



Slowdown signals

Growth estimates for the second quarter show the challenge of shoring up rural demand

The growth estimates for the July-September quarter from the Central Statistics Office show that the economy's expansion predictably slowed. GDP growth weakened to 7.1%, from the robust 8.2% in April-June, as rising oil prices combined with a weakening rupee to dampen demand. Gross value added (GVA) data show five of the eight sectors reflecting the slowdown from the first quarter, with only utility services, public administration, defence and other services, and trade, hotel, transport, communication and broadcasting services bucking the trend. Worryingly, GVA growth in agriculture, forestry and fishing eased to 3.8%, from 5.3% three months earlier, as foodgrain output in the kharif season inched up a mere 0.6% (production had expanded by 1.7% in the previous year). Given the distress in the farm sector, below-normal monsoon rains and a shortfall of over 8% in rabi sowing till November 30, the outlook for rural demand remains challenging at least for the next couple of quarters. This demand weakness in the hinterland is also evident in the consumption spending data, with growth in private final consumption expenditure slowing to 7%, compared to 8.6% in the first quarter. Manufacturing, though posting a 7.4% expansion, also poses cause for concern as the momentum almost halved from the June quarter's 13.5% and slipped back nearer to the year-earlier level of 7.1%. Index of Industrial Production data reveal that growth in manufacturing output remained becalmed at 4.6% through August-September, and when seen alongside the weakness in car and two-wheeler sales, suggest an acceleration may be some time away.

To be sure, not all data paint a less-than-encouraging picture. Gross fixed capital formation (GFCF), a key metric for investment demand, expanded by a robust 12.5%, building on the first quarter's 10% increase, and constituted 32.3% of GDP. With non-food bank credit also showing signs of a recovery, there is the discernible prospect of an investment revival. An RBI research paper posits that improvement in investment activity is being driven by cyclical factors and may last up to 2022-23, when the investment rate as measured by the GFCF is estimated to increase to 33% of GDP. The same RBI paper, however, points to risks to the investment outlook and flags the gross fiscal deficit as a key pressure point, given that borrowing by the government invariably crowds out investment demand. Here, the latest expenditure and receipts figures released by the Controller-General of Accounts are not reassuring: the fiscal deficit crossed the budget estimate for the full year in just the first seven months, raising the chances that the Centre would miss its target of limiting the deficit to 3.3% of GDP. With multiple uncertainties looming on the global trade and growth horizon and elections approaching, India's economic managers will need to be at their best to keep the momentum from sliding.

Symbol of a lost order

George H.W. Bush saw in the post-Cold War era, and also the lost promise of that moment

The passing of George H.W. Bush, the 41st President of the United States, from 1989 to 1993, is an occasion to contextualise the current turbulence in the world, especially in liberal democracies. Three events – the first Gulf War, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union – that occurred on his watch set in motion a global churn that remains with us. It was his predecessor, Ronald Reagan, who gave a rhetorical flourish to America's pursuit of global dominance in the 1980s with his depiction of the Soviet Union as the "evil empire", and his call to "break that wall". Bush, his Vice President and then successor, was not known for any rousing oratory, but one phrase he coined, a "new world order", turned out to be defining, initially for its triumph, and now for its decline. "A new era, freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace... Today that new world is struggling to be born, a world quite different from the one we've known," he said before the war that evicted Saddam Hussein's invading army from Kuwait. His address in 1990 before a joint session of Congress was on September 11, a date that would become a haunting symbol of the world that we now live in, new but not in the manner that Bush had hoped.

