



Dangerous rhetoric

Political parties must stop feasting on the complexities of Assam's demography

In the week since the final draft of the National Register of Citizens in Assam was completed, the political rhetoric has got irresponsibly away from the issue at hand. Those associated with the preparation of the NRC, including its Supreme Court-appointed coordinator, Prateek Hajela, are at pains to point out that the draft is by no means the end of the road. The more than 40 lakh people whose names are missing from the draft have a graded appeals process ahead, first at NRC seva kendras. Failing rehabilitation on the list at this stage, they can appeal to district magistrates, the Foreigners' Tribunals, the Gauhati High Court and the Supreme Court. It is a long and daunting process, and a mature polity would ensure that that no man, woman or child is stranded without legal and other assistance to deal with the paperwork. Instead, a full-blown political spectacle has unfolded, with parties trivialising the complexity of the process. The president of the Bharatiya Janata Party, Amit Shah, has filled the air with challenges to Opposition parties, particularly the Congress, to spell out their stand on "Bangladeshi immigrants" and clarify if they want them "to stay here or evict them". Sundry BJP leaders have talked in favour of an NRC in every State, giving a threatening denominational twist to the issue. And West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, seemingly as willing to court her own political constituency over the NRC draft list, has warned of a "bloodbath" and a "civil war".

There is a manifest lack of concern about those bracing themselves to go through the appeals process when one listens to a Telangana BJP MLA's violent words, a Congressperson's boasts about thousands of Bangladeshis deported on his party's watch, or the TMC chief's angry remarks. Each of those lakhs of persons who doesn't find herself on the list is a human being, given to heaviness of heart at being left off a citizens' list, wary of the process that lies ahead, and assailed by what-if scenarios. Among those on the list are people cutting across linguistic, ethnic and religious groups. Together, they do not fit the profile being conveyed by the dog-whistle politics of the BJP to sharpen its identity politics nationwide. In fact, Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, of the BJP too, has implied as much, while counselling calm. Equally, the shrill politics at the national level is holding India back from facing the necessary questions: can it genuinely heed its civilisational legacy without issuing an assurance that nobody who has lived for a long time in this land will be rendered stateless? And that the country is confident of finding a way to close this process without disadvantaging those who will be off the eventual list and those on it?

Lula's chances

With the former President seeking a third term, Brazilian politics has come alive

Even by the standards of Latin America's emotive politics, the nomination of Brazil's convicted former President, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, to contest for a third term in the October election is sensational. The charismatic leader from the left-wing Workers' Party (PT) has been serving a 12-year jail sentence since April in a bribery and money-laundering case. Mr. Lula may still have his candidacy overruled by the electoral body. But there are many factors why that uncertainty has not deterred his party from daring to nominate him for the country's top job. In July, a federal judge with suspected PT sympathies ordered Mr. Lula's release. Although the step was swiftly overturned, PT cadres were quick to seize upon the momentum generated by the initially morale-raising move. Despite the original July 2017 conviction, they have been fiercely protesting his innocence in a bid to project his candidacy for the coming election. A shot in the arm for the pro-Lula camp was an intervention from influential international quarters questioning the judicial process that led to the conviction. A number of U.S. Congressmen, besides former Presidents of Bolivia and France and a former Spanish Prime Minister, have called for an end to Mr. Lula's detention. In addition, his poll ratings, at nearly 30%, are extraordinary for someone serving a prison term. Supporters are tapping into the perception of Mr. Lula's innocence, and portray his persecution as a ploy to prevent him from seeking a third term.

Against this backdrop, PT delegates have, over the weekend, determined that, inside or out of prison, Mr. Lula is their best bet to capture the presidency. The party president even insists there is no Plan B, despite the considerable uncertainty over Mr. Lula being allowed to contest. Political opponents have sought to highlight the PT's lack of a second-line leadership as the reason for it desperately clinging to a compromised Mr. Lula. On the PT's own narrative, the 2016 impeachment of former President Dilma Rousseff was orchestrated by Opposition politicians who were facing criminal investigations. Her successor as President and the current incumbent, the centre-right Michel Temer, has been implicated on several charges of corruption and obstruction of justice. Few politicians have managed to escape the so-called Lava Jato, or Car Wash, investigations into misappropriation of public resources. Against this backdrop, the PT is clearly counting on Mr. Lula's proven popularity, especially during his tenure from 2003 to 2011 when he became a global icon for his brand of welfare economics. The centre-right Brazilian Social Democracy Party and the centrist Sustainability Network Party have nominated as their presidential candidates Geraldo Alckmin and Marina Silva, respectively. But Brazilians must wait a while longer for confirmation whether Mr. Lula will make it to the final race.

