



Wait, gain

The BJP stands to gain by not rushing in to fill the space vacated by a fractious coalition

The fall of the Congress-JD(S) coalition government in Karnataka, at the culmination of weeks of political skulduggery, hardly marks the end of uncertainty and the beginning of stability for the State. The crisis in the ruling coalition had crippled governance, even as allegations of bribing and kidnapping of legislators by the Opposition BJP emerged. The coalition tried every trick to hold its flock together, but to no avail. Howsoever delayed, the inevitable happened on Tuesday as the government led by H. D. Kumaraswamy lost a trust vote in the Assembly. In a House shrunken by the resignation of several coalition MLAs, the BJP, which had won 105 seats in the 2018 election, had a majority. Its protestations notwithstanding, the BJP has been instrumental in engineering the rebellion. Regardless of the claims of both sides, it would be difficult to concede that their slugfest had to do with any principles. The legislators who resigned from the Assembly have demonstrated a remarkable disregard for the people's mandate, and their excuses for doing so are shallow and dishonest. This drama must end, at least now.

Though it had not won a majority, the BJP, as the single largest party was invited to form a government after the 2018 election. The Supreme Court intervened to enforce an early trust vote that the BJP failed to win, paving the way for the government that has now collapsed. The BJP never ceased its machinations to drive a wedge in the coalition, and now wants to form a government. Seventeen coalition MLAs abstained from the voting, and most of them had resigned already. The status of their resignations and questions regarding their disqualification are now subjects of scrutiny by the Speaker and the Supreme Court. Many of the questions are without precedent and complicated, but they need to be settled urgently. Until then, it would be undesirable to form a new government. It would be facetious for the BJP to claim a majority in the House with its strength reduced by schemed absenteeism of members or vacant seats. Nothing in the statute prevents the BJP from staking claim, but it should not pursue that path. Instead, it should wait until fresh elections are held for all vacant seats. It is possible that the BJP could repeat its performance in the Lok Sabha election and win most of these seats. It needs at least eight more MLAs to cross the halfway mark in the House that has a strength of 224 elected members. No government with the support of fewer than half the total strength could be deemed to have a mandate. Waiting might be in the BJP's best interests. The party has an opportunity to demonstrate that it wants to form an alternative government not because of any desperation to wield power, but because it wants to ensure political stability and restore good governance.

Undermining RTI

Amendments should not downgrade the status of information panels

Any amendment to a law is bound to be viewed with suspicion if no fundamental need is seen for the changes it proposes. Amendments passed by the Lok Sabha to the Right to Information Act are so obviously unnecessary that naturally many see an ulterior motive. It is difficult not to concur with activists who contend that the amendments pose a threat to the freedom and autonomy of Information Commissions at the Central and State levels. The Central Information Commissioner, the corresponding authorities in the States (State Information Commissioners) and other Information Commissioners at both levels are statutory functionaries vested with the power to review the decisions of public information officers in government departments, institutions and bodies. The amendments propose to modify the status, tenure and conditions of appointment of these Commissioners and empower the Union government to set their tenure and remuneration. While the original law assured incumbents of a fixed five-year term, with 65 as the retirement age, the amendments say the Centre would decide their tenure. In one stroke, the security of tenure of an adjudicating authority, whose mandate is to intervene in favour of information-seekers against powerful regimes and bureaucrats, has been undermined. The original legislation says the salary and terms and conditions of service of the CIC are the same as those of the Chief Election Commissioner, equal in status to a Supreme Court judge. Similarly, the other Information Commissioners at the Central level have the same conditions of service as Election Commissioners. At the State level, the SIC has the same terms and conditions of service as Election Commissioners, while other Information Commissioners are equated with the Chief Secretary of a State.

The government claims its aim is to 'rationalise' the status of the authorities. It argues that while the Chief Election Commissioner is a constitutional functionary, the CIC is only a statutory authority. And while the CEC is equal in status to a Supreme Court judge, it would be incongruous for the CIC to enjoy the same status as the CIC's orders are subject to judicial review by the high courts. This is a fallacious argument as even the Election Commission's decisions can be reviewed by high courts. Protecting citizens' right to information is a cause important enough for adjudicating authorities to be vested with high status and security of tenure. Given the extent to which the RTI Act has empowered citizens and helped break the hold of vested interests over the administration, the law has always faced a threat from many in power. The RTI Act was a consensus law and a product of public consultation. The present amendments have not been put to any debate. The government would do well to drop the Bill or at least send it to a parliamentary select committee for deeper scrutiny.

Having the last word on 'population control'

There should be a clear understanding that offering choices and services rather than outright state control works best



JAGDISH RATTANANI

On July 11, World Population Day, a Union Minister expressed alarm, in a Tweet, over what he called the "population explosion" in the country, wanting all political parties to enact population control laws and annulling the voting rights of those having more than two children. Just a month earlier, a prominent businessman-yoga guru wanted the government to enact a law where "the third child should not be allowed to vote and enjoy facilities provided by the government". This, according to him, would ensure that people would not give birth to more children.

