



Tough-talking

India must ensure it's not cut out of the resolution process with the Taliban

The Taliban reconciliation process is moving at a faster pace than was anticipated. Talks facilitated by Russia in Moscow this week, with mainstream Afghan politicians sitting around the table with Taliban leaders, are similar in their approach to the recent U.S.-Taliban talks in Qatar, though the two are rival processes. The U.S. and Russia have accepted the idea that peace in Afghanistan is not possible without major concessions to the Taliban, including dialogue without insisting on a cessation of violence. In the duration of the Moscow conference alone, Taliban fighters killed 47 security forces personnel in attacks in Kunduz, Baghlan and Samangan provinces. The U.S. and Russia have, in separate processes, agreed to sidestep the Ashraf Ghani regime in Kabul, and accepted the Taliban's condition that it will not negotiate with the elected Afghan government at this stage. And both the Russian and U.S. processes are dependent on cooperation from Pakistan, which retains its influence over the Taliban leadership. Clearly, the current talks with the Taliban are not within the "red lines" agreed to by all stakeholders in the past: they are not Afghan-led, owned or controlled, and the Taliban has not abjured violence, or sworn allegiance to the Afghan constitution before joining talks.

However, despite the deep and obvious misgivings in New Delhi, it would be pointless to ignore or reject the outcomes of the talks, where some progress has been made. The U.S. has managed to bring senior Taliban leaders to the table, and is discussing the contours of its ultimate withdrawal from the Afghan war. The Taliban has unequivocally renounced ties with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and committed to preventing Afghan soil from being used by foreign terrorists. For its part, Russia has hosted conferences where Taliban leaders sat down with members of the Afghan High Peace Council and senior Afghan politicians, including some contesting in this year's presidential elections. While India's principled position that it will not directly or publicly talk to the Taliban until it engages the Afghan government remains valid, it is necessary that India stays abreast of all negotiations and isn't cut out of the resolution process. It is hoped that a robust channel is open between Indian intelligence agencies and all important groups in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, in order to ensure that Indian interests, development projects and citizens are kept secure. New Delhi must intensify its dialogue with regional and global stakeholders, and impress upon them that any dialogue with the Taliban must not come at the cost of the hard-fought victories of the Afghan people in the past two decades: on establishing constitutional democracy and the rule of law, and securing the rights of women and minorities.

Checks and balance

Seeking a count of 50% of VVPAT slips is too much: the focus should be on ending glitches

In a significant and welcome change from their earlier demand for a return to paper ballots, representatives of a large section of the mainstream Opposition parties met the Election Commission (ECI) to demand changes to the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail counting process during the general elections. Returning to paper ballots will be regressive. The Electronic Voting Machine process, despite the plethora of grievances about its functioning from the Opposition parties, is a major improvement over paper-based voting. There has been no evidence of EVM-tampering as claimed by some parties, and administrative and technical safeguards instituted by the ECI and EVM manufacturers have held steady since the introduction of the EVM. Despite this, the ECI had fast-tracked the implementation of the VVPAT, an adjunct to the EVM that allows for a paper trail for voting and later verification of the electronically registered mandate in the ballot unit of the EVM. VVPATs are now deployed in all Assembly and parliamentary elections with EVMs. This implementation has not been without some misgivings. The Opposition's demand for a count of 50% of the VVPAT slips, as opposed to the current system of counting VVPAT slips in one randomly selected booth of each constituency, is aimed at ensuring that EVMs have not been tampered with. ECI safeguards are robust enough to prevent this, but VVPAT recounts could eliminate any remaining doubt about possible "insider fraud" by errant officials or manufacturers.

While the demand to count half of all the slips is an over-reaction, as a scientifically and randomly chosen sample of booths is a reasonable enough verification for the process, there remains the question whether counting one booth per constituency is a statistically significant sample to rule out errors. A more robust sampling technique that factors in the average size of the electorate in any constituency for each State and voter turnout, involving the counting of more than a single booth in some States, may be a better method. The ECI's response that it is waiting for a report on this from the Indian Statistical Institute should be encouraging. The other issue with the VVPAT is more significant: machine glitches. During the parliamentary by-elections in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and Assembly elections in Karnataka in 2018, VVPAT glitches resulted in machine replacement rates rising to 20% and 4%, respectively. Glitches in the VVPAT machines were largely due to spooling issues in the print unit, which was sensitive to extreme weather. Some hardware-related changes were introduced, which improved its functioning in the recent elections in five States. Machine replacement rates due to VVPAT failures came down to 1.89% for Chhattisgarh. Deployment of improved machines should help curb glitches in the Lok Sabha elections.

