



Mind the gap

Revenue trends underline the government's challenge on the fiscal consolidation front

Eight months into the financial year, the Centre's fiscal deficit has already overshoot the full year's budget estimate by as much as ₹92,349 crore. And given last year's fiscal slippage – the deficit in the revised estimates for 2017-18 was 3.5% of GDP, wider than the 3.2% originally targeted – the augury is far from reassuring. While total expenditure growth, at 9.1% so far this year, has remained below the budget projection for a 10.1% increase, worryingly growth-inducing capital spending is set on an underwhelming trajectory. The 4% increase over the eight-month period is less than half the 9.9% growth the Centre had budgeted for the year. However, it is the trends in revenue that give cause for disquiet. In his annual budget presented in February, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had projected revenue receipts to show a healthy 14.6% increase from the revised estimates for the preceding year, on the back of a 16.6% jump in net tax revenue. Granting that tax revenue does tend to bunch up and get skewed with an upward bias into the final quarter, the April-November revenue receipts and net tax revenue growth numbers, at 8.1% and 4.6% respectively, are far from reassuring. If there is a silver lining on the revenue front, it is the buoyancy seen in non-tax revenue, which surged more than 31%, putting the government comfortably on track to meet the budget estimate for a 3.9% increase. Still, non-tax revenue is budgeted to account for just over a seventh of total revenue and it is hard to see it helping bridge anything more than the smallest of shortfalls in tax receipts.

There is another factor to contend with in sizing up the fiscal calculus this year. With the general election only a few months away, the government needs to avoid the temptation to open the spigot with an eye on the political benefits that it may see accruing. Some of the expenditure plans it has committed to recently have either been factored in or will at most impact the margins – be it public sector bank recapitalisation or an increase in the quantum of incentives for the export of onions to reverse the slide in prices. But the bigger challenge remains in finding ways to rustle up the requisite revenue to keep the deficit from slipping for a second year running. The seven public sector enterprises that have been cleared by the Cabinet for share sales as part of the disinvestment programme are, at best, only likely to partly help meet the budgeted non-debt capital receipts target of ₹92,199 crore. As the Reserve Bank never tires of cautioning, the onus is on the government to avoid further fiscal slippage as it could hurt the economy by crowding out vital private investment. This at a time when it has just been showing signs of a revival.

HIV reality check

Two lives, of a donor and a recipient, are devastated by lapses in blood screening

A 23-year-old pregnant woman in Tamil Nadu tested positive for HIV after receiving a unit of blood at a government hospital blood bank, indicating glaring lapses in screening procedures. The blood was donated on November 30 and transfused to the pregnant woman on December 3. Testing all donated blood units for a number of transfusion-transmissible infections, including HIV, is mandatory in India. The ELISA test used in all blood banks to screen for HIV has very high levels of sensitivity to diagnose samples positive for the virus. It can be said with certainty that the blood bank had failed to screen the blood for HIV. The question of testing the donated blood for HIV during the window period (the time between potential exposure to HIV and when the test reveals for sure if the person has HIV) does not arise as the donor's HIV-positive status became known in 2016 when he donated blood at the same blood bank. Since 2004, prior to donation, all blood banks are required to obtain from donors written consent as to whether they wish to be informed about a positive test result. In case a donor tests positive for HIV, blood banks are required to refer the donors to designated voluntary counselling and testing centres (VCTCs) for disclosure and counselling. That the blood bank tried but failed to contact the donor in 2016 indicates that the donor had consented to be informed of a positive result. In a further tragic twist, he found out elsewhere that he was HIV-positive, and dutifully contacted the hospital on December 10, but his blood had already been transfused by then. On Sunday he passed away after consuming poison.

Studies show that blood banks in India have a success rate of less than 50% in contacting donors who have tested positive for transfusion-transmissible infections. Under the 2004 National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) Action Plan, VCTCs are required to inform the blood bank of a donor's HIV-positive status to stop the person from donating blood in the future only when the confirmatory test done at the VCTC too is positive. Since only half of the consented donors are contactable and even fewer visit a VCTC, it is imperative that NACO finds a viable alternative without compromising the donor's identity. The focus should also be on creating awareness among donors to visit a VCTC to confirm their HIV status when alerted by blood banks. After all, timely confirmation helps donors start on early treatment to keep the virus under check and take precautionary measures to reduce the risk of infecting their partners and others through sexual and other kinds of contact and through blood donation. After winning a protracted battle to keep away professional donors from donating blood by encouraging voluntary donation, it is time blood banks and NACO worked to make safe blood availability a reality at all times.

