



Caution needed

Supreme Court decision on the Rohingya's status must protect those fleeing persecution

The Supreme Court's decision to examine the question whether illegal immigrants are entitled to refugee status needs to be welcomed, but with caution. It is debatable whether the Centre is right in claiming that this has emerged as a substantial question of law in the context of the Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar. For, it is fairly obvious that those escaping persecution in their home country are invariably undocumented. It logically follows that those fleeing conditions of war or conflict will have to be treated as refugees first before their cases can be examined in detail, and deemed fit for deportation as illegal entrants. It will be strange if any court holds that no illegal immigrant is entitled to refugee status. That would amount to a perverse denial of the very existence of refugees as a class. What the government is perhaps looking for is a decision holding that it can choose the class of illegal immigrants it wishes to treat as refugees; and that it can deny that status to any section it deems a threat to national security or is likely to strain local resources. The court's decision to go into the issue, therefore, offers an opportunity to clarify India's approach to the refugee question, which has generally been favourable to vulnerable entrants, but is stridently hostile to the Rohingya.

India is not a signatory to the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, 1951, and a Protocol adopted in 1967 on the subject. However, since Independence it has by and large adhered to the larger humanitarian principles underlying these instruments. In this backdrop, it is astonishing that the present regime is determined to deport the Rohingya, in utter disregard of the danger to their lives in Myanmar, and in violation of the principle of non-refoulement, the norm that prohibits states from forcibly returning refugees to conditions that caused them to flee their homes in the first place. It will be amoral and unjust if this most vulnerable group from Myanmar's Rakhine state, numbering about 40,000 in India now, is denied refugee status. With the Centre taking a stand against treating them as refugees, a positive ruling is needed from the apex court to prevent their forcible deportation. The government's keenness to deport the Rohingya is rooted in the technicalities of its citizenship law. It defines "illegal immigrant" as any foreigner entering India without valid travel documents, or overstays a permitted period of stay. It rules out giving citizenship by registration to such illegal immigrants. The amendments it proposes to the Citizenship Act do not cover Muslim immigrants and are limited to persecuted Afghan, Bangladeshi and Pakistani minorities. India should work with the world community on the voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya and not besmirch its fine record of humane treatment of refugees by pursuing the deportation option without relent.

Grecian churn

Greece under Mr. Mitsotakis is set for a period of stability and continuity

The verdict in Sunday's Greek elections affords a rare comfort for Europe's centrists, who, arguably with the exception of Spain in April, have of late ceded ground to populist forces. The conservative centre-right New Democracy party of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has won 158 out of the 300 seats. The left-wing Syriza party of outgoing premier Alexis Tsipras was left with 86 seats. Critical support for Mr. Tsipras could not be ruled out from MeRA25, the Greek wing of Europe's anti-establishment DiEM25, of ex-finance minister Yanis Varoufakis; it has nine seats. But there is another dimension to this overall sense of political balance and stability in Parliament. Golden Dawn, the anti-Muslim party that ranked third in the last elections, has been convincingly rejected by voters, with less than the requisite vote share to enter the legislature. The potential for mischief from hardline nationalist parties was on display only recently. In January, Mr. Tsipras's government narrowly survived a vote of confidence after Independent Greeks, a coalition partner, withdrew support, refusing to back the renaming of the former Yugoslavian state as Northern Macedonia. Given the influx of immigrants and the refugee crisis, the ruling New Democracy and Opposition Syriza party both have a moral responsibility to consolidate the middle ground. Mr. Mitsotakis has assumed charge under relatively benign conditions. Four years ago, Greece was bearing the brunt of an international bailout, biting austerity measures and a collapsing banking system while on the verge of being ejected from Europe's single currency zone. That prospect is way behind, as the general consensus is that the euro is destined to succeed, for failure would be too costly.

Athens last year managed to exit the €86-billion bailout programme, but conditions in 2019 are far from ideal. Economic growth is at a tepid 2% rate as the population continues to be weighed down by reforms to the once generous pension system and spending cuts to the education and health-care budgets. The roughly 18% unemployment rate is by far the highest in the European Union. Mr. Mitsotakis, the Harvard-educated former banker, is said to be well regarded in the Brussels establishment. The inference is that the economic path of the past four years would not be derailed. The concern for Greeks is over whether Mr. Mitsotakis can navigate what seems a difficult road ahead without overly adding to their woes. Athens's strategic Mediterranean location lends greater heft to the EU's approach on the external policy front. Mr. Mitsotakis must leverage the goodwill he apparently enjoys with Brussels to shape an asylum policy underpinned by enlightened self-interest and humaneness. As Greece makes a fresh start, its leaders should temper the expectations.

