



## A shattered peace

The Central, West Bengal governments must do more to calm tempers in Darjeeling hills

Peace in West Bengal's Darjeeling hills has been shattered again, with the key hill party, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, renewing its demand for a separate Gorkhaland state. The protests started with the suspicion that Bengali would be made mandatory in the hills, but have spiralled into a broad-based 'indefinite' agitation with the GJM targeting symbols of the state and ordering closure of all government offices from June 12. In May, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had announced that all students would have to study Bengali from Class I, but later clarified that it would not be compulsory in the hill district of Darjeeling. The GJM, which had lost the Mirik municipal election to the Trinamool Congress in May, appeared to hear only one part of the language decree, and announced a host of marches and shutdowns. When Ms. Banerjee arrived in Darjeeling with her ministers for a meeting on 'development' last week, she was greeted with protests and stone-pelting of a kind not seen since 2013. The Army was called out, and Ms. Banerjee stayed put in Darjeeling till she thought a semblance of normality had returned. With May and June constituting the peak tourist season, the GJM has, for now, kept hotels, shops and transport facilities outside the purview of the shutdown. It is the peak season for the Darjeeling tea too, with the second flush harvesting on. This eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation spells fresh trouble for a region that depends on tourism and tea for its survival.

If the first day of the indefinite bandh was more or less peaceful, it was thanks to the heavy military presence and the stringent measures announced against those who supported it, including a possible break in service for employees missing work. For their part, GJM leaders Bimal Gurung and Roshan Giri want the Centre to intervene. When the TMC came to power in 2011 after 34 years of Left rule, the GJM had agreed to the formation of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration after three years of violence in the hills. Mr. Gurung, who had set up the GJM in 2007 with the sole agenda of separation from West Bengal, became its chief executive, saying he would take the Gorkhaland demand to Delhi and refrain from shutdowns in the hills. But with the TMC making inroads in the hills, the GJM clearly feels its wings are being clipped, especially with the government setting up several development boards of ethnic communities and further weakening the hill party. Watching from the sidelines is the Bharatiya Janata Party, which is keen to expand its base in the State. GJM leaders are in touch with BJP president Amit Shah, but the Modi government has not yet spelt out its stand on Gorkhaland. While the State government must be firm and quick to quell cries for the formation of a separate state in the border region, the GJM should tread carefully as a spiral of violence hurts hill-dwellers the most.

## Moroccan Spring?

Rabat is struggling to contain anti-government protests after the death of a fisherman

The shadow of the 2010-11 Arab Spring still hangs over Morocco, as its authorities scramble to contain the latest political turmoil. The trigger for the current troubles was the gruesome death last October of a fisherman while retrieving allegedly illegal catch from the police in the Mediterranean port town of al-Hoceima. The incident in the Rif region, which has been periodically restive, proved a catalyst for social unrest witnessed since then against the general marginalisation of the population, and culminating in the detention of scores of protesters, including journalists and human rights activists. Protests have rocked Rabat too. Attempts to restore normalcy have been hampered as the government and angry protesters continue to trade accusations. A leader of the protest movement has been charged with threatening the security of the state, while some followers face criminal investigation. The monarchy under King Mohammed VI is contending with the overall fallout from the 2004 constitutional guarantees for women, including a minimum age for marriage and fair procedures for divorce. A decade-long campaign for gender justice is now focussing on the denial of equal ownership rights for women, and the government-backed privatisation of tribal land.

Against this backdrop, the onerous task of restoring popular faith in the democratic process has fallen on the multi-party coalition of Prime Minister Saad Eddine el-Othmani who took office in March. Paradoxically, the installation of the incumbent government led by the Justice and Development Party came after a prolonged impasse since the general elections of last October. The stalemate lent substance to scepticism that the reforms set in motion in the wake of the Arab Spring were at risk due to the renewed assertiveness of the traditional elites close to the monarchy. Morocco had successfully averted the political upheavals of the Arab Spring witnessed in Libya and Egypt through a calibrated approach of constitutionally managed transition. In return, the country remained a favoured destination for foreign investment and revenue from a thriving tourism sector. These were no mean achievements, in stark contrast to the atrocities unleashed against hundreds of thousands of popular protesters and the lurch towards authoritarian and more brutal regimes elsewhere in the Arab world. The same political sagacity and national stewardship is once again the need of the hour in order to restore confidence in the democratic process. The Prime Minister is known as a consensus-builder, and a genuine dialogue between the government and the leadership of the popular movement is key to a return to stability. Equally, the monarchy would do well to exercise restraint to facilitate the smooth functioning of the mainstream political process.