Ayodhya and the challenge to equality

The Ram temple issue remains a metaphor for Muslim disenfranchisement



SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

In elections to three State Assemblies of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh late last year, candidates of the Muslim faith won 11 of the 520 seats in play. That would seem a modest tally, by no means evidence of disproportionate political influence. The myth of a pampered minority, though, refuses to die. On the campaign trail last November, Prime Minister Narendra Modi accused the Congress party of pressuring Supreme Court judges, on pain of impeachment, to delay a final decision on the Ayodhya title suit. The charge stems from a lineage of propaganda invented by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which holds the Congress guilty of the cynical politics of Muslim appeasement.

Secularism in India has been variously characterised, though few of these have done justice to the vigour with which the issue was debated in the Constituent Assembly. In the aftermath of Partition, seen as the outcome of the community-based template of political competition introduced under British rule, secularism was an article of faith across the ideological spectrum, though only in a limited definition as a seamless sense of national identity.

A superfluity
Minority representation was discussed at length and set aside as a superfluity. There was no case for assured representation on communal lines, since the guarantees of equality before the law and access to public services and employment would ensure fair out-

comes for all.

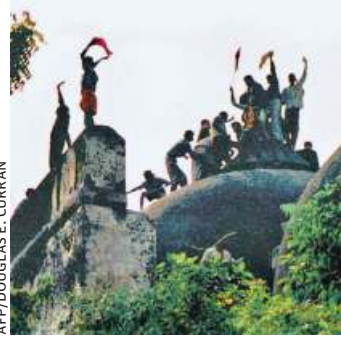
Ananthasayanam Ayyangar put it thus, addressing an interlocutor from the minority community in the Constituent Assembly: "I am a Hindu and if you allow me to represent you, I will come to you at least every four (sic) years. Similarly a Muslim man can come to Hindus. Ultimately, we will all come together." For Sardar Patel, the possibility of both separate communal electorates and assured representation was unthinkable, no less than an incentive for certain citizens to "exclude" themselves and "remain perpetually in a minority".

Equality embraced the right to be different, though not a difference in rights. Exceptions would be granted only where classes of citizens were known to have suffered a deficit of social and cultural capital on account of discrimination through history. The construct of a "minority" segued into a notion of social and educational backwardness, remediable over generations through procedures of affirmative action.

These were formulations steeped in unwitting upper caste privilege, a sense that the Constituent Assembly – elected on a very narrow franchise and voided of its more eloquent minority spokespersons by Partition – spoke for a true nationalism at risk of dilution by sectarian demands.

A narrower identity
In the real world of dislocation and trauma, Partition witnessed a number of local vigilante efforts to inscribe a narrower identity on the incipient nation. The surreptitious introduction of idols into the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, where a dispute over building rights on an adjacent site had simmered since the late 19th century, was one such act, though by no means the only one.

It is on record that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote insis-



AP/DOUGLASE CURRAN

tently to the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh at the time, Govind Ballabh Pant, insisting that the idols smuggled into the Babri Masjid should be removed. Less known is his suggestion in a 1949 letter to the Minister, Mehr Chand Khanna, of a wider problem involving the expropriation of a number of Muslim places of worship.

Nehru's insistence on the reversal of these intrusions gradually receded from the attention span of governments at the State and local levels. Ayodhya, like numerous other incidents from the time, would have faded into the distant recesses of memory had not the politics of waning upper caste hegemony and the decline of the Congress provided occasion for it to spark back to life.

If equality was a constitutional promise impossible to reconcile with upper caste hegemony, identity was a serviceable alternative. From about the 1980s, the seamless spirit of the Indian nation that was so much a concern of the Constituent Assembly, gave way, at least in electoral competition, to the construct of a nation of multiple identities, contending for influence over the whole.

The U.P. strategy
From its birth in the 1980s, the Ayodhya campaign has been a metaphor for a minority faith's disenfranchisement. And nowhere is this story told more eloquently than in India's largest State, Uttar

Pradesh, where Muslims constitute over 19% of the total population, and hold a mere 24 seats in a 403 member Legislative Assembly. This tally from the 2017 election is the lowest since 1991, when Muslim representation in a somewhat larger State Assembly, prior to the hill districts being hived off, stood at 21.