The travails of the modern icon

Balance and fairness elude the Indian quartet, whose fate sways between hagiography and hysterical downsizing



SHIV VISVANATHAN

Icons have always been a part of memory and heritage, carrying the seal of the sacred. Classical iconography was, in fact, the study of religious icons, an exploration of symbols and their meaning. While iconography has a sense of tradition, modern society looks at its icons differently. The perspective did not always carry the mark of the sacred, but combined folklore and propaganda in interesting ways.

An important plurality

Folklore captures a sense of orality and storytelling in plural ways. Each locality has its own version of the hero and his exploits, providing a sense of a modern epic. Yet, the stories can be deeply plural, reflecting different histories and memories. Shivaji is seen in Maharashtra as the great liberator, but grandmothers in south India used to hushing children to sleep, warning them that Shivaji would come. This sense of plurality was critical and gave to each locality a sense of creating its own icons.

Mass culture and state propaganda operate differently. If folklore has a sense of joy, mass culture brings to its icons a sense of frenzy, hysteria, what one can call a modern sense of idolatry. The narrative possesses an official character which creates a grid of uniformity. The stories are hyperbolic, following a grid. Often there is an attempt to rewrite history or give it a caricatured quality. The figure of Rana Pratap is a good example, where attempts have been made to rewrite his fate in the Battle of Haldighati. Modern memory

does not take kindly to defeat and populist memory often takes historical memory and alters it. There is a hyperbolic quality to this rewriting but this act differs from a Stalinist rewriting of histories. Stalin took old Russian heroes, stalwarts of the Bolshevik Revolution, especially those who challenged his dominance, and converted them to non-persons, literally erasing their role in history. The fate of the Indian icon has been constructed differently. The poignancy comes from a benign neglect, reducing memory and commemoration to a ritualistic event, an empty marker.

The four pillars

In fact, it is interesting to consider the fate of four great modern Indian icons – Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru (left, in picture), Vallabhbhai Patel (right, in picture) and Subhas Chandra Bose. Each followed a different narrative and each suffered what we can call the travails of the modern icon.

The Gandhi of the independence movement was every child's icon, hero and idol. But Indian officialdom and the historian created a one-sided Gandhi, a saint rather than an experimental politician. By museum-ising Gandhi, we put his memory into mothballs. He was reduced to a few select anecdotes, a watered-down version who populated textbooks. The uncomfortable questions he raised, the controversies around him were forgotten. From one of the great monuments of the era, he became a memorial and was soon reduced to mnemonic commemorations on birthdays through official clichés. In 2019, it'll be 150 years since his birth, and one realises he is being stripped for official slogans and programmes, where his great quotations become clerical clichés. A Gandhian programme combined the political and the ethical, which



Swachh Bharat Abhiyan does not – it is a mere act of governance, a spectacle which has still to encounter untouchability and the septic tank.

The career of Bose followed a different trajectory, of erasure and temporary revival. Bose's mystique derived from two sources: from the Azad Hind Fauj which was a counter to Gandhi's satyagrah imagination, and from the mystery of his disappearance. The fact that there is a mystery around his death created a literal industry of inquiries by every opportunistic politician. The sense of possibility, the repeated excitement of the ever revived question, "what if Bose had lived?", always gave a sense of alternative possibilities and histories to India. Many people felt that the Indian narrative would have been different.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's attempt to honour the Azad Hind Fauj tried to cater to this obsession. It was an attempt to play down the Nehruvian imagination. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has attempted to capture history by appropriating Congress icons. It is an act of political envy which reveals that the BJP senses its own national heroes as pygmies before this Congress quartet.

Nehruvian magic

The fate of Nehru has been the most controversial. The memory of Nehru has been battered by opponents ever since the war with

China. Nehru has been unfairly constructed as a Pandora's box of errors since then. People even attributed the roots of the Emergency to his sense of administration. Yet, Nehru pops up like a spring flower after every one of these attacks. The Nehruvian imagination stands like a huge aesthetic canvas despite the BJP's attempt to belittle him. One has to acknowledge that his leadership evoked a different style, a different set of memories from Indira Gandhi's. Nehru's ideas of modernisation still have a political appeal. It was his era that saw the building of the great institutions that Indian modernity talks about. One can criticise their decline, but no one can deny that Nehru brought a magic to modernity and institution-building. A.B. Vajpayee's attempt to give a Nehruvian touch to his politics testified to the validity of the Nehruvian imagination and style.

