



Chasing the monsoon

The forecast has enhanced the economic outlook, but India must conduct a water audit

The forecast of a normal monsoon has brought relief all around. For farmers, the India Meteorological Department's estimate that rainfall during the summer, between June and September, will be 97% of the 50-year average of 89 cm, is bound to raise fresh expectations. This is the third year in a row that they can look forward to a high output for a variety of crops, although fiscal realities have come in the way of realising higher farm incomes. The Centre has been supportive of higher returns through the Minimum Support Price mechanism and additional bonuses have been announced by States such as Madhya Pradesh for procurement, but these have helped mainly rice and wheat. From a water management perspective, though, this trend has led to a skew towards these crops, which are heavily dependent on groundwater. Now that another year of good cropping is expected, and unremunerative prices will depress public sentiment, it is vital for the Centre to arrive at a policy that gives constructive advice to farmers on the ideal cropping mix and help them get the cost-plus-50% margin that it has promised them. The IMD's decision to provide a more fine-grained forecast on the monsoon's progress, particularly in the central and northern regions, will meet a long-felt need and can potentially guide farmers better.

The long-term challenge is to make the most of the rainfall that India gets, ranging from a few hundred millimetres or less in the northwest to more than a few thousand millimetres elsewhere. The Master Plan for Artificial Recharge to Ground Water drawn up by the Centre should be pursued scientifically, to help States with the most water-stressed blocks get adequate funds to build artificial recharge structures. Moreover, for those farmers who choose to continue with wheat and rice, transfer of expertise and provision of equipment that enables efficient utilisation of water is vital. An estimate of water used to grow rice and wheat, measured in cubic metres per tonne, shows that India uses more than what, say, China does. In the case of cotton, the figures present an even more staggering contrast: 8,264 cubic metres for India, against 1,419 for China. Combined with distortions in procurement subsidies, water stress due to such use is inevitable. On the monsoon as a whole, studies indicate a change in the pattern since 2002, barring some of the worst El Niño years, likely due to higher land temperatures and cooler oceans. What is well known is that a good monsoon raises agriculture's contribution to GDP growth, while a drought year depresses it. Clearly, governments need to invest consistently to harvest the monsoon, both on the surface and underground, with community participation.

Clamour for death

The anger is justified, but not the proposal to grant capital punishment for rape of minors

Each time a horrific sexual crime hits the headlines, there is a clamour for prescribing the death penalty for such offences. Given this, it is perhaps no surprise that the gang-rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl in Jammu and Kashmir has evoked a similar response. Union Minister for Women and Child Development Maneka Gandhi has said her ministry will seek an amendment to the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, to provide for death as the maximum punishment for the rape of those below 12. The anger is understandable but legislation ought to be a well-considered exercise and not a response based on a sense of outrage over particular incidents. The last time a ghastly crime led to legislative change was in 2013, following a national outcry over the gang rape and murder of a woman in Delhi in December 2012. That set of amendments to criminal law was a structured response, largely based on the recommendations of a committee of eminent jurists. In its January 2013 report, the committee, headed by former Chief Justice of India J.S. Verma, decided against recommending the death penalty for rape, despite demands. It rightly took into account the possibility of awarding life sentences without remission for aggravated sexual assault, as well as "the current thinking in favour of the abolition of the death penalty". However, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, set the death penalty for rape in the event of it causing the victim's death or a persistent vegetative state, and for repeat offenders.

In recent months, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana and Arunachal Pradesh have sought to amend the law to prescribe the death penalty for the rape of a minor below the age of 12. There is a clear dichotomy of views on the desirability of prescribing a death penalty. Enlightened public opinion would not approve of a vengeful state response to individual brutality, even if outraged public opinion clamoured for it. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the death penalty has never been a deterrent against any sort of crime. There is little empirical evidence to show that those about to commit a capital offence would stop themselves merely out of the fear of being hanged. Further, there is a legitimate concern that the country's judicial system has not been consistent in awarding the death penalty. The Law Commission, while recommending abolition of the death penalty, except in terrorism-related cases, observed that it is difficult to operate the "rarest of rare cases" principle without a hint of arbitrariness. It will be especially wrong to force judges to compare the relative 'merits' of rape victims based on their age and choice between death sentence and life. Lengthy prison sentences, constituting both well-deserved consequences for grave crimes and a life-long opportunity for penitence, will adequately meet the ends of justice.

Managing an election

In Karnataka, political one-upmanship has driven the concerns of the State to the backstage



VALERIAN RODRIGUES

While the major contenders on the political scene in Karnataka – the Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Janata Dal (Secular) or JD(S) – are yet to release their manifestos, the full-blast campaign that they have unleashed has made it amply clear that their priority does not lie in mounting a programme and seeking their mandate, and eventually accountability on that ground, but merely in winning the elections.