That year, when the BJP first won power in U.P., marked the prelude to the climactic act of destruction at Ayodhya. But political energies were spent once the offending 16th century monument was effaced. The BJP was unable to mobilise the same fervour in elections that followed, never gaining a majority of its own till the sweep of 2017.

Analysis by the Trivedi Centre for Political Data, at Sonapat's Ashoka University, shows that the BJP's electoral strategy in U.P. was built on a 60 versus 40 calculation. With Muslims and two other caste groupings – Yadavs and Jatavs – making up roughly 40% of the State's electorate, the BJP strategy targeted the remaining 60%. Key to the BJP's sweep of the U.P. elections was its success in drawing in a critical mass of votes from strata that had reason to feel aggrieved at their exclusion from the dominant coalitions shaping politics post-Ayodhya.

Too loose a standard
The endless turmoil caused by Ayodhya compels a reexamination of other fundamentals of the Constitution. Articles 27 and 28 have been read as reproducing, though in a weaker fashion, the guarantee of secular statecraft of the U.S. First Amendment, which prohibits the establishment of any religion by law.

Though the Indian state is enjoined to neutrality, religion is allowed an active role in the public sphere under Article 25, which assures every citizen the freedom to

"profess, practise and propagate" any faith.

By definition, every religion enters the fray with a claim to universality; no religion is willing to accept a domain of application limited in time and space. The unfettered exercise of Article 25 rights in this sense puts the general will at risk of being bent to a majoritarian assertion. The restraint of "public order" mandated by the Constitution is too loose a standard to prevent the intrusion into politics of religious majoritarianism.

In his recent book, *A People's Constitution*, Rohit De speaks of how in the early years of Indian independence, "electoral minorities", i.e., communities of caste and religion that were unlikely to "represent themselves through electoral democracy", were over-represented in litigation invoking the writ jurisdiction of newly established constitutional courts. Clearly, the Ayodhya petition claiming the restitution of a monument commandeered in the name of another faith was one such instance.

With electoral compulsions now acquiring increasing urgency, the BJP government has demanded that the Supreme Court unfetter a large part of the land held in trust pending a final settlement of the case. Party spokesmen have also mused aloud about issuing an ordinance as an act of executive will to preempt an adverse judicial finding. This attempt to dismantle the last remaining restraint to the majoritarian will is sure to fuel a new fervour in the upcoming general election, putting further pressure on the institutions of governance and challenging their capacity to uphold constitutional integrity.

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Trump and his generals

For all their discord, no one appears to know how to manage chaos at a time of U.S. retreat



KRISHNAN SRINIVASAN

Not even U.S. President Donald Trump's worst enemies would deny that he has fulfilled many election campaign foreign policy promises, including opting out of international agreements on climate change, the Iran nuclear accord and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, and pressuring allies to pay more for joint defence. A matter for surprise then, is that another Trump campaign pledge, to end the 'endless wars' and bring American troops abroad back home, specifically to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria and Afghanistan, is met with denunciation and open or indirect obstruction from both civilian and military circles.

The opposition within
This opposition, marked by some high-level resignations such as Secretary of Defence James Mattis – which have been accorded hero-martyr status by the media – has been provoked by Mr. Trump's decision to repatriate some 2,000 forces from Syria and around 7,000, which is around half the total number, from Afghanistan. Mr. Trump's moves are condemned as

isolationist and favouring the 'enemies' of the U.S., especially Russia and Iran. Regarding Afghanistan, his opposition was not astute enough to perceive that the draw-down was a necessary prelude to direct negotiations with the Taliban. The objectors also imply that Israel is exposed to greater danger, a cause certain to enjoy bi-partisan favour. General Mattis, in his resignation letter, wrote he was leaving "because you have the right to have a Secretary of Defense whose views are better aligned with yours." It is amazing that it took him two years to detect any misalignment.

No proposal to draw down the U.S. military presence abroad will be acceptable to Mr. Trump's critics, because the American military-industrial complex referenced by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1961 still holds the civilian authority in thrall, and since World War I, U.S. foreign policy has been totally militarised. To every international problem, Washington has only two responses: the application of sanctions, and the threat or use of force.

