

NEWS ALERT

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AGRICULTURE

PIONEER, APR 26, 2019

Bumper foodgrain output expected this kharif season

With the Indian Meteorological Department forecasting “near normal” monsoon this year, the Agriculture Ministry on Thursday set its target for foodgrain production during kharif season 2019-20 at 147.9 million tonnes (MT), with rice output pegged at 102 MT. These targets are higher when compared to the actual kharif output for 2018-19, which is 142.24 MT, as per the second advance estimates.

The Ministry also expects the production during the 2019-20 rabi season to be tentatively around 143.2 MT. At the National Conference on Agriculture, officials said rice production would touch the 102 MT-mark this kharif season, while maize production would be around 21.3 MT.

The production of bumper foodgrain output expected this kharif season, cereals will be about 35.8 MT, while that of pulses would be around 10.1 MT. The output of jowar, bajra and ragi will be 2.1 MT, 9.5 MT and 2.3 MT, respectively. Also, total oil seeds production is likely to be 25.84 MT and the sugarcane output is expected to be 385.50 MT, the Ministry said. Cotton output is estimated to be 35.75 million bales (each of 170 kg).

CHILD WELFARE

STATESMAN, APR 30, 2019

WHO's child

WHO has underscored the crucial link between a child's health and exposure to the marvels of technology, the subtext of its announcement last week being that there is an age and time for everything.



The World Health Organisation has advanced a cache of pregnant guidelines to parents in general.

It has riveted its focus to children, whose well-being is increasingly being reduced by the political class to a rhetorical chant of “universal basic health”. The goalpost is lofty, but with little or no action in the follow-through at least in India. While the platitude may have its compulsion in the season of elections, the UN entity has hit the bull’s eye with its tut-tutting against exposure to technology up to a certain age.

The emphasis quite distinctly is on the familial way of life. Hence the assertion that “infants who are less than a year should not be exposed to electronic screens”, now ironically integral to family bonding in the drawing room.

Chiefly, those between 2 and 4 ought not to be exposed to more than one hour of “sedentary screen time” each day. The caveat has a universal application, and is arguably of far greater relevance to the technologically advanced developed world, where robots are increasingly replacing human endeavour.

Physical exercise and sleep are of far greater importance so far as children are concerned; both can stave off obesity and diseases during adolescence and adulthood. Restrictions or even elimination of “screen time” for children below the age of 5 will result in healthier adults.

WHO has underscored the crucial link between a child’s health and exposure to the marvels of technology, the subtext of its announcement last week being that there is an age and time for everything. “Achieving health for all means doing what is best for health right from the

beginning of one's life," is the cardinal message of WHO's Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

For all the jaw-jaw on universal basic health, the consummation devoutly to be wished for can flounder in the absence of fundamental safeguards. Early childhood is a phase of rapid development, indeed a period when the lifestyle patterns of a family "can be adapted to boost health gains".

Thus has WHO devised a trilateral equation of the child, family life, and technology given its awesome spread. Indeed, technology is developing faster than the scientific study on the effect new devices can have on the child's brain. Beyond the adverse effect of the radio and television, is the relatively new phenomenon called "screen time", specifically the time that is spent watching TV, using computers, smartphones, digital tablets and video games.

Hence the warning by WHO that such totems of contemporary lifestyle, however convenient and almost indispensable, can affect the development of the child's brain and overall health. The report, based on data garnered in 2018, has dealt with what "scientists know and don't know, about the link between the screen, behaviour, and development".

The child's health is a critical determinant of public health ~ an index of human development. Which, sad to reflect, has been plummeting in India for the past few years. Acchhe din is on test.

CIVIL SERVICE

HINDUSTAN TIMES, APR 26, 2019

Bureaucrats must be made as accountable as politicians | Opinion

Politicians are made accountable every five years in India. NDA I makes way for UPA I-II and then NDA-II. But the basic structure of permanent bureaucracy is never called into question or held accountable the same way.

Politicians are made accountable every five years in India. NDA I makes way for UPA I-II and then NDA-II. But the basic structure of permanent bureaucracy is never called into question or held accountable the same way. With career bureaucrats having an average shelf life of over 30 years, many self-serving mandarins outlive politicians by miles, with far less accountability and even less at stake. Then, this isn't true of just India. Other countries, including all of our sub-continental neighbours exhibit the same behaviour.

In this context, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena has made the bureaucracy accountable by firing his defence secretary and police chief for the Easter Day massacre by the Islamic State inspired National Towheeth Jamaath (NTJ) terrorist group.

To be sure, the communication failure between Sirisena and the country's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe also contributed to the

lack of response from the state despite actionable intelligence. The political blame definitely rests with the former as national security powers are centralized under the head of state. Apart from the multiple alerts based on operational grade intelligence sent by India warning of impending attacks to Sri Lanka, New Delhi sent one of its senior most intelligence officers to Colombo to drive home the seriousness of the threat. The post-attack CCTV footage with Islamic bombers carrying military grade explosives in their back-packs into luxury hotels and churches without any security checks makes it quite evident that alerts were either swept under the bureaucratic carpet or not acted upon.

In some ways, the Easter Day attacks and the 26/11 Mumbai massacre have a lot of similarities in the context of intelligence alerts and national security response but stand in sharp contrast over accountability. There was a specific intelligence alert from US intelligence about the intruding Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT) ship from Karachi, which was duly disseminated to the Indian Navy and Coast Guard. The Mumbai Police had been warned at the highest level about the impending attack and possible modus operandi of the jihadis. But the Indian Navy did not find the intelligence actionable enough and the Mumbai police believed, after the attacks started, that it was witnessing gang warfare, not a terror attack. This is no different from the Sri Lankan Army and Police which believed that the only threat to the Island nation was from Tamil separatists and not self-radicalized jihadis who have been growing in numbers since the rise of ISIS in 2014. The result was that 166 innocents were gunned down in 26/11 and we are still counting the dead in the April 21 bombings.

