Deliberate, don't disrupt

Legislators could do well by adhering to a model code of conduct

ne of the most unedifying sights in public life is lawmakers taking to organised disruption of legislative business. Such displays became common in Parliament in the past decade as political parties and legislators demonstratively advertised their points of view without recourse to debate. A number of crucial bills have taken an inordinate time to be enacted due to disruption, while others were not enacted despite a broad consensus – such as the Women's Reservation Bill – due to the behaviour of a few naysayers. Many sessions of Parliament in the recent past saw little business being done due to repeated disruption. In this context, Vice President Venkaiah Naidu's exhortation to political parties to incorporate a model code of conduct for their legislators in State Assemblies and in Parliament is welcome. He suggested that the code should include stipulations on members not entering the well of the House, and desisting from sloganeering and unruly acts. If indeed parties adopt a code, it will go a long way in making parliamentary work meaningful. Otherwise, the general public will lose interest in the procedural aspects of parliamentary democracy and limit their participation to just voting in the elections.

But the absence of disruption alone does not make for meaningful debate. The current Budget session sailed through with minimal disruption. Yet the high productivity during the session came without sufficient deliberation over crucial bills, several of which were rushed through without vetting by parliamentary standing and select committees. These committees have in the past been useful in expanding discussion over laws with civil society and experts from various streams of the larger society. They have also facilitated an enhanced cross-party coordination over issues. By not sending a single Bill among the 28 that were introduced and passed to a standing or select committee for scrutiny, the current session accentuated the trend that has minimised the importance of such committees over the last few years. Unlike the 15th Lok Sabha (2009-2014), when 71% of the bills were referred to such committees, in the 16th Lok Sabha, they constituted only a fourth of the overall number of bills. Time spent on debates in the current session in both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha was barely a third of the overall business. This does not augur well for lawmaking. As Mr. Naidu has also pointed out correctly, deliberation is an important component of parliamentary democracy apart from legislation and accountability of lawmakers. All three aspects must cohere for a thoroughgoing procedural democracy.

War within war

As the Saudi-led coalition crumbles, Yemen needs a nationwide ceasefire

The Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen is proof of how things can go wrong with an ill-conceived, poorly strategised and geopolitics-driven nilitary interference that cares little about human lives After four years of war, the Saudis have not met their declared goal – pushing back the Shia Houthi rebels from the capital Sana'a and restoring the ousted government which is now temporarily headquartered in the southern city of Aden. On the contrary, the war has pushed Yemen into what the UN calls the worst humanitarian crisis. Thousands have been killed, tens of thousands displaced and about two thirds of the country's 28 million people do not have enough to eat. And now, there is a rebellion within the coalition. Last week, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a militia group that was fighting the Houthis as part of the Saudi-led coalition, turned against their masters and captured the presidential palace in Aden as well as the city's main port. In return, Saudi jets targeted STC fighters before a tenuous ceasefire set in. It now looks like a three-way conflict. The Shia Houthis, who the Saudis claim are backed by Iran, are controlling much of the country's north including Sana'a. Yemen's internationally-backed government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, the Saudi ally, is controlling the south, though Mr. Hadi is running the purported administration from Saudi Arabia. The STC wants the south to be an independent entity, like it was till the Yemeni unification in 1990.

The STC's rebellion also signals the growing friction in the multi-national coalition Saudi Arabia has stitched together to fight the Houthis. The STC is backed by the UAE, a crucial partner of Saudi Arabia in its foreign policy adventures. They stayed together in propping up the military dictatorship of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt, in countering the spread and influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world, in opposing the Iran nuclear deal and on blockading Qatar. But when it comes to Yemen, the Saudis see the Hadi government and Sunni Islamic parties, including the Islah, as allies who could stabilise and rebuild the whole country after the Houthis are defeated, while the UAE, already frustrated by the coalition's failure to defeat the rebels, counts on the STC and is staunchly opposed to the Islah party, which has ties to the Brotherhood. The UAE has already pulled out of the Yemen war leaving it to Saudi Arabia to defeat the Houthis. And with their continued backing to the STC, the Emiratis appear less concerned about defeating the Houthis than maintaining their influence in southern Yemen. This should be a moment of reckoning for Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince and the main architect of the Yemen intervention. He has lost the war and his coalition is crumbling, while Yemen is left with unimaginable human suffering. It is time for a nationwide ceasefire and talks with all stakeholders under the mediation of a willing UN to find a political settlement to the crisis.

