



## A clear failure

Having mishandled NEET, Tamil Nadu must focus on upgrading academic standards

This is one failure that the Tamil Nadu government will struggle to live down. Its handling of the challenge posed by the new norm that all medical college admissions should be based solely on the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test has been a disaster. It failed to prepare students under its school education board for the demanding common entrance test conducted by the Central Board of Secondary Education, and it could not defend before the judiciary its controversial decision to block 85% of medical seats for State board students. In the process, it has completely let down aspiring doctors from the State. The admission scene for professional courses has been beset by uncertainty, confusion and all-round despair. The national admission policy was undoubtedly thrust on an unwilling State government by the Supreme Court and the Centre. Yet, despite knowing that the State cannot remain insulated from the policy, the Tamil Nadu government did not respond with a concrete plan to upgrade its syllabus and prepare students for the task ahead. On the contrary, it misled students into believing that they would get an exemption from NEET. It may have been justified in passing two Bills to exempt the State from NEET and send them to the Centre to secure the President's assent. But meanwhile it should have told students to be ready for NEET if the assent did not come. The Centre is obviously reluctant to advise the President to give his assent, as granting exemption to one State may lead to similar demands from other States; and, the legislation may not survive the Supreme Court's scrutiny.

It was an act of desperation that led the State government to reserve 85% of the seats for Tamil Nadu board students. The biggest flaw was that classifying students based on the board through which they passed their higher secondary examination was legally impermissible. It was no surprise when a single judge struck down the order. Now, a Division Bench has upheld the decision. It has made a pertinent observation that it is up to the State government to upgrade its syllabus and infrastructure so that students from Tamil Nadu do not lag behind their counterparts elsewhere. Tamil Nadu's apprehensions about NEET-based admissions are genuine. The prospects of students from rural areas and economically weaker classes may indeed suffer. However, these fears need not be permanent. The time has come for the State government to focus on raising academic standards at the school level. It can no more evade its responsibility for State board students not faring well in highly competitive entrance tests. It should rework its school syllabus and teaching methods to get State board students NEET-ready next year. As for this year's medical admissions, enough time has been lost. The State should move ahead with the process of admitting students based on the NEET rankings without further ado.

## Breaking addiction

Lower nicotine content in cigarettes is an idea whose time has come

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has struck panic among tobacco companies by announcing a comprehensive proposal to reduce the amount of nicotine in cigarettes to non-addictive levels. This is aimed at striking at the root of the problem of smokers getting addicted, and being unable to quit the habit. While the proposal is at an early stage and it may take a while before it gets implemented, if at all, it outlines a powerful strategy. Nicotine does not directly cause cancers and other diseases that kill people, but is extremely addictive. By keeping smokers addicted for the long term, nicotine exposes them to nearly 7,000 chemicals, many of them deadly, every time they smoke. Reducing nicotine in cigarettes to non-addictive levels would therefore have multiple benefits — reduce the likelihood of new users (those in the 15-24 age group) getting hooked to cigarettes, increase the chances of habitual smokers being able to quit, and cut smoking-related disease and death burden overall. In the U.S. alone, nearly half a million smoking-related deaths are reported each year. While more studies are required to establish clear causality, a paper published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2015 showed smokers using reduced-nicotine cigarettes lit up fewer cigarettes a day compared with those smoking standard cigarettes.

The FDA, however, has no plans to regulate nicotine content in electronic cigarettes and other nicotine-replacement products, which are seen to be alternatives to help smokers quit the habit. A study published a few days ago in the journal *BMJ* found that a "substantial increase" in e-cigarette use among adult smokers had led to a "significant increase" in the quitting rate among smokers. By making it illegal a year ago to sell e-cigarettes to children, the FDA has effectively addressed the growing concern about children taking to vaping. Yet, the U.S. has much to learn from India on tobacco control measures. While India is yet to prohibit the sale of e-cigarettes to minors, it has followed most of the measures mentioned in the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control guidelines. Unlike the U.S., India banned tobacco advertisements long ago, introduced pictorial warnings (covering 85% of the front and back of packages of tobacco products), and prohibited the use of descriptors such as light, mild and low as well as the sale of flavoured cigarettes. Threatened by the dwindling number of young smokers, there is the possibility that tobacco companies will target developing countries such as India with renewed vigour. While they may pull out all the stops to subvert or dilute tobacco control measures, the government should remain resolute in not losing the gains made in the last few years — the number of tobacco users reduced by more than eight million between 2010 and 2016.