Both these demands are wayward and represent a warped thinking which has been rebutted rather well in the Economic Survey 2018-19. The Survey notes that India is set to witness a "sharp slowdown in population growth in the next two decades". The fact is that by the 2030s, some States will start transitioning to an ageing society as part of a well-studied process of "demographic transition" which sees nations slowly move toward a stable population as fertility rates fall with an improvement in social and economic development indices over time.

Dangerous imagery

The demand for state controls on the number of children a couple can have is not a new one. It feeds on the perception that a large and growing population is at the root of a nation's problems as more and

more people chase fewer and fewer resources. This image is so ingrained in the minds of people that it does not take much to whip up public sentiment which in turn can quickly degenerate into a deep class or religious conflict that pits the poor, the weak, the downtrodden and the minorities against the more privileged sections. From this point to naming, targeting and attacking is a dangerous and short slide. The implications of such an approach are deep and wide but not easily understood because the argument is couched in sterile numbers and a rule that, it would seem, applies to all sections equally. On the contrary, what is suggested is the ugliest kind of discrimination, worse than physical attacks or social prejudice because it breaks the poor and the weak bit by bit, and in a very insidious way.

Policy of choice

The fig leaf of population control allows for the outrageous argument to be made that a family will be virtually ostracised and a citizen will be denied his or her basic rights if he or she is born as the third child. This has of course never been public policy in India.

In fact, a far-sighted and forward-looking National Population Policy (NPP) was introduced in 2000 when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the Prime Minister. The essence of the policy was the government's commitment to "voluntary and informed choice and consent of citizens while availing of reproductive health care services" along with a "target free approach in administering family planning services". This is a position reiterated by various governments, including the present government on the floor of both Houses of Parliament. For example, in March 2017, the then Minister of State



(Health and Family Welfare), Anupriya Patel, in a written reply in the Lok Sabha noted that the "family Planning programme in India is target free and voluntary in nature and it is the prerogative of the clients to choose a family planning method best suited to them as per their reproductive right".

The then Health Minister, J.P. Nadda, has said pretty much the same thing. About a year ago, he articulated the "lifecycle framework" which looks to the health and nutrition needs of mother and child not merely during pregnancy and child birth but "right from the time of conception till the child grows... carrying on till the adolescent stage and further". This argument is not about denying services but about offering choices and a range of services to mother and child on the clear understanding that the demographic dividend can work to support growth and drive opportunity for ordinary people only when the population is healthy.

Crucial connections

Thus, family health, child survival and the number of children a woman has are closely tied to the levels of health and education of the parents, and in particular the woman; so the poorer the couple, the more the children they tend to

Shifting strategic concerns

What India needs to do as the U.S. and China get busier in the subcontinent



ZORAWAR DAULET SINGH

The U.S. President Donald Trump's latest gaffe has introduced another thorn in what is now clearly an unsettled India-U.S. relationship. His claim, on Monday, that India sought U.S. mediation in Kashmir will pinch the Narendra Modi government more because it strikes at a vital interest: India's territorial integrity. But if we had been more attuned to international shifts, we would have noticed that structural trends in South Asia have been changing over the past several years. While India's hand is not as strong as we sometimes believe it to be, there might be opportunities to leverage the international situation further down the road.

Perceived advantage

If we step back and evaluate the India-Pakistan equation over the past five years, what stands out is that both sides proceeded from a perception that each holds an advantageous position. India's confidence emanated from Mr. Modi's electoral victory in 2014 that yielded a strong Central government and expectations of stable ties with all the major powers. Mostly overlooked in India, Pakistani leaders too have displayed confi-

dence that the international environment was moving in a direction that opened options for Pakistan that were unavailable in the previous decade. This included the renewed patterns of Pakistan's ties with the U.S. and China, with the latter reassuring Pakistan and, most importantly, the Army on their respective strategic commitments and bilateral partnerships. In the U.S.'s case, this appears to have been undertaken discreetly to avoid ruffling India's feathers, with the result that the enduring aspects of U.S.-Pakistan ties remained obscure, but still very real. In the past few days, the resilience of that relationship has come out into the open. Let us not ever forget that this is a military alliance forged in the 1950s. Historically, U.S. policymakers have always sought to restore the alliance with Pakistan whenever Islamabad's ties with China became stronger. India has borne the brunt of this recurring geopolitical dynamic.

