



Inclusion over exclusion

Fears of a vocal section should not override the rights of NRC claimants to due process

With the Supreme Court-led process of updating the National Register of Citizens in Assam nearing its deadline of July 31, the complexities involved in the gargantuan exercise have dawned upon the executive. Both the Central and State governments have sought an extension. But it remains to be seen whether the Court, which has insisted on sticking to the timelines, would relent when it hears the matter on July 23. The first draft NRC published on the intervening night of December 31 and January 1, 2018 had the names of 19 million people out of the total 32.9 million who had applied for inclusion as citizens. The second draft NRC, published on July 30 last, upped it to 28.9 million but left out four million found ineligible. Around 3.6 million of them subsequently filed citizenship claims. An “additional exclusion list” was issued last month containing 1,02,463 names included earlier in the draft list. In anticipation of millions being ultimately left out, the Assam government is moving to set up 200 Foreigners’ Tribunals to handle cases of people to be excluded from the final NRC, as part of a larger plan to establish 1,000 such tribunals. The State government is also preparing to construct 10 more detention centres; six are now running out of district jails.

A humanitarian crisis awaits Assam whether the final NRC is published on July 31 or after. In the run-up to the final publication, case after case has emerged of persons wrongfully left out of the list. The process has left no group out of its sweep, be it Marwaris or Biharis from elsewhere in the country, people tracing their antecedents to other Northeastern states, people of Nepali origin, and caste Hindu Assamese. The prime targets of this exercise, however, are Hindu Bengalis and Bengali-origin Muslims of Assam – more than 80% of the 4.1 million people named in the two lists belong to these two groups. Yet, the rationale of the Centre and State in seeking a deadline extension, as found in their submissions in the Supreme Court, betrays an exclusionary bias. The joint plea sought time to conduct a 20% sample reverification process in districts bordering Bangladesh and 10% in the rest of the State to quell a “growing perception” that lakhs of illegal immigrants may have slipped into the list. This, despite the State NRC Coordinator’s reports to the apex court suggesting that up to 27% of names have been reverified during the process of disposal of claims. It hasn’t helped that the Central government keeps holding out the prospect of unleashing a nationwide NRC to detect and deport illegal aliens, when it has no index to base such an exercise on – the 1951 register was exclusive to Assam. The accent should be on inclusion, not exclusion. The wheels of justice cannot pander to the suspicions of a vocal majority without giving the excluded access to due process.

Unpresidential slant

Trump’s racist tweets risk damaging the fabric of American society further

A visceral debate on racism and immigration has again gripped the United States, after President Donald Trump attacked four Democratic Congresswomen of colour, asking them to return to the “totally broken and crime infested places from which they came”. His tweets raised a furore over their racist tenor and exacerbated the sense of bitter polarisation, given the strident ongoing debate over Mr. Trump’s zero-tolerance approach toward undocumented migration. The House of Representatives, under Democratic control, voted to condemn Mr. Trump’s remarks as racist, marking the first such reprimand of a sitting President in over a century. Not only did that Congressional rebuke to Mr. Trump pass mostly along partisan lines, by a vote of 240 to 187, but other senior Republicans including Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell defended the President against the racist label. Nevertheless, Mr. Trump hit back again at the four Congresswomen – who have adopted the moniker “the Squad” – on Twitter for what he called their “horrible and disgusting actions”, “racist hatred”, and for being “anti-America”, “anti-Semitic”, and possibly communist sympathisers.

Stepping back from the immediate, acerbic terms of this exchange, the bigger concern is that these hateful comments risk damaging the fabric of American society further, as they are an unmistakable and painful hint from their President that legal immigrants, especially people of colour, are not welcome. Yet, there can be no denying the significance of immigrants as a demographic cohort of the country. More than 44.5 million immigrants, at least 13.7% of the overall population, reside in the U.S.; one in seven U.S. residents is foreign-born. Mexicans, Indians and Chinese immigrants are respectively the largest sub-groups within this cohort. It was little surprise then, that Ilhan Omar, one of Mr. Trump’s targets, situated the comments in the agenda of white nationalism, arguing that given the direct contravention of U.S. constitutional values implied, it was time to consider impeaching him. Yet impeachment would be an option only if the Senate were also to come under Democratic control, or if there might be some conceivable reason why Republicans would break with their recent record of siding with Mr. Trump no matter how egregious his conduct. A more tedious, but deep-rooted approach would be for liberals of all hues to engage in a meaningful dialogue with their conservative detractors, over what they could agree on as a common minimum agenda and values that could anchor their nation’s march into the 21st century. If a nationwide conversation of this sort, aimed at discovering a reasonable middle ground is not undertaken, the very idea of the American dream, of a meritocracy built on harnessing talent from around the world, will unravel fast.

