



# THE EDITORIAL PAGE

**WORDLY WISE**  
THE SMELL AND TASTE OF THINGS REMAIN POISED A LONG TIME, LIKE SOULS...  
— MARCEL PROUST

## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

### TERROR IN KABUL

Bomb attacks at airport have brought home the enormity of the challenge in Afghanistan under Taliban

THE TWIN BOMB attacks on Thursday at Kabul airport that killed over 100 people have underlined the catastrophe that has befallen Afghanistan. ISIS-Khorasan has claimed one bombing saying it was carried out by one of its suicide bombers against "a large gathering of translators and collaborators with the American Army at Baran Camp near Kabul Airport". Thousands of civilians were massed at Kabul airport, desperate to flee the Taliban since their takeover on August 15. For years, Afghanistan has been the happy hunting ground for extremist-terrorist groups, and the Taliban takeover was always going to bring them to the surface. Taliban-al Qaeda contacts continue, and the ISIS-K has been in a bloody contest for space with the Taliban, claiming responsibility for large terror attacks in which hundreds of civilians have died over the last three years. The question that arises from the airport bombing is how a fully loaded suicide bomber managed to evade the armed street patrols set in place by the Taliban and its allies. On the one hand, the attacks have shown that the Taliban are not fully in control; on the other, the bombings have helped the Taliban, feared by Afghans as brutal oppressors with designated global terrorists in their own ranks, but now seeking international legitimacy and assistance, in projecting themselves in somewhat less cruel light than those who claim to have carried out the terror attack.

For the US military, the deaths of at least a dozen of its servicemen in the attack, made it the largest single-day casualty since 2011. President Joe Biden has pledged that America will "hunt down" the killers. At this moment, when the US is rushing to evacuate all Americans and its last remaining troops from Afghanistan, it is not clear how that promise is going to be kept. When the Americans vowed to go after al Qaeda, there was a definite quarry — Osama bin Laden. At this point, the reality unfolding in Afghanistan is that of many terrorist groups, all with links to each other, and to the Taliban. If the ISIS-K claim is accepted, the true nature of this group — with its floating membership of militant groups from Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba included, along with Chinese and Uzbek groups — needs to be understood. Indian intelligence officials believe it has links to the Haqqani Network, which is a part of the Taliban. Does Biden's threat mean that the US will go after them in their Pakistani safe havens?

The situation is getting more critical, and India's first priority, as External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar noted at an all-party meeting, is to evacuate all its nationals. In a silver lining, flights have resumed at the airport. The government must also make clear its stand on allowing Afghan nationals to enter the country. If India wishes to retain its long friendship with the Afghan people, it should welcome those who seek refuge here, and prevent a repeat of the shabby deportation of an Afghan woman parliamentarian. The government has said it was a mistake. It should ensure a course correction.

### CRUDE FACT

No realistic plan of reducing import dependence in edible oils is possible without recognising the role of oil palm

INDIA PRODUCED 93.18 lakh tonnes (lt) of vegetable oils in 2020-21 (November-October), as against 85.38 lt and 76.87 lt in the previous two years. But despite this record output, as estimated by the Solvent Extractors' Association of India, the country will end up importing some 133 lt, from the 155.49 lt of the 2018-19 oil year. Simply put, India imports anywhere from nearly 60 per cent to over two-thirds of its vegetable oil requirement, depending on how good the rains are, entailing an annual foreign exchange outgo of \$10-11 billion. It is in this context that one must view the Narendra Modi government's new National Mission on Edible Oils-Oil Palm. The scheme aims at increasing the total area under oil palm from the current 3.5 lakh hectares (lh) to 10 lh by 2025-26. Growers would be entitled to a minimum "viability price" for their fresh fruit bunches (FFB) production, which is 14.3 per cent of the last five-year-average crude palm oil (CPO) price adjusted for wholesale inflation.

The focus on oil palm is not misplaced as it is a crop that can yield 20-25 tonnes of FFBs per hectare, translating into 4-5 tonnes of CPO. No other oilseed can give so much: Mustard and groundnut yields aren't more than 2-3 tonne per hectare and the oil recovery from that only at 35-40 per cent. No realistic plan of reducing import dependence in edible oils — to, say, 30-40 per cent from the existing 60-70 per cent — is possible without recognising the role of oil palm. Out of India's annual 130-150 lt vegetable oil imports, 80-90 mt is accounted for by palm oil alone.

That said, there are valid concerns over introducing oil palm in tropical rainforests or biodiversity-rich areas such as the Andaman & Nicobar Islands and the Northeast. The crop is probably better suited for states such as Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Odisha, where it can replace paddy and be grown using drip irrigation, mulching and other water-saving practices. India is anyway producing too much rice and any diversification must be welcomed. But the focus should, for now, be on states already cultivating oil palm. Farmers there have had a mixed experience with the crop that takes at least five years to grow and start yielding 20-25 tonnes of FFB/hectare. An assured "viability price", protecting against fluctuations in global edible oil markets, should instil confidence among farmers in these states. Let them expand acreages first before others in more ecologically fragile regions.

