



Reduce, segregate

We need substitutes for plastic, incentives to re-use, and better waste disposal

Maharashtra's ban on several consumer articles made of plastic, introduced after a three-month notice period to industry and users, is an extreme measure. It is naturally disruptive, and Mumbai, famed for its resilience in the face of urban challenges, is trying to adapt quickly. Today, stemming the plastic tide is a national imperative. India hosted this year's World Environment Day and Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a high-profile pledge, to international acclaim, that it would do away with all single-use plastics by 2022. This goal is not yet backed by an action plan so that State governments and local bodies can be in sync. Worldwide, the problem has got out of hand, with only 9% of about nine billion tonnes of plastic produced getting recycled. India has an uninspiring record when it comes to handling waste. It has patchy data on volumes, and even less on what it recycles. This lackadaisical approach is at odds with its ambitious goals. Quite simply, if the Centre and the States had got down to dealing with the existing regulations on plastic waste management and municipal solid waste, a ban would not even have become necessary. Specifications for the recycling of different types of plastics were issued two decades ago by the Bureau of Indian Standards.

To address the global concern that the bulk of India's plastic waste – estimated officially at 26,000 tonnes a day – is being dumped in the oceans, there has to be an effort on a war footing to segregate it at source. The Urban Development Secretary in each State, who heads the monitoring committee under the rules, should be mandated to produce a monthly report on how much plastic waste is collected, including details of the types of chemicals involved, and the disposal methods. Such compulsory disclosure norms will maintain public pressure on the authorities, including the State Pollution Control Boards. But segregation at source has not taken off, as there is little awareness, official support or infrastructure. Even bulk generators such as shopping malls, hotels and offices do not abide by the law. Priority, therefore, should be given to stop the generation of mixed waste, which prevents recovery of plastics. Companies covered by extended producer responsibility provisions must be required to take back their waste. In parallel, incentives to reduce the use of plastic carry bags, single-use cups, plates and cutlery must be in place. Retailers must be required to switch to paper bags. Potentially, carry bag production using cloth can create more jobs than machines using plastic pellets. What needs to be underscored is that plastics became popular because they are inexpensive, can be easily produced and offer great convenience. But, as the UN Environment Programme notes, their wild popularity has turned them into a scourge. Consumers will be ready to make the switch, but they need good alternatives.

Erdogan's day

Turkey's President breezes through the election and will now wield enhanced powers

Recep Tayyip Erdogan's re-election as President of Turkey comes as no surprise. With this, his authoritarian grip will be further consolidated; in the new term, he will acquire the sweeping executive powers given to the presidency through last year's referendum. With Mr. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its allies also winning the parliamentary election, his control over the government is untrammelled. The elections were held in a state of emergency, imposed in July 2016 following a coup attempt. One presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş of the pro-Kurdish Peoples Democratic Party (HDP), contested from prison. The outcome, which was expected, is a big setback to the secularist Republican People's Party, the main Opposition. Its candidate, Muharrem İnce, who ended up with 30.7% of the vote compared to Mr. Erdogan's 52.6%, had promised to bring back a system of checks and balances over presidential power by strengthening civil liberties and restoring a constitutional democratic order. Mr. İnce had attempted a new compact between Turkey's secular vote bank and religious conservatives, in an attempt to overcome the distrust between the statist-secularists and Islamic parties that has polarised Turkish politics since the days of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The rise of the neo-Islamist AKP and the consolidation of Mr. Erdogan's power drew from the backlash against the statist-secularists and the economic growth in the first decade of AKP rule.

A faltering economy, characterised by plunging foreign direct investment, high inflation and a depreciating lira, had given the Opposition some hope of taking the fight to Mr. Erdogan. But the President's polarising personality and his party's wide organisational reach, coupled with the perception that he was the right person to revive economic growth, helped him retain power. His electoral victory will embolden his regime to continue its authoritarian policies against critics, a greater worry now in the face of his newly acquired powers. His victory is likely to see Turkey continuing with its belligerent role in the West Asian neighbourhood. For minorities such as the Kurds, the silver lining is the fact that Mr. Demirtaş's liberal-democratic HDP managed to win more than 10% of the vote to secure entry into Parliament. In contrast to Mr. Erdogan's triumphalism as the results trickled in, Mr. İnce was graceful in defeat and promised to work as an Opposition force for a more democratic Turkey. A stable, democratic and pluralist Turkey is essential in a neighbourhood that continues to be blighted by ethnically driven civil wars. As things stand, Mr. Erdogan's victory signals another hyper-nationalist, authoritarian turn.

