

Opinion

MONDAY, OCTOBER 21, 2019

RIGHTS AND WRONGS

Union defence minister Rajnath Singh

Ever since we abrogated Article 370, there has been nothing like human rights violation on the land of Jammu and Kashmir... But the Congress people do not understand this



Rational Expectations

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What if JSW had paid ₹19,700 cr?

Had ED attached Bhushan Power's assets post-sale, how would JSW have got its money back? This is a big setback for the IBC

IT IS CERTAINLY possible, as the Delhi High Court has held, that the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) overrides other Acts like Sarfaesi and the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), in which case, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) is well within its rights to attach Bhushan Power & Steel's properties since, according to its investigations, they were part of a criminal act. You could argue that, even if this is true, the ED should take action against Bhushan's promoters, and not the company; indeed, if the company's assets are frozen, they could well become worthless in the one to two decades, or more, that it will take for the case to be finally settled in the country's various courts. The ED, on the other hand, will argue that, if it doesn't attach the proceeds of the crime, substantive justice will not have been served.

Right now, the ED, along with other agencies, was investigating various charges, including siphoning off of funds by the promoters of Bhushan Power. While it concluded that the charges were correct and attached some of Bhushan Power's assets, the problem is that, at the same time, Bhushan Power was also being sold by the banks it owed money to, using the IBC law. The case now revolves around whether the company can be sold when the ED is taking action against it since it is clear the prospective new owner (JSW Steel) cannot be asked to pay good money—in this case, ₹19,700 crore—without having a cast-iron guarantee that neither will any assets be seized nor action taken against the company (Bhushan Power) that it is now taking over.

As luck would have it, the sale process got inordinately delayed. Even though JSW had emerged as the likely winner a long time ago, as in the case of Essar Steel, Bhushan's promoters tried to regain control by offering to pay the banks all the money that was owed to them; this was to be done by converting the debt to cumulative redeemable preference shares. By September, however, all of these challenges had been dealt with, and JSW was declared the winner of the auction process; its bid gave bankers around 40% of their outstanding loans to Bhushan.

The question that now arises is what would have happened if JSW had made the payments for Bhushan Power and, after that, the ED attached the latter's assets. Would the government have ensured JSW got its money back from the banks, or would it tell the firm to approach the courts for justice; and possibly that, since JSW knew Bhushan's promoters were being probed, it should have factored this in its calculations.

It is obviously true that, at the time the IBC was being formulated, it wasn't possible for the government to anticipate each legal challenge that would arise, or the interpretation various courts of law would give, or the various ways in which defaulter-promoters would try and retain control of their companies even though the law was quite explicit in not allowing this. But, surely, when a challenge of the sort that has come up in the JSW-Bhushan case arises, the government needs to respond by changing the law, and issuing necessary clarifications?

It is always possible that JSW may eventually win the case and, when it approaches the Supreme Court on the issue, the SC may agree that once a company has been sold, its assets can't be attached, and that certain types of prosecution will have to be halted. But, when such a big challenge arises, this is not something the government should leave to the vagaries of the court. Indeed, given that it is investigating siphoning off of funds and other promoter misdemeanors in so many of the firms being sold in the insolvency courts, you'd think the government would be working overtime trying to fix this. Alternately, it should have ruled that wherever there is an investigation taking place, the company will not be sold, either through IBC or any other process.

The immediate consequence of this incident is likely to be that bidders are going to be more cautious when it comes to bidding for IBC firms, at least till such time as there is more clarity on whether or not assets can be attached and criminal/other proceedings can go on after a firm is bought. This is ironic since, at a time when investment levels in the country continue to plunge, the IBC process was seen as a sure-shot way to get investments back. For one, fairly good quality assets were available at 50-60% discount levels; two, since the concerns being sold had already set up large capacities, a buyer wouldn't have to waste years trying to get all manner of permissions, including environmental ones, to set up similar capacities.