### SMELLS LIKE HERITAGE

Following Melbourne's lead, India could recognise — and celebrate — aromas unique to its culture

STRONG SMELLS DON'T always deserve the bad rap they get. Take Vegemite, Australia's favourite spread with a punchy, unmistakable aroma that brings tears to some eyes. So deep is the Australian love for Vegemite that Melbourne has decided to list the smell emanating from the factory where it's made as part of the city's heritage. The rest of the world, including India, should take note.

The Melbourne City Council's decision is remarkable not only because a smell has been recognised as having heritage value, but because it is not one that is universally-loved, in fact far from it. Those who've grown up with a pot of Vegemite sitting on the breakfast table may adore its savoury fragrance — a gift of the brewer's yeast that is used to make the spread — but those who haven't grown up with it usually can't stand it. This puts the recognition in quite a different league from, say, the 2018 Unesco "intangible heritage" label granted to the art of perfumery in Grasse, the French region known as the Perfume Capital of the World. It assigns value to a unique aroma, instantly recognisable to a certain culture and loved by it, even if described as "stinky" by the rest of the world. India must note the potential in this idea.

We could celebrate the sharp, unmistakable aroma of drying bombil as an inalienable part of Mumbai's cultural landscape. What about the smell of ripe jackfruit in a Kerala backyard? Cowdung cakes being dried on the walls of a village home in Gujarat? Asafoetida may have been described by non-comprehending Europeans as "Devil's dung", but we know how appetising a dal smells when freshly tempered with this aromatic. And how about the muscular smell of axone, the fermented soybean paste used in Naga cuisine? If anything, this country has an embarrassment of olfactory riches to choose from.

# Cohabiting with Covid

A zero-Covid world looks less imminent. But humans can make the microbe less lethal



K SRINATH REDDY

EVEN AS CHINA doubled down on its "zero Covid" strategy in the past week, government spokespersons in Australia and New Zealand have started expressing doubts about persisting with this strategy.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said that it is highly unlikely that his country would ever return to zero-Covid cases. New Zealand's Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins admitted that the highly infectious nature of the Delta variant has raised "pretty big questions" about the approach to "eliminate the disease". These two countries had till recently experimented with a "travel bubble" between them, while keeping out travellers from other countries, hoping to permanently close the door on the virus.

Singapore had earlier given up on the zero-Covid strategy and Israel is beginning to acknowledge that its much acclaimed war to crush the virus is ending in a stalemate. Most other countries are getting reconciled to the notion that we will have to live with the virus, while preventing severe disease and death through extensive vaccination. Even the protection offered by vaccines is now appearing to be less of an impenetrable shield and more of a buffering vest that absorbs much of the bullet's force, resulting in mostly mild breakthrough infections. Tom Frieden, former director of the Centers for Disease Control in the USA, recently commented that there is much that we don't understand about this virus.

Yet, there is. If not specifically about this virus, we do know about the evolutionary biology of other microbes, to start eschewing the war-like slogan of eradication. The only two microbes that have been completely eradicated so far are smallpox in humans and rinderpest in cattle. Even polio has not been eradicated all over the world — it still lurks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Getting rid of the coronavirus completely is an unrealistic ambition, especially since it is a respiratory virus that spreads far and fast. Indications are clear that the only winning strategy we have is to protect people from severe disease through vaccination and use tested measures to contain transmission till we vaccinate a large majority of the global population. By doing so, we should aim to steer the virus towards becoming milder even as it continues to be a presence in our world.

The failure of the zero-Covid strategy also calls for renewed commitment to global solidarity. If all of humanity does not collectively practice transmission containment norms and a vast majority of people in all countries is not vaccinated, the virus can emerge with new mutants that do not reduce their virulence even as they infect with ease. The evolutionary pressure has to be exerted by the host species as a whole, not in secluded pockets. That realisation must change the behaviour of anti-maskers, vaccine opponents and vaccine hoarding nations. Otherwise, the virus will feast on our follies to kill many more, even though its evolutionary instinct is not to do so.

ing milder even as it continues to be a presence in our world.

Cautionary counselling, that we should not sound militaristic calls for microbial eradication in our response to infectious agents, comes from a scientist who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine and Physiology at a very young age in 1958 — Joshua Lederberg. In a seminal essay on the history of infectious diseases, published in *Science* in 2000, he advises us to discard the "waging war" metaphor and recognise the evolutionary imperatives that drive the microbe's behaviour. Lederberg suggests that "a successful parasite (one that will remain infectious for a long time) tends to display just those epitopes (antigenic fragments that stimulate the immune system) as will provoke responses that a) moderate but do not extinguish the primary infection and b) inhibit other infections by competing strains of the same species or other species". Is the Delta variant racing to claim that crown or will yet another variant emerge to achieve a better balance between high infectivity and continued presence among the human population, which it will seek to use for replication but be careful not to extinguish?

