



THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

NO DISEASE SUFFERED BY A LIVE MAN CAN BE KNOWN, FOR EVERY LIVING PERSON HAS HIS OWN PECULIARITIES. — LEO TOLSTOY

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

THE SURE SHOT

After course correction, Centre, state and healthcare workers have notched up formidable dashboard. The success must be built on

FOR THE BETTER part of the past two-and-a-half months, since the government started implementing its revamped Covid vaccination strategy, the target of inoculating the country's adult population by the end of this year seemed an unrealistic one. The pace of vaccination had, no doubt, gone up appreciably after June 21. However, with vaccine hesitancy posing a formidable challenge and the old problem of Centre-state discord over supplies surfacing now and then, valid questions were being asked of the healthcare system's capacity to administer more than 150 crore shots in six months. In the past four weeks, the country has taken important steps in addressing those concerns. The data puts the changed situation in perspective: The first 10 crore doses were administered in 85 days, the next 10 crore took 45 days, less than 20 days were required for the journey between 50 crore and 60 crore inoculations and in the past 10 days, nearly 8 crore people have received the jab. A particularly heartening aspect of the turnaround is the increased uptake of vaccines in rural and less urbanised parts of the country — they accounted for about two-thirds of the shots administered last month.

The project, which was in utter disarray during the second wave, got a new lease of life after the Centre changed its procurement and distribution policy in June. Vaccine supplies, especially that of Covishield, have gradually improved. After initial hiccups, the coordination mechanism between the Centre and states has begun to work well, and the vaccination strategy, based on calibrated targets, seems to be falling in place. Equally notable have been the efforts of local administrative agencies and grassroots-level healthcare personnel to persuade vaccine sceptics. In several parts of the country, health departments used their limited resources creatively and utilised the social capital enjoyed by ASHA and anganwadi workers to allay misgivings while combating, simultaneously, the demands of the second wave. The course correction in June gave an impetus to such initiatives. With prior information about vaccine supply, district authorities could fine-tune their strategies for awareness campaigns. The personal example set by the inoculator — more than 80 per cent of medical personnel and frontline workers have received both the shots — played no small role in enhancing confidence in the vaccines.

There's still a long distance to travel to attain the vaccination targets. More than 50 per cent people in the country's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, have not yet received a single shot. West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand and Bihar are other significant outliers to the project's recent success. The fact that the contagion continues to be rampant in Kerala despite the state being amongst the top performers of the vaccination project frames the enormity of the challenge. Only 17 per cent of the eligible population has received both the shots and things could get out of hand if the virus mutates to more infectious variants. The year-end target for two shots for all adults is, therefore, non-negotiable. At the same time, new imperatives such as vaccination for adolescents demand the policymakers' attention. Increasing the momentum built in August and enhancing the atmosphere of trust will be critical in addressing these challenges.

CURIOUS CASE OF CBI

Now that contents of Deshmukh preliminary enquiry are out in open, onus is on the agency to clear the air

THE CENTRAL BUREAU OF Investigation's arrest of its own sub-inspector and a lawyer close to the family of former Maharashtra minister Anil Deshmukh once again raises concerns about what and who it chooses to investigate, and how. The CBI is investigating allegations that as Maharashtra Home Minister, Deshmukh asked police officials to collect bribes from Mumbai's bars and restaurants. The serious charge of political corruption was made by the controversial former Commissioner of Mumbai Police Param Bir Singh, who also named Sachin Waze as the police official Deshmukh is said to have directed to organise the collections. Singh's allegation, significantly, came after his own transfer, following Waze's arrest in the Antilla security scare case. It was on Singh's plea that the Bombay High Court directed the CBI to conduct a preliminary enquiry (PE) to establish if an offence was made out. Singh himself is now being investigated by the state government.

The CBI's crackdown last week came after the PE report, which had concluded that no cognizable offence was made out against Deshmukh, became public. The CBI has not denied that report, it has said senior officers overruled the PE, and decided a corruption case was made out against the former minister. That isn't quite convincing.

