



Monsoon's here

With fears of the impact of El Nino receding, India must make the most of a good rainfall

The arrival of the monsoon along India's shores on May 30, with a meteorological forecast for rainfall that would almost match the normal average of 89 cm, is cause for cheer. It appears that the official forecaster, the India Meteorological Department (IMD), is less apprehensive now about the negative impact of a late-onset El Nino phenomenon in the Pacific Ocean, since it expects a favourable swing in Indian Ocean sea surface temperatures to act as a counter. This year's summer monsoon rainfall will be studied closely for more than one reason. The IMD is using an improved dynamic forecasting model that relies on high-grade computing after several years of off-the-mark predictions, and its accuracy will be tested. In the area of agricultural productivity, a second consecutive year of normal rainfall will improve the prospects of higher output from the 60% of farmland that is without irrigation facility. Combined with the benefit of low oil prices, and thus low inflation, this could spur rural prosperity. Giving rural residents a better deal is imperative. Even with ongoing urbanisation, there is a need to improve the socio-economic infrastructure in villages, starting with health, education and housing. It is also important to relieve a significant section of rural residents from debt. The All-India Debt and Investment Survey, conducted by the National Sample Survey Office in the 70th round during January-December 2013, showed that 31.44% of rural households were in debt.

There will also be variations. Indications are that Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Goa and parts of Tamil Nadu may get less than average rainfall this year, while Kerala, Karnataka and the Western Ghats region could get more than the normal. Preparing for rainfall variations between years and among geographic regions should be a policy goal, but this has not received the needed attention. The long-term neglect is reflected in the lack of irrigation facility for more than half of all productive land. A good year is a time to prepare for the future, and if 2017 concludes with a bountiful monsoon and harvest as expected, the Centre and the States should focus on creating the infrastructure that will build resilience against droughts. State governments need to prepare cities and towns for the monsoon on a continuous basis. Clearing of urban waterways and creation of new reservoirs are absolute necessities, since flooding has assumed crippling proportions on the one hand, while municipal supply of drinking water is unable to meet new demand from expansion of housing. Unchecked pollution is making a lot of naturally harvested water unproductive, with poor management of solid waste in cities turning lakes into cesspools. A good monsoon is described by economists as a four-month-long swing factor for the national economy, more so because it generates millions of direct farm jobs. That should make it a central policy concern, with efforts made to tap every drop.

The Kumble factor

A decision on retaining him as head coach must not be muddled with personal agendas

The Indian cricket team should have been exuding confidence as it begins its title defence in the ICC Champions Trophy in England from June 1 to 18. It comes off a long and successful season at home, and in the normal course of things the buzz would be about India's match against Pakistan at Birmingham on June 4, given how rarely the traditional rivals play each other these days. However, all is not right in the dressing room, and there is distracting speculation about an imminent change in leadership. It started with the Board of Control for Cricket in India calling for fresh applications for the head coach's post since the incumbent, Anil Kumble's one-year contract will end after the Champions Trophy. The BCCI clarified that Kumble would have a direct entry for the process, but the last-minute scramble, just as Virat Kohli's men landed in England, raised questions. There had been enough time for the Board to take a call on the head coach, whether it meant retaining Kumble or opting for a new candidate. It did not come as a surprise, therefore, when leaks surfaced about Kumble seeking a higher pay package for the Indian players and support staff. Disgruntled BCCI officials painted Kumble as a man extracting his pound of flesh, and the anti-Kumble campaign was sharpened with suggestions that Kohli is not comfortable with his "overbearing" ways.

Such talk about differences between coach and skipper does nobody any good. Whatever be the nature of their alleged differences, the Kumble-Kohli combination has delivered excellent results. While there could be the odd difference of opinion, on the field it is entirely the captain's call on how to guide the team. Last year in the West Indies, when Kohli preferred Rohit Sharma over Murali Vijay in the third Test at Gros Islet, Kumble backed his decision. Victory in the West Indies and a golden run at home against New Zealand, England, Bangladesh and Australia are a testament to Kumble's and Kohli's man-management skills and a validation of the talent within the ranks. The unsavoury tidbits planted in the media about Kumble are a terrible contrast to the can-do spirit with which he took charge as coach in June 2016. Now, the Cricket Advisory Committee comprising Kumble's former team-mates Sachin Tendulkar, Sourav Ganguly and V.V.S. Laxman has an unenviable task. They have to sift through fresh applications, besides having to assess Kumble's performance, and then take a call on who should be the head coach. Positions of authority in cricket teams usually have a four-year cycle coinciding with the World Cup. Ideally, the next head coach, be it Kumble or somebody else, should be given a contract till the 2019 World Cup in England. The focus must be on the demands of cricket.

