colonialism was unquestionably a triumph. Seeing the imperial power out of our lives was a matter of rejoicing. Watching Jawaharlal Nehru unfurl the Tricolour on the

Red Fort was "very heaven".

We must and will celebrate that and more – the advance of India on the path of economic self-reliance and prosperity, electoral democracy and the rule of law. But we cannot afford to forget the price at which that independence came. Not just because it was a heavy levy but because we are paying that cess even today. And it may be called the Two Nations Theory Cess.

The Two Nations theory had two celebrated articulators: Vinayak Damodar Savarkar of the Hindu Mahasabha and Mohammed Ali Jinnah of the Muslim League. Their perspectives were different, their purposes divergent. Savarkar believed Hindus and Muslims were two nations living in their distinctness within an un-harmonised India but he did not want a division. Jinnah believed Hindus and Muslims were two separate nations that needed to be in two separate nation states.

The Muslim League's advocacy of the Two Nations theory reached its purpose by the formation of Pakistan 70 years ago. What of the counter goal of a Hindu Rashtra?

Bedrock position

For some three generations over the last 70 years, India has been a plural society with a secular government committed to the idea that religion has no business with government and government has

no interest in religion.

Has that bedrock position been officially reversed? No, it has not. But it stands undermined.

Those connected historically and culturally to the idea of a Hindu Rashtra are, today, promulgating their passionately-held philosophy in different ways, dispersed incidents, apparently unconnected, in ways that make a Muslim feel fearful, a Christian feel as light as a leaf that can be blown off by a single majoritarian breath, a liberal feel vulnerable, a dissident feel targeted. They serve to make the cattle-trader afraid, the non-vegetarian at his meal declare it is not, please, Sir, not beef. They go to make the journalist feel hesitant, the farmer feel betrayed, the Dalit and the tribal feel insecure. Above all, anyone hurt by administrative wrongdoing or dismayed by state policy feel afraid to say so for: if you are against the government, you are against the nation.

Fear is abroad, like an invisible fume that you do not see but know that it surrounds you. And know, too, that it can ignite in your face.

The great American thinker Thomas Jefferson said: "We may consider each generation as a distinct nation." A new generation of Indians, a new distinct nation, is marking the 70th anniversary of our independence in an idiom and with a vocabulary which has nothing to do with the freedom struggle. It is making 'the differently disposed', both outside and within the Hindu fold, its target. And its equally active counterpart in Pakistan, going for 'the other' both within and beyond Islam, is not its adversary but its twin. Their religion is not Hinduism or Islam, it is Separateness.

On the 70th anniversary of independence and partition we must resist a second partitioning of India, of its versatile ethos, through an invisible surgery, performed by the knife of discord moving under the numbing anaesthesia of fear.

Gopal Krishna Gandhi is a former administrator, diplomat and Governor

Fuelling other fires

The Grenfell Tower tragedy will feed into the frenzied debate over inequality and social justice in Britain



VIDYA RAM

How soon is too soon to raise difficult, politically charged questions about a tragedy that has cost lives? It's become an increasingly pertinent question in Britain, which has witnessed a series of devastating events – from three terrorist attacks within a three-month period to the catastrophic fire that engulfed a residential tower block in west London on Wednesday killing 17 people, with the death toll set to rise further.

In the past politicians have often stayed away from questions around whether policy decisions have contributed to tragedies for a certain amount of time, but in the heated political and highly ideologically charged country that Britain has become over the past year, that's become less so.

In the days immediately after the Manchester attack, Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour party, spoke out against the government's foreign policy and cuts to police forces, arguing that the

tragedy raised questions about both: whether Britain's interventionist approach in countries such as Syria, Libya and Iraq contributed to the risk to civilians from terror attacks back home, and whether cuts to police forces made it harder for them to gather counterterrorism intelligence sufficiently rigorously. His decision to do so was clearly not off-putting enough to the public, who handed the party its biggest increase in terms of share of the vote in post-war Britain.

Austerity link to tragedy?

The fire was still raging through Grenfell Tower on Wednesday morning when Mr. Corbyn drew a potential link between the government's austerity programme and the tragedy.

"If you deny local authorities the funding they need, then there is a price paid by a lack of safety facilities across the country. I think there needs to be some very searching questions as quickly as possible in the aftermath of the fire," he told LBC Radio, also pointing to the cuts that had taken place to fire services across the country, and reiterating his message that people could not be protected on the cheap.

This time he was not a lone voice in raising questions about whether



policy had played a role: Ronnie King, the honorary administrative secretary of the House of Commons All Party Parliamentary Group Fire Safety and Rescue Group, had told the radio station earlier in the day of how his group and others had urged the government to act upon the findings of past inquiries that had highlighted the need for reform of the fire regulations governing tower blocks, often a crucial part of affordable housing schemes in city centres. The recommendations were not acted upon.

Others on the scene noted the lack of council staff on hand as the tragedy unfolded, with community organisations stepping in to provide assistance. "There's been so many cuts, there aren't enough people to do with this," a Kensington and Chelsea councillor told *The Guardian*.

