



## Two cheers

India better score in the latest SDG Index, but methodological tinkering is cause for concern

India's push in the right direction in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to clean energy, urban development and health has helped it improve its overall SDG score from 60 in 2019 to 66 in 2021, according to NITI Aayog's SDG India Index 2020-21. Besides SDGs on eradication of poverty and hunger, measures related to the availability of affordable, clean energy in particular, showed improvements across several States and Union Territories. The campaign to improve the access of households to electricity and clean cooking fuel has been shown to be an important factor. While this is cause for cheer, the Index reveals that there has been a major decline in the areas of industry, innovation and infrastructure besides decent work and economic growth, again made worse by the lockdowns imposed by the governments seeking to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. But the stark differences between the southern and western States on the one hand and the north-central and eastern States on the other in their performance on the SDGs, point to persisting socio-economic and governance disparities. These, if left unaddressed, will exacerbate federal challenges and outcomes, as seen in the public health challenges during the second wave across some of the worse-off States.

Notwithstanding the improvement in key indicators, the Index has curiously made some methodological changes that render comparisons on some SDGs over previous years moot. The SDG on inequality shows an improvement over 2019, but the indicators used to measure the score have changed. The 2020-21 Index drops several economic indicators and gives greater weightage to social equality indicators such as representation of women and people from marginalised communities in legislatures and local governance institutions, and crimes against SC/ST communities. By dropping the well-recognised Gini coefficient measure and the growth rate for household expenditure per capita among 40% of rural and urban populations (instead, only the percentage of population in the lowest two wealth quintiles is used), the SDG score on inequality seems to have missed out on capturing the impact of the pandemic on wealth inequality. This could be a significant miss as a UN assessment of the impact of COVID-19 had said that the South Asian region may see rising inequality. Methodological issues on measuring other SDGs have been flagged before, but the lack of adequate measurement of economic inequality seems to be a glaring miss. Like in the first wave, the second wave, with more fatalities, has had similar outcomes on livelihoods and jobs. While the better score for India in its endeavour to achieve SDGs will bring some cheer, governments must work on addressing pressing issues such as increased inequality and economic despair.

## Winds of change

Israel gets new coalition, but it is unlikely to survive long with its ideological contradictions

In Israel's fractious political landscape, Benjamin Netanyahu has been known as the master of survival. In power since 2009, he has seen allies come and go, protégés turning out to be rivals, and elections happening in the shortest intervals. But he hardly missed an opportunity to turn crisis into political gain, which allowed him to become the longest serving Prime Minister, overtaking David Ben-Gurion. However, this may be ending. A coalition of eight parties, under the leadership of Opposition politician Yair Lapid, could oust Mr. Netanyahu from power and form a 'change' government. In this, Mr. Lapid, who leads the centrist Yesh Atid party, has joined hands with the right-wing Yamina of Naftali Bennett, and other parties ranging from pro-settlers to left-wing and Arab parties. According to the coalition agreements, Mr. Bennett, who was part of the far-right Jewish Home before founding Yamina, would be the PM for two years followed by Mr. Lapid. Mr. Lapid says his coalition has the support of 61 Members of the Knesset (MKs) – a razor-thin majority in the 120-member Parliament. Messrs. Lapid and Bennet are now pushing for a quick vote in the Knesset, while Mr. Netanyahu is putting pressure on the right-wing MKs of the coalition to vote against the government.

Even if the coalition does sail through the Knesset vote, it might, with its conflicting ideological views, remain fractious and feeble. But that does not diminish the importance of the political changes that are under way. The country has seen four elections in the last two years, with no party winning a majority on its own in any. Last year, Mr. Netanyahu formed a short-lived unity government with the Opposition leader, Benny Gantz. Mr. Gantz, leader of the centrist Blue and White, is now with Mr. Lapid. It is Mr. Netanyahu's repeated and failed attempts to form a stable right-wing government that have led the anti-Netanyahu parties from across the spectrum to come together. Also, this is the first time in Israel's history that an Arab-majority party has signed a government coalition agreement. Till last year, Arab parties were considered untouchables by the mainstream Jewish parties. But now, the United Arab List (Ra'am), which has 4 MKs, has officially joined the coalition, breaking a political separation wall. If voted out of power, Mr. Netanyahu will have to fight a corruption trial and possible leadership challenges within the Likud without the shield of premierships. When the Gaza fighting broke out on May 10, coupled with riots in Israeli cities, many thought it would help him politically. But the Gaza fighting appears to have weakened his position among his right-wing allies, who alleged that his government surrendered to Hamas by agreeing to the ceasefire. Mr. Netanyahu is now caught between unhappy right-wing allies and a united opposition.