Thought for food

We need to hasten efforts to prevent food waste, at the consumer household level and in the supply chain



VINITA BALI

One of the unfortunate paradoxes of our lives today is that despite adequate food production and unimaginable advances in technology, one in three persons worldwide is not getting enough of the right food to eat and approximately 800 million of seven billion sleep hungry every night. Not surprisingly, this makes poor diet the No. 1 risk factor by far, for the global burden of disease. Poor diets globally are more responsible for ill health as compared with the combined effect of drugs, tobacco and alcohol. Women and children continue to be the most vulnerable, with 156 million stunted children in the world and 40% women anaemic. Add to this the fact that the world adds 200,000 new people to its population every day, of which India adds 58,000. This translates to the need to feed two billion more people by 2050 and to support a higher demand for major crops, estimated to increase by 50%, from 2.5 to 3.5 billion tonnes.

Staying on target

It is therefore with compelling reason that Target 3 for the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12 is to "halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer level, and reduce food losses along production and supply chains including post-harvest losses". Food loss is valued at \$1 trillion globally by the Food and Agriculture Organ-

isation, enough to feed the 800 million who sleep hungry every night. Of this, over 200 million are in India, a country that grows sufficient food to feed its burgeoning population of 1.3 billion.

The SDGs have clearly put the spotlight on food loss and waste, and we are beginning to see more attentive discussion on the subject. At the recently held Food Congress in Dusseldorf in early May 2017, the focus was on identifying possible solutions for both – through better farming practices, use of technology, better information, change in consumer behaviour, etc. Estimates of "food waste and food loss" range between 30 and 50% for both developed and emerging countries.

In developed countries "food waste" happens more at the consumer household level, where more is purchased than consumed; and in emerging economies, it is the supply chain that leads to "food loss" during harvest, storage or in transit, largely due to poor infrastructure and inadequately aligned processes. As an example, India's cold storage requirement is 66 million tonnes, and the national storage capacity currently available is approximately 30 million tonnes. Investment in creating adequate cold storage capacity alone will stem food loss substantially. With increasing wealth, India is, ironically, home to both food waste and food loss.

In either scenario, food that is produced (using depleting and critical resources such as water) but not consumed is a colossal waste which we cannot afford to ignore. Food loss is also nutrition loss, productivity loss and therefore GDP loss. The 40% food loss in



India translates to approximately \$7.5 billion, and for a country where agriculture contributes 15% to GDP and employs 53% of the workforce, this is clearly unaffordable.

These are serious statistics, and unless there is an effort to address food loss factors systemically, the state of health and nutrition of our people will continue to be inadequate, as food loss means loss of macronutrients such as calories, fats, proteins; but even more alarming, it means loss of micronutrients because foods that are rich in micronutrients are also perishable – fruits, vegetables, poultry, fish, dairy, etc. Additionally, with urbanisation and rising incomes, the length of the food value chain also increases, as what people eat becomes less and less connected to where they live.

The Global Nutrition Report 2016 has highlighted India's overall tardy progress in addressing chronic undernutrition, manifest in stunting (low weight for age), wasting (low weight for height) and micronutrient deficiency or "hidden hunger".

With 17% of the world's popula-

tion, India remains home to a quarter of the world's undernourished people, a third of the world's underweight children and a quarter of the world's hungry. This demographic cannot possibly result in a productive and efficient workforce, or be converted into any meaningful economic dividend. The World Happiness Report 2017, which looks at quality of people's life beyond GDP and per capita income and includes economic variables, social factors and health indicators, has ranked India at 122 of 155 countries. India's decline in 2014-16, compared with 2005-07, is on account of poor and slow progress on social factors and health indicators.

Agriculture has to be one of the drivers of India's growth, and even though we are the world's third largest producer of food, our agriculture growth has fallen well below the targeted 4% over the last 15 years. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute, India needs to at least double its investment in agricultural research to double farmers' incomes by 2022. This will not happen only with a focus on rice and wheat – more diversity is needed, with the addition of vegetables, fruits and dairy farming.

Harnessing technology to increase agricultural productivity, where we lag both our potential and competitive benchmarks will be critical to our overall well-being. As an example, since the 1960s India's groundwater irrigation has increased dramatically, and since the 1980s groundwater levels have been dropping, thus stressing the system. Groundwater recharge therefore becomes a critical variable to augment agricultural productivity. Further, imports of agri-

cultural commodities have increased from 4% of GDP in 2008-09 to 5.5% of GDP in 2013-14, according to the Economic Survey. Edible oil imports alone in the last year cost us ₹65,000 crore (\$10 billion). This need not be the case in future.

Dignified quality of life

To provide even a baseline and dignified quality of life to its people, India has to address enhancing agricultural productivity, crop diversification and eliminating food loss and waste with a firm resolve, backed with the right and timely action. The last must be done on priority as it deals with food already available. So the key question is, how do we minimise food loss given that the government wants this, businesses want this, and people want this?

