



Stress test

Water management reforms are needed to avert public hardship and economic loss

On the cusp of the southwest monsoon, several arid States are hoping to revive their rivers and reservoirs with bountiful rain. One of them is Gujarat, which is roiled by the long-tail effect of a deficit monsoon between August and November last year. The State government has embarked on a labour-intensive programme to desilt rivers and waterbodies ahead of the rains. Its predicament reflects the larger reality of drought in India, aggravated by heat waves and significant rain deficits in different regions. This year's fall in reservoir storage levels to below-average levels has affected farmers who depend on the Sardar Sarovar dam, and 27 other reservoirs including those in Madhya Pradesh. A reinvigorated Congress in the opposition has turned the heat on the BJP government in Gujarat, which is hard put to defend itself against the charge that dam waters were depleted merely to fill the Sabarmati river for a visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in December, when he undertook a seaplane journey on the river. Its response has been to roll out a campaign to deepen waterbodies on the one hand, and arrange religious events to propitiate the gods on the other. But it has had to prioritise drinking water needs over farming, and suspend irrigation supply from the dam on March 15. This year, Delhi has been at loggerheads with Haryana over reduction of water released in the Yamuna, highlighting growing stresses over a vital resource. Urgent water management reforms must be undertaken to help citizens and avoid losses to the economy.

In a normal year, the pre-monsoon phase from March 1 brings some respite and India gets about 130 mm of precipitation before the rainy season begins. This year began with a sharp 50% deficit, but touched near-normal levels, though not in the northwestern region. The monsoon itself is highly variable. This underscores the need for comprehensive reforms at the level of States, with the Centre helping to conserve hydrological resources. If Gujarat improves rural water storage structures and creates many small wetlands beyond the compulsions of politics, it can ensure long-term prosperity for thousands of villages in Saurashtra, Kutch and the northern region where pumps run dry with un-failing regularity. Farmers will get relief from the monsoon vagaries that affect the Narmada, whose waters are apportioned among four States. There is also the challenge of reducing demand for farming, given that the Mihir Shah Committee estimated public irrigation efficiency to be a low 35%. Farmers need to be helped with the latest technologies to cut water use. The State government is thinking of going in for desalination. Decentralised water storage too will help cities like Ahmedabad, Rajkot, Surat and Vadodara when water supply from large dams and other sources dwindles. If climate change is going to influence monsoon vigour and availability in coming years, the time to take action is now.

Vote for choice

Ireland votes in numbers to rid itself of inhumane restrictions on abortions

Ireland has firmly pulled itself into the 21st century by voting overwhelmingly (66.4% vs 33.6%) to repeal the constitutional block on abortions. In a referendum, the Irish voted to repeal the Eighth Amendment that practically prohibits abortions. The amendment, introduced in 1983 to strengthen an older law outlawing abortions, grants an unborn child and the woman carrying it an equal right to life. Consequently, abortions in Ireland have been only permitted when the life of the woman is at risk, including from suicide. This exception too was introduced as late as 2013, after 31-year-old Savita Halappanavar, a dentist from Karnataka, died of sepsis in a hospital after being denied an abortion while miscarrying at 17 weeks. The couple made multiple requests for a termination but were told it was not possible because Ireland was a Catholic country, her husband said during the inquest that followed. The inquest ruled that Halappanavar had died as a result of a medical misadventure and her case helped galvanise the pro-repeal movement. Images of Halappanavar with a beaming smile could be seen on walls and placards in the run-up to Friday's vote. Those luckier than her are able to travel abroad for abortions; amendments to the law permit travel for such purposes as well as information on abortion processes available overseas. Alarming, there were still no exceptions for pregnancies resulting from rape or incest, or when the foetus had a fatal abnormality. In 2016 the United Nations asked Ireland to relax its laws around abortion after a woman's highly publicised experience of trauma travelling to England to terminate her pregnancy because of fatal foetal abnormalities.

The Irish government has indicated that it will now pass laws giving women the right to terminate pregnancies up to 12 weeks. Abortions will be permitted between 12 and 24 weeks when there are fatal foetal abnormalities or risk to the life of the mother or serious harm to her. Beyond 24 weeks, abortions would be permitted when there are fatal abnormalities. Ireland has been fiercely divided over abortion despite making progress to separate Church and State and adopting more open social attitudes. It legalised same-sex marriage in 2015 and elected the first openly gay Prime Minister, Leo Varadkar, last year. Mr. Varadkar has been in favour of the repeal, describing it as a 'quiet revolution'. The timing of the decision is especially significant given that the democratic world has made a noticeable shift to the right, exemplified by Brexit, the rise of Donald Trump in the U.S., and right-wing populism in continental Europe. Religion is a powerful force in people's lives but antediluvian ideas have no place in modern-day governance. The referendum is a giant step in the right direction.

