

# Opinion

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**NEW FACE OF AN OLD ADVERSARY**  
Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Indian diplomat

The US is not the US of the past, so repeating mantras of the past is not helping. There is a need to realise [that] the current architecture is much more complex than before

## Rational Expectations

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### I, the judge I, the jury

As CJI case gets caught in the harassment-vs-conspiracy tangle, real issues of judicial accountability continue to get ignored

**S**EVERAL MONTHS AGO, when the then Chief Justice of India (CJI) Dipak Misra was being vilified by many as being soft on the government, several leading lawyers and civil society activists lionised Justice Ranjan Gogoi—he was one of the four Supreme Court judges who held a press conference against Misra—and said that, given how Gogoi had gone public, prime minister Narendra Modi would never appoint him as CJI even though he was next in line. As it happened, Dipak Misra did recommend Gogoi as his successor and Modi did appoint him. And yet, today, many of those who lionised Gogoi are quite vocal in criticising him.

A lot of the criticism, of course, is justified since, after he was accused of sexual harassment, CJI Gogoi presided over a 3-judge bench that discussed the matter and passed an order suggesting that the media refrain from publishing the detailed affidavit of the complainant—the order, interestingly, was issued in the name of the two other judges. Also, while Gogoi's first response should have been to let an independent inquiry be conducted into the claims, he instead spoke of a conspiracy to hobble him; and, instead of answering the charges which go well beyond sexual harassment (*bit.ly/2VjaW0A*), the chief justice said that if charges like this were made, no good people would want to join the judiciary.

While Justice SA Bobde, the second-most senior judge in the Supreme Court, has constituted a 3-judge panel to look into the sexual harassment charges, the SC is also pursuing the line that the chief justice was framed and the heads of the Delhi police, the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Intelligence Bureau were also summoned for consultations based on the statement of a lawyer who says he has proof that this is a frame-up. The fact that two seemingly contradictory paths are being taken at the same time makes it unclear as to how things will pan out—if there is a conspiracy, does it mean the CJI is not guilty of the sexual harassment charge? The question was raised in the Supreme Court on Wednesday, but no real clarity emerged other than reiterating the fact that both lines of investigation are being pursued in parallel.

A related problem is that if the 3-judge panel absolves the CJI of the charges, not too many are going to believe the panel was not influenced by the fact that he is the head of the judiciary; in order to convince people, the detailed panel report with its reasoning will need to be made public, and the chances of that happening are pretty slim. More than anything else, an in-house committee looking into charges against the chief justice seems to reinforce the view that, above all, the judiciary is a closed shop; the judges appoint each other and also review corruption and other charges against each other. Politicians are accused of having untrammelled power but they, at least, face the voter every five years; in the case of the judges, there is no higher authority. Theoretically, the political class can remove a judge through impeachment, but this requires major political parties to be united. In the famous case of Justice Ramaswamy, when it came to the vote after the arguments for and against the impeachment—Congress MP Kapil Sibal defended him—the Congress MPs simply walked out of the house, ensuring the impeachment couldn't go through.

Ironically, many of the issues raised by the four judges—including (then) Justice Gogoi—when Dipak Misra was CJI remain unaddressed even today, including the allegations of high-handedness and the CJI presiding over benches that are deciding on cases concerning him. The letter to CJI Misra referred to the case against Justice CS Karnan, who had written a letter to the prime minister, giving an initial list of 20 corrupt sitting/retired Supreme Court and High Court judges. In that case, the letter says, “two of us observed that there is a need to revisit the process of appointment of judges and to set up a mechanism for corrective measures other than impeachment”.

Till the 1990s, all judicial appointments were made by the government in consultation with the CJI. Over the course of three important cases, culminating in the Third Judges case in 1998, SC arrogated this power to itself by creating the collegium system to appoint/promote judges. The government tried to strike a balance by suggesting a National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) to appoint/promote/probe judges, but SC struck this down. And this is while the SC admitted to serious shortcomings in the collegium and spoke of the need to make this more transparent. Ostensibly the SC struck down NJAC because it gave the government an equal say in selecting judges—3 nominees each—but the judges and the government both had a veto right as well since no nomination could go through if any two members did not agree.