Several people will cite the JSW-Bhushan case to argue that, as in the case of 2G and various mining licences that were cancelled, the courts are derailing the growth process. Nothing could be farther from the truth. For one, when there is a corruption case, what else were the courts to do but cancel the licences? Nor is it true that this affected investment in the sector since, as it happens, the bulk of telecom investment, in 3G and 4G networks, took place after the licences were cancelled. Two, once the 2G licences were cancelled, they were quickly re-auctioned and, in some cases, bought back by the companies themselves—companies like Telenor had, by then, disassociated themselves from the 2G accused like Sanjay Chandra of Unitech; meanwhile, the criminal cases continued against people like Chandra, and no action was taken against the companies. In the case of the coal and iron ore mines, similarly, there would have been no problem if, after the illegal mines were cancelled, the government quickly auctioned them and gave all clearances. It can't be that difficult for the government to apply the same principle: the criminal cases against individuals will continue, but no case can be initiated against new promoters or the firms themselves.

Nanny STATE

UP's mobile ban in colleges/universities is ill-advised and does more harm than good

STUDENTS AND TEACHERS in Uttar Pradesh's universities are no longer allowed to carry mobile phones inside the premises of colleges/universities. The directorate of higher education of the Yogi Adityanath-led government, as per an IANS report carried by *The Hindustan Times*, has said that the ban will foster a "better teaching environment for students". It is difficult to see the basis of the belief, and, indeed, any merit in the government's decree. The Uttar Pradesh government had earlier banned mobile phones in the chief minister's official meetings, including Cabinet meetings, on the grounds that messaging apps were posing a distraction. The fact that messaging apps, and other internet enabled functions serve the core needs of many government functions, from maintenance of law & order to mounting disaster relief, seems to have been lost on the state leadership.

What the UP government seems to forget is that, in the digital world, connectedness has distinct gains for education, just as it has for governance. Internet offers students access to supplementary educational material that can bridge the deficits plaguing classroom teaching, especially in a state like UP. Indeed, the Kerala High Court recently ruled that the right to access internet is core to the right of persons to education. Invalidating the expulsion of a student from a girls hostel for violating a mobile phone ban, the Kerala HC stated that "the usage of mobile phones in order to enable the students to have access to internet will only enhance the opportunities of students to acquire knowledge from all available sources based on which they can achieve excellence and enhance quality and standard of education." More important, it is rather ironic that adults who may be trusted to exercise the right to vote, and choose able leadership can't be trusted to use phones in a judicious manner.

Twitter Revolution, Facebook revolution—these terms became widespread during the Arab Spring rebellions at the beginning of this decade. They are outdated now: For today's protesters in Hong Kong and Barcelona, or for Extinction Rebellion activists in capitals around the world, the social networks and even messenger applications run by big US corporations are becoming a secondary tool, and one not used for organisational purposes. After protesters in Egypt forced president Hosni Mubarak to resign in February 2011, one of the revolution's public faces, Google executive Wael Ghonim, went on CNN to be interviewed by anchors Anderson Cooper and Wolf Blitzer. When Blitzer asked him what was going to happen next, the following exchange ensued:

Ghonim: Ask Facebook.
Blitzer: Ask what?
Ghonim: Facebook.
Cooper: Facebook.
Blitzer: Facebook. You're giving Facebook a lot of credit for this?
Ghonim: Yes, for sure. I want to meet Mark Zuckerberg one day and thank him, actually. This revolution started online. This revolution started on Facebook.

That was so 2011. If there is any one app today's protesters would want to credit, it is Telegram. But not even this itinerant messenger, whose team was based in St Petersburg, Berlin, London and Singapore before ending up in Dubai, plays the same kind of outsized role that Facebook and Twitter took on in previous protests, up to and including Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement of 2014.

With its powerful group messaging functionality and "channel" feature which allows users to broadcast information, Telegram is the central media platform for the Hong Kong protesters of today, who are now pushing for greater democracy for the former British colony. It is also the go-to tool for pro-indepen-

ENCRIPTING REBELLION

REAL-WORLD REVOLUTIONS NEED NON-COMMERCIAL TECH TOOLS. PROTESTERS EITHER DESIGN THEIR OWN OR FALL BACK ON OPEN-SOURCE APPS

There will be no more Facebook revolutions

LEONID BERSHIDSKY

Bloomberg



denge Catalans who have taken to the streets to protest the long prison sentences for leaders of the Spanish region's doomed 2017 secession bid. There, the secretive Democratic Tsunami group uses Telegram to communicate with its 150,000 followers. It also uses a Telegram bot to collect data for an app it created to map protest activities and street clashes.

For its part, Extinction Rebellion has been moving from Facebook-owned WhatsApp to Telegram because it allows bigger group chats, and because it has a voting tool that allows independent-minded rebels to decide what they want to do. (This tool is also used in Hong Kong).