The NEP and liberal arts education

The draft’s endorsement of critical thinking would have gained credibility if it had promoted liberal values



KRISHNA KUMAR

A few months ago, a school principal told me about her conversation in the morning assembly with children of the middle (Grades VI-VIII) section. She had asked them for suggestions to turn the school into heaven. Some children suggested a garden, with trees, grass, and flowers blossoming all year round. Others pointed out that the school already had a nice garden. They suggested that heaven should have peace, so we should end all fights. The assembly ended with everyone taking a vow to stop all fighting in the school to make it like heaven. A short while later, two boys came scuffling into the principal’s office, quarrelling and seeking her intervention. On inquiry, one of them said, “Ma’am, didn’t you say you want our school to be like heaven?” Then he pointed at the other boy and asked, “What is he doing here, Ma’am? He fights with me all the time.”

This story came back to me when I started reading the section on higher education in the 480-page draft of the National Education Policy (NEP). I had completed my reading of the section on school education, so I was ready to be told how a future generation that spends its school years under the guidance of the proposed new policy will spend its college years. For improvement in learning at school, the draft NEP wants critical thinking and creativity to be treated as the cornerstones of intellectual development from early childhood onwards. As a term,

critical thinking or inquiry has gained enormous popularity of late. It does not mean ‘critical’ in the common sense. How the term has evolved in recent educational theory implies the ability to place ideas and problems in a larger context in order to locate creative links and clues by using information and concepts drawn from different subjects. Imagine our youngsters proceeding to higher education after this kind of intellectual training at school: you can picture a transformed college classroom.

Pivotal to reform

In the draft NEP, the section for higher education opens with ‘liberal arts’ as the key to reform. This is another term that has been gaining currency in India over recent years, but its history is rather different from that of critical thinking. In India, owing to our colonial history, we are more used to the term ‘liberal’. In modern education, ‘liberal arts’ refers to undergraduate courses in America’s elite private universities. For years, I have been looking for a suitable term in my mother tongue, i.e. Hindi, to convey the many layers of meaning underlying the word ‘liberal’. The common translation is ‘udaar’ or large-hearted. (I am sure this is the term they will use when the draft NEP is made available in Hindi.) The idea of liberalism as large-heartedness or intellectual generosity ran into trouble when ‘neo-liberalism’ gained centre-stage in economic policy. The only way one might notice some generosity in it was by recognising the state’s willingness to loosen its grip. Neo-liberalism has now settled in, transcending ideological boundaries, but its impact on liberal arts education in America is far from clear. Many scholars have suggested that the turn to-



wards neo-liberal policies has weakened critical thinking in liberal arts courses. This matter has suddenly become relevant for us in the wake of the draft NEP proposing both critical thinking and liberal arts, virtually in the same breath.

Applying critical thinking

Implementing the draft NEP in my own mind, I thought of using critical thinking to reflect on the prospects of liberal training. The late Professor Ravinder Kumar, an eminent historian of modern politics, was a self-avowed liberal. I once heard him explain why liberalism is the hardest social doctrine to practice. He said the capacity to tolerate your adversaries, with curiosity to understand them, calls for a mutual agreement. If there is no such consensus, i.e. liberal outlook is practised by one side only, it can be frustrating, and might even lead to a tragic failure of liberalism itself. When I hear about liberal arts courses being offered in private universities, I often wonder what future awaits them. How will they face a world in which the ‘narrow domestic walls’ are rising higher and higher? This metaphor was used by Tagore, a bold liberal, who wanted India to become a ‘heaven of freedom’. ‘Where knowledge is free’, the same poem

Green shoots of economic growth

Without factoring in agriculture, the vision of a \$5-trillion economy will remain a distant dream



NAVEEN P. SINGH & RANJITH P.C.