Sound bite games

They have a set of tactics up their sleeves to win, and have chosen to reinforce traditional modes of politicking, by employing new techniques and imagery of communication. Elections, far from being an occasion to reformulate and re-order common interests, have become in their hands an endorsement to govern yet for another term. They are turned into sophistries of managing castes and communities, sound bites, image-projection and communication skills, and garnering resources for the same. There are no differences between political parties with regard to these indicators, although their capacity to deploy them and tap resources hugely varies.

Apart from projecting their respective parties and leadership as being immensely upright, efficient, fair, development-prone and non-partisan, political parties have attempted to reach out to the symbolic wealth of communities and castes, promised bounties to agitating farmers, held discussions with key constituencies such as business leaders and the youth, organised mammoth public rallies, and conducted padayatras and road shows. The Siddaramaiah re-

gime has resorted to extensive, and probably expensive, use of print and electronic media to advertise its achievements, the BJP and the JD(S) being a poor second and third in this regard so far. While the BJP is known for its astute use of media and image-crafting, it seems to have been busy so far in a reconnaissance exercise to tune up its party in the State, and its performance in this regard hitherto cannot hold a mirror up to what it would do in the next few days prior to voting scheduled on May 12.

One saw BJP president Amit Shah prostrating before the 110-year-old revered Shri Shivakumara Swamiji of Siddaganga Mutt in Tumkur. As for Congress president Rahul Gandhi, his body language expressed a degree of comfort while visiting the great Shankara Mutt at Sringeri, given the long association of the family with the advaita tradition of Shankaracharya, but he seemed ill at ease at several other shrines. While Swami Nirmalanandji of the Adichunchanagiri Mutt is known to be close to Yogi Adityanath, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, and Mr. Shah, who was one of the first to call on him as part of his electoral rounds, Mr. Gandhi was not too far behind. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah also employed the long-term demand of the Veerashaiva Lingayats for a separate religious tag to win over a section by recommending this demand to the Centre through a Cabinet resolution. The BJP shouted hoarse, but everything seemed fair in the electoral war.

Tactical innovation

There was some tactical innovation too. Mr. Gandhi bonded with top State leaders of the Congress over pakodas and vadas at roadside tea stalls, and fish delicacies on the coast. There was widespread use of selfies including at Namma Metro. The BJP, attuned to sterner patriarchal ways, however, took the bait, by making its chief ministerial candidate live in slums



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for a day or two, travel short distances in an auto rickshaw and eat in Dalit households. H.D. Kumaraswamy, the JD(S) chief ministerial aspirant, responded to the plebian icing of his counterparts by projecting himself as 'Kumaranana', the protective big brother, and resorted to a highly personalised style of campaigning. Such rehearsed gestures are at variance with the everyday life of the top political leaders of this country. However, they have their value in connecting to people, but as independent variables have little to offer in reinforcing participation in the ongoing life of a democratic polity or enhancing the quality of the life of people.

The political rhetoric mounted by the Congress revolved around demonetisation, Goods and Services Tax, the Rafale deal, bank fraud, and the creeping authoritarianism of the Narendra Modi-Amit Shah duo, *vis-à-vis* the performance of the Siddaramaiah regime. It also accused the JD(S) of being the BJP's B-team. The BJP charged Mr. Siddaramaiah's government with corruption, minority partisanship, insensitivity to farming distress, divisive approach with regard to the Lingayat legacy and donning the false mask of religiosity. Mr. Kumaraswamy tended to focus on the great record of his family in politics, promising a shift of policy to agrarian concerns. This political rhetoric, however, has made little headway

in grappling with the great challenges that confront the State.

The real issues

If we employ public reasoning as a lens, regional disparity clearly emerges as the most stark issue. A vast region of the State comprising Bidar, Kalaburagi, Yadgir, Vijayapura, Bagalkot, Raichur, Koppal, Gadag and Ballari districts suffers from overdetermined deprivation. These districts were peripheral to colonial provinces or centres of princely states; are part of the rain-shadow belt; and register less than half of the average Human Development Index of Bengaluru and coastal Karnataka. With landless labourers forming an average 40% of rural households, many households have to opt for seasonal migration to neighbouring regions to survive. There is a higher concentration of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Muslims in this region. It is also caught in the vicious circle of patron-client relationships, under the tutelage of the 'big' man, the 'dora' or 'sahukar'.