Much of Pakistan's contemporary leverage can of course also be traced to the ongoing phase of the Afghan conflict. It fended off the most dangerous phase when U.S. policy might have shifted in an adversarial direction, or instability in the tribal frontier areas might have completely exploded. Thus, the Pakistan Army perceives itself in a position of strength where Washington, Beijing, and even Moscow have recognised Pakistan's role in a future settlement on the conflict in Afghanistan. So, both India and



Pakistan perceive themselves to be in a comfortable strategic position. At any rate, the evolving roles and interests of third parties are becoming significant again, and how Delhi leverages the international environment will determine the success of its overall policy.

Pakistan's benefactors

Both the U.S. and China have overlapping interests in regional stability and avoidance of a major sub-continental conflict. While each maintains deep ties with Pakistan for different reasons, it is unclear to what extent their longer term interests coincide with India, which seeks a structural transformation in Pakistan's domestic politics and external behaviour. The U.S. and China appear content with, or probably prefer, a Pakistan with a strong Rawalpindi, along with competent civilian governance structures and an elite with a wider world view. A Pakistan that looks beyond South Asia could be a useful potential partner in burden sharing, ironically for both the U.S. and China. For Washington, the Pakistan Army is an in-

have. This is a relation that has little to do with religion and everything to do with opportunities, choices and services that are available to the people. The poor tend to have more children because child survival is low, son preference remains high, children lend a helping hand in economic activity for poorer households and so support the economic as well as emotional needs of the family. This is well known, well understood and well established.

As the National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16) notes, women in the lowest wealth quintile have an average of 1.6 more children than women in the highest wealth quintile, translating to a total fertility rate of 3.2 children versus 1.5 children moving from the wealthiest to the poorest. Similarly, the number of children per woman declines with a woman's level of schooling. Women with no schooling have an average 3.1 children, compared with 1.7 children for women with 12 or more years of schooling. This reveals the depth of the connections between health, education and inequality, with those having little access to health and education being caught in a cycle of poverty, leading to more and more children, and the burden that state control on number of children could impose on the weakest. As the latest Economic Survey points out, States with high population growth are also the ones with the lowest per capita availability of hospital beds.

In fact, demographers are careful not to use the word "population control" or "excess population". The NPP 2000 uses the word "control" just thrice; in references to the National AIDS Control Organisation; to prevent and control communicable diseases, and control of childhood diar-

rhoea. This is the spirit in which India has looked at population so that it truly becomes a thriving resource; the life blood of a growing economy. Turning this into a problem that needs to be controlled is exactly the kind of phraseology, mindset and possibly action that will spell doom for the nation. It will undo all the good work that has been done and set the stage for a weaker and poorer health delivery system – exactly the opposite of what a scheme such as Ayushman Bharat seeks to achieve. Today, as many as 23 States and Union Territories, including all the States in the south region, already have fertility below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. So, support rather than control works.

Scars of the past

The damage done when mishandling issues of population growth is long lasting. Let us not forget that the scars of the Emergency are still with us. Men used to be part of the family planning initiatives then but after the excesses of forced sterilisations, they continue to remain completely out of family planning programmes even today. The government now mostly works with woman and child health programmes. Mistakes of the Emergency-kind are not what a new government with a robust electoral mandate might like to repeat. So it is time to ask some of the prejudiced voices within the government and ruling party not to venture into terrain they may not fully understand.

Jagdish Rattanani, is a faculty member at SPJIMR and co-author of the advocacy book, 'Population: Questions That Should Be More Frequently Asked' (Through The Billion Press)

surance card for persisting security challenges such as regime survival for U.S. client states in West Asia as well as for the containment of Iran. For China, a stable Pakistan can be a partner in the Belt and Road initiative and future continental industrial and energy corridors. As the writer Andrew Small underlines, Beijing's large economic investments "come with some clear expectations about the choices that Pakistan's political and military leadership make about their country's future".

In sum, both the U.S. and China seek a strong, stable and secure Pakistan that controls its destabilising behaviour because that undermines their wider regional interests. For the U.S., a revisionist Pakistan pulls India inward and away from potential India-U.S. cooperation on Asian geopolitics. For China, it undermines its industrial and connectivity projects in Pakistan, while negatively impacting India-China ties. Hence, evolving interests of the great powers in South Asia might not necessarily portend an adverse geopolitical setting for India in the medium term. This is even more plausible if the widening comprehensive national power gap between a rising India and an unstable Pakistan make the latter's traditional role as a balancer or spoiler unattractive in the eyes of the great powers. As Pakistani scholar Hussain Haqqani predicts, "You can try to leverage your strategic location as much as you like, but there will come a

time... when strategic concerns change."

So, while it is reasonable to forecast that both the U.S. and China benefit from a more normalised Pakistan, India's policymakers should also remain clear-eyed that neither country would be willing to expend much strategic capital in an ambitious policy to reorder the domestic scene or civil-military relations in Pakistan. In any case, Indian statecraft is essential to reorient perceptions of the great powers. Maintaining that India has the right and the capacity to adopt an active defence posture – that is, blocking the flow of cross-border terror by proactive operations on the Line of Control (LoC) along with reserving the option for more ambitious punitive strikes in response to major terrorist attacks on Indian military targets – would play an important part in shaping how third parties view Indian interests and thereby assume constructive roles in managing Pakistani behaviour.