To say that the Easter Day attack was a retaliation of March 21 Christchurch Mosque attack is rather simplistic as India had picked up plans of a possible attack in Sri Lanka way back in December 2018. Christchurch may have been only been the trigger. However, unlike India, Colombo has made the bureaucracy accountable and has sent a strong message down the ranks that incompetence won't be tolerated. Barring Mumbai police commissioner and the home minister of day, none of the actual recipients of the actual operational intelligence were held accountable for the humongous fiasco that 26/11 was. While many experts will argue that the action of the Sri Lankan President will lower the morale of the troops, the counter is that just as there should be zero tolerance to terror, there should be none of bureaucratic incompetence.

The Easter Day attacks and their response highlight a crying need for bureaucratic reform in countries across the sub-continent, where seniority is still confused with merit. This is also due to poor human resource assessment filters with nearly all bureaucrats having outstanding annual confidential records.

For last mile delivery whether it is on the platform of governance or internal security or diplomacy, the bureaucracy must be made as accountable as the political leaders of the day. Events such as the Easter Day or 26/11 are also indicators of the government's response to crisis like any natural calamity. The old World War II British architecture, which was not even rooted in the prevailing sub-continent eco-system, should give way to more accountable governance keeping in mind the local facts on ground. Else, even the best of actionable intelligence will fail.

CLIMATE CHANGE

STATESMAN, APR 24, 2019

Number of heat waves and cold waves on the rise in India



Heat waves and cold waves in the country have increased manifold in the past two years, according to data put out by the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation.

While the number of reported casualties declined in the case of heat waves, they have increased in the case of cold waves. Rajasthan experienced the highest number of heat and cold waves from 1970 to 2018.

Extremes of temperature While the number of heat waves increased 14 times in 2017 compared to 2016, the number of cold waves spiked 34 times in the same period. The numbers for 2018 dropped marginally.

Punishing heat and cold The number of heat-related deaths has come down despite an increase in heat waves since 2015. However, the number of deaths due to cold waves has risen in this period. Over 3,000 people died due to heat waves in 2015 and 2016.

Mapping hotspots and cold pockets Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh & Telangana (considered a single entity) have been hit by the most number of heat waves.

Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have had the highest number of cold waves from 1970 to 2018. South India has not been hit much by cold waves.

The below maps depict the prevalence of both waves across years and across States.

ELECTION

PIONEER, APR 26, 2019

Candidates will have to advertise criminal records from poll expenses: EC

The Election Commission (EC) has made it clear that candidates will have to bear the cost of advertising their criminal antecedents in TV and newspapers as it comes in the category of 'poll expenses'. The poll panel has made it compulsory for candidates contesting elections to advertise their criminal antecedents in TV and newspapers at least thrice during electioneering.

Though directions in this regard were issued on October 10, 2018, the rule is being used for the first time in the ongoing Lok Sabha elections.

EC officials said political parties have been informed that candidates will have to bear the cost of the advertisement from their poll expenses. Some parties had approached the poll panel urging it to allow the advertisement expenditure be borne by them and not the candidates.

The parties too will have to advertise the criminal records of the candidates they have fielded. The expenditure of advertisement by the parties will be borne by them.

This means that candidates and parties contesting the elections will have to publicise their criminal records at least on three different dates in widely circulated newspapers and popular TV channels during the campaign period.

Candidates who do not have records have to mention that. The candidates will now have to fill up an amended form (number 26). They will have to inform parties about their antecedents such as cases in which they have been convicted and cases pending against them.

The parties, the EC said, will be “obliged” to put the information about the candidates on their websites. The EC direction of October, 2018 was silent on whether the candidates will have to pay

from their pocket for the publicity.

Parties which fail to comply, face the prospects of getting their recognition withdrawn or suspended. Candidates have to submit clippings of their declaration published in papers and parties have to submit details about the number of such candidates in a state.

While there is a ceiling on expenditure of candidates, the parties have no such limit. Candidates in Lok Sabha polls can spend up to Rs 70 lakh.

All registered political parties have to submit a statement of their election expenditure to the election commission within 90 days of the completion of the Lok Sabha elections.

All candidates are required to submit their expenditure statement to the poll panel within 30 days of the completion of the elections.

ENERGY RESOURCES

STATESMAN, APR 30, 2019

Iran oil imports put India in tough spot

Indian refineries have steadily reduced their dependency on Iranian oil; however, may not be able to stop it altogether.



The United States announced its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018.

The deal, also termed as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, was signed in July 2015 between the five permanent members of the UNSC and Germany on one side and Iran on the other. The US re-imposed all

earlier sanctions on Iran in November last year. As per President Donald Trump, this was the ‘worst deal ever’.

While China, also a signatory to the deal had some reservations, mainly that the deal permitted Iran to develop weapons outside the agreement including ballistic missiles, it accepted the same. All other members who initiated the deal were against the US action. They attempted to bypass US sanctions and continued trading with Iran.

They were hopeful that once the US presidency underwent a change, the US would re-enter the deal. However, fearing US sanctions, many European companies stopped dealing with Iran including purchasing its oil. India joined nations in claiming that US sanctions were not UN sanctions and hence it would not adhere to them.

The reality is now changing. The main opponents of the deal were Israel and Saudi Arabia, both sworn enemies of Iran. Both worked to convince the US that Iran was continuing its project of developing nuclear weapons despite agreeing to the contrary. Further they blamed Iran for supporting terrorist groups in the Middle East including in Syria and the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Recently the US stated that since re-imposition of sanctions, Iran has been unable to pay Hezbollah fighters, proving to the world that its sanctions are working. The US is firm in its plan of seeking a regime change in Tehran and the easiest, non-costly and non-military option was to force an economic collapse by imposing sanctions. It is aware that a military option may not be easy and could fail.