Microbes evolve much faster than humans. However, we can exert evolutionary pressure on the virus by creating barriers for its easy transmission and prevent a prolonged stay in infected humans whereby it finds enough time to mutate. We do the former by using masks, moving in well-ventilated areas and avoiding crowds. All of these are especially needed when we know that the virus has a highly infectious spread through aerosols that move far beyond six feet. We achieve the latter objective, of limiting the duration of viral presence in the bodies of infected persons, through effective vaccines. By simultaneously pursuing these twin strategies, we can exert evolutionary pressure on the virus to become milder in virulence, albeit more infectious when given the opportunity.

Why will the virus become less virulent over time? Because its survival advantage depends on having a human host, in whom it can replicate. It cannot afford to wipe out our species, for it will script its own extinction by doing so. Why then does the SARS-CoV-2 virus

still kill so many across the world? Lederberg's essay provides an explanation. He writes: "Those relatively few infectious agents that cause serious sickness or death are actually maladapted to their host, to which they may have only recently gained access through some genetic, environmental or sociological change." That fits the SARS-CoV-2 virus so well! The virus can still be made to adapt through human strategies.

Eradication of the virus is also a difficult goal to reach when there are alternate hosts where the virus can find refuge and from whom it can re-emerge to infect humans. There are reports now of minks, cats, dogs, lions, tigers, gorillas and white tailed deer being infected with the virus. These can potentially become reservoirs, while the vastly numerous and highly mobile human population will remain the favourite vehicle for the virus to hitchhike its way across the world. It can and will slip through lockdowns. Like love, as Shakespeare declares in *Venus and Adonis*, the virus too laughs at locksmiths.

Human societies have to resume economic and social activities, albeit with caution. We cannot be living with long lockdowns, lest we irreparably harm the future of our children. We must free ourselves from the obsession with zero-Covid, while we vigorously nudge the virus to become a less threatening co-habitant of our shared planet.

The failure of the zero-Covid strategy also calls for renewed commitment to global solidarity. If all of humanity does not collectively practise transmission containment norms and the vast majority of people in all countries is not vaccinated, the virus can emerge with new mutants that do not reduce their virulence even as they infect with ease. The evolutionary pressure has to be exerted by the host species as a whole, not in pockets. That realisation must change the behaviour of anti-maskers, vaccine opponents and vaccine hoarding nations. Otherwise, the virus will feast on our follies to kill many more, even though its evolutionary instinct is not to do so.

The writer, a cardiologist and epidemiologist, is President, Public Health Foundation of India. The views expressed are personal



URMIL TAT

## A HELPING HAND TO KABUL

India must diversify its development aid to Afghanistan

OVER THE PAST few weeks, there has been much talk about India's diplomatic stakes being threatened by the changing political scenario in Afghanistan. Despite the current unpredictable political climate, India's years of investments in infrastructure and grassroots development could act as a building block for cementing relations with the new regime in the coming years.

India is currently the fifth-largest donor in Afghanistan. The latter is also among the top five recipients of India's external assistance. India's total development assistance over the years has been worth over \$3 billion. The current situation on the ground is different from the 1990s, when India had to move out of Afghanistan due to the Taliban takeover. India has established itself over the last two decades as a reliable development partner, having largely delivered on its envisioned projects.

India's development cooperation with Afghanistan has encompassed both soft and hard measures. The former has helped build goodwill and greater people-to-people contact and has involved measures focusing on health, education, capacity development and food security, among others. Many projects have been community-driven, thus helping engage a large section of people in development efforts.

As far as hard infrastructure is concerned, building institutions, roads and infrastructure for power transmission has featured prominently. Examples include the parliament building which was inaugurated in 2015, fi-

nancing the Delaram-Zaranj Highway as well as the 42 MW Salma Dam in Herat province.

India had also engaged in triangular cooperation under the US umbrella, cooperating with USAID on various programmes like the Afghan Women's Empowerment Programme, a collaboration between USAID and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) for providing vocational education for Afghan women.

