



Farm friction

The government must move purposefully to address the systemic malaise in agriculture

Since June 1, many farmers are on an unusual 10-day ‘strike’ to draw the government’s attention to distress in the fields. A federation of 130 farmer bodies has decided to stop supplies of vegetables and dairy produce to major cities and hold a dharna on 30 national highways, without blocking vehicular passage. Prices of vegetables and fruits are inching up in urban centres given the supply shock created by this ‘Gaon Bandh’; in cities like Mumbai fishermen have joined the cause. The farmers’ demands are not new – enhancement of the minimum support price regime for crops in line with the M.S. Swaminathan Commission’s recommendations, higher prices for milk procurement and loan waivers to offset low or negative returns on investment. Leaving out vegetables, food prices rose by just 0.55% in the first four months of 2018 – almost a fourth of the average 2% rise recorded in the same months between 2014 and 2016. There is a supply glut, and with a good monsoon expected, a healthy output could put additional pressure on prices. But this stir, which ends with a Bharat Bandh call on June 10, is not about the immediate crisis faced by specific sections of farmers (such as the cash-strapped sugarcane-growers for whom a cess is being considered under the GST regime). It is a culmination of multiple attempts made over a year to red-flag the systemic malaise in agriculture.

On June 6, 2017, some farmers were killed in police firing in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh, during an agitation for better crop prices. There have been agitations across the country since then, including in Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra (where thousands of farmers walked nearly 200 km to the State capital in March). The current stir also derives from lack of tangible action on assurances made earlier and imperceptible movement on the Centre’s grand promises such as doubling farm incomes and raising MSPs. That the general elections are just a year away adds a political subtext to the protest. Rural distress has dented the BJP’s electoral performance in recent months. Too much of the structural reform agenda to free agricultural markets from the grip of government rules and intermediaries remains pending. There has been dithering even on simple things like strengthening the food processing sector. Take one instance – 100% FDI was allowed in the food retail business in 2016, but little money has come in as retailers want permission to stock a few non-food items like soaps and shampoos for customers. The minister in charge had promised this over a year ago, but nothing happened. Blaming the agitators is easy; policy responses are where the heavy lifting is needed.

The strain in Spain

Political uncertainty hovers over Madrid as the new PM tries to stabilise his government

Spain’s conservative-led minority government, which fell on Friday, has been swiftly succeeded by a wobbly minority government led by the Socialists. It counts on support from, among others, Catalan and the extreme left parties. In this sense, the changeover represents continuity of the relative uncertainty that has characterised Spain since the 2016 general election. Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, who had held office since 2011, was voted out after top functionaries of his People’s Party were convicted for operating a slush fund during Spain’s construction boom in the last decade. The judicial verdict centre-staged Pedro Sánchez, the Socialist Party chief who masterminded the no-confidence motion against the government. Ironically, Mr. Rajoy had managed to form a minority coalition in October 2016 only after Mr. Sánchez’s failed bid for premiership and ouster as party leader, breaking a prolonged political deadlock and averting a third general election in the space of a year. But in a remarkable comeback, Mr. Sánchez reclaimed his party’s leadership in May 2017 and has now emerged as Spain’s Prime Minister after leading the Socialists to consecutive election defeats in 2015 and 2016. His biggest challenge is to work with the Catalan separatists, whose demands for statehood have long united the country’s conservatives and Socialists in their opposition to the idea, seeing it as a threat to Spanish nationhood. Madrid had imposed direct rule over Catalonia last year after it declared itself independent. Now, a new Catalan government has been formed under Quim Torra, who too is insistent on pushing for independence. No less of a complication for Mr. Sánchez would be working with Podemos, the far-left anti-austerity party that has sought to capitalise on the eroding base of the Socialists to project itself as the more credible progressive platform in Spanish politics.

Moreover, given the slender support his disparate new coalition commands in Parliament, Mr. Sánchez has little room for manoeuvre in terms of either economic or political policy ahead of the scheduled 2020 elections. A ray of hope amid this prevailing sense of instability is Spain’s steady recovery from the deep recession triggered by the banking and housing crisis earlier this decade. The country’s double-digit unemployment figures are way above the Eurozone average. But the current healthy rate of growth in per capita gross domestic product is projected to persist over the coming years, according to an International Monetary Fund forecast. This positive trend possibly explains the state of overall political equilibrium in Spain, as compared with the hollowing out of the middle ground in several other countries in southern Europe. Yet, political parties should not lower their vigil against anti-immigrant and anti-European Union forces trying to gain a foothold. Rising above narrow party interests to promote the common good will be the challenge before Spain’s mainstream politicians.