If India ever asks third parties to assist in the region, it should be for a cessation of Pakistan's proxy war in Kashmir, and, once an atmosphere of peace has been established, to persuade Pakistan to accept the LoC as part of a final territorial settlement similar to the offer by Indira Gandhi in the 1972 Shimla negotiations.

Zorawar Daulet Singh is a fellow at the Centre for Policy Research and author of 'Power and Diplomacy: India's Foreign Policies During the Cold War'

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.

Karnataka politics

The Congress-JD(S) coalition government in Karnataka fell under the weight of its contradictions (Page 1, "Kumaraswamy govt. loses trust vote", July 24). Nobody expected it to complete a full term of five years because a lack of trust and mutual understanding between the Congress and the JD(S) was palpably evident in its functioning. The BJP-'engineered' defections were only a catalyst. It appears naive to look for sinners and saints in an 'all is fair' no-holds-barred game of chasing political power. The Congress party needs to be reminded that it sowed the seeds of a political culture of political desertions by fence-sitters and other opportunists who sold their loyalty to the highest

bidder in the 1970s. It is pointless to catastrophise the political churn in Karnataka as the demise of democracy. We should be more worried about the real threats such as the criminalisation and plutocratisation of politics.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

■ Elections will make no sense if a person who is elected on a party ticket resigns, joins another party and in the process topples the very party on whose ticket he was elected. This is a clear example of money power having its say. Instead, the seat should be declared vacant and fresh elections held within a month. Otherwise, the menace of floor-crossing will remain. Also, the law relating to anti-defection has not served

its purpose. In fact, it legitimises group defections. One would have thought that the BJP, with its massive electoral majority, will focus on governance. On the contrary, the ugly feature one is witnessing is other political parties that are in power in States not being allowed to govern. We are heading towards a totalitarian State. It is for the people to decide.

N.G.R. PRASAD,
K.K. RAM SIDDHARTHA,
Chennai

■ The felling of the coalition government in Karnataka through orchestrated resignations is nothing short of a murder of democracy. One wonders how much money might have been spent on these kinds of defections and from where such money comes from

even after demonetisation. It is time the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution is amended to make all kinds of defections illegal, including 'two-thirds mergers'. Elected members should understand that the people's mandate is not saleable property. After Karnataka, we could be in for more drama – in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

K. MUHAMMED ISMAYIL,
Koduvally, Kerala

India-Pakistan ties

It is fine to be trying out a religion-based solution ("Editorial page, "A bridge across the India-Pakistan abyss", July 24). But nothing can move forward unless there is trust. Trust is the basic foundation which is completely absent in India-Pakistan ties.

VAISHALI MISHRA,
Mumbai

Six runs to England

Expert opinion that the second run, in the ICC World Cup final, should have been disallowed because the fielder, Martin Guptill, had released (thrown) the ball even before the batsman had crossed each other in the process of taking that second run gains credence because of the deflection of the ball from the bat which resulted in a boundary for England ('Sport' page, "An error of judgment", July 22). The second run, even according to the rules of the game, would have been perfectly legal if the batsman was neither run out nor if there

was a bonus boundary because of the deflection. It was, admittedly, too much to expect the on-field umpire to check so many aspects in his decision-making process. But that did not prevent the third umpire from intervening after television replays and informing the on-field umpires about the 'mistake'. It is sad that technological aids were not used when it mattered most which makes it even more baffling to read that the umpire does not regret the error of judgment.

V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:
www.hindu.co.in/opinion/letters/

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The opening paragraph of the report headlined "Perfect launch for Chandrayaan-2" (July 23, 2019) had termed the launch as India's first-ever *interplanetary mission* to be spearheaded by two women. It should have been *moon mission*.

The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300; E-mail:readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

Making Chennai a water-wise city

There is a compelling need for a paradigm shift in the way the ongoing water crisis is being viewed



T. RAMAKRISHNAN

The public discourse on Chennai's ongoing water crisis has been along predictable lines. Source augmentation, deepening of waterbodies and giving rainwater harvesting a renewed emphasis are among the suggestions being made, apart from demand-side management. But these ideas, however well-meaning they may be, have their limitations. There is a compelling need for a paradigm shift in the way the water crisis is being viewed.

When it comes to source augmentation, in the last 40 years, a couple of major projects were taken up for Chennai to tap both fresh water and sea water.

The Krishna Water Supply Scheme or Telugu Ganga Project (1996) and the New Veeranam Project (2004) were implemented using two important inter-State rivers – the Krishna and the Cauvery, both of which depend on the southwest monsoon (June-September).

