

Defusing the ticking time bomb called diabetes

In June 2023, a study conducted by the Madras Diabetes Research Foundation in collaboration with the Indian Council of Medical Research and the Union Health Ministry revealed that 11.4% of India's population or 10.13 crore people are living with diabetes and 15.3% of the population or an additional 13.6 crore people are pre-diabetic. It also found that 28.6% of the population would be considered to be obese as per the BMI measure.

Consumption of ultra-processed foods

According to the World Health Organization, a major reason for this is the consumption of unhealthy ultra-processed foods and beverages, which are aggressively marketed displacing traditional diets. Such food includes carbonated drinks, instant cereals, chips, fruit-flavoured drinks, instant noodles, cookies, ice cream, bakery products, energy bars, sweetened yogurts, pizzas, processed meat products, and powdered infant formulas.

Scientific evidence shows that diets heavy with ultra-processed food and beverages or high in sugar, fat, and salt are risky and can lead to diabetes. A 10% increase in the consumption of ultra-processed food a day is associated with a 15% higher risk of type-2 diabetes among adults. When food is ultra-processed, its structure is destroyed and cosmetic additives, colours, and flavours are added. This makes people eat more, gain weight, and heightens the risk of diabetes and other chronic diseases. Further, obesity and diabetes are key risk factors for heart disease and deaths. A study showed that those who had more than four servings of ultra-processed food a day were much more at risk of cardiovascular



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mortality than those who took less than two servings a day. An upward trend was found for all-cause mortality too.

A playground for the food industry

It is reported that the sale of sugar-sweetened beverages has fallen in the last 20 years in many high-income countries. To compensate for the loss of sales, companies are now focusing on low- and middle-income countries. India is a playground for the food industry. Billions of rupees are spent on marketing and advertising ultra-processed food and beverages, which leads to increased consumption by vulnerable populations. While the food industry blames people for bad choices, it is not the people but the environment around them that is to blame. Marketing targets younger generations and the growing middle class, making it hard for an individual to choose healthy food options. Children in particular are exposed to cartoon characters and given incentives and gifts. Celebrity endorsements also determine their consumption decisions.

The result is a deepening public health crisis, the ticking time bomb of diabetes. Sugar-sweetened beverages are a major source of added sugar in diets and put people at a higher risk of type 2 diabetes. In such a context, policy and regulatory actions are warranted.

The food industry does not want any restrictions on marketing; they offer partnerships as well as arguments of economic development as 'stakeholders'. The food industry also participates in programmes such as 'Eat Right', making false promises. Such partnerships do not allow us to make a strong regulation that could

reduce the consumption of ultra-processed food and beverages. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India has shown a lacklustre response to the crisis and allowed a dominating role to the food industry while suggesting front-of-package labelling, which is still not in place. Many say that people should exercise. While this is good for health, it should be in addition to a regulatory policy on restricting the marketing of ultra-processed foods and providing warning labels on junk food and beverages.

Mandatory provisions

The only way the government can safeguard people from the manipulative strategies of the food industry is through a legal framework or even an ordinance (Article 123 of the Constitution) with the objective of reducing/halting the consumption of ultra-processed foods. It could also include defining 'healthy food', a warning label on unhealthy food, and restrictions on the promotion and marketing tactics of unhealthy food and beverages. The people must be informed of the risk of consuming such food. In this process, there is no reason to partner with the food industry that is responsible for ill health.

The governments of South Africa, Norway, and Mexico have recently taken similar actions. The Government of India can show its strength to regulate food labelling and marketing. Such a law will be a clear demonstration of the will of the government. The Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles, and Infant Foods Act flattened the growth of commercial baby food. The proposed new law could do the same to unhealthy foods and beverages. This is an idea whose time has come.

National unity, a three-dimensional view

India's national unity evolved over more than a century, through political and social movements and legal and constitutional designs. This involved intense battles and wise compromises among constituent groups. The national identity thus constituted developed along three dimensions. The first dimension is the search for harmony and justice among castes, the second is harmony of religious communities, and the third is a common ground among various regional identities. These three dimensions can be alternatively labelled as Hindu unity, Hindu-Muslim unity, and heartland-periphery unity. A milestone in this journey was the making of the Constitution, but there is a long prelude and an ongoing postlude to it.

M.K. Gandhi was the primary spokesperson of the first two axes – Hindu unity and Hindu-Muslim unity. He declared himself a Hindu when that category was still contested. "I find peace in the Hindu religion... I studied other religions also, and I decided that whatever its defects and drawbacks, Hinduism alone could be the religion for me. That is what I feel and that is why I call myself a Sanatani Hindu," he told the Gaubhati session of the Indian National Congress in 1926, and held on to that belief until death. Gandhi attempted to interpret Hinduism in an increasingly inclusive manner. He insisted on its legitimacy as a historical category independent of the subcontinent's encounter with colonialism and other religious traditions. "Gandhi assumed that loyalty to religion was the dominant loyalty in India," writes historian Ravinder Kumar, who also notes a "conspicuous absence of the language of class" during the Rowlatt Satyagraha.