India’s dream of becoming a \$5-trillion economy by 2024 is now in the open with a ‘blue sky’ vision envisaged in the Economic Survey this year. The document lays down a clear strategy to augment the growth of key sectors by shifting gears as the current economic conditions are smooth in terms of macroeconomic stability to expand growth. However, unless there are adequate investment reforms in primary sectors, steps taken to augment growth in other sectors would be futile.

Investment is the key

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), insufficient investment in the agriculture sector in most developing countries over the past 30 years has resulted in low productivity and stagnant production.

In India, with a steadily decreasing share of 14.4% in Gross Value Added since 2015-16, the sector’s contribution to a \$5-trillion economy would be around \$1 trillion – assuming a positive annual growth rate hereafter.

Investment is the key to unlocking the potential of a developing economy. However, the myopic

policy regime in the past several decades has resulted in sluggish investment growth in the farm sector. Therefore, strengthening the sector with an enabling investment package (both public and private) is critical.

First, the wave of investment should touch segments such as agro-processing, and exports, agri-startups and agri-tourism, where the potential for job creation and capacity utilisation is far less. Integrating the existing tourism circuit with a relatively new area of agri-tourism (as a hub-and-spoke model), where glimpses of farm staff and farm operations are displayed to attract tourists, would help in boosting the investment cycle and generate in-situ employment.

Second, investment needs to be driven to strengthen both public and private extension advisory systems and the quality of agri-education and research through collaboration and convergence. It would also serve as a stage to demonstrate resource conservation and sustainable use through organic, natural and green methods, and also zero budget natural farming.

Third, given that India has the highest livestock population in the world, investment should be made to utilise this surplus by employing next-generation livestock technology with a strong emphasis not only on productivity enhancement but also on conservation of indigenous germplasm, disease surveillance, quality control, waste utili-



sation and value addition. This would lead to a sustained increase in farm income and savings with an export-oriented growth model.

Fourth, investment in renewable energy generation (using small wind mill and solar pumps) on fallow farmland and in hilly terrain would help reduce the burden of debt-ridden electricity distribution companies and State governments, besides enabling energy security in rural areas.

Fifth, a farm business organisation is another source of routing private investment to agriculture. Linking these organisations with commodity exchanges would provide agriculture commodities more space on international trading platforms and reduce the burden of markets in a glut season, with certain policy/procedural modifications.

Pivotal role for data

Finally, data is the key driver of modern agriculture which in turn can power artificial intelligence-led agriculture, e-markets, soil mapping and others. Currently, there are issues of enumeration, maintenance and accessibility to help maintain agri-data on various

said. The liberal arts undergraduate courses I am referring are to cost ₹8 lakh per year.

The draft NEP’s support for liberal arts comes with a plea for increased public funding. It also cites employability as a justification. Even more interestingly, the argument excavates historical grounding. It says: “Indian universities such as Takshshila and Nalanda... definitively emphasised the liberal arts and liberal education tradition.... The critical Indian concept of liberal arts has indeed become extremely important in the modern day employment landscape of the 21st century, and liberal arts education of this kind is already being extensively implemented today (e.g. in the United States in Ivy League schools) with great success. It is time India also brought back this great tradition back to its place of origin.” (pp. 223-224).

The resounding, elaborate commendation of liberal arts in the draft NEP brought me back to the principal’s story about turning her school into heaven. The boy who asked her about his classmate – “What is he doing here, Ma’am?” – was asking a fundamental question pertinent to the future of liberal values. The youngster’s query demonstrates that he has internalised the spirit of the age. Many children do that. Their questions carry valuable material to understand our times better and more objectively than we might be able to do as adults, submerged as we are in our ethos, feeling forced to cope with it. The boy’s query contained the hope that principal Ma’am, being the custodian of heaven, will exercise her authority to adjudicate in his fight. What were her choices? There were mainly two: to expel the alleged fighter or to ask the complainer to talk to his adversary. Only the latter would

qualify as a liberal administrative measure.