Iran still controls the Strait of Hormoz and could impact movement of international oil. The main income for Iran flows from its export of oil and gas, hence targeting that is the first step. Initially it gave eight nations, including China, India, South Korea and Japan six months to steadily reduce their purchase of Iranian oil. The period ends on 1 May 2019.

After this date there would be no waiver on purchase of oil. Specific to India, they have permitted it to continue developing the Chabahar port, which would not be within the purview of sanctions. To further impress India, the US has stated that it is supporting India in its attempts to list Masood Azhar as a global terrorist, Indian entry into the NSG and in its actions to isolate Pakistan.

Hence, it expects India to comply with its demands. US state department official Alice Wells was in India last week to discuss this with Indian officials. The US's attempts to control oil prices and enhance production to meet the demands of world oil without purchases from Iran has met with partial success. India is one of the nations which would face difficulties.

India is the world's third largest oil importer, imports 80 per cent of its oil and 40 per cent of its natural gas needs. India is also Iran's second largest importer of oil after China. Indian refineries have steadily reduced their dependency on Iranian oil; however, may not be able to stop it altogether. India has for the first time even commenced purchasing US oil, seeking to expand its procurement base.

With sanctions also imposed on Venezuela and most of Libyan oil not being available due to the ongoing civil war, the market to procure oil is smaller. Iranian oil comes with options which few suppliers can meet. These include free shipping, insurance and a 60-day credit period. With OPEC imposing a cut in production to enhance oil prices, adopting US sanctions would enhance oil prices by almost 35 per cent.

Thus, India's new government will be forced to increase oil prices as soon as it comes to power. It will also impact the value of the rupee and enhance inflation. Are there options for India? It is evident that the US is unwilling to back down. It is pushing hard and would have to act against even allies if they do not adhere to its demands.

Thus, India may shift to a rupee payment model, which may work for a limited number of barrels per day, not at the figure India imports at present. During earlier sanctions, India imported 100,000 barrels a day on rupee terms from Iran. India is also concerned with its weapons purchases from Russia including the S-400 missile system. These are likely to come under CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) which could impact India.

The US has been offering its own weapon systems as a replacement, but India is unwilling. If India stops purchase of weapons from Russia, it would push Russia into the Pakistani camp and enhance sale of Russian weapons to Pakistan. It would also impact Indo- Russian relations. India needs Russia to also control a belligerent China. Pakistan is already seeking to purchase arms worth USD 9 Billion from Russia.

India would have to push the US to ignore CAATSA in a quid pro quo for accepting its demand for reducing purchase of Iranian oil. India's acceptance of US demands on Iran may be effective, provided all others follow suit. China has announced that it opposes US's unilateral sanctions and is unwilling to adhere to it. In case India backs down and China continues, then it would lose the advantage it has in Iran.

With doors closing, India may have to toe the US line. If that happens and oil prices continue to rise, the Indian economy would be impacted, for which there are no options. Hence, in all probability India would bargain that if it reduces oil procurement from Iran, the US would have to accept Indian military purchases from Russia, without imposing CAATSA. Will the US agree remains the mute question.

(The writer is a retired Major-General of the Indian Army)

HEALTH SERVICES

HINDUSTAN TIMES, APR 29, 2019

What is behind Indians' life expectancy going up?

An improvement in healthcare along with a decline in infant and child mortality have contributed to this progress



In the Puranas, there is a reference to a demoness named Jataharini. I should be careful however; in Ayurveda, the same word means a group of diseases. Here, I mean the demoness Jataharini, as it was in Markandeya Purana. There, she was a demoness who snatched away newborns. She was also mischievous. She would take away a baby from

one house to another, and from there to another, to create confusion. In the process, she would eat up the every third baby that she grabbed.

The Jataharini story effectively tells us that the infant mortality rate then was 333 per 1,000. Some four centuries ago, these were levels throughout the world. Lack of data doesn't allow us to get a firm handle on infant mortality rates (IMRs) in pre-Independent India. Around 1900, India's IMR would have been around 200. Some advanced countries had much lower IMRs. In 1900, Portugal had an IMR of around 150. This was more or less the level in most parts of England and Wales in second half of the 19th century. In more advanced countries, declines in IMR happened after 1900.

In 1951, India's IMR declined to 146. Latest figures — an IMR of 34 — are for 2016. Sure, there are interstate variations. In Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, IMR is still stands above 40. But it's declining all across the country, and is true for every state.

In 1940, Minoos Masani wrote a book that is all but forgotten now. It was titled *Our India* and it dealt with children. Masani's views were socialist in tone. According to the book, the life expectancy in 1940 was 27 years. Masani had used numbers from the 1931 Census. By the time the Censuses of 1941 and 1951 came out, India's life expectancy had increased to 32 years. (Naturally, India in 1931 and 1941 was geographically different from the India of 1951). In Census 2011, it went up to 67 years, with, understandably, some difference between the life expectancy of males and females. In 2019, numbers are bound to go a bit higher, which we will know only in Census 2021. If this is an indicator, India surely fares better in 2019 than in 1951.

Why has life expectancy increased? It may have many obvious reasons: sanitation, sewage treatment, clean drinking water, immunisation, control of smallpox, tuberculosis, malaria, better medical treatment and so on. We normally use the expression life expectancy (in years), but we really mean life expectancy at birth. We often forget that as we survive longer, life expectancies increase. These numbers emerge from what demographers call life-tables. These are estimated, and are not direct Census figures. Ignoring the male/female difference, this is what such numbers look like today: Roughly, life expectancy at birth is 68.7 years; at age one, it is 71.6 years; at age five, it 72.1 years; at age 10, 72.4 years, at age 12, 72.8 years; at age 30, 73.5 years; at age 40, 74.4 years; at age 50, 75.8 years; at age 60, 78.1 years; and at age 70, 81.5 years.

