Crisis defused

Compulsory learning should be limited to the child's mother tongue

The Centre has moved quickly to defuse a potentially volatile controversy over the charge of Hindi imposition. It is quite apparent that the Narendra Modi government did not want the language issue to acquire disproportionate importance at a time when it is embarking on its second innings with a huge mandate. Further, given the impression that the ruling party does not have much of a presence in South India, barring Karnataka, it did not want to be seen as being insensitive to the concerns of southern States, especially Tamil Nadu. The reference in the newly unveiled draft National Education Policy to mandatory teaching of Hindi in all States was withdrawn following an outcry from political leaders in Tamil Nadu, a State that is quite sensitive to any hint of 'Hindi imposition' by the Centre. The modified draft under the heading 'Flexibility in the choice of languages', has omitted references to the language that students may choose. However, the broader recommendation regarding the implementation of a three-language formula remains, something Tamil Nadu, which will not budge from its two-language formula, is averse to. The gist of the original sentence in the draft NEP was that students could change one of the three languages of study in Grade 6, provided that in Hindi-speaking States they continued to study Hindi, English and one other Indian language of their choice, and those in non-Hindi-speaking States would study their regional language, besides Hindi and English. The revised draft merely says students may change one or more of their three languages in Grade 6 or 7, "so long as they still demonstrate proficiency in three languages (one language at the literature level) in their modular Board examinations some time during secondary school". It may not amount to a complete reversal , but is still important in terms of conciliatory messaging.

However, there is a larger issue here. Ever since the Constitution adopted Hindi as the official language, with English also as an official language for 15 years initially, there has been considerable tension between those who favour the indefinite usage of English and those who want to phase it out and give Hindi primacy. In Tamil Nadu, it is seen as a creeping imposition of Hindi in subtle and not-so-subtle forms. The tension has been managed based on the statesmanship behind Jawaharlal Nehru's assurance in 1959 that English would be an associate language as long as there are States that desire it. One would have thought that with the ascent of coalition politics the instinct to stoke differences based on language would die out. Unfortunately, it keeps coming up, especially in the form of imposing the three-language formula on States. Language is primarily a utilitarian tool. While acquisition of additional tools can indeed be beneficial, compulsory learning should be limited to one's mother tongue and English as the language that provides access to global knowledge and as a link language within India. It is time attempts to force Indians proficient in their mother tongue and English to acquire proficiency in a third are given up.

Behemoth's shadow

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is clearly sensing the BJP breathing down his neck

Constituents of the National Democratic Alliance are feeling the weight of the BJP's dominance. With 303 seats, the BJP is not dependent on any party for its survival in government, an objective that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and party president Amit Shah, now also Union Home Minister, had publicly set even while they were scouting for regional allies ahead of the election. Alliance politics as India knew it, whereby partners bargained for political power, has been rendered redundant by the BJP. It has offered little more than symbolic representation to them in the government. While parties such as the Shiv Sena and the Lok Janshakti Party accepted one Cabinet berth each and joined the government, the Janata Dal (United) led by Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar considered such symbolic representation meaningless and perhaps even humiliating. The JD(U) turned down the offer of a single berth, and expanded the Council of Ministers in Bihar offering the BJP one berth, which it has, in turn, refused to accept. The BJP and the JD(U) have been partners for long, with a brief interlude beginning 2013, in which time the JD(U) formed the government in Bihar in alliance with the RJD and the Congress. By 2017 Mr. Kumar did an about-turn, parting with the two parties and taking the BJP's support to continue in office.

Another moment of reckoning is upon Mr. Kumar, almost. Bihar should have Assembly elections in 2020. Used to the indulgent style of an earlier generation of BJP leaders such as A.B. Vajpayee and L.K. Advani, the Chief Minister has never quite adjusted to the abrasive style of the current, far stronger BJP. Mr. Kumar, from the backward castes that hold considerable political heft in Bihar, has been a link between them and the upper castes drawn to the BJP and hassled by the RJD's more assertive form of social justice politics. Projecting himself as a backward caste leader and blunting social justice politics with Hindutva, Mr. Modi has brought about a realignment of social groups in Bihar. With the BJP's own leadership in the State now packed with several backward caste faces, the party is hoping to flip its equation with the JD(U) and take the dominant role, as it did with the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. Mr. Kumar senses the ground under his feet slipping away even as his administrative adventurism of prohibition, after initial political dividends, has turned out to be a drag on the State's revenues and policing. To be an opponent of the BJP under Mr. Modi and Mr. Shah is not easy; as it turns out, being an ally isn't necessarily easier either.