Perhaps this is what the draft NEP also wants in its push for the liberal arts, as a futuristic substitute for the monochromatic ‘BA’ our system is used to and stuck in. Since the draft NEP is committed to critical thinking, surely its writers had cast a glance at the larger ethos and noticed the demise of several bastions of liberal education. Had they evinced even moderate concern, their endorsement of the liberal arts would have gained credibility. Unless liberal arts graduates are to be produced exclusively for export, their training would have to include the smartness to not let anyone know what exactly you believe in. One suspects that their American counterparts already receive such training.

Let me get back to the heaven alluded to in the principal’s story. Trees and peace apart, a school turned into heaven will surely have to resolve the problem of fear, so endemic to our education system. The boy who wanted the principal to adjudicate was not afraid of indicating to her his own preferred solution. It was implied in the question: ‘What is he doing here?’ This stance also carries the hope of impunity from being charged of intolerance. As a grown-up he might say: ‘If we want to preserve our neatly fenced heaven, why can’t we expel from it the people we don’t appreciate?’ We might add: isn’t this already being argued in many liberal countries, so why should we hesitate? My principal friend, however, followed her instinctive good sense and sent the two boys away, asking them to talk it over and play without a quarrel together.

Krishna Kumar is a former director of the NCERT

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Betrayal of verdict

The political conundrum in Karnataka, and the apex court’s reaction to it, come as a disappointment to the State’s electorate (Front page, “Karnataka CM asked to prove majority on Friday,” July 19). Legislators get elected because of the backing of their party and voters choose a party more than the candidate. Hence, it is unethical for MLAs to switch loyalties midway into a term. To pre-empt such crises, the Representation of People Act should be amended and the new rule should stipulate that once a candidate gets elected from a given party’s ticket, his resignation, stepping down or demise will result in the party nominating a different member. This

would ensure that the mandate given to a party is not sabotaged by individual politicians and also save the expenditure incurred in conducting bypolls.

B. SUNDAR RAMAN,
Coimbatore

■ The anti-defection law has been often misused by some legislators to suit their unethical and immoral political intentions. However, deleting the 10th Schedule will amount to throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Also, the suggestion that legislators who act in unscrupulous ways should be voted out in subsequent elections may not work in India as polls are fought not on the merits of a candidate but on extraneous factors like caste and money power. The ever-increasing numbers

of legislators with criminal records vindicates this point (Parley, “Does the anti-defection law serve any purpose?” July 19). The Karnataka crisis has turned into a street-fight with legislators switching sides and throwing barbs at each other. The parties care less about what the people want; winning the crown is all that matters to them. The Supreme Court’s bizarre verdict on the rebel MLAs has only come as the cherry on the cake. The common man is left scratching his head in bafflement.

A.V.S. SHUBHANGI,
Bengaluru

ICJ reprieve

The International Court of Justice’s directive to Pakistan to reconsider the case of Kulbhusan Jadhav can be

construed as an indictment of Islamabad’s military courts and its system of dispensing rough-and-ready justice. However, though the ICJ has halted Mr. Jadhav’s execution pending a review of his trial, it has not entertained India’s request for either his acquittal or a retrial in civilian courts. The international court did not have the jurisdiction to rule on such matters. Both the countries must now move forward and pursue diplomatic channels to bring closure to the case.

K.S. JAYATHEERTHA,
Bengaluru

Abolish sedition law

Section 124A of the IPC, introduced by the British to curb dissent, is a draconian provision. It is condemnable

that more than 70 years since India’s Independence, the state is deploying it not just to settle political scores but also to silence journalists when they report on issues like the Maoist insurgency and communal violence (Editorial, “Sword against pen,” July 18). The sedition provision is not just an anachronism in the democratic set-up of the country, it also runs counter to the freedom of speech and expression enshrined in Article 19 1(a) of the Constitution. It is high time the government of the day abrogates the provision.