The agency needs to come clean given how the noise in this case has been amplified by the grind of several political axes. More so when the head of CBI, Subodh Jaiswal, was Director-General of Police of Maharashtra until December 2020, and his differences with Deshmukh and the Shiv Sena-led Maha Vikas Aghadi government, had become public. He left the state police in the middle of his tenure. It was under him that a senior police officer tapped phones to investigate what she alleged was a cash-for-transfers scam, indirectly implicating Deshmukh. It is unusual that a case is registered when the PE says no offence is made out. Now that this PE is out in the open, the onus is on the agency to address the questions raised. For due process in the case — and for its own credibility.

FREEZE FRAME

EP UNNY



America after Afghanistan



ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY

Is Washington too war-weary, is the world too far away? There are no clear answers

THE AFGHANISTAN WAR has formally ended. Its end has led to a new foreign policy doctrine for the Biden era. In a speech of clarity, conviction and force, President Biden laid out the principal components of the doctrine.

First, containing China and Russia will be the focus of US foreign policy under him. Second, cyber security is a new mode of warfare and must be given prime attention. Third, America's counter-terrorism project will not be pursued via boots on the ground. Instead, "over the horizon" capabilities, meaning satellites and unmanned drones, will be the predominant instruments. Fourth, nation-making or democracy-building will not be the purpose of external military deployment which, if used, will have clear and achievable goals strictly limited to security, not extendable to larger politics. Security will not include counter-insurgency, meaning long-term military involvement in a civil war. Fifth, democracy and human rights will continue to be key drivers of foreign policy, but economic tools and diplomacy will be the main methods for achieving such goals. Countries cannot be forced to be free via military means.

This doctrine is different from how Biden's two predecessors viewed foreign policy. For Donald Trump, bringing the military back home, withdrawal from alliances and unilateralism were important goals. Biden would strengthen alliances, but bring the armed force back from areas where they have ceased to serve "vital national interest". Though this was not explicitly stated, the implication is that American military deployment in Japan and South Korea will continue, for these "military theatres", aimed at balancing China, are much more important than Afghanistan.

The Biden doctrine also departs from how President Obama, his former boss, viewed foreign policy. Obama remained quite torn about military deployment overseas and might even have believed that disengagement from Afghanistan was vitally important. But he could not fully take on the security establishment, and left the troops in Afghanistan.

Going against much of the security establishment, Biden has pulled the military out. For over a decade, certainly since the killing of Osama Bin Laden (May 2, 2011), Biden has favoured troop disengagement from Afghanistan, but first Obama overruled him and then Trump did

not complete the withdrawal, though he did prepare the ground for it, however controversially. As President, Biden finally had power to act on his beliefs, and he ended the war. It was also an election promise.

Criticism, especially from an important segment of the security elites, is likely to continue. The principal critique centres on Biden's framing of the choices — escalate or leave. If America did not withdraw now, said Biden, the only other choice was sending thousands of troops for a third decade of war. Critics disagree. They say that the option of keeping a small force in Afghanistan and maintaining air support for the Afghan National Army was available. It would have at the very least kept the stalemate going, and not handed a victory to the Taliban. The Afghan army collapsed not because it had no will to fight, but because US support, critical to military combat, was abruptly withdrawn.

Scholars of Afghanistan's internal politics disagree with Biden's security critics. For them, the fundamental flaw of America's security approach was its concentration of power in Kabul, whereas Afghanistan's historically rooted tribal and ethnic differences required a decentralised mode of governance and power-sharing. The more power was concentrated in Kabul, the more the nation-building was undermined. Add the sanctuary provided by Pakistan to the Taliban, and the whole system became vulnerable to the Taliban's penetration and capture.

Biden's security critics have also run up against an important political reality. For years now, America's public opinion has been turning against the Afghan war. The recent popular frustration was about how the military withdrawal was executed, not about the withdrawal per se. Moreover, this frustration is likely to ebb, for an estimated 90 per cent of Americans living in Afghanistan have been evacuated. That thousands of Afghans, who worked alongside the Americans, remain trapped in the country appears to generate some regret, but no overpowering emotion. Biden barely touched on this morally significant matter in his speech.