In 2016, the average life expectancy in the United States was 78.7 years. If you happen to survive till 70, you are not that worse off compared to an average American. To make an apples versus apples comparison, at age 70, life expectancy in US is around 85 years. Even then, the Indian is not that worse off. If you survive till that age, nature of disease and access to medical services are probably the same as in more advanced countries. The average Indian is worse off at earlier ages. Since Independence, life expectancy at birth has increased in India, which is pretty much clear.

Has it increased because of declines in infant mortality (that is, children below one year of age) and child mortality (that is, children below the age of five) or has it increased because of health improvements elsewhere in the age spectrum too? It's probably a combination of both, and one is asking for a decomposition (or break-up) between two kinds

of effects. Unfortunately, the answer is complicated since it depends on the stage of demographic transition. In the initial stages, most increases in life expectancy are attributable to mortality declines for infants and children. In later stages of demographic transition, increases are more attributable to mortality declines across the age spectrum.

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INFORMATION LITERACY

HINDUSTAN TIMES, APR 30, 2019

Access to information is not the same as information literacy

The greatest challenge for information literacy in India is not the lack of verification methods — the Internet makes those especially easy to access — but the fact that it requires us to work against certain lifelong instincts.



As the largest democratic election in the world is underway, our decisions seem to have become more difficult than ever before, precisely because of the millions of reports, opinions and debates that are available to us in 2019. It feels overwhelming to process all that information, identify real news from the fake, and make the decisions that best represent our intentions. We are now decidedly past the “simpler” era when one or two trusted newspapers, radio or TV newscasts would adequately inform our thoughts about everything.

Information is the formative unit of democracy. Traditional media of the past maintained its own biases and gatekeeping. The opening up of those gates in the 21st century, especially through the Internet, has added to our mainstream conversation many more perspectives from marginalised communities; individuals who were previously silenced by oppressors and abusers; places too deep in the interiors of the country for city-based media to regularly cover their news. If anything, this explosion of information from non-traditional sources is the growing up of our democracy.

But access to information is not the same as information literacy. Information literacy is more than the sum of available information and the ability to read it — it is the skillset to evaluate the information itself. Nowhere is that gap more prominent than when a sensational WhatsApp message is shared by thousands of people who can obviously read, own smartphones and internet connections, but don't think of verifying the authenticity of that message.

Why are such basic practices of information literacy missing among so many literate, even well-educated Indians? As adults, we are constantly

performing far more complex tasks than pressing “search” on Google. Those tasks don’t feel insurmountable to us, because we have learned to do them in small increments over a lifetime, until they became instincts that we no longer have to think about. Information literacy is also an instinct, but we did not learn it the same way.

At the school level in India, we are taught the humanities by rote learning and memorisation, rather than questioning and analysis of sources. School-level science gives us some training in individual agency — we solve our own math problems or conduct experiments in labs. But we “commit and vomit” the humanities, instead of learning skills like comparing contradictory reportage about historical events, which would have been our formative steps in information literacy. We come out of school believing that science is open to thinking and exploration, but the humanities are “fixed”.

Higher-level humanities education does train in those analytical methods, but their absence at the school level makes the greatest difference to our instincts. In a country where the brightest students choose to study science at the college level, and a large population does not study past school at all, our instincts are collectively developed to accept cultural information — religion, literature, history and, through its continuum, news — as unquestionable and fixed. Despite considering science somehow more “objective,” we are more comfortable with the idea of it constantly evolving with new people discovering new things, than with history evolving the same way. We feel unsettled when our rote learnt humanities lessons are questioned, even though in most cases

our familiarity with Mahatma Gandhi is the same as our familiarity with rocket science — we read about them in school.

The greatest challenge for information literacy in India is not the lack of verification methods — the internet makes those especially easy to access — but the fact that it requires us to work against those lifelong instincts. We are a nation of the devout, headed by a prime minister who is mythologised by his followers, to the extent that nothing from a NaMo retail brand to a NaMo news channel to a NaMo biopic originally scheduled to be released in the midst of the election process strikes them as contradictory to the objectives of unbiased elections.

Democracy is not an automatically benign system if its participants cannot sufficiently distinguish history from myth, fact from fiction, news from rumour, propaganda or advertising. Today in India we are saturated with information, but we as a nation will not be making smarter decisions till we get better at evaluating the information we get. We will need those skills no matter who wins on May 23, for a democracy does not begin and end with elections. We perform our democracy every day, as individuals and as the nation, and we can only make our country work better for us if we are equipped to navigate its enormous outpouring of information in the 21st century. Let us learn to make an instinct of that.

Mimi Mondal is a speculative fiction writer and editor, and the first Hugo Award nominee from India

JUDICIARY

HINDU, APR 22, 2019

Sexual harassment allegations: CJI violated procedure by hearing own case, say Supreme Court lawyers



It sought appointment of a committee headed by full court of the apex court to impartially investigate and inquire into the allegations

A storm of public opinion is gathering against the manner in which a Bench led by Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi convened on April 20 and *SUO MOTU* heard a case involving sexual harassment allegations levelled against him by a former Supreme Court employee.

The Bench was convened at short notice after online news portals published allegations levelled by a woman against the CJI. The hearing sparked a public debate on whether the CJI was sitting as a “judge in his own cause” and whether the Bench should have followed the principles of natural justice by giving the complainant a fair chance to be heard in the first place before passing remarks about her.

