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The burden of disease

Neglect of public health has left millions of Indians vulnerable to non-communicable diseases

The recent release of National Health Profile (NHP) 2019 is once again a dismal reminder of India's neglect of public health even by the standards of other neighbourhood and low-middle income countries. Its public health expenditure, at just 1.28 per cent of GDP, is way below that of Maldives, Thailand, and Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The NHP has chosen to overlook a globally accepted indicator of health access — direct out-of-pocket expenditure (OOPE). The OOPE accounts for 62.5 per cent of total health expenditure in India. In France, the government's share is 78.2 per cent while in China, it is above 56 per cent. Such expenditure pushes a staggering eight crore Indians below the poverty line every year.

To bridge the public funding gap, governments past and present have opted for an insurance-based model of financing. While Ayushman Bharat and its State-level equivalents such as Arogyashree have helped reduce OOP, it would be a mistake to assume, as the NITI Aayog has done in an earlier policy paper advocating a PPP approach to healthcare, that publicly funded health infrastructure is not crucial. In health, it is State-run models that have worked, from Scandinavian countries and Sri Lanka, to Costa Rica and Cuba. Even if India's healthcare systems cannot be fully run by the government, there is certainly a great scope for expanding the State's footprint — not just in healthcare infrastructure, but also in medical education, the root cause of unaffordable private healthcare in India. In India, inclusive health is a contradiction in terms. The health infrastructure — divided into primary, secondary and tertiary, where primary care is State-managed and tertiary care privately controlled — is based on an outmoded notion of morbidity. For instance, non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiac ailments and cancer are not elite, lifestyle disorders, but are increasingly claiming their victims among the poor as well; yet their treatment falls in the domain of expensive tertiary care. NCDs account for 63 per cent of all deaths in India, and their effects on the poor, underweight and malnourished, in the form of low weight diabetes, for instance, can be lethal. Recent Global Burden of Disease data shows that a rise in NCDs is related to inadequate intake of fruit and vegetables.

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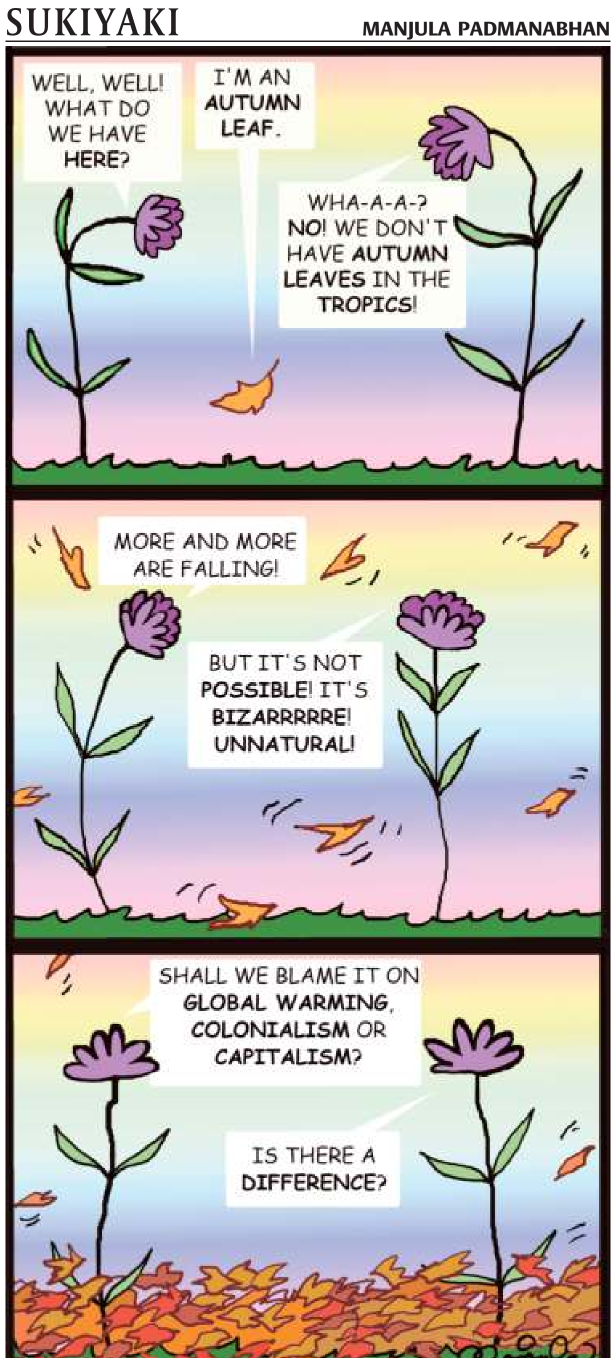
The effects of India's poor emphasis on State-run healthcare are quite evident: even Bangladesh has done better. If Bangladesh's per capita income is fast closing up with India's, it is because it has focussed on the basics. India has pursued growth in isolation of developing its human capital.

