



So close, yet so far

Chandrayaan-2 might have failed in an objective, but the mission itself is not a failure

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) came tantalisingly close to creating history in the early hours of September 7 when the robotic lander Vikram followed the predetermined descent trajectory and came just within 2 km of the lunar surface before contact was lost. While it is unfortunate that the lander failed to safely touchdown, it is apt to remember that ISRO was attempting powered landing for the first time. To put it in perspective, there have been 38 attempts so far by other countries to land a rover on the moon and have succeeded only a little more than half the time. This April, Israel's Beresheet lunar lander crashed to the lunar surface. But early January this year, China's Chang'e-4 touched down on the lunar far side and deployed the Yutu-2 rover to explore the South Pole-Aitken basin. In Vikram, the velocity was successfully reduced from about 6,000 km per hour at the start of the descent at 35 km altitude to a few metres per second before communication snapped. That strongly indicates that powered landing went as per plan till about 2 km altitude from the lunar surface.

While the powered landing of Vikram and exploration of the moon's surface for 14 earth days by the Pragyan rover were one of the main objectives of Chandrayaan-2, it is wrong to think that the mission itself has failed. On the contrary, 90-95% of the mission objectives have already been "accomplished". The orbiter is safe in the intended orbit around the moon. And with the "precise launch and mission management", its life span will extend to almost seven years. Carrying eight of the 13 payloads, the orbiter will spend the next nearly seven years making high-resolution maps of the lunar surface, mapping the minerals, understanding the moon's evolution, and most importantly looking for water molecules in the polar regions. Some of the impact craters in the South Pole are permanently shadowed from sunlight and could be ideal candidate sites to harbour water. Water on the moon would, in principle, be used for life support and manufacturing rocket fuel. With the U.S. wanting to send astronauts to the South Pole by 2024, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), in particular, will be keen on data from the Chandrayaan-2 orbiter. The ISRO's Moon Impact Probe and NASA's Moon Mineralogy Mapper on board Chandrayaan-1 had already provided evidence of the presence of water in the thin atmosphere of the moon, on the surface and below. A NASA study last year found regions, within 20° of each pole in general and within 10° in particular, showed signs of water. The Chandrayaan-2 orbiter will now possibly reconfirm the presence of water on the moon.

Italy afloat

The rise of the far right has been halted, but the respite might be temporary

Rome's unlikely ruling coalition of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) and the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) seems free of the many unwieldy elements of the previous government. To begin with, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte would now command greater functional independence. Earlier, he was hamstrung by two deputies from the M5S and its former ally, the far-right League, whose antagonism weighed on the 14-month long coalition. As Interior Minister, the League's leader, the hard-line anti-immigrant Matteo Salvini, adopted a hostile stance on the rescue of refugees stranded at sea, in the Mediterranean. Under the stewardship of a known immigration expert, Italy can hope to return to a course consistent with (EU) policy it had helped shape during the onset of the refugee crisis earlier this decade. Similarly, there will be relief in Brussels over the appointment of an influential PD member of the European Parliament to the economy portfolio. Under his predecessor, the bloc was faced with the risk of a deliberate breach of its already shaky fiscal rules. Worse, given the size of its economy, Rome's threat to quit the Euro single currency was far more potent than Greece's in 2015, sending financial markets into a tizzy. A key plank of the new coalition is to expand education, research and to stimulate growth.

As Foreign Minister, the M5S leader Luigi Di Maio would be obliged to temper his populist anti-EU rhetoric, which at times bordered on suggestions to the effect that Italy, one of the EU's founder-members, would withdraw from the bloc. The coalition has been granted additional legitimacy following its online ratification by the M5S's vast membership. But the unusual coming-together of the two traditional adversaries was brought about by the intervention of veterans Beppe Grillo and former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, respectively. They overruled their parties from going for a general election, given that the M5S is the largest in Parliament and much of its term still remains. That move spectacularly wrong-footed Mr. Salvini, who in mid-August pulled the plug on the coalition with M5S, following the League's emergence as the largest party in May's European elections. He has already attacked the new government as one engineered by Paris and Berlin. With his incendiary campaign, Mr. Salvini continues to receive high poll ratings and strong populist backing. Frictions in the new coalition would be apt for him to force an election. Governance by consensus would therefore have to form the operative principle. Mr. Conte has been reported to have emerged from his relative political inexperience during the recent crisis, confronting Mr. Salvini's sectarian agenda and enabling the coalition to close ranks. The good former professor would know that the far-right's current halt in Italy is but temporary. More needs to be done to keep Italy afloat.