On Monday, the first working day after a tumultuous weekend, the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA), a body of over 6,000 lawyers practising in the Supreme Court, said Saturday’s hearing was “in violation of the procedure established by as well as the principles of natural justice.” In an urgent meeting, the executive committee of the SCBA said a Full Court should take “all the necessary steps” under the law in this issue.

“The allegations of the ex-employee have to be dealt with as per the procedure established by law. The law must be applied in each and every case uniformly,” SCAORA resolved.

The association said it “strongly disapproves the manner in which the complaint was dealt with”. It urged for an inquiry and action into the woman’s complaint. She has already written to 22 Supreme Court judges, detailing her allegations against the CJI.

The association sought an “immediate appointment of a committee headed by the Full Court of Supreme Court to impartially investigate and inquire into the allegations against CJI and give an independent finding into the matter”.

The Women in Criminal Law Association (WCLA), a collaborative group for women in criminal litigation, had also issued a statement demanding a fair inquiry into the allegations. In a statement on April 20, the association said the “complaint should be treated as per procedure and principles of fairness and justice, including the fundamental right to equality before law”.

However, the Supreme Court Employees Welfare Association issued a statement “on behalf of all employees” strongly condemning the “false, fabricated and baseless allegations” against the Chief Justice.

The employees association said the allegations were meant to malign the institution. The association said it stood firmly with the CJI to “defeat the malicious attempt of external forces to target the Indian judiciary”.

OMBUDSMAN

TELEGRAPH, APR 26, 2019

The enormous responsibilities of the Lokpal

The conduct of the first Lokpal will set the tune for the future

By Amitabha Bhattacharya



The chairperson and eight members of the Lokpal have been appointed almost five years after the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013 came into force. Few other pieces of legislation since Independence have attracted such attention and passed through such turbulence. In its broad scope — it covers public servants from the prime minister to the minions of the Union government (but not the armed forces) — in its wide-ranging powers to initiate investigation and direct prosecution, in terms of

bestowing such high status to the chairperson and members, in ensuring that at least half of the members are from minority groups, in investing the Lokpal with the power to supervise any investigating agency, including the Central Bureau of Investigation, this comprehensive act, read with attendant amendments to various other acts, sets a new standard.

The Lokpal has enormous responsibilities to shoulder. Can it live up to the expectations? Can it institute changes, something that the Election Commission did under T.N. Seshan? The conduct of the first Lokpal will set the tune for the ones in the future. Certain issues must be kept in mind in this context.

The changing patterns of corruption must be comprehended, given the recent amendments to the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988. Much of the corruption at the higher level is associated with complex economic decision-making in which private parties and government functionaries are involved. Will the Lokpal also carve out a role for itself to act against private parties? Differentiating between *bona fide* mistakes and wilful collusion to cause losses to the exchequer, or between misconduct and criminal misconduct, is crucial to ensure that the corrupt are identified swiftly, isolated and punished. The Lokpal must have at its disposal the technical expertise to steer through this labyrinth.

Occasionally, illegal money can be made by following the correct procedure. Harassing public servants (sometimes years after their retirement) for money made by political leaders through such a process does not yield dividends. Using investigative agencies to cower political

opponents, especially when the regime changes, has become a norm. The Lokpal has to devise a means to address such concerns.

The Lokpal must examine the conditions that breed corruption. Since officials work under political pressure and have to take decisions in a time-bound manner based on inadequate information, the Lokpal has to ensure that rules for tenders and so on are drafted in a manner so as to serve public interest. Corruption in the middle and lower rungs often stems from the information asymmetry between service-providers and citizens. Much headway can be made by way of digitization, elimination of discretion and widespread sharing of information.

The Lokpal will have under it an ‘inquiry wing’ and a ‘prosecution wing’. It also has the power to attach properties temporarily. But if complaints are sent to the Lokpal and investigating agencies or if the government or the courts direct such agencies to pursue cases, it can result in the overlapping of jurisdiction. Another issue that requires consideration is the provision of an appeal to the high court or the Supreme Court against an order of the Lokpal. It will be interesting to note the higher judiciary’s response in such instances.

There can be attempts to undermine the Lokpal’s authority by people in power. Expanding the definition of corruption, burdening the Lokpal with work beyond its carrying capacity and keeping vacancies intact could be some ways of rendering the Lokpal ineffective. Civil society and the higher courts must keep a close vigil to prevent the Lokpal’s degeneration into another *quasi*-judicial body meant to accommodate superannuated judges and bureaucrats.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

HINDUSTAN TIMES, APR 26, 2019

Setting the agenda for good governance a must

Political parties come out with manifestos to pronounce their plan of providing good governance. However, these are at macro level, expecting individual candidates of their party to draw out micro-level plans.

It is election time again, and that too, a national one. The Election Commission is rightly urging us to go to the polling booth and vote.

At this juncture, it may be worthwhile to ask: “Why do we vote?”

I guess the answer will be varied: starting from exercising our franchise to following the crowd. Be that as it may, our votes get us something in return.

What kind of return we seek from our effort? Again, the answer will greatly vary depending on individual orientation depending on tribe, caste, religion, political leanings, local considerations or freebies on offer.

At the end of the day, everyone seeks good governance on the basis of his/her understanding; and expects the winning candidate to provide that.

Political parties come out with manifestos to pronounce their plan of providing good governance. However, these are at macro level, expecting individual candidates of their party to draw out micro-level plans.

Many candidates are unable to draw an effective micro-level action plan for their constituency. They either parrot what their national leaders are speaking, or endlessly badmouth the opposition candidates and their parties. The aim is to gain advantage by lowering the esteem of others, which is an antithesis of good governance.

Each political party tries to convince the voters why it is the most deserving one; and is also best suited to provide good governance.