Twenty years after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, there is no popular appetite left in America for prolonging the war. Afghanistan is simply too far away from the national imagination. Even if the Afghan war

did not take too many American lives, it was consuming enormous resources — \$300 million a day, as Biden put it. Moreover, in recent years, terrorist attacks on US soil have come from home-grown groups, not from Al Qaeda or the Taliban based in Afghanistan. The end of the war thus meets the test of domestic popular endorsement. But what about its international implications?

Two interconnected issues are relevant here. First, the Afghanistan intervention was a NATO-supported military enterprise. It is not clear that Biden consulted European allies before deciding to withdraw. Biden's explicit endorsement of multilateralism sits uneasily with his unilateral withdrawal.

Second, and more important, thousands of Afghan allies were left behind in a situation all too vulnerable to the Taliban's naked aggression. This is bound to create great uneasiness in Taiwan and Japan. Both face Chinese hostility, which in Taiwan's case is especially vigorous.

China's Taiwan preoccupation is not adequately appreciated in India's intellectual and political quarters, which remain understandably concerned with China's border plans. But in the wider intellectual circles, it is well known that Chinese security policy has a relentless Taiwan obsession. For Beijing, the border with India is a much less significant game. China has never given up its ambition of capturing Taiwan, which it views as a "renegade province". In 1895, Japanese colonialism took it away, and then, in 1949, those who lost the Chinese civil war made a home there. China views the return of Taiwan as just revenge for its historic humiliation.

Taiwan's security functions under an American umbrella. Biden says that withdrawal from Afghanistan was necessary because the US must now concentrate on China (and Russia). But will the US provide firm support if Taiwan is mortally threatened by a surging China? Or, is America too war-weary, and Taiwan also too far away from the popular imagination? After Afghanistan, this is a scary question in world politics. There are no clear answers, only doubts about America's plans or capabilities.

The writer is Sol Goldman Professor of International Studies and the Social Sciences at Brown University

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CHANDRA BHAN PRASAD

CHANDAN, THE PIONEER

Mitra made space in mainstream media for the Dalit voice

THE MORNING OF November 16, 1996, is an event Dalit history will sing of. *The Pioneer* flashed an edit page article by BN Uniyal — 'In Search of a Dalit Journalist'. Chandan Mitra was the editor of *The Pioneer*. The article declared that the earth was not flat, that Indian media practised apartheid.

The article had a background. A brawl had taken place between Manyavar Kanshi Ram and a noted TV journalist. The media stood with the journalist. The *Washington Post's* South Asia bureau chief, Kenneth J Cooper, was puzzled — no dissenter in the entire media. An African-American, Cooper sought Uniyal's help to find a Dalit journalist. Uniyal spent days searching: "Suddenly, I realised that in all the 30 years I had worked as a journalist, I had never met a fellow journalist who was a Dalit, not, not one".

To me, Uniyal is not an Indian civilisationally, not a Hindu at all; perhaps a white man in disguise. How else could he have "f****d" the conscience of the Indian media? But was being Uniyal enough? There seems to have lived a Holy Book in Chandan, which granted Uniyal the freedom to go after caste-Hindu apartheid.

That November 16 morning had an unsettling impact on me — to laugh or cry? *Thuk...thuk...* the JNU hostel door whispered. A Statue of Liberty lookalike walked in. She dragged me to the Vasant Vihar office of the *Post*. Innately seditious, Cooper would tell me about newsroom diversity in America. With

The Print now, Rama Lakshmi went through a hundred pages from the American Society of News Editors website that tracked workforce diversity in American media.

In a few weeks, we produced an 18-page memorandum, 'End Apartheid from India Media, Democratise Nation's Opinion'. It was submitted to the Editors Guild of India, Press Council, and Delhi-based media outlets. I was in *The Pioneer* office to submit a copy. That's when I met Ajaz Ashraf, a *Pioneer* staffer — we became friends. I started writing op-eds for *The Pioneer*.