Bush lived to see the unravelling of the world order and the concomitant turmoil. It is no coincidence that nationalists such as President Donald Trump define their politics as a rejection of the order that led their societies for the "last 30 years". Colin Powell and Dick Cheney, American war enthusiasts who shaped its 43rd President George W. Bush's bravado and arrogance, and contributed to his ignorance, rose to prominence during Bush Sr.'s presidency. He was also criticised for overlooking Pakistan's pursuit of nuclear weapons and neglecting Afghanistan in the years that followed the withdrawal of the Soviets. But connecting him to his son's follies, the relative decline of America and the disorder in the world offers only a limited explanation of our times, besides being unfair to Bush's legacy. Bush, the last World War veteran to become U.S. President, represented a bygone era. He sought the middle ground and consensus in domestic and international politics, built alliances, restrained his words in moments of triumph, had an introspective streak on the U.S. economic model, and tried to appreciate the aspirations of other countries. He sent handwritten notes to people and lamented how moderation had become a bad word. But change was on the horizon. After him, conservative politics in the U.S., including that led by his son, took a strident turn. It is not surprising that he did not deny reports that he did not vote for Mr. Trump in 2016.

Sing like an Urban Naxal

He seeks to liberate language and thought for democracy. He is the citizen of the future



SHIV VISVANATHAN

The other day, I heard a piece of song, muttered like an irreverent doggerel, with a lovely beat. It was edgy, irreverent, but it captured a whiff of the freedom we miss today, the ease of dissent that the gravitas of editorials cannot capture.

A song for all

It went a bit like this: "I am an Urban Naxal, that is me./ Don't you see,/ The state has no love for you and me./ Because I am an Urban Naxal./ Delight-full-ee/ I am diversity's child./ Growing wild./ A bungee jumper of the mind./ Leaving conformity far behind./ I am an Urban Naxal./ I love the forest and the city./ But it is such a pity/ The government has no place in smart city/ For you and me./ They call me anti-national and full of hate/ Because they think I am anti-state./ But I must confess till due date/ All I asked/ Was a piece of land/ And a land of peace./ But government will never cease./ I am Suren, I am Sudha./ I am Ram (Guh), I am Krishna (T.M)./ I am Gandhi, I am Nehru./ An Urban Naxal that is me./ Welcome to the land of the free."

I want to thank that nameless student whose body danced the language of freedom. He was singing bhajans of the mind. His song made sense and it also captured that sense that we often respond to dissent too seriously. We sum-

mon ideology to combat ideologically, reducing debate to the level the state wants it to be. The singer and his song refused to play the opposition game, capturing the sense of freedom that dissent entails. The student's vision must embody the spirit of any response to the label/label of 'Urban Naxal'.

McCarthy meets Orwell

Linguistically the word is a clever one. It hides the art of scapegoating, the ritual of witch hunting by sanitising the word into a disease. What the song celebrates is dissent as a grammar of diversity. The word seeks to destroy that world, reworking the margins, the minorities, the pluralism of dissent into one curse word: Urban Naxal. It creates a climate of suspicion which hides the fact that it is an invented word and a constructed world. The state is free to provide the list. It calls for no proof, no fact. All it involves is a pigeonholing of names, which immediately leads to imprisonment, even mob violence. The irony is that each one of the names listed is a crusader for freedom. Freedom and the dream of freedom are distorted into a false utopia of unfreedom. Careers, lives, biographies devoted to freedom are suddenly sentenced to disloyalty. Even McCarthyism could not do a better job. It is as if a Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) consultant has combined Joseph McCarthy and George Orwell, the stigma and the witch hunt, to achieve this sophisticated mechanics of labelling. A label becomes a life sentence from which there is no reprieve. There is a slickness, a sophistication in the label 'Urban Naxal'



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that the earlier charge, pseudo-secular, does not have. The latter has a heaviness of tone, resembling a clerk's caricature. 'Urban Naxal' has the deviousness and maliciousness of a crafty advertisement. It is an all-embracing term which can be stuck on anyone, a writer, a dissenter, a tribal, a trade unionist. There are no objective features. You become objectified by being labelled. The act of enclosure begins after the act of labelling. The act of labelling creates a panopticon under state supervision. Years of idealism, political and ethical struggles get reified into the word, which evokes the logic of anti-national. It is a RSS distortion of the MeToo movement. If MeToo was an act of pain giving a voice of suffering, the state summons an epidemic of names and crucifixes them, not appealing to history like MeToo but rewriting history and biography.