While the judiciary continues to decide on who has to be appointed/transferred—the government can delay acting upon this, but gets flak in the press each time it does—even less has been done to address the other issue of judicial corruption/nepotism. While many former judges criticised CJI Misra's handling of cases like the Judge Loya one at the launch of Arun Shourie's book last year, former Delhi High Court Chief Justice AP Shah added some perspective while also criticising the Judge Loya judgment. Even after the bribery charge against Justice Nirmal Yadav, he said, she was only transferred to another court and her case is still pending after a decade; there was no proper investigation of the charges made, among others, against judges including the then CJI by former Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Kalikho Pul in his suicide note... the Judge Loya case, as Justice Shah said, was a trigger for the press event, but “what the judges allege has happened several times in the past”.

And the NJAC is at least in the public memory, but few remember the Judicial Standards and Accountability Bill that was brought in 2000 and sought to create a National Judicial Oversight Committee, a Complaints Scrutiny Panel and an investigation committee. Since two of the five members of the Oversight Committee were non-judges—the Attorney General and one eminent person appointed by the President of India—presumably, this, too, got scuttled as an attempt to muzzle the judiciary. It will be a tragedy if, after such allegations on a person of the stature of the chief justice, long-term solutions like the NJAC and the Accountability Bill are not thought of.

## CasteINC

A new study reveals when it comes to M&A deals, India Inc's caste biases crept in at the cost of future profit and growth

**C**ASTE, SOME WOULD contend, is the fulcrum of Indian society. While this is up front and centre during election season, it is a decisive force in matters of education, family and even land ownership. As a new study by researchers from IIM-Bangalore and Pomona College, California, shows, India Inc also isn't free of caste dynamics and caste bias. The study analyses over 1,200 M&A deals between 2007 and 2017 and provides evidence of how caste could be influencing business decisions—it finds a large number of mergers and acquisitions in India take place between businesses whose directors belong to the same caste group.

The research revealed that a caste bias was seen among the four broad caste groups: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. M&A transactions between sub-categories within castes, or Jatis, also paint a similar picture: Agarwals acquired Agarwal-dominated firms. In a study published in April of last year, similar homophily was found in CEO appointments and the reason for the same was that such people were more likely to be from a similar or shared social background, thus resulting in increased trust, communication and coordination—the familiarity of shared culture, so to speak. However, such deals, it was revealed in the IIM-B-Pomona College study, led to lower profits and poorer long-run performance compared with M&A deals where the leaders/leadership of the companies didn't belong to the same caste. One of the major reasons for the same could be the lack of originality and creativity in the company due to group-thinking and increased conformity. The internal biases in boardrooms therefore directly impact the economy and companies, and the same should motivate India Inc towards recognising and negotiating the implicit beliefs of a caste-based society.

**SMART FARMING**

WHAT WE HAVE ENDED UP DOING IS USING TECHNOLOGY TO GIVE ADVICE BASED ON MACRO INDICATORS. MOST ADVICE IS NOT FARMER-SPECIFIC, THOUGH SCIENTIFICALLY CORRECT

# Agri-data can reap a bumper harvest

T NANDA KUMAR

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**D**ATA IS THE new oil. This is the new mantra, currently in circulation. The original is credited to Clive Humby, UK mathematician and architect of Tesco's Clubcard. He said, “it's valuable, but if unrefined, it cannot really be used. It has to be changed into gas, plastic, chemicals, etc, to create a valuable entity that drives profitable activity; so must data be broken down, analysed for it to have value”.

The idea in this article is not to argue whether data is indeed as valuable as oil or to examine how big businesses make money from “big data”, but to make out a case for using data in the agriculture sector to further the prosperity and income of farmers. Such an approach pre-supposes access to data for use for the largest common good.

A large volume of data related to agriculture exists, but in a number of segregated silos. They are collected at different intervals of time for different purposes and collated, summarised and published by various government agencies. Historical data sets have been used extensively for analysis, understanding trends, estimating impacts of weather and policy on crops and prices, etc. These have helped policymakers and researchers to suggest changes in policy prescriptions, and design, implement and monitor schemes. But these have, unfortunately, not helped farmers take timely decisions to increase their income or even reduce losses in the event of a change in the situation.