Signal, the encrypted messenger, and Mattermost, an open-source alternative to the enterprise messenger Slack, also are popular among activists.

Direct file transfers, encrypted messengers and specially created apps have become essential for spreading all kinds of material that might land its distributors in trouble—such as the fake boarding passes Democratic Tsunami sent out so protesters could get into the Barcelona airport on October 14, causing more than 100 flights to be cancelled.

Of course, today's activists still use social media platforms run by big US corporations. But when they do, it is mainly for outward communication such as with the media, not with people actively involved in the protests. Since the Arab Spring, governments have mastered use of the big commercial social media networks themselves. Since the Hong Kong protests began, both Facebook and Twit-

ter have complained about China's attempts to use them for disinformation and counterpropaganda. Besides, many protesters believe their anonymity isn't well protected on the social networks, Malek Dudakov of the Moscow-based think tank Center for the Study of New Communications wrote in a recent report about the use of the technology by the Hong Kong protest movement.

Telegram, run by a nonprofit founded by Russian libertarian Pavel Durov, has a reputation for resisting government attempts at censorship and infiltration. Russia has attempted to block the messenger for refusing to hand over encryption keys to domestic intelligence, but Telegram has fought back and is still accessible in most of Russia. Mainland China has had more success in cutting off access to it. But even on Telegram, the risk of losing one's anonymity is a potential problem. One protest group moderator in Hong Kong was arrested in June. Durov has accused China of trying to take his service down in Hong Kong with distributed denial of service attacks.

Those efforts contrast with concerns that big US companies are more likely to cooperate with the authorities.

Earlier this month, Apple Inc. approved a smartphone map app that Hong Kong protesters have been using for distribution in its App Store after an initial ban. But then it swiftly took HKmap.live down again. Apple Chief

Facebook and Twitter are where propaganda battles rage and insults fly, not where action is coordinated

Executive Officer Tim Cook explained that the Hong Kong cybersecurity authority had told the company that the app was being used by criminals to "target individual officers for violence and to victimise individuals and property where no police are present." This episode prompted the Democratic Tsunami in Catalonia to release its own app for Android only—and not through the Google Play Store, in which most Android users get their apps.

Even though its services are blocked in mainland China, Google has also behaved in a way some protesters, and even some of its employees, find suspicious. Citing an internal rule against the monetisation of current events, the Play Store banned a game called "The Revolution of Our Times" that allowed players to act out the role of Hong Kong protesters. The game's developers had promised to give 80% of their proceeds to charity.

Big Tech's role, even if unwitting, in unrest has always looked like an aberration. Where the profit motive is involved, cooperating with governments

makes more sense than facilitating those who fight them. Now, the dust is settling on the tech revolution, and real-world revolutions need non-commercial tech tools. So protesters either design their own or fall back on open-source apps or those developed by nonprofits. Facebook and Twitter are where propaganda battles rage and insults fly, not where action is coordinated—and that is a natural consequence of their evolution as big businesses that attract way too much government attention.

So, if you're wondering what comes next for all the modern-day protest movements, don't ask Facebook.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Malnutrition issue

Figures in both Global Hunger Index (GHI) and UNICEF's 'State of the World's Children' starkly show that the incidence of malnutrition is alarmingly high in India. They underline the enormous task before the National Nutrition Mission (NNM) launched last year to make India free from malnutrition. India's position at 102 out of 117 countries is a reality check for us. Being a country with the largest number of malnourished people in the world is a dubious honour. It is scandalous that over 90% of children between six months and two years in India are not fed a 'minimally acceptable diet'. UNICEF data put the stunting rate among India's under-fives at 37.9%. The stunted lives of children deprived of nourishing food are no great advertisement to an 'emerging economic powerhouse'. It is a proven fact that the diet during the first 1,000 days after conception lays the foundation for a child's physical growth and mental development. Quality food in sufficient quantity is vital for a child's immunity and cognitive development. Malnutrition leaves children vulnerable to life-threatening diseases. Poverty, poor sanitation, unhygienic living conditions, lack of access to clean water and ignorance conspire to cause malnutrition. It follows that the economic malaise afflicting the 'Suffering India' has to be fought to make a success of the fight against 'serious levels of hunger'. It is a paradox that granaries overflow and still people go hungry. The caste angle to the problem of malnutrition is often left unstated. Most of those who suffer from malnutrition belong to the lower castes and most of the upper castes turn a blind eye to their anaemic compatriots. The Modi government can pass the patriotism test and make India strong with strong human capital by making earnest efforts to meet the nutritional needs of the country's impoverished multitudes.