At the same time, this is also the cultural heartland of the State: great dynasties such as the Chalukyas, the Bahmanis, the Adil Shahis and the Vijayanagar empire flourished here; the Urdu language was nurtured and Sufism found a pervasive presence. It is in this region that the Kannada language and script came into their own; Basavanna's Linga worship took root and Vachana literature flourished; and the great Dasa Sahitya and Carnatic music found an early home. The inclusion of much of this region under Article 371(J) has brought only a notional flow of resources to the region. It looks for a major initiative like what Sharad Pawar fashioned for Marathwada in the early 1990s.

A distinct cultural value of pluralism regulated the interaction of sects, cults, traditions and languages in the region forming Karnataka today. In fact, this pluralism was the encompassing bond

when Islam and Christianity registered their presence in the region from diverse sites. This pluralism held on its own even when passions generated by Kannada linguistic identity threatened to displace it in the 1950s and 1960s. There is a widespread feeling today that this pluralism is under attack, through a vicious design of exclusion.

Rural-urban divide

The rural-urban disconnect is far wider here compared to any other State in southern India with immense resources and opportunities concentrated in Bengaluru. While it denies the poor, the migrant and the refugee a decent living space in the city, it sucks resources from the hinterland to it in unmet ways. While the capital itself needs to find its breathing space, no serious development can be envisaged without developing nodal centres of development all across the State and particularly in northern Karnataka.

The record of employment generation in Karnataka, although impressive compared to many other States, is far off the promise made by the Congress in 2013. The State holds immense possibilities of generating alternative modes of employment. This requires a different approach than crunching numbers that the bureaucracy is familiar with.

It was the right time for Mr. Siddaramaiah and the Congress to propose a substantive agenda to reinforce democracy and equality in the State. But the Congress, desperate to win the election, has chosen to ignore tomorrow for today. The BJP is driven by a single point agenda of proving its invincibility than reinforcing democracy. The JD(S) clearly lives in the past, and has little to offer by way of laying the long-term foundations of democracy and development in the State.

Valerian Rodrigues holds the Ambedkar Chair at Ambedkar University, Delhi

The 'new' South Asia

As China's leverage increases, New Delhi has to reimagine its terms of engagement with neighbours



HARSH V. PANT

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeks to redefine the priorities of the Commonwealth at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London this week, India's neighbourhood policy is coming under scrutiny. The visit of Nepali Prime Minister K.P. Oli to India earlier this month has led to suggestions that it could mark a new beginning in India-Nepal ties after the troubles of the past, and Mr. Modi is likely to visit Nepal soon in part to regain some of India's lost strategic clout. This would also be to impart one last dose of dynamism to his 'Neighbourhood First' policy before the 2019 general election.

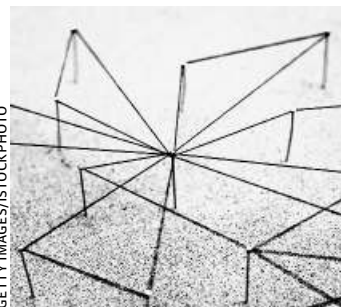
Warm to cold

Soon after coming to power, the Modi government had promised to give priority to the immediate neighbourhood; it did engage with most of the governments here productively for some time. Relations

with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh saw a dramatic improvement while Nepal was given due attention. With Afghanistan, ties were galvanised with security cooperation taking centre stage. Except for the Maldives, Mr. Modi visited all of India's neighbours and tried to reassure them of New Delhi's commitment to deliver the goods.

But at the end of four years of the Modi government, the situation is vastly different. There is now the refrain that India has lost the plot in its immediate vicinity. In Sri Lanka, domestic political developments are affecting India, while in the Maldives, India has found its diminishing clout being publicly taken apart. A vocal critic of India has assumed power in Nepal, and with a massive political mandate. In the Seychelles, India is struggling to operationalise a pact to build a military facility. China's clout, meanwhile, is growing markedly around India's periphery, further constraining New Delhi's ability to push its regional agenda.

In many ways, there is nothing new in the lament today about India's declining regional clout. This is a part of the Indian discourse and comes to the fore every few years with singular constancy.



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Contrary to what many suggest, there was never a golden age of Indian predominance in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. Smaller states in the region have always had enough agency to chart their own foreign policy pathways; sometimes they converged with those of India and at other times they varied significantly. There have always been 'extra regional' powers which have come to the aid of India's neighbours, often to New Delhi's discomfiture.

The China factor

What is true today is that post-Independence, India has never encountered anything like China in its vicinity whose intent and capabilities are posing the kind of challenge to Indian interests which New Delhi is finding hard to manage. China's entry into the South

Asian region has opened up new avenues for smaller neighbours which can be leveraged in their dealings with India. As a result, the very idea of what South Asian geography means is undergoing a change. It is not without reason that the idea of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation is gaining currency in Indian policy-making. It can potentially allow India to break through the straitjacket of the traditional confines of South Asia and leverage its Bay of Bengal identity to link up with the wider Southeast Asian region. In that sense, it is about reimagining India's strategic geography altogether.