# Saving biodiversity, securing earth's future

The National Biodiversity Mission can help mend the dysfunctional relationship between humanity and nature



KAMAL BAWA

On this World Environment Day (June 5), with the novel coronavirus pandemic raging across our vast country, we must reflect on the ways to rebuild our relationship with nature. India's vast and rich biodiversity gives the nation a unique identity, of which we can be proud. The varied ecosystems across land, rivers, and oceans, feed our people, enhance public health security, and shield us from environmental disasters. Our biodiversity also serves as a perpetual source of spiritual enrichment, intimately linked to our physical and mental well-being.

### Staggering value of forests

And while the precise economic value of all ecosystem services provided by biodiversity may not be known, estimates suggest our forests alone may yield services worth more than a trillion rupees per year. Imagine how much greater this value will be with grasslands, wetlands, freshwater, and marine added.

Sadly, today, we face not only one of the worst public health crises but also worldwide declines in biodiversity. Globally, we have lost 7% intact forests since 2000, and recent assessments indicate that over a million species might be lost forever during the next several decades. Our country is not an exception to these trends.

Climate change and the ongoing pandemic will put additional stresses on our natural ecosystems even though it is becoming clear that repairing our dysfunctional relationship with nature is one of the ways to mitigate climate change and curtail future outbreaks of infectious diseases that can bring unimaginable misery. Thus, preserving biodiversity is directly relevant to the social, economic, and environmental well-being of our people. We must rethink and reimagine the concept of One Health for all living organisms, including the invisible biota in soils that sustain our agricultural systems.

### Investments in the field

Fortunately, our government is considering major investments in biodiversity science to meet societal needs. In 2018, the Prime Minister's Science, Technology and Innovation Advisory Council (PM-STIAC) in consultation with the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change and other Ministries approved an ambitious National Mission on Biodiversity and Human Well-Being (NMBHWB). A Bengaluru-based Biodiversity Collaborative is working with the National Biodiversity Authority to hold consultations and prepare road maps of the Mission that will be steered by a core of the country's leading biodiversity science and conservation organisations, from public, academic, and civil society sectors.

The Mission will strengthen the science of restoring, conserving, and sustainably utilising India's natural heritage; embed biodiversity as a key consideration in all developmental programmes, par-



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ticularly in agriculture, ecosystem services, health, bio-economy, and climate change mitigation; establish a citizen and policy-oriented biodiversity information system; and enhance capacity across all sectors for the realisation of India's national biodiversity targets and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs).

Furthermore, the Mission will allow India (home to nearly 8% of global biodiversity on just 2.3% of global land area, and containing sections of four of the 36 global biodiversity hotspots) to emerge as a leader in demonstrating linkage between conservation of natural assets and societal well-being.

### An important framework

The ongoing spread of COVID-19 places this Mission among the most significant national initiatives. The pandemic has exposed the dysfunctional relationship between humanity and nature, and we must urgently address the issues it has laid bare: the emergence of infectious diseases; lack of food and nutritional security; rural unemployment; and climate change, with all its stresses on nature, rural landscapes, and public health. In response to these critical and interrelated issues, the Mission offers a holistic framework, integrated approaches, and widespread societal participation.

The Mission's comprehensive efforts will empower India to restore, and even increase, our natural assets by millions of crores of rupees. Mitigation programmes will lessen the impacts of climate change and other natural disasters, such as pandemics and floods. We can rejuvenate agricultural production systems and increase rural incomes from biodiversity-based agriculture while also creating millions of green jobs in restoration and nature tourism. Restoration activities across India's degraded lands, which amount to almost a third of our land area, alone could generate several million jobs.

The Mission will help India meet its commitments under the new framework for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and UN SDGs related to pressing social issues including poverty alleviation, justice and equity, and protection of life. It will generate a strong national community committed to sustaining biodiversity, promoting social cohesion and uniting the public behind an important goal.

Mission programmes will offer nature-based solutions to numerous environmental challenges, including degradation of rivers, forests, and soils, and ongoing threats from climate change, with the goal of creating climate-resilient communities. Scientific inputs, especially related to geospatial informatics and policy, can guide the development of strategies for conservation and ecosystem management.

Equally important, the Mission's "One Health" programme, integrating human health with animal, plant, soil and environmental

health, has both the preventive potential to curtail future pandemics along with the interventional capability for unexpected public health challenges. Additional programmes, directed at food and nutritional security, will in turn also influence public health outcomes.

