



Nickeled and Dimed

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Assam Floods - How Responsive is the Government?

By Vanshika Mittal



Image Source: scroll.in

Given the difficulties that the pandemic has caused already, Assam faces an additional burden of flood control, as the calamity holds in its clutches, the grim future of livelihoods and natural resources. While the world remains engulfed with the Covid-19 pandemic, environmental issues, and warnings, however, have been overshadowed. This contradicts the nature of the urgency and the gravity of these events. Many parts of the country including Assam and Kerala witness floods every year. Yet, the Center refuses to acknowledge the annual devastating floods and erosions in Assam- as a national calamity.

According to section 2d of the Disaster Management Act 2005, a disaster is defined as a catastrophe, mishap, calamity, or grave occurrence in any area, arising from natural or man-made causes, or by accident or negligence which results in substantial loss of life or human suffering or damage to, and destruction of, property, or damage to, or degradation of, environment, and is of such a nature

or magnitude as to be beyond the coping capacity of the community of the affected area. However, there are no fixed conditions to determine when a disaster can be termed as a 'national calamity'. The 10th finance commission (1995 - 2000) had examined a proposal to declare a disaster as a 'national calamity of rare severity' if it affects one-third of the state. This was agreed upon unanimously but the panel did not define 'calamity of rare severity' and left it to a case by case analysis.

The most recent statistics on the damage caused by the floods presented by the Assam State Disaster Management Authority is the following - A total of 120 animals died and 147 displaced in the Kaziranga National Park. More than 2500 villages and localities have been affected. 1,15,515.25 m² crop area that contributed towards livelihoods for thousands of farmers has been destroyed. More than 70 lakh people and 25 lakh of animals (including domestic and wild) have been displaced or affected. While the COVID - 19 situation demands people to practice physical distancing and sanitization, the people of Assam have been forced into relief camps without basic facilities available to them.

The floods in Assam are not surprising. Yet, no permanent solutions are being implemented to tackle them, instead every year the government only resorts to one-time relief packages and rescue missions. Over the years, the impact of these floods and erosions has accumulated and has now become an alarming situation. A satellite image shows how the world's largest riverine island Majuli situated in Assam has shrunk from 880 sq km (at the beginning of the 20th century) to just 352 sq km by 2014.

We need permanent solutions to the problems and not just one time compensations or rescue missions. Help received by national calamities as against one time compensations would include the National Disaster Relief Fund, Calamity relief fund which has a corpus ration of 3:1 between the center and the state, the National Calamity Contingency Fund which is fully sponsored by the center, and concessional loans. This flow of funds would firstly help reduce the monetary burden from the state and secondly allow the stricken areas to roll back into development post the disaster. It's time, the government restructured their policies. Environmental threats need to be taken more gravely for better and sustainable solutions to be implemented. Demands to label disasters as national calamities were also raised with the Uttarakhand floods in 2013, Cyclone Hudhud in Andhra Pradesh in 2014, Assam floods in 2015, and Kerala floods in 2018. Yet no provisions have been made for these.

This irresponsible behavior is not unique to the Assam floods. This can be seen as a pattern in the response by the Indian Government, the mainstream Indian media, and the Ministry of Forest and Climate Change concerning the several other environmental threats and calamities being faced by the nation. On 27th May 2020, Upper Assam's Tinsukia district witnessed a blowout in the Baghjan oil field. Consequently, this led to degraded levels of air, groundwater, and soil quality along with 30,000 families who have been affected and indigenous communities who have lost their livelihoods. Additionally, the good number 5 of the oil field that burst into flames was located near Dibru Saikhowa National Park and Maguri Motapung Beel. The Magura Motapung Beel is home to over 110 bird species of which eight are regarded as threatened, 84 species of fish, and 36 species of other animals. This accident has caused immense damage to these natural reservoirs.

The Oil India Limited spokesperson had the following remarks to make when the villagers took to protesting against the company due to their negligence and mismanagement.

"There is a reason blowout control companies exist – companies 30 times bigger than us, even in the Middle East, have used their services."

The statement reeks of ignorance and the company does not seem to regret the damage caused by them- not only to the ecosystem but also to the thousands of people. The same is reflected in our policies concerning the environment. Despite many researchers providing evidence on the causality between Climate Change and the coronavirus pandemic, the Indian government has released the Environmental Impact Assessment Draft 2020 (EIA Draft 2020) which will allow post - facto clearance. This means that a project without any environmental safeguards or clearances could carry out operations under the provisions of the new act. Despite several mishaps and fatal accidents occurring in light of industrial projects even when regulations are in place, this provision would be disastrous.

The Threat of “Generosity”—Loan Waivers Need to be Better Handled

By Gby Atee

Agriculture is the heart of all the civilizations that have thrived. It is an uncompromisable sector, which employs about 42% of the population according to ILO in 2019 (Employment). The farmers engaged in the sector deserve to be thanked countlessly for exposing themselves to the heat and cold as they cater to our basic needs. Despite being the legendary men of the nation, their plight at times goes unnoticed, leading to the 11,379-farmer suicide in 2016 as per the National Crime Records Bureau.