Moreover, much can be said about the nature of India's development aid and cooperation that distinguishes it from other donors. Firstly, India follows a demand-driven approach, which implies that the sectors for investment are chosen by the recipient government. Secondly, although its aid is extended as a soft means to gain strategic leverage, it comes without political trappings. The latter can be seen in aid extended by Germany and the US which have often been contingent on the progress in talks between the Taliban and the civilian government. Further, when compared in PPP terms, the value of the Indian rupee is often underestimated, meaning that the Indian rupee would be able to buy substantially more goods and services at adjusted exchange rates. For example, a study by the Stimson Centre found out that even though Indian aid in 2015-16 totalled \$1.36 billion, in PPP terms it could be pegged at over \$5 billion. Thus, Indian investment has not only been significant but also extremely valuable and economical over the years, for Afghanistan.

At the Afghanistan Conference in Geneva in 2020, India announced several fresh development commitments including the construction of the Shahtoot Dam in Kabul, as well as several restoration and community development projects. New political developments in Afghanistan are unlikely to lead to a complete disconnect with India and its established socio-economic role. However, India may need to adapt its programmes to new realities.

In the post-American power vacuum in the country, China is likely to be the biggest gainer. It could look to build the Wakhan corridor in order to gain better connectivity with Afghanistan, as a part of its larger BRI endeavour.

What cannot be ignored is that there is still an infrastructure deficit in Afghanistan and a need for rebuilding and reconstruction. As far as development cooperation is concerned, however, India needs to further diversify its portfolios. An area that it can look at is strengthening terms of trade between India and Afghanistan, considering the latter's trade deficit. Further, India can do much to build a more resilient Afghanistan with respect to climate change and disaster risk reduction with its spearheading global campaigns like CDRI. India needs to establish itself as a neutral entity that is keen on the development of the region but ready to work with all parties concerned.

The writer is research associate at the Center for Air Power Studies



## AUGUST 28, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

### IMPORT POLICY

THE POLICY OF importing essential commodities came under attack by Opposition members in Rajya Sabha on August 27. But Finance Minister R Venkataraman was firm in saying that imports were necessary to augment supplies, check prices and build buffer stocks. He, however, agreed with members that self-reliance was necessary. He was replying to a four-hour discussion on the price situation and the steps taken by the government. Congress (I) members held the previous government of Morarji Desai and Charan Singh responsible for the rising prices. One of the members, however, said the govern-

ment had no right to freeze wages if it could not hold the price line. The Opposition members emphasised the need for taking strong measures to curb black marketeers, hoarders and speculators. They thought the government was not doing enough.

### CPI ON POLL REFORMS

THE COMMUNIST PARTY of India which stayed away from the July meeting of the Opposition parties on electoral reforms came out with its own suggestions for such reforms. The national council of the party, which ended its four-day meeting on August 26, adopted a 15-point resolution on these

reforms. "Even to preserve democratic institutions and parliamentary democracy electoral reforms have become urgent and of crucial importance," the resolution said.

### ANGOLA RETALIATES

ANGOLAN FORCES SHOT down a South African helicopter, destroyed a tank and inflicted other casualties in heavy fighting near the southern town of Njiva on August 27, according to a defence communique issued in Luanda. Angolan news agency ANGOP said two motorised columns of South African troops backed by heavy air power entered the country from Namibia on August 24.



# 13 THE IDEAS PAGE

## Bring her back to school

Pandemic's challenge calls for concerted push to stop girls from dropping out, and to include them in professionally and monetarily rewarding fields of higher education



AMITABH KANT AND PIYUSH PRAKASH

INDIAN WOMEN EXCELLED in the most decorated Olympic Games for India so far. There is no reason for it to be otherwise in any other field, especially education, given the right support. As a nation, we can ill-afford to ignore half the potential workforce if we aspire to be an economic powerhouse. As a society, women can be the pivot to bring about critical and lasting social transformation. As individuals, they deserve a shot at being the very best they can.

The global average for the private rate of return (the increase in an individual's earnings) with just one extra year of schooling is about 9 per cent, while the social returns of an extra year of school are even higher—above 10 per cent at the secondary and higher education levels as per a decennial World Bank review. Interestingly, the private returns for women in higher education are much higher than for men—11 to 17 per cent as per different estimates. This has clear policy implications. For their own empowerment, as well as for society at large, we must bring more and more women within the ambit of higher education.

It is estimated that over 2.4 crore girls globally are on the verge of dropping out of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Pandemic-induced school closures and economic hardships have significantly exacerbated many vectors that influence the problem of women in education. In the Indian context before the pandemic, there was a welcome trend in the gradual increase in the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for women in higher education—from 19.8 per cent in 2012-13 to 27.3 per cent in 2019-20. That said, a more nuanced picture of the problem of women and higher education can be seen in Graph 1. As girls progress from primary to secondary to tertiary school levels, their numbers decrease by the year. The graph shows this gradual descent and the resulting paucity of women, who are even eligible to go to college.