I would frequent *The Pioneer* office to submit articles, collect cheques. It was probably April 1997 when I saw Chandan Mitra entering his office. Had he sported a hat and long coat, he would have resembled Lord Macaulay; a compulsive civiliser. A staffer, Avijit Ghosh, knew me well and coaxed Chandan to give me a weekly column. It was late March 1999 when Avijit took me to the editor, who smoked. Chandan wore the grace of Pratap Bhanu Mehta, the depth of GPD (GP Deshpande), and, as I would learn a little later, the heart of Ardeshtir Godrej. Filled with sugar, coffee arrived, without biscuits.

"Give me an example," Chandan asked when I argued that Dalit opinions need not necessarily match the mainstream. "Examine all Dr Ambedkar wrote, see if he sobbed, 'poverty, poverty,' sought red cards." I hadn't looked straight into his eyes. "To Ambedkar, what mattered most was dignity and freedom." "Can I smoke?" I asked. "Why not?"

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tered most was dignity and freedom. "Can I smoke?" I asked. "Why not?" He offered his own packet, I had mine. "Migration to cities is not palayan, it's a flight to freedom," I went on. Chandan flashed a cigarette again. Mine, too, went up in flames, metaphorically. "Great Indians empathetic to Dalit causes sing poverty and equality," I said. "With us also, British practised cruelty; came too late, left too early." In his smoke-filled chamber, the *Dalit Diary* was born.

Then came *The Gin Drinkers*, Sagarika Ghose's novel, and a party. I responded with a rum drinkers' party. "Rum isn't that inspirational," a guest jeered. The next day, I met Chandan, and complained about the liquid-food divide: "I want to replace rum with scotch." I was expressive; Rs 5,000 was added to my monthly honorarium. In most meetings thereafter, I spoke to his wallet, the Ardeshtir in him would smile — Rs 10,000, Rs 15,000, Rs 25,000...

In just a decade and a half — 1999-2014 — *Dalit Diary* birthed multiple thoughts: Digvijay Singh's Bhopal declaration, Dalit capitalism, English as the Dalit goddess, a new mood to the Dalit middle class.

Hello! Lord; without you and *The Pioneer*, my life would have been a pen without ink, a book without pages.

The writer is a scholar affiliated with the Mercatus Center, George Mason University, US

SEPTEMBER 6, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

PM FLAGS CRISIS

PRIME MINISTER INDIRA Gandhi has warned that the country is in a difficult phase economically, politically and militarily and these challenges call for a greater sense of national purpose. The prime minister mentioned this at a meeting of the secretaries to the government and added that the challenge was not just for those in politics but also for those in government as well. Speaking of a "crisis, which is an Indian crisis and an international crisis," Indira Gandhi said that there was a major attempt to denigrate India at international fora. "It is only when we stand firm that respect for us increases. It is wrong to think that when we give in, there will be goodwill for us," she said.

Assuring bureaucrats and civil servants, she said that she did not think all civil servants are bureaucratic.

TEACHERS' PROTEST

PROTESTS AND BOYCOTT of functions marked Teacher's Day in Delhi. A number of teachers' organisations held demonstrations in their areas to protest the neglect of teachers. The call for protest was given by the newly formed Federation of Educational Associations. The Delhi administration had to postpone a function to give awards to teachers. Members of the Delhi Primary Teachers' Association wore black arm bands and observed a fast during the day.