# The best of times, the worst of times

Without government support, farmers pay the price for a bumper crop they labour so hard to produce



MIHIR SHAH

The ongoing farmers' agitation has taken on a shockingly violent form. Discussion has revolved around an apparent paradox: why are farmers rioting after a bumper crop? But any student of economics knows that prices fall after bumper harvests, which is good for consumers but terrible for farmers. This is why the government needs to step in to buy from farmers at a minimum support price, while subsidising consumers so that they get affordable food. This is what we have done over the last fifty years after setting up the Food Corporation of India (FCI) in 1965.

If this system has been in place for so long, why are we still lurching from crisis to crisis? For long, we have said that the solution is to get people off farming. While there is no doubt we need to create more jobs in manufacturing, we must not forget that even in the year 2050, according to the latest projections, there will still be 800 million people living in rural India. And just one look at the state of Indian cities makes it clear that endlessly moving people from villages to cities could actually deepen the urban imbroglio. So solutions have to be found for agriculture – and fast.

### Use and abuse of soil, water

The problem with Indian agriculture is that we are still stuck with the so-called Green Revolution of the 1970s. I use the prefix "so-called" for a specific reason. Yes, there was a dramatic rise in food production. And India no longer needs to beg for food in the world market. But this was primarily a rice and wheat revolution. It completely neglected two-thirds of In-



SINGAM VENKATARAMANA

dian agriculture and crops grown and eaten by the poorest people of our country – pulses and millets. There is also nothing "green" about this revolution because, over the years, it has caused a deep crisis of sustainability, economic and ecological. Large-scale use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides has had an extremely adverse impact on our soil and water. Deep drilling by tubewells to grow these water-intensive crops has happened without any reference whatsoever to India's unique hydrogeology, where nearly two-thirds of our land is underlain by hard rock formations which have very low rates of natural recharge.

This has meant that there is now a serious water crisis, with both water tables and water quality falling rapidly. We have arsenic, fluoride, mercury, even uranium in our drinking water, creating serious health issues. What is worse, to get the same increase in production, farmers have had to apply more and more fertilisers and pesticides over time. This dramatically raises costs of cultivation, without a proportionate increase in production. More than 3,00,000 farmers have committed suicide over the last two decades, which has absolutely no precedent in Indian history.

### Sustainable agriculture

So what can we do to address these twin tragedies of suicides and violence by farmers? First, we need to transition to a more ecologically resilient agriculture. This becomes

even more urgent in the context of climate change. Large-scale evidence now exists that non-chemical agriculture has become a profitable alternative. As farmers reduce their dependence on synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, they slowly emerge from the ecological vicious cycle and are also able to dramatically reduce their costs of cultivation, without compromising on production. The biggest votary of non-chemical farming is the Prime Minister himself. He has also launched the Soil Health Card Scheme, which potentially enables farmers to more carefully manage input regimes. The government must announce a comprehensive package to give a green direction to the nature of subsidies in the sector.

Second, we must radically reform the management of both surface and groundwater to ensure that the water in our irrigation commands reaches the farmers for whom it is meant and groundwater is managed sustainably in a way that ensures that no one is deprived of their right to water for life. There is positive movement in both these directions within government except for some hesitation in going ahead with a new model groundwater Bill drafted by the Ministry of Water Resources. This landmark Bill seeks to replace archaic British Common Law from the 19th century, which has provided legal legitimacy to the over-extraction of groundwater that underpins the current agrarian crisis. The new law needs urgent adoption and ad-

vocacy with the States by the Government of India.

### On diversification

Third, we require continued diversification to other forms of livelihood, such as livestock and fisheries, among the fastest-growing segments of the rural economy, which could be hurt by recent policy changes. We must also shift focus away from water-intensive rice and wheat. This means radical changes in the way we grow these crops (seed, water and input regimes) but also much greater encouragement to millets and pulses, which are nutritionally far superior alternatives in a country beset with the diabetes epidemic. The key change required here is aggressive and extensive procurement of these crops by the government. FCI procurement focusses only on rice and wheat although this year we saw some initial steps in the direction of procurement of pulses. This is a welcome move but needs to go much further. The best way would be to include millets and pulses in the massive anganwadi and mid-day meal programmes.

Fourth, investments in agro-processing infrastructure are urgently required that would enable farmers to move up the value chain. We cannot continue to have them dumping their vegetables and milk on the road. They should be processed before they are sold and farmers must get their due share in the value chain.

