



Symptom as cause

The auto sales slump reflects a pervasive lack of demand

India's automobile industry is experiencing a snowballing crisis of demand that shows no signs of abating, leave alone reversing. Domestic sales across all vehicle categories slid 19% year-on-year in July, as passenger vehicle despatches plunged 31% to register the segment's steepest fall in a 19-year period. And with the wheels having come off both two-wheeler deliveries and commercial vehicle shipments, with the former contracting 17% and the latter slumping 26%, the picture is one of widespread gloom. The straightforward interpretation of the data is that demand has dried up in all corners and among all key consumer segments – urban, semi-urban and rural and personal and institutional. Nine straight months of contraction in passenger vehicle sales has also begun extracting a toll in terms of showroom closures and lay-offs at dealerships, component suppliers and vehicle makers themselves. While the Federation of Automobile Dealers Associations recently warned of more jobs being at risk, on top of about two lakh positions that have already been shed, the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers admitted that the industry had laid off at least about 15,000 contract workers in the last three months. That the broader economy is experiencing a serious slowdown has been evident for some time now and the latest data from the auto sector only bears testament to it. And as the RBI acknowledged last week "private consumption, the mainstay of aggregate demand" remains sluggish.

While some of the factors currently bedevilling demand in the auto sector are well established – the liquidity crunch in the NBFC industry and the resultant tightening of credit availability to finance vehicle purchases, an increase in up front insurance costs and the 28% GST charged on cars, motorcycles and scooters – the fact that manufacturers overestimated demand when setting up capacity, especially of fossil-fuel powered vehicles, has largely been overlooked. For example, Maruti Suzuki, India's largest car maker, has announced plans to stop selling diesel cars from April 1 as demand has slumped. In 2012, the company decided to invest ₹1,700 crore in a new diesel engine plant in Gurugram, capacity that it now needs to repurpose or idle. Simultaneously, the ride-share industry has mushroomed in recent years, especially in urban areas where choked roads and lack of parking space have incentivised rapid adoption of app-based commuting. The outlook too, especially for the near term, looks far from hopeful. The RBI's July round of its Consumer Confidence Survey, which reflected a decline in consumer confidence in July, shows 63.8% of respondents expect discretionary spending will stay the same or shrink one year ahead. In June 2018, the comparable reading was 37.3%. The onus now lies on the government to urgently formulate policy interventions to address this sectoral crisis or risk wider contagion.

Unethical actions

The mass defection of MLAs makes a mockery of democracy in Sikkim

The switching of sides by 10 MLAs from the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) to the Bharatiya Janata Party in Sikkim on Tuesday and later two others from the SDF to the ruling Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) brings a sense of déjà vu. The en masse shifts are reminiscent of what happened in Arunachal Pradesh in 2016, when rebel Congress MLAs joined the People's Party of Arunachal in order to get over the legal hurdles to defection. These actions have reduced the SDF, which ruled the State for 25 years with Pawan Kumar Chamling as the Chief Minister with the longest tenure in India, to just one MLA – Mr. Chamling himself. Such a shift might well have helped the former SDF legislators stay clear of the anti-defection law, which stipulates that a breakaway group must constitute at least two-thirds of the legislative party's strength and that it must merge with another party. But this was an unethical manoeuvre, as the elections to the Sikkim Legislative Assembly were held barely three months ago and the BJP had come a cropper without winning a single seat and just 1.6% of the overall vote. The BJP has shown no qualms – as seen elsewhere in Karnataka, Arunachal Pradesh among others – about poaching legislators instead of winning over support organically through a democratic mandate. The Sikkim defections have added yet another chapter to the hollowing out of the anti-defection law. The SDF, which finished with 15 seats (two since vacated), was a National Democratic Alliance member, but has now been replaced by the 18-member SKM in the BJP-led North East Democratic Alliance.

The SKM might have secured a clearer majority with the defection of two SDF MLAs to its fold, but a cloud of uncertainty hangs over its party leader and Chief Minister P.S. Goley alias Prem Singh Tamang. Mr. Goley was convicted in 2016 in a case of corruption and had served a sentence in prison for a year till August 2018. The People's Representation Act, 1951, mandates that a person convicted under the Prevention of Corruption Act cannot contest an election for six years after release. The fact that he is serving as the Chief Minister (he did not contest the Assembly polls) despite the conviction goes directly against a Supreme Court order in a similar case dealing with the eligibility of former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha in 2001. The court had then said that the "appointment of a person to the office of Chief Minister who is not qualified to hold it should be struck down at the earliest". In line with the drastic change in the party composition in the Assembly due to the defections, the continuance of Mr. Goley as chief minister makes a mockery of democratic and legal principles. Something is rotten in the State of Sikkim.