A demographic window of opportunity

In India, investing in the laggard States will ensure their role as being the greatest contributors of the future



SONALDE DESAI

Last month, the United Nations released the 26th revision of World Population Prospects and forecast that India will overtake China as the most populous country by 2027. The only surprise associated with this forecast is the way it was covered by the media. Is this good news or bad news? Is it news at all?

Is this news? Not really. We have known for a long time that India is destined to be the most populous country in the world. Population projections are developed using existing population and by adjusting for expected births, deaths and migration. For short-term projections, the biggest impact comes from an existing population, particularly women in childbearing ages. Having instituted a one-child policy in 1979, China's female population in peak reproductive ages (between 15 and 39 years) is estimated at 235 million (2019) compared to 253 million for India. Thus, even if India could institute a policy that reduces its fertility rate to the Chinese level, India will overtake China as the most populous country.

The element of surprise comes from the date by which this momentous event is expected. The UN revises its population projections every two years. In 2015, it was predicted that India would overtake China in 2022, but in the 2019 projections it is 2027. The UN has revised India's expected population size in 2050 downward from 1,705 million in 2015 projections to 1,639 million in 2019 projections. This is due to faster than expected

fertility decline, which is good news by all counts.

Like it or not, India will reign as the most populous country throughout most of the 21st century. Whether we adjust to this demographic destiny in a way that contributes to the long-term welfare of the nation or not depends on how we deal with three critical issues.

Population control

First, do we need to adopt stringent population control policies? History tells us that unless the Indian state can and chooses to act with the ruthlessness of China, the government has few weapons in its arsenal. Almost all weapons that can be used in a democratic nation, have already been deployed. These include restriction of maternity leave and other maternity benefits for first two births only and disqualification from panchayat elections for people with more than two children in some States along with minor incentives for sterilisation.

As demographer Judith Blake noted, people have children, not birth rates and few incentives or disincentives are powerful enough to overcome the desire for children. Ground-level research by former Chief Secretary of Madhya Pradesh Nirmala Buch found that individuals who wanted larger families either circumvented the restrictions or went ahead regardless of the consequences. As one of her informants noted, "The sarpanch's post is not going to support me during my old age, but my son will. It does not really matter if I lose the post of sarpanch."

Second, if punitive actions won't work, we must encourage people to have smaller families voluntarily. There are sharp differences in fertility among different socio-economic groups. Total Fer-



tility Rate (TFR) for the poorest women was 3.2 compared to only 1.5 for the richest quintile in 2015-16. To get to TFR of 1.5, a substantial proportion of the population among the top 40% must stop at one child.

In western societies, low fertility is associated with the conflict that working women face between work and child rearing and the individual's desire to enjoy a child-free life. Not so for Indian couples. In India, couples with one child do not consume more nor are women in these families more likely to work. My research with demographer Alaka Basu from Cornell University shows that it is a desire to invest in their children's education and future prospects that seems to drive people to stop at one child. Richer individuals see greater potential for ensuring admission to good colleges and better jobs for their children, inspiring them to limit their family size. Thus, improving education and ensuring that access to good jobs is open to all may also spur even poorer households into having fewer children and investing their hopes in the success of their only daughter or son. Provision of safe and easily accessible contraceptive services will complete this virtuous cycle.

Population and policy

Third, we must change our mindset about how population is incor-

porated in broader development policies.

Population growth in the north and central parts of India is far greater than that in south India. What should we do about the old policies aimed at not rewarding States that fail to control population growth? These policies include using the 1971 population to allocate seats for the Lok Sabha and for Centre-State allocation under various Finance Commissions. In a departure from this practice, the 15th Finance Commission is expected to use the 2011 Census for making its recommendations. This has led to vociferous protests from the southern States as the feeling is that they are being penalised for better performance in reducing fertility.

There is reason for their concern. Between the 1971 and 2011 Censuses, the population of Kerala grew by 56% compared to about 140% growth for Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. A move to use the 2011 Census for funds allocation will favour the north-central States compared to Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

However, continuing to stay with a 1971 Census-based allocation would be a mistake. Cross-State subsidies come in many forms; Centre-State transfers is but one. Incomes generated by workers in one State may also provide the tax revenues that support residents in another State. The varying pace of onset and end of demographic transition creates intricate links between workers in Haryana today and retirees in Kerala and between future workers in Uttar Pradesh and children in Tamil Nadu.