Mr. Trump is vilified as isolationist by the mainstream media, evidence that the neo-imperial spirit and god-given right to hold military hegemony is deeply internalised in the entire U.S. establishment. So also is the Francis Fukuyama prediction that "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution [is the] universalisation of Western liberal democracy as



the final form of human government." Insinuations about a self-lit foreshadow whatever contact Mr. Trump wishes to make with the only world power that can incinerate the U.S., though every previous U.S. leader held talks with his Russian counterpart to make the world a safer place. This has less to do with Special Counsel Robert Mueller's interminable inquiry about Russian collusion, and more with the imagining of America's role in the world. The *New York Times* writes of a "world order that the U.S. has led for 73 years since the Second World War", accusing Mr. Trump of reducing that "global footprint needed to keep that order together". The same theme is dutifully echoed by compliant European allies such as Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, who in July 2018 bewailed that under Mr. Trump the U.S. could not be relied upon to "impose order". But whose order?

Mr. Trump is wrong in asserting that the U.S. destroyed the Islamic

State (IS) in Syria, not only because there are some remnants of it left, but because while U.S.-coalition aircraft have dropped ordnance from several thousand feet and killed innumerable civilians in the process, the actual fighting against the IS has been done by Kurds in northeast Syria, and the Assad government, Russians, Iranians and Hezbollah elsewhere. The small U.S. contingent of about 2,000 serves to train and supply the Kurds, constrain the Turks and obstruct progress towards a peace settlement. As elsewhere, the Americans are ready to fight till the last local soldier. Mr. Trump has the support of Congress, media and the military on a tough line on Iran – again, a campaign promise – but in West Asia, Mr. Trump outsources local action to allies such as Saudi Arabia, turning a blind eye to its criminal activities in Yemen and also the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

In the process of demonising Mr. Trump, accountability, responsibility and civilian oversight are discarded, while people in uniform and in the shadows – the ubiquitous U.S. intelligence services – are raised on lofty pedestals, encouraging dissidence. To no surprise, Mr. Trump's announcements have resulted in a flurry of alarmist reactions. As demanded by the media and Congress, the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration cancelled meetings with its Russian counterpart, and an end to U.S.-Russia col-

laboration in space appears probable. The Pentagon now reports that China seeks expansion by "military and non-military means" and military bases in Pakistan, Cambodia, and elsewhere that the American public have never heard of. The Pentagon concludes that China is "developing the capacity to dissuade, deter, and defeat a potential third-party [read, U.S.] intervention in regional conflicts". With a second summit between Mr. Trump and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un in the offing, the media is predictably cautioning against any reduction of U.S. forces in South Korea as a result of any U.S.-North Korean détente, with head of the American Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, weighing in to predict that China "probably poses the greatest threat to our nation by about 2025".

Last word with Iran
The last word rests with Iran, regarded as an enemy by both Mr. Trump and his domestic adversaries. When U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed in January that "when America retreats, chaos often follows", Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif countered by tweeting, "Whenever and wherever US interferes, chaos, repression, and resentment follow." No one in the United States is listening.

Krishnan Srinivasan is a former Foreign Secretary

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Implementing the NRC
The ground realities as far as implementation of the National Register of Citizens in Assam are concerned – and that have been pointed out in the article, "A national register of exclusion (Editorial page, February 6) – are alarming. As usual, this is yet another instance by those in charge implementing an important policy decision without adequate preparation. In a country where corruption is rampant and elementary government work goes unsupervised, the sorry plight of those affected in Assam will only be prolonged unless the government quickly introduces a more refined and civilised way of compiling the NRC (Page 1,

"Home Ministry is trying to 'destroy' NRC process, says SC", February 6).

SRUTHI BABU,
Thiruvananthapuram

■ Although the Supreme Court of India is supervising the NRC exercise, it does not appear that the issues of local identity and its authentication process are being addressed. A closer look at the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill and the NRC exercise reveals the potential to take away the political rights of the Scheduled Tribes of Assam, which is guaranteed in the Sixth Schedule – in particular, land rights. Rather than implementing Clause 6 of the Assam Accord and the provisions of the Sixth Schedule in letter and

spirit, the ruling party, both at the State and Central levels, appears to be playing the card of identity and religious politics only to garner votes. The Central government must rectify procedural complexities through necessary institutional arrangements to enable a smooth NRC exercise that does not exclude the citizenship rights of local people.

NAYAKARA VEERESHA,
Bengaluru

Bullet train route
It is sad to read about the clearance given to the 'bullet train' project between Mumbai and Ahmedabad which will lead to wildlife sanctuaries being affected (Page 1, "Bullet train gets green light via flamingo

haven, national park", February 6). Can development be at the cost of wildlife which is already suffering because of alarming human development? It is ironic that while we are well aware of the need for more power to be given to programmes such as "Save the Tiger" and other wildlife campaigns, we clear, without second thoughts, mega-projects that are detrimental to the eco-system. One only hopes that good sense prevails and alternative routes are found.