Agricultural statistics is not easy to collect and compile, hence the dependence on the government. We have been using these statistics for many years in spite of the fact that it suffers from three major handicaps: timeliness, reliability and integrity. Let me

cite just one example: published statistics tells us that the production of wheat was 92 million tonnes in 2015-16 (6 million tonnes more than the previous year) and 98 million tonnes in 16-17, another 6 million tonnes more. In spite of this, wheat imports in 16-17 were 5.75 million tonnes. Since consumption trends did not show any surge to justify such large imports, the only logical conclusion is that the government itself was not confident of this data. The fact that information comes in late is well known, be it of sowing or crop-cutting data. The elaborate exercise of collection of primary data on crops that have time-honoured systems (rice, wheat, etc) still has design errors and implementation gaps. Crops like sugarcane and cotton are more difficult, not to speak of tree crops like mangoes. Even the compilation and publishing of data deserves better attention to detail. For example, there is no data on production of chicken meat for 2013-14 and the compiled data available on government's websites for 2012-13 for this item will not pass a school level statistical test!

The question is how can data become reliable and useful for farmers? How can it help the government take

the right policy decisions? To start with, let us look at the volume of data available with the government in various silos. A quick list includes data on land, ownership of lands, weather and rainfall, irrigation, electrification, crop-wise sowing, production and yield, fertiliser consumption, market arrivals and prices from APMCs, wholesale and consumer prices, procurement, etc. The list can go on. Then there are the new ‘data-driven’ schemes like soil health, PM crop insurance, PM KISAN etc, which have a wealth of details. All this information is available in different silos, not correlated, and often not inter-operable. Add to this the ‘JAM’ data and the electoral rolls, and we have ‘big data’, probably the new bio-fuel. The question is: is big data going to create wealth for

a few who can access it or capture such data or will it help farmers take more informed decisions?

To start with, let us accept the hypothesis that the farmer will be better off if provided with specific crop, soil, weather and market information advisories. This requires that his land is identified and linked to his name, and that micro-climate details like rainfall, moisture levels, soil fertility, etc, are mapped along with his crops as

**Institutions who have interest in generating usable data are banks and insurance companies. So the revenue model focuses on their needs rather than farmers' needs**

## India Inc must unite for Make in India

If domestic producers cannot access domestic alumina, it will hurt India's ability to build indigenous capacity

R GOPALAN

Former economic affairs secretary

**INDIA'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT** should be the priority of every citizen – individual and corporate alike. Indian corporate entities that are involved in any form of manufacturing or production should prioritise their actions towards national interest before other priorities. To realise the government's vision of Make in India, the country needs the support of every corporate citizen that uses the nation's assets to lend a hand in the process of nation building. Unfortunately, recent events in the alumina and aluminium sector in Odisha is damaging national economic interest.

Aluminum is a strategic metal. India is fast catching up with the world in realising the potential of the metal, its utility in energy security, aerospace, defence, infrastructure and automobile, and its adoption for government initiatives like Smart Cities, Power for All, and its indigenous space programme. For it to use aluminium in a cost-effective manner, India needs to reduce its reliance on overseas markets and focus on building domestic capacity to achieve self-sufficiency.

One primary resource that goes into aluminium manufacturing is alumina. Nalco is the largest producer of alumina in the country. Nalco mines over 6.8 million tonnes of high quality bauxite from the Panchpatmali hills of Koraput district in Odisha which serves as feedstock to its 2.2 MTPA alumina refinery at Damanjodi.

The company's aluminium smelter at Angul has a capacity of 0.46 MTPA; the company creates a surplus of nearly 1.3 MTPA. This surplus capacity is directly sold off to foreign buyers. Over the past few years, Nalco has been steadily exporting more than 1 million tonne of alumina to countries like Iran, Egypt, UAE, China, Indonesia, Malaysia and many more.

It is difficult to comprehend why Nalco is exporting alumina without

considering the importance of creating value for the nation. For example, there are large aluminium producers like Vedanta who depend on imported alumina for production.

If Nalco considers to sell alumina to these domestic producers instead, it retains the export benefits it derives as part of the export promotion. This is because companies like Vedanta is willing to participate in the tender process through their SEZ units that allow Nalco to access all benefits through the SEZ Act, 2005. It also ensures that the country does not lose foreign exchange gains and additionally, the economy stands to save on freight cost.

The economy's objective, which is at the cusp of achieving high industrialisation, rapid investment and regional growth, will not be fulfilled by denying domestic producers access to raw materials. Minerals and metals like bauxite, coal, alumina are part of a nation's wealth. There is no good reason to deny any Indian company the right to buy alumina from Nalco.