Assam's humanitarian conundrum

Neither Delhi nor Dispur has been working on a proper plan for those who will soon be declared stateless



UDAYON MISRA

With the final date for publication of the National Register of Citizens drawing near, the dividing lines are becoming sharper. While the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been expressing doubts about an "error-free" (read Bangladeshi free) NRC, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and minority organisations such as the All Assam Minority Students' Union, the Assam State Jamiat Ulama and the All India United Democratic Front have welcomed the Supreme Court's decision to observe the August 31 deadline.

The two sides

The stand by the leading minority organisations points to their viewing the NRC as an instrument to remove the "Bangladeshi tag" from lakhs of Bengali Muslims. For the AASU and other ethnic organisations, the final register will be a closure of sorts to a long struggle against foreign influx and demographic change. Therefore, given their support extended to the NRC process, apprehensions of wide-scale social unrest on the final day could be incorrect.

However, what is worrying in the long run is that neither political parties and student organisations nor civil society groups seem seriously engaged with the major humanitarian crisis that is about to unfold as large numbers of people would be declared foreign nationals by the Foreigners Tribunals

(FTs) following their exclusion from the NRC.

Although there have been vague assurances from the Central and State governments that the question of immediate detention and scrapping of rights does not arise with avenues of appeal being open to them, it is disturbing that neither Delhi nor Dispur has been working on any well-thought out humanitarian plan for those who will soon be declared as a stateless people. This becomes grave especially when there is awareness of there being errors in an exercise of such a scale.

Status before tribunals

On the contrary, statements from some BJP leaders that the country would be finally rid of the "termites" and that every single illegal infiltrator would be thrown out have only added to the overall panic and confusion. The resolution of the cases of these undocumented stateless people passing through the FTs, then the High Court and finally the Supreme Court would, naturally, take years, even if the final number of those left out runs into a few lakhs after all claims and objections are met.

Assam has 100 FTs, of which 70 may be said to be functional. The State has pledged to create 200 more FTs by September, but there is uncertainty over their being functional soon after. The Central government has approved 400 out of the 1,000 FTs the State government has asked for. The State government is not in a position to further increase the number of FTs because of infrastructural and administrative issues. Thus the process of deciding on the citizenship status of those left out of the NRC would be cumbersome, long, and involve suffering.



RITU RAJ KONWAR

Finally, there would be lakhs of poor people without the means to seek judicial redress. For them, the decision of the FTs would be final and they would be sent to detention centres. Then, there are those who have already been declared ex-parte as foreigners but tagged as "untraced foreigners". Clearly, the government has no mechanism in place to keep track of them; a State government affidavit in the Supreme Court cites a figure of some 70,000 people. Assam's Parliamentary Affairs Minister recently said that FTs had identified as many as 1,17,164 persons till March 31. There is also the issue of 'Doubtful' or 'D' voters (some 1.2 lakh people) who would be left out of the NRC till the courts resolve their cases.

Legal issues

In addition to this is the yet unresolved issue of the children of those deemed non-citizens. Recently, there was a government notification on the basis of a Supreme Court order (based on Sections 3(b) and (c) of the Citizenship Act of 1955) that births up to December 3, 2004 would be eligible for citizenship if either one parent was an Indian citizen. However, in the case of those born after December 3, 2004, the Supreme Court, on Tuesday, while categorically ruling out reopening or re-

verification of the NRC, held that children born after December 3, 2004 would not be eligible for inclusion in the NRC if either parent is a DV (Doubtful Voter), DF (Declared Foreigner) or PFT (persons with cases pending at the FTs). This would virtually leave out those born within the last 15 years to those parents, either one of whose citizenship is in doubt.

Legal issues apart, it is absolutely critical that the government, in due consultation with political parties and civil society groups, draws up a viable plan to deal with those who would be declared stateless. The State government has limited its exercise to the setting up of more detention centres to house all those declared as foreigners by the FTs. The plight of detainees – some are to be released on certain conditions – has been made worse as they are not covered by the jail manuals which are supposed to ensure the minimum standard of dignified living. A full-fledged detention centre with a capacity to hold 3,000 detainees is under construction at Matia in Goalpara at a cost of approximately ₹45 crore; the State government has already sent a proposal to the Central government to build 10 more such centres.

What would be the infrastructural costs involved in holding these prisoners with basic dignity in place? How long would these detentions last especially when the question of deportation to the country of origin does not arise? What would the fate of these people be after they are released on completion of the specified period?

Apart from losing their voting rights, would they also be shorn of their rights to land and property?