The case of T.M. Krishna

Look at the list, T.M. Krishna, Ramachandra Guha, Sudha Bharadwaj, Gautam Navlakha. One feels honoured to be a part of this group because it sounds like an honours

list of dissent and creativity and not a litany of threats.

Take the case of T.M. Krishna, among the latest intellectuals to be named Urban Naxal. He is one of our organic intellectuals, a musician deeply soaked in the culture of Carnatic music, deeply committed to democratising music by going beyond its Brahminic roots. A man who has emphasised, like A.R. Rahman, the syncretic nature of music, be it a bhajan, a ghazal or a carol. He owns up to all by celebrating all, without overplaying the individuality of any. He is a pilgrim through the worlds of music, who understands that every encounter with difference adds to the richness of identity and creativity.

But he is not a fighter for the creativity and diversity of music alone. He wants to extend his sense of music to ecology, and reads nature like music as a commons, accessible to the creativity of all. He does this by showing that a return to the fundamentals is the best challenge to the threat of fundamentalism, using the plurality of the Bhakti music. To accuse such a classical, democratically inclined mind of Urban Naxalism, forcing boycotts and threats on his performance, is obscene.

Urban Naxalism as a label strikes at the root of dissent and creativity. We face a government which wants patriotism, music, culture to march in uniform and utter the language of uniformity. The label Urban Naxalism as a tactic seeks as anti-national what is one of the most powerful pleas for freedom and diversity. It is this prospect of freedom and diversity that the label proscribes.

But the tragedy does not cease there. The danger lies in the shrewdness of the state propaganda, in its ability to name some of the country's finest intellectuals as threats to security, as devaluers of democracy and culture. The power of propaganda seeks to destroy the creativity of civil society. An officially invented word destroys several plural worlds. One has to recognise that Urban Naxal as a label stigmatises all of them, threatening the world they create.

All about thought control

One has to see this labelling strategy in tandem with the other strategies of the Bharatiya Janata Party. As an acute observer put it, the ham-handedness of party President Amit Shah threatening the Supreme Court over Sabarimala, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat demanding Ram Mandir, and the subtleties of labelling are but diverse tactics in one game of intellectual and political control. Each uses majoritarianism as a tactic to create a uniformity of thought and thought control before election time. All seek to subjugate civil society, creating or imposing a substrate of conformity. The real crime of the so-called Urban Naxal is his lack of conformity, his ability to challenge the crowd and the mob, to stand up to coercive words such as security, patriotism, border. The Urban Naxal seeks to liberate language and thought for democracy. He is the citizen of the future.

Shiv Visvanathan is an academic associated with the Compost Heap, a group in pursuit of alternative ideas and imagination

Job creation at the farmer's doorstep

The conversation on raising farmer income needs to embrace non-farm diversification



FEROZE VARUN GANDHI

The Telangana government's recent announcement of the Rythu Bandhu scheme has spotlighted the policy of utilising cash transfer to assist land-owning farmers with a non-agricultural income – instead of the traditional policy measures of price interventions, trade restrictions and farm loan waivers. While the scheme is nominally intended as investment support for inputs such as seeds and pesticides, it implies a transfer of ₹8,000 per acre for every land-owning farmer over two crop seasons.

As Credit Suisse notes, the scheme has an inbuilt bias for large farmers, allowing 9% of farmers with more than five acres to earn 34% of the total payout. My travels across Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, among other States, over the last few years, have shown how difficult it is for marginal farmers to eke out a living from just agricultural income.