At the crossroads

Two images frame our choice today, police standing by indifferently or rescuing the victim and thereby the mob



SHIV VISVANATHAN

This is about footage and photographs of two events, like two strips of memory; cuttings from everydayness. One of them, from Hapur in Uttar Pradesh this month, shows a vigilante group hunting for alleged cow slaughterers and smugglers. It is a blood sport. The mob picks up Sameyuddin, a 65-year-old man, and forces him to confess. It then drags a 45-year-old, Qasim, like a sack before it lynches him. He begs for water as he is being beaten up, but the mob refuses.

What is even more terrifying than the violence is the indifference of the policemen in front of the crowd. They don't seem to care, barely registering the event. An apology from the authorities is an ironic addition to the unbelievable tableau.

The second incident occurred in May, at Ramnagar in Uttarakhand's Nainital district. A Hindu woman and a Muslim man get isolated in a temple. The mob drags the man out, hitting him at random. A policeman stands up to the mob, protecting the victim with his body. The crowd around waits in anticipation. All that stands between them and their target is the Sikh policeman.

Chronicling violence

Two videos, two fragments, two vignettes of violence. How does one react to the chronicler of violence? Every interpretation is an act of risk, and a mediation on violence demands nothing less.

Marshall McLuhan, the philosopher of communication once

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO



claimed pithily that 'the medium is the message'. McLuhan's comments may have become textbook clichés but even now the original power of the insight seeps through. We realise more and more that how we communicate determines what we communicate. We sense this as we watch the video.

Violence in India today is always communicated as a video strip; a piece of gossip floating in digital time. Today we feel that the video as a fragment embodies us best. The video presents voyeurism combined with the open bleakness of an anatomy class. The irony is that an instrument that recorded family marriages has now become the archive for the collective violence of the time. Between video and selfie, we write today's history. Mob violence is the new serial of our time.

We have to theorise a little about the video before we analyse the two fragments more specifically. It is not merely that the video/photograph captures every act of public violence, it also makes the private public. The image links violence as an act of production with violence as consumption. It is almost as if it attempts to create a new idea of the social. The old idea of the social around the family or state sounds tired and empty, even stale. The new social is quick

to form and quick to dispense. It is represented by the mob. Today the social, or the sense of the collective, is constituted around the mob and its violence.

Understanding the mob

Three terms then become critical: the mob, the spectacle and the spectator. It is as if the mob has taken over history and myth, combining the worst of nature and culture. There is no equivalent of the hero in history, as in the warrior or the *satyagrahi*. There is no concept like class or state, just the mob waiting for a random trigger. The mob's double is the crowd. There is little to choose from – one plays the perpetrator and the other the spectator. Both are hungry for the spectacle. The only reminder that we live in a society subject to constitutional rules is the policeman. The policeman too can merge into the background and play the spectator indifferent to spectacle. His indifference, his boredom have an edge as he sits as if waiting for his favourite serial. The victim, by the very label Dalit, Muslim or woman, is the only social category; the scapegoat marked for violence. The indifference of the police in the video appears both surreal and slapstick. It spooks justice, the concept of duty, the Constitution as they let the violence go on. Of course, it all oc-

An unequal platter

It is time the government finds a sustainable solution to the malnutrition crisis



SOUMITRA GHOSH & SARIKA VAREKAR

Development is about expanding the capabilities of the disadvantaged, thereby improving their overall quality of life. Based on this understanding, Maharashtra, one of India's richest States, is a classic case of a lack of development which is seen in its unacceptably high level of malnutrition among children in the tribal belts. While the State's per capita income has doubled since 2004 (the result of sustained high economic growth), its nutritional status has not made commensurate progress.

A comparison

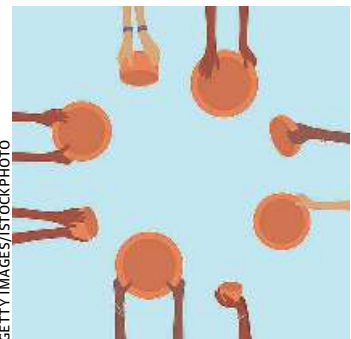
A comparison of nutrition indicators for children under five years, using the third and fourth rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2015-2016 and 2005-06, shows this: though stunting has declined from 46.3% to 34.4%, wasting rates have increased from 16.5% to 25.6%. Further, the un-

derweight rate (36%) has remained static in the last 10 years. This is worse than in some of the world's poorest countries – Bangladesh (33%), Afghanistan (25%) or Mozambique (15%). This level of poor nutrition security disproportionately affects the poorest segment of the population.