VARGHESE GEORGE,
Secunderabad

■ Being a prestigious project that was initiated by none other than the Prime Minister, it is quite obvious that the ministries

concerned are on a fast-tracking approval spree just before the general election. One is not sure how far compensatory afforestation or site restoration proposals would prove effective in maintaining the ecological balance. Under the guise of development, India's forest lands are being encroached upon with impunity, leaving many species in distress. It is also disputable whether the bullet train project will be cost effective and completed in time, given the right of way issues that would surface from time to time.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

Team West Indies
There are several reasons behind the gradual decline of West Indies cricket ("Sport

page, "When West Indies do well, the world rejoices", February 6). With the retirement of some of the greatest cricketing names in the early 1990s, countries in the West Indies opted for athletics as their chosen field. The subsequent years too were mired in issues regarding payment due to a paucity of funds with the cricket board. As pointed out, the disharmony and clash of egos have also exacerbated the decline. There has only been mediocrity in the available pool of cricketers. It is only natural that rebuilding the side has been an extremely time-consuming process.

V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

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We need a leap in healthcare spending

India needs to focus on long-term investment, not only episodes of care



T.S. RAVIKUMAR
& GEORGI ABRAHAM

The Central and State governments have introduced several innovations in the healthcare sector in recent times, in line with India's relentless pursuit of reforms. However, while the government's goal is to increase public health spending to 2.5% of GDP, health spending is only 1.15-1.5% of GDP. To reach its target, the government should increase funding for health by 20-25% every year for the next five years or more.

While the Interim Budget is responsive to the needs of farmers and the middle class, it does not adequately respond to the needs of the health sector. The total allocation to healthcare is ₹61,398 crore. While this is an increase of ₹7,000 crore from the previous Budget, there is no net increase since the total amount is 2.2% of the Budget, the same as the previous Budget. The increase roughly equates the ₹6,400 crore allocated for implementation of the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY).

Per capita spending on health

According to the National Health Profile of 2018, public per capita expenditure on health increased from ₹621 in 2009-10 to ₹1,112 in 2015-16. These are the latest official numbers available, although in 2018 the amount may have risen to about ₹1,500. This amounts to about \$20, or about \$100 when adjusted for purchasing power parity. Despite the doubling of per capita expenditure on health over six years, the figure is still abysmal.

To understand why, let's compare this with other countries. The U.S. spends \$10,224 per capita on healthcare per year (2017 data). A comparison between two large democracies is telling: the U.S.'s health expenditure is 18% of GDP, while India's is still under 1.5%. In Budget terms, of the U.S. Federal Budget of \$4.4 trillion, spending on Medicare and Medicaid amount to \$1.04 trillion, which is 23.5% of the Budget. Federal Budget spending per capita on health in



the U.S. is therefore \$3,150 (\$1.04 trillion/330 million, the population).

In India, allocation for healthcare is merely 2.2% of the Budget. Per capita spending on health in the Budget in India is ₹458 (₹61,398 crore/134 crore, which is the population). (Medicare and Medicaid come under 'mandatory spending' along with social security.) Adjusting for purchasing power parity, this is about \$30 — one-hundredth of the U.S.

Admittedly, this runaway healthcare cost in the U.S. is not to be emulated, since comparable developed countries spend half as much per capita as the U.S. Yet, the \$4,000-\$5,000 per capita spending in other OECD countries is not comparable with India's dismal per capita health expenditure. The rate of growth in U.S. expenditure has slowed in the last decade, in line with other comparable nations.

The ₹6,400 crore allocation to Ayushman Bharat-PMJAY in the Interim Budget will help reduce out-of-pocket expenditure on health, which is at a massive 67%. This notwithstanding, per capita Budget expenditure on health in India is among the lowest in the world. This requires immediate attention.

Health and wellness centres

Last year, it was announced that nearly 1.5 lakh health and wellness centres would be set up under Ayushman Bharat. The mandate of these centres is preventive health, screening, and community-based management of basic health problems. The mandate should include health education and holistic well-

ness integrating modern medicine with traditional Indian medicine.

Both communicable disease containment as well as non-communicable disease programmes should be included. An estimated ₹250 crore has been allocated for setting up health and wellness centres under the National Urban Health Mission. Under the National Rural Health Mission, ₹1,350 crore has been allocated for the same. The non-communicable diseases programme of the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke has been allocated ₹175 crore, from ₹275 crore. Allocation to the National Tobacco Control Programme and Drug De-addiction Programme is only ₹65 crore, a decrease of ₹2 crore. The allocation for each of the wellness centres is less than ₹1 lakh per year. This is a meagre amount.