Rural India's economic situation continues to worsen. A recent survey by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (All India Rural Financial Inclusion Survey) shows that the average monthly income of rural households is ₹8,059, with agricultural households deriving only

43% of their income from agriculture; most of it is from providing daily wage labour and government jobs. While agricultural households typically had a higher income than non-agricultural households, they had higher debt on average (₹1,04,602 and ₹76,731, respectively). This is also reflected in the decoupling of urban Indian incomes from rural India with per capita income in rural India lagging a fair bit. The government has sought to double farmer income by raising minimum support prices, but such initiatives would apply directly only to 48% of rural India, with non-agricultural households being left behind. Perhaps we need to look at alternative sources of income.

Diversification is the key

The conversation on raising farmer income needs to embrace non-farm diversification, an important pathway for empowering landless labourers and marginal farmers, as development economist Daniel Coppard recommended in a 2001 report.

Diversification, away from marginal farming, is typically the answer – as a few papers on the subject show (Adams and He, Lanjouw, Janvry, and Reardon) – helping to overcome land constraint to income growth, while allowing farmers to cope with exogenous shocks through additional income. In some cases, it even allows them to reinvest in productivity enhancing agricultural technologies. Within this, there are two key sectors, where appropriate reforms



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can lead to significant income support for marginal farmers.

Opportunity in livestock

The livestock sector can offer significant opportunities for bolstering non-farm income. The current breeding policy (based on exotic blood and artificial insemination) needs to be revamped. A national breeding policy is also needed to upgrade the best performing indigenous breeds. Buffalo breeding ought to be given more attention, while poultry breeding should be focused on conservation. State governments should be encouraged to participate in national breeding policy implementation, creating an environment for competition among alternative suppliers of artificial insemination. Consensus must be built among breeders to develop indigenous breeds. The feed supply (currently inadequate) needs to be mitigated through greater imports, with feed technology packages developed for extension dissemination. Geographical information system-based analysis must be utilised to map production systems. Private investment must also be encouraged. Animal health care should become a priority, with greater in-

vestment in preventive health care. The government needs to create better incentive structures for investment in livestock in the States that are lagging while harmonising rules, regulations and regulatory authorities across States. State governments should sponsor research and assessment of the market, along with highlighting investment potential.

Focus on migrant workers

We should also embrace the fact that agricultural labourers routinely seek construction-related daily wage labour to bolster their income. Improving the conditions of migrant workers in the construction sector requires a multi-pronged approach. First, we have to enable migrant workers to get deserved access to various government (Central and State) schemes, despite the lack of identity proof. Access to Anganwadi facilities should be provided regardless of their identity documents. While multiple laws exist for the welfare of construction workers, compliance is abysmal. The penalties for non-compliance have to be increased to a significant fraction of the construction cost, payable by the builder. Registration of workers with the Welfare Board should be made mandatory and be the responsibility of the contractor and the builder. If the contractor is found to engage or employ any worker without a registration card/ID, penalties (monetary and non-monetary) should be imposed, which would then be used for improving awareness and pe-

netration of registration cards and their benefits. The registration cards should be linked to their Jan-Dhan accounts, and transfer of payments on a periodic basis be made directly to their accounts. In order to improve the condition of women, strict anti-harassment laws should be implemented. Creche facilities at construction sites should be provided to also ensure that children are not neglected; they often play with gravel and dust, which can threaten their health. Utilisation of a construction cess has to be improved if we are to make any difference to the lives of our construction workers. Workers should also be provided with training and skilling in their areas of interest, as it could lead to higher earnings and credit-worthiness.

Our policies should help create sustainable, long-term, rural, non-farm employment options which can aid the rural poor in overcoming barriers to economic prosperity. India's rural development policies should increasingly focus on developing markets, infrastructure and institutions that can help sectors such as livestock and construction growth. While India's post-Independence rural policy has primarily been about driving people away from agriculture and towards cities, we must now incentivise job creation at their doorstep.

Feroze Varun Gandhi is a Member of Parliament, representing the Sultantpur constituency for the BJP. His book, 'A Rural Manifesto', has just been published

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.