Demographic dividend provided by the increasing share of working age adults is a temporary phase during which child dependency ratio is falling and old-age

dependency ratio is still low. But this opportunity only lasts for 20 to 30 years. For States such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu which experienced fertility decline early, this window of opportunity is already past.

As the United Nations Population Fund estimates, over the next 20 years, the window of opportunity will be open for moderate achievers such as Karnataka, Haryana and Jammu & Kashmir. As the demographic window of opportunity closes for these States, it will open for Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other States that are the last to enter fertility transition. This suggests that workers of Bihar will be supporting the ageing population of Kerala in 20 years.

The focus areas

In order to maximise the demographic dividend, we must invest in the education and health of the workforce, particularly in States whose demographic window of opportunity is still more than a decade away. Staying fixated on the notion that revising State allocation of Central resources based on current population rather than population from 1971 punishes States with successful population policies is shortsighted. This is because current laggards will be the greatest contributors of the future for everyone, particularly for ageing populations of early achievers. Enhancing their productivity will benefit everyone.

It is time for India to accept the fact that being the most populous nation is its destiny. It must work towards enhancing the lives of its current and future citizens.

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Turning down the heat

There is enormous potential in mitigating climate change through forest restoration



SUJATHA BYRAVAN

During the run-up to the Paris climate change meeting in 2015 (COP-21) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, each country decided the level and kind of effort it would undertake to solve the global problem of climate change. These actions were later referred to as nationally determined contributions (NDCs).

India made a number of promises that would lead to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, or mitigation, and actions to adapt to living in a warmer world, or adaptation. Many of its described programmes and plans were intended to enable India to move to a climate-friendly sustainable development pathway. Primarily, by 2030, there will be reductions in the emissions intensity of the GDP by about a third and a total of 40% of the installed capacity for electricity will be from non-fossil fuel sources. India also promised an additional carbon sink – a means to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere – of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent

through additional forest and tree cover by the year 2030. Trees and other vegetation fix carbon as part of photosynthesis and soil too holds organic carbon from plants and animals. The amount of soil carbon varies with land management practices, farming methods, soil nutrition and temperature.

Enhancing green cover

India has yet to determine how its carbon sink objectives can be met. In a recent study, the Forest Survey of India (FSI) has estimated, along with the costs involved, the opportunities and potential actions for additional forest and tree cover to meet the NDC target. Given that forest and green cover already show a gradual increase in recent years, one might use this increase as part of the contribution towards the NDC. Or one might think of the additional 2.5-3 billion tonnes of CO₂ equivalent sink as having to be above the background or business-as-usual increase.

The additional increase in carbon sinks, as recommended in this report, is to be achieved by the following ways: restoring impaired and open forests; afforesting wastelands; agro-forestry; through green corridors, plantations along railways, canals, other roads, on railway sidings and rivers; and via urban green spaces. Close to three quarters of the increase (72.3%)



will be by restoring forests and afforestation on wastelands, with a modest rise in total green cover.

The FSI study has three scenarios, representing different levels of increase in forest and tree cover. For example, 50%, 60% or 70% of impaired forests could be restored. The total increase in the carbon sink in these scenarios could be 1.63, 2.51 or 3.39 billion tonnes of CO₂ equivalent by 2030, at costs varying from about ₹1.14 to ₹2.46 lakh crore. These figures show that the policy has to be at least at a medium level of increase to attain the stated NDC targets.

Natural forests

A recent study in *Nature* by Simon Lewis and colleagues provides insights into what works well with regard to green cover. Locking up the carbon from the atmosphere in trees, ground vegetation and soils is one of the safest ways with

which to remove carbon. If done correctly, the green cover increase will provide many other benefits: it will improve water quality, store water in wetlands, prevent soil erosion, protect biodiversity, and potentially provide new jobs. The authors estimate that allowing land to be converted into forests naturally will sequester 42 times the carbon compared to land converted to plantation, or six times for land converted to agroforestry.

Another study in *Science* by Jean-François Bastin and colleagues estimates that it is possible to add 0.9 billion hectares of canopy cover worldwide, potentially mitigating up to two-thirds of historical greenhouse gas emissions. This would then prevent or delay the worst impacts from climate change.

Restoration type is key

Taken together, these studies indicate that while there is enormous potential in mitigating climate change through forest restoration, the amount of carbon stored depends on the type of forest restoration carried out. The most effective way is through natural forest regeneration with appropriate institutions to facilitate the process. Vast monocultures of plantations are being proposed in some countries, including in India, but these hold very little carbon; when they are harvested, carbon is released

as the wood is burned.