### Need for a cadre

The planned Mission recognises that we need a strong and extensive cadre of human resources required to meet the enormous and complex environmental challenges of the 21st century. This will require training professionals of the highest calibre in sustainability and biodiversity science, along with an investment in civil society outreach. The gains of environmental change will be upheld and carried forward by the cultural change from environmental education for millions of students, from kindergarten to postgraduate levels.

Finally, biodiversity is everywhere, and we interact with biodiversity all the time in our daily lives. Public engagement, whether it is in the policymaking arena, or in exploration, restoration and conservation of biodiversity, is a critical component of the planned Mission.

Today, on the heels of the International Day for Biological Diversity celebrated last month, nothing could be more important than to renew our pledge to nurture all life on earth.

Kamal Bawa is President of the Bengaluru-based Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), and currently leads the Biodiversity Collaborative. The views expressed are personal

# The time to limit global warming is melting away

There are no second chances and nations must use COP26 to address the enormous threat of climate change



ALOK SHARMA

This is an incredibly difficult time for the world. The world is facing two momentous challenges: COVID-19 and climate change. Both need us to come together globally to find a way forward. World Environment Day (June 5) is an important moment to take stock on climate change.

When I was in India earlier this year – my first visit to Asia in my new role – I saw first-hand India's ambitious work on renewable energy, and held vital discussions with government leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, businesses and civil society. I was inspired by the resolve I saw.

### India's response

India has a strong record on tackling climate change, including impressive domestic targets to have 450GW of renewable energy by 2030, and establishing the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI). India played a critical role in delivering the landmark Paris Agreement and we are

working just as closely with India in the run-up to COP26, the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties, to be hosted by the United Kingdom in Glasgow from November 1-12, 2021. Last month, Mr. Modi and the U.K.'s Prime Minister Boris Johnson committed through the 2030 UK-India Roadmap to work closely together on the best ways to drive the green growth agenda. They reaffirmed their personal commitment to work together for an ambitious outcome in November and sustained action beyond.

When the U.K. welcomes the countries of the world to Glasgow in five months' time, it will be a moment to get the world on track to address the enormous threat of climate change and build a cleaner, brighter future for everyone.

In 2015, the world signed the Paris Agreement, to limit global temperature rises to well below 2°C, aiming for 1.5°C, because the science tells us that would avoid the worst effects of climate change.

### Emissions have to be cut

In terms of limiting warming, every fraction of a degree makes a difference. An average global temperature rise of 2°C, compared to 1.5°C, would see hundreds of millions more people affected. The Climate Action Tracker estimates that countries' current emissions



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reduction targets have us on course for average temperature rises of 2.4°C. To limit warming to 1.5°C, we must halve global emissions by 2030. So this is the decisive decade.

This is what makes this year's COP so critical, and as hosts of COP26, the U.K. is pressing for urgent action around four key goals.

First, to keep 1.5°C within reach, globally, we need to reach net zero by the middle of this century. To achieve this we will need to take strong action over the next decade. In the U.K. we have found that setting ambitious short-term targets backed up by a net zero target has given a clear signal that the future is low carbon. India will reach its own decisions, but I firmly believe India has an opportunity to show that a different development path is possible. An opportunity to be at the forefront of a new global green transition with all the benefits of jobs and cleaner

air that brings. India has already proved it has the innovation and political will to do this. India has quadrupled wind and solar capacity in the last decade.

Our second goal is to protect people and nature from the worst effects of climate change. Even as the world has been dealing with the novel coronavirus pandemic, the dangers of global warming have continued to become more evident.

Having been born in India and having spent time as the U.K.'s Secretary of State for International Development, I am committed that this COP will deliver for the communities most vulnerable to climate change. The two cyclones, Tauktae and Yaas, that hit India last month, show that we must act on the very real need for flood defences, warning systems and other vital efforts to minimise, avert and address the loss and damage caused by climate change. India's CDRI, which the U.K. is proud to partner on, is already a great initiative towards this.

### Funding promise

Our third goal is for developed countries to deliver the \$100 billion they promised annually to support developing countries. The U.K. is pushing for all developed countries to increase their climate finance commitments ahead of COP26, to deliver the right flow of

finance and technology to meet the needs of countries such as India in their transition. This is a personal priority for me, one that I am committing to work tirelessly to deliver – we need all developed countries to step up, as it is a matter of trust.

