



Stunted, wasted

The national framework to improve nutrition for children must be upgraded on priority

The health, longevity and well-being of Indians has improved since Independence, and the high levels of economic growth over the past two-and-half-decades have made more funds available to spend on the social sector. Yet, the reality is that a third of the world's stunted children under five – an estimated 46.6 million who have low height for age – live in India. A quarter of the children display wasting (that is, low weight for height) as well. As the Global Nutrition Report 2018 points out, this finding masks the wide variation in stunting levels in different parts of the country. District-level data show high and very high levels of stunting mainly in central and northern India (more than 30% and 40%, respectively), but less than 20% in almost the entire south. This shows the important role played by political commitment, administrative efficiency, literacy and women's empowerment in ensuring children's health. Food and freedom go together, and the availability of one strongly influences access to the other; social institutions can work to improve nutrition and children's welfare in free societies, and the absence of hunger enables people to develop their capabilities. Governments should acknowledge the linkages and commit themselves to improved nutritional policies. The national framework to improve nutrition already exists. The Anganwadi Services scheme, which incorporates the Integrated Child Development Services, caters to children up to age six, and to pregnant and lactating women. If it has not worked well in several States, it must be subjected to a rigorous review and targeted interventions for supplementary nutrition made.

Among the factors affecting the quantity and quality of nutrition are maternal education, age at marriage, antenatal care, children's diet and household size. Now that mapping of malnutrition at the district level is available, as in the Global Nutrition Report, it is incumbent on State governments to address these determining factors. A second issue is that of the quality of nutrition in packaged foods available to children. Going by the report, only 21% of these foods in India were rated as being healthy, based on overall energy, salt, sugar and saturated fat on the negative side, and vegetable, fruit, protein, fibre and calcium as positive factors. The fact that the global average of processed foods scored only 31% and a peak of 37% in New Zealand indicates that whole foods and cooked meals emerge superior. India should invest more of its economic prosperity in its welfare system, without binding itself in restrictive budgetary formulations. The Economic Survey 2017-18 put social services spending at 6.6% of GDP, an insignificant rise after a marginal decline from the 6% band during the previous year to 5.8%. The latest report on stunting and wasting should convince the Centre that it needs to understand the problem better and work with the States to give India's children a healthy future.

A moving menace

Mob violence in the name of cow protection is shredding civic order

The violence in Uttar Pradesh's Bulandshahr district is yet another notice of the toll being taken on civic order on account of the failure to crack down on vigilante mobs. Two persons, including a police inspector, lost their lives to bullets fired in Syana when villagers gathered outside a police post in protests over a rumour that cow carcasses had been found in the vicinity. In a curious coincidence, Monday's violence touches back to the hate crime that marked the beginning of this long spell of vigilante violence over 'cow protection' across north India. Subodh Kumar Singh, the inspector killed in Bulandshahr, had been the first investigating officer when Mohammed Akhlaq was lynched near Dadri, also in western U.P., on September 28, 2015 on a rumour that he had beef in his possession. Then as now, an equivalence was sought to be made between the crime of mob violence and murder on the one hand, and the rumoured cow slaughter on the other. Alongside those charged with the violence, who include members of the Bajrang Dal, an FIR has been filed against seven Muslims for alleged cow slaughter. Investigations should reveal whether the mob at the police post formed organically, or whether there was a conspiracy to set up a communally polarising confrontation. In the din of pledges of speedy investigation by everyone from police to Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, there is no equivalent messaging that no rumour or act of cow slaughter justifies mob violence.

Ever since the BJP came to power nationally in 2014, its governments in the States have moved to tighten laws prohibiting cow slaughter. Attendant to the legislative prohibition, bands of gau rakshaks, or cow-protection vigilantes, have created an atmosphere of fear, purportedly acting on suspicion of cow slaughter to round up and lynch at will cattle traders and passersby alike. Probes into the killing, in most cases, move in parallel with investigations into the allegations of cow slaughter or the possession of beef. And in a pattern that has crystallised, the hurt sentiments of gau rakshaks are played up to reinforce an equivalence between actual murderous crime and rumoured cow slaughter (often, as in the case of Pehlu Khan in Rajasthan's Alwar district in April 2017, just for transporting cattle). The police, picking up the political signalling or even out of fear of being out-numbered, tend to play down the gravity of the crime – as in the case of a lynching in Hapur this year, initially projected as an outcome of road rage. In a disturbing indication of the impunity gau rakshaks believe they enjoy, they have captured on camera incidents of violence, including Monday's. Why wouldn't they, when the state has been playing to their script.