# The empire strikes back

Pakistan's deep state always works with a king's party — as it did for the judicial coup against Nawaz Sharif



RAKESH SOOD

Had Nawaz Sharif continued as Prime Minister till 2018, he would have created history by becoming the first Prime Minister to have completed a full five-year term in Pakistan's 70-year history. As it happens, he still created history, though of a different sort. When he resigned on July 28, he became the only thrice elected Prime Minister who had his tenure cut short each time by 'the empire', or the deep state in Pakistan.

### Panamagate

The Panama Papers leaks in April last year consisted of more than 11 million documents, from the law firm Mossack Fonseca, containing confidential attorney-client information dealing mostly with offshore entities and bank accounts. Of these, eight pertained to Mr. Sharif, his sons Hassan and Husain and his daughter and political heir Maryam.

These revealed four property purchases by the family in London in the 1990s, hardly a secret in Pakistan. Opposition leader, the cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan, immediately dubbed it 'Panamagate' and demanded Mr. Sharif's resignation.

As protests mounted, Mr. Khan threatened a 'lockdown' in Islamabad. The government imposed Section 144, setting the stage for a confrontation. The situation was similar to the 2014 protests, also led by Mr. Khan together with the cleric-turned-politician Tahir-ul-Qadri, alleging rigging in the 2013 elections that had brought Mr. Sharif to power for the third time. At that time, the army played a role in diffusing the situation. This time, the Supreme Court stepped in to announce the setting up of a five-member bench to hear a bunch of petitions filed by opposition politicians seeking Mr. Sharif's disqualification on grounds of cor-



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ruption. On April 20 this year, the Supreme Court came out with a split verdict. Two of the judges felt that Mr. Sharif should be disqualified, but the majority view found the evidence insufficient and recommended setting up a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) to examine the issue and submit a report within sixty days.

Establishment of the JIT was unprecedented in Pakistan's judicial history. The team included officials from the Federal Investigation Agency, the National Accountability Bureau, State Bank of Pakistan, the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan, and interestingly, an officer each from the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Military Intelligence. The 10-volume report, submitted to the Supreme Court on July 10 highlighted irregular movements of large sums of money in the form of loans and gifts between offshore entities in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United Kingdom and recommended re-opening of a number of earlier cases while initiating a clutch of new inquiries.

The Supreme Court bench reconvened and this time, reached a unanimous verdict, disqualifying Mr. Sharif and Finance Minister Ishaq Dar (his son is married to Mr. Sharif's daughter) and directing the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) to initiate cases against them, together with Hassan, Husain, Maryam and her husband Capt. Safdar. Further, NAB is to

complete its task within six months, before the elections next year.

### A judicial coup

Ironically, after all the investigations, the disqualification verdict is based on a technicality. Mr. Sharif stood disqualified for having violated Article 62 of the Constitution which specifies that any member of Pakistan's National Assembly must be 'sagacious, righteous and non-profligate, honest and upright', a provision that had been introduced by General Zia-ul-Haq. The verdict was based on the JIT discovery that Mr. Sharif had been Chairman of Capital FZE, a Dubai-based entity, from August 2006 to April 2014, at a monthly remuneration of 10,000 Dirhams, and this disclosure was missing in the asset declaration filed for the 2013 elections. The Supreme Court had therefore judged Mr. Sharif not to be 'honest and upright' and therefore 'disqualified' to be a member of the National Assembly. The defence lawyers had pointed out that the company belonged to his son Hassan, that Mr. Sharif had never drawn any remuneration, and the remuneration was notional, needed for the visa when Mr. Sharif was in political exile in the UAE. The Supreme Court interpreted differently; the amount was a 'receivable' and therefore 'an asset' that should have been declared!

The NAB will uncover many more skeletons, pertaining to money laundering and corruption, which could lead to imprisonment

and fines unless Mr. Sharif is able to go into exile or do a deal. This is why he needs to keep control within the family. Former Petroleum Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi has been appointed interim Prime Minister for 45 days while Mr. Sharif's younger brother Shahbaz resigns from his position as Chief Minister of Punjab, enters the National Assembly and takes over as Prime Minister. In Punjab, there is talk that Shahbaz Sharif's son Hamza, who is a member of the provincial assembly, will take over as Chief Minister. With 209 seats in the 342-member National Assembly, Mr. Sharif can call the shots as long as the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz or PML(N) rallies behind the family. At stake is the Sharif legacy compounded because of lack of clarity about whether the disqualification is permanent or for a finite period. Article 63, also introduced by Gen. Zia, provides for disqualification of an elected member for five years on grounds of 'contempt of court' (this was used to dismiss Yousaf Raza Gillani in 2012) but Article 62 does not specify any time frame.

