

A roaring success

Project Tiger has led to an increase in the numbers of the big cats in India

India has just 2.4% of the world's land area but contributes about 8% of the known global diversity. It is the largest tiger range country in the world and, with nearly 30,000 elephants, also the largest Asiatic elephant range country. The rhino population of nearly 3,000 makes India the largest single-horned rhino country. It is the only country to have Asiatic lions, whose population increased from around 525 in 2015 to 675 in 2020; the leopard population is also up by 60% in four years. The numbers of endangered aquatic species have also shown improvement because of measures like cleaning of rivers and water bodies. India has added over 2,200 sq km of forest and tree cover by 2021 in comparison to 2019. In a decade, the number of national parks and sanctuaries, around which eco-sensitive zones have notified, have increased from 9 to 468.

'Project Tiger', launched in 1973 when Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister, was aimed at ensuring a viable population of the big cat in its natural habitat, protecting it from extinction and preserving areas of biological importance as a natural heritage that represent the diversity of ecosystems across the animal's range in the country. Its task force envisioned the tiger reserves as breeding nuclei, from which animals would migrate to adjacent forests. Celebrating the success of the project as it completes 50 years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said 'Project Tiger' was a matter of pride not only for the country but also for the whole world as India not only saved tigers but also provided an ecosystem for them to thrive on. He said that on the occasion of the completion of 75 years of Independence around 75% of tigers are in India; in a period of 10-12 years, 75% of the tiger population has increased and it is only likely to go up in the future. According to figures provided by the tiger census, the number of big cats in the country has increased to 3,167 in 2022 from 2,967 in 2018. In 2006, there were 1,411 tigers, in 2010 the number stood at 1,706 and in 2014, it went up to 2,226.

Though the tiger population has gone up in the Shivalik Hills-Gangetic Plains region, central India and the Sundarbans, numbers have gone down in the Western Ghats, including in Goa and Karnataka, and the Northeast-Brahmaputra plains due to habitat loss, fragmentation and poaching over the years. According to the 'Status of Tigers Report 2022', aligning the aspirations of largescale economic development while safeguarding the forests and wildlife and mitigating human-tiger conflict is one of the major challenges. The data showed a "decrease in tiger occupancy throughout the Western Ghats", except in a few areas. The area recorded 824 "unique tigers" in 2022 as compared to 981 in 2018, indicating a decline in some regions and stability in well-protected reserves. While populations within protected areas have either remained stable or increased, tiger occupancy outside of these regions has significantly decreased, such as in the Wayanad landscape, the BRT Hills, and the border regions of Goa and Karnataka. While wildlife in the human-dominated landscape is a cultural part of the Western Ghats, there is increasing tension between humans, and mega herbivores and carnivores. There is utmost need to address this if the Western Ghats, one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, is to be retained.

The Western Ghats face several challenges such as deforestation, habitat loss, poaching, man-animal conflict, invasive species and climate change that threaten the survival of many species and the overall ecological balance. The recent forest fires in many parts of Goa are examples of the problems confronting the region. The situation could change if Goa were to announce the setting up of a tiger reserve in the forest areas falling under its territory, as recommended by the National Tiger Conservation Authority. This would reduce the movement of humans in the protected areas and would allow flora and fauna to thrive. The additional advantage would be that if there is an increase in the number of big cats, it would attract a large number of tourists and also help the local economy.

PM Modi and his degrees of knowledge

We have a non-expert who carries all the pitfalls of an expert, like a sense of certitude - a double whammy that has brought us wild-cat policy decisions



Jagdish Rattanani

It was not very long ago that spam messages and forwards used to be not about the veracity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's university degrees but about the plethora of academic degrees and honours showered on his predecessor Dr. Manmohan Singh, who remains by those terms the most educated Prime Minister India has had. Those messages asked us to take due national pride in the fact that Dr. Singh had more to show in terms of formal qualifications than probably any other leader in the world at that time. Yet today, it would be difficult to say that Dr. Singh's leadership gave us good governance, or that he himself stood up or even spoke up when he was required to. It was the 'misgovernance' under him that in good part led to the Congress ceding power to the BJP under Narendra Modi.

Today, social media messages are about the suspected lack of education of the current Prime Minister, and the question being posed is whether the Prime Minister of India need be formally educated or not. This would be the wrong pill for the ills the nation is faced with today. It is of course proper to ask if the degrees shown by the Prime Minister and his team are genuine. If they are not, then the charges of dishonesty, fraud and worse will stick, and political as well as regulatory consequences must follow. But that is a very different issue from the point sought to be made that the Prime Minister ought to be necessarily formally educated.