Though the Krishna Water Supply Scheme, if realised fully, can take care of at least half of the Chennai Metropolitan Area (CMA)'s projected water demand of 1,721 million litres a day (MLD) for 2020, Tamil Nadu has not received the assured quantum from Andhra Pradesh even once in the last 20+ years. As regards the Cauvery project, the 'upper-riparian attitude' of Karnataka determines the flow to Tamil Nadu. In effect, realisation of water by Chennai hinges on nature and inter-State ties, both of which are, more often than not, unpredictable.

Tapping stone quarries

Another source since 2017 for the city has been the abandoned stone quarries located on the outskirts, from where water is drawn for public water supply after treatment.

Further, two desalination plants of 100 MLD each were commissioned in 2010 and 2013. Work has begun on another desalination plant of 150 MLD while steps are on to set up another 400 MLD unit. However, given the costs and environmental



An operator filling his water tanker at a Metrowater station in Chennai in June. Even if there are bountiful monsoon years, it is unlikely that the southern metro will become a water-surplus city. • GETTY IMAGES

concerns, it is unlikely that Chennai can afford to stretch this option beyond a point.

Deepening of tanks and lakes, a popular option, is easier said than done. Issues such as the costs involved in removing and transporting the silt and inadequate disposal arrangements have bothered the authorities to such an extent that nothing much has been done.

As regards rainwater harvesting (RWH), it cannot be a panacea and site-specific requirements will have to be kept in mind while putting up RWH structures. The model of storing rainwater and reusing it may demonstrate the efficacy of RWH.

Many of the options being suggested to overcome the distress situation faced by Chennai have been tried out in the past. Yet, just one bad monsoon has pushed the city to yet another water crisis. This scenario may get repeated in the future too.

Even if there are bountiful monsoon years, the prospects of Chennai becoming a water-surplus city are remote. An official document prepared a few years ago estimated that the CMA, which covers not only Chennai Corporation but also nearby municipalities, town panchayats and village panchayats, will have a shortfall of 1,089 MLD in 2020. Even assuming that the southern peninsula experiences good southwest and north-east monsoons this year, the gap can

come down only by a maximum of 400 MLD.

A note available on the website of The Energy and Resources Institute states, quoting the Central Public Health and Environmental Engineering Organisation, that the average water supply in urban local bodies of the country is 69.25 litres per capita per day (LPCD) against the service level benchmark of 135 LPCD. For a metropolitan city like Chennai, the benchmark goes up to 150 LPCD. If one were to go by the admission of Chennai Metrowater, the service level achieved in March 2018 was 112 LPCD. This is why the need for a paradigm shift becomes all the more important.

Waste-water recycling

Just as in many other Indian cities, the concept of waste-water recycling and re-use has not yet caught the imagination of either the authorities or the public in a big way. The demand-supply gap will be a permanent feature of urban India unless society realises the critical importance of recycling and re-use of water. It needs to be noted here that on an average, 85 litres of water goes waste for every 100 litres utilised.

There is also another reason why the concept ought to be popularised. According to information furnished by the Centre, while urban areas of the country generate 61,948 MLD of

sewage on a daily basis, the installed capacity of sewage treatment plants (STPs) is just 23,277 MLD. This means that only 37.5% of sewage generated can be treated. As per a conservative estimate, Chennai generates about 930 MLD of sewage, whereas its STPs can handle 727 MLD. With rapid urbanisation, the space for new plants is hardly available in peri-urban areas of Chennai, a scenario applicable to any other city in India. As a result, the city's rivers and canals have been reduced to carriers of raw sewage. Over and above these reasons, one of the targets set under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by UN member-countries in 2015, is to halve the proportion of untreated waste water.

Non-consumptive use

There are numerous ways through which waste water can be treated at the point of generation. Several Information Technology companies, located outside the city limits, have adopted the concept as they have their own STPs and use the treated water for non-consumptive purposes such as gardening and flushing toilets. Some high-end residential apartments too have begun implementing the idea.

Realising the potential benefits, Chennai Metrowater has at last launched work on establishing two tertiary treated reverse osmosis plants of 45 MLD each. The process will involve sewage treatment in three stages and will use reverse osmosis system through which most of the dissolved solids and bacteria will be removed from the treated sewage.

Besides, projects are on to experiment with the idea of conjunctive use of fresh water and treated sewage – mixing treated sewage with fresh water by letting it into the lakes of Porur and Perungudi. These are only some modes of water treatment, the scope for which is enormous and still untapped.

