



The worst may be over

The economy is showing positive signs though a turnaround is some distance away

The latest set of economic numbers released this week sends across mixed signals about the health of the economy. Core sector growth, which measures the output of eight major infrastructure sectors of the economy, went into negative territory for the first time in over four years in August as five out of the eight sectors constituting the index shrank in size. Overall growth in these sectors dropped to -0.5% in August in contrast to the same month last year when core sector growth stood at a much stronger 4.7% and July this year when it was 2.7%. The coal sector witnessed the worst fall, contracting 8.7% year-over-year in August, while steel, fertilizer and refinery products saw positive growth. These dismal numbers suggest that the economy is still some distance away from posting a strong revival in growth and it may be too soon to predict a definite turnaround. However, other high-frequency data on the economy suggest that the worst might be over. Vehicle registrations have witnessed a strong comeback in September as discounts ahead of the upcoming festival season have managed to spur sales. Further, although car and tractor companies continue to witness a drop in sales compared to last year, their rate of contraction has begun to slow down. A return to the sales levels witnessed last year, however, will require a stronger rebound in the overall economy.

Other macroeconomic indicators that could potentially tie the hands of the government as it tries to tackle the slowdown have also shown signs of improvement. The government has limited its borrowing in the first half of the year to ₹4.42 lakh crore, which is in line with its initial borrowing plan in order to achieve the fiscal deficit target of 3.3% for the year. The current account deficit at the end of the first quarter of the current financial year has narrowed to 2%, from 2.3% at the end of Q1 last year, thanks to higher service sector exports. The result of the various stimulus plans that have been announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman over the last few weeks and the Reserve Bank of India's spree of rate cuts beginning in February will be seen over the next few months and quarters. It is doubtful, however, whether these reform measures, even if they manage to reverse the slowdown, will be enough to boost growth over the 8% mark anytime soon. The Economist Intelligence Unit, for instance, predicts GDP growth to be just over 5.2% this fiscal. The corporate tax cut last month was an important structural reform that could significantly boost animal spirits in the economy. More such reforms, however, will be needed to permanently lift India's growth trajectory.

Difficult compromise

In Austria, the conservatives will have to seek common ground with political rivals

Sunday's snap election has ensured the return of Sebastian Kurz of the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) as Austrian chancellor. The previous government led by Mr. Kurz collapsed in May over a corruption scandal involving his coalition partner, the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ). But the more important question is whether Vienna's centre-right party is ready to jettison the xenophobic right in its bid to form a new government. The answer would depend on how Mr. Kurz, known to be ideologically flexible, plays his cards in the coming weeks. Foremost, an alliance between Austria's two mainstream parties and the biggest in these elections, ÖVP and the Social Democratic party (SPÖ), is almost ruled out. Neither is any longer animated by the idea of a grand coalition between them, no matter that circumstances warrant such pragmatism among centrist parties. That leaves Mr. Kurz the option to explore a three-way alliance among ÖVP and two smaller parties from Sunday's polls – the Greens and the pro-business liberal NEOS. The Greens may have good reason to use the opening, given the chance it affords them to build on the popular support their counterparts gained from the European elections in May. Any positive movement in this regard cannot, however, be assumed given the fraught nature of such negotiations.

Instructive is the case of the so-called Traffic Light coalition talks in 2017, among German social democrats, liberals and the Greens that dragged on for months before the current government was installed in Berlin. On the other hand, it would be awkward for Mr. Kurz to revisit the alliance with the anti-immigrant FPÖ, especially after the latter lost over a third of its 2017 vote share in Sunday's poll. That tie-up broke down after revelations that the former vice-chancellor and FPÖ leader had tried to hand control of a media house to a Russian oligarch for campaign support. After its poor showing, one view is that it should sit in the opposition. Another view is that under a new leader, the FPÖ is well placed to return to negotiations with the conservatives. Crucial to a reading of this scenario is also Mr. Kurz's past embrace of FPÖ's Islamophobia, prior to the 2017 elections. Given the fragmentation of the polity, coalition talks have been deadlocked for months in many European countries, warranting a second mandate even before the legislature met. Mr. Kurz may have to work with the FPÖ in order to break any impasse. He may well calculate that the far-right would be more pliant inside the government than in the opposition. In this fluid scenario, the best that can be expected of Mr. Kurz is an earnest attempt to find common ground among parties otherwise in competition. That is the recent lesson from Rome, where populists and the centre-left struck a difficult compromise.