Insisting on formal qualifications will make political positions less inclusive particularly in India given the widespread inequality, adding new burdens on those outside the system

As the rule book stands today, a university degree is not a prerequisite to be the Prime Minister of India. This is as it should be. Knowledge, of the formal and expert variety in particular, is closely linked to power, and the interlock can disenfranchise the majority



while creating a minority of 'experts' who begin to control, command and get away unquestioned. Thus, development 'experts' deliver the worst of development with their ideas, power and reach. The environmental crisis is after all a result of the development experts running amok. The so-called economic 'experts' did not predict the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, and may have had a hand in the making of that crisis. Queen Elizabeth II of the U.K. was moved to ask at the London School of Economics, which inaugurating a £71 million new academic building: "It's awful... Why did no one see it coming?" There were no answers. There is no dearth of money either for the Rockstar academic institutions.

We are dealing with a privileged class of people here. Their knowledge is important but it is not the only knowledge there is. Knowledge also resides in indigenous cultures, customs, the ways and means of understanding developed over the centuries outside the university systems. A memorandum from the executive office of U.S. President Joe Biden in November 2021 recognised "Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK) - a form of Indigenous Knowledge - as one of the many important bodies of knowledge that contributes to the scientific, technical, social, and economic advancements of the United States and to our collective understanding of the natural world."

Insisting on formal qualifications will make political positions less inclusive particularly in India given the widespread inequality, adding new burdens on those outside the system - which is what the narrative of the Prime Minister has been

right from the beginning of his shift from Gujarat to New Delhi. In an interview in 2014, he was quoted as saying: "I'm an outsider. I actually consider myself as an outsider not only to Delhi politics but to politics per se. For 50 years of my life, I was just moving around interacting with people trying to understand the problems they face. I was always on the move from one part of the country to another, from one state to another."

In an interview long before this, he was quoted as saying: "You may be surprised to hear this... but I'm not educated."

We can agree that in India today we have a leader who is clearly the antithesis of an 'expert', and the expectation at the least ought to be for him not to suffer the pitfalls of experts. He can listen to experts without buying everything they might suggest. We look to the 'non-experts' for a different kind of knowledge, a sense of curiosity, observation and listening that is more grounded in the real needs of everyday people, in respect for the environment and a true celebration of 'vasudhaiva kutumbakam' - that the world is one family. In this context, the worst would be the non-expert who pretends to be the expert. The definitive pronouncements against the well-studied reality of climate change and all the embarrassing stories that are the stuff of ridicule these days come from this desire to claim expert status without having expert knowledge.

Degrees in 'entire political science' fall in the same category of creating the "pretence of knowledge" without having the requisite knowledge. Barack Obama's remarks that pointed to Donald

Trump and his anti-intellectualism seem apt in this context: "It's not cool to not know what you're talking about". We have a non-expert who carries all the pitfalls of an expert, like a sense of certitude - a double whammy that has brought us wild-cat policy decisions like demonetisation, the suddenly-imposed lockdown, the beating of thalis that showed just how much noise empty vessels can make.

What we need is not a Ph.D. Prime Minister but an empathetic Prime Minister who can humanise the knowledge of experts and make it serve the people and the nation with its rich ethos of caring for people, the planet and indeed the wide cosmos

The demands for an educated Prime Minister are a good way to attack the BJP and its leader but they sidetrack the issue. The demands have to be for a more humane Prime Minister who listens, cares and builds for the future rather than one who tramples rights and runs roughshod over everyone seen as an opponent. What we need is not a Ph.D. Prime Minister but an empathetic Prime Minister who can humanise the knowledge of experts and make it serve the people and the nation with its rich ethos of caring for people, the planet and indeed the wide cosmos.

The Billion Press

(Jagdish Rattanani is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR.)

INBOX

Life blighted by rising prices

Until a few years ago, prices of commodities and products were increased only once a year in February at the time of presentation of the Union budget. Today, we see that the prices are increased frequently, and the total increase in a year is substantial. Take the case of cooking gas, petrol and diesel. The prices of these products are increased time and again. Further, not only are additional items brought under GST but also items which are in the lower rate group are moved to the group which attracts higher GST rate. The prices of almost all medicines have been further increased recently. The state government has also increased the power tariff and infrastructure tax from April. The price of fish, the staple food of Goans, has become prohibitive. The frequent and substantial increase in prices has hit the common man hard. The government authorities seem to be unwilling to do anything about it since they are not affected. Employees of the government and the establishments in the organised sector are compensated partially by variable dearness allowance but the vast majority of others have to face the situation on their own. The plight of unemployed people is unimaginable. Government cannot remain cool and calm when people face a serious problem like this one. It must act. It must introduce

austerity measures and stop wasteful and avoidable expenditure. The common man cannot be expected to bear the brunt of the rising prices and high inflation indefinitely.