VIJAY SINGH ADHIKARI,
Nainital, Uttarakhand

Violation of rights

The Indian state’s violations of human rights in Jammu and Kashmir in the name of

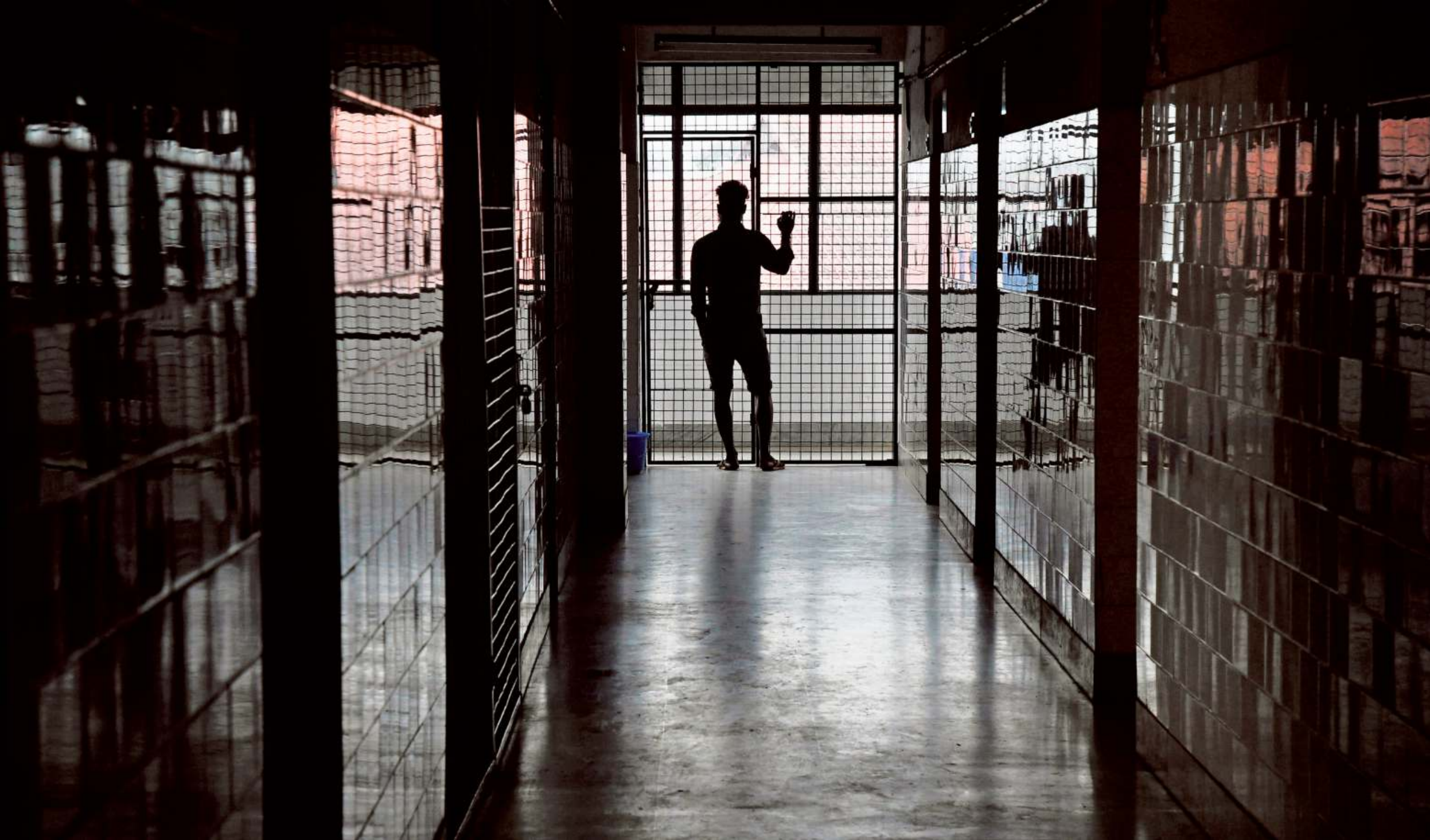
protecting national security are open knowledge (Editorial page, “OIC’s curious record on Xinjiang,” July 19). The writer’s observations on how countries in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) work may have some substance but it won’t be appreciable for India to indulge in ‘whataboutery’. The OIC’s silence on restrictions in Xinjiang doesn’t absolve India of its own responsibilities. If New Delhi wants to get more respect in the international arena, it needs to raise the bar when it comes to protecting the human rights of all its citizens and residents.