Rebooting the system for a skills upgrade

There needs to be a road map to rescue private Industrial Training Institutes from their weak state



SANTOSH MEHROTRA & ASHUTOSH PRATAP

Small shops, basements, tin sheds and godowns. These are not random workplaces but places where private Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) are running in the country. Disturbing facts such as these come from the report of the Standing Committee on Labour (2017-18) headed by Bharatiya Janata Party MP Kirit Somaiya, on the "Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and Skill Development Initiative Scheme" of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE). It was submitted to Parliament few months ago.

Explaining the scale-up

The ITIs were initiated in the 1950s. In a span of 60 years, until 2007, around 1,896 public and 2,000 private ITIs were set up. However, in a 10-year period from 2007, more than 9,000 additional private ITIs were accredited.

What explains this huge private sector scale-up? The committee says that it is not efficiency but a disregard for norms and standards. However, the ITIs are not alone. The National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) today has more than 6,000 private training centres. Since it has short-term courses and its centres open and close frequently, it is all the more prone to a dilution of standards. Private training partners have mushroomed at the rate of five a day (mostly with government support) and it is clear that the government has been unable to regulate private institutions for quality. Private sector engagement in skill

development has been taken up by standalone private training partners and not employers. The latter could have made the system demand-driven. Meanwhile, the lack of a regulator for skill development, with teeth, has led to poor quality affiliation, assessment and certification.

The Somaiya committee report is scathing in its tone and specific in details. It outlines instances of responsibility outsourcing, no oversight, connivance and an ownership tussle between the Central and State governments.

Private-ITI accreditation troubles started when the Quality Council of India (QCI), a private body, was hired due to "high workload of affiliation and shortage of [government] staff". The QCI did not follow accreditation norms created by the National Council for Vocational Training (NCVT) and it appears that neither scale nor standard was achieved, but only speed. "Speed" now risks the future of 13.8 lakh students (on an average, 206 students per ITI) studying in these substandard ITIs, which can be closed any time.

The ITIs have a unique functioning set-up. While they were formed under the government's Craftsman Training Scheme scheme, their day-to-day administration, finances and admissions are with State governments. The NCVT performs an advisory role. The ITIs often run into issues with no one to take ownership. A case in point is the examination process – the question paper is prepared by the NCVT, but administered and evaluated by instructors of the State Councils for VT. The NCVT is just a stamp with no role in actually assessing quality. How can quality outcomes be expected without quality assessments?

The parliamentary committee has shed light on the ITIs. If the same exercise were extended to other skill development schemes,



the picture would be grimmer. There are 183 cases pending in High Courts on non-compliance of norms by the ITIs. However, the short-term training programmes of the Ministry evade any scrutiny and action. For example, the Standard Training Assessment and Reward scheme spent ₹850 crore in 2013-14 with no norms for quality. There were no Aadhaar checks, attendance requirements and batch size limitations. Private training operators have made a profit with no court cases.

The report also reinforces disturbing findings of a national survey by the research institute (NIL-ERD) of the Planning Commission in 2011 about private ITIs: they offered training in less than five trades (in government ITIs it is less than 10); had fewer classrooms and workshops for practice; and their teachers were very poorly paid.

A starting point

So what can we do systemically? A good point to start would be the Sharda Prasad Committee recommendations.

We need better oversight, with a national board for all skill development programmes. The core work (accreditation, assessment, certification and course standards) cannot be outsourced. Like every other education board (such as the CBSE), a board is required in vocational training that is accountable. Since we have the NCVT as a legacy, it should be used as a kernel to constitute the board. We should also have a mandatory rating system for the ITIs that is pu-

blished periodically. A ranking of the ITIs on several parameters such as the one done by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council in tertiary education can be replicated.

There should be one system, with one law and one national vocational education and training system. The silos in which vocational training happens in India is unfortunate. We need to create a unified national vocational system where the ITIs, NSDC private vocational trainers and vocational education in schools, and the other Central ministries conducting training gel seamlessly and can learn from, and work with each other. A unified legal framework can facilitate such a unification. The absence of a law has only weakened regulation and monitoring. What we need is a national vocational act that replaces all scattered regulations – recommended in the 12th Five Year Plan.

Micro-institutional reforms

The ITIs have many internal issues such as staffing and salaries that need attention, as the NILERD nationwide survey in 2011 had found. There is also a critical need to re-kill ITI teachers and maintain the student-teacher ratio. Since technology obsolescence is a continuous challenge, financial support envisaged through the NSDC should be extended to the ITIs.