Besides, some of the trees selected for the plantations may rely on aquifers whose water becomes more and more precious with greater warming. Such forms of green cover, therefore, do not mitigate climate change and also do not improve biodiversity or provide related benefits. India, therefore, needs first to ensure that deforestation is curtailed to the maximum extent. Second, the area allocated to the restoration of impaired and open forests and wastelands in the FSI report should be focussed entirely on natural forests and agroforestry.

While using a carbon lens to view forests has potential dangers, involving local people and planting indigenous tree varieties would also reduce likely difficulties. Instead of plantations, growing food forests managed by local communities would have additional co-benefits. Once natural forests are established, they need to be protected. Protecting and nurturing public lands while preventing their private enclosure is therefore paramount. Active forest management by local people has a long history in India and needs to expand to meet climate, environmental and social justice goals.

Sujatha Byravan is a scientist who studies science, technology and development policy

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.

Reining in hate

The law-enforcers being mute is what ends up emboldening the fringe to tease, torment and even take a toll on lives (Editorial page, "The growing power of the lumpen", July 10.) The episodes of lynching are a blot on the face of a free, democratic India. If the new slogan of the government, 'Sab ka saath, Sab ka vikas, Sab ka vishwas' is to have any meaning, quick steps need to be initiated to win back the trust of all who are being targeted.

C.V. ARAVIND,
Bengaluru

has worked on predictable lines: first denial, then symbolic arrests, later customary baills, protracted trials with endless adjournments and, finally, a much-delayed conviction, if at all. Public memory is short and a young son lost. Who will compensate his family for the irretrievable loss? So far no senior minister or even the Prime Minister has spoken out consistently to reassure the minorities. Civil society must make its presence felt especially as the Opposition is in disarray.

Dr. KURUVILLA VARKEY,
Oddanchatram, Dindigul, Tamil Nadu

Malnutrition trap

The chest-thumping around the vision of a \$5 trillion economy for India has no meaning if it doesn't touch the poorest and the deprived in a positive way (OpEd page, "The malaise of malnutrition", July 10) The grim fact that only 16% of

funds allocated under POSHAN Abhiyaan was used by governments betrays the sheer insensitivity of the authorities towards the malnutrition-afflicted. The cascading tendency of a transmission of poverty from mother to children continues, which is proof enough that the government's efforts have had only peripheral impact.

AYYASSERI RAVEENDRANATH,
Aranmula, Kerala

The inherited dehumanising poverty explains the persistence of malnutrition on a large scale. Children born in impecunious circumstances suffer the most from malnutrition. It is all the more reason for governments to intervene to provide adequate nutrition to all. Funds for food to all yield great returns and help in unlocking the full potential of citizens besides

strengthening the workforce. Governance can be termed 'good' only when it banishes hunger and starvation. The poor must also be valued like the rest of the population since attaching less value to their lives is one unstated reason why their nutritional needs are not taken care of as they should be.

G. DAVID MILTON,
Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

What about recycling?

Ever since the Union Budget laid out the path for electric vehicular transportation, there has been debate on how this will affect the automobile industry and its associated peripheral markets. However, there has been little debate on the importance of (lithium) battery recycling and the issue of tackling solid waste. If EV technology is to have a bright and sustainable future in India, there has to be a complete product lifecycle

system in place. Recycling must go hand-in-hand with market, production and job opportunities.

SREENJ C.M.,
Thalassery, Kannur, Kerala

Elephant repellent

Elephants are afraid of bees and there are numerous case studies across the world to show that the world's largest land-based animal is terrified of the tiny insect. While a bee sting does not affect the thick hide, it is the stings to the elephant's most sensitive areas, namely its trunk, mouth and eyes, that hurt the most. Research has shown that in Africa, placing beehives every 30 m or so is effective in keeping 80% of African elephants away from farmland. A paper in *Current Biology* (2018), titled "Wild Sri Lankan elephants retreat from the sound of disturbed Asian honey bees", has shown that the Asian elephant is also scared of

bees. Therefore, using bees has potential as a control strategy in Sri Lanka, India, Nepal and Thailand.

Beehive fences are gaining popularity in Africa, costing a fraction of what an electrified fence would, according to an *NYT* article. Farmers also have a new source of income from selling honey besides boosting the role of bees as top pollinators. As far as the strategy of sound amplification is concerned, which has been elaborated in the report, "Honour for 'Plan Bee' that helped save jumbos" (July 10), the fact is that elephants are smart and quickly learn that the threat from a recording of buzzing bees is unreal. Therefore investing in the real thing works best as a few stings reinforce its efficacy.

NADIKERIANDA CHINNAPPA,
Bengaluru

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