BITRA RAGHUVeer,
Mangalagiri, Andhra Pradesh

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Ecstasy and the agony

The small town of Aluva in Kerala is emerging as a hub for narcotic traffic and use. The State is stepping up its efforts to curb the problem, but easy availability and access to drugs is spurring the trade, reports **M.P. Praveen**



“Stringent laws and severe punishment do not seem to have worked as a deterrent for peddlers.” ■ THULASI KAKKAT

Dressed in a grey shirt and black trousers, Amal*, 21, walks into the room with a big smile. No one would be able to guess that he was locked up in a drug rehabilitation centre in Muvattupuzha in eastern Ernakulam for over a fortnight. Amal was acquainted with drugs when he was just 13 years old. He was in danger of “losing his mind”, he says, before he controlled his impulses in order to get his life back on track. Gentle prodding by the excise officials who had nabbed him as well as his mother’s tears paved the way for his rehabilitation.

Amal looks composed. “It feels like waking up from a nightmare,” he says. “Earlier, I could not smile, enjoy jokes, or have a normal conversation. I was in a different world. I could beat anyone to pulp and feel nothing about it. I feel more human now.”

While his little hamlet Manjali in Ernakulam district is famous for its halwa and biryani, it was ganja that Amal fell in love with as a teenager, influenced by his peers. “But I never got addicted to it. The ganja that we get here is of low quality. Once, during an online chat, a friend and I shared some pictures of the grass we smoked. And he snubbed me for savouring trash,” he says.

Like several others, Amal went on to trade ganja for headier stuff, all because of a friend who was into “real stuff” and kept the source of his supply close to his chest. Soon, Amal was catapulted to a life of perpetual high, riding on a cocktail of meth, MDMA, and LSD.

His family, comprising an indifferent father, clueless mother and a younger brother, had known that something was amiss with him. But it took his mother time to find out what was going on.

Vishal*, 19, was on the verge of depression at 15 when his learning disability isolated him from his competitive peers. At his school in suburban Ernakulam, neither his teachers nor his peers came to his rescue. His aloofness, however, attracted the attention of a peddler who introduced him to ganja. By the time his dependence on drugs was detected by the family, Vishal had become an addict. He went through a de-addiction routine, which proved futile. But four years since his first experience with ganja, Vishal is slowly piecing together his life. A bad accident which confined him to bed for about three months was what finally pulled him away from the clutch of drugs.

An emerging hub for narcotics
It is hardly a coincidence that Amal and Vishal hail from places near Aluva, which is to the north of Kochi in Kerala. Located on the banks of the Periyar river, the town is in the news almost every other day for its unenviable profile as an emerging hub for narcotics traffic and



The theory for long has been that youngsters with emotional problems and from dysfunctional families are most vulnerable to drugs. Now youngsters from perfectly normal families are also turning to drugs solely for recreational purposes.

C.J. JOHN
Psychiatrist

use. Easy availability of drugs, peer patronage, mobile phone-aided access to dope networks, and lack of care from family or society are egging on the trade. The users are mostly students who are barely out of school and college.

“It was after considering the vulnerability of these students that we began two enforcement drives in Aluva: Operation Holiday with a focus on students who stayed back in hostels during the summer vacation, and Operation Monsoon to sensitise newcomers at the start of the new academic year,” says K. Chandrapalan, Deputy Excise Commissioner, Ernakulam district.

“Sniffer Sheikh”, a well-known supplier of Nitrazepam tablets to the students of a college in Aluva, was caught during Operation Holiday. Nitrazepam is a psychotropic drug prescribed for anxiety and insomnia, but is a hit among the youth.

“He had thick, lustrous hair and a feminine face. He used to cleverly use that to enter girls’ hostels too. He ran a well-entrenched network assisted by four aides for the State-wide supply of Nitrazepam tablets which he sourced in bulk from neighbouring States,” says N.D. Tommy, a Civil Excise Officer who was part of the drive and was awarded by the Excise Minister for exemplary enforce-

ment work.