The contours of the Kashmir move

India's actions were enabled by the unilateralism in global politics and a decline in multilateral arrangements



SUHASINI HAIDAR

The government has defended its twin decisions to revoke operative portions of Article 370 of the Constitution and dividing Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories as "internal policy" that warrant no international comment. While the Prime Minister's moves have a domestic basis, their manner, or "Modi's vivendi" as it were, must be studied in their broader global context.

The U.S.-Afghan factor

The immediate context is the future of Afghanistan and what the deal between the United States and Pakistan for Afghanistan will mean for India. According to reports, an assessment by Indian intelligence agencies that there would be an imminent settlement was what triggered the discussion within the Modi government about a response that would ensure India was not overlooked.

The U.S.'s deal for the return of the Taliban to Afghanistan's mainstream has three specific dangers for New Delhi. First, the deal would most certainly derail the Afghanistan elections planned for September 28, or make their results irrelevant. India's stakes in a democratic Afghanistan go beyond the process since every one of the 17 presidential ticket aspirants is a leader with ties to India. Second, a deal will bring the Taliban, whose leaders owe allegiance to Islamabad and Rawalpindi, into the central power structures and institutions in Kabul. Third, intelligence estimates indicate that after the deal, U.S. troops will not "zero out" completely but continue to maintain between

three and five military bases. In the past, America's dependence on Pakistan for supply routes and security guarantees led the U.S. seeking concessions from India on Kashmir. The U.S. President's comments in July, during a media interaction with Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan that the U.S. counts on Pakistan to "extricate" it from Afghanistan, accompanied by an offer to mediate on Kashmir, set alarm bells ringing in Delhi and dictated the timing of the recent moves. Facing a fast-closing window of opportunity to consolidate its position in Jammu and Kashmir, the government chose to present the U.S. and Pakistan with a fait accompli before a deal was concluded.

The UN's limited impact

The government's move in Kashmir, which had not been contemplated in all the decades since India signed the 1972 Shimla agreement - India and Pakistan committed that "neither side shall unilaterally alter the situation" has also been enabled by the prevailing unilateralism in international politics and the concomitant decline in multilateral arrangements. It is clear that the UN and the UN Security Council have few real powers to stop New

Pakistan has itself carried out such a reorganisation in the parts of Kashmir it occupied in 1948: military control and demographic changes in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), or what Pakistan calls Azad Jammu and Kashmir: elections in which its national parties, the Pakistan Peoples Party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf take part, and an ongoing process to dilute Gilgit-Baltistan's autonomous status. Pakistan has done all this without any UN pushback. In addition, its sustained support of terror groups inimical to India has discredited its protests



on the Kashmir issue. Given that four permanent members of the UNSC have already accepted Kashmir's reorganisation as an "internal matter" - and China's dissent is mainly on the issue of the reorganisation of Ladakh and Aksai Chin – there is little expectation that the UNSC petition by Pakistan will make any headway. The Prime Minister can travel next month to New York quite confident that he will not face more than a few uncomfortable moments and perhaps some protests outside the UN, if at all.

The government has already tested the UN's will and faced no repercussions. In July 2014, the government declared that the U.N. Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) set up in 1949, had "outlived its utility", and asked it to vacate its premises in Delhi. In September 2016, after the Uri attacks, the government publicly announced it had crossed the LoC, a line monitored by the UNMOGIP, to carry out what it called "surgical strikes" on terror

camps in PoK. While such operations have frequently been mounted by the Indian and Pakistani Armies, this was the first such public claim and faced no pushback whatsoever from the UN. In mid-2018, the government also dismissed the first report by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation on both sides of the border in Kashmir, accusing the High Commissioner of "individual bias". And in February 2019, India announced that it carried

out air strikes on a terror camp in Pakistan, after which the Pakistan Air Force dropped bombs over the LoC in Kashmir. Aside from warnings to keep the peace, the UN's reaction was mild, and the UNMO-GIP's role non-existent.

During this period, the ineffectiveness of the UN has been writ large over many other similar disputes. Russia's control of Crimea has only strengthened since 2014 despite a UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution, UNSC statements and a "package of measures". When the U.S. decided, in 2017, to declare Jerusalem as Israel's capital, it lost a vote in the UNGA, but suffered no real action as a consequence of changing the decades-old status quo. Neither has Israel, despite UN censure of the Gaza bombings, and settlements in the West Bank; nor has China changed after UNSC resolutions on Tibet and UNGA petitions on Xinjiang.