Throttled at the grass roots

Local governments remain hamstrung and ineffective — mere agents to do the bidding of higher level governments



T.R. RAGHUNANDAN

Democratic decentralisation is barely alive in India. Over 25 years after the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments (they mandated the establishment of panchayats and municipalities as elected local governments) devolved a range of powers and responsibilities and made them accountable to the people for their implementation, very little and actual progress has been made in this direction. Local governments remain hamstrung and ineffective; mere agents to do the bidding of higher level governments. Democracy has not been enhanced in spite of about 32 lakh peoples' representatives being elected to them every five years, with great expectation and fanfare.

The ground report

Devolution, envisioned by the Constitution, is not mere delegation. It implies that precisely defined governance functions are formally assigned by law to local governments, backed by adequate transfer of a basket of financial grants and tax handles, and they are given staff so that they have the necessary wherewithal to carry out their responsibilities. Above all, local governments are to report primarily to their voters, and not so much to higher level departments.

Yet, none of this has happened, by a long shot. Where did we go wrong? Was the system designed to fail?

The Constitution mandates that panchayats and municipalities shall be elected every five years and enjoins States to devolve functions and responsibilities to them through law. This is regarded as a design weakness, but on closer

look, is not one. Given diverse habitation patterns, political and social history, it makes sense to mandate States to assign functions to local governments. A study for the Fourteenth Finance Commission by the Centre for Policy Research, shows that all States have formally devolved powers with respect to five core functions of water supply, sanitation, roads and communication, streetlight provision and the management of community assets to the gram panchayats.

Key issues

The constraint lies in the design of funding streams that transfer money to local governments. First, the volume of money set apart for them is inadequate to meet their basic requirements. Second, much of the money given is inflexible; even in the case of untied grants mandated by the Union and State Finance Commissions, their use is constrained through the imposition of several conditions. Third, there is little investment in enabling and strengthening local governments to raise their own taxes and user charges.

The last nail in the devolution coffin is that local governments do not have the staff to perform even basic tasks. Furthermore, as most staff are hired by higher level departments and placed with local governments on deputation, they do not feel responsible to the latter; they function as part of a vertically integrated departmental system.

If these structural problems were not bad enough, in violation of the constitutional mandate of five yearly elections to local governments, States have often postponed them. In 2005, when the Gujarat government postponed the Ahmedabad corporation elections, a Supreme Court constitutional bench held that under no circumstances can such postponements be allowed. Subsequently, the Supreme Court rejected other alibis for election postponement,



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such as delays in determining the seat reservation matrix, or fresh delimitation of local government boundaries. Yet, in Tamil Nadu, panchayat elections have not been held for over two years now, resulting in the State losing finance commission grants from the Union government.

Downside of centralisation

Successive Union governments have made a big noise about local involvement in a host of centrally designed programmes, but this does not constitute devolution. Indeed, the current Union government has further centralised service delivery by using technology, and panchayats are nothing more than front offices for several Union government programmes. The beaming of homilies over the radio to captive audiences of local government representatives does nothing to strengthen local governments.

Union programme design for cities is inimical to decentralisation. The 'Smart City' programme does not devolve its funds to the municipalities; States have been forced to constitute 'special purpose vehicles' to ring fence these grants lest they are tainted by mixing them up with municipality budgets. There cannot be a greater travesty of devolution.

Sadly, except for a few champions of decentralisation in politics and civil society, people do not distinguish the level of government that is tasked with the responsibility of delivering local services. Therefore, there is no outrage when the local govern-

ment is shortchanged; citizens may even welcome it.

On corruption

Are local governments as corrupt as they are alleged to be? Doubtless, criminal elements and contractors are attracted to local government elections, tempted by the large sums of money now flowing to them. They win elections through bribing voters and striking deals with different groups. Furthermore, higher officers posted at the behest of Members of Legislative Assemblies, often on payment of bribes, extract bribes from local governments for plan clearances, approving estimates and payments. Thus, a market chain of corruption operates, involving a partnership between elected representatives and officials at all levels. Yet, there is no evidence to show that corruption has increased due to decentralisation. Decentralised corruption tends to get exposed faster than national or State-level corruption. People erroneously perceive higher corruption at the local level, simply because it is more visible.