The Constitution of India, through Article 14, provides for equality before the law or equal protection within the territory of India. In this context, if an Indian corporate citizen is not allowed to participate in the sale process of domestic asset like alumina, it can be seen as denial of fundamental rights and therefore violation of the constitution.

In fact, in a comment made when he held the portfolio of ministry of mines, Piyush Goyal, minister of railways and coal, had succinctly captured the problematic prioritising of export of raw materials when he said, “I made a study

to understand why and I was taken aback by the fact that we are producing alumina, the raw materials for aluminium, in large volumes but exporting it to other countries instead of adding value in India and selling finished products”.

The Odisha High Court's judgment of March 26, 2019, in the matter of Vedanta Limited and Another vs National Aluminium Company Limited, where it upheld that Vedanta can participate in the tender process, further consolidates Goyal's view.

If domestic producers cannot access domestic alumina, it will hurt India's ability to build indigenous capacity. It will also create a situation where the state of Odisha—the guardian of the bauxite mines that Nalco explores—will lose out.

This is because by denying access, Nalco is hurting the state's ‘Make in Odisha’ vision and stifling socio-economic development of the region. Jeopardising industrial development of Odisha can effectively put jobs of more than 20,000 people at risk. Sensing the seriousness, in fact, more than 12,000 people from various spheres of society made a representation to the state government, requesting for Vedanta's participation in the tender process.

It will be the endeavour of the economy to ensure that domestic production is encouraged to fulfil the objective of Make in India. The comment of a senior minister and a state high court's decision show that there is a need for authorities to come together to set an example that will ensure India's national assets are used for the purpose of nation-building above all else.

also advisories on fertilisation and irrigation schedules, pest control measures and market trends are given on time. Today's technology is capable of doing this in real time. What we have ended up doing, however, is using modern technology to give ‘unsolicited’, often irrelevant, advice based on macro indicators. Most advice is not farmer-specific, though scientifically correct. We fill their ‘inbox’ with multiple, often confusing, messages.

Modern technology offers better options. There are enough young entrepreneurs in the country today who can offer farmers specific solutions using data from the sky, the soil and the market. These new start-ups, though not a large number at present, are struggling with two core issues: access to existing data and the revenue model. Primary data in the government is mostly a ‘no-entry’ zone. Generating usable data is costly and the farmers do not pay for expensive options. Institutions who have interest in micro-climate, crop monitoring, etc, are banks and insurance companies. So the revenue model focuses on their needs rather than farmers' needs. If the government were to change the entire extension system to a more specific, farmer-oriented, data-driven, real-time advice model, the game will change.

We need to start with two things: First, give open, but ‘limited’ (limited on account of privacy and national security issues) access to primary data in the government. The government can, if they choose, levy a small charge for access. Second, provide technical backstopping to agri start-ups and enable a revenue model to enable them to participate in the extension space. Let this new bio-fuel be used in a retail format to power farmers' prosperity!

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### The right order

The Supreme Court has done well to order the Gujarat government to pay 2002 Gujarat riot victim Bilkis Bano ₹50 lakh as compensation, and provide a government job and housing in the area of her choice. Bano, then 21 and five-months pregnant, was gang-raped in Randhikpur while fleeing the violence in the aftermath of the Godhra train burning and her three children were killed by an anti-Muslim rioting mob. The court's order for the withdrawal of pension benefits for three police personnel and the action of demotion by two posts against an IPS officer must act as a deterrent

— Ravi Chander, Bengaluru

### IT in the NAM region

Amid a widening skill-gap and a higher sub-contracting on account of prolonged Brexit woes, tougher visa extension/immigration norms and rising local hiring by US IT firms, a marginal revenue growth is a positive indicator for the sector. It is prudent to review the existing cost-effective measures viz crowd-sourcing, limited automation and on-demand staffing, and generate greater real value for stakeholders. Delivering business solutions with a relatively shorter delivery cycle and high-quality implementation of projects ought to be the key objectives. It is important to raise equity capital without resorting to redundant corporate actions, curtail rising employee costs and mitigate workforce issues due to uneven wage structures and insecurities. Newer business avenues demand a greater risk appetite, as income via legacy sources viz support, maintenance and consulting is near saturation. Proposed relaxation of immigration norms by Canada is a welcome move to attract professionals with the desired niche skills and promises to preserve the existing client base in the NAM region, thereby benefiting the sector