Reflecting a trend

Finally, while "Modi's vivendi" on Kashmir is aimed at his domestic base, it mirrors the prevailing trend of populism worldwide, much like the demonetisation decision in 2016 did: recapturing the national narrative, startling opponents with an unexpected move, and thrilling voters with forceful action. In his treatise "What is Populism?", Princeton professor Jan-Werner Müller recounts how populist regimes frequently frame their actions as representing the will of the "real people", a group they exclusively represent. By extension and example, those who dissent are deemed to be not "Real Poles" (prawdziwi Polacy) in Poland or "Real Hungarians" in Hungary. In the same vein was the retort by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to his opponents: "We are the people. Who are

In populist moves worldwide, such actions are "authorised by blame accrues to the government if anything goes wrong. By contrast, says Müller, democratic accountability would actually mean that the burden is on the government to justify just how it uses its political judgment to ensure desired outcomes.

The Kashmir line

In the Kashmir case, the government's actions, which have included the pouring in of troops, a clampdown on communications and the arrest of local leaders, have all been justified through the expressions of euphoria the decisions have elicited among its supporters nationwide. The populist assessment is that any negative consequences - violence in Kashmir, resistance in Jammu and Ladakh to the freeing up of property rights, for example, or the larger impact of worsening India-Pakistan ties on the Kartarpur corridor, Kulbhushan Jadhav's fate, and trade and transport arrangements - will not hurt the government as they were authorised by "the will

of the people" The prevailing narrative is that the government's Kashmir decisions have finally allowed 'Realpolitik' to prevail over the woollyheaded idealism of the past that has not benefited the nation in all these years. Furthermore, an influx of investments and non-Kashmiri residents into the Valley will "normalise" it and usher in an age of prosperity. While the term Realpolitik is used today in a positive sense, it is important to remember the context in which its earliest proponent, Athenian general Thucydides introduced it, In the 'History of the Peloponnesian War'; here he states: "Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must."

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Writing out a clean Bill on health

Medical education needs continuous reforms; the National Medical Commission Bill could be the first step towards this



SUMANT NARAIN

ver the past few days, there have been expressions of concern in various fora ov er a few clauses of the National Medical Commission (NMC) Bill, now enacted. Even medical professionals have protested. According to media reports, there are five primary concerns. These pertain to the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET)/National Exit Test, empowering of community health providers for limited practice, regulating fees for only 50% seats in private colleges, reducing the number of elected representatives in the Commission, and the overriding powers of the Centre.

On examinations

First, a focus on the examinations. For the past few years, a separate NEET is being conducted for undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In addition there are different examinations for institutes such as the All India Institute of Medical Sciences and the Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research. This Act consolidates multiple exams at the undergraduate level with a single NEET and in turn avoids multiple counselling processes. NEXT will act as the final year MBBS examination across India, an en-

trance test to the postgraduate level, and as a licentiate exam before doctors can practise. It aims to reduce disparities in the skill sets of doctors graduating from different institutions. It would also be a single licentiate exam for graduates across the world. Thus, the government has in effect implemented a 'One-Nation-One-Exam' in medical education.

Second, concerns have been expressed over the limited licence to practise for community health providers. We have to appreciate that even with about 70% of India's population residing in the rural areas, the present ratio of doctors in urban and rural areas is 3.8:1; 27,000 doctors serve about 650,000 villages of the country. A recent study by the World Health Organisation shows that nearly 80% of allopathic doctors in the rural areas are without a medical qualification. The NMC Act attempts to address this gap by effectively utilising modern medicine professionals, other than doctors in enabling primary and preventive health care. Evidence from China, Thailand and the United Kingdom shows such integration results in better health outcomes. Chhattisgarh and Assam have also experimented with community health workers. Further, the Act requires them to "...qualify such criteria as may be specified...." thereby ensuring quality.

Fee structure

The next issue relates to the capping of fees. It is an open secret today that private medical colleges

are capitation fee-driven, resort to a discretionary management quota and often have charges of corruption levelled against them. The Indian Medical Council Act, 1956 has no provision for fee regulation. Until now, 'not-for-profit' organisations were permitted to set up medical colleges, a process involving enormous investments and a negotiation of cumbersome procedures. The NMC Act removes the discretionary quota by using a transparent fee structure. It empowers the NMC to frame guidelines for determination of not only fees but all other charges in 50% of seats in private colleges to support poor and meritorious students.