A rocky road for strategic partners

With decisions that adversely affect India, the Trump administration fails to distinguish friend from foe

MOHAMMED AYOOB

The Donald Trump administration's recent actions threaten the foundation of trust and flexibility on which India-U.S. relations are premised. However, they seem to be part of a pattern progressively visible in American foreign policy in which bullying friends has become the name of the game. The Trump administration's insensitive approach towards its allies in Western Europe by denigrating the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the European Union (EU), threatening to impose tariffs on EU goods in connection with trade disputes and Europe's relations with Russia, and Washington's unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal that roiled its European partners are all evidence of this policy.

Bookends of stability?

The same paradigm explains Washington's recent moves *vis-à-vis* India. These stand in sharp contrast to the first year of the Trump administration when the U.S. was actively wooing India as a strategic counterweight to China and because of its rapidly expanding market that was seen as providing great opportunities for American business. In a major foreign policy speech in October 2017, then U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared that India and America were "two bookends of stability – on either side of the globe" and that the "emerging Delhi-Washington strategic partnership" was essential to anchor the rules-based world order for the next hundred years.

Even before Mr. Tillerson's speech India had come to be seen as a pillar of American policy in Asia. The term 'Indo-Pacific region' appeared prominently in the joint statement issued by Mr. Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the end of the latter's visit to the U.S. in June 2017. Since then, it has come to replace the term 'Asia-Pacific region' in American foreign policy jargon. In May 2018, the Pentagon changed the name of the U.S. Pacific Command to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, emphasising not only the strategic linkage between the Indian and Pacific Oceans but also the geopolitical prominence of India in the U.S.'s Asian strategy.

However, the Trump administration seems to have reversed course in recent months. U.S. unilateral actions on three fronts have simultaneously demonstrated what amounts to downgrading India in American strategy. The announcement on April 22 by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that Washington would not renew after May 2 the exemption that it had granted India and seven other countries regarding import of Iranian oil was one sign that American unilateralism had trumped coherent strategic thinking.

The Iranian share of Indian oil imports stood at 10%. While it would not be impossible for India to replace Iranian oil, the American announcement failed to consider the strategic importance of Iran in Indian foreign policy and the damage it could do to India-Iran relations. Iran's strategic location and the common concerns of

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both countries regarding the future of Afghanistan and the threat of terrorism emanating from Pakistan make Tehran an ideal geopolitical ally of New Delhi. India is also engaged in building the Chabahar port in southeastern Iran, which could act as the gateway for India to Central Asia, bypassing a hostile Pakistan. Moreover, by forcing India to tamely accept the American diktat on Iranian oil, it has torn off the veneer of "strategic autonomy" that Indian policymakers had long touted as the fundamental creed of Indian foreign policy.

The second leg of this tripod is the U.S. threat to impose sanctions on India if it buys the S-400 missile defence system from Russia for which a deal had been signed in October 2018 by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Mr. Modi. The U.S. has argued that India's purchase of the S-400 systems will violate the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), a U.S. federal law that requires the country to impose sanctions on states entering into major military deals with Russia.

This puts India in a Catch-22 position. If it defies U.S. threats and goes ahead with the purchase, it would subject India to economic sanctions and curtailment of defence and high-tech cooperation with the U.S. If it buckles under American pressure and cancels the S-400 deal, it will have major negative implications for India's relations with Russia, its largest arms supplier and a time-tested friend. Furthermore, it will make it clear that India is for all practical purposes a "lackey" of the U.S., thus once again severely damaging its standing and credibility in international circles.

Trade hurdles

The third and latest instance of unwelcome U.S. pressure was the announcement on May 31 that, beginning June 5, India will be removed from the preferential trade programme, known as the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), which gives developing countries easier access to the U.S. market and lowers U.S. duties on their exports. Mr. Trump signed off on a presidential decree to that effect alleging, "India has not assured the United States that India will provide equitable and reasonable access to its markets."

India is the largest beneficiary nation under the GSP scheme, and exported goods worth $6.35 billion to the U.S. under the preferential regime last year. This is close to 10% of the goods exported by India to the U.S. While the Indian reaction to the American decision has been mild so far – the Commerce Ministry termed it "unfortunate" – it is bound to cause resentment in New Delhi, especially since U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross had assured the government that benefits would not be cut off until after India's elections, thus allowing the new government time to reflect on the issue.