The primary reason for hiring the QCI and the mess that followed was this: "huge workload of affiliation and shortage of staff". This is true even today. It is unlikely that without fixing this, the QCI mistake will not be repeated. There has been a tremendous push by the government for private sector talent in government; perhaps it is worth considering talent from the open market to fill up higher posts in skill development.

Institutional reforms such as moving the office of the Directo-

rate General of Employment (the arm that has all data on employment) from the Ministry of Labour to the MSDE would help. It would also complement the Directorate General of Training already under MSDE.

Employers and financing

This is the last but perennial challenge. Given the scale of our demographic challenge, a belief that financing from corporate social responsibility, multilateral organisations such as the World Bank, and the government will meet the financial needs for skill development is wishful thinking.

The only way to mobilise adequate resources the right way is to do skills training, and have equipment and tools that keep pace with changing needs and ensure that employers have skin in the game. This is possible through a reimbursable industry contribution (RIC) – a 1-2% payroll tax that will be reimbursed when employers train using public/private infrastructure and provide data. RIC, which is implemented in 62 other countries, was recommended in the 12th Plan and is an idea whose time has come.

Finally, while there is so much talk of skills for the future and the impact of artificial intelligence and automation, data show that 13.8 lakh students in the ITIs are suffering due to poor institutional accreditation. Placement in NSDC training has been less than 15%. Maybe if we take care of the present, we will be better prepared for the future.

Santosh Mehrotra is Professor of Economics, Centre for Labour, Jawaharlal Nehru University, a member of the Prasad Expert Committee on Sector Skill Councils, and a lead author of the National Skills Qualification Framework. Ashutosh Pratap works on skills and jobs issues and has worked with the Expert Committee

Thirty years after the 8888 uprising

Myanmar's stability and development depend on how the issues of equality and federalism are addressed



NEHGINPAO KIPGEN

August 8 marks the 30th anniversary of the people's uprising in Myanmar. The '8888' uprising (or the eighth day of August 1988) is one of Myanmar's most important historic days in the context of the pro-democracy movement (Picture shows the student flag with the 'Fighting Peacock' insignia, and used during the uprising).

The anniversary organising committee is holding events (from August 6 to 8) including political discussions on topics such as 'A 30-year journey to democracy', 'Towards equality for ethnic people and a federal union' and 'Myanmar politics and the military regime'. The committee will be submitting the results of these discussions to the government.

Still relevant

For a few years now, the day has also been observed in different parts of the world by Burmese expa-

triate. Inside Myanmar too, it has been marked by pro-democracy groups in different capacities. But this year's programme in Myanmar is significant for three reasons: it keeps alive the spirit of democracy; underscores the need for equality and federalism; and builds an awareness campaign on the role of military.

'8888' was a people's movement that challenged the then ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party's grip on political, economic and social affairs which led the country into extreme poverty. The protests and the bloody crackdown gave rise to the National League for Democracy (NLD), a political party which paved the way for the current Myanmar State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi's entry into politics and for the pro-democracy movement to continue.

The past 30 years have seen a change in leadership – from military dictatorship to a military-backed semi-democracy and then to a negotiated hybrid regime with power being shared between unelected military personnel and an elected civilian leadership.

The political change paved the way for former military generals to lead the country in civilian garb during the Union Solidarity and



Development Party government which was led by President Thein Sein from 2011. Then, from 2016, Ms. Suu Kyi and the NLD formed the first civilian government in over half a century.

Interestingly, both Myanmar's President Win Myint and Ms. Suu Kyi were political prisoners in the aftermath of the 1988 uprising.

The objective of '8888' was twofold: to push for the transfer of power from the military to a civilian leadership and a change in the political system from an authoritarian regime to a multi-party democracy.

But for the country's ethnic minorities, their struggle and political demands that date back to before Myanmar's independence in 1948 continue. The non-Burman ethnic armed groups have fought for a federal democracy that guarantees autonomy or self-determination in their respective areas

and the right for control over their people and resources. The kind of federalism the ethnic minorities want, based on equality of rights to all citizens, has been denied by the military leadership and the government.

The core issues

The '8888' anniversary organising committee, which is predominantly from the Burman-majority, understands this need and has laid emphasis on the importance of equality and federalism. These issues are today the most discussed in the ongoing peace talks between the civilian government, the military and the ethnic armed groups. The success or failure of the peace talks (or the 21st Century Panglong conference) will largely depend on how these two issues are handled. On this also depends Myanmar's peace, stability and development.