Recovering Gandhi's religious vision

It's time to challenge the idea of religion as a monolith and follow Gandhi who encouraged multiple religious attachments



RAJEEV BHARGAVA

Gandhi was suspicious of many things modern, including modern Hinduism: a new, 19th century religion, sharply demarcated from others, and a fitting rival of Islam and Christianity. Why? Because he viewed himself as a *sanatani*, an adherent of a way of life that started long, long ago but, unlike the ancient that is dead and gone, continues to live today.

Ineradicable diversity

Central to this seemingly everlasting Hindu imagination is its deep plurality, reflected in its acceptance of the co-existence of three basic ethical forms: one dependent on multiple gods and goddesses, one on a single god, and one even entirely independent of god, gods and goddesses (truth-seeking). For Gandhi, this religious-philosophical plurality is the inevitable and healthy destiny of humankind. "There is endless variety in all religions" and "interminable religious differences," he said. "Some go on a pilgrimage and bathe in the sacred river, others go to Mecca; some worship him in temples, others in mosques, some just bow their heads in reverence; some read the Vedas, others the Quran... some call themselves Hindus, others Muslims..." For Gandhi, there is not only diversity of religions but also diversity within them. "While I believe myself to be a Hindu, I know that I do not worship God in the same manner as any one or all

of them."

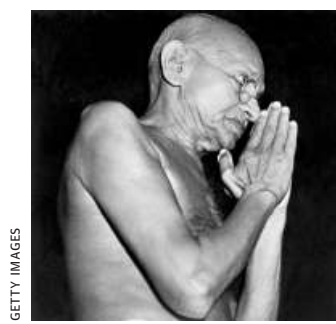
Given the inescapability of deep religious diversity, he argued, "the need of the moment is not one religion for the whole of human kind, but mutual respect, equal regard and tolerance of the devotees of different religions." This moral-practical attitude of equal regard for all religions is entailed by an epistemic grasp of the deeper, more fundamental unity of all religions. "The soul of religion is one, but encased in a multitude of forms. Wise men will ignore the outward crust and see the same soul living under a variety of crusts."

The basic reference of all religions is the same: God or Truth. "All religions are true and all have some error in them and that whilst I hold by my own, I should hold others as dear as Hinduism and make no distinction between them."

Inclusive monotheism

Gandhi's *inclusive* (belief in one God that encompasses all gods) rather than *exclusive* (belief in only one True God, while holding all others as false) monotheism flows directly from Indian 'polytheistic' traditions, a trait they share with other religious traditions of the ancient world (Greek, Latin, Pre-Islamic Arab religions). The implicit theology of these religions allows for translation of gods.

In virtually all cultures of classical antiquity, each god performed a function based on his cosmic competence – gods of love, war, knowledge, or craftsmanship. Likewise, each god embodied an entity of potentially cosmic significance – gods of fire, rain, earth, time, sun, moon, sea or there were primal gods who create, destroy, preserve and so on. Virtually, ev-



GETTY IMAGES

ery god or goddess in one culture could be related to gods and goddesses of another culture. For example, the goddess Parvati of one Indian regional culture is related to the goddess Durga of another region by viewing both as benign and fierce forms of one primal goddess, Devi. This way differences – benign/fierce – continue to be viewed as irreducible and yet translatable. This is a theology of recognition in which the gods and goddesses of each culture are recognised within the background of a common semantic universe.

One feature of inclusive monotheism then is that "all worship the same God although under different names". Gandhi illustrates this by a striking verse from the Guru Granth Sahib in which Nanak says that God may be called by the name of Allah, Rahim or Ram. Such an ecumenical perspective permits multiple attachments. If different names refer to the same god, then why not embrace all?

Two more things follow. First, "to revile one another's religion, to make reckless statements, to utter untruth, to break the heads of innocent men, to desecrate temples or mosques is a denial of God." Second, "it is wrong for anyone to say that his God is superior to that of another's. God is one and the same for all. At one level,

there is a fundamental unity among all religions and precisely because of it they must be regarded as equal. If so, movements of conversion or purification are pointless. "The real Shuddhi movement consists in each one trying to arrive at perfection in his or her own faith." In such a plan, a person's character is the only test. "What is the use of crossing from one compartment to another, if it does not mean a moral enhancement?"

Tolerance and respect

For Gandhi, respect and toleration were related, and virtually indistinguishable. This might appear strange. To 'tolerate', in the classical 17th century meaning of the term, is to refrain from interference in the activities of others even though one finds them morally repugnant and despite having the power to do so. Here one puts up with, even suffers the morally reprehensible activities of others. At best, the powerless other escapes interference of the powerful because the latter shows mercy towards them. This is hate-based toleration – I hate but still tolerate.

