



## Growth with inequality

### Highlights:

1. The Economic Survey seems to privilege wealth creation over the reduction of income disparity
2. The survey goes on to forecast that the economy is currently experiencing a V-shaped recovery that would enable GDP to expand, even by a 'conservative estimate', by 11% in real terms in 2021-22.
3. However, the document fails in providing an honest assessment of the on-ground economic situation by overlooking key aspects including the extent of unemployment even as it hints at the level of rural joblessness, which followed the return of millions of urban casual workers in the wake of last year's hastily implemented lockdown.
4. In contending that growth should be prioritised over inequality in tackling poverty when the pandemic has exacerbated the gap between the rich and the poor, the survey seems to privilege wealth creation over all else.

## The Mahatma and the empowerment of the other

### Empowerment of the Other

If there is only one idea that Gandhi should be remembered for and identified with, it is the idea of empowerment of the other.

### Different opinion as right

Undoubtedly, the essence of Gandhi's political philosophy is the empowerment of the other, irrespective of gender, race, class or creed. That is why Gandhi understood democracy as a socio-political institution which seeks to empower the other by asserting its right to speak freely and to act differently.

The Gandhian appeal to the ethical is in fact a way to civilise modern politics from within, by shortening the circuit of conquest, domination and violence. By addressing the question of the otherness of the other, Gandhi was trying to cultivate the individual's capacity for ethical citizenship and empathetic friendship. From Gandhi's perspective, non-violence encouraged an awareness, which moved the individual away from monistic egocentricity and closer to



pluralistic shared suffering. What is so fascinating and relevant with the Gandhian approach to politics is that Gandhi understood the civilisational process of freedom-making as an inclusion of the other as the other.

### **A mode: Peaceful Political Dialogue with the other**

Unsurprisingly, Gandhi's idea of empowerment of the other is feasible only in a political community where people have the art of listening. In other words, the art of listening, as much as the freedom of speech, is a mode of laying emphasis on the otherness of the other against all forms of tyranny. Accordingly, we can consider as tyrannical an individual or a society which refuses to the other the right to speak and the time and space to listen. Gandhi did not consider social, political or even religious marginality as a curse, but more as a constructive asset which helped the individual maintain a critical distance from all traditions of thought while entering a dialogue with any form of otherness.

## **The farm laws need political resolution**

It is the supreme authority of Parliament which has the power to solve the issue despite the negotiations outside.

### **Issues:**

1. The issues raised by the farmer representatives are not just limited to the demand for a guarantee of Minimum Support Price (MSP) and the repeal of the three farm laws.
2. Farmer mobilisations represent the anger against the political economy of agricultural reforms. The genuine fear of corporate takeover and withdrawal of the state go beyond the three Acts.
3. It is essentially about the trust deficit between the state and the farmers who see the actions of the state as allowing greater control by the private sector which will ultimately dispossess them from the meagre resources and land that they have.

### **Reasonable fears**

These impressions are not entirely unfounded if one is to go by the experience in different states such as Bihar in abolishing the APMC system. But these fears also gain strength at a time when the economy is slowing down and the agricultural



sector has seen severe distress in the last six years, starting with the twin droughts of 2014 and 2015. With a decline in agricultural wages and falling farm gate prices and farm incomes in the last three years, these Acts represent a pattern of state withdrawal from support to the agricultural sector.

### Flaws in legislating

1. This is precisely why any attempt by the government to resolve the deadlock has to go beyond the nitty-gritty of the three laws; it has to start from instilling trust in the government's actions and rhetoric of reforms.
2. The flawed understanding of the government that this issue is a regional issue concerning only a section of farmers.
3. The attempt by both farmer unions as well as the government to exclude other political parties out of such dialogues and discussions is unlikely to resolve the issues which concern every State of the country ruled by different political parties.
4. But it also reflects the process of legislating on important issues without taking into account the concerns of various stakeholders.
5. Not only was the timing wrong, but even the attempt to force these pieces of legislation without any discussion in Parliament created an impression of stubbornness on the part of the government to deny any form of dialogue and consultation.
6. The failure to consult State governments, which are important stakeholders, has also created the peculiar situation where six large States have now passed separate pieces of legislation in their State legislatures negating the three central Acts.

### Budget session as an opportunity

1. A parliamentary standing committee with representations from different political parties will not only give it more legitimacy but will also allow diverse opinions from States and political parties to be represented.
2. For the government, which is willing to suspend the implementation for one and half years, it will also allow it time, space and the political forum to convince the States and farmers about the benefits of such reforms.



3. More than that, it will be an opportunity to bridge the trust deficit between the government and the protesting farmers.
4. For a government which is serious about reforms in agricultural marketing, repealing the Acts in the current form and starting the process afresh will only reaffirm its seriousness and commitments to the agricultural sector and the farmers of this country.

## The problem of ageing dams

**Crux:** India's ageing dams can threaten water security, affect farmers' income, and increase flooding.

### Highlights:

1. Dams and reservoirs are believed to secure our water needs for the future. However, data and studies show that they can threaten our water security.
2. **Deeply silted:** It is not a secret anymore that India's dams are now ageing and concomitantly, reservoir water is being replaced by soil, technically known as silt or sediment reducing storage capacity.
3. **Becoming Obsolete:** India is ranked third in the world in terms of building large dams. Of the over 5,200 large dams built so far, about 1,100 large dams have already reached 50 years of age and some are older than 120 years.
4. To make matters worse, studies show that the design of many of our reservoirs is flawed. Because of poor design, siltation rates observed in Dams are way higher.
5. Therefore, the storage space in Indian reservoirs is receding at a rate faster than anticipated. Reservoirs are poised to become extinct in less than a few decades with untold consequences already underway.