Not to mention, the government over time has paid some attention to the gripping crisis and has rolled out policies for the welfare of the farmers. Agricultural loan waivers, schemes that spring under times of unprecedented crisis, and political motives are among the many other programs. Although many defend the scheme for the hope it brings to distraught farmers, there are questions concerning the effectiveness of the scheme. The following pages will throw light on the effectiveness of the scheme, using the example of the 2008 ADWDRS and look closely at the problem of moral hazard that worries economists, thereby understand the need to rejig the current schemes.

The Agricultural Debt Waiver and Debt Relief Scheme of 2008 expected to achieve more than just offering a reassuring solution to the unsustainable level of debts that plagued India's rural economy. Those who had pledged under two hectares, at the time when the loan was disbursed were eligible for a 100% unconditional waiver, whereas those who pledged over two hectares could avail themselves of a conditional 25% waiver if they repaid the other 75% in the stipulated time. It wanted to incentivize productive investment that was hampered by the existing huge debt, through clearing borrower's collateral, which they could use to avail themselves of new credit. Those who received full waivers were expected to respond in a more positive way than those with a partial waiver, but the outcome was different.



Image Source: Financial Express

Observations by Martin Kanz in his paper published in American Economic Journal revealed that the household debt decreased significantly by about 30%, however, the number of new loans taken out by those who received full and partial waiver remained almost the same. Those who receive a full waiver after about a year and a half showed an 8% decline in debts from formal banks and a 6% increase in debts from the informal sector—friends and family taking a larger proportion than the high-interest lenders. Also, households who received a full waiver were less willing to invest further and they had a greater decline in agricultural yield than those who received a partial waiver.

Furthermore, it created an unexpected impact on the future expectations of the people. It changed the people's belief about the consequence that defaulting would have on reputation; the scheme proved that those who received the most waiver, were less bothered about the effect on reputation. However, they were more concerned about access to future credit because of the default status. Therefore, those who received a full waiver saw the debt relief as a short-term relief, which was bad for their future credit needs.

Today, RBI reports allude to the increasing NPA in anticipation of loan waivers. The gross NPA of the sector stood at 8.44% as on March 31, 2019. This emphasizes the problem of moral hazard—the tendency to take more risks when protected from the cost of the action. When such loan waivers are declared, borrowers are inclined to default payment, thus accumulating non-performing assets. This harmful trend undermines the credit culture and hampers the credit system, which is sustained by a line of trust that rests between the lender and borrower. Such a relief package can indeed brighten the lives of many, however, without dealing with moral hazard, the scheme will do more harm, than good. Nevertheless, that is not a reason to condemn the policy. Prasad and Gupta write that the cost of loan defaults from corporates imposes a greater cost on the state than that of the farmers. When industrialists are given the luxury of allowance, arguably farmers too deserve one. Instead of debates to end such schemes, it is essential to engage in a healthy deliberation to alter the same to be efficient.

One suggestion could be that waivers must be targeted to the needy, instead of making it universal. It must be done by assessing the sources of income and performance of farmers and then deciding on the waiver. Care needs to be taken when examining the case, as the task must be delegated to a third person other than bank representatives. This is because the waiver is good for the bank and it has the incentive to tag the farmer as deserving a waiver. It is expensive; the process of identifying and evaluating whom a needy is, as it also requires the defining characteristic of a needy farmer. Yet, by targeting, it is possible to control the extent of the spread of moral hazard.

Secondly, from what The Economic Times reported, the government can pay the farmers the amount they owe, which they must in return use to repay the loan. The effect of this is to maintain the borrower and lender relationship, as the borrower must take the initiative of paying back. This retains the trust and bond and prevents migrating from high-cost informal lenders.

Relief schemes such as loan waivers, at times, are the only means to address certain calamity. Nonetheless, it depends on how effectively the policy is planned. When building a new set of policies, which is inevitable post-pandemic, policymakers must be careful enough to account for previous failures and not make the same mistake again. Only when designed thus, it can foster positive change.



Glimmers of the “American Dream” in Slaughterhouse

2020

By Trisha Nagpal



Image source - Medium

On January 1st, 1982, seventeen-year-old Annie Moore was the first of 12 million immigrants to be processed at the federal immigration depot in Ellis Island.

Millions of miles from their home country, they flocked to the 'land of the free and home of the brave' with the statue of liberty in the distance and the star-spangled banner stretching as far as the eyes could see. Possibility wafted in the air as did the promise of social mobility all encapsulated in the prettily packaged “American

“On June 12th 2015, from a podium inside Trump Tower in Manhattan, Donald Trump kicked off his presidential campaign by declaring the American dream dead”. (The Hill)

On July 6th, 2020, US President Trump came close to ensuring it.

Whether the American Dream is dead or not is secondary to the fact that the Trump Immigration crackdown effectively makes the very act of dreaming impermissible to the tens of millions lured to its shores. Thus, committing an act of cruelty. For many can try and many may fail, but to be denied a shot in realizing it is a betrayal of everything America stands for.