However, parties do differ in their view of what good governance comprises of, each seeing the task from its own perspective. This means each individual voter and each political party – if not each candidate – will have a differing perspective on what the task of governance entails.

The big question is, “Whether the twain ever meet?” No one knows for sure.

For the sake of clarification it may be worthwhile to amplify a little on the factors that contribute to good governance. But, to start with, what is governance?

Governance is the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented). The concept centres around the responsibility of governments and governing bodies to meet the needs of the masses as opposed to select groups in society.

Setting an agenda for reaching good governance is of huge interest but is also a complex task. It is, therefore, proposed that we think of a “good enough governance” agenda rather than what is ‘good’ in a theoretical sense.

In the construction of this “simpler” agenda, one needs to revisit the nature of policies that have worked in the past and set priorities in a strategic way.

Since governments carry out with goals like the provision of public goods to its citizens, there is no better way to think about good governance other than through deliverables, which are precisely the one demanded by citizens, like security, health, education, water, enforcement of contracts, protection to property and environment.

Rather than blindly vote, the central question a voter needs to ask is: ‘Will my candidate be able to deliver those in my constituency?’.

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PUBLIC FINANCE

HINDUSTAN TIMES, APR 26, 2019

Cash transfer promises: Recipe for a fiscal disaster

Not only is the country's tax base small, it is also difficult to raise tax rates too much without reducing compliance



Rate cuts by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) may not find transmission into lower interest rates in the Indian economy if election promises of large cash transfer programmes are kept. Fears of large government

spending without any clear plans to raise tax revenue or cut other expenditure can increase economic fragility as well as create expectations that India will move away from the path of fiscal consolidation. This would mean government can only borrow at higher interest rates. Higher cost of capital would mean lesser private investment.

Election promises of both leading political parties involve larger government spending. Both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress have made promises regarding cash transfers in their election manifestos. India's fiscal deficit currently stands at 3.4% of gross domestic product (GDP). Even this is an underestimate as not all expenditure was shown in this year and not all borrowing was shown to be explicit borrowing of the Central government in the last budget. Both parties remain quiet on how they plan to fund the additional expenditure; the two paths to not borrowing more are either to tax more or to cut expenditure.

The government has already launched the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana for cash transfers to marginal or poor farmers who own land up to two hectares. The manifesto promised to increase the scope of PM-Kisan scheme to all farmers in the country. In addition, the BJP manifesto promises a pension scheme for all small and marginal farmers in the country. Short-term new agriculture loans up to Rs 1 lakh at zero per cent interest rate would be made available. Even beyond the manifesto, there are promises for collateral free loans of Rs 50 lakh to traders and pensions for shopkeepers.

The Congress has promised farm loan waivers, one crore jobs, National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) days to increase from 100 to 150, and the Nyuntam Aay Yojana (NYAY) to provide Rs 72,000 a year to the 20% poorest families in the country. Health expenditure would be doubled to 3% of GDP, and so on.

If all these election promises are to be kept, Central government expenditure would increase by around 3% of GDP. One proposal is to tax the rich more. But who is rich in India? The notion of rich is, of course, relative. Households who earn Rs 1 lakh per month in India are rich by Indian standards as only about 0.3% of the population earns more than Rs 12 lakh a year. 99.7% of households in India earn less than Rs 1 lakh per month.

Taxing 0.3% of households to distribute to the remaining looks very hard. So perhaps the top 5% should be taxed? But 95% of households earn less than Rs 50,000 per month (or ~6 lakh a year). Eighty per cent of households earn less than Rs 3 lakh a year or Rs 25,000 per month. This is hardly the section that is “rich” and should be taxed to pay for the poor.

At best, raising taxes for redistributing income from rich to poor households would involve taxing about 5% households who earn more than Rs 50,000 per month and transferring money to the poor. This has limited possibilities. Not only is it difficult to tax the middle class politically, even the amount of revenue that can be raised without pushing rates too high and taxing away even 50% of their income, or almost Rs 25,000 per month away from them, will not raise revenues adequately.

Not only is the tax base small, it is also difficult to raise tax rates too much without reducing compliance. Wealth tax, or taxing the super-rich in developing countries, has usually ended up in capital flight without raising revenues.

The other alternative is to cut expenditure. Considering that interest payments, salaries and subsidies are difficult to cut, there are no clear plans outlined by either party on what will be cut. Usually this means, as it has in the past, that capital spending will be reduced.

In all probability, large cash transfer programmes mean large fiscal deficits, upward pressure on interest rates and moving away from fiscal targets. If all that is promised materialises, India will, unfortunately, almost certainly, head towards a fiscal crisis.

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TERRORISM

TRIBUNE, APR 28, 2019

Easter carnage: Some unanswered questions

Indian Intelligence inputs on last Sunday's attacks in Colombo were time-and venue-specific. Why did the Sri Lankan authorities choose to ignore these?



There is a stunned sense of disbelief among Indian intelligence officials, both serving and retired, over the ease and sophistication of the Sri Lankan bombing and the single-mindedness of its perpetrators.

Moreover, they feel it is not yet over. There is the looming threat of more violence from the men and women not yet picked up by the police and believed to be on the run. Rumours have been quickly emptying the streets in Sri Lanka. They begin to fill in only when the police sound the all-clear a little while later.

Till the other day, terrorists of a little-known organisation, Jamaat al-Tawhid al-Watania group (National Thowheed Jamath) — whose core belief is to reject democracy as a political system because its laws were not handed down by God — were known in just a handful of Sri Lankan police stations as motorcycle ruffians, who would vandalise Buddhist statues and scoot.

