Step back

Sustained tension at the Bhutan tri-junction suits neither China nor India

The boundary stand-off with China at the Doka La tri-junction with Bhutan is by all accounts unprecedented; it demands calmer counsel on all sides. The tri-junction stretch of the boundary at Sikkim, though contested, has witnessed far fewer tensions than the western sector of the India-China boundary even as India and Bhutan have carried on separate negotiations with China. China's action of sending People's Liberation Army construction teams with earth moving equipment to forcibly build a road upsets a carefully preserved peace. In fact, during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit in 2014 the stretch was opened as an alternative route to Kailash Mansarovar for Indian pilgrims as a confidence-building measure. That the PLA decided to undertake the action just as the year's first group of pilgrims was reaching Nathu La cannot be a coincidence. Moreover, it came only days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's bilateral meeting with President Xi in Kazakhstan. The warmth that officials reported at the meeting was obviously misleading, and it is important for India and China to accept that relations have deteriorated steadily since Mr. Xi's 2014 visit. The stand-off comes after a series of setbacks to bilateral ties. Delhi has expressed disappointment over China's rejection of its concerns on sovereignty issues, and refusal to corner Pakistan on cross-border terrorism or help India's bid for Nuclear Suppliers Group membership. In turn, India's spurning of the Belt and Road Initiative and cooperation with the U.S. on maritime issues has not played well in China – neither has the uptick in rhetoric, including statements from the Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister questioning India's "One China Policy" on Tibet, and from Army chief Bipin Rawat on India being prepared for a two-and-a-half front war.

These issues have to be addressed through sustained dialogue. In the immediate term, however, talks must focus on defusing the tensions at the tri-junction. China has made the withdrawal of Indian troops a precondition for dialogue. This would be unacceptable to India, unless the PLA also withdraws its troops and road-building teams. Apart from its own commitments to the *status quo*, Beijing must recognise the special relationship India and Bhutan have shared since 1947, the friendship treaty of 2007 that commits India to protecting Bhutan's interests, and the close coordination between the two militaries. For its part, India would be keen to show that it recognises that the face-off is in Bhutanese territory, and the rules of engagement could be different from those of previous India-China bilateral clashes – at Depsang and Demchok in the western sector, for example. Bhutan's sovereignty must be maintained as that is the basis for the "exemplary" ties between New Delhi and Thimphu. The Indian government has been wise to avoid escalation in the face of China's aggressive barrage, but that should not stop it from communicating its position in more discreet ways.

Victory in Mosul

The city has been taken from the IS. The Iraqi government now needs to win over its people

The capture by Iraqi forces of the Grand al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul, from where Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself 'caliph' in July 2014, marks the end of the 'caliphate' in Iraq. For three years, the mosque was a symbol of power for the IS, whose black flag flew atop the historic 150-ft tall al-Hadba minaret. IS fighters blew up the minaret when they retreated, practically declaring their defeat in Iraq's second largest city. They are now confined to some pockets of Mosul, and Iraqi commanders believe it is only a matter of days before they can declare total victory. For the Iraqi troops, the eight-month battle has been particularly torturous, given the high casualties and the strong IS resistance, on the battlefield and through suicide attacks elsewhere. It is quite a turnaround for the Iraqi army, which left its barracks and fled the city without even a nominal fight three years ago when it came under IS attack. The ease with which the IS took Mosul, home to over a million people, had raised alarming questions about the professional capability of the Iraqi army to defend its territory against further possible IS expansion. But Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who ordered the Mosul mission and stayed the course despite the huge challenges involved, has put to rest such concerns, for now.

Mr. Abadi managed to stitch together a difficult alliance to fight the jihadists. While the elite Iraqi counter-terror forces led the ground battle, Iran-trained Shia Popular Mobilization Units as well as the Kurdish Peshmerga militia also joined in. The U.S. provided air cover. Despite conflicting interests – the U.S. and Iran are rivals while both Tehran and Baghdad have uneasy ties with the Kurds – the joint front they forged against the IS could be a replicable model elsewhere, especially in Syria where the IS still controls territories. For Mr. Abadi, however, a bigger challenge is to rebuild Mosul, where hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced, and prevent the regrouping of the IS. The destruction of the 'Caliphate', the proto-state that Baghdadi established, doesn't mean that the IS as an insurgency has been defeated. The group is likely to retreat to Iraq's deserts, much like what al-Qaeda in Iraq, the predecessor of the IS, did during 2006-10 after the death of its leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and subsequent military blows. They struck back when they found an opportunity in crisis-stricken Syria and in Iraq's restive Sunni belt, including Mosul, which was simmering against the sectarian policies of Nouri al-Maliki's Shia regime. The IS may also bide its time. Mr. Abadi should reassure Mosul's population that his government will not make the mistakes his predecessor committed. He has retaken the city, and now he has to win over its people.