Fair elections

The Election Commission is known for the excellent manner in which it conducts elections in a free and fair environment. This was solely due to the efforts of T.N. Seshan, former Chief Election Commissioner. However, there are allegations now of mandated election regulations being flouted openly and in a manner that is supposed to favour the government in power ("EVMs being tampered with: Congress", December 2). These are enough to sow the seed of doubt. If this continues unchecked, we could be setting the clock back to the days when our elections were marked by chaos and disorder.

KISHORE SARKAR,
New Delhi

■ The Congress's claims of the BJP attempting to subvert the mandate are not only

baffling but also laughable. The Congress is making a hullabaloo over imaginary issues. If the party really doubts the Election Commission's competence and impartiality, it must show courage to act legally against the election body.

C.G. KURIKOSE,
Kothamangalam, Kerala

Sidhu and politics

Cricketer-turned-politician Navjot Singh Sidhu was an ace opening batsman in his heyday but his innings in politics is at best a mixed bag. His immaturity in his frequent pronouncements is glaring ("My captain' quip lands loquacious Sidhu in a jam", December 2). His capitulation to Pakistan is bad enough, while his considering himself as a one-man crusader for fostering peace with Pakistan is stretching things too far.

C.V. ARAVIND,
Bengaluru

■ Mr. Sidhu's visits to Pakistan have only stimulated the start of a process of people-to-people dialogue in what are otherwise tense and frozen India-Pakistan relations. Those who wish to reap only political dividends in this context are neither sincere to the peoples of the two regions nor have any regard for the teachings of Guru Nanak who strived all his life counselling one to shed one's ego.

BRJ B. GOYAL,
Ludhiana, Punjab

HIV testing

Global sensitivity regarding AIDS and HIV infection is often hampered by misinformation and a lack of proper medical education and awareness. When compared to developed nations, HIV testing is still largely taboo in most developing and under-developed nations across the

northern and southern hemispheres. The root cause of such social mistrust, prejudices and injustice related to HIV testing and/or screening can be linked to conservative, authoritarian and paternalistic attitudes. If caste, creed, ethnicity, religion and language divisions still run within our societies, taboos associated with HIV testing will make an individual uncomfortable or insecure towards any public demonstration or acceptance of the fact that he or she is undergoing HIV screening. Unless our level of awareness increases and makes us more accommodating towards HIV-positive individuals, transparent HIV testing will remain a distant dream in these parts of the world.

SAIKAT KUMAR BASU,
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Cyclone in the delta

The "Ground Zero" report, "Destruction in the delta"

(December 1), mentions the last major cyclone in the region to be in 1952. There was a greater one on November 30, 1955. I used to be the sub-collector, Nagapattinam, those days. Then Tanjore district comprised the area now under five districts and Nagapattinam revenue division included Nagapattinam, Nannilam and Thiruthurai poondi taluks. The cyclone struck at night and a tidal wave swept 30 km inland near Vedaranyam. As it retreated, it eroded road embankments and the railway line to Vedaranyam. The displaced population was accommodated in the temples. As everyone gave away stocks of rice stored for their own consumption, gruel centres could be opened the very next day. The worst hit was Vedaranyam. It took us four days to reach it. Meanwhile,

the Gandhian, Sardar Vedaratnam Pillai, organised relief camps. So fierce had the winds been that a railway locomotive, parked in the station, had been lifted and cast against the verandah of a PWD inspection shed – in those days located almost opposite the railway station. We counted more than 200 bodies. Countless cattle had also died. Thondi, in the neighbouring district, had also been cut off. We had to keep supplies going using sailing vessels from Nagapattinam. The Ramakrishna Mission undertook construction of houses for the poor at Vedaranyam. The name Ramakrishna Nagar is derived from this. There were no advance warning systems then.

T. MADHAVA MENON,
Thiruvananthapuram

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