It would be simplistic to assume that a rise in unethical practices in this profession is solely the result of private medical education. While a cap on fees is necessary, there is also a need for incentives to attract private investors. In any case, the transparency that NEXT provides would lead to fee regulation through market forces. The Act also provides for rating of colleges. Thus, reducing entry barriers for setting up medical colleges, along with their rating, is expected to benefit students. They would be able to make an informed decision before seeking admission.

The next issue is of representation in the NMC. A report of the then vice-chancellor, NITI Aayog, on reforms in medical education says: "The current electoral process of appointing regulators is inherently saddled with compromises and attracts professionals who may not be best suited for the task at nand. Indeed, there is ample evidence that the process has failed to bring the best in the field in regulatory roles. The process is based on what is now widely regarded as a flawed principle whereby the regulated elect the regulators." The Act, therefore, provides for a transparent search and selection process with an eclectic mix of elected and nominated representatives, both in the search committee and the commission itself. The government has further addressed the concern of preponderance of selected members in the commission by adding members from State medical councils and

universities. Finally, we need to view the issue of overriding powers of the Centre in the context that the Medical Council of India, even if directed by the government on critical matters, may not always pay heed. In public emergencies, citizens expect the government to address issues. In the current set-up, it may not be possible all the time. Also, the government should be able to give directions so that NMC regulations align with its policy. Hence, these powers. The use of such authority would follow the principle of natural justice: the NMC's opinion would be sought before giving directions.

In a nutshell

While some sections of people have sought to create a negative perception about select clauses of the Act, they have not highlighted other features. The Act establishes the Diplomate of National Board's equivalence to NMC-recognised degrees – a long-pending demand. It also promotes medical pluralism. Then, there is a paradigm shift in the regulatory philosophy from an input-based, entry barrier for education providers without corresponding benefits, to its becoming outcome-focused. Both the number of doctors and their skill sets are expected to improve. Autonomy to boards and segregation of their functions will avoid a conflict of interest and reduce rent-seeking opportunities. And 'quacks' are liable to face imprisonment or be fined or both. The Act ends inspector raj.

The efforts of successive governments have now culminated with the NMC Act replacing the IMC Act. There is no denying that medical education needs continuous reforms in order to usher in improvements in health care. There cannot be just one solution. The NMC Act is a serious attempt to meet the primary need of more medical professionals in the country; it is a beginning.

Sumant Narain is a civil servant and ex-director, NITI. The views expressed are

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.

China's gesture

Every year, Indian pilgrims undertake an arduous journey to the high-altitude Kailash Manasarovar. Peace of mind is a goal. At this juncture the perceptible change in China's attitude, whereby it has spent 36.8 million RMBs in building reception centres at the various points and equipping them with a number of facilities is a gesture that will help India-China ties (Page 1, "In Manasarovar, Chinese lend a helping hand to Indian pilgrims", August 13). The words attributed to Nixon Waterman are relevant here: "I am sure that we would differ less and clasp

our hands in friendliness. Our thoughts would pleasantly agree, if I know you and you know me." R. PICHUMANI, Thippirajapuram, Tamil Nadu

Rainfall metrics In the context of the heavy spells of monsoon rain, it would be most appropriate to have two scales - one for intensity and the other for magnitude – to measure rainfall. There is no scale to classify rains above a certain intensity. The term "exceptionally heavy rainfall" is too blanket a term. For example, there was a report of 82 cm of rain on a single day in the Nilgiris district which is a

Kerala, there has been rain averaging 40 cm. Therefore, the present system of classification of rains should change. The 'intensity scale' could be formulated to judge and predict the intensity of rain in a given area and at a given period of time. Events such as cloudbursts and a very heavy downpour may be grouped under this category. The 'magnitude' scale could be used to record and interpret rains for a 24-hour period in a given area. There also need to be special studies to analyse cloud patterns. with predictions of 'intensity' and 'magnitude'

record in Tamil Nadu. In

based on these. For the 'magnitude scale', in addition to the classification of low intensity rain the revisions can be on these lines: 25 cm-50 cm: 'Extremely heavy rain' (Category 1); 26 cm-75 cm: 'Extremely heavy rain' (Category 2); 76 cm-100 cm: 'Extremely heavy rain' (Category 3); Above 100 cm: 'Extremely heavy rain' (Category 4). In the 'intensity scale' over a short period (less than five hours), the scale could be: 0.1 to 5 cm: 'Moderate': 5 to 9 cm: 'Intense (warning); 10 cm: 'Cloudburst' (Take action - disaster); 10.1 to 15 cm: 'Floods, flash floods' (Heavily disastrous); 15.1 to