SUKIYAKI

MANJULA PADMANABHAN



India's irresponsible flip-flops at RCEP

Had it not been for the opposition to tariff cuts by most stakeholders, a secretive New Delhi would have inked the deal

BISWAJIT DHAR

After engaging for six years for establishing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the largest free trade agreement (FTA) ever, India decided to pull out when leaders of the 16 participating countries had convened in Bangkok for announcing the conclusion of negotiations.

The trigger for the pull-out was the unprecedented opposition to the most obvious component of an FTA — tariff liberalisation. Never before did almost all major stakeholders, from farmers, trade unions, civil society organisations and industry associations representing the sectoral interests, come together to make their voices heard against a policy initiative of the government.

Their immediate concerns were the threat to the existence of domestic entities in the face of stiff import competition. The voices perhaps became louder given the uncertain state of the Indian economy, which has been losing momentum, and whose growth projections going forward have been lowered by almost every institution.

For the domestic stakeholders, the lack of transparency and predictability in the government's engagement with RCEP was among the most problematic issues. Take, for instance, the trigger for the huge discontent over what seemed to be a tacit acceptance by the government that it would effect deep cuts in tariffs, which was what the mandate of RCEP had stipulated.

This came to many of the stakeholders as a surprise since in an early phase of the negotiations, in 2015 to be precise, the government had taken the nation into confidence by stating clearly that it was not willing to accept the RCEP negotiating mandate on tariff cuts. In the initial tariff offer the government informed the stakeholders that the additional market access to its three FTA partners from among the RCEP participating countries (RPCs), namely ASEAN, Korea and Japan, would be kept at modest levels, and China's access to preferential tariffs under RCEP would be significantly lower than those of other participants.

The transparency that the government displayed was unparalleled — never before had any government disclosed its negotiating position in the FTAs. It was an assurance from the government that the interests of the stakeholders would be protected.

Turn in tide

The next phases of the government's engagement in RCEP negotiations saw the tide turn completely in the opposite direction.

The government seemed to have changed its initial position in tariff negotiations by committing to the RCEP negotiating mandate, but the extent of the shift was not quite clear. Further, in some of the critical areas like investment and electronic commerce, the government seemed to be backing proposals which were in complete contradiction with its domestic policy template.

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On the issue of investment, the government had declared, once again in 2015, that it would discuss investment agreements on the basis of the Model Text for the India's Bilateral Investment Treaty, which it had adopted to protect itself from frivolous investment disputes under the investor state dispute settlement mechanism (ISDS).

Clear view The government must be transparent in its decision-making ISTOCK

In keeping with this stance, the government had terminated bilateral investment treaties with 58 countries in 2017. However, some parts of the investment chapter of RCEP available in public domain suggest that the provisions are no different from those of the investment treaties that the government had rejected in 2017.

In other words, if the disquiet among domestic constituencies over tariff liberalisation had not taken centre-stage, the government would have taken the commitment to implement an investment agreement whose adverse consequences were too well-known.

E-commerce

Equally serious would have been the commitments on electronic commerce (e-commerce), which is the elephant in the room for at least two reasons. First, its definition is anything but clear. This implies, the sectors of the economy that e-commerce could impact cannot be gauged easily.

The second and the more contentious aspect of e-commerce is the possibility free flow of data across international borders. This raised a myriad of issues, ranging from flows of sensitive data from the point of view of the country's security, personal data and other information pertaining to the functioning of the economy.