The phrase penned by historian, James Truslow Adams, referred to “a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” While the interpretation of the American Dream was one that opposed the forces of capitalism to allow equal opportunity to all, the American Dream has been redefined and reinterpreted multiple times since. The interpretation this piece will use is the most common interpretation of the dream which is that “no matter who you are or where you come from, in America with hard work and sheer willpower you can attain your version of success.” What the dream looked like varied depending on the time —from being a homeowner with white picket fences, a backyard, and a family to living a life of luxury-gold enameled teeth and every possible excess. The point was that it was a simple recipe for success. The American Dream is what transformed America into a land of promise and unbridled opportunity. It was the embodiment of the American ethos which rested on meritocracy, “the belief that entrepreneurial success and corresponding upward mobility depend solely on the ability to work hard and hustle.” (The Boston Globe)

But it must be acknowledged that this version of the American Dream, apart from being deeply ingrained in the capitalistic system- is an able bodied dream, a gendered dream, a coloured dream, and now it is also an anti-immigrant dream. Trump’s America and previous reinterpretations have failed to provide an inclusive vision, which is why now more than ever before, it needs to be reimagined.

History’s commitment to dreams and all that they stand for — from Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a dream’ to the ‘American Dream’ — has reified the power of a shared collective consciousness in realizing the unthinkable.

The phrase has been redefined and weaponized as a political stratagem promised by every US President from Roosevelt’s tenant farmers to Obama’s promise of employment. Trump’s definition of the dream was Economic Nationalism, of fewer people from the “shithole countries” and more people from countries “like Norway” to realize the “pro American”(read:pro-white) goal of the country’s destiny.

Trump’s policies from America First to the recent F1 Visa ban dictates who gets to dream of promise and hope in the world’s biggest democracy today. As the anti-immigrant sentiment grows, the American dream dwindles on the horizon. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement banned F-1 visas (which allowed International students to reside in the country until they finished their education) for Universities that were going online for the next semester. “This would force students to either transfer to schools with in-person instruction or to leave the country all in the middle of a global pandemic.” (CNBC) The F-1 Visa ban was, however, reversed on July 14th.

Additionally, through the America First policy, which emphasized withdrawal from international treaties to put native-born people first, President Trump turned an already fragmented society into a cesspool of xenophobia targeting the immigrant. The predominant narrative portrayed them the stealers of jobs who need to be deported, by banning their visas with the anguish for a green card left to fester for 195 years. The Trump administration has been unrelenting in its goal of physically yanking the American Dream from the hands of the immigrant if only to “safeguard” it. The result of all this has been a decline in immigration, by up to 70% in 2018. (New York Times)

The decision to hold onto the faint glimmers of the American Dream must be made by Congress. “When the Great Depression hit, President Roosevelt’s Second New Deal led to the creation of Social Security. Confronted by staggering poverty and persistent racial injustice, President Johnson launched the Great Society, protecting against racial inequality. Congress must do the same today. There is a clear need for an independent, bipartisan body — a National Commission to Restore the American Dream — to articulate a bold strategy for bridging the country’s economic divide.” (Boston Globe)

Because if the American Dream is worth pursuing then what makes it worthwhile is that we are all part of its becoming, that we are all part of the making of a country that cannot be truly great until it is truly inclusive.

EU Recovery Plan: Twilight for a more integrated Europe?

By Samarth Gupta

The onset of the coronavirus pandemic outside of China was filled with reports of worsening health crises in South European nations of Italy and Spain. Not only was Southern Europe severely affected by the health crisis, but also because of huge economic disruption, due to their heavy reliance on tourism which forms a large part of revenue in these nations. Tourism as a percentage of GDP is 11% in Spain, 11.8% in Italy, 18% in Greece and 19.1% in Portugal. This huge loss of tourism revenues coupled with already existing large stock accumulated public debt meant that these nations were lacking in the capacity to institute further debt to cover their emergency health expenditures as well as roll out economic stimulus packages. For instance, Italy and Spain rolled out stimulus packages amounting to 3.5% and 3.4% of GDP respectively, in contrast to 12% by the USA and 9.4% by Germany.

While the financial woes of Southern Europe were increasing, the North was comparatively much better off with much smaller public debt before the pandemic and relatively lesser number of infections in these nations. The economic contraction was much less in the North as compared to the South which in turn meant a lesser burden on the government budget. In light of all these developments, the European Commission, the executive branch of the EU, proposed a recovery package of 750 billion Euro for the European nations which are facing economic and health crisis. According to this proposal, the package would comprise 500 billion Euros in grants and 250 billion Euros in loans.

Although helpful to the South it was opposed by the Northern nations due to the size of the grants that it was offering to the South. Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and Denmark (known as the frugal four) were especially opposed to any such plan because of the difficulty that they would encounter domestically in gaining support for such a big amount of bailout package. Moreover, they also demanded the right to veto any budgetary allocation that was to be made using these funds and implementation of a more stringent rule of law in Hungary and Poland, (due to reports of large scale institutional corruption in these nations) which were to receive huge benefits from these funds. Naturally, these demands were unacceptable to South Europeans and any possible negotiations on these issues were bound to be long and arduous, if possible. But these assumptions were proven wrong at last week's EU summit at Brussels which met to discuss this recovery package.



source – EURACTIV.com

The summit at Brussels from the very start was divided between the camps of South Europeans, the frugal four and the mediating powers, (France and Germany) which were trying their best to reach an agreement between the other two camps. The agreement was reached after four long and arduous days of debate and it accommodated the interests of both the camps while moving considerably towards expanding the fiscal powers of the EU. The Frugals saw the number of loans increased to 360 billion euros and grants were decreased to 390 billion euros and also gained rebates on the future budget of the EU. At the same time the demands of rule of law and oversight over budget were shelved for another day. Hence, every leader emerged from the summit claiming victory on some or the other front.