All said, a wise society cannot allow itself to become complacent once the rainy season starts. The present debate needs to be taken forward so that waste water is reused and recycled in an imaginative and optimal way. This way, Chennai can take pride in being a water-wise society.

ramakrishnan.t@thehindu.co.in

Contentious remedies for a clear, structural malady

The NEP's proposals will not ensure equity in health care



GEORGE THOMAS

The primary objective of medical education should be to provide a cadre of personnel to take care of the health needs of the country. In addition, any education policy in the modern world has to take into consideration social objectives, for example equity and justice in enrolment and access. That apart, certain fundamental questions need answering too. For instance, how many years of training are required for a medical professional? What should be the purpose of a basic degree in medicine? Is specialisation required? If so, how much and how is it to be done?

The draft New Education Policy (NEP) speaks about equity, inclusiveness and sustainable development at many points, starting from the preamble. However, it is by no means clear that its recommendations will fulfil these objectives, especially in the field of medical education. For example, on page 300, it states that fees in medical colleges, both public and private, will be left to be decided by the institutions themselves. However, just a few pages later, it asserts that the cost of education should be lowered.

At another point, the policy document states that all private institutions should be not-for-profit. It appears that the committee that drafted the report hoped that this recommendation, as well as the regulatory apparatus suggested by it, by itself will take care of the problem of profiteering. However, what gives it such confidence is hard to understand given that the present policy too is to consider higher education a not-for-profit enterprise but has become a very large driver of the black economy, according to several reports. Though the document states at several points that no student should be deprived of education due to lack of finances, the solution it suggests is scholarships.

Confused thinking

The fact that on the one hand, the cost of education is sought to be lowered and on the other, fees are allowed to remain unregulated, betrays confused thinking. With the National Medical Commission Bill regulating fees only for 50% of seats in medical colleges, it looks like the commitment to equity is merely a pious homily.

At several points in the policy document, the need for a flexible education system has

been stressed. One part of this flexibility is in the possibility of multiple entry and exit points. One can understand having a National Entrance Examination for admission to undergraduate courses. However, it is absolutely clear that having a National Exit Examination for MBBS as the mode of entry to postgraduate courses is neither flexible nor fair. Can a student be expected to take the exit examination multiple times if the initial score is not good enough? Are all medical colleges across the country of the same standard to ensure a level-playing field? Sealing the student's fate once and for all through an exit examination is certainly not just.

High level of centralisation

The objectives of autonomy and adaptation to local needs are contradicted by the high level of centralisation in medical education by the National Medical Commission. The document considers separation of the functions of regulation, funding, accreditation and standard setting as absolutely necessary. However, the National Medical Commission has sought to arrogate to itself many of these functions. Further, the recommendation that diploma courses should be expanded in order to provide "intermediate specialists" lacks focus. What are these intermediate specialists supposed to do?

Multiple postgraduate courses have been started without any clear rationale. The MBBS degree has been debased to such an extent that it is considered merely a necessary requirement for postgraduation. One of the main drivers of the thirst for a postgraduate degree is the lack of adequate respectable employment opportunities for an MBBS graduate. The overwhelming privatisation of health-care delivery in India has led to the concentration of personnel in those parts where the public has the capacity to pay. Having a postgraduate degree has a multiplier effect on employability, income and respectability for the doctor. How useful it is for the society is questionable.

The policy document does not recognise that the main driver of inequity in health care is the presence of a large, poorly-regulated, for-profit sector. Private interests have ensured regulatory capture in health-care policymaking. It appears that the National Education Policy has not escaped this capture, hence the clear disconnect between the repeated exhortations to ensure equity and quality and the recommendations which will achieve neither.

Dr. George Thomas is an orthopaedic surgeon at St. Isabel's Hospital, Chennai

Island of hope in the midst of global measles resurgence

Sri Lanka has become free of the viral infection

R. PRASAD

On July 9, Sri Lanka became the fourth country in the Asian region – after Bhutan, The Maldives and Timor-Leste – to eliminate measles. Amidst an increase in the number of cases worldwide, especially in Europe, this came as an encouraging development. Measles is considered as eliminated when a country interrupts transmission of an indigenous virus for three years.

However, the viral infection has, since the beginning of 2018, seen a resurgence in 49 of the 53 countries in the World Health Organization (WHO)'s European Region. A total of 1,60,000 cases and more than 100 deaths were reported from these 49 countries between January 1, 2018 and May 30 this year.

The number of cases reported last year in the European Region, the highest in this decade, was thrice the number reported in 2017 and 15 times the number for 2016. With nearly 78,000 cases reported in the first five months of this year, indications are that the number will surpass last year's.

Ironically, the sharp increase in the region came despite vaccination coverage for the second dose being at a record-high of 91% in 2018. So what could have caused the spike? According to the WHO, the vaccination coverage has "not been uniform across the region nor high enough to ensure herd immunity" to break the transmission cycle.



While global coverage for the first dose of vaccine has remained stagnant at 85% and for the second dose, it is still at 67%, the coverage for Sri Lanka has been above 95% for both the first and second doses. The vaccine is provided to children under the routine national immunisation programme.