Fifth, we need to ensure access to credit and crop insurance, especially to our 85% small and marginal farmers. This is why I am strongly opposed to farm loan waivers as they destroy the integrity of the banking system and potentially undermine the extraordinary anti-poverty initiative led by Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of women across the country. So many of these extremely poor women, with more than 97% loan recovery ratios, have helped the banking system survive in remote

rural India. All this great work of providing an alternative to the usurious moneylender-traders is threatened by loan waivers.

Finally, we need strong Farmer Producer Organisations, to overcome massive handicaps faced by isolated farmers and enable them to really benefit from market participation.

### Demonetisation crunch

While many cumulative factors have taken a toll on farmers over decades, more proximate factors explain the outbreak of extreme violence. Speaking to farmers and traders, it appears that demonetisation squeezed so much liquidity out of the system that traders did not have requisite cash to buy the farmers' produce. Farmers also feel that persisting with imports, even after clear signs of a bumper harvest, further depressed prices. Having lived in remote rural Madhya Pradesh for the last three decades, I do not recall a crash in prices as dramatic as this year's, that too in the peak of summer. In Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka, prices of tuar, gram, soybean, grapes, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, milk, garlic, cumin, coriander and fenugreek are at historical lows. And when this happens in crops with high costs of cultivation and inadequate government support, the impact is catastrophic, leading to what the Reserve Bank of India has called "fire sales". Which has also created apprehensions about kharif sowing. No wonder the farmers are upset.

Violence shows no way forward. But this is a juncture agrarian policy reform in India cannot afford to ignore. Only a comprehensive policy response can ensure that farmers' distress becomes a thing of the past.

*Mihir Shah, a member of the erstwhile Planning Commission, has lived in remote rural Madhya Pradesh for the last three decades, working on issues of water and livelihood security*

# Waiting for reconciliation in Myanmar

Aung San Suu Kyi makes some progress in addressing long-standing federal issues



RAJIV BHATIA

The second 21st century Panglong peace conference, which ended after six days of deliberations (May 24-29), was marked by some drama in and outside the conference hall. The degree of progress achieved towards national reconciliation should be measured by scratching below the surface.

The 20th century Panglong peace agreement was masterminded by Aung San – the architect of modern Burma. By ensuring the cooperation of key ethnic minorities, he won Myanmar's independence. But at the age of 32 he was assassinated, leaving the challenge of nation-building to his successors. They all failed. Now, his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi – de facto leader of Myanmar – pilots the project to weld together 135 ethnic races into a democratic and federal state. Will the daughter complete the task left unfinished 70 years back?

Ms. Suu Kyi called the conference outcome "a significant step".

Our assessment indicates that some progress has indeed been made. What follows the conference may be as important as what happened last week.

### Players and issues

Two basic issues need to be appreciated here: role players and substance of dialogue. The peace process has been managed by a national tripartite committee comprising the government (including the military), political parties and eight Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) which had signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in October 2015. Ms. Suu Kyi's government has been anxious to make the process inclusive by bringing other ethnic groups within its fold.

From this perspective, limited success was achieved. The United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), a coalition of seven EAOs, insisting on amending the NCA before their participation, boycotted the conference. However, the Panghsang Alliance composed of another seven EAOs, including the principal armed rebels such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the United Wa State Army (UWSA), took part in the inaugural ceremony and then held discussions on the sidelines with the government, especially Ms. Suu Kyi.



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

This group remains opposed to the NCA, but it has real clout as it controls nearly 80% of armed rebels in the country. They joined the process indirectly, thanks to the proactive diplomacy of China.

The main achievement of the first Panglong conference, held in August-September 2016, was that it took place. But the second conference went into substantive issues. Participants, including the military, agreed to secure a federal state. This was a significant gain because in the past the military regarded federalism as taboo. Probably sensing its flexibility, a few ethnic representatives pushed for the inclusion of the right to secession, a demand that was turned down by the government. It is

viewed as "a red line" by the military.

Agreement emerged that states and regions could have their own constitutions provided they were in conformity with the federal constitution. Forty-one principles relating to five sectors – politics, security, society, economy, and management of natural resources – were discussed; broad agreement was reached on 37 principles. Two noteworthy features of the conference may be highlighted here. First, while EAOs suffer from internal divisions and the bulk of them are still outside the process, the government and the military are working in coordination. Yet, the two have different long-term objectives: Ms. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) wants genuine democracy and considerable autonomy for states and regions, whereas the military is conservative on both facets. She demonstrated her political skills by seeking to bridge the divide between the military and the extremist elements in EAOs.

### The China factor

Second, China's decisive role came out in the open. Days before the conference, Ms. Suu Kyi visited Beijing to participate in the Belt and Road Forum. At a bilateral meeting, Chinese President Xi Jin-

ping assured her that China would continue to provide Myanmar with assistance in its internal peace process. Meeting her separately, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang discussed infrastructure projects, according to Xinhua, suggesting their "proper handling" in order "to guide cooperation expectation and boost confidence".