The funds that are to be provided to the affected nations will be provided by issuing of bonds by the EU and will mark the first time that the EU has gained fiscal capacity on such a large scale. Although it has issued bonds in the past to finance the recovery of Ireland and Portugal during the crisis of 2011-2014, to date, its budget deficit amounts to just 52 billion euros. But this forms only a fraction of the proposed 750 billion euro recovery fund that it will be spending. This is also the first time that the EU has gained access to a real budget that can be used counter-cyclically over such a wide area. The fund also forms about 4.7% of the economic output of the region and is expected to help in the economic recovery of the region without plunging the public debt levels in affected areas to unsustainable levels.

This move has also catered to the long-standing demand of European investors to have a safe Euro denominated asset akin to US treasury bonds. Hence, the move has been met with increased optimism from rating agencies as well and has been given AAA rating by two out of three rating agencies. The move has also improved the prospects of the EU moving towards greater economic integration by increasing its scope from being just a currency union to becoming a fiscal union.

Apart from the economic and financial aspects, this move has infused greater vitality within the idea of the EU. The EU has stepped up its engagement within the region and has increased the scope for multilateral crisis management within the region and consequently, has demonstrated its credentials as a platform that can promote meaningful cooperation within Europe. This is a rare example in the recent Covid-19 pandemic where nations are moving towards more closed economies and credentials of both globalization and international institutions are under increasing scrutiny.

Who is “Cancelled” in “Cancel” Culture?

By Prerna Vij



Image Source - The Atlantic

The Harper’s Bazaar letter raked up an important conversation that has been borne out of the changing methods of interaction. Social media has become one of the fastest growing avenues from which most people today get their news and information. What this inevitably also allows, is that anyone and everyone is allowed to have an opinion on the news that comes. This allows for an interaction that is both more nuanced than just receiving the news through regulated news sites and also rather dangerous because it allows for uninformed and rather harmful takes on issues to gain traction.

The idea that the letter attempts to explore has a strong undertone that is related to the “cancel culture” that has become increasingly relevant. In recent times, several people including JK Rowling, the author of Harry Potter, have been cancelled online because of their tweets. Jk Rowling was canceled because of her transphobic tweets online and therefore the conversation then catapulted into an overall conversation around free speech itself. The letter too strongly highlights the need for us to co-opt the model of free speech which is prevalent under liberal democracy. It pushes for allowing opposing opinions to exist and for us to grow and learn. It calls the errors that people make, for which they are ‘canceled’ as “clumsy mistakes”. The only contention that I want to present is, at what cost? What is the cost of your freedom to speak your thoughts and to promote this “idealistic” model of a liberal society that allows for this speech to exist? What exactly constitutes cancel culture?

In a tweet by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez- the youngest female congresswoman, talks at length about the aspects of cancel culture and how they function. According to her, the term cancel culture itself stems from a position of entitlement. The argument here is that the person getting canceled still gets access to a large captive audience and they claim to be victims if people choose to tune them out. AOC goes on to explain how exactly cancel culture works. She tells us that she has an entire network run by white supremacists, spouting dangerous lies about her and hampering her work, while also ensuring that she is at the receiving end of several death threats. Therefore for us to fully categorise cancel culture, we must be first able to categorize who is the one getting canceled in the first place. Is JK Rowling being ‘canceled’ for her tweets, accountability or an actual threat to free speech? Rowling is an influential person. She wrote one of the most popular fiction series of our generation and it is hurtful that she was the one spewing this hate. However, what she faced was definitely not “cancel” culture. If you have the platform for expression, then you must also be beware of when you are held accountable for those ideas.

Opinions don’t exist in a vacuum. The cost of you freely speaking your mind cannot come at the cost of further marginalization of an already oppressed community. Therefore, the idea that the Harpers Bazaar letter seeks to impose, is somewhat of a mischaracterization. It forgets that people signing that letter are both “heard” and “popular”. It’s almost hilarious that people with problematic views complain about cancel culture when there are many speaking up against fascist governments, being arrested left, right and center. It is dangerous that there is a lack of perspective when it comes to the addressal of these issues. Rowling, who is known worldwide and carries a certain stature, spewing transphobic rhetoric is both dangerous and troubling. I am not equipped to clarify where we draw the lines for free speech, which is the duty of the law. However, there have always been mechanisms that exist within the community that promise to make it more inclusive and welcoming. “cancel culture” is that mechanism. As the world becomes more aware of the atrocities and systematic aggressions committed by those in power, it is becoming increasingly clear why canceling people has become a problem for people who are now being held both accountable and responsible for their thoughts.

New York Times, rescinding their supremely problematic article in which a senator advised the state to take military action on its own people is a sign of tolerance. The fact that people are being fired for not supporting the Black Lives Matter, is an institutional stance that they want to protect and respect the black lives that work there.

The question that begs to be asked is then what is the cost of cancel culture, and more importantly who is bearing that cost? Because if the answer to that is those in power, then cancel culture is nothing but a term that is set up to invalidate the opinions of those that have been marginalised and under the shadows for far too long. They have lived through the struggle of their bodies being under constant threat, but as AOC puts it very eloquently- “cancel culture does not affect spicy contrarians who want to play devil’s advocate with your basic rights in the NYT.”