— G David Milton, Maruthancode

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Nobel lessons for Indian research

One hopes that decision-makers in the Indian government will make administrative data readily available to researchers from all nations for its own development

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Views are personal



THIS YEAR'S NOBEL prize in Economics was particularly noteworthy for several reasons. For the world as a whole, the fact that one of the winners, Esther Duflo, was only the second woman—and, at 46, by far the youngest ever—Economics winner stood out. Duflo has been vocal in pointing out the deficiencies of the profession in terms of making women feel welcome and valued. Her prize will help accelerate a corrective process already underway.

The prize, of course, was based not on gender, but the work done, and it was noteworthy also for recognising a methodological approach that has sought to understand the causes of poverty by doing field experiments, or randomised controlled trials. Duflo's co-winners, Michael Kremer and Abhijit Banerjee, while a decade or so older, are still relatively young prize winners, which adds to the statement being made about the value of this kind of research. The benefit, of course, is precision with respect to causes—if one is interested in whether A causes X (and how much is the impact), controlling for other factors, applying the 'treatment' A, and having a benchmark, or 'control' ('not A'), to further isolate the impact of A on X is much more reliable than using data that was collected for other purposes. In the latter case, one might pick up correlations and confuse them with causality, or be unable to control for other factors, and end up with misleading estimates of impacts. I will return to the methodology shortly.

Kremer was cited for pioneering experimental work in East Africa (interesting fact: my colleague, Jonathan Robinson, once co-authored an important paper with Duflo and Kremer, explaining seeming puzzles in the use of fertiliser by Kenyan farmers, and he has gone on to become an important practitioner in this academic area), but Banerjee and Duflo have mainly worked in India. Indeed, Banerjee and Duflo are husband and wife, and the supreme ac-

ademic power couple. Their story, and the fact that they have also been producing non-technical books that explain the relevance of their work (*Poor Economics*, published in 2011, and *Good Economics for Hard Times*, being published next month), has been dominating the headlines, overshadowing their co-winner to some extent.

Of course, the fact that Banerjee is of Indian origin, and has been commenting and advising on Indian economic policy, has been extremely important for a nation that has been somewhat starved of good news in recent months. There are certain ironies in his academic pedigrees

from India—Presidency College and Jawaharlal Nehru University—in terms of the state of higher education in India, as well as national and state politics. For the moment, everyone is celebrating his prize, and he is "fully Indian," something that Raghuram Rajan was once accused of not being. Coincidentally, Banerjee and Rajan wrote and spoke together exactly on the day the prize was announced; Banerjee's recommendations included prescriptions for fiscal and monetary policy in the short and medium terms, as well as the suggestions that might most appeal to the government—'pray' in the short run, and 'pray more' in the longer run. Banerjee and Rajan were two of over a dozen co-authors of a report on India's economic strategy, which I commented on in these columns at the beginning of 2019.

Banerjee and Duflo, and many others, have made working on the Indian economy more mainstream, and respected in the economic profession in the US—a welcome outcome of their passion for doing relevant economic research. I have previously highlighted the portal, Ideas

for India, where non-technical accounts of much of this work can be found. A look at the range of that research reminds us that there is much to be learned from so-called administrative data (such as household surveys) as well, despite the challenges in identifying clear causal relationships between policy 'A' and outcome 'X'. Diane Coffey and Dean Spears used different kinds of data—and not just field experiments—to make the case for paying more attention to sanitation and access to toilets, with visible impacts on policy and politics. In other cases, such as the status of household savings in India, the only useful data may be from large-scale surveys, and not smallish field experiments.

One hopes, therefore, that after the immediate glow of the prize has passed, decision-makers in the Indian government—both politicians and bureaucrats—at the state and national levels will be more and more open to making administrative data readily available to researchers from all nations, and giving freedom to researchers to

conduct field experiments. It must be noted, university researchers are already subject to strict standards for how they deal with human 'subjects' by their home institutions. A corollary of this openness is being willing to allow NGOs or non-profits the flexibility to fund, and collaborate on these studies since they can often bring in local, ground-level expertise that makes the research more reliable, or make it possible to do the 'trials' at scales that are more informative, and policy-relevant. One should also remember that bureaucrats can be an important source of information for asking the right questions, and designing the right policies to test—strengthening that avenue of interaction could also reap rewards for India's economy.