In the build-up to the peace conference, Sun Guoxiang, China's special envoy on Asian affairs, camped in Naypyitaw, meeting key figures and paving the way for arrival of representatives of seven EAOs from Kunming on a Chinese plane. Ms. Suu Kyi's top aide U Zaw Htay told an interviewer that the success of the peace process did not "necessarily" depend on China, but China "does play an important role".

The coming weeks will be revealing. If fighting does not break out between the military and insurgents again; if a formula is crafted enabling all EAOs to join the peace process; and if the dialogue resumes soon, hopes will be strengthened. Probably the deadline is 2020. Aung San's spirit and the people of Myanmar are waiting.

*Rajiv Bhatia is Distinguished Fellow, Gateway House, and a former Ambassador to Myanmar*

## 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.

### The distressed farmer

Addressing an election rally in the parched Jhajjar district of Haryana in 2004, former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee promised to usher in a second Green Revolution. Referring to the late Devi Lal's loan waiver scheme, he said that he "did not believe in such populist measures" as they were virtual invitations to default. The solution to farmers' woes, he argued, lay in making their profession lucrative. Such deviation from political expediency was echoed by RBI Governor Urjit Patel, who termed farm loan waivers a "moral hazard" and sought consensus among political parties in India to desist from announcing them. Further, expressing her concerns over the repayment culture among the farmers, State Bank of India Chairperson Arundhati Bhattacharya maintained that support to farmers should not be at the

cost of credit discipline. It is, therefore, surprising why the BJP is encouraging recidivist tendencies among its State governments instead of encouraging state investment in agricultural backend infrastructure. It is time the government came up with a robust framework to mitigate agricultural distress and rural indebtedness and prevented State Chief Ministers from indulging in "cowboy banking" (Editorial - "The rot in farming", June 13).

SHREYANS JAIN,  
New Delhi

■ Almost all political parties are resorting to loan waivers without proper analysis of its pros and cons or even confirming whether the benefits do go to the deserving sections of the farming community. A substantial amount would be drained from the exchequer and undeserving people would find a place to enjoy the benefits. Instead

of initiating such a step – of waivers – why can't the government think of giving free seeds, fertilizers and insurance cover to the fullest extent possible against any type of losses during a cultivation period to small and marginal farmers? This would act as an incentive to poor farmers to carry out agricultural operations during all seasons. There also needs to be a long-term vision drawn up by experts in the field. Financial institutions would also appreciate such an atmosphere with assured repayments in the normal course and hassle-free credit flows to the sector.

P. GOPINATH,  
Thiruvananthapuram

### The GST sword

Several provisions under the Goods and Services Tax law that have been framed will harm small and medium enterprises. Apart from having to deal with a lengthy annual audit report with a dozen annexures, a

dealer will also have to submit three online returns every month on different dates. As most such dealers will find it tough doing these tasks themselves on a high-technology-based digital platform for various reasons, seeking professional help again will add to their costs. The unjustified and unfair rule of reversal of the input tax credit of a receiving dealer in the case of his supplier not remitting the connected tax amount to the government will keep him engaged in the unproductive task of knocking at his suppliers' doors relentlessly. The high cost of compliance, both direct and indirect, under the GST will thus strike at the very survival of the small and unorganised sector.

KAMAL LADDHA,  
Bengaluru

### It's raining exams

"It is not so very important for a person to learn facts.

For that he does not really need a college. He can learn them from books. The value of an education in a liberal arts college is not the learning of many facts, but the training of the mind to think something that cannot be learned from textbooks," said Albert Einstein. But contrary to this, the educational system encourages the rote-learning method, resulting in a slew of written examinations which test a candidate on a readymade stock of questions without any check on testing conceptual comprehension ("Leave them students alone", June 12). Recently,

the Tamil Nadu State Education Minister announced as many as 41 "educational reforms", much to the discomfiture of students, teachers and parents; students will now have to face three consecutive common examinations. It is a dismal fact that Tamil Nadu State board students are unable to crack the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test examination. One only visualises schools being reduced to the level of coaching centres.

E.S. CHANDRASEKARAN,  
Chennai

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### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

A report about a boy from Haryana (June 12, 2017) topping the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE)-Advanced 2017 said the examination was held for admission to all the 23 Indian Institutes of Technology and the *Indian School of Mines (ISM)*, Dhanbad. It is clarified that the latter is now called *IIT (ISM)*.

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, Kasturji 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