A deal that can be done

The Korean imbroglio reflects America's fear of any meaningful adjustment to the global balance of power



ZORAWAR DAULET SINGH

The whirlwind U.S.-North Korean bromance hit a temporary roadblock last week. If American President Donald Trump's decision to open direct talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un a few months ago came as a surprise, last Thursday's dramatic somersault to pull the plug on a summit that could have ushered in a transformed Northeast Asia will not leave too many scratching their heads. After all, Mr. Trump's foreign policy since the outset of his administration has swayed erratically between his own pragmatism and the hawkish elements in the larger security establishment. At almost every stage, we have seen Mr. Trump succumb to the default worldview inside his administration and across the broader political spectrum.

If we accept the proposition that Mr. Trump remains stifled in a national security system still largely dominated by the traditionalists, the question then turns to what the calculus is of the policymakers really playing the strings. The traditionalists, in essence, fear change. Having been accustomed to a unipolar moment – fleeting as it was – when the U.S. held sway over all geopolitical and

geoeconomic matters, the changes in the past decade have come as a psychological shock to this self-belief in global preponderance. Mounting evidence of an emerging multipolar world and waning of American relative strength should have prompted a strategic reassessment of the U.S.'s role in the world. Instead, the establishment, despite a popular domestic revolt in the 2016 U.S. presidential election that catapulted Mr. Trump to office, has scoffed at any meaningful adjustment to the global balance of power.

A viable deal

North Korea's search for state security and regime survival is well known. Nuclear weapons, as in most other cases, were deemed the only reliable card to security. Since 2006, when the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea's official name) conducted its first nuclear test, the process of nuclearisation saw sustained progress over a decade along with ballistic missile testing to demonstrate a path towards a credible deterrence capacity. But it was not until the July 2017 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test that Washington awoke to the reality of its own homeland being part of a deterrence equation with Pyongyang. The North Koreans shrewdly realised that only the possibility of a direct threat would stir the U.S. into serious talks. And it seemed to work. For after the usual "fire and fury" charade, Washington responded positively to the prospect of a nuclear deal.



The DPRK, for its part, was actively encouraged by its great power benefactors to pursue such an opening. As direct neighbours of the DPRK, both Russia and China have a self-interest in stabilising the Korean peninsula and closing an unfinished chapter of the Cold War. South Korean domestic politics too was geared to tap this moment. In short, the regional context was conducive at all levels for a détente and bargaining process to ensue.

What a deal could look like

The contours of a deal remain viable. Pyongyang would cease its quest for intercontinental nuclear weapons capability in lieu of a gradual normalisation of ties with the U.S. along with a lifting of multilateral economic sanctions. As a result, the DPRK would gain regime and national legitimacy, assurance of survival and an opportunity to economically transform itself. The U.S. could also claim success on several fronts. A deal would confine the DPRK to a regional nuclear

A health scheme that should not fail

The implementation of Ayushman Bharat requires a strong reform agenda



K. SUJATHA RAO

The launch of Ayushman Bharat, a national health protection scheme (NHPS), in the last stretch of this government's tenure comes as no surprise. Social policies in the areas of education, health and the welfare of the disadvantaged or farmers almost always get announced before elections. No political party is an exception to this rule since such 'feel good' welfare policies are useful in conferring a sense of legitimacy and caring on the government seeking another term.

Despite these political motivations, those working in these neglected sectors welcome such policy announcements as the crisis is acute in these sectors.

Health policies have two objectives: to enhance the health of the population and reduce the financial risk for those accessing treatment. Success in the first is measured by a reduction in the disease burden and subsequent increase in people's longevity. Reduced spending or getting impoverished when seeking health-care measures the second. Since the health

scheme seeks to address both these critical health goals, it is an important step forward.

The scheme has two components: upgrading the 150,000 sub-centres (for a 5,000 population level) into wellness clinics that provide 12 sets of services; and providing health security to 40% of India's population requiring hospitalisation for up to a sum assured of ₹5 lakh per year per family. If implemented as integral components of a strategy to improve the abysmal status of India's health-care system, these initiatives can help achieve the goals of equity, efficiency and quality.

