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EDITORIAL

It has been a strange year. Eight months are already past and it looks as if the coming four months hold more of the same—provided the tensions on the north-eastern borders settle down. The number of Covid-19 infections in India are second only to the United States now though, mercifully, our mortality rate is relatively low. No one can predict what the figures will be like by year-end. A kind of fatigue appears to have set in, and it is becoming more and more difficult to get people to comply with necessary precaution. Some of us are fatalistic and some live in hope of a vaccine becoming available.

The economy was already struggling and with all that has happened in the last few months, GDP growth has contracted 23.9 per cent in the April–June quarter. Agriculture was the only area where the figures were positive. It will be a long time before we are able to get back to positive figures. These are very difficult days: the job market is in a total slump; spending has become very conservative; manufacturing and trade, construction, aviation and transport have all been badly hit.

Much has been written and spoken about the many aspects of the economy, health infrastructure and the inability to anticipate and manage the huge number of migrants who would need to return to their villages in the absence of jobs in urban centres—and so many others. However, to my mind, what the past six months have done to our children and young adults going to school and college is truly appalling. For a majority of students in high school and university in our country, examinations are really what matter. In the absence of a better system of assessment and evaluation of talent and ability, it is their examination results that determine the rest of their lives—almost. I have personally witnessed—as must all of you—the way in which these young people prepare for their examinations and their consequent mental state. For them to be in suspense for so many months about results, examinations, admissions, entrance tests and the norms thereof without any clarity from the various authorities nor any organised counselling, would have taken a heavy toll. A toll

that is not easily identifiable or measurable. I believe this is going to be a major fallout of the pandemic and the consequent uncertainties. We cannot afford a zero year, examinations have to be held—but one wishes they could have been managed with more thought and planning as well as some degree of uniformity across the country.

Focused on pandemics and catastrophic changes are three papers in this issue that work around this from the perspectives of history, literature and food.

The lead paper is a look into another uncertain global scenario: India's election to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for an eighth time, and the challenges it will face in its two-year tenure. Not least among them is the prevailing and worrying tension with China.

This issue has a predominantly historical bent, with articles on the origins of languages, religion and philosophy, knowledge production, comparative literature and political thought. The photo essay too is on two ancient but still functional temples in Odisha: Lingaraj and Jagannath.

The Summer issue always carries the C. D. Deshmukh Memorial Lecture, delivered this year by Ashoke Chatterjee, who has worked tirelessly for the handicrafts sector. It is tragic that while India is the world's largest resource of artisanal skill and wisdom, its artisans and their crafts are in crisis today.

This time the Summer and Autumn issues have been combined into one, larger volume. It was necessitated by these unprecedented times and the lockdowns that affected the work of all those involved in publishing the Journal. Let's hope we never have to do this again, at least not for this reason.

OMITA GOYAL