— Girish Lalwani, Delhi

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ILLUSTRATION: ROHNITPHORE

**ALOK KUMAR & SEEMA BANSAL**

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**IMPROVING LEARNING OUTCOMES**

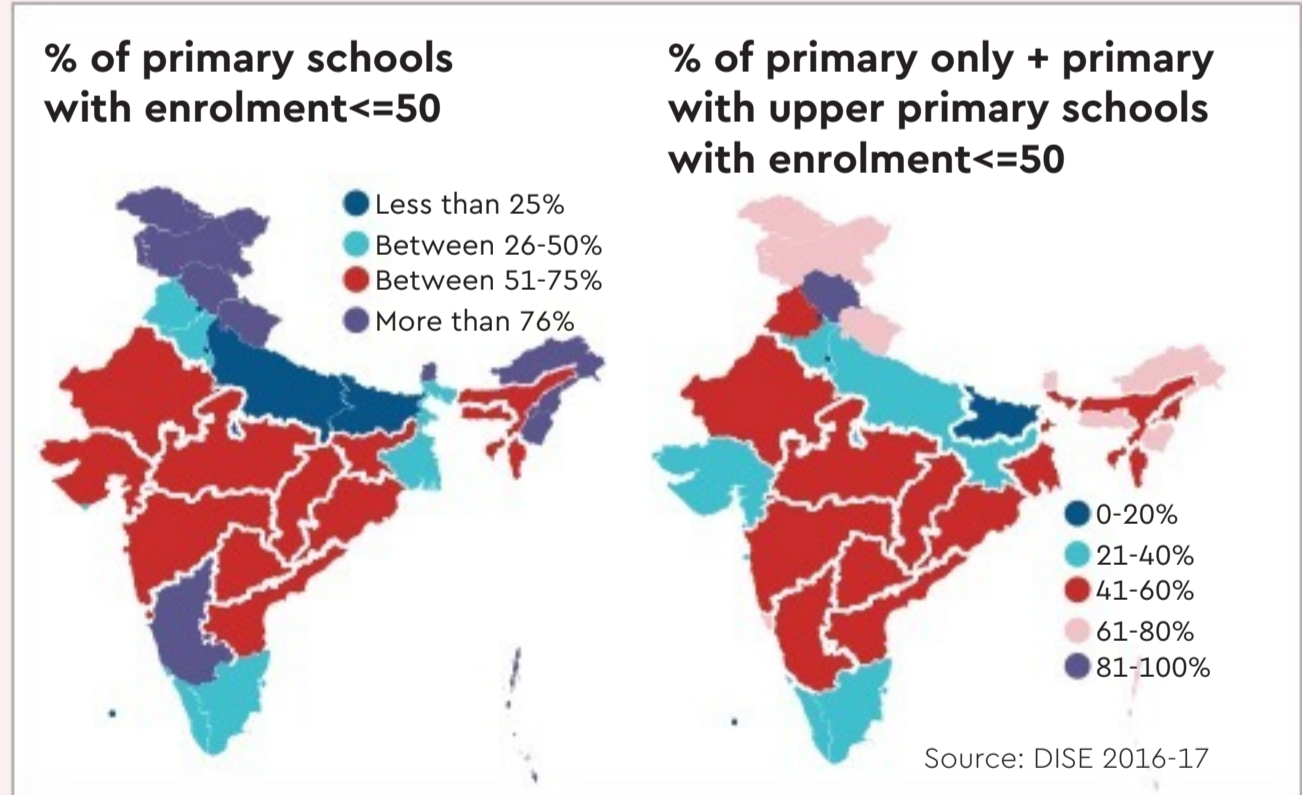
# Fix the chassis before tuning the engine

The most basic input to improving learning outcomes is to create schools that are functional. A school that has a minimum size, adequate teachers and basic infrastructure is a prerequisite to effective teaching. Without this, undertaking pedagogical interventions is akin to fine-tuning the engine of a car whose chassis is broken

**L**OOKING BACK AT THE last decade, we have only partially redeemed the pledge we made to our children under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. While we have been largely successful in fixing the access challenge, with 100% gross enrolment at primary levels, learning outcomes have remained disconcertingly low. While various sources paint somewhat differently nuanced pictures, the headline remains similar: about 50% of Class 5 students cannot read a Class 2 text, according to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), while the National Achievement Survey (NAS) cautions that average scores in several grades and subjects are as low as 40-50%.

