

# The Hindu & BL Editorials

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## Democracy trumps



### **Vandalism on Capitol Hill and the institutional response to it offer important lessons**

Outgoing US President Donald Trump has been an outright embarrassment for a country that has sought to export democracy to the rest of the world. Smooth transfer of power is a *sine qua non* of a mature democracy, and the US, as one of the world's oldest democracies, can lay claim to this tradition as can European democracies and, notably, India. But Trump will go down in history for trying to upturn the very foundations of electoral democracy by not accepting the November verdict, and thereafter goading his support base to take to the streets. He also persuaded, if not threatened, Electoral College representatives to overturn Democratic party wins in various provinces. Despite losing 40 lawsuits and the support of party Senators and leaders, he persisted with his rabble-rousing rhetoric — appealing to the “people” to make “America great” by being loyal to him and taking on institutions such as the Supreme Court and some members of Congress because they had “betrayed” him. This gracelessness culminated in a mob vandalising Capitol Hill at precisely the time that the US Congress had convened to validate the election result and declare Joe Biden the next President. However, in the farcical and tragic violence of January 7 there was a silver lining — the institutions in the US standing in unison to affirm the rule of law over the mob.

Those who stood out for upholding democratic ideals in a time of crisis were numerous Republican Senators, who said the President was unfit to hold office, even if for another 11 days or so, and notably Vice-President Mike Pence. Pence affirmed Biden's win, despite being under pressure to use his office to question the

Electoral College verdict — Republican Congressman from Texas Louie Gohmert appealed to the Supreme Court to impress upon Pence to overturn the result. Prominent Republican Senator Ted Cruz, too, played along in this act of brinkmanship. The Supreme Court refused to entertain such pleas despite its Republican bench strength. The fracas also points to a failing in the US electoral system: the leeway enjoyed by the Electoral College in interpreting the mandate is not clear.

The world over, democracy has from time to time been subverted by a mob or clique that claims to represent the popular will. In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has subverted institutions and converted elections into a one-horse race. This has been seen across Africa, and to some extent in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Democracy is not just about being able to hold free and fair elections, but also about ensuring that institutional checks and balances are alive and kicking.

## Optimism unbounded: On signs of an economic recovery

**NSO projections of GDP seem overly optimistic even as the economy rebounds**

The first advanced estimates of economic output for the current financial year posit a picture of an economy rebounding robustly in the second half from the pandemic-induced slump of the preceding two quarters. The National Statistical Office on Thursday projected that GDP in the 12 months ending March would total almost ₹134.4-lakh crore in constant prices, **reflecting a 7.7% contraction from the preceding year's figure**. To reach that level, the NSO has assumed that output will recover vigorously in the third and fourth quarters. After **contracting by almost 16% in the April-September period**, it sees GDP being just a mere ₹10,400 crore short of the year-earlier second half's figure. It is this mathematical projection that is hard to square with the economic reality revealed in both the NSO's more detailed sectoral output forecasts as well as other emerging trends from ground-level activity. Both the expenditure side and gross value added (GVA) across various industries point to the high degree of optimism implicit in the NSO's assumptions. Private consumption expenditure — the single biggest component propelling GDP, at well over 50% — is estimated to shrink 9.5% in the full year, after contracting nearly 19% in the first half. This presupposes that consumers have largely shed their wariness to spend in the face of COVID-19 and have begun to set about consuming goods and services at close to pre-pandemic levels, the dampening impact of lost jobs and reduced incomes notwithstanding. GVA data for manufacturing and services, however, seem to belie this postulation.

While the NSO expects manufacturing to shrink 9.4% this fiscal, albeit narrowing from an almost 20% contraction in the first half, it sees the crucial GVA services

component of trade, hotels, transport, communication and broadcasting contracting 21.4% (the most among all the GVA constituents) over the 12-month period. Clearly, with the mandated social distancing norms having taken the highest toll on high-risk indoor activities, it is this omnibus services sector which contributes almost a fifth to overall GVA that is bearing the brunt of the pandemic-related restrictions. The forecast for government spending also appears far too upbeat. The NSO sees government final consumption expenditure (GFCE) jumping 17% in the second half, erasing the first-half's contraction and buoying the annual figure to a growth of 5.8%. The end-November fiscal deficit data show the government lagging well behind its budgeted revenue and capital expenditure targets, and with just four months to go and revenue receipts continuing to underwhelm, it is hard to fathom how the GFCE can increase so appreciably in the second half. True, the NSO has furnished a caveat that its estimates are likely to undergo sharp revisions. The upcoming Economic Survey could move away from these overly optimistic assumptions with a more sober assessment of the economy.

## Night and day: On sexual assault cases in U.P.

**To expect women to stay indoors for their safety is to deny them their freedoms, rights**

**Unnao. Hathras.** And now **Budaun**. The dirge continues as news of **another horrific alleged rape and murder emerged from Uttar Pradesh** on Sunday. A 50-year-old anganwadi worker, who visited a temple, was found brutally battered outside her home at a village in Badaun district. After she succumbed to the injuries, a depressingly similar pattern came to light: the police had dithered with both the post mortem and in registering an FIR. The culprits, a priest and his two associates, were arrested by Thursday night, with the State government saying that stern action would be taken. What came as a shocker, however, was the reaction of a senior member of the National Commission for Women who visited the family. **Chandramukhi Devi was quoted as saying**, "I tell women again and again that they should never go out at odd hours under anyone's influence... I think if she had not gone out in the evening or was accompanied by any child of the family perhaps this incident could have been avoided." Such remarks worsen the situation for women who have to battle against skewed societal gender conditioning. When insensitive utterances emanate from a national commission actually meant to uphold women's rights, it reeks of a primitive mindset wherein lawlessness is overlooked and responsibility pinned, perversely, on the woman for ensuring her own well-being.

All the hard work put in by women in all spheres including science and technology comes undone by such crude statements. The equal rights movement means

nothing if women are stopped from going out whenever they want to or need to, day or night. But it is also imperative that with society steeped in gender prejudices, the government, police and family must step up to provide a safe environment. In 2019, the NCRB data show 88 rape cases were recorded every day in India with U.P. reporting the second-highest number at 3,065 cases. But records never tell the whole story for many rapes are not reported due to social stigma. Although after the **Nirbhaya incident in 2012**, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act laid down the rules for stringent punishment, **crimes against women** continue, pointing at other issues that should be addressed from patriarchal mindsets to poor policing. For gender parity, more women must join the workforce, but thereby hangs another sorry tale. According to Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy data, women accounted for 10.7% of the workforce in 2019-20 and many lost jobs due to the pandemic. By November 2020, the CMIE reported that men recovered most of their lost jobs but not women. It is a matter of shame that even in 2021, women are asked to stay indoors at night instead of reaching for the moon.