To curb these tendencies, first, gram sabhas and wards committees in urban areas have to be revitalised. The constitutional definition of a gram sabha is that it is an association of voters. Because of our erroneous belief that the word 'sabha' means 'meeting', we try to regulate how grama sabha meetings are held and pretend that we are strengthening democracy. Cosmetic reforms of the gram sabha by videography of their meetings, does little for democracy. Consultations with the grama sabha could be organised through smaller discussions where everybody can really participate. Even new systems of Short Message Services, or social media groups could be used for facilitating discussions between members of a grama sabha.

Second, local government organisational structures have to be strengthened. Panchayats are bur-

dened with a huge amount of work that other departments thrust on them, without being compensated for the extra administrative costs. Local governments must be enabled to hold State departments accountable and to provide quality, corruption free service to them, through service-level agreements.

Third, we cannot have accountable GPs, without local taxation. Local governments are reluctant to collect property taxes and user charges fully. They are happy to implement top-down programmes because they know that if they collect taxes, their voters will never forgive them for misusing their funds. The connection between tax payment and higher accountability is well known, but we wish to ignore these lessons.

India's efforts in decentralisation represent one of the largest experiments in deepening democracy. Decentralisation is always a messy form of democracy, but it is far better than the operation of criminal politicians at the higher level who appropriate huge sums of tax-payer money, without any of us having a clue. We can keep track of corrupt local government representatives; at the higher level, we will never know the extent of dirty deals that happen.

We have given ourselves a reasonably robust democratic structure for local governance over the last two decades and more. It is for us to give life to this structure, through the practice of a robust democratic culture. Be warned; if we do not tell our higher level governments to get off our backs so that we can better govern ourselves, they will not. It is as important to tell higher level governments to stay away as it is for us to hold our local governments to account.

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Trump, Europe and the Iran effect

The Iran crisis reflects the strains between the U.S. and Europe over the U.S. President's maximalist political approaches



RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO

Last month, the impromptu visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, to the G-7 summit caught many leaders, especially the U.S. President, Donald Trump, off guard. Mr. Zarif was in Biarritz, the venue, at France's behest and though there were no meetings or negotiations with the American delegation, he was able to meet with the French President, Emmanuel Macron, and continue discussions about recent initiatives between the Presidents of Iran and France on the Iranian nuclear issue.

European leaders, and France in particular, have highlighted the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" plan in regard to Iran being a way with no end. And this was why they had decided to try and keep the nuclear deal going despite Iran's seizure of tankers in the Strait of Hormuz. The division between the European Union (EU) and the U.S. over Iran has been one of the most pressing security challenges since Mr.

Trump decided last year to abandon the deal that was struck in 2015. The European nations want to preserve the deal, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), even if they seem worried about a growing list of violations by Iran of the deal.

Iran has deliberately violated its terms by producing more low-enriched uranium than the agreement permits.

Ensuring energy security

First and foremost, the major reason is that Europe needs to keep the Persian Gulf open to guarantee the flow of oil and ensure its economic security. However, on this issue, France and Germany have refused to join the American plan called "Project Sentinel" to protect ships passing through the Strait of Hormuz. Second, the Europeans are fearful of getting involved in another war in West Asia which they do not want. The truth is that they do not trust that Mr. Trump will keep his word: that he will not attack Iran.

Third and last, the Europeans have been trying to find ways for their businesses to work around American sanctions on Iran. France, Germany and the United Kingdom have developed a mechanism to trade with Iran legally using a trading system known as INSTEX, short for Instrument in



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Support of Trade Exchanges. It has been designed to permit countries to trade with Iran without the use of American dollars, so as to avoid the U.S. financial system. For many European companies, the risk of facing sanctions because of trade with Iran outweighs any gain from trading with the Islamic Republic and more specifically the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) which is targeted by the U.S. as a terrorist organisation.

No appetite for war

The Iran crisis and the debate it has fuelled reflects the strains between the U.S. and Europe over the maximalist political approaches of the U.S. President. But it also shows the wariness of America's allies about the war-mongering intentions of Mr. Trump's hawkish advisers to provoke a war with Iran no matter what the consequences are for the rest of the world. As such, the G-7 summit

was not a success, especially with the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, trying to make a move against the EU on the JCPOA with the need to keep Mr. Trump on his side for an eventual trade deal following Brexit. Let us not forget that relations between Iran and the U.K. are not as rosy as one might think. Iran's recent seizure of a U.K.-flagged tanker in the Strait of Hormuz has thrust the relationship between London and Tehran into deep turmoil. This comes at a sensitive time when the Europeans are trying to salvage the Iranian nuclear deal.