There is clearly a structural and behavioural component to this, and the door is open for investment in food system infrastructure: storage, transportation, processing, etc; investment in information systems that help identify loss by crop and region so solutions can be specifically tailored to the problem; use of technology to better connect supply and demand; public-private partnerships with companies to reduce spoilage and loss; creation of food banking networks that work with civil society and development agencies on getting food already available to those that need it. Among the several priorities we have, minimising food loss has the potential to be transformative in multiple ways.

Vinita Bali is chair, Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition. Views expressed are personal.

Don't tax the tiller

Even the net benefit of taxing agriculture isn't worth the cost of monitoring and rolling out such a system



FEROZE VARUN GANDHI

For peasants, the Mughal Empire was fundamentally an extractive state; a protection racket run riot. Typically, the land revenue share of a crop varied between 33% and 50%, depending on fertility, with a further 10-25% paid to the zamindar for his efforts. Its replacement by the East India Company and later the British government provided little respite. Zamindars were now granted hereditary and proprietary rights, with the rate of assessment fixed in perpetuity. The Company's share was often fixed at 2/3rd of the gross produce received by the zamindars from the ryots. The consequences of such land revenue systems were stark – agricultural output grew at just 0.37% per annum between 1891 and 1947, with foodgrains at just 0.11% per annum, while commercial crop output rose by 1.31% annually; meanwhile the population rose at 0.67% annually. The colonial government pushed farmers into heavy debts and eventual pauperisation.

Post-Independence, the national and State governments sought to redress this. The Agrarian Reforms Committee of 1949 sought a programme of land reforms that would transform the actual tillers into owner-cultivators by a large scale. Instead, a step-by-step approach was adopted to ab-

olish intermediaries, which encouraged zamindars to evict existing tenants instead, pauperising them further. The Central government did its part by seeking to not tax agricultural income, with most States following suit.

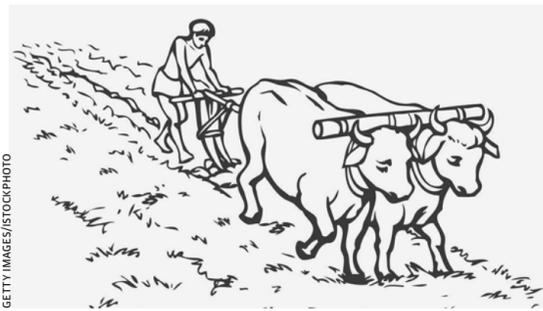
Pitfalls in the tax demand

However, with growth in agricultural rising, a demand for taxing agricultural income has arisen. Agricultural income declared by taxpayers, in returns filed till end 2014, for exemption was at ₹9,338 crore, with over 2,746 income tax cases declaring ₹1 crore agricultural income in the 2014-15 assessment year.

The estimated total annual agricultural income from cultivation and livestock, as estimated by the National Sample Survey Office, is at ₹4,16,092.5 crore, with the total income of the top bracket at ₹16,084 crore and that of the first two brackets, including households with over four hectares, at ₹83,433 crore.

Taxing 9,73,000 large farm holdings having greater than 10 hectares of land earning an average of approx. ₹5 lakh annually shall yield about ₹1,200 crore of agricultural income tax on varying crop conditions, consequent incomes and applicable tax rates.

We've tried this before. The K.N. Raj Committee on Taxation of Agricultural Wealth and Income (1972) sought to institute a progressive agriculture tax on agricultural income in a norm-based manner, with regional average crop yields defining levy rates in a universal manner. The recommendations were not accepted, given limited political and grassroots support.



However, there remain significant pitfalls with this demand. Given the level of informal occupation prevalent in agriculture, implementing an agricultural tax will not be easy. Any agricultural tax system would have to evolve crop-specific norms of return to the land, while accommodating external shocks like droughts, floods or pests. Furthermore, for imposing tax on value of goods produced, the mechanism would fail to take individual farm economics into account, thereby presenting a case wherein a farmer would be taxed even if he makes a loss on sale. It shall require administration to ensure exact estimate of crop productivity and realised sale price per crop harvested – a seemingly homogenous task for all farmers. Lack of clarity on land titles and cropping patterns based on lease/share-cropping shall further introduce randomness to the system.

Further complications arise if farmers suffer from multiple crop failures followed by one successful crop, for the income in that period

may be subjected for tax payment. Taxing agricultural incomes is an idea devoid of knowledge of farming practices as well.

Many farmers save seeds from one harvest for the next and the practice remains critical to running Indian agriculture – proposals based on value of goods produced would end up taxing such sustainable practices as well. For tax based on sales, it shall disincentivise farmers to sell through organised formal channels, thereby increasing risk to farmer's income. Instead of raising agricultural income, we would trend back to age-old farmer pauperisation.