Blurry Borders: Analyzing the Indo-Nepal Kalapani dispute

By Vedaansh Kaushik & Vanshika Shahi

The centuries-old bilateral ties between India and Nepal have been founded on the age-old connection of history, culture, tradition, and religion. Therefore, these ties go beyond the realm of politics and economics. Citizens of India and Nepal can move and work freely in each other's country without any passport or visas. A lot of such ties and benefits between the two nations extend beyond the formal treaties. The recent border conflict between the two nations has been over a 338 square km strip located at the trijunction between India, Nepal, and China and the three areas of interest in this trijunction are Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura, and Kalapani. The issue came to light when Nepal's House of Representatives passed a bill on 13 June that introduced a new map that included the above-mentioned territories.

The river on the western side of the border, which has been used to define the border, comes from two sources in the north, which merge, together into one stream called the Kali River. The maps following the Treaty of Sugali created by the British East India Company demarcated the western stream of the Kali River as the border for the Gorkha kingdom and, hence, the currently disputed land of Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura, and Kalapani became a part of the Gorkha Kingdom. But soon the British realized the geographical and economic significance of the region and shifted the border from the western stream to the eastern stream of the Kali River. In the years that followed, the monarch of Nepal did not raise any objection regarding the same. Hence, over some time, this became the border between India and Nepal.

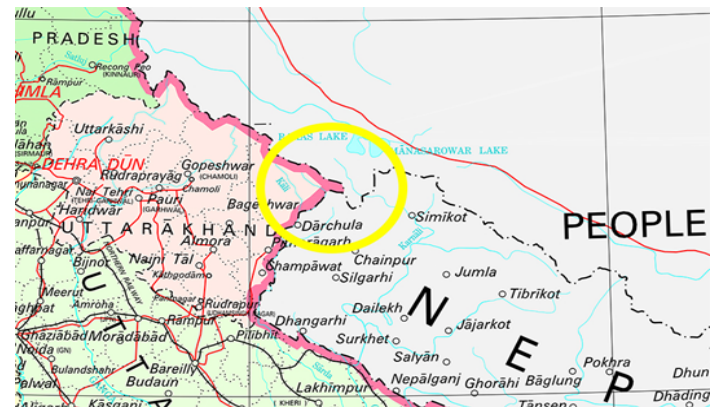


Image Source: myrepublica.nagriknetwork.com

On May 8, the Defence Minister of India virtually inaugurated an 80km long road in the Himalayas connecting the China border at Lipulekh pass, the disputed region, which was met with protest from Nepal. India has been in an effective possession of this territory for at least sixty years. Therefore, India's new road, up to the Lipulekh pass, is not an unprecedented change in the status quo. India has controlled this territory and built other infrastructure here before, besides conducting its administration and deploying military forces up to the border pass with China. Although Nepal claims the region to be a part of its territory as stipulated in the Treaty of Sugali. The claim for territorial integrity is strengthened based on the fact that the Treaty of Sugali was the last treaty signed between India and Nepal to demarcate the territory and hence should be followed.

The poem by Ruskin Bond, 'Mending walls' epitomizes the dilemma that is born with the concepts of borders. On one hand, he uses the phrase 'good fences make good neighbors' where he highlights the fact that clearly demarcated borders bring peace ensuring better coordination, and on the other hand he questions the same notion of borders that discount essential aspects of humanity by asking, 'what I was walling in or walling out'. Borders may establish order but sometimes disregard the cultural, social, or economical intersections that thereby affect the locals. The border skirmishes between India and Nepal bring out the same debate of whether there should be clearly defined borders between both the countries or not.

Relations between India and Nepal have been very amicable for centuries, but it is in recent times that relations have been deteriorating. The Lipulekh conflict has added fuel to the fire and the primary reason for the conflict was that there weren't enough documented pieces of evidence that could determine which part of the land belonged to which country. The social intersections in terms of language, beliefs, norms, and cultures are so wide that it is difficult to make a clear-cut distinction in the first place. These border skirmishes just make it difficult for the locals residing in these border areas. Political greed tends to destroy the peaceful life of the locals who mostly talk amongst themselves and maintain peace in the border regions. Blurry borders hence can prove to be a very peaceful settlement.

Borders are not just "visible lines" in a map but rather exert power as markers of sovereignty. Therefore, borders are institutions that make it possible for states to use and to manage their human, economic, natural, and other resources and claim exclusive rights to territorial authority. Principles of 'nation-state' sovereignty and the right of 'national self-determination' implicitly decide how powerful a state is and therefore political border plays an essential role in the arena of international politics.

In the case of Nepal and India, much political insecurity has made the situation complex. 'The relative sizes of the economy, India's history of intervention in Nepali domestic politics, and extreme dependence on India have led to an inferiority complex and the growth of anti-Indian sentiments.' India's concern about China's expansionist move in Nepal has added to the insecurity level creating an environment of unrest. Having such undefined borders may or may not be a boon, but are essential to the study of borders. Whatever may be the case, they immensely impact the lives of the residents living in both nations.



The Fourth Industrial Revolution - Klaus Schwab

By Siddharth G.