Regular vaccination campaigns

The island nation, where measles is a notifiable infection, has also carried out periodical mass vaccination campaigns to reach the small pockets of unimmunised children. Sri Lanka also has strong surveillance in place.

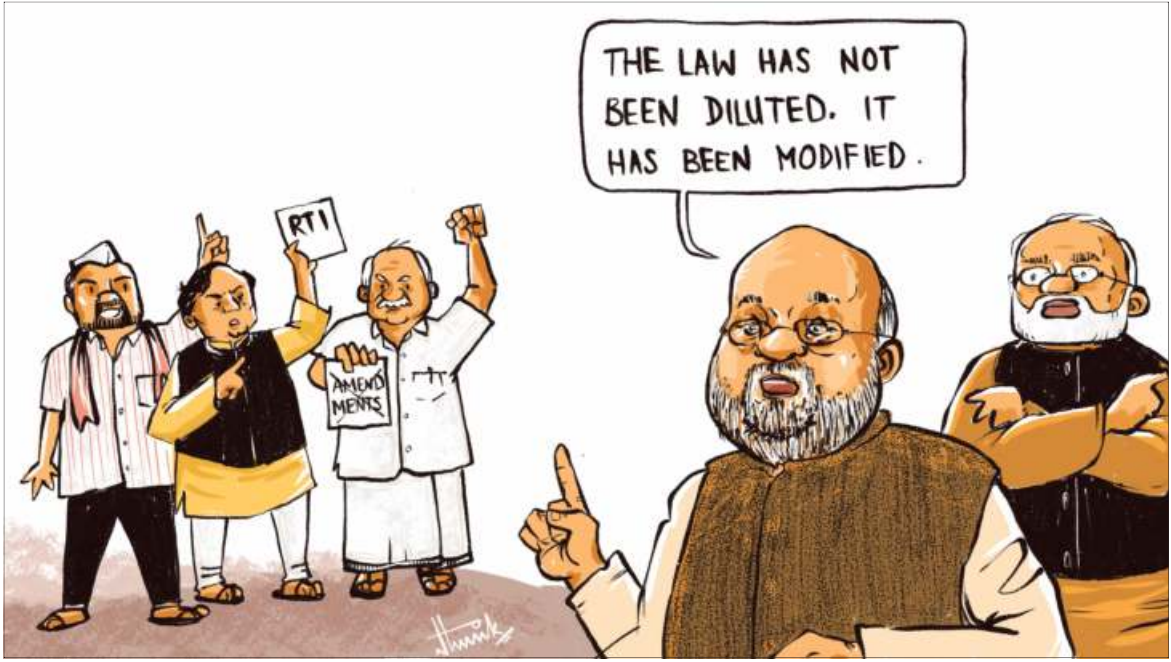
However, the country did encounter a few bumps in its path. In 1984, it introduced measles vaccine in the national immunisation programme and set the goal of eliminating the infection. Though local outbreaks were reported, the annual incidence declined till the year 1999.

During Sri Lanka's measles epidemic of 1999-2000, nearly 15,000 cases were reported following which a two-dose vaccine schedule was introduced, resulting in a sharp decline in incidence. The country reached an elimination target of less than five per one million people in 2011.

But in 2012, the measles immunisation schedule was changed following which babies no longer received measles vaccine at the age of nine months but a measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine on completing 12 months. Following this, in 2013, the country witnessed its last major measles epidemic. Besides other reasons, the change in immunisation schedule was seen as a possible cause.

The MMR vaccine schedule was again changed following a sero-survey data. Babies now began receiving the first dose at nine months and second dose at the age of three years. The country reported its last case of measles caused by an indigenous virus in May 2016.

prasad.ravindranath@thehindu.co.in



DATA POINT

Race to the South

Never before in history has a country even attempted to soft-land an object near the moon's South Pole. If all goes well, India's Chandrayaan-2 will achieve this feat on September 7, 2019. The South Pole is suspected to harbour reservoirs of ice, proof of which will have massive impact on future missions. By Vignesh Radhakrishnan