Not worth the effort

In addition, any crop-specific taxation would have to be traded-off against input subsidies, which are nationally uniform for fertilisers and vary on a State-wise basis for water and electricity. Should input subsidies, assumed to be high at the institution of the crop tax rate, fall in the future, the farmer would effectively lose out on both ends of the value chain. Any crop-specific

taxation would have been locally based, with a national crop register not necessarily linked to which crops would be taxed in specific regions or States. The tax rates for the same crop in different regions could be different, inequitably ensuring arbitrage for some farmers.

Amidst all this, it is hard to determine if there would be net benefit to taxing agricultural revenues, even for rich farmers (defined on local thresholds), compared to cost of monitoring and rolling out such a system. Even a progressively structured taxation system would encourage fictitious ownership splits amongst rich farmers and their relatives. Even assuming a net take of approx. ₹1,200 crore, the potential increase in the Central government's taxation revenues would be increased by about 0.1%, while input subsidies, currently totalling ₹35,784 crore in 2016-17, would face significant upward pressure. Is this truly worth the effort?

Agricultural taxation has historically been considered the third rail of Indian politics. While we harken about improving economies of scale in agriculture, such efforts send discouraging signals to large and medium farmers who seek to increase their produce through utilisation of better techniques, differing crop patterns and more judicious use of agricultural inputs. A nation-state where a farmer can be moderately rich one year and marginally poor the other cannot in good conscience tax their income.

Feroze Varun Gandhi is a Member of Parliament, representing the Sultanpur constituency for the BJP

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Assault on ideals

Not only is the notification issued under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (PCA) on the buying and selling of cattle in animal markets unconstitutional, its timing is also an attempt to target a people preparing for their month-long fasting and the feasts which follow ("All animals are equal," editorial, May 29). In fact, with the spate of lynchings and violent attacks by goons in many parts of the country on the pretext of protecting the cow, any decent government and polity would have shown some seriousness towards bringing in an anti-lynching law. It is a shocking coincidence that both the U.S. – which claims itself to be the oldest democracy – and India – the biggest

democracy – have at varying points seen incidents of targeted lynchings. India urgently needs to learn from the gory and shameful history of the U.S. in this matter, enact a stringent anti-lynching law and strengthen the secular, enlightenment values of its education system and the administration itself. A polity built on the foundation of non-violence and constitutional ethos cannot tolerate violence on the part of its people.

FIROZ AHMAD,
Delhi

The Centre's notification on cattle slaughter is more than just a deliberate attempt to encroach upon States' powers. It is an attempt to encroach on our rights related to food and eating

habits. Poor people often get their food supplement from red meat, which is available at a moderate price. With the banning of cattle slaughter, many more people are likely to suffer from malnutrition. The cow slaughter ban and beef consumption ban will provoke a situation similar to that created in Bihar after the liquor ban, leading to more black marketing. Mahatma Gandhi had once been asked if he supported a ban on cow slaughter. He responded by telling that it would "mean coercion against those Indians who are not Hindus". Cow slaughter ban and beef ban will be counterproductive to our nation in two ways – it will polarise the country and it would provide opportunity to some

unscrupulous traders to engage in black marketing. In both cases, the ordinary people would be the worst sufferers.

K.A. SOLAMAN,
Alappuzha

Army chief's defence

A simple question should be posed to those who support in the name of patriotism the action of Major Nitin Leetul Gogoi in using Farooq Ahmed Dar as a human shield: would they continue to hold the same opinion if they or their kith and kin are required to undergo what Mr. Dar underwent? ("Questions that won't go away," May 30). If we were to go by the reasoning offered by Army Chief Bipin Rawat, use of a human shield will be seen as a legitimate standard

procedure used by military personnel. Our judgments on Major Gogoi, no doubt, should be tempered by the fact that he acted on the spur of the moment in a do-or-die situation. But the Army Chief's approval for the action, especially when a court of enquiry is examining the matter, was totally unwarranted.

MANOHAR ALEMBAATH,
Kannur

Language policy

It is important to continue with English as one of the prime languages ("Beyond the language conflict," May 30). Given the international relevance of English, we cannot afford to regress at the world level. On the other hand, Hindi may be given a dominant place but not at the cost of other

languages. The current scenario, where it is being suggested that Hindi be made the link language, it imposes unnecessary burden on the people of non-Hindi-speaking States to learn Hindi. A contrarian view could be that it will be extremely useful for people from the north to learn a south Indian language, or even for people from the south to learn the language of the neighbouring States. The growing importance of cities like Hyderabad, Bengaluru and Chennai as a source of employment can actually serve as a link to their languages and cultures.

RAGHAV R.N.,
Bengaluru

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