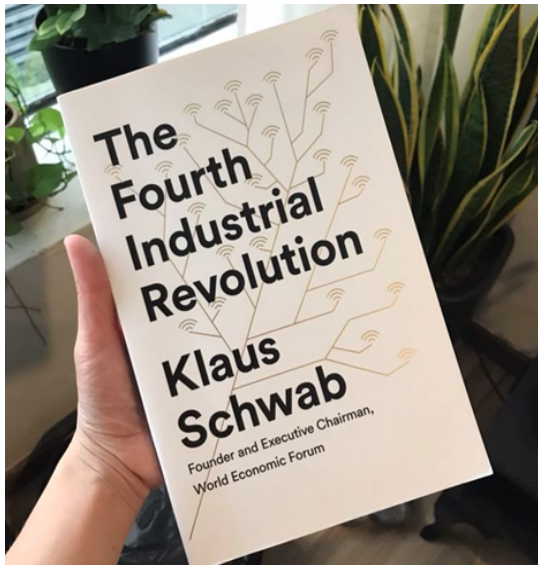


Image Source: westminster.ac.uk

Though we might have seen technological development and innovation revolutionizing the way we live and interact with the world we live in, it seems like we have accepted it as a way of life. We would never have painted a picture of our future and thought about how it would impact our lives, our goods, and this world. 'The Fourth Industrial Revolution', the book by economist and Founder Chairman of the World Economic Forum, Klaus Schwab, paints the picture of our future for us by giving his views and expectations of this period he calls 'The Fourth Industrial Revolution' — a period marked by rampant digitization and diffusion of technology into our daily lives.

Written lucidly, the main content of the book is divided into three main subsections. The first section touches upon the history of the first three revolutions, triggered by different inventions such as the steam engine, the assembly line and the semiconductors. He also talks about how different they are from these revolutions, in terms of velocity, depth and impact. In the second section, he talks about different drivers of this revolution, and also about some innovations such as 3D printing, blockchain and genetic engineering and how they will change the physical, digital and biological spheres of the world. The third and the most important section talks about its impact on the Economy, Business, Society and the Individual.

His optimism shows in the way he paints the picture of our future with emerging concepts such as additive manufacturing and on-demand economy and giving a time frame on how they would occur in a 50-page long appendix. Though many of them are still in their nascent stages, the time frame definitely shows an achievable path towards the same. Recent developments show a somewhat similar trend. For example, research was being conducted at the University of Maine in 2019 and a patrol boat built using 3D printers using the concept of additive manufacturing. It took only 72 hours to build it, thus giving hope for the viability of 3D printing and additive manufacturing techniques. He might miss the target of 2025 by some years because of the COVID-19 pandemic, though.

One thing that should be appreciated about this book is the fact that the author tries to present two sides of the same coin. While he talks optimistically about the future that awaits us, he takes time to acknowledge the repercussions of the same. While he talks about revolutionary technologies that change the way we produce, consume and interact with the world, he also warns us about its negative impact, especially in terms of employment, gender inequality and possible repercussions on the developing countries, especially since he predicts the future of production to be driven by innovation, and not by cheap labor.

I would like to criticize this book for the following reasons. Firstly, this book talks about the impacts of these developments mostly from the producer's and the working population's perspective. It doesn't focus much on the consumer's perspective. For example, he touches upon the topic of inequality but only lays emphasis upon the producer's perspective, since he believes that competition driven by technology and innovation, with no significant marginal costs, in an extremely competitive market, will automatically bring the prices down, making it more accessible to many people. While this is, to a large extent, true, we do see everyday examples of many people losing out on opportunities due to gross inequalities in incomes, especially in times of lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, recently, a father sold his cow, his sole source of income, to buy his two children a smartphone to attend online classes, and a girl from Kerala committed suicide as she was not able to attend her online classes.

Secondly, he agrees that many of the countries have still not reaped the benefits of the previous industrial revolutions, such as complete coverage of electricity. He stresses on improving the human development indexes in these countries to fully leverage the benefits of this revolution through intervention from the government, producers and the civil society. Unfortunately, this is a long and a tough road ahead. An example of this phenomenon in Finland. In 1800, its average annual income was \$827 and its child mortality rate was 42%. In 2017, however, its average income stood at \$40,586 and its child mortality rate stood at 0.23% — a feat that almost took 217 years to achieve. While it's possible for other countries to achieve the same, chances are that by the time other countries with bad human development indicators catch up, other developed countries would have reaped the benefits of this revolution, leading to more inequality. He does say that technological innovation can reduce this time period. But he leaves it to the readers to ponder more over this. Given the scope of this ambitious book, the ways to do this could have been further elaborated upon.

Finally, more attention can be given on other impacts such as on education and internal security. While international security and the evolution of weapons are widely discussed, other important implications such as what Fareed Zakaria in his book 'The Future Of Freedom' calls the 'democratization of violence', which is the dissemination of information about dangerous weapons that can be accessed by anyone through technology, were never discussed in the book. This book is, indeed, ambitious, and it delivers to an extent. It talks about the future and how it will dramatically change the way we live. It raises many important questions, but falls short in answering many of them, given the scope of this book.



Behind The Scenes - A Glimpse.