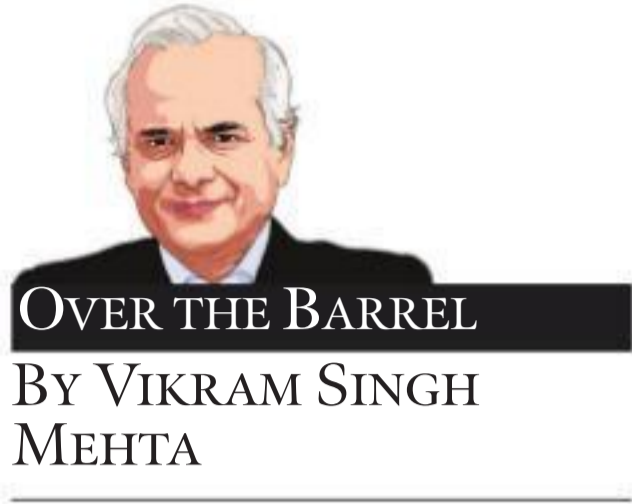
POLICE VERSUS AKALIS

THE PUNJAB POLICE has completely sealed road and rail links with Haryana to prevent the Akali Dal (L) volunteers from heading to Delhi to participate in a dharna on September 7. On the face of it, the Punjab Police's strategy appears to be to stop trains at the isolated Shambhu railway station and pack off the Akali volunteers. Fire brigades have been posted at all major points on the route in question. Though not a single truck crossed from Shambhu on September 5, the police conceded that volunteers would surely move by trucks to reach the protest. This could well be because the Punjab Truck Union is widely considered to be favourable to the Akali Dal.



On assets, a narrow view

National monetisation pipeline ignores contemporary challenges of pandemics, global warming and social unrest, is blinkered to structural problems of state-owned enterprises



OVER THE BARREL
By VIKRAM SINGH MEHTA

I WAS SURPRISED by my negative reaction to the FM's announcement of the National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP) to lease a slew of "brownfield" (already developed) but underutilised public sector assets to the private sector with the objective of raising Rs 6 lakh crore over the next four years. I was surprised because I did not expect to be a critic of efforts to not just monetise "dead capital" but also to remove the heavy hand of bureaucratic intervention in the management of public assets. I have long been an advocate of competition and I should have welcomed this announcement. Instead, what coursed through my mind was the thought that this was one more seemingly good scheme generated in the crucible of a consultancy firm that will not see the full light of day.

The assets identified for lease cover the full range of infrastructural and public service utilities. These include roads, railways, ports, power, mining, aviation, oil and gas pipelines, warehouses, hotels and even two sports stadia. Nearly seven decades back, most of these assets were deemed to be of strategic public interest and placed under the control of state-owned public enterprises (PSE). It was argued then that the private sector could not be entrusted with the custodianship of these socially important assets. In the years since, the PSEs have disappointed even their most ardent well-wisher. Barring a few exceptions, they have failed to deliver on their financial and social objectives.

As a result, there has been a call to privatise many of the PSEs. I too have been a votary of such a move. And I still am. But I am not enthused by the NMP. I have no issue with its economic or financial logic. The idea of creating "structured public-private partnerships" to unlock value from public sector assets and to recycle the revenues so raised into new infrastructure makes eminent sense. But I am concerned. My concerns are three-fold and relate to its philosophic underpinnings (to sound somewhat pompous).

First, the design of the NMP is out of sync with contemporary pressures. The world is in the crosshairs of existential challenges — global warming, pandemics, geopolitical chaos and fundamentalism. India has to additionally tackle endemic poverty, disappointed expectations, social polarisation and the erosion of democratic institutions. In this context, this scheme has been set within too narrow a frame.

NMP has been conceptualised around the metrics of financial value. The assets are valued on the basis of conventional financial metrics (enterprise value, book value, net present value, the costs of comparable assets). They are then leased (not sold) at appropriately discounted lease charges. The focus of the investors is, understandably, to recover their upfront payments plus earn



CR Sasikumar

their threshold return within the stipulated lease period.

I am no apologist for the government, and I have little doubt the private sector will unlock greater financial value from these assets. But I do have a problem with a model that looks at public utility assets through the narrow lens of finance only and, thereby, underrates their potential contribution to public welfare. My concern is the model seemingly absolves the government from the responsibility to unlock the intrinsic "social" (to include "smart" and "clean") value of these assets.

Second, NMP is designed to attract deep-pocketed financial institutions (PE firms) and industrial conglomerates. This is because the valuations are so high that few other entities will have the resources or the risk carrying capacity to respond. The result will be a deepening of the concentration of capital and existing inequalities. There will be economic and social implications. The model does not build in safeguards to manage or mitigate these implications.

Third, the government should have asked itself a fundamental question before placing a substantial share of public assets on the block: Why have these assets been so poorly managed? Was it because of bad leadership, inadequate talent within the PSEs, and/or systemic and structural shortcomings? The reason for asking this question is because the answer would have helped define the appropriate steps needed for enhancing their productivity.

