



Let's not talk about it

Humanity's greatest challenges remain, despite the pandemic having relegated them to the background



A virus that was possibly spawned in a Chinese laboratory has played havoc with the world over the past two years. As I write this, there have been 209 million confirmed cases of Covid-19 and 4.4 million deaths globally. The good news is that around 4.5 billion doses of vaccines have been administered. And while it is true that new variants of the virus keep emerging with frightening regularity, it is equally true that safety guidelines, urban management, hospital protocols, scientific research and large-scale

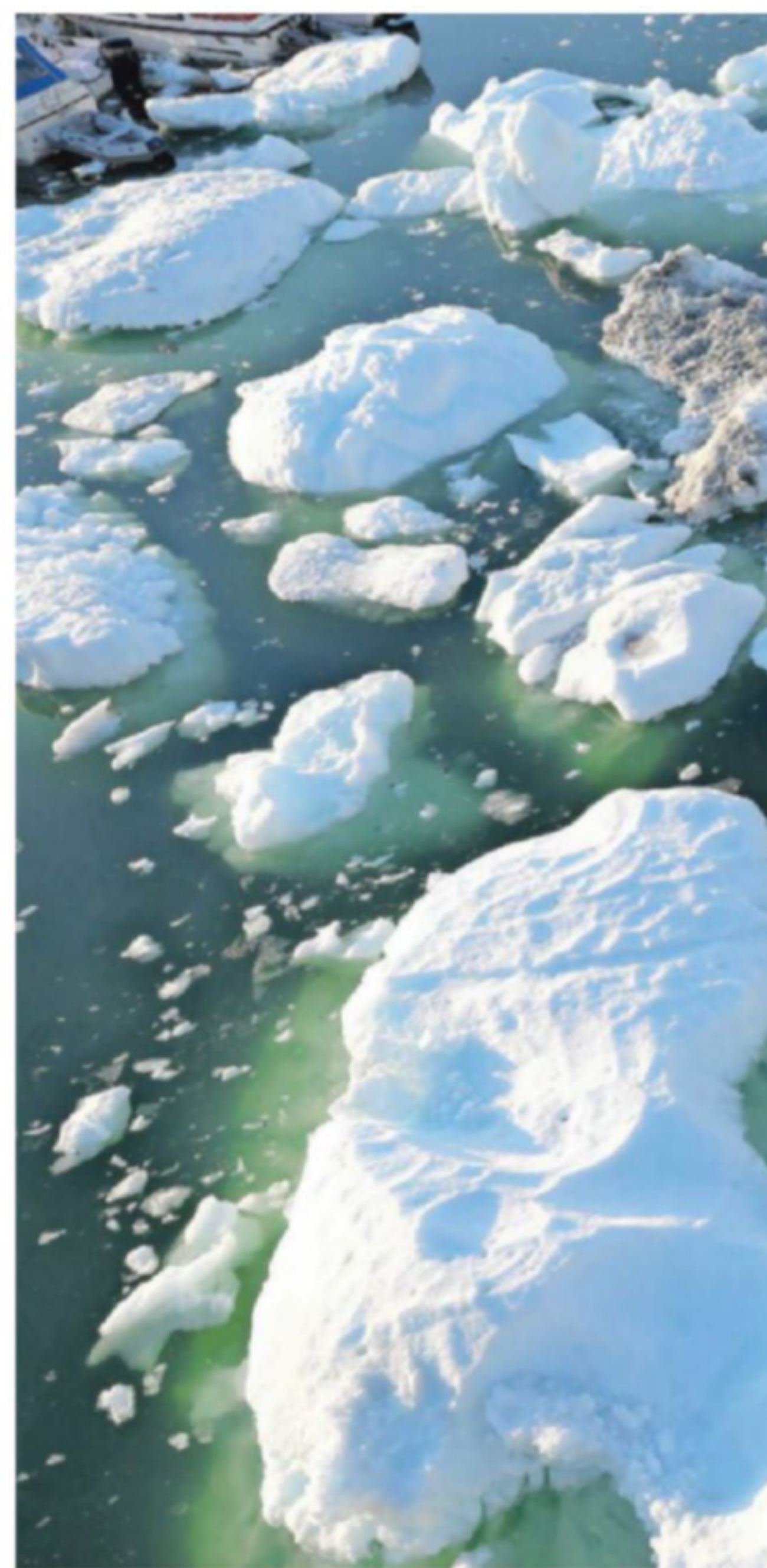


BY ASHWIN SANGHI

immunisation may allow humanity to emerge from this war to see another day.

But the pain of stubbing your toe is felt only until you bang your head even harder. Alas, the challenge

of fighting Covid-19 has relegated all other issues to the back-burner. I have always maintained, and continue to hold, that humanity's greatest challenges in the 21st century will be climate change, water scarcity, population-resource disparity, power imbalance and ideological extremism. These issues may have receded into the background owing to Covid-19, but they remain. A pigeon closes



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its eyes upon seeing a cat, hoping that the cat will magically vanish as a result. That is precisely what the world is doing with the most pressing issues of our times.