Gandhi's 'toleration' is different. How? Parents often put up with the blemishes of their children which they would not suffer in others. We choose to overlook a fault in our spouse, lover, or close friend that we would not excuse in others. We might endure differences with fellow citizens because we value fraternity. In short, we tolerate some disagreeable beliefs and practices of persons or groups because we identify with many of their other beliefs and practices. In all such cases, we put up with disagreeable states of others even if we have some power to do something about them simply be-

cause we have love or love-like feelings for them. Others are tolerated not despite hate but rather because they are loved – I love, so I tolerate. This is Gandhi's love-based toleration, entirely consistent with respect.

Unlike the mainstream, hate-based conception of toleration that presupposes that oneness with significant others is achieved by abolishing the radical other, by eliminating plurality, for this second, Gandhian conception, oneness is attained by accepting all radical others as equally significant because they variously manifest one supreme being. Thus, to tolerate is to refrain from interfering in the life of others not despite our hatred for them, but because we love them as alternative manifestations of our own selves or because we deeply care for some basic norm common to all of us. We may not be able to be what they are, we may even dislike some of their beliefs and practices but we recognise that they are translations of our own selves or of god within each of us. This, Gandhi believed, binds us together in a relationship of lasting affection.

Gandhi's religious vision encouraged multiple attachments, multiple belongings, and multiple religious identities. Is it not time that we challenge the idea of religion as an exclusive monolith, one for which the highest achievable social ideal is an opportunist, morally dubious hate-based toleration and recover the deep pluralism and love-based toleration at the heart of Gandhi's religious vision? Indeed, as religious rivalry, conflict and violence intensify, can we afford not to?

Rajeev Bhargava is Professor, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi

What would Gandhi say about the Indian media?

He would be delighted to see the rise of regional and social media and would be appalled by the spread of fake news



M.V. RAJEEV GOWDA

As we celebrate Mahatma Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary, a thought experiment that could yield provocative insights would be to explore what Gandhi would say about different aspects of modern India. Since Gandhi was a journalist before he became a political revolutionary, I will conjecture how he would have responded to the state of the Indian media today.

Gandhi, the journalist

Gandhi started as a journalist with the *Vegetarian* in England, before launching a weekly newspaper called *Indian Opinion* in South Africa. When he returned to India, he founded publications like *Navajivan*, *Young India*, and *Harijan* that became communication platforms for the freedom movement.

Writing about the Satyagraha in South Africa, Gandhi highlighted the critical role of the media. He wrote: "I believe that a struggle which chiefly relies upon internal strength can be carried on without a newspaper, but it is also my experience that we could not perhaps have educated the local Indian community, nor kept Indians all over the world in touch with the

course of events in South Africa in any other way, with the same ease and success as through *Indian Opinion*, which therefore was certainly a most useful and potent weapon in our struggle."

Believing strongly that journalism should be accessible and empowering, Gandhi was an ardent supporter of the regional media. He published *Indian Opinion* in four languages: English, Gujarati, Hindi, and Tamil. He also inspired other journalists to write in regional languages. On this front, he would have been happy to see that the regional media is flourishing in India today.

Gandhi argued that "one of the objects of a newspaper is... to fearlessly expose popular defects". Thus, a vital role of the media is to speak truth to power and ensure accountability and transparency. However, today, he would find a media that has mostly acquiesced in a Prime Minister taking no questions at press conferences and generally eats out of his hand. He would have been appalled, for instance, by how the mainstream media avoided asking hard questions on the economy during the 2019 general election. When the Modi government rejected the Periodic Labour Force Survey that showed record levels of unemployment, it was given a free pass. After the election, when it acknowledged that the data was indeed valid, there was no outrage from the media on such an important issue. So, is the Indian media



GETTY IMAGES

cowed down by epithets such as "presstitute" and "anti-national"? Or is concentrated ownership of Indian media houses by businesses that are afraid of attracting the government's wrath affecting the editorial line?

The Modi government is already denying advertisements to some media houses. While Gandhi had no problems with big business (and garnered substantial support from them), he did decry a dependence on advertising.

The Press Freedom Index, released by Reporters Without Borders in August 2019, ranked India 140 out of 180 countries. The report highlighted how criminal prosecution, especially sedition, is rampantly used to gag journalists. It also noted that "at least six Indian journalists were killed in connection with their work in 2018". The recent death anniversary of Gauri Lankesh is a chilling reminder of the cost of standing up for truth in India. A strong critic of communal politics, who refused to sell ad space in her newspaper to

protect its integrity, and wrote mostly in Kannada, Gauri was a journalist Gandhi would have been proud of.