The architecture is not the force

How a business friendly government has failed to arrest the slide in private investment



PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

It may appear that the recent hullabaloo over GDP (gross domestic product) growth in the past decade has cast a shadow over assessment of the economy's progress since 2014, but it is not so. There exists enough information for this as GDP is not the sole indicator on which one needs to rely in such an exercise. Arguably, investment is another, mainly private investment, for governments can always raise their capital outlay ignoring the calculus of profitability.

The private-economy link

For a profit investor, on the other hand, financial commitments are based closely on anticipated profit. The expectation of profit is itself tied to the expected state of the economy. As much of the future is uncertain, some part of its expectation is likely to be based on current trends. Thus, private investment is tied both to the present state of the economy and its anticipated vigour. For a government interested in invigorating the economy, then, it is essential to inspire confidence in the private investor. The investment meant here is the expenditure on productive capacity as opposed to buying shares or even durable goods in secondary markets.

Private investment in relation to output has in most years since been lower than what it was in 2014. This may come as a surprise to some as the government of Narendra Modi had appeared a business friendly one. While noting the slide in private investment, two points may be made. First, the private sector comprises two segments, the corporate and the un-



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incorporated, termed household, in Indian national accounts. Since 2014, after initially declining private corporate investment has shown a mild rise while household investment has fallen sharply. The overall effect has been downward. This despite the pro-business reputation of this government and the strong and repeated communication of the Prime Minister that it would support those who 'Make in India'. Clearly this talk has not been enough to convince private investors, who probably find insufficient dynamism in the economy today and are unsure of the likely impact of the government's policies on its future. The most business friendly government at the Centre in recent times has not had success in turning around a slide in private investment. This is the second point to note.

While 'adventurist' has been pronounced as a verdict on the economic policy since 2014, a purely economic explanation is at hand. The government may have mistaken the architecture for the force. For an economy, by architecture we would mean the framework within which activity takes place while force is the ebb and flow of the demand for and supply of goods.

Elements to the architecture

It is possible to see four elements of the architecture as visualised by the Modi government: the presence of foreign direct investment

(FDI), a digital payments network, a streamlined indirect tax regime and less government. The government has had some success in moving the economy towards such an architecture. Almost the first significant economic move of the Prime Minister was to have met American CEOs while in New York in 2014. This has been followed by an increase in FDI to record levels since. But the fact remains that FDI is not a large part of total capital formation in India, and, therefore, even at the heightened level cannot really make too much of a difference. Also, FDI into India has generally flowed to sectors with a lower multiplier effect on output. Then came the demonetisation, initially spoken of as a 'surgical strike' on black money hoards but subsequently rationalised as nudging Indians towards adopting digital payment. The inevitable formalisation of the economy was to lead to more tax revenue for the government, enabling greater spending on infrastructure.

Next came the launching of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). The government cannot claim all the credit for this desirable move, for a restructuring of the indirect tax regime has been on the books, if not in the works, since the 1970s and there has been a high degree of participation of the States in its launching. However, in the haste to appear as reforming, the Central government may have over-

looked the need for a strong information technology (IT) network, education of the taxpayer and a facilitating tax bureaucracy. The States may well have agreed to the date of launching as they were to be compensated for any loss of revenues. Finally, the counterpart of the election slogan, 'minimum government', has materialised in the form of a steadily declining share of public expenditure in the economy. So the government has been able to achieve the architecture that it aspired to. Extensions of it have reached the two arms of macroeconomic policy. First, there was the move to what is referred to as a 'modern monetary policy framework'. This has meant that the sole objective of monetary policy would be inflation control. That there can be collateral damage to growth is considered inconsequential. Fiscal policy has been guided by 'fiscal consolidation' or a focus on deficit reduction. That this could be achieved by varying combinations of the revenue deficit and public investment appears not to have been considered.

A significant part of the promise of demonetisation and the introduction of the GST, namely higher public revenues from formalisation, has not materialised. In fact, there are reports of the possibility of the fiscal deficit target for this year being breached due to lower than expected indirect tax revenues. On the other, it is clear that the dip in the growth rate in 2016-17 was due to demonetisation. The economy had slowed in the very next quarter after it was implemented, with the manufacturing sector actually contracting. As for the macroeconomic policy that has been pursued since 2014, it has acted as a pincer movement on aggregate demand. Rising interest rates, presumably needed to ensure that the inflation target is met, and fiscal consolidation are sure to have crimped it. Apart from any immediate effect of lo-

wering the fiscal deficit, the route it has taken may also have consequences for long-term growth. In 2017-18, Central government capital expenditure was lowered in real terms. A less recognised aspect of the modern monetary policy framework is that the real exchange rate has appreciated since its adoption. This could only have reduced the demand for India's exports, further lowering aggregate demand and holding back private investment.

Unimaginative maxim

The economic policies of the Modi government have failed to enthuse the private sector. Private investment has continued to slide during its tenure. A most natural thing for the government to have done would have been to raise substantially its own investment. This it has not done. A rising public investment can nudge the private sector to follow suit as the latter perceives superior growth prospects raising the latter's expectation of profits. Actually, "minimum government" is an unimaginative maxim for governing the economy.

The government must respond imaginatively to the emergent economic situation. In the context, to the extent that sliding private investment reflects declining profit expectations, economic policy must anchor profit expectations. Under India's new monetary policy framework, institutionalised by this government, the monetary authority aims to anchor inflationary expectations but this by itself can do little to convince firms of improved profits in the future. That this is how the economy works may be surmised from the fact that inflation has trended down steadily since even before 2014 but that has not revived private investment.

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Cutting through the smog

Practical interventions exist to tackle the issue of stubble burning



SEEMA BATHLA & RAVI KIRAN

Incidents of stubble burning – following the harvest of paddy crop in Punjab and Haryana – cannot be averted by imposing fines, or giving notice or giving farmers capital subsidy. Instead, the issue requires long-term vision and strategic policy interventions.

Air pollution is a worry especially in north India. Stubble burning is said to be a key factor behind the formation of a dense cover of smog in this part of India though its contribution is less than 20%. Farmers are held responsible for the crisis but what is at fault are the flawed and short-sighted policies of the Central and State governments.

Policy of rotation

In the 1960s, wheat-paddy crop rotation was encouraged in Punjab and Haryana to make India self-sufficient in foodgrain production. Large public investments in irrigation and adoption of high yielding varieties under the Green Revolution helped achieve the goal and make the nation food secure. Ho-

wever, the negative externalities in terms of land degradation, adverse soil health due to overuse of fertilizers and pesticides, and plummeting water tables have surfaced.

The share of paddy (rice) in the gross cropped area in Punjab has increased from 6.8% in 1966-67 to almost 36.4 % in recent years, while it has increased from 4.97% to 20% in Haryana. The increase has undisputedly been at the cost of the area under maize, cotton, oilseeds and sugarcane. The policy of minimum support price for crops, in tandem with their assured procurement and input subsidy, have left farmers with no option but to follow this rotation. Besides, Punjab enacted a water conservation law in 2009 which mandates paddy sowing within a notified period (some time in June instead of the earlier practice in May). A shorter period of sowing days prohibits transplantation before a notified date, which in turn limits the window available for harvesting paddy to between 15 and 20 days. As a result, farmers who are pressed for time to sow wheat and maintain crop yield find stubble burning to be an easy and low-cost solution.

One possibility to curtail the practice is to ensure that the government encourages crop diversification towards less water-inten-

sive crops by extending price incentives and better marketing facilities. In some districts, farmers have started growing kinnow fruit but are often dissuaded due to high price volatility and the absence of a market. The policy of a 'price deficiency system' – as initiated in Haryana and Madhya Pradesh – should be adopted to strengthen the production and marketing of alternative crops. Another option is to replicate the Telangana model of providing farmers an investment support of ₹8,000 per acre each year and withdraw price-based support.

Punjab faces another serious problem: labour shortage. In the Agricultural Census 2011, average land-holding size has increased from 2.89 hectares in 1970-71 to 3.77 hectares in 2010-11 – higher than the national average of 1.5 hectares. Paucity of labour for various farm operations is substituted by machines for which the government extends financial support.

A road map

Farmers have already made investments in seed drill machines for sowing wheat after paddy harvest. Increasing pressure by the government on farmers to purchase the 'happy seeder' to abate stubble burning adds to the cost incurred by farmers. Even if the



machine is available at a subsidised rate of nearly ₹1 lakh, it would remain idle the whole year and become a liability in terms of maintenance. It is not a viable option for small and marginal farmers who hardly earn ₹60,000 in a year. Imposing a fine for burning straw is again unreasonable. The fine imposed per hectare is much lower than the cost incurred on a 'happy seeder'.