Two months into Operation Monsoon, excise officials conducted an awareness session at a school in Aluva when a section of students tipped them off about an ice-cream vendor who sold toffees to senior students. The sleuths sent a student to purchase toffee, sold in the range of ₹30 to ₹50. The toffee turned out to be ganja parcelled in wrappers. The seller had purchased the wrappers in bulk from Tamil Nadu. “Aluva is perhaps ideally located for transporting, storing and supplying the contraband across the district,” says Tommy.

From Aluva, the shadowy network has cast its spell over Kochi. Former Excise Commissioner Rishi Raj Singh had warned a few years ago that Kochi would become home to the second biggest community of drug addicts after Amritsar. He wasn’t completely off the mark.

Despite the spike in demand for designer drugs, ganja continues to have a stranglehold over drug abusers – perhaps because it is cheap and readily available. “Ganja largely comes from the Naxal-infested areas of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Odisha. This is where a few ganja farmers from Idukki district have migrated and it is from these places it is smuggled in via Namakkal, Cumbum and Theni in Tamil Nadu. A colony named Uthamapuram, located between Namakkal and Cumbum, is notorious for ganja trade but remains out of bounds for enforcement agencies,” says T.A. Ashok Kumar, Assistant Excise Commissioner (Enforcement).

The business model for ganja is simple. A couple of kilograms for a few thousand rupees are smuggled in, split into numerous small packets, and marketed under the brand name, Idukki Gold, to leverage the popular perception that ganja from Idukki is the best, says Kumar.

Vying with ganja in terms of volume are the Nitrazepam tablets. These are smuggled from Tamil Nadu and Karnataka where they can be bought from medical shops without a prescription. A strip of Nitrazepam tablets bought for around ₹40 is sold for as high as ₹500 making it a highly lucrative business proposition, Kumar says.

There are other types of drugs too. Early this year, an excise squad in Ernakulam made arguably the biggest-ever haul of hashish in Kerala. Over six kilos of hashish valued at ₹13 crore in the market were seized from a man who used to smuggle the substance from Nepal via Uttar Pradesh.

In September last, 30 kg of MDMA, also known as Ecstasy, worth around ₹200 crore, was seized after it landed at a courier company in Kochi from Chennai while on way to Malaysia. Aluva is

transforming into a transit point, a cog in the wider scheme of international drug cartels.

The anti-narcotics squads have also noticed a unique but disturbing trend in the State where abusers double up as carriers. And this is forcing the squads to keep a tab on youngsters commuting between Kochi and places like Bengaluru and Goa. “A sense of adventure gets the better of many youngsters when they are away from home. They try out drugs thinking it’s going to be a one-time thing, but soon find themselves linked to the rackets as the trade fetches easy money,” says a squad member.

Spike in cases
The number of narcotic cases registered in Kerala by the Excise Department alone spiked from 2,033 in 2016 to 5,946 in 2017 and 7,573 (nearly 1,000 in Ernakulam district alone) in 2018. In the first five months of 2019, 3,316 cases were registered, of which Ernakulam accounts for 421. The figure has already surpassed the total number of cases for the whole of 2016.

The police registered 6,501 narcotic cases in 2016, 9,359 cases in 2017, 9,521 in 2018, and 3,970 cases till May this year. The volume of ganja seized by the Excise Department for the corresponding periods stood at 502 kg, 1,333 kg, 1,885 kg, and 1,365 kg. Seizure of hashish dropped from 10.79 kg in 2016 to 1.98 kg in 2017 before soaring to 65.94 kg in 2018 and 40 kg till May this year.

The most perceptible rise was in the seizure of Nitrazepam tablets – from 1,500 tablets in 2016, it rose to 7,800 in 2017, 10,700 in 2018, and 3,100 in 2019.

“The seizures account for just a fraction of the drugs smuggled in,” says Sam Christy Daniel, State Additional Excise Commissioner (Enforcement). “The apex court decree that the informant and the investigation officer should not be the same person has further dented the enforcement drive of the Excise Department which is already affected by manpower shortage. The enforcement wing of the Excise Department is restricted to 58 circle inspectors and 14 Deputy Excise Commissioners for 138 excise range offices across the State.”

While contraband drugs always had their presence in the State, the proliferation of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substance cases is attributed by large sections to the previous government’s decision to close down bar hotels below the four-star category towards the end of its term in 2015.