The RCEP does not provide a definition of e-commerce. This leaves the door open for definitions provided by other forums, as for instance, the OECD, according to which, goods or services are ordered online, but the payment and the ultimate delivery of the goods/services do not have to be conducted online. This definition would suggest that there is a thin line dividing conventional foreign trade transactions and e-commerce conducted across international boundaries. In recent years, several members of the WTO have been engaged in developing rules on e-commerce, but India has consistently opposed this move.

Among the reasons why India has opposed discussion of e-commerce in the WTO was the push by some countries to keep e-commerce transactions free from import tariffs. In other words. imports using the e-commerce platform would not face any tariff restrictions.

The RCEP chapter on e-commerce seems to have adopted this framework, despite India's presence in the negotiations. This implies that if India had been a party to RCEP, the extent of market opening would have been far more than what the tariff cuts suggest. Two provisions of the e-commerce chapter on cross-border transfer of information and location of servers are particularly contentious.

The former provision stipulates that RPCs must allow data and other information to freely flow across borders, and the latter provides that no RPC can insist that servers of entities engaged in e-commerce business must be located in their territories. Both these provisions run counter the Draft National E-Commerce Policy that the government had circulated in February 2019.

There are at least two important takeaways for the government from its RCEP experience. The first is that new generation FTAs like the RCEP can cause a rupture of government's autonomous policy space in critical areas like tariff policy, treatment of foreign investors and data protection policy, among others. Given that the country's development deficits need a degree of government intervention, foregoing the policy space would be least desirable.

And, second, there must be complete transparency in the government's decisions-making and, therefore, FTAs which require democratic governments to negotiate in secrecy are inappropriate forums to take decisions on the country's future.

The writer is Professor, Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, JNU

Where women stand in economics academia

They have a fair presence at the assistant professor level, but are poorly represented at higher positions and prestigious forums

AMBRISH DONGRE / KARAN SINGHAL
UPASAK DAS

Prof. Esther Duflo, only the second woman to win the Nobel prize in Economics, talked about a 'structural and fundamental problem in economics' in her telephonic interview recorded just after the public announcement of her winning the prize. And the problem, she said, is that 'there are not enough women in economics.'

Economics continues to be one of the most male-dominated disciplines. Lower share of women from the undergraduate level all the way up to faculty and research positions in prestigious institutions is a reality in American and European universities.

The barriers that hinder entry, survival and long-term success of women in economics include lack of role models, lower probability to receive tenure, higher standards set by journal referees, harsher evaluations by students, unwelcoming environment in seminar halls and online forums, and family commitments.

What does evidence from India suggest as far as presence of women in economics academia is concerned? In our ongoing work, we look at two dimensions of presence — what fraction of faculty members in economics are women; and what is the share of women's participation in one of the most prestigious research conferences in India, namely, the *Annual Conference on Growth and Development*, held annually since 2004 at Indian Statistical Institute, New Delhi.

Not good enough

Participating in prestigious conferences is an important aspect for professionals as it signals quality research, and provides opportunities for collaboration and networking.

The share of women among assistant professors is higher than at other levels, suggesting improvement over time. But the extent of improvement is not uniform across institutions.

Interestingly, institutions that are most sought after for Master's programme in Economics have much higher share of women faculty at the assistant professor level relative to 'elite' institutions in the US and Europe.

Share of women among economics faculty

Women at various levels (%)

Institutions	Assistant	Associate	Professor	Overall
Elite institutions offering Master's programme in Economics	42	36	22	31
Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs)	31	28	16	24
Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs)	26	28	17	23
Central Universities	26	18	18	22

But before we pat our backs, we must realise that the share of women in Master's programmes in India, elite as well as non-elite, has been around 50 per cent for a while now. Then why don't we see close to 50 per cent women faculty in Economics departments in Indian institutions?

Our analysis of the gender of the authors of the research papers presented at the annual ISI conference presents a more sobering picture. The share of females authors is close to only 30 per cent and has not changed much between 2004, the first year of the conference, and 2017.

Average number of male authors per paper presented in the conference across these years has been much higher than the number of female authors.