The democratic transition in Myanmar thus far has been meticulously designed by the military. The primary objective, which is laid out in the country's 2008 Constitution, is to give the military a dominant role in politics. In a parallel to the 'Burmese way to socialism' introduced by former military leader Ne Win in the 1960s,

Myanmar now practices what can be called the 'Burmese way to democracy' as introduced by former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt in 2003 when he announced the military's seven-step road map to a flourishing democracy.

But now, in political discussions, the '8888' leaders should look at democratic transitions in other countries. They should share their findings not only with the civilian government but also with the military leadership.

The military may hesitate to roll back its dominant role in Myanmar's politics but it should note that no democracy can succeed when the military holds the reins and is unaccountable to an elected civilian leadership.

For democracy to strike deep roots in Myanmar, the role of the '8888' leaders remains important. The military must note that the people of Myanmar as well as members of the international community want a democracy that respects the rights of all its people, including the minorities.

Nehginpao Kipgen is Associate Professor and Executive Director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University

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.

Court and judge

In a democracy, the judiciary has the right to correct the errors made by the executive. Justice K.M. Joseph has only been discharging his duties which should not go against him later. The reversal of his seniority is unfortunate and speaks volumes about the arbitrary exercise of power by the state to subvert democracy ("SC judges upset at change in Justice Joseph's seniority", August 6).

C.P. CHANDRADAS,
Ramanattukara, Kerala

■ Having failed to stall the elevation of Justice Joseph to the Supreme Court, the government has only created the perception that it can still strike again wherein the senior judge has been made junior to two other judges, Justice Indira Banerjee and Justice Vineet Saran. This is a great injustice.

THARCUS S. FERNANDO,
Chennai

■ It is strange that much attention is being devoted to issues such as the seniority of individual judges. Such violations are very common in the bureaucracy, which though unfair, do not warrant the level of anguish that is being expressed. One wonders how the seniority of an individual judge affects the common man, whose only concern is about the early delivery of justice. When will the media focus on the burning issues of the masses, of which there are plenty?

T. MURALEEMOHAN,
Palakkad

Explanation needed

A reader from Mysuru ("Letters to the Editor", August 6) has aired his views on how the Indian National Congress can emerge as the preferred choice in an electoral contest. However, the truth, bitter as it may be, is that a false and deceptive front of unity which binds the Opposition in its one-

point agenda of dethroning the BJP. Not one of them has any clear-cut policy on how to rectify the so-called "wrongs" of the BJP government. They should submit a list/schedule of what they feel has gone wrong along with the details of how they are going to set things right. We also need to know the methods they are going to use to relieve people of the so-called difficulties under the Narendra Modi government. Mere wailing from every available platform without data and solutions will never convince anybody. For the leaders of the varied Opposition parties, the sole goal seems to be only to become the Prime Minister. How are they going to convince the electorate that they can be an alternative to the BJP?

B.S. JAYARAMAN,
Coimbatore

Migratory politics

The writer's views may be idealistic but are bereft of

any pragmatism and practicality (Editorial page, "Citizenship and compassion", August 6). Being hospitable and compassionate towards persecuted refugees is one thing and allowing the indiscriminate inflow of illegal immigrants is quite another. We must realise that the issue is also about scarce resources. There are also security concerns. The political opportunism over the issue must end and conscious deliberation must prevail to solve this serious issue.

KUMAR HRISHIKESH,
Kolkata

■ The issue of illegal immigrants will always be contentious. Had it been nipped in the bud, the NRC issue would not have assumed the proportions it now has. With the general election approaching, it is natural that political parties will play to the gallery. The idea of plurality is intact; it

should not be allowed to overlap with the issue of illegal immigration.

R. SRIDHARAN,
Chennai

Fading charm

Test cricket has lost its charm mainly because of draws. It is no surprise then that the popularity of the shorter T20 and one-day matches has been due to "instant coffee" results. This

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The full form of UIDAI was erroneously given as Unique Identity Authority of India in the report, "Bid to spoil image of Aadhaar" (some editions, Aug. 6, 2018). It should have been Identification. It was corrected in the City editions.

In the Open page article titled "The nostalgic dosa" (Aug. 5, 2018), the reference to *President* in the paragraph above the penultimate paragraph should be corrected to read as *Prime Minister*.

The application fee for filing a Right To Information (RTI) petition is ₹10 and not ₹0 as given in Question No. 7 of the Easy like Sunday morning quiz (Magazine, Aug. 5, 2018).

In the story titled "Traffic jams in the brain" (Science & Technology page, Aug. 5, 2018), the reference to *exoskeleton* should be changed to *cytoskeleton*.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturba Buildings, 855 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com