Written-off in the hinterland

Our education system has failed to integrate the rural into the larger political community, the nation

KRISHNA KUMAR

Rural Mandsaur, where five persons were killed during a demonstration recently, is a prosperous region of western Madhya Pradesh. More than a decade ago, I had the opportunity of spending two days with the children of a private residential school in Mandsaur.

At that time, it was the only English-medium residential school. Its vast and opulent campus in the middle of sprawling green fields was a great anomaly. The school had little to do with its milieu. It represented the dream of a philanthropist to export the best human talent of his region to the global market. This dream resonated national policy trends which, since the mid-1980s, had chosen to view education mainly as human resource development. The idea that education can serve a village in ways that allow it to retain its best boys and girls had been discarded long ago. If you carried in your mind any residues of Gandhi's ideas about village education, you would see the residential academy in rural Mandsaur as an incongruity.

Here was an institution set up to give its metropolitan counterparts stiff competition on global playgrounds. The school had invested heavily in computers. Its strategy to serve rural children was neither purely commercial nor patronising. It was a professional bid to give rural youth an opportunity to aspire for legitimate heights. Some of them belonged to well-off farming families who could afford to send them to study in a residential school. But there were quite a few whose parents had small land holdings or minor jobs. For them, the school meant a potential break from the likelihood of a life dependent on shrinking income from agriculture and labour.

A supplier of talent

The impact of education on rural life has remained consistent since colonial days. When a village boy did well at school, he was expected to shift to a nearby town. That is where he could expect his talent to be recognised. Gradually, villages became the supplier of talent to the city. Only those who were dependent on land stayed back. With the passage of time, land got subdivided into smaller pieces, making agriculture unattractive. In recent times, investments made land more productive, but real income declined. Work opportunities in villages in non-agricultural pursuits remained scarce, and, in the recent past, job growth has come to a standstill. The phenomenon of 'waiting' to find work, described by Craig Jeffrey in the context of Uttarakhand and western Uttar Pradesh, is valid elsewhere too. One part of this phenomenon is the struggle to sustain one's aspiration and the other part is living with frustration.

It is quite common these days among parents in all districts of M.P. to send their sons and daughters to towns such as Bhopal and Indore for coaching. As a broad spectrum industry, coaching now represents an acceptable way of spending much of your youth. It fills time and protects you from feeling constantly frustrated. Countless young men and women find themselves in a formidable situation that offers neither a choice nor the hope that something will eventually turn up. Coaching classes provide access to a peer group where everyone is faced with a similar, chronic crisis. Lakhs of students from rural and semi-urban areas spend their youth getting coached indiscriminately for competitive entry into an ever-shrinking opportunity market. Every year, a new army of candidates for coaching is spewed out by rural schools. Many get absorbed in the coaching industry itself, or in its ancillary industry of private tuition.

Rural alienation

Despite better connectivity by road and phone, villages continue to be alienated from the state's imagination. The former Finance Minister, P. Chidambaram, once said that migration from rural areas has a positive side to it because the state's services are more accessible in cities. His belief that change in the rural-urban ratio of population will accelerate development is widely shared. It underpins development planning, especially the project of 'rural development'. In a historical study of the Indian village, Manish Thakur has demonstrated how the term rural development represents an essentially colonial view of the village. This view also enjoys political and academic consensus. According to this view, modernity for the village can only mean its merger in the urban landscape. The legitimacy granted to panchayati raj has not diminished the political isolation of the village. The recent protests in Mandsaur and surrounding areas show that higher productivity and relative prosperity have not given the farming community any political clout or relief from uncertainty.

Education could have been a means of integrating the rural into the larger political community symbolised by the nation. This did not happen for several reasons. To begin with, schools in rural areas remained neglected and attempts to improve them never gained momentum. Policy focus remained on selecting the talented from among rural children through schemes such as Navodaya Vidyalaya. The larger cohort of rural children suffered the consequences of low budgeting and poor staffing. The message that rural children received and absorbed was that they must change their behaviour and values in order to become good citizens. Education of the rural child has failed to depart from the stereotype which associates modernity with city life. Education has, indeed, exacerbated the rural-urban asymmetry, deepening the alienation of the rural citizen.

Farmers or peasants?