To be an environmental world power

Cross-border environmentalism is crucial for South Asia, but India is not inclined to take the lead



KANAK MANI DIXIT

Ecological ruin is on a gallop across South Asia, with life and livelihood of nearly a quarter of the world’s population affected. Yet, our polities are able to neither fathom nor address the degradation. The distress is paramount in the northern half of the subcontinent, roping in the swathe from the Brahmaputra basin to the Indus-Ganga plain.

Within each country, with politics dancing to the tune of populist consumerism, nature is without a guardian. The erosion of civility in geopolitics keeps South Asian societies apart when people should be joining hands across borders to save our common ground.

Because wildlife, disease vectors, aerosols and river flows do not respect national boundaries, the environmental trends must performe be discussed at the regional inter-country level. As the largest nation-state of our region, and the biggest polluter whose population is the most vulnerable, India needs to be alert to the dangerous drift.

China has been resolutely tackling air pollution and promoting clean energy. But while Beijing’s centralised governance mandates environmentalism-by-decree, the subcontinental realities demand civic participation for sustainability to work. Unfortunately, despite being a vast democracy where people power should be in the driving seat, the Indian state not only neglects its own realm, it does not take the lead on cross-border environmentalism.

Thus, Bihar is helping destroy the Chure/Siwalik range of Nepal to feed the construction industry’s demand for boulders and conglomerate, even though this hurts Bihar itself through greater floods, desertification and aquifer depletion. Air pollution is strangling the

denizens of Lahore, New Delhi, Kathmandu and Dhaka alike, but there is no collaboration. Wildlife corridors across States, provinces and countries are becoming constricted by the day, but we look the other way.

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) has chosen India to be the ‘host country’ to mark World Environment Day today. But when will New Delhi rise to connect the dots between representative democracy and ecological sanity?

Rivers into sewers

Truth be told, the environment ministry is invariably the least empowered in the major countries of South Asia, without clout vis-à-vis line ministries, and unable to coordinate the ecological response. Governments were content once to regard environmental protection as synonymous with wildlife protection. Today they stand unprepared when the challenges have greatly multiplied and deepened.

There is distress across the ecological spectrum, but one need only study the rivers and the atmosphere to track the inaction of governments and our weakened activism. On water, the subcontinent is running out of the resource due to the demands of industrialisation and urbanisation, and continuation of the colonial-era irrigation model based on flooding the fields.

The economic and demographic forces are arrayed against the rivers and their right-of-way. In the hills, the Ganga in Uttarakhand and the Teesta of Sikkim are representative of rivers that have been converted into dry boulder tracts by ‘cascades’ of run-of-river hydroelectric schemes. The same fate now threatens the rivers of Nepal and India’s Northeast, while the tributaries of the Indus were ‘done in’ decades ago through water diversion.

Everywhere, natural drainage is destroyed by highways and railway tracks elevated above the flood line, and bunds encircling towns and cities. Reduced flows



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and urban/industrial effluents have converted our great rivers into sewers. We refuse to consider drip irrigation as a solution just as we fail to acknowledge that the rivers are made to carry hundreds of tonnes of plastics daily into the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea.

While underground aquifers are exploited to exhaustion, the popular ‘river-training’ prescription imprisons our rivers within embankments, according to the inherited Western engineering canon that does not factor in the natural silt carried by rivers of the Himalaya. The would-be high-dam builders have not adequately studied the phenomenon of Himalayan cloud-bursts, nor do they find it necessary to address the question: how do you de-silt a deep reservoir when it fills up with sand and mud?

Sadly, activists in Bihar and elsewhere who propose the ecologically sound ethos of ‘living with the flood’ have been relegated to the media backwater. They need to be heard, for the Ganga plains are densely populated for the very reason that the natural meanderings of rivers spread the largesse of loess across the land – silt that is now locked away between dykes.

Ground fog, brown cloud

As the UNEP will be the first to insist, climate change is introducing massive disturbances to South Asia, most notably from the rise of sea levels. The entire Indian Ocean coastline will be affected, but the hardest hit will be the densely populated deltas where the Indus, the Irrawaddy and the Ganga-Brahmaputra meet the sea.

The climate change discourse

Governance and the Governor

Misuse of the office by some is not a justification for removing it altogether. We need proper checks



AGNIDIPTO TARAFDER

The article, “Do we need the office of the Governor?” (Editorial page, May 24, 2018), raises important questions about a constitutional post which has come under fire. While the developments in Karnataka over government formation after the Assembly election results are the peg for this, calls to do away with this often maligned position are hardly new.

An overseer

Under the constitutional scheme, the Governor’s mandate is substantial. From being tasked with overseeing government formation, to reporting on the breakdown of constitutional machinery in a State, to maintaining the chain of command between the Centre and the State, he can also reserve his assent to Bills passed by the State Legislature and promulgate ordinances if the need arises. Further, under Article 355, the Governor, being the Central authority in a State, acts as an overseer in this regard.

There are numerous examples of the Governor’s position being abused, usually at the behest of the ruling party at the Centre. The root lies in the process of appointment itself. The post has been reduced to becoming a retirement package for politicians for being politically faithful to the government of the day. Consequently, a candidate wedded to a political ideology could find it difficult to adjust to the requirements of a constitutionally mandated neutral seat. This could result in bias, as appears to have happened in Karnataka.

A possible solution would be not to nominate career politicians and choose “eminent persons” from other walks of life. Both the Sarkaria and M.M. Punchhi Commissions seem to hint at this. But this could also lead to the creation of sycophants within the intelligentsia, an equally worrisome prospect. On the other hand, there are instances of politicians who have risen above partisan politics, and performed their role with dignity and without fear or favour. In this one can think of former President Pranab Mukherjee, former Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee, and former West Bengal Governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi.

One has to consider the verdict of the Supreme Court in *B.P. Sing-*



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hal v. Union of India, on interpreting Article 156 of the Constitution and the arbitrary removal of Governors before the expiration of their tenure. This judgment is crucial since a fixed tenure for Governors could go quite far in encouraging neutrality and fairness in the discharge of their duties, unmindful of the dispensation at the Centre.

Undoubtedly, the most crucial issue relates to the exercise of gubernatorial discretion. The Governor has the task of inviting the leader of the largest party/alliance, post-election, to form the government; overseeing the dismissal of the government in case of a breakdown of the Constitution in the State; and, through his report, recommending the imposition of President’s rule. There are examples of the last two having been

has not evolved enough to address the tens of millions of ‘climate refugees’ who will en masse move inland, paying scarce heed to national boundaries in the search for survival. To understand this imminent phenomenon, one may recall what the Farakka Barrage did to livelihoods in downstream Bangladesh, causing the flood of ‘undocumented aliens’ in India.

The retreat of the Himalayan glaciers is jeopardising the perennial nature of our rivers and climate scientists are now zeroing in on the ‘atmospheric brown cloud’ to explain the excessive melting of snows in the central Himalaya. This high altitude haze covers the Indo-Gangetic plains for much of the dry season and penetrates deep into the high valleys.

This cloud is made up of ‘black carbon’ containing soot and smog sent up by stubble burning, wood fires, smokestacks and fossil fuel exhaust, as well as dust kicked up by winter agriculture, vehicles and wind. It rises up over the plains and some of it settles on Himalayan snow and ice, which absorb heat and melt that much faster. It is no longer anecdotal that the ice-falls of the Himalaya could before long transform into waterfalls.

Like the ‘brown cloud’, the policy-makers are yet to consider the *seet lahar*, the ground-hugging fog that engulfs the subcontinent’s northern plains for ever-extended periods in winter, a result of the spread of canal irrigation and simultaneous increase in the presence of particulate matter in the air. This inattention to the indescribable distress of millions of the poorest and shelter-less of the plains is hard to comprehend.

A new kind of Chipko

When environmental impact assessments have become a ritualistic farce in each country and governments react with great prejudice against environmental activists, it is little wonder that the Chipko Movement of Uttarakhand is erased from memory. Today, environmental activists all over tend to be lampooned in the media and social media as anti-national, anti-

development saboteurs.

Meanwhile, the task of preserving the forests and landscapes has mostly been relegated to the indigenous communities. You will have the Adivasi communities of the Deccan organising to save ancestral forests, and the indigenous Lepcha fighting against the odds to protect the upper reaches of the Teesta. The urban middle class is not visible in environmentalism, other than in ‘beautification projects’.

Perhaps we have been foolhardy in waiting for another Chipko to emerge, and the changed times may require new approaches. Tomorrow’s activists must work to quantify the economic losses of environmental destruction and get local institutions to act on their ownership of natural resources. The activists must harness information technology so as to engage with the public and to override political frontiers, and they must creatively use the power of the market itself to counter non-sustainable interventions.