History shows that where there is long-term commitment and resource allocation, rich return on investment is possible. For instance, AIIMS, New Delhi is the premier health institute in India with a brand value because of resource allocation over decades. AIIMS Delhi alone has been allocated nearly ₹3,600 crore in the Interim Budget, which is a 20% increase from last year. Similar allocation over the long term is needed in priority areas.

Prevention and its link to GDP

NITI Aayog has proposed higher taxes on tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food in order to revamp the public and preventive health system. This has not found its way into the Interim Budget. A focused approach in ad-

ding tax on tobacco and alcohol, to fund non-communicable disease prevention strategies at health and wellness centres, should be considered. Cancer screening and prevention are not covered. There is no resource allocation for preventive oncology, diabetes and hypertension. Prevention of chronic kidney disease, which affects 15-17% of the population, is not appropriately addressed. The progressive nature of asymptomatic chronic kidney disease leads to enormous social and economic burden for the community at large, in terms of burgeoning dialysis and transplant costs which will only see an exponential rise in the next decade and will not be sustainable unless we reduce chronic kidney disease incidence and prevalence through screening and prevention.

Due to lack of focus in preventive oncology in India, over 70% of cancers are diagnosed in stages III or IV. The reverse is true in developed countries. Consequently, the cure rate is low, the death rate is high, and treatment of advanced cancer costs three-four times more than treatment of early cancer. The standard health insurance policies cover cancer but only part of the treatment cost. As a consequence, either out-of-pocket expenditure goes up or patients drop out of treatment.

Increase of GDP alone does not guarantee health, since there is no direct correlation between GDP and health outcomes. However, improvement in health does relate positively to GDP, since a healthy workforce contributes to productivity. We don't mean to say that funding must be redirected from current allocations to preventive care. The 1,354 packages for various procedures in PMJAY must be linked to quality. For various diseases, allocation should be realigned for disease management over a defined time period, not merely for episodes of care. Further, the health sector must be made a priority area, like defence. Since a major innovation in universal healthcare is being rolled out, it must be matched with a quantum leap in funding. Only if we invest more for the long-term health of the nation will there be a similar rise in GDP.

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At the cost of quality

The decision to provide financial rewards for publication in science journals and patents is fraught with problems



R. PRASAD

On January 30, a little more than four years after the last hike, the Ministry of Science and Technology increased the fellowship stipend for PhD students by nearly 25%. The government says the hike will be reviewed periodically. Since the increase is far less than the 80% hike that research fellows have been demanding for the last six months, they have decided to continue with their protests. The government is also planning to provide "financial and academic incentives to enhance and recognise the performance of research fellows", for which an Inter-Ministerial Empowered Committee has been set up. Excerpts of the Committee's recommendations, tweeted by the Department of Science and Technology on February 2, provide a glimpse of the financial rewards to be given for publication and patents. While the modalities are yet to be worked out, offering financial rewards for publication is a bad idea.

Cause for concern

Giving rewards based on papers published in journals, and determining the incentive based on whether the paper is published in an international or Indian journal, is fraught with problems. In China, for example, researchers were given about \$44,000 in 2016 for a single paper published in prestigious journals such as *Nature* and *Science*. The impact factor (a proxy for the relative importance of a journal) of journals was used to calculate the prize money for publication. This led to an unprecedented increase in unethical research practices and frauds committed by Chinese researchers. This could also happen in India, which already has an ignominious record in this area and has no nodal body to address scientific frauds and unethical practices.

In India, a one-time financial reward of ₹50,000 and ₹20,000 has been recommended for a paper published in an international and Indian journal, respectively. This is a "hare-brained scheme," says P. Balaram, former director of the Indian Institute of Science and former editor of *Current Science*. "Whoever has come up with this is ignorant of the history of scientific publishing. They will destroy research (with this scheme)." It is worth remembering that though the University Grants Commission's

intent to introduce Academic Performance Indicators was good, APIs were largely responsible for the spike in predatory journals published from India. There is little guarantee that the reward system based on publication will not lead to further erosion in the quality of science research in India.

In addition, giving greater rewards for publication in international journals makes no sense as international journals are not uniformly superior in quality to Indian ones. While *Nature*, *Science*, *Cell* and *The Lancet* are prestigious, there are many journals which are of poor quality. Similarly, some Indian journals are better than international ones despite having a low impact factor.