20 cm: 'Devastation': 20 to 30 cm: 'Devastation on a large scale'; Above 25 cm: 'Unimaginable consequences'. A. RAJAGOPAL KAMAT,

Malaparamba, Kozhikode, Kerala

Switching off The article, "Shut TV, marvel at the beautiful world" (Open Page, August 11), was a good piece of advice. Many a stereotyped serial is watched by millions even though they are smart in guessing the plot from the beginning to the end. Watching them may be a sheer wastage of time, energy and money, but there is a curiosity to know the already known.

Are those not following the advice adhering to the maxim "live and help to live"?

C.G. KURIAKOSE, Kothamangalam, Kerala

Cricket in Olympics

The announcement by MCC World Cricket Committee Chairman Mike Gatting that cricket may well be a part of the 2028 Olympics is heartening ('Sport' page, August 13). A T20 format will be a feast for cricket fans. Likewise, the game of cricket should feature in the Asian Games K. PRADEEP,

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:

Sanguine amidst slowdown

Despite stagnant incomes and increased joblessness, Indians are hopeful about the economy's future



Any major country in the world would give an arm and a leg for a growth rate of 6% per annum. But, in India, we lament such an achievement as a 'slowdown'. This is because, somehow, today we perceive any growth below 7% to be unsatisfactory. And not so long ago, we perceived any growth rate below 8% to be less than satisfactory.

What has changed now? It is not as if our per-capita income levels have suddenly shot up to a point where a lower growth rate can be considered satisfying. We are still a lower-middle income country.

What has really changed is our perception of what a satisfactory growth rate will be. Such perceptions do matter as they reflect the mood of the times that influences economic decisions. For instance, usually, growth in discretionary spending is a function of growth in income. But, if income expectations change, then the relationship between income and discretionary spending could also change. Similarly, aspirations and social norms impact decisions. If the mood turns sombre, if aspirations are diluted and if social norms turn less upbeat, economic decisions would be less enthusiastic even if income growth remains unchanged.

Seeking consumers' opinion

Further, if changes in perceptions of individuals result in synchronised waves of optimism or pessimism, such shifts could well determine whether an economy moves towards accelerated expansion or a slowdown. Hence, it makes sense to ask consumers about their perceptions of expected well-being and then derive an aggregated sense of the mood to anticipate future economic trends.

According to George Katona, who pioneered work on consumer sentiments at the University of Michigan, discretionary spending depends on the ability and willingness of a consumer to spend. While ability is reflected in the consumers' income and assets, willingness to spend is re-



flected in the consumers' perception of future prospects.

How have Indians perceived their future in the recent past? There are two regular surveys which answer this question. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has been conducting a Consumer Confidence Survey since 2010 and the Centre For Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) has been conducting a Consumer Sentiments Survey as a part of its Consumer Pyramids Household Survey (CPHS) since January 2016.

Expectations of income increase Both show that during 2018, a rising proportion of Indians felt that their incomes would rise over a one-year horizon. Both show that this increase in income-growth expectations of 2018 was of a distinctly sharper gra-

dient than seen earlier. According to the RBI survey, around the end of 2017, 46.5% of households expected their incomes to increase and 12.7% expected a decline. On a net basis, 34% expected an increase. By end-2018, the net figure had gone up to 57.3%, signifying a major improvement in income expectations during 2018.

The CMIE's CPHS shows a similar rising trend but at a different level. The net proportion of households that expected an increase in income increased from less than 5% in February 2018 to 23% in May 2019.

Both surveys show that this rising optimism about household incomes has declined in 2019. The RBI's survey shows that the decline began in the first quarter of 2019 while the CPHS shows it began in the second quarter. Interestingly, both showed pessimism on jobs during 2018. The consistent contradiction in both surveys is noteworthy. Households did not see an increase in jobs in 2018 but they did expect incomes to im-

prove. This means hopes were high

even in the face of job losses. Received wisdom on consumer sentiments tells us that people have an uncanny way of revealing their assessment of change in prospects. Bad news during sustained bad times is not really newsworthy and it does not attract much attention. On the other hand, good news or news of hope during a bad patch can change perceptions. Such a hope could have been provided by one-time cash transfers to households last year.