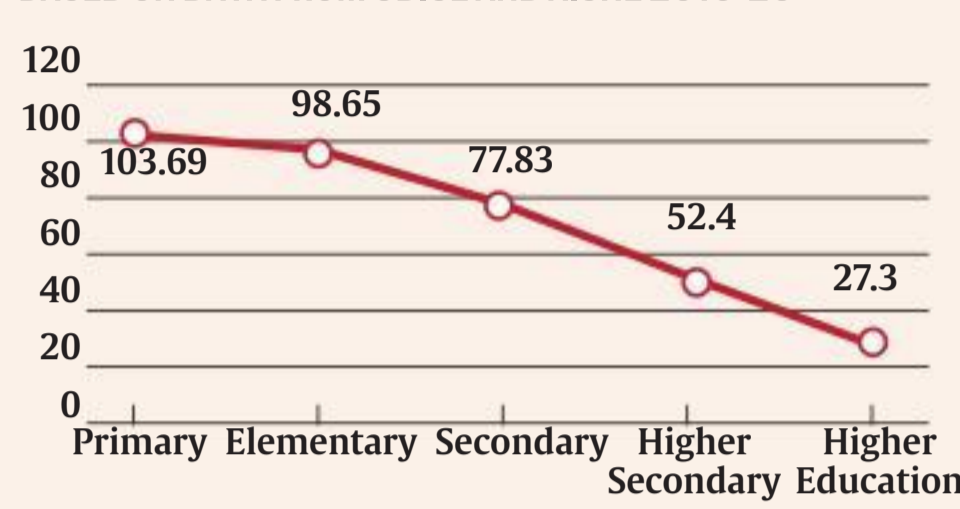
The reasons for girls dropping out in rural India are varied. The primary ones are obvious: Girls drop out of school because, one, they are engaged in domestic activities (31.9 per cent), two, they have financial constraints (18.4 per cent), three, they are not interested in education (15.3 per cent), and four, they get married (12.4 per cent). It is estimated that over one crore girls are on the verge of dropping out of schools due to the pandemic alone.

The problem is not only rooted in poverty and poor quality of school education, but also gender biases and outdated social norms. It comes as no shock that the states having the highest rate of secondary school drop-outs among girls are also the ones where a significant percentage of girls get married before the age of 18 years, as we see in Graph 2.

Deep-rooted gender biases are also reflected in the choice of schools, access to private tuitions and the choice of discipline in higher education. As per the NSS 2017-18, 75th round, on 'Household Social Consumption: Education', at the higher secondary level, 28 per cent of boys attend private schools as opposed to 24 per cent of girls. The average annual household expenditure on girls at this level is Rs 2,860 less than that on boys. In India, the average annual cost for professional courses is much higher compared to that of simple graduation programmes (Rs 50,000 vs Rs 8,000). Of the girls who do manage to enrol in a tertiary degree, a smaller proportion go on to pursue professional courses such as engineering (28.5 per cent), while many more take courses such as pharmacy (58.7 per cent) or opt for "normal graduation" (52 per cent) as per AISHE 2019-20. Their representation is lowest in institutions of national importance, followed by deemed and private universities.



GRAPH 1  
BASED ON DATA FROM UDISE AND AISHE 2019-20



GRAPH 2  
BASED ON DATA FROM UDISE 2019-20 AND UNICEF

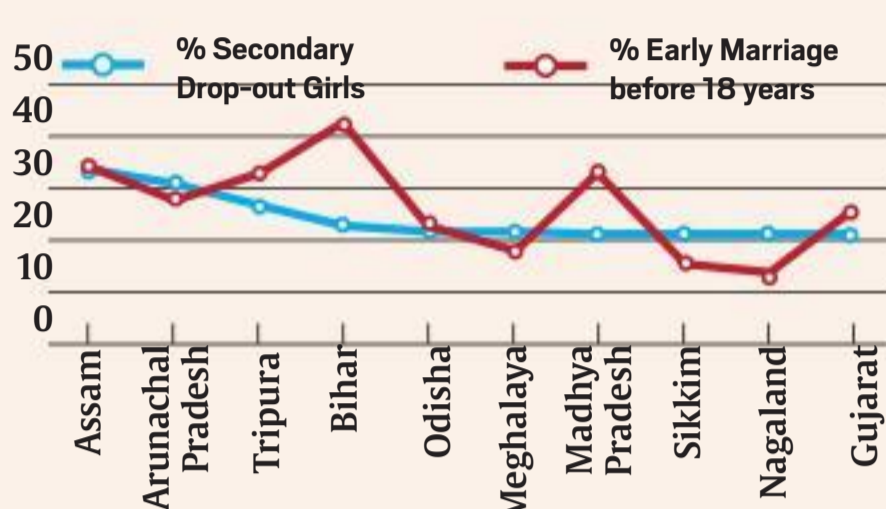


Illustration by CR Sasikumar; Graphics: Tarun Sehgal

To overcome these systemic challenges, the government has taken a number of initiatives in the past such as the National Scheme of Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education (NSIGSE), supernumerary seats in all IITs and the PRAGATI Scholarship scheme for girls in technical education. However, in these unprecedented times, we need unprecedented measures to address the issue of girl child school drop-outs and bring more girls in professionally and monetarily rewarding fields of higher education.