"If average or below average papers are submitted to Indian journals, the overall quality of the journals will be low compared with international titles," says Professor Balaram. By giving 60% lower stipend to students publishing in Indian journals, the government will unwittingly be widening the gap between Indian and international journals, which will be self-destructive in the long run.

Also, "Indian science suffers from deep-rooted, structural problems — fellowships get delayed and project funding is not released on time," says Gautam Menon, a computational biologist at the Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Chennai. He argues that "the government should reward good research with generous funding and fewer constraints." With hundreds of papers being published each year, it is debatable whether the government will be able to provide incentives given that research labs have reportedly been facing a fund crunch of late.

Reward for patents

The proposal to provide students an incentive of ₹1,00,000 on obtaining a patent (Indian or international) is a bigger recipe for disaster. While obtaining a patent is not difficult, it costs ₹10,000-₹30,000 to file a patent in India. Drafting the patent costs an additional ₹50,000 and there is also an annual renewal fee. Also, not all patents translate into products. The Science Ministry has not learnt from the mistakes of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). In late 2016, the CSIR instructed its 38 labs to stop indiscriminate filing of Indian and foreign patents. Then CSIR Director-General Girish Sahni had said that a "majority of patents are 'biodata' patents" and had been "filed for the sake of filing without any techno-commercial and legal evaluation". In such a scenario, a financial incentive for patent-filing will only exacerbate the problem.

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SINGLE FILE

A worrying approach

Will Ayushman Bharat hurt the spirit of cooperative federalism?

SUJATHA RAO



With West Bengal, Telangana, Delhi and Odisha not joining Ayushman Bharat, the question arises whether the scheme is hurting the idea of cooperative federalism. The Seventh Schedule of the Constitution makes States responsible for hospital services. The States have their own

schemes to provide financial risk protection to those seeking medical relief. Based on the ongoing centrally sponsored scheme, the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana, the Central government launched an improved version in 2018 called the National Health Protection Scheme (NHPS) for a sum assured of ₹5 lakh per family per year.

The insistence to prefix Ayushman Bharat to existing State names and the despatch of a personalised letter to 7.5 crore families with only the Prime Minister's photograph were seen as attempts to attribute the entire credit to the current administration, though State governments are equal partners — funding 40% of the scheme, bearing the responsibility of its implementation and covering double the number of beneficiaries.

Given that the Central government transfers funds to States through the Finance Commission, Central Sector Schemes and the Centrally Sponsored Schemes, it is expected of the National Health Agency (NHA) to build an institutional architecture, standardise procedures, costs and access all data for effective monitoring. This is important as it is accountable to Parliament and the Comptroller and Auditor General for the proper utilisation of allocated funds. But such standardisation can stifle innovation and entail costly structures that may not accommodate local conditions, preferences, and cost-effective solutions. Instead, when funds are provided, subject to achieving certain goals, States have scope to innovate, model the design to fit their context, resource base, epidemiological status, level of development, take total ownership and be accountable for outcomes.

The NHA's approach does not appear to be built on consensus. Its model consists of outsourcing the vital functions of pricing services, pre-authorisations, scrutiny of bills, grievance redressal, and fraud detection to private companies and third-party administrators. This may increase administrative costs from the current 6% to 30%, as seen in the Medicare scheme of the U.S.

Besides, the policy of providing fiscal incentives to the private sector to establish hospitals in deficit areas without insulating government-owned facilities or the small and marginal hospitals that together provide 95% of hospital care will tighten the grip of corporates on secondary and tertiary markets. This will result in cost escalations — more so because of the rapid consolidation and aggregation of tertiary hospitals by foreign financial conglomerates and private equity funding agencies, impacting prices, access to tertiary care and the very sustainability of the NHPS.

The writer is a former Union Secretary at the Ministry of Health, Government of India, and author of 'Do We Care? India's Health System'



FAQ

Pension for informal sector workers

The government has allocated only ₹500 crore for the scheme

T.C.A. SHARAD RAGHAVAN

What is the scheme?

A major announcement in the Interim Budget 2019-20 was the creation of the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Mandhan, a pension scheme for informal workers. Under this scheme, subscribers will receive an assured monthly pension of ₹3,000 per month from the age of 60 onwards. Towards this, they will have to contribute ₹55 a month (if they join at the age of 18 years), or ₹100 a month (if they join at the age of 29 years). The government will match these contributions. The government has reportedly set a cap on the age of joining at 40 years, but this is yet to be officially confirmed by the Labour Ministry.