Taken together, these three decisions indicate that Washington is impervious to Indian strategic concerns and economic interests despite its earlier pronouncements that it considers India a valued "strategic partner". These decisions are part of a unilateralist syndrome that currently afflicts American foreign policy. Mr. Trump and his advisers, principally National Security Adviser John Bolton and Mr. Pompeo, no longer seem to discriminate between friend and foe when making important policy decisions. Such an attitude does not bode well for the future of America's relations with its friends and allies. Washington appears to have overlooked the fact that even the "indispensable nation" needs reliable friends and allies.

Other options

S. Jaishankar, India's new Minister of External Affairs and an outstanding diplomat with a wealth of experience in dealing with Washington, will have to convince American policy-makers that this maxim is relevant to the U.S.'s relations with India. Mr. Jaishankar should subtly communicate to his interlocutors that this is especially true now that the international system is becoming progressively multipolar, thus increasing foreign policy options available to Indian policymakers.

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The sum and substance of the jobs data

Rising unemployment must also be seen as a function of rising education and aspirations

SONALDE DESAI

The report from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) is finally out, garnering a lot of attention based on selective reading of tables and spurring partisan debates. In particular, the staggering increase in the unemployment rate, from 1.7% in 2011-12 to 5.8% in 2017-18 for rural men and from 3.0% to 7.1% for urban men, has generated wide ranging hand-wringing. However, a more nuanced picture emerges if we are to look beyond the partisan debates to policy implications of the data on employment and unemployment. Three takeaway points from these data are of particular policy relevance.

Three pointers

First, while the unemployment rate is a frequently used measure of poor performance of the economy, under conditions of rising school and college enrolment, it paints an inaccurate picture. Second, the reported unemployment rate is dominated by the experience of younger Indians who face higher employment challenges and exhibit greater willingness to wait for the right job than their older peers. Third, the unemployment challenge is greatest for people with secondary or higher education, and rising education levels inflate unemployment challenges. These three conditions, taken together, suggest that part of India's unemployment challenge lies in its success in expanding education while not expanding formal sector jobs.

Comparison of male employment and unemployment data from the National Sample Survey Office's (NSSO's) 68th round Employment survey conducted in 2011-12 and the new PLFS of 2017-18 illustrates each of these points. The unemployment rate is calculated by dividing the number of unemployed by the number in the labour forces, that is, the sum of employed and unemployed. This statistic ignores people who are out of the labour force – students, homemakers and the disabled.

Unemployment rate data

As long as the proportion of the population out of the labour force is more or less stable, the unemployment rate is a good indicator of the changes in the employment situation. However, India has seen massive changes in proportion of individuals enrolled in an educational institution over the past decade. For 15-19-year-old rural men, the proportion primarily engaged in studying increased from 64% to 72% between 2011-12 and 2017-18. As a result, while the proportion of the population aged 15-19 that is unemployed doubled from 3% to 6.9%, the unemployment rate tripled from 9% to 27%. Leaving the numerator (proportion of population unemployed) same while the denominator changes by removing students from the labour force can overstate job losses.

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The proportion of the population that is unemployed has increased only slightly for population aged 30 and above but increased substantially for younger men. For rural men (30-34), the proportion of unemployed increased from 1% to 2.3% while that for men (20-24) increased from 4.6% to 16.1%. Much of the increase in male unemployment is located among ages 15-29. It is important to recognise that in a country dominated by informal sector work, remaining unemployed is possible only for individuals whose families can survive without their immediate contributions. While a 25-year-old may spend his time diligently applying for a formal sector and be supported by his parents during this period, a 30-year-old with a wife and children may have no option but to take any work available to him, even if it pays poorly and offers little job security.

Finally, the unemployment rate has been traditionally high for men with secondary or higher level of education and this is the segment in which most of the increase in unemployment is located. The unemployment rate for illiterate rural men increased from 0.5 to 1.7 between 2011-12 and 2017-18 but the absolute increase was substantially larger, from 3.8 to 10.5 for rural men with at least secondary education. Similar trends are evident for urban men.

This increase in unemployment for educated youth comes at a time when education has expanded substantially. Among rural men (15-29 years), the population with secondary or higher education increased from 43% to 53% between 2011-12 and 2017-18; in urban areas there was a five percentage point increase, from 61% to 66%.