What needs to be recognised, however, is that this is not for want of effort. Effort has come from multiple quarters—the government itself, aid agencies, foundations and a whole host of not-for-profits. In fact, 30-50% of India's CSR spend goes towards school education. And there

is significant support to education innovation and reform from multilateral agencies and foundations. However, achieving a sustained improvement in learning outcomes has remained elusive.



The NITI Aayog has been at the vanguard of the movement to shift the focus from a schematic approach tracking inputs (school infrastructure, teachers, books and mid-day meals) to a learning outcome centred systems approach. Whether it is the School Education Quality Index (SEQI), SATH-E or the Aspirational Districts initiative, primacy has been accorded to learning outcomes as the ultimate goal. What will it take for us to achieve a step change in learning and quality in our public education system?

This three-part series challenges some of the common thinking on improving learning outcomes and presents a somewhat contrarian view on the road to transformation.

Typically, most education systems and the host of actors supporting these systems have operated on the assumption that one or more of three initiatives will address the problem: content & pedagogical changes (including edtech), teacher/principal training, and student assessments linked to individual and systemic accountability. However, in spite of years of effort and multiple pilots as well as large projects, these strategies have only been moderately successful. Why?

In our view, one of the key reasons for this continued stasis is that in many places our existing delivery structures do not allow for these interventions to be successful. India today suffers from the twin challenges of unviable sub-scale schools and a severe shortage of teachers, which makes in-school interventions only marginally fruitful.

Because of an emphasis on enrolment, India adopted the strategy of building schools near every habitation, culminating in a proliferation of schools

with tiny populations and inadequate resources. Today, India has almost 3-4 times the number of schools (15 lakh) than China (about 5 lakh), despite a similar population and lesser geographical size. Not surprisingly, about 4 lakh schools have fewer than 50 students (as stated in NITI Aayog's India Three Year Action Agenda) and as a result are allocated a maximum of two teachers. In reality, often the schools have one teacher due to vacancies and shortages.

In these schools, a single teacher has to attempt a mission impossible—simultaneously manage students of 3-5 different grades while also handling all administrative work-alike. These schools neither have a principal nor clerical staff. Infrastructure—libraries, playgrounds or computers—is a far cry. The large number of schools makes monitoring visits by officials few and infrequent—resulting in poor mentoring or accountability of these schools. Today, an estimated 1.5 crore students in India study in unviable sub-schools. How can these children ever learn in such an environment?

This issue is compounded by teacher vacancies. By most estimates, India has a shortage of more than 10 lakh teachers, and teachers that do exist are often inefficiently distributed—it is not uncommon to find several surplus teachers in an urban school, while a single teacher may manage 100-plus students in a rural school. Some states, like Jharkhand, have a severe teacher shortage of over 40%, while 60% positions are occupied by contract teachers, many of whom find it difficult to qualify the teachers' eligibility test. In effect, the state has only 25-30% of required teacher positions staffed by fully qualified teachers. Aggregated state-wide metrics like PTR (pupil-teacher ratio) often hide such gaps.

In our experience across Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan, the twin challenges of sub-scale schools and lack of teachers imply that most academic interventions—whether content, pedagogy, training or assessments—have a limited and unsustainable impact.

The solutions are simple—albeit politically sensitive. The first is to consolidate sub-scale schools within short distances of each other, if necessary through provision of transport facilities or allowances. School consolidation, pioneered in states like Rajasthan and Jharkhand, has already reaped rich dividends through improved learning environments and even improved enrolment, belying fears of a fall in access and increased dropouts. Larger integrated schools have several immediate benefits—including providing students grade and subject-specific teachers, improved discipline and critically more time available for teaching due to the availability of supporting staff. Community involvement also tends to be higher because of a larger parent group.

The second solution is strategic efforts at reducing teacher vacancies—at an aggregate and a school level. This implies large-scale teacher rationalisation (moving teachers from surplus schools to deficit schools), restructuring complicated teacher cadres, and, most importantly, increased investment in teacher recruitment through better planning and more stringent processes. Madhya Pradesh has undertaken an online teacher rationalisation process, moving about 10,000 teachers from surplus to deficit schools. States like Odisha and Rajasthan have also made good progress on recruitment, including making it an online, competitive process, resulting in less than 10% teacher vacancies.