Recently, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said that, over the next two decades, the world is likely to overshoot the 1.5°C threshold above pre-industrial levels. This would probably result in rising sea levels, forest fires, rainstorms, heat waves, temperature extremes, coastal flooding, drought, ocean acidification, species extinction and increased pest and pathogen threat. But talk to experts on climate change and we hear the usual suggestions: use public transport, take shorter showers, switch to electric vehicles, recycle waste and plant trees. Very few discuss the billions of cows, goats, chicken, pigs and turkeys that are crowded into industrial farms and produce enormous amounts of



**WARMING
WARNING**
Greenland is experiencing one of its biggest ice-melts. Climate change is one of humanity's greatest challenges

methane. Every gram of methane is 84 times as potent as a gram of carbon dioxide in trapping atmospheric heat. The US Environmental Protection Agency says that animal agriculture is the single largest source of methane emissions in America. So, if we truly want to fight climate change, humankind must transition to an increasingly vegan lifestyle. But such a view must be motivated by hippies, vegetarians and tree-huggers. So, let's not talk about it.

A poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge says, "Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink". Isn't it ironic that our elevated sea levels will be accompanied by water scarcity? Only 0.01 per cent of the water on earth is fresh and accessible. Almost 97 per cent of our water is saline and around three per cent is extremely difficult to access. A third of the global population lives under conditions of water scarcity.

By 2030 there will be a 40 per cent gap between demand and supply of water. According to UNICEF, half of the world's population could be living in areas facing water scarcity by as early as 2025. In fact, one out of every four children will be living in areas of extremely high water-stress. Around the world, water use has been increasing at more than twice the rate of population growth in the last century. Many regions of the world will soon run out of ground water. Added to that is the concern that a large part of the water supply in many countries is contaminated. In the meantime, geopolitics and unchecked dams will ensure that river waters become the very reasons for war. But such a view belongs to the anti-industrial lobby and no one wants to discuss depressing parched earth scenarios. So, let's not talk about it.

What should we talk about then?

Ah, yes, almost a billion of the world's 7.7 billion people are affected by hunger. Around 33 countries already have extremely alarming levels of hunger. The world's population is set to grow by 83 million people each year and reach 9.8 billion by 2050. A child born in a country with the lowest ranked healthcare is 60 times more likely to die than a child born in a country with the best healthcare. The average income of people living in North America is 16 times higher than that of people in sub-Saharan Africa. And the inequality is not just among nations. According to the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report, the world's richest one per cent own a whopping 43.4 per cent of the world's wealth. Resource inequalities could fuel strife, both internal and external. But discussing wealth inequality between individuals and countries is Marxism. So, let's not talk about it.

Since it is inconvenient to talk about veganism, depressing to talk about water deprivation, and leftist to talk about inequalities, let's turn our attention to another topic: the world's indefatigable economic engine, China. Economic growth has enabled China, on average, to double its GDP every eight years. Today, China has become the world's largest economy on purchasing power parity basis. It is also the world's largest manufacturer, trader, and holder of foreign exchange reserves. But China's economic power has been accompanied by even greater tightening of control by the Communist Party of China.

China's economic clout has meant that it can detain a million Muslim Uyghurs in what they call 're-education' camps in Xinjiang. It can push through massive projects such as the Belt-and-Road Initiative while saddling developing nations with crippling debt. China props up some of the world's worst regimes including North Korea and Pakistan. It brazenly

wages war on democracy in Hong Kong while continuing to sabre-rattle against Taiwan. It undermines territorial waters by building artificial islands in the South China Sea. It is the world's largest cyber-snoop and also one of the world's largest polluters. Not content with needling India on its borders, China has territorial problems with Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore and countless others. Given the huge dependence on Chinese investment, supply chains and trade, it is inconvenient to talk about (excuse the pun) the bull in the china shop. And if former British prime minister Neville Chamberlain could be deluded into believing that he had brokered "peace for our time" with Adolf Hitler in 1938, then where is the harm in believing that China's economic, political and military clout will not have serious consequences for the world? But holding China to account is war mongering. So, let's not talk about this inconvenient truth either.