### Working as a team

Fourth, we must work together to deliver on these goals. That includes building consensus among governments for an ambitious, balanced and inclusive outcome – so that the negotiations in Glasgow are a success. As well as bringing businesses and civil society on board behind our COP26 goals, and building up international collaboration in critical sectors.

We must act now, to launch a concerted effort to reduce emissions throughout the next decade. And use the COVID-19 recovery to reimagine our economies, building a better future.

I call on all countries to step up efforts on these goals, because COP26 is our last chance for keeping hopes of limiting global warming to 1.5°C alive, and our best chance of building a brighter future; a future of green jobs and cleaner air.

This is our moment. There are no second chances. Let us seize it together.

Alok Sharma is COP26 President

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Court on sedition

In recent years, mere criticism against the government of the day has been found sufficient to initiate sedition charges. Against this background, the Supreme Court of India's quashing a sedition case registered against a senior journalist sends a clear message (Page 1, "Journalists need protection against sedition charges," June 4). The actions of the government spring from laws enacted by the British in the pre-Independence era. While quashing the sedition charges, the top court has not laid down any new rules. Given that the ruling dispensation is using this existing law liberally to act against those who criticise it, it is time the law is amended to define clearly what is sedition and what is not.

D. SETHURAMAN, Chennai

■ The judiciary has ensured that Indian democracy

remains alive and kicking. Except for a short period during the Emergency, the freedom to question and criticise leaders including the Prime Minister was a given – with none of the prickliness displayed by this government. It is unfortunate that the mainstream media often balks at giving space to critics of the government. Though social media channels have given many a platform to voice their opinions, it remains to be seen how long this space too remains free.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, Mumbai

■ The original wording of the sedition law is the cause for its continuous misuse and there is enough equivocation in its range to be able to suppress a great deal of activities. Even if there is a decline in the rate of conviction in such cases, and the person is acquitted, there is every likelihood that he may be targeted by applying the law again. This aspect of

the law adversely affects a person's freedom of speech and expression. It is ironic that conviction is not required to stifle dissidence. The Supreme Court's intervention is important to ensure that citizens are not robbed of their right of freedom of speech and expression.

VENU G.S., Kalluvathukkal, Kollam, Kerala

### On the trail

The *modus operandi* of all Indian white collar criminals is well known. Yet, when it comes to action, success seems to elude us, with none of those who feature at the top of the list brought back to India. The perception this creates is that the law seems to be on their side. Perhaps there needs to be global action taken at, say the level of the United Nations to ensure that laws governing matters concerned with economic offenders are amended. Meanwhile, there are no signs that white collar crimes are decreasing. India's banks on the other

hand seem to be the main losers.

GOVARDHANA MYNEEDU, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

### Doctors in peril

The profession which imparts life to the masses is now seen to be begging for life. What a shame. The recent incidents of violence against doctors in Assam and Karnataka are outright barbaric. Surprisingly enough, we, as doctors, have no support of the masses, no media channel to highlight our plight and no human rights activists to protest against these acts. We spend endless hours of service trapped in a PPE suit and with utmost dedication in handling this pandemic. There has to be legislation or an amendment of existing laws to deal with and reduce such instances.

D. KRISHNAN BHATTACHARYA, Kolkata

■ The prevailing violence against doctors, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, is jeopardising

not only the lives of doctors but also the lives of those patients dependent on the doctors. The Government of India should amend the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, and add a clause for severe punishment against those who perpetrate atrocities against doctors.

SANDEEP GOYAL, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

### Uncharitable comment

It is unfortunate that Justice Vipin Sanghi of the Delhi High Court, while commenting on the Centre's vaccination policy, has questioned it for prioritising older people over the younger population. He has tried to justify his statement with his most uncharitable remarks, that the '80 year olds are not going to carry this country forward. They have lived their lives...' He has conveniently forgotten that it is only the hard work and sacrifices of many elders that have made India into the good state it is today. The judge could have opined that vaccination should have

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been given to all.

THARCIUS S. FERNANDO, Chennai

### Library project

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin's announcement that a state-of-the-art library is to come up in Madurai is a befitting gift for this ancient city which has helped promote the Tamil language. The project will be a boon for many in the districts.

R. SIVAKUMAR, Chennai

### Lockdown rules

Extending or otherwise the complete lockdown, especially in Tamil Nadu, lies in the hands of the people. The scenes telecast by various channels are a mirror to the attitude of a majority of our people, who are habituated at throwing caution to the winds. Even if the daily case count is down, rules come first. There has to be caution and compliance.

MANI NATARAJAN, Chennai