The fact is that if the reason for low productivity was poor leadership or lack of talent, the transfer of these assets to a different, private sector-led organisational and investment structure would make sense. But if the reason had to do with structural impediments,

then such a change may not be warranted, at least not in the first instance. For, the private sector cannot tilt against windmills. The example of gas pipelines is illustrative. These pipelines are indeed hugely underutilised. But this is not because of the "inefficiency" of GAIL, the PSE operator. It is because of structural factors beyond the control of GAIL that have impeded the growth of gas demand. These factors are the shortage of domestic gas supplies; the regressive taxation system; the relatively uncompetitive price of gas and the perennial tussle between the Centre and state governments over land access. The operatorship of these pipelines is not, in short, the reason for the stressed state of these assets. A similar point can be made about most of the other assets identified for monetisation. Their low productivity is because their PSE operators have faced a combination of systemic hurdles related to weak dispute resolution mechanisms; regulatory miasma; lack of transparency in governance; pricing distortions and intrusive bureaucratic intervention.

The point is that until and unless these systemic problems are addressed, the private sector will find it difficult to harness the full value of these assets and the transfer of ownership to them will offer at best a partial palliative. On the other hand, if the problems do get addressed, the PSEs could well be better custodians as the government shareholder will have presumably mandated them to look beyond just the accretion of financial value.

Private-public investment structures make sense, but they must be modeled to also generate social value. In today's world, there are no shortcuts to sustainable development.

The writer is chairman, Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP)

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"If Ms [Angela] Merkel were standing [for elections], she would almost certainly win. After 16 years in office, that is some compliment to her political skills and consensual style of government."
— THE GUARDIAN

Teaching a new world

As boundaries dissolve and contexts shift, teachers must embrace change



AMEETA MULLA WATTAL

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I invited Gopalkrishna Gandhi to address 500 principals from across the country at the National Progressive Schools' Annual Conference. He started by saying, "You are a teacher and are obliged by your own sense of self-esteem and not of others. You have to keep your smiles within an ambit of permissibility, your laughter in a decimal count, your tears in a milligram drop of admissibility, for you must not seem too common, too regular, too weak."

"This is not easy! A father may frown or berate, a mother might shield or forgive, but you are meant to be different, for you are a teacher. How do you scold without causing hurt, how do you instruct without seeming to be preaching, assist without seeming to patronise? How can you join in a celebration without feeling loss of form, lament without appearing to compromise your stoicism? And yet, you try to do so, for you are a teacher," he said.

This made me think that the life of a teacher is a challenge — complex and unbelievably demanding. We are supposed to be enlightened and look dispassionately at our own personal vision and mastery before the shared vision process begins. How do we translate ethical dilemmas in a world where awareness is incomplete?

The greatest teachers, whether the Buddha, Christ, Rama-Krishna, Aurobindo, Yogananda or Nanak, never taught in classrooms. They had no blackboards, maps or charts. They used no subject outlines, kept no records, gave no grades. Their students were often poor and their methods were the same for all who came to hear and learn. They opened eyes, ears and hearts with faith, truth and love. They won no honours for their wisdom or expertise, and yet, these quiet teachers changed the lives of millions because they were inclusive and their minds were laboratories of compassion, empathy and reflective thinking. They were stoic and equanimous.

As teachers, we are meant to inculcate a love for community but not become sectarian; a love of reason but not become parochial; a love of country but not become jingoistic.

Teachers often feel they are not in power and yet in a position of great responsibility. The world is changing so rapidly and the context that our schools confront is so dynamic that we, as educators, must embrace change and make adjustments or potentially lose the franchise for preparing the next generation.

Today more than ever, we need to challenge prevailing standardised education policies and practices in favour of more individualised holistic approaches that prepare children to live productively in a rapidly changing world. We need to

implement processes which foster student autonomy and leadership, encourage inventive learners with skills, understand and channelise the creative spirit, maximise liberty to make meaningful decisions and develop global partnerships.

With globalisation, a dilution of boundaries has taken place, creating both interdependence and insecurity. In fenceless societies, all of us, strong and weak, majority and minority, rich and poor, feel equally threatened by the other.