Gandhi was ready to face sedition charges for his journalism. In 1922, he pleaded guilty in order to expose the undemocratic nature of the sedition law, which he termed a "prince among the political sections... designed to suppress the liberty of the citizen". He would be astounded to see this British-era law being used against journalists and activists today too.

In the era of fake news

Gandhi emphasised that publication of "false news is a crime against humanity... *Young India* will be stale when truth becomes stale." He would have been shocked that doctored videos became the basis for demonising student leaders of Jawaharlal Nehru University. The infamous "tukde, tukde gang" label was propagated by TV anchors, who spun malicious and fictitious tales to whip up public frenzy.

Further, Gandhi would have been disgusted by prime-time TV debates, which are sensationalist, jingoistic, partisan, exploitative of viewers, and prone to warmongering. Given that journalists can choose what information to share and what aspects to emphasise or downplay, they are in a privileged position to influence thinking, behaviour and attitudes. Gandhi would be saddened by the blatant misuse of this privilege.

One development that would have thrilled Gandhi is the rise of social media platforms. He would see these as empowering technologies that allow citizens to share their ideas and mobilise politically. He would have welcomed how the Internet has allowed independent, non-mainstream journalistic voices to fight on valiantly.

However, the prevalence of fake news on social media would have deeply upset him. Gandhi would find it unbelievable that WhatsApp messages can trigger mobs to lynch people. He would have condemned BJP President Amit Shah when he praised the fake news-spreading capacity of his party members. He would have been relieved that fact-checking sites have emerged to debunk fake news.

Given Gandhi's foray into Noakhali in 1947, he would have tried his best to communicate with our fellow citizens of Jammu and Kashmir and to lift the lid on what is actually happening there.

Gandhi said, "Freedom of the press is a precious privilege that no country can forgo." At another time he stated: "It is my certain conviction that no man loses his freedom except through his own weakness". One can only hope that the media heeds his words and reclaims the strength and independence befitting the fourth pillar of our democracy.

M. V. Rajeev Gowda is a Congress member of the Rajya Sabha representing Karnataka. Views are personal

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 bottom rung

It is unfortunate but not surprising that U.P. is at the bottom of NITI Aayog's School Education Quality Index ("Kerala tops education ranking," October 1). Successive governments in the State have been fighting to stay in power by using the religion, caste and community card. Not one of them has attempted to improve the State's social indicators. Besides displaying remarkable ineptitude, they have been plagued by scams. The present BJP government is no different. It is busy with Ram Mandir politics and protecting cows while ruining the social fabric of the State and doing nothing about

development. It is not just education, health care too is abysmal in U.P.

J.P. REDDY,
Nalgonda

EC's order

During the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha election campaigns, the BJP accused the previous Congress governments of corruption and even called former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi "Corrupt No.1" ("Dangerous precedent", October 1). All this was only to get votes, given that the party clearly doesn't practise what it preaches.

D. SETHURAMAN,
Chennai

The Election Commission has been repeatedly

criticised by the Opposition parties but that apparently is no skin off the EC's nose. The EC's acts of omission and commission in the recent past are a sad reminder that the days of T.N. Seshan, M.S. Gill and J.M. Lyngdoh are long gone and that constitutional bodies that are deemed autonomous are a pale shadow of their once glorious past.

C.V. ARAVIND,
Chennai

Remembering Gandhi

Gandhi may have publicly proclaimed and practised the Hindu faith, but he remained firm in his commitment towards secularism. He had huge respect for other faiths. In

his scheme of things, communalism has no place in any civilised society. As the nation celebrates his 150th birth anniversary today, we should stand united in rooting out hatred and intolerance.

M. JEYARAM,
Sholavandan

It is ironic that we are celebrating Gandhi even as we are busy destroying everything he believed in and stood for. It is time for us to reflect on why our country has changed so drastically since Independence. Only by ensuring that Gandhi's ideals come true can we truly celebrate him.

B. VEERAKUMARAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

When I see Dalits, other minorities, climate change activists and young Indians on the streets protesting peacefully, I know that Gandhi is still relevant. Gandhi fought a struggle that we will never understand, a freedom that we take for granted today.

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

>>>In the report, "Kushagra Rawat – in it for the long haul" (Sept. 30, 2019), the name of coach Peter Gattrell had been erroneously referred to as Peter Carswell.

>>>In a Sports page story titled "Asian Age C'ship | Three more gold for India" (Sept. 28, 2019), in the paragraph that read – "He singled out the junior swimmers for praise, despite Shoaib Ganguly being the lone gold medalist and India not winning a single medal in Group II girls category," – Group II girls should be changed to Group I girls.

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