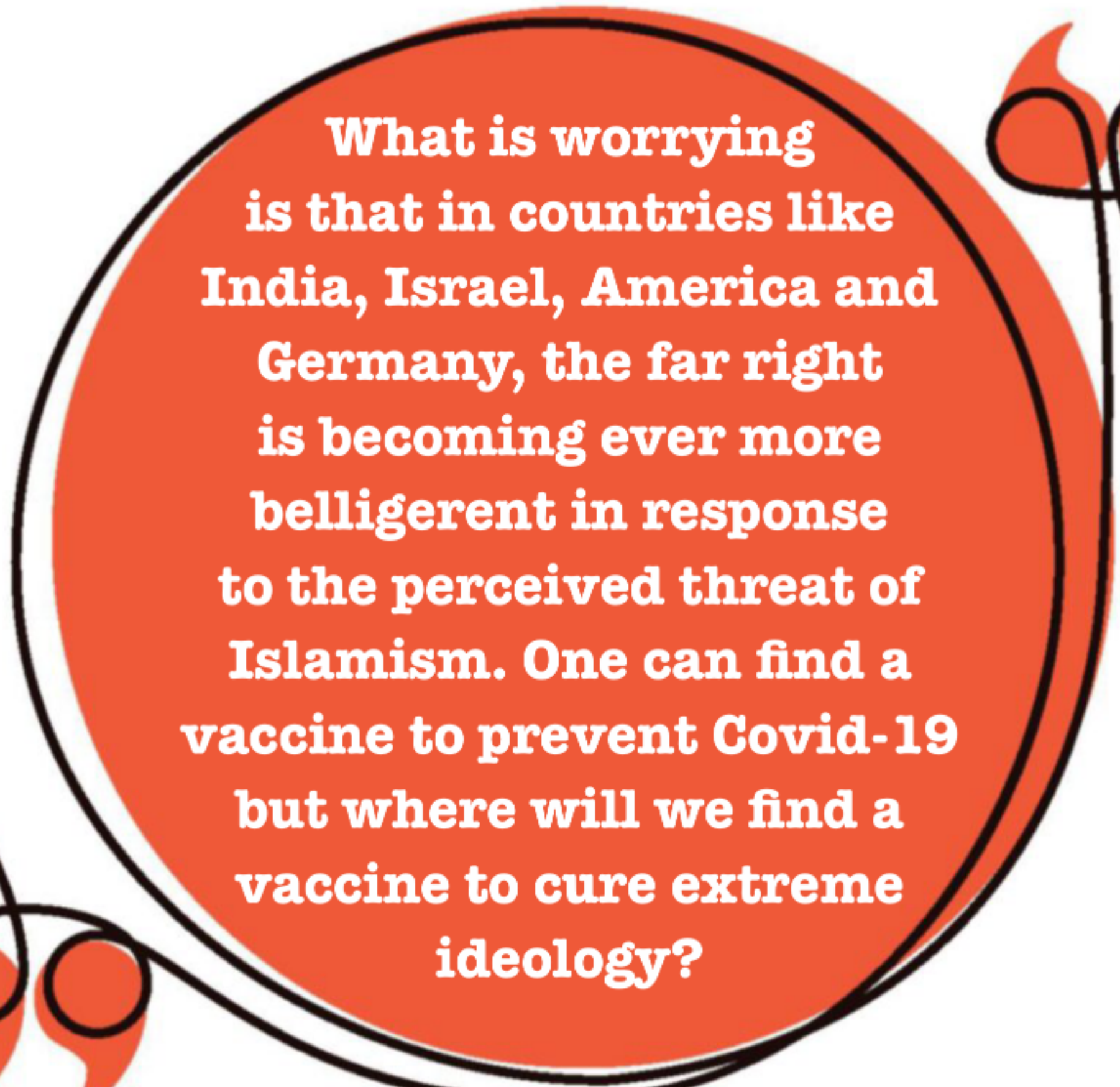
Fine, then consider this. A million Uyghur Muslims are incarcerated in Xinjiang, but one hears barely a peep from the 57 members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation that includes 45 Islamic countries. They are quick to point out the injustices—both real and perceived—against Muslims in Kashmir, Palestine, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, but there is a strange conspiracy of silence around the Uyghur situation. What explains it? Truth be told, the Islamic world is a divided lot. The only unity is a medieval ideology that clings to gender inequality, LGBTQ revulsion, apostasy prevention and dislike of the unbeliever.

The world vainly tries to fight Al Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram, Hezbollah and the Taliban, but is reluctant to accept that the real fight is against the Wahhabi-Salafi ideology that inspires such groups. Even the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, has found it necessary to push for new interpretations of the more contentious texts. But anyone suggesting Islamic reformation is usually branded an Islamophobic bigot. What is worrying is that in countries like India, Israel, America and Germany, the far right is becoming ever more belligerent in response to the perceived threat of Islamism. One can find a vaccine to prevent Covid-19 but where will we find a vaccine to cure extreme ideology? Let's do the next best thing instead. Let's not talk about it.

The great poet, Mirza Ghalib, wrote "*Hum ko maloom hai jannat ki haqiqat lekin dil ke behlane ko Ghalib yeh khayal achcha hai.*" We know the reality of paradise, but it is a good idea nonetheless, well suited to keeping the heart happy.

So, let's just stay happy by not talking about anything that matters.

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