In order to avoid distances between communities and people, we as teachers need to emphasise partnerships and alliances that will help move from self-centred existence to coexistence, from confrontation to interaction and from alienation to collaboration. To achieve meaningful education, we must enable our children to live together in mutual empowerment.

We have to give greater attention to the happiness and health of our children. If we do not empower our youth with strength from within, they will find other ways of expressing their concerns.

We take decisions every day, which may have tremendous moral implications for the students in our care. Teaching, after all, is not just a set of technical skills for imparting knowledge to students. It involves caring for children and being responsible for their development in a complex society.

We must make time to look inward — to become aware of the realities that we take for granted, the ways we create knowledge and make meaning in our lives, and the aspirations and expectations that govern what we choose from life. We must also look outward, explore new ideas and different ways of thinking and interacting, connect to multiple processes and relationships outside ourselves, and clarify our shared vision with our students.

A shared vision is a very powerful idea that connects a collective learning consciousness. The time for us as teachers is now. Now is the time to make real the promise of good education. Now is the time to open the doors of opportunities to all our children, weak or strong, rich or poor, disabled or able. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksand of inertia and shake off the work-from-home culture by building a foundation for our children through robust offline teaching, learning practices and values.

As I stand in the hallways of learning, I ask myself: Do I always adhere to ideals? Do I not need someone to see my own realities? Do I walk, talk, comfort, teach like one who is a fully evolved human being, the perfect specimen who has absolutely no cares? I have to continue to ask these questions, and reflect on these conundrums. In spite of it all, I have to continue to envision, engender and enact a new culture of learning that addresses, supports and develops the core existential aspects of a human life: The sense of being, becoming and belonging and the sacrosanct celebration of life, because I am a teacher.

The writer is chairperson and executive director, Education, Innovations and Training, DLF Foundation schools and scholarships programmes

The nutrition-hygiene link

Overcoming malnutrition challenge requires attention to both diet and sanitation



B SESIKERAN

IN THE 75TH year of Independence, India has a lot to rejoice about and a lot to reflect on. We have overcome two crushing Covid-19 waves. However, more than four lakh people have died from the disease. Thousands of children have been orphaned and thousands more are suffering from a lack of basic facilities. Of all the problems confronting the youth, nutritional insecurity is the worst, holding the power to cripple the future of an entire generation. A recent UNICEF report stated that nearly 12 lakh children could die in low-income countries in the next six months due to a decrease in routine health services and an increase in wasting. Nearly three lakh such children would be from India — nearly as much as the countrywide death toll from Covid-19. If this challenge has to be mitigated, India must use the pandemic as an opportunity to come up with long-term multi-stakeholder solutions to the problem of nutrition in the country.

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS 5) indicates that since the onset of the pandemic, acute undernourishment in children below the age of five has worsened, with one in every three children below the age of five suffering from chronic malnourishment. According to the latest data, 37.9 per cent of children under five are stunted, and 20.8 per cent are wasted — a form of malnutrition in which children are too thin for their height. This is much higher than in other developing countries where, on average, 25 per cent of children suffer from stunting and 8.9 per cent are wasted.

Inadequate dietary intake is the most direct cause of undernutrition. This, however, is the most obvious cause of the problem. Several other factors also affect nutritional outcomes, such as contaminated drinking water, poor sanitation, and unhygienic living conditions.

According to the World Health Organisation, 50 per cent of all mal- and under-nutrition can be traced to diarrhoea and intestinal worm infections, which are a direct result of poor water, sanitation and hygiene. Nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) are intricately linked, and changes in one tend, directly or indirectly, to affect the other. The global nutrition community has long emphasised this interdependence, suggesting that greater attention to, and investments in, WASH are a sure-shot way of bolstering the country's nutritional status. In India's case, in particular, with its population of more than a billion people, both WASH and nutrition must be addressed together through a lens of holistic, sustainable community engagement to enable long-term impact.