As we have seen, the highs of environmental movements are invariably followed by lows, and so to exit the cycle what is needed is an “environmental system” inbuilt into the infrastructure of state and society. Work towards ecological sustainability must go beyond ritual, with the path seeming to lie in the empowerment of local government all over. Elected representatives in cities and districts must be challenged to emerge as the bulwark of environmentalism even as the provincial and national governments are asked to rise to their regulatory responsibilities.

When ‘organic environmentalism’ rises from the grassroots and makes state authority accountable, South Asia and its peoples will be protected. At that point, no force will be able to stop activism across the frontiers and South Asia will begin to tackle pollution and dislocation as one.

Kanak Mani Dixit, a writer and journalist based in Kathmandu, is the founding editor of the magazine, ‘Himal Southasian’

al circumstances that necessitate the use of his discretion, but as a crucial link within this federal structure in maintaining effective communication between the Centre and a State. As a figurehead who ensures the continuance of governance in the State, even in times of constitutional crises, his role is often that of a neutral arbiter in disputes settled informally within the various strata of government, and as the conscience keeper of the community.

In the current political climate – examples being Goa, Manipur and Karnataka – it may seem natural to suggest that the post of the Governor has outlived its utility. These occurrences are but instances in a long chain of events stretching back decades, all of which point to the need to ensure proper checks and balances to streamline the functioning of this office. However, misuse of a position of power should not serve as a justification for removing the office altogether, unless such a position has totally lost its relevance. Rather, these debates on limitations on the power of constitutional functionaries should be allowed unimpeded to ensure the organic development of our polity.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The message of June 4

In more than one article published in *The Hindu*, Gopalkrishna Gandhi has made clear his wish, subtly or directly – to see the Bharatiya Janata Party removed from power both at the Centre and in States. His article, “Heed the echoes of June 4” (Editorial page, June 4), is one more instance of this. Towards this end, he has eloquently advocated unity among the Opposition parties which includes the Left. But the question is whether those who come together on such a narrow agenda can stay united for a full term. One recalls how during the UPA’s rule (2004-2014), the constituents arm-twisted a helpless Prime Minister at

every turn, starting from the allocation of ministerial berths to exiting, leaving behind a trail of megascams. As for the Left, after promising outside support, it blocked the Congress-led UPA government from making crucial decisions before withdrawing support over the signing of the India-U.S. civil nuclear deal. If UPA-I still survived, it was due to conditional support. The people should get a government the majority elect in 2019.

V. JAYARAMAN,
Chennai

■ An Opposition alliance that is composed of units that are in synchrony with the other is the need of the hour if such a formation is to take

on the BJP. The 2019 election will be a fight against communalism. After four years at the Centre, there is little to cheer about for the BJP. The ruling party has been following almost everything that is unconstitutional, the economy is in a shambles and foreign relations are at an all-time low. What the BJP needs to realise is that people cannot be swayed by appealing to just their religion or caste.

VIMAL VARHESE,
Angamaly, Kerala

Nagpur visit

Ever since former President Pranab Mukherjee, a veteran Congressman and one who has held vital portfolios, confirmed that he had

accepted an invitation from the RSS to visit its headquarters in Nagpur, a host of voices have been heard, critiquing his decision (“Pranab’s Nagpur visit a hot topic”, June 4). For the secular lobby, the RSS has always been untouchable and it has been puzzled that a strong votary of secularism and an arch critic of the RSS is now treading a new path. Whether Mr. Mukherjee is having second thoughts about his assessment of the RSS is the moot question. One cannot ignore some of the comments by those who matter in the RSS on the need for inclusion. Have these got Mr. Mukherjee’s attention? C.V. ARAVIND,
Bengaluru

■ I fail to understand why there is such a hue and cry. First, the RSS is not a banned organisation and in a vibrant democracy such as ours no organisation should be perceived to be untouchable. Also, once Mr. Mukherjee became the President of India, he ceased to be a Congressman. Once he’s relinquished presidentship he is perceived to be an ordinary citizen.

K.S. SUNDARAM,
Coimbatore

Tobacco use

The link between cancer and the consumption of tobacco has been established beyond doubt, yet weaning away people, more notably adolescents, from tobacco use has a poor success rate, if

not met with outright resistance and defiance (Editorial, “Fire without smoke”, June 4). Data on a thinning smoking population in India may be heartening news but the ground realities convey that those who are initiated into tobacco far outnumber those who have quit. Today’s free Indian youth do not need sermons, much less watchdogs over their conduct in public. Personal liberty and privacy are the bywords today. In most residential complexes in London, smoking is a very strict ‘no’ for all. Can we dare enforce such a rule in the Indian context?

SVANAMANI VASUDEVAN,
Chennai

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