Behind The Scenes has designed six modules to cater to different issues of the people belonging to the lower strata of society. The modules are written in English with pictures alongside to facilitate a better understanding of the content. They also include several interactive activities in order to make the session fun and engaging. In addition, they come with a facilitator's note that has a glossary of Hindi words attached for ease of imparting the modules. The purpose of the modules is to spread awareness about the topics being covered. Listed below are the names of the module with a gist of what information they contain:

1. Usage of Mobile Phones: The module seeks to make the essential know-hows of operating a mobile phone readily available as well as easily understandable. It covers what different symbols on the home screen mean, how to change general settings of the phone to one's comfort and liking with pictures of the phone screen next to the instructions.
2. Superstitions: This module aims to uncover the real reasons behind popular superstitious beliefs of people in order to correct any misassumptions people might have, thereby allowing them to make an informed decision in their daily lives. The module also includes pictures depicting the superstitions and a brief paragraph on the logic behind each superstition.
3. Substance Abuse: The module aims to shed light on the money spent on harmful substances and if one stopped spending money on these, what other useful objects can be bought in the same amount. Detailed calculations are shown for people to understand the financial consequences of engaging in substance misuse and where else can they spend their money instead.
4. Finances: This module covers the aspects of maintaining family finances and small scale businesses. An accounting book is part of the module where one can note their daily expenses. Small scale businesses that one can start from their own home are mentioned and how to go about it, is explained.
5. Health: This module covers the physical, mental as well as menstrual aspect of being healthy. The module covers the benefits of a balanced diet and exercising. It also has do's and don'ts in regards to menstrual health and hygiene. Lastly, the module attempts to build conversation around mental health by listing down symptoms of some of the mental illnesses and the individual steps one can take to combat the symptoms.
6. Coronavirus Special: This module was curated to help understand how the virus affects every human being. It includes tips on how to recognise symptoms and how to prevent being affected by the virus in the first place. The module also debunks the myths and rumours around the virus by stating accurate facts. Tips on how to manage finances in such times are also included.

THE PILOT TEST

As part of our pilot, we conducted 5 sessions on the modules of health (both physical and mental), self and family financial management as well as small businesses. This was part of our lean method of testing - where we aimed to gather feedback from the beneficiaries to assess whether the BTS model is helpful to them - and whether they found it easy to inculcate the content of our modules into their daily routines. The classes were extremely successful, and testimonials from the beneficiaries attest that the information imparted was essential for a sustainable livelihood. They were happy about gaining a long-run perspective about how unnecessary spending - which may not seem like much today - could add up to substantial amounts in the future, and how it can effectively be saved instead. The health module sessions focused on the food pyramid, telling the beneficiaries about healthy foods to consume and to break their food intake down into 6 meals - 3 big, and 3 small in between. The danger and risk of substance abuse of any kind - tobacco, alcohol - was reiterated. The session on small businesses was about exploring different avenues to earn a side income - whether it is by newspaper hawking, taking on ironing jobs, or by making bangles from the comfort of their own houses. The beneficiaries were extremely appreciative of the simple, easily applied methods listed in the module - via which they could bring about small changes in their lifestyles that could lead to a better standard of living in the future.



One of our beneficiaries, Ashok, progressed in leaps and bounds after attending the sessions conducted. He realised that he was undertaking a lot of unnecessary expenditure per day, on tobacco, for both himself, as well as his friends. Understanding the health risk associated with tobacco and that what seemed like a small amount per day, could add up to a large amount at the end of the month led him to completely cut his expenditure on tobacco. Instead, he now saves the money for future use. According to him, "My friends asked me to pay for their gutka as well. Neither would I eat, nor would I pay for anyone. Friendship can be maintained without indulging in bad habits. Eating gutka together is not friendship."

Now, however, owing to the pandemic and the barriers it has imposed on mobility and in-person classes, we have recently started a YouTube channel to reach our beneficiaries and impart our modules by turning them into YouTube videos. The videos and their descriptions are in Hindi, for greater ease of understanding by our beneficiaries. The aim of creating a YouTube channel is for people to take up the BTS initiative of #helpyourhelpers - by introducing your helpers to our channel, and encouraging them to watch our videos and inculcate the knowledge imparted in their daily lives.

The link to our YouTube channel - https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMvBWrDyDwiTtAl_Vcn42ZQ

The link to our Instagram for more details about our projects - https://www.instagram.com/_behind_the_scenes_/

The link to our Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/Behind-The-Scenes-111790550512766>

We are also currently taking online sessions based on our modules over Zoom, in collaboration with other NGOs. If you are interested in collaborating with us, or have any queries about our projects, do contact us through Instagram, Facebook or contact Vanshika Mittal at +919589706950/ drop an email at vanshika.mittal_ug21@ashoka.edu.in.