A feasible remedy could lie in the setting up of custom hiring centres or inviting companies to make investments for rental purposes. If the state provides an app-based support system, to rent out tractors and farm implements and earn additional income – there are examples of this in Nigeria and also in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar – it would be akin to the 'Uberisation of agriculture'. It would avoid stubble burning and at the same time make farming more mechanised, cost effective and a source of

employment.

Another far-sighted approach could be in effective use of paddy straw. Unlike wheat residue, which is used as fodder, paddy straw is non-palatable to animals as it has high silica content. Farmers, who have already been sensitised to refrain from burning residue, should be given options such as biomass generation. Now, hardly 20% of straw is managed through biomass power plants, paper and cardboard mills. The government should use geospatial techniques to identify areas where stubble burning is severe and encourage installation of biomass plants at such locations. This will not only reduce transportation costs for the firm or village entrepreneurs but also help the government achieve its target of generating 227GW based on renewable energy sources by 2022. Farmers can also be incentivised to sell the residual for additional income. The residual has uses, such as in paper, cardboard and packing material making and also hydroseeding (defiberised rice straw can be used in hydroseeding for erosion control).

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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.

Agrarian crisis

It is painful to learn from media reports that a farmer in Maharashtra destroyed his brinjal crop unable to accept the reality that 1 kg fetched 20 paise. Another farmer, again from Maharashtra, was also in the news for sending his earnings of ₹1,064 for 750 kg of onion to the Prime Minister to register his protest. These instances only highlight the poor state of agriculture in India (Editorial, "Uneasy fields", December 4). One has lost count of the number of farmers having ended their lives as a result of distress in agriculture. Many more families involved in farming are bankrupt. When will our parliamentarians discuss the issues affecting agriculture in depth?

Dr. D.V.G. SANKARARAO,
Nellimarla, Andhra Pradesh

■ Loan waivers? Is this the only solution to farmer's distress? Does the cycle of taking loans end if waived today? Those in charge of governance must think of collaboration between agriculture officers, soil researchers, technology manufacturers, gram sabhas and agrarian market specialists. Together, they must find a solution to boost farmers' income.

PRATHIMA KUNUSOTHU,
Hanankonda, Warangal, Telangana

■ Farming is not just a job, it is a way of life. The political class in India is largely responsible for the plight farmers in India today find themselves in. Enabling adequate water resources and popularising organic farming are some workable solutions.

K. NAGENDRA KUMAR,
Nandyal, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

■ The misery of our farmers is well known and the solutions to their woes are not very extraordinary. It is true that election season will lead to a lot of political noise with respect to farmers' issues. But it remains to be seen how much of this noise translates into concrete steps. Long-term solutions include infrastructure building, rationalisation of subsidies, control on intermediaries and contract farming with special safeguards for our farmers. A solution should not get restricted to the rhetoric of loan waivers as a step like this will not help small farmers who have no access to formal credit.

SIDDHARTH CHATURVEDI,
Mumbai

■ Farmers in India are furious, and rightfully so. They voted for the

government in the strong belief that it would address agrarian distress. On the contrary, their problems have worsened as farm incomes have been affected by slower output growth, higher costs and increased vulnerability to climate change. To these one can add the new set of problems that have resulted from government policies. Years of crippling debt, drought and falling income have cast a shadow over the future of Indian farming.

R. SIVAKUMAR,
Chennai

A 90-day truce

It is abundantly clear that the U.S. has been made to eat humble pie as its nouveau protectionist policies seem to have done more harm than good (Editorial, "Tariff truce", November 4). With China having imposed tit-for-

tat tariffs in response to U.S. moves, American companies and consumers are sure to have begun feeling the heat. Finding a mutually acceptable agreement within the 90-day timeframe seems a tall order.

Moreover, with the Democrats taking control of the U.S. House of Representatives, President Donald Trump will find it hard to make unilateral decisions.

NALINI VIJAYARAGHAVAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

Much read

As a resident of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, I can count myself in a list of those who are avid readers of *The Hindu*. The daily usually reaches here late in the afternoon. We understand that the logistics involved in reaching the paper to us are expensive but

are willing to overlook this. *The Hindu* happens to be our window to the world and is a paper worth reading.

AKSHAY.S.,
Port Blair, Andaman & Nicobar Islands

Heavy bags

The school bag has become a much-talked-about burden that rests on the shoulders of students. It was R.K. Narayan who raised the issue of his maiden speech in Parliament. The absence of a political will and social consensus is the reason why there is no solution. Parents and politicians should strive to find a solution before the next academic year begins. The mountainous burden children bear can be reserved for later in life.

G.T. SAMPATHKUMARACHAR,
Mysuru

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