But the underlying factors that have traditionally framed India's difficulties in getting its neighbourhood policy right remain as potent as ever. India's structural dominance of South Asia makes it a natural target of resentment and suspicion which New Delhi has often found difficult to overcome. India is also part of the domestic politics of most regional states where anti-India sentiment is often used to bolster the nationalist credentials of various political formations. State identity in South Asia often gets linked to oppositional politics

vis-à-vis India. South Asian states remain politically fragile and the economic projects in the region have failed to take off as a result. This means that the room available for India to manoeuvre in the region is severely limited despite what many in New Delhi and outside would like to believe.

Successive Indian governments have struggled to get a grip on the neighbourhood. Initially, the struggle with Pakistan engaged a large part of India's diplomatic capital. Today, there seems to be a clear recognition that India's Pakistan policy is merely a subset of India's China policy. And as Beijing's economic and political engagement in India's periphery has grown, New Delhi is coming to terms with the reality of a 'new' South Asia. India will not only have to more creatively reimagine its strategic geography but also evolve new terms of engagement with its neighbours; terms which reflect the reality of our times in which both India and its neighbours can have a stake in each other's success.

Harsh V. Pant is Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi, and Professor at King's College London

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.

Oil pricing

Oil sector reforms are not merely about the price that consumers pay for fuel at the pump (Editorial - "Slippery slope", April 17). It is also about how the fossil fuel-dependent economy manages the supply and consumption of a commodity that is mostly imported. The government, like its predecessors, has fallen victim to the 'low oil price curse' – complacency induced by low international prices for the last three years and the consequent lull in devising policies to reduce the oil import bill and promoting alternative fuels. In fact, counterintuitive as it may seem, the best time to fast-track fuel reforms is when prices are low because the government has the fiscal margin to reshape the oil economy without hurting consumers.

It is unfortunate that the government has lost the zeal that it demonstrated some time ago to have an electric vehicles-only policy from 2030, presumably because of lobbying by the automobile industry. It is futile to depend on fuel-efficiency and the personal habits of consumers to reduce imports. The 'impractical card' has always been waved to thwart reforms like what is being done now to undermine the introduction of electric vehicles. Is a decade too long for the automobile industry to shift gears?

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

Blast case verdict

The wheels of justice have turned but only to derail, leaving the family members of those affected devastated ("All five accused walk free

in Mecca Masjid blast case", April 17). Will there be an answer to the question they raise: who then engineered the blast? The verdict raises disturbing questions about the credibility of our investigating agencies and the criminal justice delivery system. Expectedly, there has been a war of words, politically. One wonders whether there will be an appeal. Steps should be taken to strengthen the investigative machinery at the Central and State levels and, most importantly, try to and insulate it/them from political influence.

S.K. CHOUDHURY,
Bengaluru

Need for values

A telling detail that leaps out of the welter of facts around the horrendous gang-rape and murder of a minor in Kathua, Jammu, is that it was perpetrated in a

place of worship. Why have words failed our otherwise eloquent and articulate godmen and women and gurus? Indians of all creeds who take pride in their spiritual culture too are also fighting a battle against those who commit heinous crimes under the gaze of those in power. Human values are the weapons most needed today.

VASANTHA SURYA,
Bengaluru

Women under siege

Women in India are under siege given that there seems to be a distressing incident every minute. From being tortured, abused and then killed in a place of worship (Kathua) to being asked by persons in authority to engage in unethical activities (Aruppukottai, Tamil Nadu), the reports of girls and women subject to gross

abuse are demoralising. At a time when society is expected to uphold women's rights, it is shocking that a professor in Tamil Nadu, and a woman, tried to 'lure' girl students in an attempt to appease higher authorities. One has to compliment the four students who had the

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the Business Review page report headlined "What demonetisation did to tax collections" (April 15, 2018), a sentence read: "Put simply, every additional rupee of nominal GDP growth for India yielded an equivalent new rupee of direct taxes for the Centre. It should have been every additional percentage point of nominal GDP growth."

A Sports page report headlined "Walk in the park for Knight Riders" (April 17, 2018) erroneously referred to Md. Shami as a left arm pacer. He is a right arm fast bowler.

It was not Mohammad Shahzad's (Afghan wicketkeeper) picture. An "In Brief" report - "Shahzad fined after playing for Pakistan club" (April 17, 2018, Sports page) - had inadvertently carried the photograph of Pakistani cricketer Ahmad Shehzad.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 855 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com