It is our belief that today the most basic input to improving learning outcomes is to create schools that are functional. A school that has a minimum size, adequate teachers and some basic infrastructure is a non-negotiable prerequisite to effective teaching. Without this, undertaking pedagogical or assessments interventions is akin to fine-tuning the engine of a car whose chassis is broken. Undertaking school mergers and unlocking teacher recruitment and rationalisation requires significant political commitment. Without this all other interventions can provide only short-term and small gains. States like Rajasthan and Jharkhand provide a template for how to undertake this effectively.

(This is the first in a three-part series.)

# Empowering women through safe water

**POONAM SEWAK**

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## How to turn women from water bearers to water managers

**P**ADMAJA RUNS A small water enterprise in her village Rangashaipet, in Telangana. This region of Telangana has fluoride contamination in the groundwater, leading to crippling fluorosis. This disease sets in early in the children, stunting their growth, mottling and decaying their teeth, and causing early ageing due to skeleton erosion. Now, the residents of Rangashaipet have access to clean and safe drinking water through a woman-managed and treated water facility.

The relationship between women and water is eternal. Women have traditionally been water bearers, walking miles, lugging water home. They are disproportionately burdened with unpaid tiresome domestic work, care for the sick, robbing them of opportunities to learn skills and be employed.

According to a World Bank report, India ranks 120 among 131 countries in female labour force participation rates. The economic contribution of women in India stands at 17% of GDP, which is lesser than half of the global average. It becomes very difficult for an economy to grow sustainably if 50% of its population is not an active part of the workforce. Including at least 50% of women in the national workforce can ramp up India's GDP growth by 1.5 percentage points.

Small water enterprises (SWEs) can play an important role in fostering women entrepreneurship and ensuring their economic participation in the nation's development. SWEs can provide opportunities to women to turn from water bearers to water managers, improving availability and accessibility of safe drinking water, earning livelihood, and improving their quality of life. Nearly 13.8 crore households that comprise 69 crore people lack access to safe drinking water. Nearly 2 lakh people die every year in India because of consuming contaminated drinking water. Engaging women in the management of

SWEs can help achieve the twin objectives of women's empowerment and provision of safe drinking water to the communities, contributing to UN Sustainable Development Goals 6 (Clean Water), 5 (Gender Equality) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

Promoting the concept of SWEs, the Safe Water Network India (SWNI) took up the initiative to empower grass-roots women—self-help groups or slum-level federation by empowering them with skills, deploying technology, and

reducing their work hours to mainstream them into an economic activity, thus changing their historical role from water carriers to safe water managers. Their journey was not easy given societal barriers, gendered roles and responsibilities, access to finance, besides lack of skill-sets. To achieve this goal, a series of training programmes were developed and workshops conducted in local languages where women entrepreneurs were trained to understand the technological and operational aspects of treatment facilities. Technological innovations deployed at water stations provided women entrepreneurs' flexible work hours to maintain a work-home balance. The ical station managers were also trained to engage with customers and educate their community members about the benefits of consuming safe drinking water.

The results are remarkably impressive. There was a visible shift in water carrying patterns. At ical stations, for example, men (over 75%) come to collect water on their bicycles and motorcycles using their prepaid RFID cards to dispense water in cans. Additionally, women working at these water stations not only earn a livelihood, but also make a positive and long-lasting impact within their communities and contribute to the national economy.

Despite India's notable GDP growth rate, a huge population is underutilised. Government-run initiatives like Skill India Mission and Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana are fostering an enabling environment for entrepreneurship, but there continues to be a persistent need to create more prospects for women to earn gainful employment. Investment in SWEs provide an opportunity to women, particularly in rural areas, to improve the health of communities and earn livelihoods. More initiatives need to be taken to create gender parity in the economy. It's the collective responsibility of the government and society to realise the goal of a more inclusive, sustainable and prosperous future.

## REGIONAL CAFE: TAMIL NADU

**IDLI HAS BEEN** the ultimate comfort food in south Indian homes forever. It is a healthy, easy-to-consume dish. Made of fermented ground rice and *urad dal*, it has no great taste on its own. You have to have it with a variety of *chutneys*, powders and *sambar* to make it really interesting. It has been breakfast food for school-going children, which they have usually found boring. The *dosa* has always been considered sexier.