### Consequences

1. When soil replaces the water in reservoirs, supply gets choked. The cropped area begins receiving less and less water as time progresses.
2. The net sown water area either shrink in size or depends on rains or groundwater, which is over-exploited.



3. Crop yield gets affected severely and disrupts the farmer's income. In fact, the farmer's income may get reduced as water is one of the crucial factors for crop yield along with a credit, crop insurance and investment.
4. It is important to note that no plan on climate change adaptation will succeed with sediment-packed dams.
5. The designed flood cushion within several reservoirs across many river basins may have already depleted substantially due to which floods have become more frequent downstream of dams.
6. The flooding of Bharuch in 2020, Kerala in 2018 and Chennai in 2015 are a few examples attributed to downstream releases from reservoirs.

### Conclusion:

The nation will eventually be unable to find sufficient water in the 21st century to feed the rising population by 2050, grow abundant crops, create sustainable cities, or ensure growth. Therefore, it is imperative for all stakeholders to come together to address this situation urgently.

## Building a robust healthcare system

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been vociferous demands to strengthen the country's public health system. With better governance, northern States can bring their health systems on a par with southern States.

### North-South Dichotomy

Not surprisingly, the efficacy of the public health system varies widely across the country since it is a State subject. India may fail to achieve the earlier SDG because of the poor performance of the northern States. It is surprising that the Government of India does not hold them responsible and accountable for poor performance but is satisfied with the average. Equally surprising and disappointing is that these State governments themselves are indifferent to their poor performance.





## Some key health parameters in select States

State	Infant Mortality Rate	Under Five Mortality	Maternal Mortality Ratio	Total Fertility Rate	% deliveries by untrained personnel
Bihar	32	37	149	3.2	19.0
M.P.	48	56	173	2.7	7.2
Rajasthan	37	40	164	2.5	1.6
U.P.	43	47	197	2.9	14.0
T.N.	15	17	63	1.6	0.2
Kerala	7	10	42	1.7	0.1
India	32	36	113	2.2	7.8

SOURCE: SRS DATA FOR 2018

### Data Analysis:

1. These data are revealing. The northern States are performing very poorly in these vital health parameters. In Madhya Pradesh, the number of infant deaths for every 1,000 live births is as high as 48 compared to seven in Kerala.
2. In U.P., the Maternal Mortality Ratio is 197 compared to Kerala's 42 and Tamil Nadu's 63.
3. The percentage of deliveries by untrained personnel is very high in Bihar, 190 times that of Kerala.
4. Another vital parameter that has an impact on poverty, Total Fertility Rate, is very high in Bihar (3.2) against the stabilisation rate of 2.1.
5. Tamil Nadu and Kerala have done so well that their population will decline over the years. This has been made possible thanks to the effective Maternal and Child Health and Family Welfare services provided by these States.

### Hold the poor performer accountable

1. Some of these States are performing so poorly that they are comparable to the poorest countries in the world, pulling down the average for India.
2. The Government of India is just looking at the averages which are somewhat reasonable thanks to the excellent performance of well-governed States.



3. Unless all the States perform well, there will be no dramatic improvement in the health system.
4. It is sad this is the outcome despite Finance Commissions pouring non-Plan funds into these States in addition to substantial Plan allocation from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.
5. More money does not and cannot produce results. Only clear focus and better governance can.

### **Tamil Nadu's example**

1. It is because of enlightened political leadership which was interested in the health and well-being of the people. The district administration was spearheading these health initiatives because of the government's focus and drive.
2. The government encouraged healthy competition among the districts by giving prizes to the well-performing ones. By the 1990s, family planning drives were no longer necessary, and all that was needed was some fine-tuning of the Maternal and Child Health programme.
3. The result is that the Total Fertility Rate of Tamil Nadu is among the lowest in the country (1.6) comparable to that of Germany (1.57) and Japan (1.43).
4. In addition to a clear focus by the political executive, Tamil Nadu has the advantage of a public and preventive health structure.
5. A good administrative structure could therefore deliver to the demands of the political executive, benefiting the people of the State.

### **Way Forward:**

1. Poor performers must be asked to reach the levels of the southern States within three to five years.
2. When Chief Ministers are focused on health and the district health administrations are held accountable, performance is bound to improve.
3. An important measure that can make a difference is a public health set-up in these States that addresses primary and preventive health.



4. Tamil Nadu manages its public health set-up with just about 150 public health professionals. Therefore, it cannot be difficult for other States to build a public health cadre quickly.
5. Unless we invest in human capital, FDI will not help. It will only increase the wealth of the already wealthy and accentuate income disparity. Investing in health and education is the primary responsibility of any government. It is time the governments — both at the Centre and States — gave health its due importance.

### **Conclusion:**

Improving the health of such a large population requires concerted efforts over years. The southern States started early and are enjoying the benefits. BIMARU must start in earnest at least now. There are no shortcuts; only persistent and focused efforts at the highest level of government will improve preventive care and primary healthcare.