



Towards a clean-up

Clearer policies and investment in the right systems are needed to meet sanitation goals

The Swachh Bharat Mission is a high-profile national programme enjoying extraordinary political and budgetary support. With its subsidy-based mass toilet-building programme, it has put up millions of individual house latrines in rural areas: a government-commissioned survey estimates that the coverage now extends to 62.45% of households, up from 39% in 2014. Among these households, nearly 92% of people who have access actually use the toilets. Big gaps exist, but these are encouraging trends, given the many positive outcomes that sanitation produces. The most important of these is reduced stress for women, who suffer silently in its absence. There are well-known gains to public health as well. Success can be measured, however, only through a rigorous assessment of how the new facilities fare over time. There is data from undivided Andhra Pradesh to show that household latrines built before the current Swachh programme lapsed into disuse because many rural households did not have a water source. The newer ones may meet the same fate without access to water. Also, Dalit houses tend to have lower coverage, hinting at structural difficulties in accessing schemes. Rural housing also needs stronger policy support, without which it cannot wipe out the deficit of about 60 million units that are needed to plan for universal toilet access.

In the Centre's assessment, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and Telangana have particularly failed to upgrade rural sanitation, while Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Uttarakhand, Haryana and Gujarat have exceeded the goals. Given the substantial funding available from the Centre, State governments cannot have a convincing reason for a poor record. The Union Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, which has introduced a new district-level ranking, should persuade the more backward States to bring about infrastructure improvements. Yet, total Swachh will remain elusive, because even urban India has no comprehensive waste management plan, leave alone the less affluent rural areas. Nearly 60% of sewage generated in the cities currently flows untreated into rivers, waterways, lakes and the sea. The rules on segregation of waste remain on paper even in the bigger cities. It is now left to environmentally conscious citizens to adopt green practices, compost and sort their waste. The big metros generate a few thousand tonnes of garbage every day, and city managers focus their energies on transporting refuse to landfills. Many Indians do not see the waste they generate as their problem, and consider it to be someone else's responsibility. Mahatma Gandhi saw in this attitude the pernicious roots of societal divisions, and campaigned against it. Achieving his vision for a clean nation will take more than symbolism – it needs clear policies and investments in the right systems.

Race for Nairobi

The presidential election again faces controversy; Kenya needs a simpler system

Kenya's elections typically have not just highly charged campaigns, but they are protracted affairs after the vote too, with fierce contestation over the result and often violence. It had been hoped that this month's presidential election would break that cycle, but events have so far played to previous trends. All votes have still not been counted, but with well over 90% of the polling stations declaring results, President Uhuru Kenyatta had secured almost 55% of the vote, with the Opposition candidate, Raila Odinga, trailing by about 10 percentage points. Mr. Odinga of the National Super Alliance has disputed the provisional lead for the incumbent in Tuesday's election. The former Prime Minister has claimed the Opposition alliance's own tabulation is at variance with the provisional figures, alleging that official databases have been hacked. The election commission dismissed the allegations, insisting that the polls were held in a free and fair manner after an overhaul of the mechanism. Curiously, the poll authority said that it had not received any formal complaint from the Opposition. The suspense over the ultimate outcome is likely to linger, not just because the election commission is allowed seven days to declare the final tally. The two-stage process in the announcement of the results, besides poor electronic connectivity to interior regions, could complicate matters. For instance, the provisional tallies are based on text messages sent by the returning officers from various polling stations to the commission's database. The final official results are calculated from the prescribed forms filled out at different polling centres and transmitted electronically to the commission.

The technically complex system – the tabulation system broke down in the previous election – has added grist to the Opposition mill. Mr. Odinga had exuded confidence about his own prospects, while expressing cautious optimism about the conduct of a free and fair poll following a reshuffle in the electoral body. But he has now sought to make connections between the murder of a top poll official last week and the results. Equally, there have been concerns over the maintenance of law and order during previous elections. More than 1,000 people were killed in post-election violence in 2008, drawing international condemnation. The 2013 presidential election was marred by clashes. The availability of well-established channels to resolve electoral disputes is a pre-requisite for a functioning democracy, and Kenya needs to consider further reforms in the light of repeated disputes. But the shortcomings of these institutions cannot be a licence for the display of muscle power and violation of fundamental freedoms. The government as well as the Opposition have a moral responsibility to ensure that the current controversy does not deteriorate into violence and bloodshed.