At a time when there is a frenzied national debate over inequality and social justice, the tragedy will inevitably feed into this. The tower is owned by the local council in a borough considered the most unaffordable to rent in the entire city and which, like most of the rest of London, has extreme wealth sitting side by side with great deprivation.

Harrods is as much part of the borough as social housing estates such as the Lancaster West Estate, with largely working-class, multi-cultural communities.

The chilling blog of the Grenfell Action Group chronicles the many times over the years that residents had raised questions around neglect, often relating to fire safety regulations. "The Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Association," it ominously warned last November.

The tragedy has unsurprisingly led to checks up and down tower blocks across the country, while Prime Minister Theresa May has pledged a full investigation. But keeping up the pressure will be essential – tensions around inequality and the ability to have one's voice heard have long simmered

below the surface in the capital city, exploding at points as they did in 2011 when thousands rioted, triggered by the death of Mark Duggan, a black man stopped by police in North London. They swiftly became about much more: the angry energy of the urban poor.

Fire safety standards

But while in the aftermath of such situations promises of goodwill and measures to tackle underlying problems are aplenty, in reality they've rarely been acted upon in a concerted way. In the case of Britain's tower blocks, one architect, Sam Webb, told various media outlets on Wednesday of a report he'd worked on as early as the 1990s which warned the government that the majority of tower blocks he surveyed across the country had failed to meet basic fire safety standards.

The precise cause of the fire will only become known in the days and weeks to come as firefighters contend with the grim aftermath, but the anger palpable in the local community and beyond makes the need to ask difficult questions more pressing than ever. Politicians and the public must have the guts and persistence to ensure they're answered and dealt with.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Deadline jitters

The Finance Ministry's resolve to go ahead with implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) from July 1, rejecting the chorus of demands for its postponement, is myopic ("Put off GST rollout to Sept.1, Aviation Ministry tells FinMin," June 15). Experts have justifiably raised a red flag over the challenges faced by industries in the service sector. Companies with multiple offices spread across the country are now required to obtain separate registration for each State. With barely 15 days remaining for the roll-out, the IT system and the GST Network (GSTN) system are not even accepting new registrations. The GST Suvaidha Providers (GSP) too have reportedly expressed their inability to perform

their assigned tasks due to various technical and other reasons. Some of the rules too have not been finalised yet. There is nothing sacrosanct about July 1 as the GST is required to be only operationalised by September.

S.K. CHOUDHURY,
Bengaluru

Anti-democracy

The Election Commission (EC), acclaimed for its professionalism in holding elections in a transparent and fair manner in a vast country like India, appears to have suddenly lost its way by seeking power to punish for contempt ("Unfair proposal," editorial, June 15). There is no yardstick to measure what amounts to 'contempt'. Positive criticism may be looked upon as contempt by an intolerant institution.

Democracy thrives and evolves through debate and discussion, though the process of reaching consensus may face difficulties. The EC has still a lot to answer for concerning issues of public interest such as missing names on electoral lists and bribing of the target electorate.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

The EC's seeking of power to punish for contempt is yet another sad example of how intolerant our institutions of democracy have become to criticism. There is no doubt that the EC still continues to enjoy the confidence of the large majority of people despite some embarrassing questions posed by political parties. However, the institution can retain public trust only if it responds to

criticism through a codified process rather than attempting to silence the already fading voices that raise scepticism. Further, the 'power to punish' under contempt law invites abuse in general and has to be revisited.

S.A. THAMEEMUL ANSARI,
Kavalpatnam, Tuticorin

Next First Citizen

With the Election Commission of India issuing the statutory notification for the country's 15th presidential elections, it seems just next to impossible that a broad consensus would emerge between the NDA dispensation and the Opposition front. One wonders why the ruling elite swung into action so late in this regard as June 28 is the last date of filing nominations. As far as the

majority mark in the Electoral College – comprising all elected MPs and MLAs – is concerned, the BJP seems to be way ahead. However, as we complete 70 years of independence, our legislators need to make sure that the winner gets elected unanimously. It was a good four decades ago, in 1977, that Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy got elected unopposed, the only person to have done so thus far.

HEMANT KUMAR,
Ambala City

Paradise getting lost

The little pleasures of mountaineering – escaping into the beautiful Nature and discovering yourself while getting lost – have disappeared due to its vulgarisation, as has happened in the case of Mount Everest ("Mission

Everest Inc," FAQ, June 15). The fragile ecology of the peak is adversely affected due to overcrowding and littering of the glaciers and camps. If this so-called tourism boost continues at the present pace, the day is not far away when this pristine peak would be called the 'world's highest garbage dump'. The recent crumbling of Hillary Step should be a strict warning to stop exploiting our mountain ecosystem. Efforts must be put in not only by the government but also by NGOs and citizens themselves to prevent soil erosion, trampling of vegetation and excessive waste disposal caused by incessant expeditions.

KRITI CHACHRA,
New Delhi

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