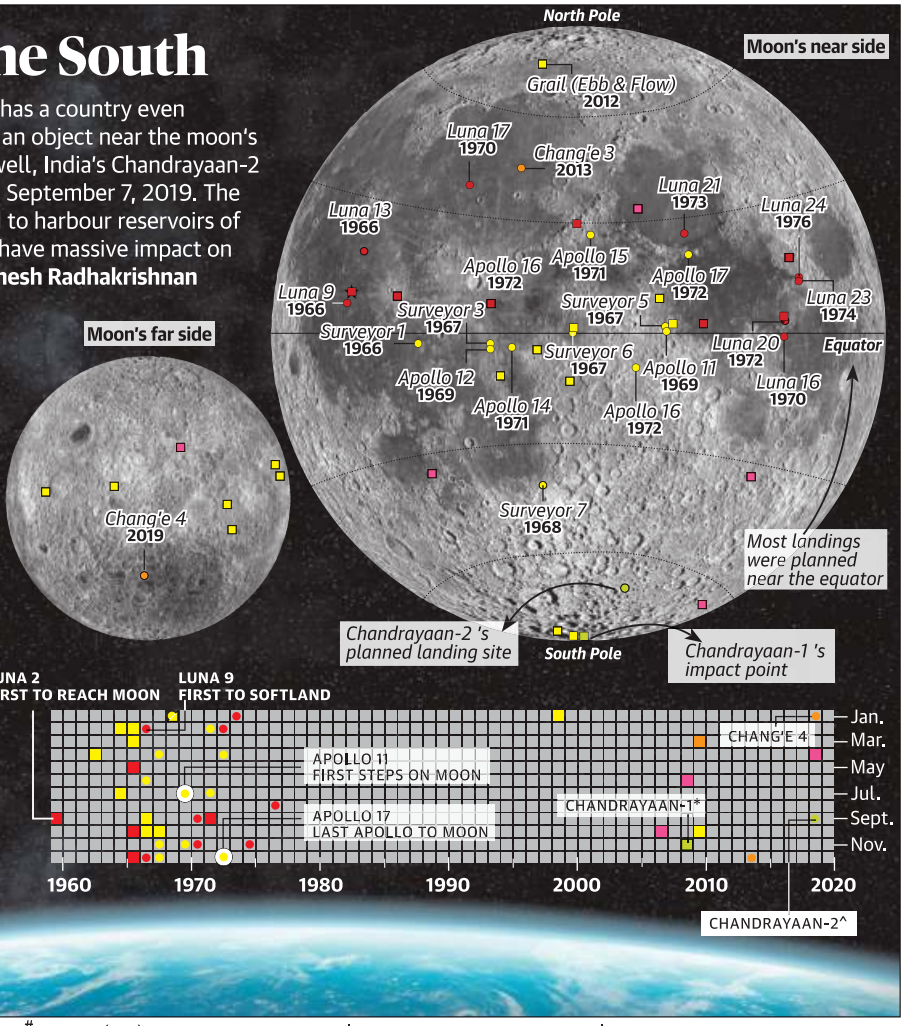
Landing sites

The two moon maps show soft-landing and crash/impact sites of spacecraft sent by various nations

- United States
- U.S.S.R./Russia
- China
- India
- Others

Missions' timeline

The graph shows soft-landing and crash/impact dates of spacecraft on the moon from 1959 to 2019. The colours/shapes denote the same as the moon maps



* VIA AN IMPACT PROBE; ^ PROPOSED; # EUROPE (ESA), JAPAN, ISRAEL, S. KOREA | DESIGNED BY L. BALAMURUGAN | SOURCE: NASA, REUTERS

The Hindu FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 25, 1969

Yahya yet to respond

The Pakistan President Gen. Yahya Khan has not yet sent a reply to Mrs. Indira Gandhi's letter sent through Mr. Kewal Singh, the External Affairs Secretary, who went to Islamabad recently to sign the Kutch Agreement. The Prime Minister had, in that letter, urged an early normalisation of Indo-Pakistan relations at least in the cultural sphere. General Yahya Khan made no comment even on her renewed proposal for the appointment of a joint Indo-Pakistan body at any level to consider all outstanding problems between the two countries. The Prime Minister's letter, dated June 22, was placed on the table of the Rajya Sabha to-day [July 24] by the Deputy Minister for External Affairs, Mr. Surendra Pal Singh, in reply to a question whether India proposed to enter into any meaningful discussions with Pakistan. Deploing the almost total lack of contact now between the peoples of India and Pakistan whose destinies were inextricably intertwined, Mrs. Gandhi suggested that it would help to remove misunderstandings and misconceptions if both countries eased the regulations for travel between the two countries, encourage greater cultural contact in the field of letters, art, music, science and sport.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 25, 1919.

Leper problem in India.

The Rev. Frank Oldrieve, Secretary of the Mission to lepers in India, delivered an interesting and instructive lecture last evening [July 22] at the Regent's Park Hall [in Dacca] on "The Leper Problem and How to Solve it". The Lecture was illustrated by magic lantern pictures. His Excellency Lord Ronaldshay, who presided, in introducing the speaker made reference to the great service the mission has been rendering to humanity. His Excellency said that it was a matter for regret that very little attention was being devoted by the people to the disease of leprosy, whereas malaria, tuberculosis and other diseases had engaged so much of their attention. Out of a total of more than Rs. 44,00,000 of the annual expenditure, only a small fraction was received from the public. There was an exhibition of pictures showing the infectious character of the disease and the relief work that the mission has been carrying on in the different centres in India. The total number of lepers in India would be nearly 150,000. The Rev. Oldrieve said that the disease was not hereditary but according to expert opinion it was infectious.