Constitutional expert Sebastian Paul thinks that the growing menace of drugs is a fallout of the liquor ban. “Enforcing prohibition without laying the groundwork will not only lead to its failure but give rise to other more serious societal problems. History is replete with evi-

dence to that effect. The advent of bootlegging and consequential law and order problems in America in the aftermath of prohibition is a classic case,” he says.

By the time the decision to close down bars was reversed by the new government in 2016, drug peddlers had spread their tentacles far and wide.

A long journey to de-addiction
At the rehabilitation centres, counselors have a tough time dealing with the addicts. “In most cases involving ganja, the users gather a lot of wrong information on the perceived benefits of cannabis. Ganja is found to be the most common gateway to synthetic drugs and intravenous (IV) drug abuse using stuff like Buprenorphine. Once people reach that stage, chances of recovery are very remote,” says Faris Basheer, Medical Officer at the Vimukthi de-addiction centre run by the Excise Department at Muvattupuzha.

Set up six months ago, the centre has so far treated 462 outpatients and 62 inpatients. The Vimukthi de-addiction centres are manned by a psychiatrist-social worker, a medical officer, a psychologist, a counsellor and three nursing and security staff each. The centres follow a protocol starting with detoxification of victims, a personality study and motivational sessions leading to eventual rehabilitation and mainstreaming during a three-week-long stay, free of cost.

Psychiatrist C.J. John, who has over the years dealt with several drug abuse victims from all age groups and family backgrounds, says that there is a new trend among the youth. “The theory for long has been that youngsters with emotional problems and from dysfunctional families are most vulnerable to drugs. While that theory still holds water, a new tendency seems to be on the rise where youngsters from perfectly normal families are turning to drugs solely for recreational purposes. As we focus more on treatment and rehabilitation, the most critical area of early detection is often overlooked,” he says. He says there is a need for an enforcement protocol in dealing with the youth caught in drug trade so that they are not stigmatised for the rest of their lives.

Stringent laws and severe punishment do not seem to have worked as a deterrent for peddlers. The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act has two schedules dealing with narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. The punishment varies with the kind of drug and the quantity of seizure. “It is only in the case of contraband drugs like ganja that less than one kg is treated as a small quantity and bail is granted. As for psychotropic drugs, even a few milligrams are considered the commer-

Earlier, I could not smile, enjoy jokes, or have a normal conversation. I was in a different world. I could beat anyone to pulp and feel nothing about it. I feel more human now (after rehab).

AMAL
Manjali resident

cial quantity, and anyone found possessing that much even inadvertently or out of ignorance lands up behind the bars for years,” says M. Revi Krishnan, a lawyer in the Kerala High Court. “The statute is rigorous. With the judiciary also taking a serious note of the drug menace, even procedural lapses are not taken as a ground for bail,” he adds.

State-led initiatives
Efforts are under way at various levels to deal with the crisis. Student Police Cadet, a novel initiative of the Kerala police, has emerged as an effective tool in countering the problem. There are about 60,000 student police cadets across school campuses in the State and one of their major tasks is to ensure that the immediate vicinity of their schools is tobacco-free. These cadets also pass on information about substance abuse among their peers to teachers to ensure timely, corrective intervention.

Besides, a campaign named Our Responsibility to Children, run by the State Police and the Women and Child Development Department, is under way for early detection of children vulnerable to drugs. Under the programme, 15,000 teachers have been trained to detect potential victims early on, intervene where correction is needed, and ensure their integration into the mainstream. Over 100 psychiatrists and psychologists and 2,000-odd social mentors are also associated with the programme.

Then there is Hope, a programme introduced a couple of years ago, which is aimed at extending academic and career support to students who failed to clear the 10th standard exam. “You can imagine the state of mind of these students. They are the most vulnerable as they crave for acceptance. This makes them perfect targets for anti-social elements and drug networks,” says P. Vijayan, Inspector General of Police (Administration), Police Headquarters.

School Protection Groups operated jointly by the Education, Police and Excise departments and ward-level Vimukthi Senas with five volunteers each are some of the other initiatives being tried out by the State to keep its younger generation away from drugs.

The number of addicts and seizure of drugs shows that it requires sustained efforts to curb the new scourge.

*Names have been changed to protect identities