There is much to be learned from administrative data despite the challenges in identifying clear causality between policy and outcome



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● DIGITALLY READY

Fears of digital

There is a need to address the risk of “something going wrong” for those on the fences to join the digital bandwagon

THERE IS OFTEN ANGUISH, on why adoption of digital payments is slow. One of the reasons, some claim, is that we have an overly ambitious “less cash” vision, and in trying to cover the entire 700million+ transacting population, in the digital payment revolution, we are ignoring what the customers want. Considering the level of poverty and consumption patterns, the practical approach would be to aim 500 million wallet customers. For the other 200 million customers, who are still struggling for a decent living, our standard of digital inclusion should be different, at least, for some time. Subsidy/ pension/ grants being credited into their bank accounts through the Aadhaar Payments Bridge—a digital platform operated by NPCI—and easy access to AePS for cash withdrawal at citizen service centres or bank branches should be good enough. For these users, cash is the most comfortable payment instrument.

This target group of 500 million customers is not homogenous. They fall

in three categories

- a) active users/early adopters (100 million),
- b) casual users/early majority (250 million), who are sitting on the fence to turn into active users; and
- c) “cash meets all my needs” users/late majority (150 million), who require some form of mandate like its been done for GST/income tax payment beyond a cap or what is being contemplated for toll gate payment on national highway from December 1, 2019.

Immediate focus, therefore, should be on the second group of 250 million casual users. Though these have smart phones, debit cards, and hail from an economic strata that demands regular payments for various utility bills and other household needs, the fear of “something going wrong and not knowing how to resolve” makes them reluctant. They understand the likely benefits of digital payments, but use the digital channel only when necessary. They do not invest adequate time in understanding how to secure transactions or use grievance redressal

mechanisms. One unhappy experience is good enough to turn them off. Living with cash is considered more comfortable than inviting risk. Instances of insensitiveness of some Payments Service Providers (PSPs) while rolling out products, without completing the rigours of thorough testing just to meet the time-to-market deadlines, goes against the very principle of digital transactions. Neither the simplicity of UPI nor cashbacks attract these users.

The fear of account being debited without generating a charge slip while using the debit card at a restaurant or a shop makes many nervous. Many, also opt for Cash-on-Delivery (COD) option while conducting e-commerce transactions, knowing very well that a cashback of 2-5% is available on digital mediums—cards, UPI, wallets and internet banking. A few also opt COD to check the quality or quantity before payment. Most e-commerce firms accept return within a week and also have simple process for refunds. But anecdotal evidence of technical glitches, privacy violation, wrong or delayed credit, deter them from such transactions. Mostly, debit cards are used for cash withdrawal from ATMs.

RBI has been responding positively by issuing guidelines/circulars/notification to ensure such customers of safety and security of transacting online. The Payment System Board—a committee of the central board of RBI—reviews its position periodically, and issues strategic directions to the regulatory departments for framing policy. The policy measures cover two primary areas.

- a) transactional security & data privacy; and
- b) grievance redressal.

Transactional Security and Data Privacy

To protect the customers from unauthorised transactions or unauthorised sharing of data with third party, and to ensure that service is available to the customers as promised, RBI has mandated that

- a) payment cards conform to EMV standards
- b) EMV enablement of all card acceptance points
- c) multi factor authentication—first in Card Not Present (CNP) transactions and subsequently for Card Present (CP) transactions, and then other digital channels

- d) Mobile alerts by core banking system (CBS) to customers for every debit and credit transactions
- d) To provide the customer with the option of transaction cap and mode of transaction
- e) PA-DSS and PCI-DSS compliance of PA-DSS system infrastructure at all service providers in the value chain
- f) need for certification of acceptance terminals—Cards and Aadhaar
- g) periodic information security audit
- h) creating facility for monitoring of transaction velocity and frequency
- i) data localisation, etc.