Nehru is a perennial icon, whose ability to survive has made a mockery of his critics. Instead of hyperbolic attacks and hysterical critiques, one senses that a quieter nuanced assessment would have been more devastating and effective. Sadly, balance and fairness elude the fate of the Indian icon who sways between hagiography and hysterical downsizing, both of which reduce Indian history to a comic strip of exaggerations.

Appropriation of Patel

The recent events around Sardar Patel capture the travails of a modern icon poignantly. Patel, like Bose, was labelled one of the ignored men of modern history, even when both were larger-than-life creatures in folklore. In fact, they did not need the manicuring of history to make them relevant. The BJP's attempt to appropriate Patel is in that sense pathetic, more interesting as a caricature, a case-study in propaganda than a historical ritual of redemption.

Lifelines beyond farm loan waivers

In addition to reforming the credit system, agriculture should be made profitable



KIRANKUMAR VISSA

Rural agrarian distress is firmly at the centre of the national discourse today, triggered by the recent Assembly election results in the Hindi heartland as well as continuous farmer agitations in the past two years (picture). Just a month ago, the farmers' march in Delhi highlighted the reality of their deprivation, anger and resolve. Quite remarkably, their presence rallied the urban middle classes to march in solidarity, and leaders of major political parties to pledge support.

Cry of distress

A farm loan waiver was among the first steps taken by the three new governments in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and has understandably set off a debate about its usefulness. In fact, this is only the latest round of loan waivers. Since 2014, there have been similar moves in Telangana, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, which are States run by various parties. The political system is essentially responding to a cry of distress by addressing the direct point of pain. It is their

mounting debt burden that is pushing farmers to despair and suicides. The NSSO Situation Assessment Survey of Agricultural Households (2013) shows that 52% of farming households are indebted, with rates as high as 89-92% in some States. The quantum of debt has increased enormously, especially from informal sources. Indebtedness has become the elephant in the room that cannot be ignored.

A loan waiver is only an element of immediate relief. It is an acknowledgment that farmers have been pushed into debt due to the systemic failures of the government. The burden on farmers on account of just three items (lack of compensation during drought and disasters, the failures of the crop insurance scheme, and the deficit due to prices falling below the announced Minimum Support Prices) runs to tens of thousands of crores every season. Farmer organisations can justifiably claim that it is the nation that is indebted to the farmers, and not the other way around.

Bill to tackle indebtedness

But the key questions are: how can one ensure that its benefit reaches small and marginal cultivators who are the ones who really require relief? And how does one guarantee that the same situation is not replayed five years later? Repeated loan waivers used every few years as election sops may be



in the interest of political parties but are not in the interest of farmers. Immediate relief should be accompanied by a long-term systemic solution to indebtedness.

The unique aspect of the ongoing farmers' movement is that their demand goes beyond a one-time loan waiver – they want enactment of a law for freedom from indebtedness. The Bill, which has been developed by the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee, incorporates two key elements of reform: a functional institutional credit system which is accessible and accountable to all cultivators, and protection from debt trap in bad years.

First, it guarantees all farmer access to institutional credit; this covers not only land-owning farmers but also sharecroppers, tenants, adivasi and women farmers, and animal-rearers. It requires the registration of all cultivators and providing them Kisan credit cards. This is critical because marginal and landless farmers are mostly excluded from institutional credit, thereby putting them at the mercy of predatory lending by

moneylenders and input dealers. Tenant farmers who lease land from other land owners are especially vulnerable. A study by Rythu Swarajya Vedita in June 2018 showed that 75% of farmer suicides in Telangana are by tenant farmers. The NSSO Situation Assessment Survey (2013) showed that the average debt from institutional sources for small and marginal farmers was only ₹17,570 per household, and ₹1,41,804 for medium and large farmers. The Reserve Bank of India did issue guidelines in 2014 for extending loans to Bhoomi Heen Kisan (landless farmers) and for a debt-swapping scheme to convert informal loans of farmers into bank loans, but they have remained on paper.

Second, it establishes farmers' distress and disaster relief commissions at the national and State levels, based on the model of Kerala's Farmers' Debt Relief Commission. Based on incidences of natural disasters, extensive pest attack and such calamities, the commission can recommend declaration of certain areas or crops as distress-affected in any particular year. Thereafter, it has the power to order measures of debt relief, which may include loan rescheduling, interest waiver, one-time settlement, discharge of debt in instalments, or, in an extreme situation, immediate discharge of debt. The State-level commission is also empowered to pass orders regarding non-institutional loans of dis-

truss-affected farmers.