Our collective cross to bear

Across the South Asian region, the state is culpable of empowering the mob against the weak



PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

In India, thugs assault Dalits and Muslims employed in the cattle trade in the name of Hindu dharma, a writer is hounded out of two Bengals for saying that minorities have been ill-treated in Bangladesh, priests attack Rohingyas in Myanmar for no other reason than that they are Muslim, in Sri Lanka racists suppress a Tamil minority on grounds of difference, in Pakistan a Christian sweeper is arrested upon accusations of blaspheming Islam, and in Nepal people of the hill country disempower those of its plains through constitutional manoeuvre. Even Afghanistan, which tends to be seen mainly as the victim of big-power rivalry, has its share of home-grown domination to acknowledge in the condition of the Hazara, a people with a history of living there for at least as long as anyone else. In all these countries, an entrenched patriarchy ensures that women are subordinated. Thus, in parts of India it is considered normal for widows to be forced by tradition to board a one-way train to Mathura. And, amidst the beauty of Pakistan's Swat Valley, a girl child is shot and mutilated for seeking the right to go to school.

It would be difficult to name another region of the world that produces as much hate as South Asia. Is there a common thread to these ghastly incidents? Yes, there is. These acts are the outcome of identity politics that enforce behaviour based on sectarian values derived from religion. Of significance is that the overwhelming majority of South Asian states are formally democracies. These incidents take place while the state mostly stands

by watching. While in some instances the state is an active agent of identity politics, in others it has been captured by its custodians. Across the region, the state in South Asia is culpable of empowering the mob against the weak.

The cost of identity politics

As August 15, 1947 was a defining moment for most of the countries of the subcontinent, or at least for the largest number of its people, on this 70th anniversary of their independence we may want to reflect on what has been gained since. It is apparent that identity politics is ripping apart the social fabric in all the countries of South Asia except tiny Bhutan. But what is less well recognised is that it may have had a role in these countries not moving forward in eliminating socio-economic deprivation, leaving it as one of the most backward regions of the world. South Asia as a region lags behind the rest of the world in human development. When the state responds to identity politics by allowing the mob to dictate its goals, it has the potential of holding back economic and social progress. While class is a significant part of the explanation of why human development has progressed so slowly here, identity politics embraced by the state camouflages its abject failure to advance it. This is true everywhere but it is perhaps in Pakistan that the people have suffered most from state-sponsored identity politics.

The economist Mahbub ul Haq pointed out how, on their fiftieth anniversary, while Pakistan's per capita income was 35% greater than India's it had significantly lower levels of literacy, school enrolment and access to safe drinking water. This when by international standards, India itself had low levels of these indicators and was not the best performer even in South Asia. It is not clear how much Pakistan's position has changed by now but it is notable



that 50 years into independence, it was not able to provide the most basic of goods to its population. When the state is able to claim legitimacy by resort to identity politics, in this case that of religion, it escapes scrutiny of its record on matters secular. Haq also pointed to the dazzling statistic that during a certain phase in their history, India and Pakistan together spent more in the global arms bazaar than Saudi Arabia, a country with per capita income 25 times theirs. This draws our attention to the economic burden of defence expenditure in South Asia. However, it perhaps inadvertently assumes a certain symmetry between India and Pakistan. The territory that was delineated as Pakistan is not disputed. This is not the case with India. Pakistan's military expenditure is directly related to the reason of its state.

Ruptured social fabric

The situation in India is more complex given its diversity. Its early political leadership successfully delegitimised identity politics. There had been agitations for the formation of linguistic States, of course, but they had mostly taken the form of uniting people rather than dividing them. From the 1980s this was to change, however. By now, for close to three decades Uttar Pradesh, a region the size of France and Germany combined, has been ruled by three different

political formations all purveying some form of identity politics though the exact marker may have varied. It remains the most backward among India's States in terms of human development. Surely a relationship between identity politics and development is evident in the regional variation in India. Once confined to the States, identity politics has since come to occupy a place at the level of the Central government. Between the cynically conceived Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act of 1986 and the cunningly crafted Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Regulation of Livestock Market) Rules, 2017, governance has been communalised to secure the position of political parties.