Key issues

An evidence-based strategy will need to address and resolve several key issues affecting the sector. The first is the massive shortages in the supply of services (human resources, hospitals and diagnostic centres in the private/public sector), made worse by grossly inequitable availability between and within States. For example, even a well-placed State such as Tamil Nadu has an over 30% shortage of medical and non-medical professionals in government facilities.

A related question that arises is that while the NHPS will empower patients with a ₹5 lakh voucher, where do they encash this? The health budget has neither increased nor is there any policy to

strengthen the public/private sector in deficit areas. While the NHPS provides portability, one must not forget that it will take time for hospitals to be established in deficit areas. This in turn could cause patients to gravitate toward the southern States that have a comparatively better health infrastructure than the rest of India.

The issue is about the capacity of this infrastructure to take on the additional load of such insured patients from other States, growing medical tourism (foreign tourists/patients) as a policy being promoted by the government, and also domestic patients, both insured and uninsured. It is still unclear whether the implications of the national policy on the fragile health systems of States have been fully comprehended and how they propose to address them.

The price factor

Second, the strategy for negotiating/containing prices being charged for services needs to be spelt out. An experience in Hyderabad is instructive. A three-day stay in a hospital for a respiratory problem cost me ₹1.8 lakh. In order to understand the extent of overbilling, I checked 'Rajiv Aarogyasri', the health insurance programme in Andhra Pradesh. The rates here were not only incomparable but also did not reflect market prices of common proce-



dures or treatment protocols to be followed by hospitals. So a CT scan that costs ₹19,080 in the Hyderabad hospital (it is the same rate across the city) was only ₹500 in government hospitals in Tamil Nadu (₹7,000 in private hospitals in Tamil Nadu and Delhi).

The Aarogyasri scheme has only package rates, a procedure that all States have since followed as a model. Package rates are not a substitute for arriving at actuarial rating. In the absence of market intelligence, arbitrary pricing and unethical methods cannot be ruled out.

More importantly, there is no way the government or the payer has an idea of the shifts in the price of components within the package. This knowledge is essential to regulate/negotiate prices to contain costs. This also explains why there is no dent in the exorbitant health expenditures being faced in India despite government-

polar world will look like in the foreseeable future.

An open window

The rhetoric from both sides suggests that the window for talks remains wide open. Even as he called off the summit on May 24, Mr. Trump maintained a high measure of respect for Mr. Kim and spoke about how a "wonderful dialogue was building up" between the two leaders and that he "very much" looked forward to meeting Mr. Kim in the future. In his oral remarks, Mr. Trump closed by intriguingly hinting that the "existing summit could take place or at a future date". The DPRK's response the following day was equally effusive in portraying Mr. Trump as a rousing advocate for change. Pyongyang has drawn a sharp distinction between a "bold" Mr. Trump who dared to tread in a new direction and his hardline advisers. Not mincing its words, the DPRK had previously expressed a "feeling of repugnance" towards National Security Adviser John Bolton and described Vice President Mike Pence as a "political dummy". Echoing Mr. Trump, Pyongyang concluded its May 25 statement by expressing "an intent to sit with the U.S." in any format "at any time", prompting Mr. Trump to welcome the "warm and productive statement" that could "lead, hopefully to long and enduring prosperity and peace."

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sponsored schemes.

Finally, the absence of primary care. The wellness clinic component is a step towards bridging that lacuna, but with no funding, the commitment is hollow.

A pilot done in Tamil Nadu showed that within six months of upgrading primary health-care facilities (human resources, drugs and diagnostics), there was a rise in footfall, from 1% to 17%. At the same time, it requires a minimum outlay of ₹1,500-₹2,000 crore to bridge the deficiencies. In the northern States there are hardly any sub-centres and primary health centres are practically non-existent. It is estimated that ₹30,000 crore will have to be spent if this three-tier primary health-care system is to be brought to minimal health standards. The sum would rise further if there are to be mid-level providers (as in wellness clinics).

In an environment of scarce resources, prioritisation of critical initiatives is vital to realising health goals. The implementation of Ayushman Bharat will have to be contextualised and synchronised with a reform agenda that must include improved governance and an enforcement of regulations.

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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.