The realisation that most cases of malnutrition cannot be explained by poor diet led researchers to re-examine other possible sources of the problem, including the longstanding suspicion that unsanitary living environments lead to chronic gut injury. One of the first instances of the link between WASH and nutrition appeared in the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, which urges states to ensure "adequate nutritious foods and clean drink-

ing water" to combat disease and malnutrition. In 2015, Jean H. Humphrey from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health highlighted that poor hygiene and sanitation in developing countries leads to a sub-clinical condition called "environmental enteropathy" in children, which causes nutritional malabsorption and is the source of a variety of problems, including diarrhoea, retarded growth and stunting.

In simple terms, environmental enteropathy is a disorder of the intestine which prevents the proper absorption of nutrients, rendering them effectively useless. Since the disorder was intricately connected to the poor environmental conditions its victims lived in, it came to be called "environmental enteropathy". Diarrhoeal diseases, intestinal parasite infections and environmental enteropathy together impact the normal growth and cognitive development of children, leading to anaemia, stunting, and wasting. Childhood diarrhoea is a major public health problem in low- and middle-income countries, leading to high mortality in children under five. According to NFHS 4, approximately 9 per cent of children under five years of age in India experience diarrhoeal disease.

Safe drinking water, proper sanitation and hygiene can significantly reduce diarrhoeal and nutritional deaths. On the one hand, poor WASH facilities exacerbate the effects of malnutrition. But, on the other hand, pre-existing micronutrient deficiencies exacerbate children's vulnerability to

WASH-related infections and diseases. WHO has estimated that access to proper water, hygiene and sanitation can prevent the deaths of at least 8,60,000 children a year caused by undernutrition. It's evident that there is a direct, and irrefutable, correlation between sanitation and nutrition, and the sooner we acknowledge it, the faster we can work towards fixing it.

With the onset of Covid-19, proper hygiene and sanitation measures have assumed even greater importance. A simultaneous approach to nutrition and WASH will not only aid India's fight against malnutrition, bolster Covid resilience amongst the most vulnerable sections of society but also safeguard against monsoon-related health challenges. This will require a coordinated, multisectoral approach among the health, water, sanitation, and hygiene bodies, not to mention strong community engagement. An integrated approach to nutrition and WASH at the individual, household, and community levels along with Covid management will serve to tackle the problem of mal- and under-nutrition from the ground up, building awareness and accelerating implementation of clean and safe living strategies.

At the end of the day, all sides are working towards a common goal: A safe and healthy population and the hope that the 75th year of Independence becomes a watershed moment in India's journey.

The writer is former director, ICMR- National Institute of Nutrition

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TRICKLE-DOWN HATE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Hate news' (IE September 4). The Supreme Court gave a statement regarding the communal tone of news channels and lack of accountability on social media. This escalating rate of fake news and the communal outlook portrayed by the media does not just bring about a bad reputation to the country, it affects ordinary people. The telescoping of such news puts minorities in danger physically as well as psychologically. The rate of hate crimes and prejudice among the common masses regarding minorities has increased. This leads Muslims to be treated as second-class citizens. Bringing in the state to install accountability is hardly the solution when the state itself is the problem.
Enaya Anwar Hussain, Mumbai

PRACTICAL IDEALISM

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The idea of a teacher' (IE, September 4, 2021). The author's eloquent elaboration of the idea of a teacher is neither "impractical", nor idealist, but purely utilitarian, along the lines of men of action like Paulo Freire, employing similar ideas in spreading literacy in Cuba. Even our own National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005) introduced some "impractical" ideas, namely, "language across curriculum", "construction of knowledge", etc. and redefined the vision of a teacher accordingly. In the role of a teacher, one is seen as a humane facilitator to empower young learners to explore their innate physical and intellectual attributes and view knowledge

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as "personal experience" constructed in a teaching-learning context, rather than the textbooks.
G Javaid Rasool, Lucknow

DANGER TO PRIVACY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Surveillance State' (IE, September 4). Far from being praiseworthy, Delhi's mass installation of CCTVs in an increasingly authoritarian state raises many questions on surveillance and privacy. While purportedly installed to tackle crimes against women, a lack of supportive data renders this claim hollow. On the contrary, policing and tracking women, particularly non-conformist women, is a real danger. Stronger implementation of existing laws and societal change should be the way forward to combat violence against women.
Ila Railkar, Mumbai