In the countries of South Asia with their diverse populations, identity politics destroys social cohesion and stands in the way of economic progress. Interestingly, this is equally true for countries with a large minority population, those with an overwhelming majority and those that are near homogenous. Thus, it is quite obvious India cannot hope to enjoy peace if its substantial religious minorities are not treated fairly. For the first time, Indian democracy is under the scanner abroad. Even after a military victory over the Tamil Tigers, Sri Lanka may have lost some international support, not to mention its relative prosperity in South

Asia. And Pakistan, which though true to its name has been cleansed of the other, finds itself engulfed by Islamic fundamentalism. Pakistan's deep state is right to say that the country is a victim of terrorism but it is there for all to see that the terrorism emanating from it, targeting sites both in India and within, is of its own creation. Ironically, given the intentions of the masterminds of 26/11, Muslims died disproportionately at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus in Mumbai.

The only path to progress

The pursuit of identity as some preordained, undefinable and immeasurable essence exclusive to one's imagined community is a slippery slope to tread. Peace in South Asia can be assured only by secular democracy. Identity politics delays our achieving it.

Plato had thought peace can be assured only if rulers were philosophers and a philosopher was the king. In the infancy of the Indian republic its people came close to experiencing this ideal. One of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's observations was that in times of strife it is to poets that we turn. Thus, as war clouds gathered in Europe in the late 1930s, W.H. Auden wrote: "In the nightmare of the dark / all the dogs of Europe bark / And the living nations wait / each sequestered in its hate."

There is a certain resemblance between the moment captured by these lines and our collective condition in South Asia today. A difference though is that unlike in Europe then, hate here is not aimed outside our countries but within them. However, we cannot escape the consequence of hate even when it is not aimed at us. South Asians can flourish only when hate is quelled. The poet would have said, "Tolerate the mob and lose your country."

Pulapre Balakrishnan is an economist

It's time to focus on the toxic air we breathe

NITI Aayog's draft energy policy ignores the health impacts of energy choices



DHARMESH SHAH

On June 27, 2017, the Niti Aayog released the draft National Energy Policy. It invited comments from the public to help strengthen its perspectives on some of the complex issues surrounding energy security. Several public policy research and civil society organisations partook in the process and critiqued the policy from various standpoints.

Public health and growth

An important aspect that the draft policy ignores is public health, especially in the context of the energy mix envisaged under the NITI Ambition Scenario. The Ambition Scenario is a tool to arrive at a range of possible energy futures for the energy sector till 2040. The range presents the scenarios which India may follow if it were to follow a business-as-usual path versus if it

were to transition to an ambitious pathway which is cleaner and more sustainable.

In the document, there are 14 references to health, of which only five relate to public health in the context of household cooking fuel. The rest are analogies to describe the health of the coal sector and discoms. The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that air pollution is the number one environmental health risk. In 2012, about three million premature deaths were attributable to ambient air pollution. The cumulative toll in terms of illness and impairment is likely to be greater.

According to environmental health researchers, children represent the subgroup of the population most affected by air pollution and will be the primary beneficiaries of policies to reduce fossil fuel emissions. Moreover, research has also established links between public health and a nation's economic growth. The estimated cost of ambient air pollution in terms of the value of lives lost and ill health in OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, India and China is



more than \$3.5 trillion annually. Similarly, a joint study by the World Bank and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation found that the aggregate cost of premature deaths due to air pollution was more than \$5 trillion worldwide in 2013 alone. In East and South Asia, welfare losses related to air pollution were the equivalent of about 7.5% of GDP.

Given that every sector's decisions, including the energy sector, can have repercussions on determinants of health, the WHO's Health in All Policies (HiAP) framework was established wherein health considerations are made in policymaking across different sectors, such as power, transport, agriculture and housing, that could influence health. In keeping with

HiAP, the Health and Family Welfare Ministry (MHFW) established a steering committee with the aim to garner multi-sectoral commitment to address the issue of air pollution in India. Furthermore, the National Health Policy of 2017 views reducing air pollution as vital to India's health trajectory. However, the National Energy Policy neither reflects nor supports the commitment outlined by the MHFW.

Vision documents like the National Energy Policy have to strive to minimise the unavoidable health impacts of energy production, and their associated health costs, especially given the policy's stated objectives of sustainability and economic growth. The policy should include a health impact assessment framework to weigh the health hazards and health costs associated with the entire life cycle of existing and future energy projects and technologies. For instance, there is no method under the current policy regime, as proposed by the NITI Aayog, to evaluate the health impacts of coal's contribution to mercury and fine particulate pollution, or the risk of radi-

ation with envisaged increase in nuclear power, or the occupational exposures to silica and cadmium during photovoltaic panel manufacturing.