Use of Aadhaar for payment transactions has also seen regulatory changes. Certain categories of banks such as co-operative banks require license to offer mobile banking to their customers over the fear that over-enthusiasm, without corresponding security infra, may land the customers into difficulties. RBI has also mandated certain issues of payments service offering to be placed before the Board for deliberation. One may recall, that way back in 2011 when RBI introduced two-factor authentication for CNP transactions, it was accused of “killing e-commerce”. Transactions have increased multi-fold since. It is a clear case study that transactional security helps growth of digital payments. India was a clear leader in two-factor authentication in e-commerce, and recently many countries world over are migrating to this practice.

Grievance Redressal

The second set of measures initiated by RBI refer to Grievance Redressal Mechanisms. They constitute the hygiene factor and bedrock for migrating to a less-cash society in due course. Many of the regulatory measures are a direct response to customer complaints, of gaps in the machinery and crying need for attention. Measures implemented so far are

- a) zero liability of customers in unauthorised digital transactions
- b) stringent Turn Around Time (TAT) for resolving the complaints, failing which a penalty is imposed on the service provider (India’s TAT requirements for digital payment system is much better than many developed countries)
- c) complaint position to be placed before the Board
- d) Scheme of Ombudsman for digital transactions
- e) extending the period of service availability
- f) customer consent before onboarding onto digital channel and the option to fix amount cap or withdrawal
- d) contact details for customer complaints to be prominently displayed
- e) availability of 24x7 call centre or service centre in case of 24x7 services.

In addition, all customer service measures including transparency in service charges are equally applicable for digital payments.

We have a long way to go before we can claim ourselves to be a less cash society. Our ecosystem is evolving and we need to be patient. Payment innovations like UPI are taking place at the right pace, but UPI volumes alone should not be the benchmark to fix targets for banks and payment authorities. The qualitative indicator like the level of customer complaints should be the primary parameter for monitoring. Since RBI is planning to publish payment system data on a monthly basis, in a granular manner, bank-wise data on customer complaints and security breaches needs to be included. The Payment Gateways, Collection Aggregators and other non-bank players in the value chain are now processing millions of digital payments every day; but there are hardly any regulations on them. They must be regulated and supervised by RBI, before an explosion takes us by surprise. For digital payments to cover all sections of society and less cash vision to be realised early, care and caution is as much necessary as speed.

(This is the last piece of the article series on digital payments.)

● TEACHING RIGHT

A silent revolution

VRINDA
SARUP

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Harayana, in association with Language and Learning Foundation, is using a new model to redefine primary education

CRITICAL TO A good foundation is a grip on the language. This is less complicated when the local language is the medium of instruction. It is for this reason that the draft New Educational Policy lays a strong case for early foundational learning in language and maths. This is well recognised among educationists, academia and practitioners. Numerous methods exist for achieving this objective, both in the government and private-run schools. Yet, there is no mandated common comprehensive design or methodology to ensure a strong foundation in language and mathematics by Class 3. This situation exists across all government schools. The National Achievement Studies of the NCERT or ASER shows poor performance of children in language learning and simple mathematics. This is alarming, as the bulk of enrolments (70-75%) are in government-run schools.

A government primary school in Mirzapur village of district Kurukshetra, Haryana seems to be following a different approach. Five-seven year olds in Class 1 and Class 2 can read stories from their textbooks and story books with fluency (in their dialect, which is a form of Hindi). These children are from deprived backgrounds and are first-generation learners. There are taught by young teachers, who are earmarked teachers for Class 1 and 2, and have been intensively trained by the Language and Learning Foundation (LLF), an NGO working closely with the government of Haryana to build a strong foundation of language and learning in seven districts of the state.

The Haryana Education Department appears committed to sustain the methodology that has emerged, to ensure that language learning foundation of Class 1 to 3 students is strong. The local education administrators are confident that by the time of the next National Achievement Studies, ASER or the state’s own assessment of student learning, their

Class 3 children will score better. To ensure better results, educational administrators have themselves gone through training and have developed a sense of understanding to use this methodology.

The LLF instructional design seems to have brought a complete transformation in the teachers’ approach towards teaching local language, which is Hindi in this case. The teachers gradually and progressively help children develop an understanding of Hindi words, sentences, followed by stories, poems and writing skills. The workbooks are well-crafted and are used by the children to develop writing skills. These can also be used as colouring books or material for augmenting motor skills. There is compatibility between the prescribed class textbook, Jhilmil, and a comprehensive Teacher Guide, which reminds the teacher of the scope and variety of classroom transactions that she has been trained for, including the way in which she can move forward.