However, by the turn of the century, *idli* has been gaining name and fame. The millennials have rediscovered it. *Idli* and *idli*-making is fast becoming to be a big business, creating a lot of opportunities. For the past three years, March 30 is being celebrated as the World Idli Day. The hashtag 'World Idli Day' started trending and remained one of the top-3 Twitter trends that day.

The World Idli Day is the brainchild of an autorickshaw driver in Chennai turned *idli* entrepreneur, Eniyavan, who started out with a small *idli* shop called Mallipoo Idli in 1997. Mallipoo is the Tamil name of jasmine flower and the best *idlis* are supposed to be as fragrant and soft as jasmine. Eniyavan sells many types of *idlis* in his shop every day, and has come up with more than 2,000 *idli* varieties. He has prepared pizza *idli* to attract children. The

# Packaged idli is going places

You can carry 400 calories of healthy food in your pocket

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purists may not approve, but his *idlis* are proving to be popular. He caters to weddings and other large functions. The city has always had small and large eateries serving *idlis*. Not all offered quality products. Long queues used to form to get the best ones from hole-in-the-wall places. While *idli sambar* was *de rigueur* in five-star hotel breakfast menus, they could never get the taste of the *idli* right.

In 2014, Murugan Idli Shop entered the city. Its promoter is from Madurai city, known for quality *idlis*. The restaurant

started serving fluffy soft white *idlis* with other popular south Indian items. Murugan Idli became so popular that it now has many branches in the city, and has also spread its wings to Singapore and the UK. The traditional way of making *idli* batter is arduous. Wet grinders from Coimbatore and *idli* pans fitting into pressure cookers have made life easier. To make *idli*-making even more simple, ready-made long-lasting *idli* batter is now available over the counter. Bangalore-based PC Mustafa's iD Fresh Food's ready-made *idli*



*dosa* batter is a runaway success with a ₹200 crore turnover.

Five years ago, *idli* went high-tech when RU Srinivas launched the Idli Factory. Srinivas was an award winning chief executive of Caliber Point, a BPO. An MBA and an ACA, he had been a professional for 30 years. As he was climbing up the career ladder, he was travelling incessantly. He found that if you were travelling for a living, finding food at odd hours was proving to be a real challenge. "I was exhausted, I wanted to do something different. I

decided to move from a BPO to a KPO (Kitchen Product Outsourcing)." *Idli* has had its origins in Karnataka. The first reference to *idli* was made in a cook book published by a Mysore king 1,300 years ago. "I always imagined from my school days carrying food in my pocket like a geometry box. The geometry box was my inspiration for *idli*, but them in pockets, and walk away. I took the plunge when I went with a friend for breakfast to a restaurant and we were paying through our nose for a couple of *idlis*. I realised that the cost of *idli* was nothing compared to the infrastructure surrounding it—such as the packaging, the middlemen and distribution, and so on."

Srinivas set up a centralised kitchen. He was literally thinking out of the box, changing the shape of the *idli*, and its packaging, making it dry, non-messy and easy to carry. He set up a central kitchen, invested in simple machinery to make *idlis* on scale. For a couple of years, it remained a casual operation. Then came the breakthrough. "The airport started stocking our *idlis*. Then the Indian Railways started showing interest. We are on railway platforms. This was the gateway to an unimaginably large market with low margins."

The fun phase for Idli Factory was over. Srinivas got into the excel sheet mode. "I approached a pharmacy chain and asked them to offer my *idlis*. It's like selling candies and chocolates over the counter. I was finding different channels for the *idli*."

As Srinivas points out, there are no set rules for making *idlis*. "It's not like preparing scotch whisky." He says his *idlis* are a product of a lot of research. He guarantees that they will stay fluffy for 24 hours. He offers several varieties including the very traditional Kanchipuram *idlis*. They have been given names like Madras Bars, Madras Roundtana and so on. There are no preservatives in these *idlis*. The packaging is biased on the geometry box of his dreams. "You can carry 400 calories of healthy food in your pocket."

Having broken even in a small way, Srinivas is on an expansion mode. "There is a lot of demand for Idli Factory *idlis* all over the country and abroad also. I need to raise more funding to grow big. There are over 25 states in India. If I set up four kitchens in each state, which will service 25 kiosks, it will be a big business. Everybody is considering healthy food options. In the next five years, there will be a scramble for healthy food. My only competition will be from aunties making *idlis* at home."