And will they be denied access to government welfare measures such as health and education both for themselves and their children? How would the state deal with those declared stateless but who already hold some cultivable land? There have been suggestions to declare those declared stateless not to be allowed to acquire landed property.

Potential crisis

The idea of holding lakhs of people in detention centres is bound to be a self-defeating and disastrous one which would go against all fundamental humanitarian principles and international covenants involved in the treatment of migrants, even if they happen to be illegal ones. The State cannot absolve itself of its responsibility by declaring someone a foreigner, placing him or her in a detention camp for a certain period to begin with and, after that, just allow him or her to continue to live on with some restrictions and without most of the rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

There is a lot of speculation that after all the claims and objections are finally met, the final number of the excluded might touch 15 lakh people, which would include the four lakh out of the initial 40 lakh people excluded who did not file any claims. In addition to this figure would be the one lakh people left out in a recent revision as well as 'D' voters. However, this is just an estimate. It is obvious that the State of Assam would be faced with a humanitarian challenge of massive proportions, one for which it seems least prepared.

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A playing field for political violence

History offers a narrative on why it is so entrenched in Bengal, irrespective of political affiliations



SUVOJIT BAGCHI

Why Bengal witnesses large-scale political violence is a question that is often asked. The answer is complex and multi-layered. The people in Bengal, mainly the poor, developed a sense of entitlement, largely as a result of the Left's long rule. Many argue that such entitlement is what shaped people to express their opinion vociferously.

For example, Amala Naiya, 65, a domestic worker in a south Kolkata neighbourhood, said that she felt "hugely empowered" after the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) came to power. She said, "They told us to report to [the] party office on [an] employer's [act of] misconduct. It was a relief." This "relief" that the working class experienced taught people to dissent; this is perhaps why Bengal witnessed protests recently when a doctor was manhandled in comparison to the silence that has greeted the killing of tribals in Sonbhadra, Uttar Pradesh.

Bengal's protests, which have often been violent, go back in its history, where as tribals to Nawabs, peasants, ascetics, fakirs (musician mendicants) to underground revolutionaries often chal-

lenged the British in what was its largest Presidency. When the Congress was dislodged in 1967 and 1977, the State witnessed intense violence. The quelling of the Naxalbari uprising witnessed unprecedented State repression, while an unknown number of citizens were killed when the Left was dislodged by the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in 2011. Thus, the thread of violence compounded by British policies ended up damaging the economy.

Economy and violence

Undivided Bengal – the Bengal Subah – flourished under the Nawabs as Hooghly and Murshidabad attracted investors from overseas centuries ago. Problems began under British rule as a result of multiple factors. British revenue collection was "higher" in the year of the famine (1769-73) than in previous years, if one is to go by Prasanna Parthasarathi's book, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not*. In addition, anti-peasant regulations and Winston Churchill's policy to block food import in the 1940s triggered another famine, crippling the economy even further. Partition sounded the death knell. After Independence, big capital did not engage in the region like it had done in west India to pull the State out of its crisis. This is partly owing to the State's reduced size and population growth due to in-migration. Till 2001, the Census recorded the State as having had the highest



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population density among the big States. This increased pressure on land accentuated by small holdings making it difficult for industry to acquire land. In addition, the post-Independence policies of the Congress government debilitated the economy. Thus growth of capital, other than in trading was stunted, resulting in peoples' extreme dependence on political parties and their local 'satraps'.

As Amitava Gupta, a columnist, has argued in a recent article, "The biggest industry in West Bengal is politics and [the] biggest employer is [the] Trinamool Congress." Such dependence turned realpolitik violent as people are often required to defend their employer (the political party of the day), in turn boosting polarisation. However, physical violence, a factor to reckon with even today, is deeply political in Bengal rather than being driven by caste violence. Religious communalism has had a different story behind it.

Communal riots were common especially in the areas north of Kolkata from the late 19th century due to a rise in settlements of "up-

country men... the Hindi or Urdu speaking migrant workers", as Dipesh Chakravarty says in his paper, *Communal Riots and Labour: Bengal's Jute Mill-Hands in the 1890s*. Communal violence escalated during Partition but ebbed during Left rule; there has been a revival recently. The key explanation of recent episodes of communal violence is not difficult to understand.

'A sense of power'

Almost always, the depressed castes such as homegrown Dalits or Dalit refugees from Bangladesh, and unemployed youth from other States (who continue to live in extreme poverty) are engaged in violent fights against equally poor Muslims. Till recently these communities were solidly with the TMC. Bhagnu, a retrenched jute mill worker turned rickshaw puller in Kakinara, an area witnessing communal violence, argued succinctly why he shifted allegiance from the TMC to the Bharatiya Janata Party: "What has secularism given me?"