Intelligence officials in India had detected the activity in this group and may have even placed moles inside Tawhid as evident from the detailed information passed on to their Lankan counterparts. This raises the first flag. The conspiracy theory of a well-placed rat inside the Sri Lankan government, who prevented this information from being acted upon, has been well flogged.

“Take a deep look at their domestic politics for clues,” suggests an Indian intelligence officer. Indeed, the Sri Lankan government is at war with itself. There was a moment late last year when Sri Lanka had two Prime Ministers. Today, parliamentary elections are looming and will be followed by the Presidential elections. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe did not receive the advisories from the Sri Lankan security forces that had built a case on the basis of three Indian tip-offs. The question that crops up is why didn't the police take them into preventive detention when the Indian advisory was event and venue

specific? After all, the time-honoured method of cops all over the world is to remove suspects from public circulation till the doubts about their intentions are cleared.

A warning had surfaced as early as in January when the cops had stumbled upon a massive cache of explosives and weapons linked to this group. The police's April 11 security memo even mentioned the timings during which one of the Tawhid terrorists, supposedly on the run, would visit his wife. A week earlier (and 10 days before the blasts) Indian intelligence had transmitted to its Sri Lankan counterparts, the cellphone numbers and information about Tawhid chief Zaharan and his cohorts.

In Sri Lanka, where human rights abuses were rampant and few heads turned over the hundreds of cold-blooded assassinations during the more than 30 years that the security forces battled Tamil militants, its post-conflict society surely wouldn't have minded if the suspects had been put behind bars.

That the police knew who exactly the group members were is borne out by the swiftness of arrests after the blast. So far, 50 arrests have been made. Indian officials offer leeway only on one count — departmentalism that exists within governmental bodies the worldover. Colombo has admitted that the security memo was circulated only among those in VIP security. But how could the April 11 security memo that was detailing the scenario of an impending catastrophe in very plain language be ignored? Steeled in the crucible of reoccurring and extremely bloody turmoil since the early 1970s (which invited the first Indian military intervention), the police would have known what to do.

This lack of activity by the police more than the convulsions of domestic politics befuddles Indian investigators.

If there is a missing link of the as-yet-unknown people who sat on the April 11 security memo backed by frequent Indian warnings, there is another missing link of the master-trainers who inserted sophistication and the ability to wreck spectacular depredation by what was till the day considered a rag-tag gang. Where is the link to an international network which Sri Lankan health minister Rajitha Senarathne confidently predicts?

The ISIS claim of involvement is not yet taken as gospel. After all, it is its wont to take ownership of every single attack in Europe, even if some of these have later turned out to be the handiwork of Muslims who happened to be very frustrated and/or ideologically indoctrinated individuals.

And now that the deed is done, it is this indoctrination that worries Indian investigators. Like the Dhaka cafe attack, many of the suicide attackers came from families that did not lack material wealth. In the wider Indian subcontinent, from the times of Osama bin Laden, the affluent lot were the ones who instigated and motivated. Rarely did they get their hands dirty. Here in Sri Lanka, and much like the Dhaka cafe attackers, indoctrination and indoctrination among the super affluent component of the Tawhid was sky high. Living in a pristine three-storey whitewashed bungalow, the lady of the house did not bat an eyelid before blowing her three children and an unborn child along with her when the cops came knocking.

If people who lacked nothing and faced no existentialist fears of being mowed down by an aggressive majority were putting their lives and family reputation on the line, indoctrination might have entered a new phase in the subcontinent, suggest Indian security officers. The rage they directed against their fellow Sri Lankans may have its origins in the form of perceived injustices in other lands. ISIS' hate speeches and its promise of a mono-faith Garden of Eden here on earth may have turned some minds. It has quickly capitalised on the tragedy and turned multilingual; its messages claiming ownership of the bombings were also issued in Tamil and Malayalam.

The Indian continent seems to be in a pincer group of perverted brainwashing. The known thrust was coming from the Hindukush and the land between the Tigris and the Euphrates. This thrust from the south was not anticipated.

TRIBUNE, APR 28, 2019

Fear spills over, grips Tamil Nadu

The bombing has put the state at unease, especially the Muslims. There are fears that it could be used to drive a wedge between Muslims, Christians .

The serial blasts that ripped through Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday resonated across Palk Strait in Tamil Nadu, rather quickly, in many ways. First, the Tamil Nadu Thowheed Jamath (TNTJ), an Islamic organisation, had to disown Sri Lanka's National Thowheed Jamath, the

outfit suspected to be behind the mindless bombing of churches and hotels that left over 250 dead (as per the revised estimates) and 500 injured. And then the revelation that India's National Investigation Agency had learnt about a possible ISIS attack on the Indian High Commission in Colombo and also on churches in Sri Lanka much earlier raised serious security concerns in Tamil Nadu. The inputs gathered by the NIA during the course of a probe into an ISIS-inspired terror module, operating in South India with a view to killing prominent political leaders, were passed on to Sri Lanka through the diplomatic channel.

With the Sri Lankan security agencies goofing up on the Intelligence input, they have come to haunt the Indian security agencies. It is not that the mindless violence has invoked fear of a similar attack on Indian soil, but it has certainly led to an increased vigil on the high seas. The long Tamil Nadu coast could be used as a landing haven by fleeing terrorists or those associated with the attacks in Sri Lanka. Also, the revelation that Sri Lanka-based Islamic terrorists and those of their ilk in Tamil Nadu have links has increased the fear perception in the state, thus putting the agencies on high alert.

The Easter massacre impelled the Muslim groups in Tamil Nadu to reveal their motives. On the day next to the massacre, TNTJ vice-president P Abdul Rahman told a website, "We have nothing to do with them. We don't even know who they are." Incidentally, in November 2015, TNJT founder P Jainulabdeen was invited by Sri Lanka's Thowheed Jamath for an event but was denied entry into the country by the Sri Lankan government.