The irony is that Nawaz Sharif had started his political career with the blessings of the army in the Zia days. He became the Chief Minister of Punjab in 1985 and the ISI helped him cobble together the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (JI) coalition which won him his first term as Prime Minister in 1990. Since then, his differences with the Army and the 'deep state' have only grown. In 1993, amid increasing differences with Gen. Abdul Waheed Kakar, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dismissed his government, but Mr. Sharif fought back, and the Supreme Court restored his position. The army then brokered a deal under which both he and the President resigned, ending his first stint. His second stint in 1997-1999 was more turbulent. The nuclear tests of 1998 encouraged him to respond favourably to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's peace overtures which were derailed by the Kargil conflict. His botched-up attempt to replace Gen. Pervez Musharraf led to

the coup in 1999 and the exile for eight years.

### Basic faultline

Like Generals Kakar and Musharraf earlier, Gen. Raheel Sharif too was his choice but differences emerged. The army had to dissuade him from going after Gen. Musharraf and he later blamed the army for encouraging Imran Khan's agitational politics, aimed at weakening the PML(N) hold in Punjab, the largest province which accounts for 183 seats in the 342-member National Assembly. Panamagate was already unfolding when relations with the army worsened with the Dawnleaks incident last October for which the army held his office responsible. His Information Minister resigned and after a prolonged inquiry, his Adviser, Tariq Fatemi, too had to go. Differences on policy approaches with India and Afghanistan had become more pronounced. He wanted to claim credit for the projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to ensure his re-election in 2018. He had to go.

The 'deep state' has always worked with a king's party, and there have always been politicians willing to oblige. Gen. Musharraf had encouraged Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain to set up PML(Q) to wean away Punjab during Mr. Sharif's exile; Gen. Zia had helped form the PML(F) under Pir Pagara and later Mr. Sharif himself had been a beneficiary. This time, Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf played the role of the king's party and the Supreme Court legitimised the ouster. But he too is under investigation. Coups in Pakistan come in different forms and this was a judicial coup, of a judgment reached before the trial was done. But behind it is the 'deep state' which exposes the fundamental fault line in Pakistan, of building a state based on faith while denying its civilisational roots.

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# Barriers to well-being

The extent of society's responsibility for child health care needs clarity



K. SRINATH REDDY

The recent controversy around the health care of Charlie Gard, a terminally-ill 11-month-old baby in the United Kingdom who was finally taken off life support and passed away on July 28, got huge media coverage, polarised public debate and unleashed tense legal battles around complex ethical issues related to the health care of a baby. The infant was born with a serious mitochondrial disorder that led to the wasting of his muscles and brain. There is no definitive treatment and the baby was on life support since last October.

### Protecting a child's interests

His parents wanted to take Charlie to the United States where an experimental therapy of nucleosides would have been attempted, with an estimated 10% chance of benefit. Doctors at Great Ormond Street

Hospital in London said that his clinical condition ruled out any benefit and felt it unethical to subject the baby to the turmoil of a "futile" journey. As serial scans showed severe brain damage, they held out no hope of survival and felt that the boy should be allowed to die with dignity. The parents wanted to try out the experimental therapy and repeatedly took the hospital to court. They failed to convince British courts and the European Court of Human Rights which deferred to the hospital's assessment. The U.S. Congress intervened to grant extraordinary citizenship to Charlie so that he could travel for treatment but the British court did not permit his release from the hospital. Last week, the parents finally gave up after the American expert said that the latest scan ruled out any possible benefit at this stage.

The ethical and legal tangles involve questions of what is in the best interest of the baby. Here, the court decided on behalf of the baby after hearing all the parties in an emotionally drenched contest. As expected, public opinion mostly supported the parents while the legal verdict upheld the medical recommendation not to prolong or



aggravate the baby's suffering. The key message that emerged is that society has the final responsibility to protect the child's interests, however determined.

### The monetary angle

Still, there is a strange deviation from this rule when it comes to paying for the treatment of a child with serious conditions such as heart disease or treatable leukaemia. In countries with high levels of treatment coverage under a system of universal health coverage (UHC), this cost is covered in part or full. In many countries it is not, especially when the cost of the

procedure is high. The child gets treated only if the parents can afford it or risk bankruptcy to save their child. Is this fair?

In countries where social services are very sensitive to child rights, the child is taken away from the parents if the child is abused or even neglected. The responsibility of a civilised society to protect the child is thereby affirmed. How is it then that the neglect of a child's medical problem is not seen as a failure not just on the part of parental care but of the obligation of society too to protect the vulnerable child?

Economists will say that UHC cannot cover all treatments for everybody because resources are finite. They are right. However, how does this stance reconcile with society's duty to protect the child? Even if complex diseases with limited benefit from treatment are excluded, should not UHC cover conditions that seriously affect the health and the well-being of the child but have treatments available that add many years of functional life? What about funding for improving the functionality of children with disabilities?