The principle is that farmers who suffer losses due to circumstances entirely out of their control deserve to be protected. Given that agriculture is a key national enterprise, the concepts of limited liability and bankruptcy protection need to be adapted to the farming sector. This approach provides targeted protection to distressed farmers when they require it, rather than allowing debt, distress and suicides to accumulate until an election year. At present, crop insurance with its inadequate coverage and payout is unable to fulfil that role, but distress relief would include any payout from crop insurance.

Act on solutions

In addition to reforming the credit system, agriculture should be made profitable by ensuring fair remunerative prices, lowering the cost of cultivation, and promoting viable farmer collectives and sustainable models of agriculture.

The challenge before political parties and governments is to deliver on the institutional solutions demanded by farmers. The farming community is not likely to relent if governments adopt a business-as-usual approach and kick the can down the road for the next term.

Kirankumar Vissa is a member of the National Working Group of All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee

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.

Trapped in a mine

Apart from the slow response by all agencies concerned in rescuing the miners who are still trapped in a water-filled coal mine Meghalaya's East Jaintia Hills since December 13, and the stream of discussion about whether the mine was illegally operated, I find no one bringing up the role, if any, of the Directorate General of Mines Safety at Dhanbad, Jharkhand, which has all-India jurisdiction. As a former mining man myself, I am puzzled by this silence from the Mining Inspectorate and also at the absence of any query as to whether such mines get inspected at all. It is a very sad state of affairs.

S.V. RAGHAVAN,
Chennai

Weeks have passed and the fate of those trapped is still unknown. The rescue efforts have been found wanting. One cannot help but recollect the efforts made in Thailand to rescue a team of young boys and their coach from a deep cave. Meghalaya should have acted immediately. The case of the Meghalaya miners should not be forgotten.

A. BHUYAN,
Nagaon, Assam

Coaching factories

High expectations of parents, peer pressure and some times avarice have crushed many a bud before it can blossom into a beautiful flower (Main edition, 'Sunday Special' - "The dark side of dream merchants in Kota's coaching factories", December 30). Many parents

in India feel that an engineering seat in the IITs and campus placement alone are enough to ensure the well-being of their children. There are umpteen options available to make a mark in life. Parents should understand that a peaceful life is more valuable than a fat bank balance. Life can be made simple. It is parents who make it complex for their children.

T. ANAND RAJ,
Chennai

The suicide by a teenager, an IIT aspirant, is yet another indicator of the inadequacies in India's education system, which imparts everything except the maturity to deal with failures. It is common knowledge that getting into a prestigious institute is not a

walk in the park and it requires a great deal of mental prowess and determination to achieve this. Despite coming with an iron will to try to achieve their dreams, some students are unable to scale the peak and resort to extreme steps. This is where the cracks in our education system become evident. The school curriculum needs to include a good deal of material on handling stress and failure. This will go a long way in enabling students to approach life from a practical point of view and also understand that failures are a part of life.

ARJUN PRASANNA S.,
Bengaluru

Noon meal scheme

What is really needed in respect of the noon meal

scheme in Tamil Nadu is to shift meal preparation from the Department of Social Welfare to that of School Education so that teachers evince more interest in the physical development of children. It is also high time that meals are prepared in 'central kitchens'. The meal scheme in the administrative regions of Puducherry is a good example to emulate – state-of-the-art central kitchens. The Tamil Nadu government also needs to extend the scheme till class XII ("Noon meal scheme in peril?" December 30).

A. RAMADAS,
Puducherry

'Green' embassy

The Norwegian Embassy in Delhi has set a fine example on how to go green (Example 2, 'Sunday Special' -

"Norway goes green in Delhi", December 30). That the embassy has earned some money from waste recycling and has also saved water by recycling is a lesson that waste can become wealth. India can also advise its embassies to go green.

RADHIKA KUMAR,
Bengaluru

From 2018 to 2019

The Magazine section has brought down the curtain on the year 2018 in a splendid way (*The Hindu* with *The New York Times* - Turning Points, Global Agenda 2019, December 30). While the issue evoked a sense of nostalgia, it also gave readers a promising vision of 2019.

VIDHYA B. RAGUNATH,
Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

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