First, as an immediate step, in every locality, a mohalla school or a community learning programme should be started with appropriate Covid norms if the local disaster management authorities and the state governments permit. Evidence from the Ebola pandemic shows that continued engagement with educational activities reduces drop-outs in a statistically significant way. NITI Aayog, with the help of civil society organisations, had started a community programme led by volunteers called "Saksham Bitya" in 28 aspirational districts where more than 1.87 lakh girl students were trained in socio-emotional and ethical learning. Such initiatives should be replicated to ensure more girls do not drop out of schools during the pandemic.

Second, to predict likely drop-outs, a gender atlas comprising indicators that are mapped to key reasons for school drop-outs should be developed. Teachers should also be trained in all the scholarships and schemes available that provide economic support to girls and their families for continuing their education.

Third, there is a need to revise the National Scheme of Incentive to Girls for Secondary Education in areas or states with high prevalence of drop-outs and early child marriages.

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Fourth, special education zones need to be set up in areas which have been traditionally backward in education. Every panchayat showing a consistent trend in girl child drop-outs should have composite schools till higher secondary (classes I-XII). The National Education Policy 2020 provides for a gender inclusion fund. This fund should be utilised to support STEM education in these schools as well as in all Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas.

State governments need to leverage existing schemes to design interventions to promote women in higher education. The recently modified viability gap funding scheme includes provisions for social infrastructure projects, including education. For greenfield projects in higher education, 60 per cent of the funding can be accessed as viability gap funding from the central and state governments. For pilot projects in education, close to 80 per cent of the funding is available as viability gap funding and an additional 50 per cent as operational cost in initial years.

Fifth and most importantly, behavioural nudges are going to be key in tackling social prejudices and orthodox cultural norms that prevent girls from achieving their innate potential. Behavioural Insights Units (BIU) may be established across states to tackle social issues with the help of ultra-local NGOs/CSOs to reach the last mile. NITI Aayog has taken a leap forward in this direction by establishing a BIU to tackle nutrition and health challenges in aspirational districts.

The pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges for educators and students, especially for those on the margins, including girls. However, with recent experiments and learning experience, informed targeting of ample resources and an agile policy environment, this challenge could well prove to be an opportunity. Given the right enabling environment, educational outcomes can be improved.

Kant is CEO NITI Aayog and Prakash is senior associate, Education Vertical, NITI Aayog

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"In a pandemic, what would you expect? Not joy, for sure. But Covid is far from the only shadow looming over us."

— THE GUARDIAN

## The land question, and answer

India needs a radical land reforms programme. Land reform should be a central subject, while agriculture can remain with the states



M KUNHAMAN

THE FARMERS' AGITATION in India has attracted worldwide attention and support. This is as it should be. Farmers are our *annadata*. During the Covid-19 pandemic, while all the sectors were thrown into a tailspin, the farm sector has sustained us.

The post-Independence history of Indian agriculture has few parallels, due to the unique success of the Green Revolution. Within 12-15 years, the country achieved food self-sufficiency. Ending food imports helped us save vast fiscal resources which could be used for development and welfare. Unprecedented rural prosperity ensued.

However, national-level food self-sufficiency did not result in household-level food security. Poverty co-existed with prosperity due to inequitable resource distribution and concentration of land. Its alleviation and eradication necessitated welfare intervention through the Food Security Act, MGNREGA, etc. The absence of effective and equitable land reforms, thus, accounts for the persistence of poverty.

The story of land reforms in India is a dismal one. Being a state subject, various states implemented reforms with varying degrees of effectiveness and equity. But everywhere, the objectives were the same: Abolition of feudal landlordism, conferment of ownership on tenants, fixing land ceilings, distribution of surplus land, increasing agricultural productivity and production, etc.

Many of the objectives were achieved, many were not. Feudal land relations were abolished; tenants got ownership rights. However, owing to manipulations in land records, much surplus land was not available for distribution among the landless tillers of the soil, the majority of whom were the former "untouchables" and today's Dalits. Less than one per cent of the total land in the country was declared as surplus. The programme was implemented in a country where non-agricultural sectors and activities were fast developing, absorbing increasing numbers of the rural population. The relevant criteria for land entitlement should have been employment and main source of income.