The RBI survey quantifies this eloquently. While 9.5% households, on a net basis, believed that employment conditions had worsened in 2018, 28.5% households believed employment conditions would improve

Their faith in the future remained intact even in the face of adverse outcomes compared to expectations. In December 2017, 9.4% of the households believed employment levels were worse (on a net basis) than a year ago but simultaneously, 33.6% believed they would improve in a year. A year later, in December 2018, 8.7% still believed the employment levels were worse than a year ago. Yet, a larger proportion – 37.6% believed these would improve in a year.

Optimism continued to prevail even in the latest July 2019 RBI survey, where 13% of households believed that employment conditions had worsened over a year but 31% of them believed that these would improve in a year. Such optimism is seen in income expectations as well. As of July 2019, on a net basis, only 3% of the households believed their incomes were higher compared to a year ago but 48.5% believed these would be better a year later.

Divergent findings on spending

How does this optimism on income and employment translate into a willingness to increase spending on discretionary or non-essential items? Here, the RBI and CMIE surveys diverge significantly. The RBI survey is prescient in anticipating a slowdown in the automobile sector. It shows that while households are optimistic on jobs and income in spite of current adverse conditions, they are not similarly gung ho about spending on non-essentials. In mid-2018, on a net basis, 53% of the households expected to spend more on non-essentials a year ahead. By July 2019, this proportion fell to 15%.

The CMIE's CPHS asks a related but somewhat different question, on whether households considered current conditions to be a good time to buy household durables. It shows that till July 2018, respondents who believed that it was a good time to buy consumer durables roughly equalled those who believed it wasn't. Both numbers were at about 22.6%. By March 2019, the proportion of pessimists declined to 17% and that of optimists increased to 30%. The CMIE survey shows an improvement in the mood to spend on discretionary goods. This reflects the fact that sales of domestic appliances began a recovery in the June 2018 quarter and grew at double-digit rates during the December 2018, March 2019 and June 2019 quarters.

Evidently, there isn't any widespread consumer goods slowdown. The slowdown is prominent in the automobile sector but not in other industries. The RBI survey reflects the former and the CMIE survey reflects the latter. It may be worth noting here that the RBI survey is based on a survey from 5,451 respondents from 13 towns while the CMIE's CPHS is based on over 40,000 respondents from over 300 towns and nearly 3,000 villages.

Different parts of the Indian economy are moving in divergent directions but, Indian households maintain hope in a future that will bring in more jobs and more income.

Mahesh Vyas is Managing Director, Centre

Balancing T.N.'s growth model

The State needs to reduce the burden on Chennai's water resources by diversifying other urban centres



Nearly three months into the southwest monsoon, the water crisis hasn't abated in large parts of Chennai. This scenario, for sure, will haunt the city again next summer with an even greater vigour, as freshwater supply hasn't overcome the rising demand.

This demand-supply asymmetry has rendered traditional solutions such as rainwater harvesting and groundwater recharge totally ineffective. Overcoming the crisis will, hence, require some unconventional solutions to be tried, as suggested here.

The water crisis is a consequence of the skewed, Chennai-centric development model of Tamil Nadu, resulting in the capital city's water demand overshooting its available water resources.

To illustrate, in 2001, Chennai's water requirement stood at 1,327 million litres per day (MLD); by 2021 this will shoot up to 1,980 MLD. On the other hand, the supply was only 830 MLD in 2018.

Similarly, the area coming under city limits that was just 176 sq. km in 1978 has increased nearly threefold, to 425 sq. km, today. Even if resources in the city get augmented through supply of water from Krishna and Cauvery rivers, the demand will still outstrip the supply.

De-congesting Chennai

Hence, policies enabling indiscriminate, Chennai-centric investments in sectors like IT/ITES, automobiles and real estate need a rethink. Tamil Nadu's capital city has to be de-congested and allowed to grow only as much as its available water resources permit.

Thus, the key drivers that attract people from across Tamil Nadu - like better education prospects, employment opportunities and possibilities of a decent lifestyle - need to be brought into other cities in the State, especially those with a better availability of

For instance, the districts of Cuddalore, Nagapattinam and Tiruchirappalli together receive an average rainfall of more than 1,200 mm per annum, compared to the 900 mm-1000 mm average annual rainfall of Chennai. Some of the major investments can be shifted to these areas. The Tamil Nadu government can take the lead here, moving some of its wings to these districts.