At that time, the Sri Lankan outfit was trying to bring out a Sinhala translation of the Koran. The move was opposed by local Muslim organisations that felt there were flaws in the translated version. These organisations have been opposing many other activities of the Jamath, which was accused of receiving Saudi Arabia funding to spread Wahhabism. Quite clearly, the Jamath was not popular among the Muslims in Sri Lanka.

Like the TNJT, various other Islamic organisations in Tamil Nadu — quite a few came to the fore when a controversy erupted over actor Kamal Hassan's film Vishwaroopam in 2013 — will have to prove their non-violent credentials. As of now, Muslims and their organisations enjoy a pride of place in the secular landscape of Tamil Nadu as partners of those opposed to Right-wing Hindutva politics. As the blasts might provide grist to Hindutva forces to raise the bogey of terror strikes spilling over to Indian shores, it will be incumbent on Islamic groups to dispel such fears. It is a different matter that there has not been a single instance of violence by Muslims since the 1988 Coimbatore bombings. The community has integrated itself well with the mainstream society since then, condemning terrorism always. The scaremongering could get louder if the BJP and its allies bite the dust in the elections in Tamil Nadu or the entire nation. The party has already failed in its bid to take root in the state post the demise of former Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa in December 2017 even after managing to commandeer her government and party.

WATER RESOURCES

HINDUSTAN TIMES, APR 29, 2019

Let rivers be rivers, they make best riverfronts

The rejuvenation of the Yamuna is one of the 12 key areas the AAP promises to address. After its gets full statehood, states the manifesto, the Delhi government will align multiple agencies to transform the Yamuna “just like the River Thames in London or the River Cheonggyecheon in Seoul”.

A city with world-class aspirations, Delhi often looks to emulate the best urban practices from around the globe. Promising a major transformation if it gets full statehood for Delhi, the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in its manifesto talks about making the city “one of the cleanest in the world, similar to London or Singapore, within five years”.

The rejuvenation of the Yamuna is one of the 12 key areas the AAP promises to address. After its gets full statehood, states the manifesto, the Delhi government will align multiple agencies to transform the Yamuna “just like the River Thames in London or the River

Cheonggyecheon in Seoul”. A multi-agency approach, with or without achieving full statehood, is a must to revive the Yamuna. So is drawing from global expertise. London’s Thames river, which was in the 1950s declared “biologically dead” by the Museum of Natural History, as reported by the BBC, was revived over time by installing efficient treatment plants, restoring the Victorian-era sewerage network and by enforcing laws that stopped factories from throwing dirty water into the river.

At the same time, Delhi needs its own plan to address its unique reality. Despite the encroachments — unauthorised colonies, Metro yards, train stations, a temple complex and residential apartments — a huge floodplain remains intact. Few, if any, megacities in the world can boast of such vast unclaimed expanses flanking their rivers.

Most western cities compromised floodplains centuries ago by heavily urbanising its riverbanks and wetlands. In London, at least 1.5 million people live and 480,000 properties are already built on the floodplain of the Thames and its tributaries. As much as 15% of London, including the stately riverside structures, sits on the floodplain. “What we call the beautiful riverfronts are basically canal fronts,” said Manoj Misra, the convener of the Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan.

Encasing a river in concrete is fraught with dangers. Despite the Thames barrier, floods are the biggest threat to London and a significant proportion of London’s critical infrastructure is at increased risk, warns the city’s climate change plan, pointing to excessive urbanisation around the Thames.

Parts of European cities, such as Budapest, Vienna, Dresden, Passau, Prague and Bratislava, were destroyed by the 2013 floods because they are built on the Danube riverfront. According to the World Wide Fund For Nature, Europe's longest river has seen 80% of its floodplains disappear in the last century and a half. The Rhine, the second longest, has lost more than 85% of its floodplains.

While the AAP manifesto promises a ban on unauthorised constructions on Yamuna bank, it is crucial to remember that any attempt at concretisation or even landscaping can compromise the biological and physical capacities of the floodplains essential to keep the river alive.

It is tempting to get impressed with projects like Seoul's Cheonggyecheon revival, where authorities brought down the expressway and reclaimed the stream below. The flow of water and vegetation were restored, a flood-wall built, and, as air and noise pollution levels fell, the area became a thriving public place. But the Cheonggyecheon is "not a natural stream systematically restored", wrote Eunseon Park, a researcher from the Yonsei University's Urban Sustainability Transitions lab, in an article quoted in The Guardian in May 2016. The channel gets pumped water to maintain the perennial flow and "because the bottom of the stream is made of concrete, it is nearly incapable of performing any purification functions," wrote Park.

Cheonggyecheon was an almost dead stream when it was "restored" artificially. Such methods do not apply to a living river like the Yamuna. The Seoul experiment, minus concretisation, could be useful for freeing up Delhi's numerous stormwater drains choked with sewage or buried under garbage.

The AAP manifesto promises a “beautiful riverfront” and an amusement park in the area surrounding the Signature Bridge. Instead, say experts, wetlands on floodplains need to be restored for recharging groundwater, preventing floods and retaining the natural ecosystems, much on the lines of the Yamuna biodiversity park. Activists such as Misra insist that the Yamuna floodplains should be legally protected as an eco-sensitive zone or a sanctuary.

For the Yamuna to stay alive, we need to ensure the environmental flow and not dam the river dry. For the Yamuna to stop being a drain, we have to better manage our effluents and waste. For the Yamuna to remain Delhi’s insurance for freshwater, we must stop cluttering the floodplains and allow the river breathing space. No human efforts can create a more beautiful riverfront than one shaped and reshaped by a vibrant, clean and life-giving river.

For Limited Circulation