An instructive aspect of the media coverage of the recent unrest in rural M.P. and Maharashtra is the disappearance of the distinction between farmers and peasants. Most people involved in agriculture in India are small-scale peasants. The term 'farmer' refers to the minority with substantial landholdings. Those who died in Mandsaur at the hands of the police were in all probability peasants, not farmers. Among the tens of thousands who have committed suicide out of despair, perhaps most were peasants. Their despair must be read and respected in the larger picture of visionless development. The loans they had failed to repay were minor by urban standards. Their distress reminds us that India has become morally blind in its hasty leap into what it believes to be modern.

Krishna Kumar is a former director of NCERT

Climate-proofed and inclusive

Projects to help people adapt to climate change should not inadvertently worsen living conditions of the poor

**SUJATHA BYRAVAN &
DEBAPRIYA DAS**

How will future climate change affect the poor and how does one address both poverty and climate change? This is a conundrum faced by policymakers in India and other developing countries. Moreover, 'climate-proofing' sustainable development efforts is important; that is to say, current efforts should remain relevant in the face of future climate impacts.

Among development practitioners, a paradigm shift has taken place in the last three decades or so: income alone is no longer considered as being sufficient to estimate and address poverty. One can have assets and a reasonable income and yet be poor in terms of education, nutrition, health and other living conditions. Nevertheless, in India and many other countries, governments continue to use income or consumption to estimate poverty, with specified thresholds associated with the 'poverty line'.

On this basis, using consumption expenditure data, the erstwhile Planning Commission estimated poverty in India to be at 22% of the population in 2011-12.

Dimensions of poverty

People living in poverty in various parts of the world share multiple conditions and life circumstances that have been measured and studied as a proxy to assessing poverty. Following the work of Amartya Sen, in particular, and other welfare economists and political philosophers, the dimensions that are considered often include living standards, assets, health, income, consumption and status in their societies. Thus, measures such as nutrition, quality of the floor and roof of houses, access to energy services and drinking water, level of education, jobs, and social conditions such as caste all become relevant when one tries to understand the different manifestations of poverty.

Some countries, such as Mexico, Chile and Colombia, use several dimensions to record poverty using the MPI (Multidimensional Poverty Index), a versatile tool developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) that looks at the dimensions of education, health and standard of living, giving them all equal weightage.

Each dimension includes several markers or indicators that are measured to recognise deficiencies in each. Those who are deprived in at least a third of the weighted indicators are regarded as poor. Measures such as MPI help us to estimate not only how many people are poor, but also the quality and depth of their poverty. One can also estimate the number of people who are likely to become poor as a result of slight additional deprivations, as well as those who are in extreme poverty. The most recent MPI for India calculated using India Human Development Survey data of 2011-12, estimates that 41% of the people were multi-dimensionally poor.

The adverse effects of climate change that are anticipated in South Asia are droughts, floods, heat waves, sea level rise and related problems such as food shortages, spread of diseases, loss of jobs and migration. These will harmfully affect the poorest and further deteriorate the quality of their lives. Numerous studies have shown that the poor suffer the worst effects from climate variability and climate change. One can understand these relationships by recognising that severe storms damage inadequately built houses; floods wash away those living on riverbanks; and the poorest are the most affected by severe droughts that lead to food shortages and higher food prices.

Projects and programmes designed to help people adapt to the effects of climate change should therefore not inadvertently worsen the living conditions of the poor. Adaptation programmes ought to be designed so that challenges faced by people living in poverty are recognised and reduced. Development policies that consider the context of climate change are often called "climate proofing development". But even the experts do not know how this should be done for specific sectors, policies, or particular local situations. Multi-dimensional understanding of poverty becomes important in this context of research and policy.

Multiple vulnerabilities

If one were to estimate the various vulnerabilities for poverty at district levels and then overlay expected climate change impacts for these areas, future local problems due to the combination of these would become clearer for policymakers. It may of course be impossible to predict, with great certainty, the precise impact of future climate change at the local scale and estimate how these may interact with current shortcomings in particular dimensions of poverty. Yet, there is already enough general understanding from different parts of the world to take a commonsensical approach to addressing the combination of multiple vulnerabilities.

If we learn for example that a district with severe nutritional deficiency might anticipate extended periods of drought from climate change, then the focus ought to be on improving local food access and to combine this with managing water efficiently to prepare for future water shortages. Similarly, proposed improvements in sanitation and housing ought to factor in the increased likelihood of future flooding events in low-lying areas and use appropriate design strategies that are resilient to waterlogging.

In 2015, countries agreed to meet 17 universal goals, officially known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs have targets and indicators that cover a broad range of concerns for human welfare. They include food security, education, poverty alleviation, access to safe and adequate water, energy, sanitation and so on.