The South Indian state, here, can take its cues from The Netherlands, which has two de facto capitals - Amsterdam, the official capital; and The Hague, the seat of government. Similarly, South Africa has three de facto capitals - Pretoria, the administrative capital; Cape Town, the legislative capital; and Bloemfontein, the judicial capital. Such distribution of administrative and commercial apparatus will reduce the pressure on Chennai's limited water resources and also make other towns and cities attractive for migrants.

More desalination plants

Further, when one considers desalination, Tamil Nadu's capacity pales in comparison with that of coastal West Asian countries. For instance, Saudi Arabia, the world leader in installed capacity of desalination plants, has built such plants all along its coastline and its largest plant, Ras-Al-Khair, has a capacity of 1,000 MLD. Similarly the UAE's Taweelah plant, when complete, will have a capacity of 900 MLD of potable water. On the other hand, in the case of Tamil Nadu, the total installed capacity of its two desalination plants is only 200 MLD – the Minjur plant and the Nemmeli plant both possess a capacity of 100 MLD each - and both are located along the capital city's sea coast, making the entire process Chennai-centric and suited to the requirements of only the city.

Such plants need to be built all along the 900 km-long Tamil Nadu coast - not just alone the coastline of its capital city. The cities and towns across the districts of Kancheepuram, Nagapattinam, Cuddalore, Ramanathapuram, Thoothukudi, Thanjavur and Tirunelveli should be self-sustaining in generating freshwater from these desalina-

Finally, the State's cultivation model needs a paradigm shift. Tamil Nadu cultivates paddy in an area of about 18.3 lakh hectares, requiring about 710 thousand million cubic feet (tmcft) of water - the storage capacity of seven Mettur dams!

A nominal shift away from paddy to less water-intensive but high-income crops such as pulses, vegetables, and ornamental plants would save and release fresh water amounting to the capacity of at least two Mettur dams to the hydrological supply system of run-off across Tamil Nadu.

So, it is time for Chennai, and Tamil Nadu, to think out-of-the-box solutions that can complement traditional solutions such as water harvesting and groundwater recharge. These, coupled with some prudent policymaking and planning, can permanently solve the water crisis.

J. Harsha is Director, Central Water Commission Views expressed in the article are personal

Biodiversity in the time of deluge

As it weathers repeated floods, Kerala needs to take steps to protect its fragile ecology

PRAKASH NELLIYAT

In mid-August 2018, Kerala experienced severe floods and is still struggling to deal with their devastating impact. It is a matter of deep concern that, a year later, the State is facing a similar situation. This only shows that there is a considerable human-induced natural imbalance in the State, making it vulnerable to the vagaries of climate change.

Such floods impact the poorest strata of the society the most, causing a loss of lives, livelihood options and assets. They also place an enormous burden on the government in terms of reconstruction budgets. In this context, a broader assessment of floods from a 'sustainable development' perspective, by limiting economic growth options to within the carrying capacity of the ecosystem, is the need of the hour.

True, the root cause of such floods, not only in Kerala but elsewhere, is the high precipitation levels. However, one cannot discount the role of anthropogenic factors like unscientific development and over-exploitation of nature in aggravating the damages.

Impact of climate change

In recent decades, the global climate has been changing in an unpredictable manner. As per an IPCC report, the Global Green House Gases emissions grew by 70% between 1970 and 2004. Global warming has had critical effects on the hydrological cycle and water is the primary medium through which the climate change impacts trickle down to the people.

The changing precipitation alters the hydrological systems, resulting in floods and droughts in different regions. With the certainty that climate change is already impacting most countries, there is no option but to take adequate precautions through dam management and timely public

In the case of Kerala, a structural transformation and changing patterns of land use are affecting its environment. Agriculture is becoming insignificant (11.3% of State GDP) and services (63.1%) and industry (25.6%) sectors dominate the State's economy. Further, a high population densi-

ty – as per the 2011 census, it was 860 persons per sq. km, much higher than the Indian average of 382 – the shift from a joint family system to a single-family one and a greater inflow of money, particularly from Gulf countries, has resulted in an increased construction of luxurious houses and resorts.

The government, on its part, has also been developing extensive infrastructure to support the booming services and industry sectors.