Taking stock

Four years under the Narendra Modi government have not disappointed in comparison to the scamtainted rule under the United Progressive Alliance. Under Mr. Modi, there have been remarkable schemes such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan which have at least created an awareness on the need for cleanliness; measures to bring back black money; a popularisation of yoga (and which was never attempted before) in the land of its birth; surgical strikes on an ever troublesome neighbour to put it in its place; development talks; standing up to China and reminding it that India cannot be taken for granted; a much berated exercise of demonetisation which is slowly proving itself; and the introduction of the GST which has definitely simplified things for the business community. As usual the Opposition has got to be negative and blinkered to Mr. Modi's many achievements and image. V.S. GANESHAN, Bengaluru

■ When one looks at the ground realities, Mr. Modi's slogans, from "Aache Din" to the latest "Saaf Niyat, Sahi Vikas", appear to be empty. While he has established India's position in the global order by way of his extensive visits to different continents, one doubts whether the goodwill generated has translated itself into concrete results. In India, on the economic front, schemes on housing and health have showed promise. But the "two crore jobs" remain a mirage. The woes of farmers still continue while the common man suffers the ill-effects of inflation and a rising cost of living. The Centre has also grossly failed to entuse the banking sector. However, what is most disturbing is the BJP's questionable standard of ethics in politics. The minorities are also no longer taken in consideration by the Prime Minister, which should be cause for concern. S.V. VENKATKRISHNAN, San Jose, California, U.S.

■ It has been a mixed bag. Four years without the taint of corruption is by no means a small achievement.

However, the general refrain seems to be that there is a huge gap between what was promised in 2014 and what has landed on the plate. Demonetisation and the GST have been major missteps. The failure to keep right-wing elements under check is a blot. On the external front, relations with Pakistan have only deteriorated. The government deserves at least one more term but only if it takes corrective measures. The country too suffers from the TINA factor with the Opposition still in disarray. V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

■ As a party, the BJP has few peers when it comes to blowing its own trumpet ("Honest, decisive and sensitive govt.: Shah", May 27). Although leaders within the BJP might be loath to admit it, the government's score on social inclusiveness is bad. The efforts of the BJP to wean away legislators from the Congress and the JD(S) in its bid for power in Karnataka fly in the face of the honest image that it seeks to project. But it has been decisive with measures

such as demonetisation, the introduction of the goods and services tax and its stand on triple talaq. While there have been no major scams, it has a lot to answer for in the case of defaulters such as Nirav Modi and Mehul Choksi. The banking system is also on life support, which is cause for worry. C.V. ARAVIND, Bengaluru

■ The tussle between the BJP and the Congress is on expected lines. There will always be pluses and minuses in governance. The role of the Opposition should be to not only point out the negatives but also appreciate the positives. In turn, the ruling dispensation should also show grace while facing criticism that is directed toward it from the Opposition but also from well meaning institutions that include neutral media. The sad part is that we still have a long way to go before we show this quality. VICTOR FRANK A., Chennai

Winds of change
The clear vote in favour of overturning the harsh

restrictions on abortion in Ireland is a welcome sign of both democracy in action and the advancing women's movement ("Ireland ends abortion ban", May 27). The fact that the referendum was a result of pressure brought upon the government in response to completely avoidable medical emergencies, including the death of Savita Halappanavar, is also a reflection of both a responsive government and the power of people's pressure. The joyous scenes of young campaigners singing and celebrating in the streets of Ireland after the results are a great advertisement for democracy, reinstalling one's faith in its mechanism. FIROZ AHMAD, New Delhi

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:
In the article titled "A cure for medical malpractice" (May 26, 2018), a sentence that read "Following Adya's death in October last year, Singh created a Facebook page called Fight Against Healthcare Corruption." should be recast to say: "Following Adya's death, Singh created a Facebook page called 'Fight Against Healthcare Corruption' in October 2017."

Marks spike

One is unable to comprehend how the evaluation mechanism of the Central Board of Secondary Education has evolved in recent years which allows students to score a very high percentage of marks – as seen in this year's results. The all-India topper's marks (499/500), and that over 12,000 students scored over 95% marks make one shake one's head in disbelief. Being awarded such marks would have been unthinkable some years ago. Such a liberal marking style should not put students from other boards at a disadvantage ("83.01% pass CBSE Class 12 exams, girls outshine boys", May 27). HEMANT KUMAR, Ambala city, Haryana

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