While allocating resources in the health sector, economists also prioritise public good over private good. Immunisation programmes, for example, protect persons from infectious diseases which can spread across a population and are, therefore, regarded as a public good. Personal health care is regarded as a private good. In case of children, where society assumes a caring custodial responsibility, how does this distinction hold?

In the Indian context, costly treatments that can provide high returns of longevity and functionality for children are obtained through sporadic philanthropy or limited coverage social insurance schemes funded by the government. These do not remove the barriers of access and affordability. It is time health professionals, policy makers, economists, ethicists, legal experts, parent representatives and community leaders are brought together to decide by consensus on the dimensions and delivery pathways of societal responsibility for child health care.

Prof. K. Srinath Reddy is President, Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI). The views expressed are personal

## 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.

### Mere escapism

It is mere escapism and not respect for federalism that dominates the tenor of the Centre's reply asserting that it was for States to end lynchings and attacks by cow vigilantes on Muslims and Dalits. Given the fact that the States affected the most are Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan, which are being ruled by the same party, the government can ill-afford to look the other way ("It's for States to end lynchings: Centre", August 1).

SESHAGIRI ROW KARRY, Hyderabad

■ The Home Minister having a telephonic conversation with the Chief Minister of Kerala soon after the brutal murder of an RSS worker is not seen as a violation of the federal structure. How strange. But it is a different answer when it comes to outfits in BJP-ruled States having a free-run lynching minorities. The Prime Minister cannot escape

answering this on the pretext of maintaining a federal structure nor can the BJP be selective about this. If the BJP led by the Prime Minister can help form a new State government within 16 hours, why does it take months to even condemn a single lynching?

N. NAGARAJAN, Secunderabad

### A crisis within

The decision of the Congress high command to move its MLAs from Gujarat to Karnataka shows a lack of faith of the leadership in its legislators to resist horse trading (Editorial - "Congress in disarray", July 31). A party that is ideologically driven will never face the prospect of mass defections as was seen in Arunachal Pradesh. The Indian National Congress needs to reinvent itself with a strong leadership and clear political ideology in order to regain lost ground.

AMAL BAHULEYAN, Thrissur

### In knots over NEET

This year's NEET exam is slowly metamorphosing itself into a Never Ending Exam Turmoil. As a student, it is disheartening that four years of incessant studying, sleepless nights, weekends at coaching classes for the entrance along with preparation for the 12th board exam all seem pointless now. Students are not at peace even after the intimidating ordeal is over. First, there were the delayed NEET results due to litigation on question variations in different languages. Next was the dilemma over the allotment of the State seats for all boards. New controversies appear to be sparked every day. The deadline for the State merit list is stretching indefinitely. The delay in the procedure has only led to frustration among medical aspirants. Many students have been forced to shift to other academic streams owing to the uncertainty. Colleges too are affected.

What quality of students should they open their doors to is the dilemma they face. Political parties are making the most of this opportunity to hog the limelight.

PRAKRUTHI RAMACHANDRAN, Chennai

■ It is cheap vote-bank politics and not social justice that prompts Tamil Nadu politicians to protest against NEET. While social justice can express itself in a myriad ways such as freebies and subsidies, quality ought to be the hallmark of education in this day and age. The government can't encourage mediocrity in crucial fields such as medicine or engineering. A survey has shown that engineers from Tamil Nadu continue to have the lowest employability figures.

How can Tamil Nadu attain the top position among States if it promotes mediocrity and hates excellence? When even

States such as Bihar and Rajasthan have opted for NEET, why should Tamil Nadu's politicians resist the NEET issue? The State government must take it up as a challenge and ensure that students of the State board are fully equipped to face competition.

KANGAYAM R. NARASIMHAN, Chennai

### Eroding savings

It is the "savings" culture of most Indians that strengthened the backbone of the Indian economy and helped India to handle global recession and a slowdown. The State Bank of India's decision to cut interest for SB accounts

discourages people from saving for a rainy day and results in banks losing deposits, which are its raw material. The concept of banking means accepting deposits for the purpose of lending. Losing deposits is akin to creating more problems at this juncture for government banks, which are already struggling with stressed assets. Why is the BJP, which takes such fast and hasty decisions affecting the common man, hesitant when it comes to acting against corporate and big ticket loan defaulters?

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO, Hyderabad

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### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The photo caption that accompanied the report, "Govt. to share missing Bofors files" (July 31, 2017), erroneously said it was a file photograph of Army gunners using a Bofors gun during an exercise. It is a 130-mm gun.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com