Speaking of construction, it is important to take the appropriate decision on the type and size of the structure, its location, materials it proposes to use, and permissible damages it will cause to the nature. One cannot just replicate the Gulf model of construction in Kerala's fra-



gile and ecologically sensitive landscapes. Land transactions suggest that people in the State have bought land from farmers over the decades not for cultivation, but for construction. If this trend continues, vast tracts of paddy fields and other lowlying places will get converted to plots or buildings. A loss in wetland area will naturally impact the State's ability to handle floods.

People fail to account for the damage done to natural ecosystems while estimating losses suffered due to natural disasters. Floods also wash away top soil and substantial biodiversity of the area, resulting in a reduced river-water flow, death of earthworms and spread of viral and bacterial diseases among crops. There is, at present, a lack of clarity on how best these natural assets could be restored. However, the urgency to devise suitable corrective measures has never been greater.

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DATA POINT

July 2019 was the joint-hottest month on Earth (July 2016 was equally hot). Due to the Climate rise in global temperature, in 2019, the extent of sea ice in the polar regions has dropped well below the average levels seen in past three decades. This is expected to add to the well below the average levels seen in past three decades. This is expected to add to the increasing sea levels, which have been steadily rising in the recent years. By **Sumant Sen** Graph shows global-average temperature for July relative to 1850-1900 average Off-target According to the Paris July 2019 was close to 1.2°C 1.2 1.2 Agreement 2015, the above the pre-industrial average 0.9 0.9 objective was to restrict global temperature rise to 0.6 about 1°C in the first 0.3 0.3 30-year period, compared to the pre-industrial average. The target has been missed every year since then 1895 1910 1955 1985 2015 Arctic region sea ice extent Antarctic region sea ice extent **Accelerated** meltdown 20 Both the Arctic and 1979-2010 15 Antarctic sea ice extents dropped to their lowest 10 levels in 10 at various points of time January 2019 in 2019. The chart shows 1979-2010 the change in sea ice average levels in July extent in 2019 compared to 1979-2010 average May May Jul Sep Jul Sep Mar Nov Jan A sea change Change in sea level since 1993 in mm Since 1993, global sea level has risen by an average of 3.3 mm per year. This increase is usually caused 40 Compared to 1993, the global sea level, as in April 2019, has increased by 94 mm approximately by water from melting ice 20 sheets and glaciers and the expansion of sea water as

Source: National Snow and Ice Data Centre, NASA, World Meterological Organisation, Copernicus Climate Change Programme

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FROM THE ARCHIVES FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 14, 1969

Many die in Sino-Soviet clash

China and Russia to-day [August 13] accused each other of intruding into their territory in the Sinkiang area. Both said the intruding forces had killed several of the defending soldiers. China claimed that "Several hundred" Soviet mechanized troops, under cover of helicopters, tanks and armoured cars, have crossed the border into Sinkiang province. The clash occurred 500 miles from China's nuclear installations. Peking Radio, in its Chinese language broadcast monitored in Tokyo, said China's Foreign Affairs Ministry has denounced the 'intrusion' and lodged a protest note with the Soviet Embassy in Peking. The broadcast said the Soviet intrusion took place near Yumin along the western sector of Sinkiang Province bordering the Soviet Union. The note indicated that fighting was still going on since it demanded immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops or face the consequences from the action. The broadcast said that on the morning of August 13 several hundred troops under cover of two helicopters and more than 10 tanks and armoured cars intruded two kilometres deep into Sinkiang province. Chinese border troops on regular patrol duty, responded to the attack.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 14, 1919

Mr. M.K. Gandhi has communicated to the

Indians in South Africa.

press [in Bombay] a cablegram which he has received from Ismail Aswat, Chairman, British Indian Association, Johannesburg, together with a statement of his own by way of explanation. The cable reads: "Bill assented 23rd June promulgated 3rd instant restricts companies acquiring further fixed properties and holding bonds as prior to company law, reaffirms old and Townships Acts operating as new licenses after 1st May and unrestricting present traders and successors particular township. Deputation waiting His Excellency urging withhold assent on groundless Legislation. Investigate Indian question throughout the Union for further restrictive legislation. - Aswat." Mr. Gandhi points out that the cable makes clear what he has said in a recent letter to Sir George Barnes. The restrictions imposed were clear and as he had already remarked, meant virtual ruin of the Indian settlers in Transval. They would have to die out in natural course. Mr. Gandhi proceeding explains that the use of word "assent" for a second time in the cable before to a clause in the Letters Patent providing for vetoing of class legislation.