According to NFHS 2015-16, every second tribal child suffers from growth restricting malnutrition due to chronic hunger. In 2005, child malnutrition claimed as many as 718 lives in Maharashtra's Palghar district alone. Even after a decade of double digit economic growth (2004-05 to 2014-15), Palghar's malnutrition status has barely improved.

Results from a survey

In September 2016, the National Human Rights Commission issued notice to the Maharashtra government over reports of 600 children dying due to malnutrition in Palghar. The government responded, promising to properly implement schemes such as Jaccha Baccha and Integrated Child Development Services to check malnutrition. Our independent survey conducted in Vikramgad block of the district last year found that 57%, 21% and 53% of children in this block were stunted, wasted



and underweight, respectively; 27% were severely stunted. Our data challenges what Maharashtra's Women and Child Development Minister Pankaja Munde said in the Legislative Council in March – that "malnutrition in Palghar had come down in the past few months, owing to various interventions made by the government."

Scant diet diversity

Stunting is caused by an insufficient intake of macro- and micro-nutrients. It is generally accepted that recovery from growth retardation after two years is only possible if the affected child is put on a diet that is adequate in nutrient requirements. A critical aspect of nutrient adequacy is diet diversity, calculated by different groupings of foods consumed with the refer-

ence period ranging from one to 15 days. We calculated a 24-hour dietary diversity score by counting the number of food groups the child received in the last 24 hours. The eight food groups include: cereals, roots and tubers; legumes and nuts; dairy products; flesh foods; eggs; fish; dark green leafy vegetables; and other fruits and vegetables. And 26% and 57% of the children (83% put together) had a dietary diversity score of two and three, respectively, implying that they had had food from only two/three of the eight food groups.

In most households it was rice and dal which was cooked most often and eaten thrice a day. These were even served at teatime to the children if they felt hungry. There was no milk, milk product or fruit in their daily diets. Even the adults drank black tea as milk was unaffordable. Only 17% of the children achieved a minimum level of diet diversity – they received four or more of the eight food groups. This low dietary diversity is a proxy indicator for the household's food security too as the children ate the same food cooked for adult members.

Such acute food insecurity in tribal households is due to a loss of their traditional dependence on

forest livelihood and the State's deepening agrarian crisis. Besides these, systemic issues and a weakening of public nutrition programmes have aggravated the problem. For example, 20% of tribal families did not receive rations (public distribution system) in Vikramgad (in Palghar) as they did not have a card.

Analysis of the State's Budget shows that the nutrition expenditure as a percentage of the State Budget has drastically declined from 1.68% in 2012-13 to 0.94% in 2018-19, a pointer to the government's falling commitment to nutrition. It is no wonder then that our survey data show that nutrition schemes are not having the desired impact.

It is time the government looks at the root cause of the issue and finds a sustainable solution for tackling malnutrition. This is possible only when the state focusses on inclusive development by creating employment opportunities for the marginalised which would improve their purchasing power and, in turn, reduce malnutrition.

Soumitra Ghosh teaches at the School of Health Systems Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. Sarika Varekar is a student at the same university

Such acute food insecurity in tribal households is due to a loss of their traditional dependence on

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.

On the rolls?

India is such a vast country that it has absorbed, unknowingly, millions of outsiders as its own citizens, many a time supported by vested interests to prop up their vote banks ("NRC omissions raise fear in Assam", June 25). The citizenship issue has been handled in such a casual manner over the decades that we now have strange situations of such persons holding constitutional posts or even being in possession of new identification documents which are the preserve of only Indian citizens.

Any attempt to get at the root of the problem is painted with a communal colour or seen as regional bias, rendering the whole exercise open to explosive reprisals. Restricting the exercise only to Assam while illegal citizens are spread across the length and breadth of the country is also debatable. Given the way such sensitive issues have

been handled in the past, getting a final list of legal citizens would in all probability remain a pipe dream

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

Tree felling in Delhi

The plan to fell thousands of trees in Delhi is bizarre and will only add to the misery of the residents of Delhi already battling chronic air pollution. Even if saplings are planted, it would take almost a decade for the trees to grow. There has to be a pragmatic view and selfish desires dropped. Why create a catastrophe?

DEEPSHIKHA MAJUMDAR,
Kota, Rajasthan

Saplings as dowry

Reports that around 17,000 trees could be felled in Delhi because of development have depressed many. But that despair has given rise to some optimism on reading the report, "In Odisha, a groom demands a growing

"dowry" (June 25). Given that the word "dowry" has a negative connotation, his demand was a pleasant surprise. The groom has exemplified that for any crucial movement such as afforestation, it is the common man who should be the driving force.