The WHO's initial findings from an expert consultation on Health Indicators of Sustainable Energy provide a good outline to kick-start a similar exercise in India. It lays out a few core and expanded indicators that can help monitor the progress of a nation's energy policy. The core indicators address issues related to health equity where health impact assessments become an integral part of energy policy design and implementation. The expanded indicators stress on the need to develop baseline data by generating emission inventories and source apportionment of urban air pollution that can inform mitigation and intervention policies. A nation's energy policy can have a huge bearing on society and health. It is thus important to ensure that policies directed at energy security are compatible with public health goals.

Dharmesh Shah is a Chennai-based environmental policy researcher

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Drama in the House

The foolishness of Congress rebels Raghavji Patel and Bholabhai Gohil not only saved the face of the Congress but also proved that the Election Commission is not a caged parrot unlike some of the other so-called independent institutions whose actions we have seen recently ("Unseemly contest," August 10). That the EC stood firm in its political neutrality despite visits by central Ministers of the Bharatiya Janata Party to its office to put pressure on it to validate the two votes is commendable. The BJP has suffered an embarrassment in these elections.

BIDYUT KUMAR CHATTERJEE,
Faridabad

Ahmed Patel's victory has reaffirmed our faith in democracy, but more importantly this is a victory against muscle power and money power. Though the BJP is in power in a majority of the States, its recent attempts to capture power

either by hook or by crook in other States does not show it in great light. Neither does Mr. Patel's victory signal a smooth ride for the Congress in the Assembly elections in Gujarat. The party is still plagued by factionalism and other issues. Moreover, it is a blow to the party that three Congress MLAs have moved to the BJP (with seven others set to join) and Shantersinh Vaghela has quit. Mr. Vaghela enjoys huge support among his followers in Gujarat. It is going to be a big challenge for the Congress to lead the party to victory under Rahul Gandhi's leadership.

JAYANT MUKHERJEE,
Kolkata

The BJP hasn't exactly crowned itself with political dignity. This episode shows that the party can go to any length to stall any step forward by the Congress. What would have been an ordinary election has been converted into an extraordinary one by the

BJP and has unnecessarily been projected as a battle between Amit Shah and Sonia Gandhi. The BJP has once again proved that it is not a party with a difference. Political morality was its USP during the Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani era. The present duo only cares about winning elections, not the means to win them.

V.N. GOPAL,
Chennai

For a spirit of enquiry

While rubbishing the March for Science by scientists to demand higher allocation of funds for research and curbs on pseudoscience, the author equates scientists with religious fundamentalists without providing concrete examples ("The march from yesterday", August 10). Similarly, he seems to stretch his point too far in saying that we cannot teach art, music, literature and languages as they are "not based on scientific evidence". However, it

cannot be disputed that there is a dire need to promote scientific temper and a spirit of inquiry in the country. Recently, we heard from none other than a High Court judge that peacocks are celibate and peahens get impregnated by drinking the tears of peacocks, and from a Minister that cows inhale and exhale oxygen! The sway of astrology among people despite the fact that it is based on blind faith can't be missed. Heinous practices like human sacrifices and witchcraft that are often reported in the media require a strong movement like this to ensure that people move away from the lure of superstitious beliefs.

K. NATARAJAN,
Madurai

The fact that a country like India still grapples with problems like irrationality and superstition is unfortunate. There is no doubt that we have had some great achievements in the scientific field, but we

cannot ignore the fact that this legacy is not being taken forward the way it should be. Science and research form the basis of a country's advancement and it becomes the sole responsibility of the government to promote it and ensure that it is inculcated in the very roots of society. Rational thinking based on facts can help us come out of the quagmire of false beliefs that people are falling prey to. India's March for Science is an opportunity for the government to pay heed to Article 51A (h).

APARAJITA SINGH,
Lucknow

What we understand as science is evidence-based and peer-reviewed conclusions. There is nothing called the "naïve ideas of science". The word "naïve" refers more to cultural- and religious-based opinion. And studying science does not mean objecting to the study of the arts and literature.

This march is against superstition and other such obscurantist notions which are, at best, populist. Policies have to be based on evidence and not public discourse as is happening on the GM food front.

V. RAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

The core of scientific temper is freedom for open logical criticism of all ideas, however sacrosanct they may be. There has never been any attempt to present scientific findings as eternal truths. People accept a well-examined finding until a better observation or argument comes along. This, I believe, is the essence of the scientific method. Today all sorts of obscurantist ideas are gaining traction. We are not against myths, but presenting myths as reality is the problem.

D. KRISHNA WARRIER,
Thiruvananthapuram

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