The ex-tenants, after getting land, became tenant-turned-capitalist-farmers who effectively made use of several programmes—Green Revolution technology, bank nationalisation and priority sector lending, urbanisation and expanding urban markets. They dominated the small and marginal farmers, and landless farm labourers. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was an interlocking of land, labour, credit and product markets. Those who controlled land, controlled water, which later promoted water trade, including drinking water trade. They cornered a disproportionate share of various subsidies. Many members of rich farm households moved into industry, business and professions. Many

migrated abroad for quality higher education and employment. Others returned to India and occupied important positions.

The tenant-turned-capitalist farmers formed political parties, which produced strong state-level leaders, who controlled state-level planning, fiscal policies and politics. In place of a strong Centre and weak states, came a weak Centre and strong states. Now, dismissing a state government under Article 356 is not easy. Regional satraps are democratically elected authoritarians with the power to block pro-poor changes. Bureaucracy and police have unprecedented powers. Individual freedom is often curtailed by rulers at the Centre and states.

Rich farmers have formed strong power blocs, with unquestioned clout and bargaining power, not only in north-western India but also in states like Maharashtra. Agriculturally rich states still attract large numbers of migrant workers; in some, the bonded labour system persists (with bonded labourers invariably being Dalits and Adivasis) to circumvent peak season labour shortage. The migrant workers were the worst hit by the pandemic. Atrocities against Dalits are rising practically in every state. Caste discrimination and prejudices persist.

Social restructuring needs agrarian reform, in the form of a land reforms programme, in addition to the measures that farmers are agitating for. Farmers are seeking legal safeguards against market fluctuations, especially against any downward pressure on agricultural prices. They are not anti-market. While they welcome every rise in prices, they demand legal protection against price falls, a legitimate stance.

Even as agricultural prosperity must be promoted, it should not be just shared between farmers (especially rich ones) and urban consumers, but by all. Farm workers, in particular, must benefit from it.

The relation between land and caste, between caste and labour has not been broken yet. Consider the social composition of agricultural labourers, scavengers, rag-pickers et al. Indisputably, agricultural wage rates have risen progressively. But farm workers deserve more than a rising wage rate. They deserve access to resources.

This calls for a programme of radical land reforms. Agricultural land should be pooled and equally distributed among farm households, based on the two afore-mentioned criteria. Non-farm households should not be permitted to hold farmland. The land reforms programme should not be left to the states, as it is likely to be sabotaged by regional satraps. Land reforms should be a central subject; while agriculture can remain a state subject. Such a programme will empower and enrich marginalised and excluded individuals and social groups. It should be the kernel of a justiciable universal property right that must form an integral/inalienable part of Article 21 (Right to Life) of the Constitution. The right to life is hollow without a right to livelihood. Through an effective land reforms programme, let's build a prosperous India based on equity and justice.

The writer retired as professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Tuljapur campus

## Importance of engagement

Shunning Taliban may not be wise, but India's response must factor in its conduct



PINAK RANJAN CHAKRAVARTY

THE STUNNING ADVANCE of the Taliban in Afghanistan has surprised all. An Islamic Emirate and Sharia law have been imposed and ground reports indicate that women are bearing the brunt of the obscurantist laws. The chaos outside Kabul airport is heart-wrenching: Young Afghans clinging to an aircraft taking off and falling from the sky to their deaths and mothers handing over infant children to American soldiers for evacuation. Utter desperation, despair and fear are driving the Afghans to vote with their feet. Now comes news of the terrible blasts at Kabul airport.

The Taliban is trying to project a reformed image, but its soldiers are reported to be conducting revenge killings and hunting down Afghans and foreigners who have worked for the Americans and the government. Reports of resistance in the northern Panjshir province, still outside Taliban control, have emerged. Ahmad Massoud, son of the legendary Ahmad Shah Massoud, has linked up with former vice-president Amrullah Saleh. Massoud has offered to negotiate, but the Taliban has peremptorily demanded surrender and has sent its cadres to capture Panjshir. Whether the resistance gathers momentum is too early to tell.

US President Joe Biden has repeatedly defended his decision to withdraw and he even brought forward the date of withdrawal from September to August 31. The announcement of the dates of withdrawal gave the Taliban an advantage.

Over the years, the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) fought the Taliban, suffering casualties. The American

withdrawal has been a huge blow to its morale. The withdrawal of maintenance personnel crippled the Afghan air force. Divided by ethnicities, tribal and sub-tribal loyalties, under a governance system riddled with corruption, the ANDSF splintered and melted away. For centuries, the Afghans have fought on the basis of primary tribal loyalties and not for abstract values like national interest or democracy. The ANDSF was also not trained for asymmetrical war. The Taliban used all these factors to subvert it. The US calculation for an orderly withdrawal went awry as it was predicated upon the ANDSF holding up the Taliban for some months.