Whom does it include?

In his Budget speech, Finance Minister Piyush Goyal said half of India's GDP comes from the work

done by 42 crore workers in the unorganised sector, such as street vendors, rickshaw pullers, construction workers, rag pickers, agricultural workers, beedi workers, those engaged in the handloom and leather industries, and domestic workers. He said the government must provide these workers with a "comprehensive social security coverage" in their old age. The Shram Yogi Mandhan scheme is aimed at achieving that, and therefore includes all informal sector workers with an income of less than ₹15,000 per month. According to the government, this works out to 10 crore people.

Finance Ministry officials have suggested that the pension payouts could be made directly in the workers' accounts, which would be Aadhaar-linked.

What will the government spend?

So far, the government has

allocated just ₹500 crore for the scheme, but this is likely to be increased in the full Budget that will be presented in July. An analysis of the Interim Budget documents shows that the allocation for the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Mandhan could possibly come at the expense of an existing pension scheme — the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) — announced last year to benefit more than three crore poor senior citizens, disabled people, and widows.

The NSAP had originally been allocated ₹9,975 crore in the 2018-19 Budget, which was reduced to ₹9,200 crore in the Interim Budget 2019-20, which is a drop of ₹775 crore.

Will the scheme work?

Social sector workers have pointed out that creating a voluntary contributory pension scheme for informal sector workers is not likely to work as their salar-

ies are low. The argument is that they already pay large amounts as indirect taxes.

Further, for a salaried worker, the pension contribution can be cut from the salary. A daily wage earner or migrant labourer will, however, have to regularly deposit her income each month, which is an uncertain proposition.

What lies ahead?

The government is silent on what happens to the scheme if an informal sector worker misses a contribution. Does the worker become disqualified from the scheme? If so, what happens to the amount already contributed? Will the government refund the worker that amount, or will that amount be forfeited? Another matter to be considered is what happens to a worker who transitions to the formal workforce. Answers are awaited on all these questions.

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 7, 1969

130 million tonne food target for Fourth Plan

The Planning Commission has accepted a food production target of 130 to 132 million tonnes by the end of the Fourth Plan. This target has been projected on the basis of a 100-million tonne potential this year. The production targets suggested for the major cash crops along with their estimated base-level production this year are: Oilseeds 10.90 million tonnes (8.90), sugarcane (gur) 15 million tonnes (12.50), cotton 8 million bales (6), jute 7.40 million bales (6.20), and tobacco 445 million kg. (345). While an annual growth rate of five per cent has been postulated for agriculture as a whole, the growth rate for foodgrains works out to 5.7 per cent. This is proposed to be achieved by continuing the intensive agricultural strategy.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 7, 1919

Sir R. Tagore. Visit to Coimbatore.

Sir Rabindranath Tagore and Mr. C.F. Andrews arrived [in Coimbatore] by mail train from Ootacamund yesterday [February 5]. At the railway station a large gathering of Indian gentlemen of all shades of opinion and of standing assembled and accorded a fitting welcome. Rao Bahadur A.T. Tiruvengadasami Mudaliar, a much respected leader, as President, and Mr. K.S. Vaithianatha Aiyar, M.A., the Principal of the College and Secretary to the Reception Committee, received the world famous poet. Those prominent on the platform were Messrs. Sambanda Mudaliar, Municipal Chairman, C.S. Ratnasabapathy Mudaliar, non-official President, Taluk Board, Kolangavelu Pillay, leader of the local Brahma Samajam, Kirk Theosophical Education Trust, Miss Noble, Superintendent, Maranagaundens Free Girls School, Puniacoti Mudaliar, founder, Sri Sarada Free Girls' School, Rao Saheb Ramaswami Sivan, Secretary, National Indian Association, Rai Bahadur M. Rangachariar, Mr. K.V. Srinivasar and others.

CONCEPTUAL

Liquidity premium

FINANCE

Also known as the illiquidity premium, this refers to the additional return that an investor can earn from any investment that cannot be immediately liquidated for cash in the market. Risk-averse investors generally try to avoid investing in highly illiquid assets like real estate due to the time it takes to sell these assets. This causes successful investors in illiquid assets to earn a much higher return than other investors who prefer to invest only in highly liquid assets. By the same logic, since most investors would be willing to invest in highly liquid assets, the returns from such investments generally turn out to be lower than the returns from illiquid investments.

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