The block level supervisors and the LLF support staff are regular visitors to the school. They hold periodic reviews to reinforce the teaching methodology as well as to assess learning outcomes.

Haryana seems to have demonstrated a resolve to tackle the quality learning challenge by going to its very root—ensuring sound language learning at the base of schooling. They have also, unhesitatingly, invested in the best expertise to build a system of teacher training and supervisory management, which will help attain this objective. If the Mirzapur village primary school is anything to go by, then both the government of Haryana and LLF are showing a way forward to a new young India.

COLD RUSH

Icy challenge

Distrust towards Chinese interference in Arctic is an opportunity for India

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INDIA, AS WE know, is not an Arctic nation, or even a ‘near-Arctic’ one, but China has designated itself to be one. India seems to have little business interest in the resource-rich area, and the proposed sea and land routes that are strategically emerging in the region with the melting of the sea ice, are not exciting enough to elicit a resounding response. Attending the Reykjavik annual Arctic Circle Assembly from October 9-12, the question that recurrently arose was—are we needed in this region, and, if yes, what should be the nature of our business?

The Arctic Council, established in 2013, is a quasi-government body that works with the Icelandic government to create the largest, unique and open Arctic platform. It is a meeting place for over 2,000 delegates from 60 odd countries. The Assembly does not uphold any specific embodied mandates, but is key in setting the trends and priorities for the increasingly challenging future in all the eight Arctic nations—Russia, Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the United States, plus the countries that border them.

An analysis of the varied interests in the four day Assembly with around 170

small and large parallel sessions and plenaries, reveals that apart from representations from Iceland, the USA followed by Norway, Canada, Russia and the UK had the highest number of attendees. Interestingly, though China’s presence was substantive in the sessions, it was the outlook of the other countries towards China that was worth noting. Greenland (Denmark) for instance expressed deep distrust towards China’s investment in its aviation sector. Also observable, was the keen interest of multi-nation academia in discussing China’s leading role in

the establishment of new routes in the region—notably the Polar-Silk route and the Belt and Road Initiative.

Four delegates from India’s nodal institute—National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research, Goa, working on Polar science presented the nation’s scientific stronghold in the Arctic.

India has had a vibrant Arctic scientific programme since 2008. It has been posturing for scientific leadership for many decades now—the commencement of the Antarctic programme, way back in 1982, was a significant step towards this. India’s



dedicated competence in scientific research, perhaps, helped the nation gain the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting membership, and, thereon, the Arctic Council observer status in 2013. This has been renewed again in 2019. This competence also beckons collaborative international research augmentation and enhanced expertise in global science.

The Reykjavik’s Assembly had a mere 10 purely scientific, and about 40 academic sessions, out of a total of 170. The rest ranged from policy and governance to infrastructure, industry and concerns of

the indigenous populace.

Notwithstanding India’s scientific advancement, posturing for further involvement calls for an active interest from ministerial bodies. Although, India has been partnering with Russia for oil and gas in the high Arctic, the Reykjavik Assembly saw no participation from the sector. The Arctic Council, the intergovernmental forum established by the eight Arctic nations that concerns itself with all issues (except military security), interestingly does not prohibit commercial exploitation of resources in the Arctic.

It simply mandates sustainability, “without harming the interests of local populations and in conformity with the local environment”. The Arctic Circle Assembly meeting at Reykjavik was a reflection of this very pulse.

The Arctic needs a new direction—scientific expertise, investment in oil and gas sector, infrastructure investment, new fishery technologies and skilled human capital are all being urgently sought. Is India capable of helping with expertise, manpower and investment? Maybe, yes. India’s various policy bodies and industry federations need to strategise and devise a new and challenging roadmap for interventions in the region. Antarctica, as we know, is not likely to open up for exploration for many years, but the Arctic discourse is different and mandates an aggressive and need-based directive. A noted professor on Arctic Politics, Lassi Heininen, during a plenary, in fact, warned nations—to be more specific, one nation—that claim to be an Arctic stakeholder that the Arctic belonged to its ‘right-holders’. With a quiet acceptance of India in the global fora and increasing distrust towards Chinese investments, it is an opportune time for India to show its indelible Arctic leadership to the world.