Rodney de Souza, Assagao

Senior citizens shortchanged

Railway concession to senior citizens is respect, not charity. It was withdrawn during the coronavirus pandemic under the specious argument that it was necessary to 'safeguard' them against COVID. The concession was one of the very few privileges which senior citizens enjoyed. The pandemic is now much like a flu but the concession has not been restored. Probably the railways is safeguarding senior citizens from falling between the platform and train while boarding the train! Nevertheless, we senior citizens enjoy some 'unique privileges'. We have the privilege of walking on footpaths that end abruptly every 20 ft, making it necessary for us to walk on the roads. This gives us the privilege of being hit by a vehicle on the road. It also brings in the privilege of being shouted at and even abused for walking on the road and endangering vehicles! We have the privilege of standing in common queues for bank-related work. In no other country do senior citizens enjoy this 'unique privilege'. Husband and wife together have the privilege of investing ₹60 lakh in senior citizen's saving scheme - a great privilege. But

how many seniors have the privilege of having Rs 60 lakh in the bank to invest in five-year fixed deposits?

Robert Castellino, Calangute

The greatness of a leader

Just within 14 years of Independence, as many as five IITs started their journey of excellence - all under the stewardship of Jawaharlal Nehru. Despite the relentless anti-Nehru campaign armed with the coinage 'nothing happened prior to 2014', the fact remains that right from major dams and hydroelectric projects to steel plants and other industries, extensive railway infrastructure to reputed educational and medical institutions to information technology sector, the whole infrastructure of the Indian society had been set up during the regime of the much-maligned Nehru. The visionary Nehru was enlightened enough to not mix religion with governance and state apparatus so as to respect the religious diversity of the nation and secular spirit of the Constitution. The policies of Nehru centered around employment generation; but today we are witnessing how bizarrely job opportunities are being shrunk resulting in achieving a record of joblessness all around the country. And as if sprinkling salt upon the wounds of the unemployed lot, they are being advised to start pakora selling stalls and learn to make dosas! Instead of investing energy, resources and time towards delivering welfare to the citizens with

special emphasis to the non-privileged, the national discourse remain obsessed with all sorts of divisionary issues fragmenting the nation through brute communal hatred, vitriol-filled cuss words and violence. And of course the project of 'restoring national confidence' through gigantic statues, bullet trains and vistas! In Nehru's foresight, dams resembled the temples of modern India which he worshipped; now it is the age of only grand temples and glittering corridors. The whole secular concept of separation of the state from religion is going for a toss! Also Nehru's impeccable call of "Don't spare me Shankar" not only spoke of his respect towards freedom of expression, it also proved his tolerance towards criticism, proving his liberal, humble, confident and democrat mindset. What a pity that the intolerant brigade, which can't hold a candle to the greatness of Nehru in any aspect, not only tries to erase his unfathomable contribution towards the country and display temerity enough to belittle the giant, is also hell-bent on thwarting any sort of criticism against it, thereby making a mockery of the liberal values of the Constitution and freedom of expression. When mythology, superstition, epics, religion and politics are allowed to dominate over science and spirituality, time is bound to arrive when Nehru will be made absolutely obsolete.

Kajal Chatterjee, Kolkata

Corona Watch

Situation in India as on April 10, 2023

Total cases	Recovered	Active cases	Deaths
4,47,62,496	4,41,96,318 (98.735%)	35,199 (0.079%)	5,30,979 (1.186%)

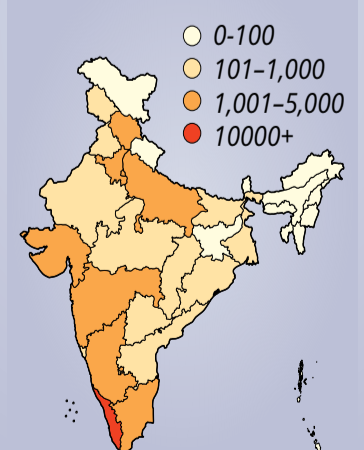
Last 24 hours

↑ 5,880 | ↑ 3,481 | ↑ 2,385 | ↑ 14

Daily positivity rate
6.91%

Weekly positivity rate
3.67%

State-wise active cases



Total tests conducted
92.28 crore

Total vaccine doses administered
220.66 crore

Source: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare & ICMR

KBK Infographics

Only letters that are exclusive to *The Navhind Times* will be considered for this column. Letters should contain the address and contact details of the author.