The three axes

Gandhi recognised that caste-based discrimination would hinder Hindu unity, which in turn would obstruct national unity. B.R. Ambedkar argued that emancipation of the depressed classes can be achieved only through their separation from the entrenched cultural universe called Hinduism. The biggest challenge in Gandhi's Hindu unity platform was the proposed separate electorate for the depressed classes. Ambedkar and the colonial rulers were on the same side of the debate on Communal Award in 1932. Gandhi was willing to die to enforce Hindu unity. The Poona Pact between the two leaders agreed on assuring representation for the depressed classes, but without a separate electorate. As part of the larger Hindu whole, the depressed classes would get more representation than they would have got under the proposal for a separate electorate.

Reservation remains part of state policy and politics, envisaged largely as an instrument to mitigate caste-based disadvantages within Hindu society. Dalits who convert to Christianity or Islam become ineligible for reservation under the



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India's national unity can be viewed as a three-dimensional construct – of castes, religions and regions. BJP has turned it into a unidimensional pursuit of Hindu consolidation in the heartland

Scheduled Caste category.

Hindu unity was non-negotiable for Gandhi, but Hindu-Muslim unity was an equally important second pillar of national unity for him. Gandhi viewed Muslims as a distinct community, recognised their autonomy, and sought out Muslim leaders in efforts to build Hindu-Muslim unity. He joined forces with the Khilafat Movement, which was driven by a transnational Muslim agenda but united with Hindus in its anti-imperialist edge. "There are two things to which I am devoting my life – permanent unity between Hindus and Muslims, and Satyagraha," declared Gandhi. His efforts at Hindu-Muslim unity by accepting them as two distinct political communities may have, paradoxically, helped antagonistic communal politics that would emerge in parallel. This acceptance of the cultural and religious autonomy of minorities too found its way into the Constitution.

The third axis, of the link between the heartland and periphery, took shape in response to the realities that the founders encountered during the making of the Constitution. During the national movement, a Hindi public sphere that emerged in the northern plains had begun to equate itself with the 'national', and sentiments elsewhere were ignored. Gandhi himself was a promoter of Hindi as the national language. "It is up to my friends in Uttar Pradesh to have a whole India; it is up to them to have a Hindi-India. The choice is theirs," said T.T. Krishnamachari, a member of the Constituent Assembly, when Hindi members insisted on enforcing Hindi across the country. Realising the danger in pushing for Hindi, the question of a national language was delayed initially for 15 years and then indefinitely. Article 370 gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir; the Sixth Schedule gave autonomy to the tribal populations in the Northeast. In 1976, considering the diverging population trends in the south and the north, inter-State redistribution of Lok Sabha representation was suspended for 25 years, and then again in 2002 for another 25 years.

A unidimensional pursuit

This national compact has been constantly evolving, and is often interspersed with violence. Three Gandhis have been assassinated in the last 75 years. New aspirations and demands of constituent groups strained this developing compact, which manifested as the gradual unravelling of the Congress system. Coalition politics that brought together separate interest groups was the outcome, but after 30 years of experiments, it was replaced by a new form of national consolidation that the BJP came to represent. The difference this time was that the BJP turned unity into a unidimensional pursuit. It used the Hindutva ideology to take over the Hindi/Hindu heartland where the Gandhian

national movement had flourished. The BJP unburdened itself of the task of nurturing Hindu-Muslim unity and unity of regions. On the contrary, by portraying the aspirations of the peripheries and religious minorities as a threat to the nation, it made heartland Hindu consolidation easier, and stronger than ever before. This also entails privileging harmony and hierarchy over justice in inter-caste relationships. The proponents of Hindutva suggest that the nation has been weakened, not strengthened, by the accommodations accorded to peripheral communities and regions, which they label 'appeasement.' This political consolidation in the heartland got the BJP 55% of the Lok Sabha seats with 37% share of the votes in 2019.

This parliamentary majority has emboldened the ruling party to unilaterally change the terms with religious and regional groups, and it plans to change more. The inter-State redistribution of Lok Sabha seats that is scheduled to follow the first Census after 2026 will shift more power to BJP strongholds above the Vindhyas from the south, potentially enabling more unilateralism. This is projected as a new era of national unity where fractured verdicts have become history and there is no challenge to the exercise of power by the national government. Newer forms of coercion and distortion of public discourse are required to sustain this model.

An ongoing conversation

The BJP says that India's national evolution matured in 2014. Its focus has been on the single dimension of Hindu unity which it believes renders questions of minority group rights immaterial, while its primary opponent, the Congress, focused on the other two dimensions – harmony of Hindus and Muslims, and regions. Understanding caste justice as fraternal unity among Hindus had come to be seen as regressive; calls for the dismemberment of Hinduism were claimed as a more radical position against caste discrimination. But Hinduism today is far more hegemonic than it was during Gandhi's time, and subaltern masses on whose behalf its destruction is sought are not enthused by that call.

At the same time, the yearning for a fairer, equitable, just social order animates subaltern castes, for instance, which is expressed around the caste survey in Bihar. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's campaign for caste justice takes on entrenched groups, most importantly liberals in his own party. Similarly, new challenges to the unity of regions over Hindi and the impending delimitation are emerging. A renewed and dynamic conversation along all the three axes is needed to reinforce national unity in the new era. This conversation is not about fragmentation but unification.

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