R. SRIDHARAN,
Chennai

No more plastic

The ban on plastic use seems to be a knee-jerk reaction. It may be looked at as an eco-friendly measure, but are we prepared and ready for the change? What impact will the ban have on day-to-day life which is heavily dependent on plastics? The whirligig of time seems to have taken a full circle and we have to get back to the days of using glass bottles, stainless steel glasses, containers and cloth bags. Having been encouraged and supported by governments, the plastic industry has witnessed gargantuan growth. How do

we propose to dispose of the huge stocks of plastic products, leave alone manage the collapse of the industry in which lakhs of people work? Would it prove to be another demonetisation drive? Such a drastic and life-changing move should have been taken through in stages and after ensuring that there are viable product substitutes and alternative jobs for those in the industry ("They keep calm and try green alternatives in maximum city", June 25).

S.V. VENKATKRISHNAN,
San Jose, California, U.S.

Governor's warning

The warning issued by the office of the Governor of Tamil Nadu of legal action being initiated against any attempt to lay siege to Raj Bhavan in the context of political opposition to the Governor's visits to various districts in the State is nothing but blatant intimidation. As a constitutional functionary,

the Governor has to respect the boundaries laid down by the Constitution. Arguments advanced by the political class cannot be brushed aside as unwarranted ("Raj Bhavan warns against laying siege to its campus", June 25).

M. JEYARAM,
Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

The front page

One has seen billboard-like advertisements on the front page of *The Hindu* before, but it was a startling sight to be greeted with the 'classified' front page (June 25). Readers are aware that advertisement revenue is a bottomline booster for newspapers. At the same time, the front page, with some exceptions, appeals to most readers when it is splashed with news more than the display of advertisements of assorted business activities scattered across in disparate chunks. There was more shock awaiting the reader who flipped the page to find a barely-clad model. Perhaps

crucially needs difference and the celebration of difference to keep society alive. As the South African philosopher A.C. Jordan advised, "One needs to reinvent the stranger constantly to keep society alive." Gagandeep Singh, the policeman at Ramnagar, plays the good Samaritan. At a time when police brutality is at its prime as in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, the policeman and the citizen become "others" to each other. To this we add the distance between a fundamentalist mob and its victim. When a policeman like Gagandeep Singh rescues a victim, the fable of the Good Samaritan is enacted once again.

The first picture, from Hapur, displays the standard indifference of society to its other. Citizenship and authority come alive when the other becomes part of the creative self. Society in this fable is born when one creates civility. Gagandeep Singh's act shows that society has to care to continue. The two pictures become 'before' and 'after' pictures of one narrative. It is up to us as seekers of meaning to read it. One exemplary act shows what is possible with a bit of courage and a touch of patience. The policeman protects the victim but does nothing to imitate the crowd. It is also a reminder that a social contract does not come alive because of formal rules. It comes alive when someone is ready to sacrifice for it.

We need a new testament for our society to keep exemplary events alive beyond constitutional clichés. Our law and order history must capture it in a more memorable way. This is the ethical and narrative challenge of our time.

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

forest livelihood and the State's deepening agrarian crisis. Besides these, systemic issues and a weakening of public nutrition programmes have aggravated the problem. For example, 20% of tribal families did not receive rations (public distribution system) in Vikramgad (in Palghar) as they did not have a card.

Analysis of the State's Budget shows that the nutrition expenditure as a percentage of the State Budget has drastically declined from 1.68% in 2012-13 to 0.94% in 2018-19, a pointer to the government's falling commitment to nutrition. It is no wonder then that our survey data show that nutrition schemes are not having the desired impact.

It is time the government looks at the root cause of the issue and finds a sustainable solution for tackling malnutrition. This is possible only when the state focusses on inclusive development by creating employment opportunities for the marginalised which would improve their purchasing power and, in turn, reduce malnutrition.

Soumitra Ghosh teaches at the School of Health Systems Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. Sarika Varekar is a student at the same university

readers who overreact to occasional changes in the format need a reality check on their perceptions of the ethical ecosystems in which newspapers function and the ways in which competitive pressures of the market force newspaper managements to dilute long-practised values.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

Rise of the underdogs

At the FIFA World Cup the big teams are floundering and unable to stamp their hegemony despite having illustrious names in their ranks. The way in which the smaller teams are posing a threat to them has certainly raised the bar for World Cup football as a whole, thanks to the increasing significance of club football which has helped players to burnish their talent.

ADWATH KERALA VARMA,
Kozhikode, Kerala

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