These three observations taken together suggest that the roots of India's present day unemployment challenges lie in its very success. Educational expansion affects the unemployment debate by skewing the unemployment statistics and by creating greater competition for well-paid jobs among a rising population of educated youth. Rising prosperity allows young graduates to wait for well-paying jobs, creating an army of educated unemployed, before being forced to accept any work, frequently returning to family farms or starting small shops.

Recognition of rising unemployment as a function of rising education forces us to grapple with different issues than a simple focus on unemployment statistics. If public policies such as demonetisation are responsible for rising unemployment, we would see across-the-board increase in unemployment for all age groups. That this phenomenon is located mainly among the young and well educated reflects a challenge that goes well beyond the temporary slowdown facing India post-demonetisation.

Meeting aspirations

Modern India is an aspirational society. After decades of economic stagnation, the 21st century has seen massive growth in aspirations. Parents invest their hearts and souls along with their rising incomes in educating their children. Children hope to make rapid economic progress well beyond the modest gains achieved by their parents' generation. The unemployment statistics based on PLFS data document the challenges these young people are likely to face.

The Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance has returned to power with a mandate that allows it the freedom to focus on key challenges facing modern India. Creating jobs for an increasingly educated workforce and ensuring that the new workers are well equipped to enter the labour force are twin challenges that deserve greatest priority. One hopes that leaders of the present government who made their political debut during the student movement in the 1970s will meet this challenge head-on.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Assessing 2019

The writer (Editorial page, "Depths of field, defined and blurred", June 3) seems to have donned the mantle of a modern Cassandra to prophesy doom and gloom for the nation merely because the people have favoured a second term for the Narendra Modi government. With the writer's imagination running riot, what was intended as a caricatured critique of the 2019 verdict seems to have ended up as a needless and unapologetic exercise of 'catastrophising', notwithstanding his conclusion that "everything in the future is out of focus". One expects the government's critics to forecast dire things but also suggest the means to realise possible positives and desirable ends. To write a government's scorecard based on worst case scenarios instead of considering what it proposes to do is embracing political adversary-ism for its own sake. Commentators who seem displeased with the people's verdict should realise that unwarranted scaremongering about the nation's future is an implied belittlement of the popular will.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

Congress's strategy

As a political party, the Indian National Congress has failed miserably due to its policy of 'opposing for the sake of opposing' and disrupting the functioning of Parliament. Congress president Rahul Gandhi's advice to his party's MPs to "shout more" against the government and ensure that the BJP does not have a walkover in Parliament and its administration is indecorous as far as the leader of a national party is concerned. This strategy will further erode people's faith in the party. Instead, Congress MPs should be magnanimous in co-operating with the government, help it pass welfare schemes and offer constructive criticism when something is going wrong.

V.P. DHANANJAYAN,
Chennai

Language formula

It is indeed ideal if "we can create a situation where every person can study in the language he dreams in, and live in an atmosphere where all in India can understand one common language". But in a country with well-defined linguistic diversity and consequent chauvinism this is an impossible dream. As a Tamilian born and brought up in Kerala, I recollect quite a few of us voluntarily joining Hindi classes after school hours, and conducted by the Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha. Our national feeling brightened as Hindi was not imposed on us and it did no harm to our mother tongue. If one follows the Kerala model, there do not seem to be problems with Hindi.

In some districts in Kerala, buses have route names in Hindi written in Devanagari to help the large numbers of migrant labourers. However, the Central government in no case can impose Hindi in Tamil Nadu.

C.V. VENUGOPALAN,
Palakkad, Kerala

Politics of food

It is clear that the Akshaya Patra Foundation (TAPF) will not use onions and/or garlic in preparations in mid-day meals for children ('Magazine', "The politics of food", June 2).

And the TAPF knows pretty well that it is next to impossible for the government to get a replacement NGO to supply 4.5 lakh meals overnight.

So what is to be done to overcome the impasse? For a start, the government must award new contracts to NGOs which will strictly comply with mid-day meal preparations that are not bland and include onion, garlic and eggs.

Independent surprise tests need to be carried out to verify the charge that the food is "bland". Instead of "talking", "debating" and "protesting" about the lack of onion and garlic, the government may request schools to come forward on a voluntary basis and provide these in some form or other. Egg can be added and a nutrition expert may even suggest providing an omelette, scrambled egg and/or mix these with rice to make the meal more palatable. There should also be a a gradual reduction in dependence on the TAPF while ensuring that schools which "volunteer" to introduce this get a subsidy from the government or let the school management impose a nominal charge for this on students.

Finally, all this should be done without any scope for malpractice.

Dr. A.K. RAMDAS,
Bengaluru

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