He did not deny that he participated in orchestrating attacks against the minorities and made it clear that protecting Bengal's secular fabric or the Constitution was not his priority given his tough life. While secularism or the Constitution failed him, Hindutva, he admitted, gave him "a sense of power".

"Having a gun," as political philosopher Frantz Fanon observed,

is often "the only chance... of giving a meaning to your death." The story of the rickshaw puller who lives without any social security, underscores why a set of the poor is attacking another set of the poor in the name of political or religious ideology in Bengal.

From Amala Naiya's "relief" during Left rule to Bhagnu's "sense of power" during the Right's rise, Bengal's politics has always had one narrative: empower the poor (rather than the rich) politically and rule. The BJP has realised that poverty, which is real, combined with religion is the ideal formula to have the TMC on the defensive. The West Bengal Chief Minister was expected to imbibed this well, combating the Left with "a pro-peasant narrative... borrowed from the Left". But she could not drive a fresh political narrative against the Right and instead focused more on soft Hindutva. It worked till the 2016 Assembly election, but the script has changed since 2019.

The faster the Chief Minister invents a political narrative that promises to empower people the better her chances of a fightback. But can a party invent a new narrative out of the blue? Whatever happens, the violence will not reduce. But the bottomline is this: whether the TMC gains ground or the BJP, political violence is entrenched in the history of Bengalis – in Bangladesh and in West Bengal.

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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.

Legislative business

The recent Budget session of Parliament not only transacted a high volume of legislative business but also remained free of noisy disruptions (Editorial, "Deliberate, don't disrupt", August 14). This is a welcome development that should become the norm rather than an exception. However, Parliament's productivity cannot be merely measured by the number of bills passed. Legislative oversight of the political executive must not only be carried out but also seen to be in place through debates, amendments to bills and enlisting the services of committees to scrutinise important bills. Although the presiding officers of the two Houses ensured that the Opposition's voice was heard in the discussions, the general perception seems to be that many bills

sailed through without adequate scrutiny. Therefore, the model code of conduct for legislators proposed by the Vice President, while formalising the rules for parliamentary behaviour should also scaffold the privilege of the executive to propose new bills within a framework of guidelines – like, for example, formulating a legislative calendar. The bottomline is there should be a minimum time between the introduction of bills and their voting so that members can examine the proposals and come up with reasoned responses.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

■ Some time ago, "logjam", "deadlock", "disruption" and "boycott" were the usual phrases readers came across when Parliament was in session. If Parliament was

most productive in this session, the credit should go to the Speaker of the Lok Sabha. Our representatives should create the perception that they are serious about debating the country's problems by maximum optimisation of parliamentary proceedings.

R. KRISHNAMACHARY,
Chennai

■ There is no doubt that the quality of parliamentary work has fallen precipitously over the years. Apart from the "model code of conduct", it might be helpful to have a rule that no law should be passed without participation of a certain percentage of the total number of legislators of the House in the debate on the bill under consideration. Every bill should also be vetted by a select committee before passing it into a law. For this, the Parliament may have to be in session for

longer periods. So be it.
KOSARAJU CHANDRAMOULI,
Hyderabad

Unrest in Hong Kong

With pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong remaining firm in their demands, the city appears to be sitting on a ticking time bomb which could affect its status as a leading financial hub. There is every likelihood of strong and decisive action using force against protesters. China with its rising super power status could be flexible and promise more autonomy to Hong Kong.

M. JEVARAM,
Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

Medical education

It was a surprise to read that the ratio of doctors in urban and rural areas is 3.8:1, with less than 27,000 doctors to serve about 650,000 villages (Editorial page, "Writing out a clean Bill on health",

August 14). Some facts. In my batch of 250 medical students only four or so hail from a rural background. After we graduate we want to go back to our hometowns and start practice. So why are there so few students from the rural areas? The answer is the NEET-UG, which favours urban students; 90% of students in medical colleges have attended coaching institutes, which also charge exorbitant

fees. It is time the NEET-UG is made more rural student friendly. The government should also provide quality and free preparatory materials to students from a rural background. More quality medical colleges and hospitals are needed in rural India, as a chunk of the population lives here.

SHRILA G.,
Navi Mumbai

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

Wrong headline: "Six killed in HP landslides" read a headline (some editions, Aug. 13, 2019) while the text was about Uttarakhand and not Himachal Pradesh.

A sentence in the story headlined "No harmful chemicals in PET bottles, finds CSIR study" (Aug. 13, 2019) that read "BPA is a synthetic organic compound and used in the manufacture of PET bottles but is now phased out after research found a link between the presence of BPA and the disruption of hormone regulation, as well as breast cancer" is wrong. It should have been polycarbonate and not PET bottles.

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, 855 & 866 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