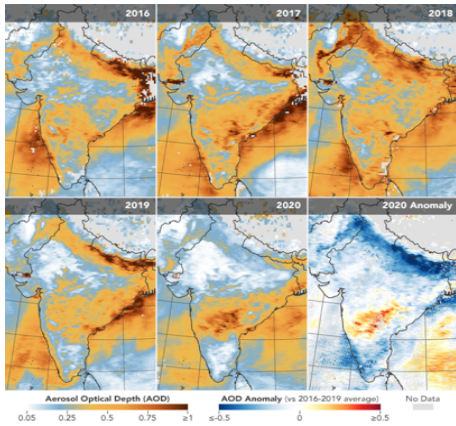


Ashok



Nature In Graphs

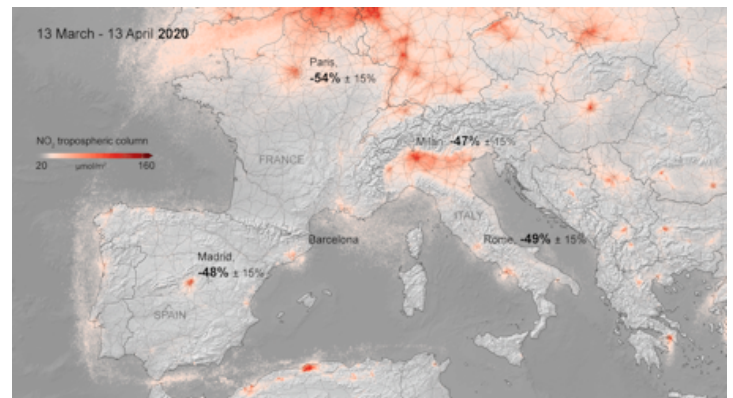
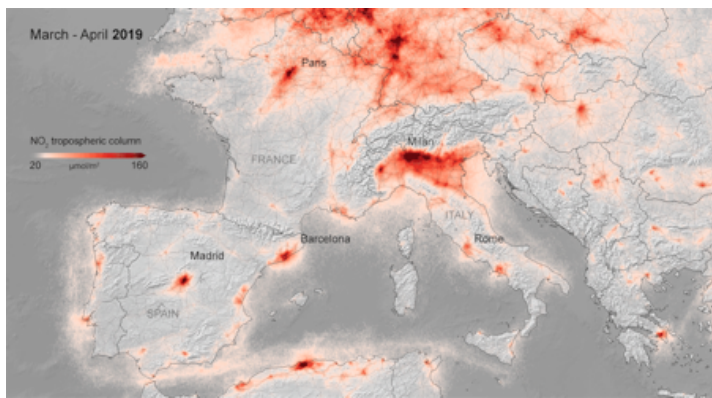
Asia



“Every year, aerosols from anthropogenic (human-made) sources contribute to unhealthy levels of air pollution in many Indian cities. Aerosols are tiny solid and liquid particles suspended in the air that reduce visibility and can damage the human lungs and heart.”

Read - <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/146596/airborne-particle-levels-plummet-in-northern-india?src=ve>

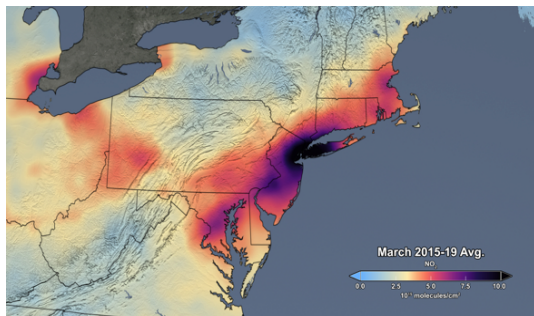
Europe



“New Data Show Air Pollution Drop Around 50 Percent In Some Cities During Coronavirus Lockdown”

Read - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffmcMahon/2020/04/16/air-pollution-drop-surpasses-50-percent-in-some-cities-during-coronavirus-lockdown/#caedc4c557b0>

USA



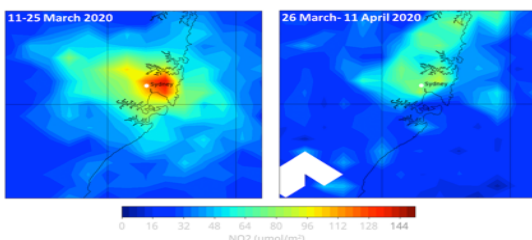
“the data indicate that the nitrogen dioxide levels in March 2020 are about 30% lower on average across the region of the I-95 corridor from Washington, DC to Boston than when compared to the March mean of 2015-19.”

Read - <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2020/drop-in-air-pollution-over-northeast>

Australia

Sydney

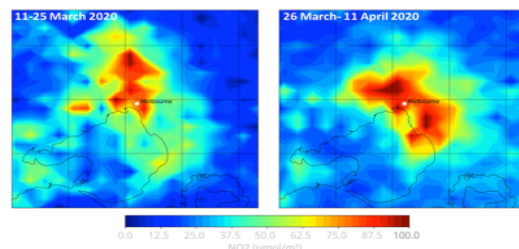
Nitrogen dioxide emissions during COVID-19 pandemic in Sydney



Source: Elena Sánchez-García / UPV-CTF Sentinel SP (Copernicus, ESA)

Melbourne

Nitrogen dioxide emissions during COVID-19 pandemic in Melbourne



Source: Elena Sánchez-García / UPV-CTF Sentinel SP (Copernicus, ESA)

“Nitrogen dioxide in urban air originates from combustion reactions at high temperatures. It’s mainly produced from coal in power plants and from vehicles. High concentrations of this gas can affect the respiratory system and aggravate certain medical conditions, such as asthma. At extreme levels, this gas helps form acid rain.”

Read - <https://theconversation.com/these-5-images-show-how-air-pollution-changed-over-australias-major-cities-before-and-after-lockdown-136723>



JULY 2020

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