Papers with all females as the authors are few in number and constituted to just about 10 per cent or even lower in most of these years. So why do we see such a drop in female presence from the high levels seen in the Master's programmes?

Are there hurdles unique to women when they attempt to opt for a Ph.D programme in India or abroad? Is this leakage due to women preferring corporate careers than academic careers? Do women find it more difficult to obtain a faculty position after completion of Ph.D? Do women find it difficult to continue to be an active researcher post marriage and child-birth?

Our informal interactions indicate that the time it takes to complete a Ph.D (typically four to six years) after Master's sometimes act as a barrier since considerations such as marriage become more important in many cases. Among those who are employed in universities (and think-tanks), childcare responsibilities (disproportionately falling on them) affect collaborations, and/or attending academic conferences.

Further explorations of these issues and creative ways to help women overcome some of the structural barriers can go a long way in making economics a more inclusive, relevant and robust discipline.

Dongre and Singhal are faculty and research associate, respectively, at IIM-A. Das is a post-doctoral fellow, University of Pennsylvania. The views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Cyber security

This refers to the editorial 'Is India cyber security ready?' (November 8). Although the article has stressed on the cyber security system at NPCIL, India has become vulnerable to cyber security threats in a much broader sense. The ongoing social and political debate on 'Pesagus' is case in point. True that a tiny country like Estonia (population 1.33 million) might have digitised. But, for India (population 1.33 billion), it is not simply the digitisation of infrastructure that is required, but the digitisation of the mindset of its citizens in the form of digital literacy. Unless there is digital literacy, there cannot be strong cyber security in our nation.

Ramala Kinnera
Hyderabad

Independent directors

This refers to 'Test for independence' (November 8). There is no doubting the good intention of the MCA for having online assessment for independent directors, as lack of corporate governance has become a big issue in the corporate world.

An independent director should be able to share unbiased opinion/view on a company's policy, activity or action. If a company is engaged in corrupt practice or some wrongdoing, then the independent director should be the first person to flag it.

It is said there is a huge difference between practice and theory. So passing an exam does not mean that a person will act independently in the true sense.

Coming to the monetary aspect, yes a handsome package may act as a good motivator but then they should be ready to get penalised, too, in case non-compliance issues crop up.

Bal Govind
Noida

Leasing of mines

This is with regard to 'Expiring mine leases may hit steel sector hardest' (November 8). The expiry of the licence for 329 mines, including 281 non-operative ones spread across 10 States, may lead to low prices in auctions as debt-ridden metal companies may not bid aggressively.

Moreover, the decision to cancel the licences of private commercial miners and renew the captive mine licences of large corporates is discriminatory and will not help give a boost a sector that is braving a slowdown. Further, among the operative mines 14 are iron ore mines and any disruption in supply will hit the steel industry, which has set an ambitious production target. Taking into account these factors, the mines should be auctioned and must pave the way even for private commercial miners to get licences. This will dilute the concentration of economic power in the hands of a few.

NR Nagarajan
Sivakasi

Maharashtra CM post

This refers to 'Approach Shiv Sena if you are ready to share CM post: Sanjay Raut tells BJP' (November 8). One fails to comprehend the rational behind the tussle between the BJP and the Shiv Sena over Maharashtra's chief ministership. Did any one ever expect such stubbornness on the part of the two pre-poll allies? Does the Sena really deserve the post of CM of Maharashtra (even on the rotational basis) when it has secured just 56 seats as against the BJP's 105?

Kumar Gupt
Panchkula, Haryana

Funding realty projects

Apropos the news item 'Govt caps funding for single stalled realty projects at ₹400 crore' (November 8). The measures announced by the government to give a fillip to the real estate sector are welcome and timely. But price caps and carpet area limit of 200 sq meters are very restrictive. It may so happen that in a project having flats of different sizes a few of them may exceed the above caps and excluding them alone from finance is not going to help the project and achieve the objective of the government package. Regardless of the size, flats may be considered for financing and preference may be given to projects with longer vintage. Also, for projects where superstructures are ready for fit-outs and only finishing is to be completed the cap on flat prices may be relaxed and need-based funding may be extended as such projects, once completed, will only improve the overall market sentiment.

M Raghuraman
Mumbai

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