Regional politics

As can be seen, no European country wants to trigger a military confrontation with Iran, one which would draw in other regional states and non-state actors. Despite the drone war between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia and the Lebanon Hezbollah and Israel which risks drawing in Iran in a new war in West Asia, European powers could play a major role in ending U.S.-led economic warfare against Iran and building a more effective diplomatic process in West Asia.

However, the reality is that at this time the situation is at a deadlock. It appears that the Trump administration will need to make its own calculations, without the

advice of its partners, in light of the costly setbacks that some of its recent policies have experienced in the region.

As for the Iranian government, the most immediate priority for containing public unrest and preventing social instability inside the country is to ask for help from France and Germany in finding a way out of the current economic crash dive. But ultimately, Iran will need to show some signs of flexibility that could possibly lead to a situation where some of the arrangements arrived at in the nuclear deal are enlarged and applied to other key issues; these could include a mutually acceptable range for Iran's missile forces as well as Iran's clandestine military adventures with the help of the IRGC in countries such as Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

Consequently, if it is true that the Islamic Republic still does not possess nuclear weapons and its conventional capabilities are still no match for those of the U.S., it is also clear that Iran has hybrid warfare capabilities and an expanded network of proxies and allies in the region which gives it a sharpened capacity to practise its hegemony in West Asia.

Ramin Jahanbegloo is Director, Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Peace, Jindal Global University, Sonapat

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.

Not a setback

The inability of the Vikram lander of Chandrayaan-2 mission to make the needed and expected 'soft landing' on the moon's hitherto uncharted 'South Pole' broke a billion and more hearts. Still, what the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO)'s complex lunar mission achieved and is set to achieve with the orbiter still safe around the moon was and would be remarkable enough to fill us with pride. It is not for nothing that the Chandrayaan-2 mission has come in for praise from NASA. The last minute glitch caused by 'hard brake' that possibly spun the lander out of control was not a failure, but a deferred success in that it is only a matter of time before

the ISRO clears the final hurdle. To quote Rabindranath Tagore, tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection. It is a misnomer to call the faltering in the last leg a 'setback' as there is nothing called 'setback' when it comes the pursuit of knowledge in the realm of science (Front page, "ISRO scientists work to decode Chandrayaan-2 lander failure", Sept. 8).

G. DAVID MILTON, Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

Doval's claim

National Security Advisor Ajit Doval needs to explain the basis of his claim that a majority of Kashmiris support the Centre's decision on Article 370 (Front page story, Sept. 8). Did he carry out any

scientific survey to ascertain the people's response? His admission that restoration of normalcy will be dependent on Pakistan's actions betrayed the Centre's helplessness when it comes to reining in a recalcitrant neighbour. We need to ask the government: By continuing with the prohibitory orders, are we not aiding Islamabad in its sinister aims?

S.K. CHOUDHURY, Bengaluru

Need for an Indian NHS

The lack of competent primary care bedevils our health system. Unless this is addressed, our pitiable health statistics cannot be rectified (Editorial page, "Empowering primary care practitioners," Sept. 7).

Despite having an excellent template provided by the Bhore Committee report, we have not made much progress in this area. Having qualified at a time when all medical education was in the public sector and having also witnessed the decline in standards after private medical colleges came to prominence, I am convinced that health care and medical education should fully be in the public sector. The inferiority of the private health care system of the U.S. in comparison with the public health services of the European countries should show us the way. Perhaps, we do need our own Aneurin Bevan to get us a National Health Service.

D. RAGHUNATH, Bengaluru

New format

I was taken aback to see the Sunday Magazine's new format as, for the past few months, I had been enjoying its 32-page tabloid version. I am sure most readers will concur with me when I say that the earlier format was better. I request you to restore it.

TILAK SUBRAMANIAN V., Udupi, Karnataka

A household name

The passing of leg-spinning great Abdul Qadir is a loss to the game of cricket. He blossomed under the

captaincy of Imran Khan, who played a key role in shaping the spinner into a household name. Qadir's bumpy and long run-up, and his ability to extract sharp spin both ways made him unplayable at times. There is a tale that on a hot day with the temperature touching 40°C, despite bowling unchanged, he spent the tea break helping the opposition leggie with his craft.

R. SIVAKUMAR, Chennai

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the news report headlined "Shehla Rashid booked on sedition charge" (Sept. 7, 2019), the reference to IPC Section 153 (*wantedly* giving provocation with intent to cause riot) should be corrected to read as *wantonly* giving provocation with intent to cause riot.

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