The Taliban does enjoy some popular support among the Afghans, who are fed up with the endemic corruption. Once the Taliban decided to move into the final stretch, Pakistan's deep state provided full logistical and other support. Pakistan's eternal quest for "strategic depth" has kept it allied with the Taliban. The deep state, led by army Chief General Bajwa, has been trying to broker an inclusive transitional government. There is still feverish activity underway to form a patchwork government and Pakistan's foreign minister will be in Kabul for confabulations. A surprising collaborator of Bajwa has been General Nick Carter, UK's Chief of Defence Staff. General Carter has been peddling the narrative of a reformed Taliban.

Pakistan is openly gloating over the Taliban "victory". It may be upbeat but blowback in the form of Islamist terrorism and its economic fallout could be game changers. Afghanistan is

bankrupt and foreign aid, which constituted around 60 per cent of its annual budget, has dried up. Pakistan is in no position to help it financially, which leaves only China with the capacity to fund it. But China does not dole out money for nothing. Will it provide financing in return for Afghanistan's mineral riches? The EU has cut off all financial aid and said that it will not recognise any Taliban government, unless it adheres to international human rights norms. The US and UK may not be averse to a compromise for their own strategic reasons. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, like the UN, has mouthed platitudes.

The strategic impact of the events unfolding in Afghanistan will reverberate for years. The chaotic American withdrawal will strengthen international perception about the durability of US's commitments. China, Iran, Pakistan and Russia, all wanted the US out of their backyard. Turkey has joined this axis. These countries have kept their embassies opened in Kabul, hoping to fill the vacuum. These developments underscore a fundamental shift in geopolitical alignments. This will also recalibrate India's ties with these countries and the US.

For India, this is a strategic setback, and raises the spectre of a revival of jihadi terrorism. Both China and Russia have been wary of terrorism spilling over into Xinjiang and Central Asia respectively. Both have refused to accept any refugees. China, with its deep pockets, has been cautious about investing in Afghanistan. Its workers in Pakistan have been killed on a regular basis. Afghanistan is far more unstable,

although its precious mineral reserves remain a compelling attraction, in addition to extending the CPEC to Afghanistan. China has already made extensive inroads into India's neighbouring countries, undermining India's interests and influence.

Pakistan-US ties are also likely to be on the agenda for a recalibration. The nuclear issue will keep some Americans worried. A former ISI chief has boasted that Pakistan defeated the Soviet Union in Afghanistan with American money and now it has defeated the US in Afghanistan with American money. The exit from Afghanistan will help the US redirect its resources to deal with the growing challenge of an expansionist and aggressive China.

India's Afghanistan options are limited. The immediate focus is solely on evacuating Indians and Afghans. The memory of dealing with the Taliban during the Indian Airlines hijacking episode has left an indelible mark. India had opted to help Afghanistan by building infrastructure, and by providing training and medical treatment. Its image among the Afghan population is positive. Its policy of welcoming Afghan refugees will buttress this image. Shunning a Taliban-dominated government may not be wise in the future, but the behaviour of the government in Kabul will be the defining factor, as will be Pakistan's behaviour. India will have to reopen the embassy in Kabul, as any prolonged absence on the ground will be detrimental to its interests.

The writer is former Secretary, MEA and former Ambassador. He is a Visiting Fellow at ORF

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### BOOM OR DOOM?

THIS REFERS TO the article 'The long road to recovery' (IE, August 26). All the claims of economic growth, explained in terms of various parameters, do not give a correct forecast. The Indian lower-middle class and the poor are under tremendous financial distress today. Unless their buying power increases, the actual state of our economy will remain overcast with gloomy clouds.

Manish Mishra, Bhopal

### CONGRESS SAGA

This refers to the editorial 'Who's in charge?' (IE, August 27). The Congress party needs a full-time president, one who is accountable, unlike the current situation where the interim president is not accountable at all but has all the necessary powers. There are several state elections before the general elections in 2024. The party should urgently resolve its leadership issues with the appointment of a full-time president.

Parth Nawale, Mumbai

### AGAINST HATE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial 'The Indore test' (IE, August 27). The incident is reflective of the underlying communal animosity between two religious groups that has been brewing for several years now. Instead of fomenting further social unrest with divisive statements, the powers-that-be need to unequivocally condemn mob rule in the state. The perpetrators of this alleged

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religiously-motivated public thrashing must be brought to book.

Varun Das, Zirakpur

### HELP AFGHANISTAN

This refers to the article 'Connect with Kabul' (IE, August 27). It is high time that New Delhi accepted the reality in Kabul. India should actively pursue soft power to restore normalcy in Afghanistan. Inking negotiations to ensure safe travel of Afghan nationals including students, patients, children and women to India who wish so is an imperative. Leveraging our hold as the rotational president of UNSC is also pertinent in this regard. Garnering global support to pressurise Taliban to opt for a civilised rule is the key.

Anjali Bhavana, Thiruvananthapuram