The deadline for reaching the SDGs is 2030. This will be a big test for India and other developing countries because these are in fact the major development challenges that the poor countries have been confronting for decades. India is taking the SDGs quite seriously and the NITI Aayog has been coordinating activities relating to their implementation, and emphasising their interconnected nature across economic, social and environmental pillars.

Yet, it is critical to recognise that climate variability and climate change impacts can prevent us from reaching and maintaining the SDG targets. Measuring poverty through its different dimensions, along with the consumption measures, would help policymakers figure out which aspects of poverty expose the poor and exacerbate their vulnerability to climate change.

Through such a process, India could also serve as a standard for other poor and developing countries that are beginning to think about inclusive "climate proofed development".

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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 GST era

In the long run, GST will turn out to be the game changer for the Indian economy (Editorial, "Midnight makeover", July 1). Tax compliance is bound to show a significant improvement while the size of the informal economy will reduce. With ready availability of real time data, government policies will be targeted better to produce the desired results. The GST will have a favourable impact on the price of essentials, provided tax benefits are passed on to consumers. However, the question remains whether the business community is prepared for this sea change. Will it willingly embrace it and cooperate or are we, as in the case of demonetisation, looking at chaotic times ahead?

VIJAI PANT,
Hempur, Uttarakhand

■ As far as consumers are concerned, suffocating on account of various taxes, a unified tax structure is bound to provide some relief. In Kerala for instance, a highly consumerist State, it is estimated that additional revenue to tune of ₹3,000 crore annually is expected to flow in. Another potentially welcome development is that infamous tax postings – the hotbed of corruption – will no longer be lucrative. The GST will have a favourable impact on the price of essentials, provided tax benefits are passed on to consumers.

B. VEERAKUMARAN THAMPI,
Thiruvananthapuram

■ The government has showcased the GST reform as another tryst with destiny. India's freedom at midnight in 1947 was simply nonpareil – it coalesced the hearts and minds of millions of people into an effusive outburst of celebration. By contrast, the present path-breaking tax reform has created many discordant voices in the very trading and business community for whom the benefit is meant ("Day One: Price cuts, peeves over returns filing", July 2). Though the Prime Minister acknowledged in his speech the contributions of the Opposition, it was too little and too late. Nothing would have been lost for the ruling party if it had heaped fulsome praise on the UPA government for pioneering the GST. Alas, magnanimity in thought, word and speech is no more to be seen in Indian politics.

V. NAGARAJAN,
Chennai

Climate of hate

As things stand today, we Indians have taken it upon ourselves to obliterate the difference between 'vigilant' and 'vigilantism'. The epidemic of hate crimes and lynchings of the minorities cannot be explained otherwise. Mob violence and the murders of fellow countrymen in the name of 'cow vigilantism' may have prompted the Prime Minister to finally break his silence, but is that enough? Crying hoarse over barbaric and shameful acts has no meaning. The absence of concrete action against the perpetrators of these crimes can only be seen as an overt endorsement of the act. What a come-down for a country that had gained its independence from the yoke of colonial imperialism, preaching the doctrine of non-violence all along. A citizen's vigilance, intellectual vigilance and media vigilance can definitely act as the biggest deterrent to the forces of darkness.

PACHU MENON,
Comba, Margao, Goa

Border rumblings

The tense atmosphere at strategic points on the India-China border reflects the need to expeditiously settle the decades old boundary dispute. While India has begun flexing its foreign policy muscle *vis-à-vis* its adversarial neighbours, China's repeated aggressive attempts to foment trouble for India on multiple fronts will be at the heart of its strategic policy to contain India. New Delhi must prevail upon Beijing that the resolution of its boundary disputes and identification of settled borders constitutes one of the core agendas in its bilateral relations.

BIBHUTI DAS,
Katirail, Cachar, Assam

Tech and jobs

It is disconcerting that the concentration of massive technological power in the hands of a few tech-czars and their companies is being used to flaunt a Utopian vision of an artificial intelligence (AI) takeover of the planet ('Ground Zero' - "Slowdown in Software Central", July 1). The suggestion of Silicon Valley entrepreneur Vinod Dham that India should seize the AI opportunity should be viewed with trepidation because of the current trajectory of automation is wholly technology-centred where computer systems will almost entirely displace the human workforce.

Techno-sceptics and sane voices in the technological world have been waging a losing battle in support of human-centred automation. It is possible to design systems where the speed and precision of computers will complement the active engagement of human workers.

The concept of adaptive automation, where roles and responsibilities are switched between computers and human operators, will, according to technology critic Nicholas Carr, "inject a dose of humanity into the working relationships between people and computers".

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram