



Over the borderline

A people-oriented approach facilitated by the Centre can help resolve Assam-Mizoram row

The drawing down of tensions between Assam and Mizoram, at least at the leadership level, with the respective governments announcing the withdrawal of FIRs against the Chief Minister of Assam and a Rajya Sabha MP from Mizoram, among other steps, comes as a great relief. These actions followed the deaths of six policemen and a civilian from Assam in a violent gunfight in the border town of Vairengte in Mizoram on July 26, which exacerbated an already fraught situation between the States. The retaliatory actions such as filing FIRs against prominent representatives, at a time when locals in the Barak Valley in Assam had already imposed a blockade, disallowing trucks with essential goods from entering Mizoram, seemed to indicate that the States' leaderships were throwing away their scabbards, militating against their own moves to restore calm. After all, the governments had taken the right decision to withdraw their police forces from a four-kilometre "disputed stretch" and let it be manned by central paramilitary forces till a permanent solution is found on the border question. But the "blockade" and the damage caused to the only rail line connected to Mizoram made matters tough, culminating in the Mizo Bar Association filing a PIL before the Aizawl Bench of the Gauhati High Court against the "economic blockade". The Chief Ministers now seem committed to talks, with Assam's Himanta Biswa Sarma even suggesting that his government will approach the Supreme Court to find an amicable solution. Continuing talks without recriminations is the only way out to tamp down tensions between the two States.

The situation should never have come to this. What began as a conflict between residents of the States in the border area that is disputed between them, morphed into a violent battle between police, with paramilitary forces doing little to control or halt this. Their role in stopping the violence and securing the peace in the border areas between the States will now be paramount, even as the Assam government must compel residents to avoid continuing the blockade. An impartial inquiry into the sequence of events that led to the firing incident and the deaths must also be held so that such a situation does not recur. On the question of settling the borders to the satisfaction of both States, a concerted, people-oriented approach by the respective authorities with the facilitation of the Centre can strive to achieve that instead of a purely juridical approach that seeks to address this via the States' respective historical claims, a method that is used to settle sovereign claims. After all, both Assam and Mizoram are part of the Indian Union, and inter-State cooperation and cohesion are central to the sanctity of the federal system.

Tigray's woes

Ethiopia should end the blockade

of the north and engage in talks with the TPLF

When Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops to Tigray, the country's northernmost region, in November 2020, he promised it would be a short campaign against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Seven months later, when Ethiopia declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew, Mr. Abiy was indirectly accepting defeat. Government troops are now facing serious allegations of war crimes as bodies wash up in a river in Sudan that borders Ethiopia. The federal troops had initially ousted the TPLF from Mekele, the Tigrayan capital, and established a parallel government. But the TPLF retreated to the mountains, and then struck back. In June, it recaptured Mekele, forcing the federal troops to pull back. At least in defeat, Mr. Abiy could have accepted his mistakes and sought a settlement. But instead, he announced a blockade on Tigray, with even international aid deliveries stopped. The UN says at least 3,50,000 people are facing a "severe food crisis" in the region. The TPLF says it will not stop fighting unless the government lifts the blockade and pulls back all opposing troops. The conflict has already spilled over into the Amhara and Afar regions, threatening the very regional make-up of ethnically divided Ethiopia. An influx of refugees has raised tensions with neighbouring Sudan.

Mr. Abiy, a Nobel Prize winner, went to war in Tigray as part of an ambitious plan to rewrite the country's power balance. Since Ethiopia embraced democracy in 1995, the TPLF, which led the resistance against the military dictatorship, the 'Derg', had played a key role in the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Mr. Abiy, an Oromo, rose to power in 2018 amid growing ethnic tensions and protests as the EPRDF's nominee. He ended the war with Eritrea, released political prisoners and promised more freedoms. But he also moved to end the TPLF's clout in Addis Ababa, which led to a split in the EPRDF. He formed a different coalition, the Prosperity Party, and retained power, by cutting the TPLF off federal government networks. When a defiant TPLF challenged the government, he declared war on Tigray. He may have hoped that the federal troops could oust the TPLF from power and establish order quickly. But he seemed to have overlooked Ethiopia's complex history of ethnic relations and the TPLF's guerrilla warfare. The war may have helped him politically — his coalition won a huge majority in the delayed June Parliamentary elections which were held in all regions except in Tigray — but it has pushed Tigray into an endless rebellion and shaken up the country's ethnic balance. It is time for Mr. Abiy to act like a statesman. He should stop the collective punishment of the Tigrayan people, end the blockade and be ready for talks with the TPLF for a mutually agreeable cessation of all hostilities.

A language ladder for an education roadblock

The dreams of many Indian students seeking to pursue professional courses in their mother tongue can be realised



M. VENKAIHAH NAIDU

Every great change starts with a revolutionary step. The recent decision of 14 engineering colleges across eight States to offer courses in regional languages in select branches from the new academic year (<https://bit.ly/3lsPuma>) marks a historic moment in the academic landscape of the country on which rests the future of succeeding generations.

Showing the way

On a parallel note, the decision of the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), to permit B. Tech programmes in 11 native languages in tune with the New Education Policy (NEP), is a momentous one. This monumental move opens the door to a whole world of opportunities — to students of B.Tech courses, in Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Gujarati, Malayalam, Bengali, Assamese, Punjabi and Odia.

The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, in his address marking the first anniversary of the National Education Policy (NEP), hailed the move and pointed out that the NEP's emphasis on the mother tongue as the medium of instruction will instil confidence in students from poor, rural and tribal backgrounds. Importantly, he added that even in elementary education, the mother tongue is being promoted and referred to one of the key drivers in this regard — the Vidya Pravesh programme launched on the occasion.

These remarkable steps should be welcomed and scaled up over the next few years to ensure that the dreams of millions of students seeking to pursue professional courses in their mother tongue are realised.

Interestingly, in a survey conducted by the AICTE in February this year, of over 83,000 students, nearly 44% students voted in favour of studying engineering in their mother tongue, underscoring a critical need in technical education.

The progressive and visionary NEP 2020 champions education in one's mother tongue right from the primary school level — improving the learning outcomes of the child and the development of his/her cognitive faculties hinge upon this.

Multiple studies have proved that children who learn in their mother tongue in their early, formative years perform better than those taught in an alien language. UNESCO and other organisations have been laying emphasis on the fact that learning in the mother tongue is germane to building self-esteem and self-identity, as also the overall development of the child. Unfortunately, some educators and parents still accord unquestioned primacy to English, and resultantly, the child's mother tongue ends up as their 'second/third language' in schools.

There are bubbles now

It would be pertinent to recall the words of the great Indian physicist and Nobel Laureate, Sir C.V. Raman, who, demonstrating exemplary vision, observed, "We must teach science in our mother tongue. Otherwise science will become a highbrow activity. It will not be an activity in which all people can participate..." (<https://bit.ly/2VvakX6>). While our educational system has seen phenomenal growth to the extent that it offers courses of international repute in engineering, medicine, law and the humanities, we have, paradoxically, excluded our own people from accessing it. Over the years, we have ended up building academic roadblocks, impeding the progress of the vast majority of our students and remained content with creating a small bubble of English-medium universities



and colleges, while our own languages languish when it comes to technical and professional courses.

Global practices

A cursory look at the global best practices in the medium of instruction at the level of higher education should inform us more on where we stand. Among the G20, most countries have state-of-the-art universities, with teaching being imparted in the dominant language of their people.

Take the Asian nations among them, for instance. In South Korea, nearly 70% of the universities teach in Korean, even as they aspire to play a role on the international stage. In a unique move, with the increasing craze for learning English among parents, the South Korean government, in 2018, banned the teaching of English prior to third grade in schools, since it appeared to slow pupils' proficiency in Korean.

Similarly, in Japan, a majority of university programmes are taught in Japanese; in China too, universities use Mandarin as the medium of instruction. In Europe, France and Germany offer us great insights into how nations protect their languages. France went to the extent of having a strict 'French-only' policy as the medium of instruction in schools. In Germany, while the language of instruction in schools is predominantly German, even in tertiary education, more than 80% of all masters' programmes are taught in German.

Canada showcases a sound approach to education, revealing a picture of a country with linguistic diversity. While English is the dominant medium of instruction in most provinces, in Quebec, a province with a majority French-speaking population, French is the medium of instruction in primary and secondary education in many schools, as also a number of universities.

In this global context, it is ironic that India has an overwhelming majority of professional courses being taught in English. In science, engineering, medicine and law, the situation is even bleaker, with native language courses being practically non-existent. Fortunately, we are now beginning to find our voice in our own languages.

How do we improve this grim situation? The NEP outlines the road map, demonstrating to us the means to protect our languages while improving the access and quality of our education. We must begin with imparting primary education (at least until Class 5) in the student's mother tongue, gradually scaling it up. For professional courses, while the initiative of the 14 engineering colleges is commendable, we need more such efforts all across the country. Private universities must join hands and offer a few bilingual courses to begin with.

One of the biggest bottlenecks for more students to take up higher education in the native languages is the lack of high-quality textbooks, especially in technical courses, and this needs to be addressed urgently.

Build on these initiatives

In the digital age, technology can be suitably leveraged to increase accessibility of these Indian language courses to students in remote areas. Content in the digital learning ecosystem, still a nascent domain in our country, is greatly skewed towards English which excludes the vast majority of our children, and this has to be

corrected.

A welcome development in this regard is the collaboration between the AICTE and IIT Madras to translate SWAYAM's courses in eight regional languages such as Tamil, Hindi, Telugu, Kannada, Bengali, Marathi, Malayalam and Gujarati. This will be a major boost for engineering students and help them transition more smoothly to an English-dominated curriculum in later years. We need more such tech-led initiatives to really democratise higher education.

Not exclusivist

Laying the stress on instruction in the mother tongue is not exclusivist in nature — as I often say, one should learn as many languages as possible, but what is required is a strong foundation in the mother tongue. In other words, what I am advocating is not a 'Mother tongue versus English', but a 'Mother tongue plus English' approach. In today's increasingly interconnected world, proficiency in different languages opens new vistas to a wider world.

Together, we must work to remove the sense of inferiority some of us display when it comes to speaking in our own languages. In the end, we must remember that if we neglect a language, not only do we lose a priceless body of knowledge but also risk depriving future generations of their cultural roots and precious social and linguistic heritage.

I hope more institutions will be encouraged and inspired in the coming years to offer courses in regional languages. India is a land of immeasurable talent. We must unlock the full potential of our youth, without letting their seeming inability to speak a foreign language impede their progress. It is against this backdrop that the decision of the 14 engineering colleges across eight States to offer courses in regional languages needs to be seen and appreciated.

M. Venkaiah Naidu is the Vice President of India

A grand tax bargain in danger of coming apart

A Goods and Services Tax version 2.0 may have to be designed soon given the flaws in the existing structure,



SATYA MOHANTY

After four years, the promise of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) remains substantially unrealised. It is a far cry from the attempted avoidance of cascading and continues to be a not very transparent multi-rate system with associated difficulties in computing and assessing tax liability, tax burden and tax incidence. States have less headroom in handling GST collection shortfall after surrendering their fiscal autonomy. When the period of five years of compensation ends in 2022, will we see a continued flawed system or a freshly minted GST 2.0, given the asymmetry of the power equations between the States and the Centre?

The tax base of GST does not appear to be expanding as the recent uptick has reversed last month. The GST is strongly co-related to overall GDP. Revenue collection of the GST is dependent on the nominal growth rate of Gross Value Added (GVA) in the economy. Since inception, GVA per quarter has been between ₹40-lakh crore to ₹47-lakh crore and GST revenue has not been higher than ₹2.7-lakh crore to ₹3.1-lakh crore. The Tax to Gross value addition is only about 5% to 6.5% though GVA

growth was much higher. Obviously, a very large segment is covered by exemption, composition schemes, evasion and lower tax rate.

Centre holds the cards

The fundamental weakness of the GST is its political architecture which is asymmetrically loaded in favour of the Centre. Disputes between States and between the Centre and the States are inevitable in a mosaic arrangement. But in the current structure, no particular body is tasked to adjudicate this through the original Constitution (115th Amendment) Bill 2011 (GST Bill) had a provision for such an institution. In the voting, the central government has one-third vote and States have two-thirds of total votes (with equal voting rights regardless of size and stake). With the support of a dozen small States whose total GST collection is not more than 5% of the total — and their Budget is mostly underwritten by the central government — the game is hugely in the Centre's favour. With equal value for each States' voting, larger and mid-sized States feel short-changed.

Severe fiscal strain is expected when the 14% compensation comes to an end as the median growth rate of subsumed taxes is only 11%, and in many States below 5% to 10%. The median subsumed tax buoyancy is below unity. This means with 1% growth, there will be a 0.75% growth of tax. The contraction of GST revenue



across the country means that the compensation amount will be higher and the clamour for a continuance of compensation scheme is inevitable.

Issues with tax structure

The second problem is the design flaws in the tax structure. Nearly 45% to 50% of commodity value is outside the purview of the GST, such as petrol and petroleum products. In addition, States which export or have inter-State transfers or mineral and fossil fuel extractions are not getting revenue as the origin States and need a compensation mechanism. The pre-existing threshold level of VAT has been tweaked too often which has led to an evaporation of tax base incentivising, enabling evasion and misreporting. Most trading and retail establishments, (however small) are out of the fold of the GST. At the retail level, irrespective of whether Input Tax Credit (ITC) is required or not, the burden can be passed off to the consumer. As a result, the loss could be as high as one third.

Third, exemptions from registration and taxation of the GST

have further eroded the GST tax base compared to the tax base of the pre-existing VAT. Exemptions are purely distortionary and also provide a good chance to remain under the radar, thereby directly increasing evasion or misclassification. Theoretically, exemptions at the final stages reduce tax realisation. As multiple rates are charged at different stages, it goes against the lessons of GST history. This tax works well with a single uniform tax rate for all commodities and services at all stages, inputs and outputs alike. While most countries have a single rate, India stands out and is among the five countries to have four rates/slabs.

Exclusion as another issue

The fourth is that of exclusion. Petroleum products remaining outside the purview of GST has helped the Centre to increase cesses and decrease central excise, in what would otherwise have been shareable with the States. Now, States will be keen on including petrol and diesel under the GST as their share of tax goes up in the process, even if there is a special rate fixed for it.

In April 2017, cess and surcharge formed 56% and 35% of the excise duty on petrol and diesel, respectively. Now, their share has increased to 91% and 85%, respectively, and the shareable central excise has reduced by ₹6.5 a litre, making it ₹2.98 for petrol and ₹4.83 for diesel. Equity requires that petrol and diesel be brought under the GST. Apart from the

complexity it creates in record keeping and 'granting ITC', in the present form it also leads to a cascading which the GST avowedly tried to avoid (<https://bit.ly/3xihYp>).

Fifth, compliance with GST return (GSTR-1) filing stipulation and the resultant tax information is not up to date. The gap in filing GSTR-1 was 33% in 2019-20 and has been increasing. As per GSTR-3B, the effective tax rate is as low as 6.5% when GSTR-1 shows an average 15% tax rate. Fraudulent claims of Input Tax Credit (ITC) because of a lack of timely reconciliation are quite high though it has come down by two thirds. Tax evasion, estimated by a National Institute of Public Finance and Policy's paper, is at least 5% in minor States and plus 3% in the major States.

These policy gaps with regard to a higher threshold (when in sales tax, it was lower) exemption level and multiple tax rates have led to a base erosion. Policy gaps along with compliance gaps do need to be addressed. Without proper tax information, infrastructure and base, the States would go in for selective tax enforcement. In the long run, voluntary compliance will suffer and equity in taxation will be violated. Finally, the grand bargain will come apart. Given all these problems, a version 2.0 of GST may have to be designed sooner rather than later.

Satya Mohanty is a former Secretary to the Government of India

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.

CM's interview

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has taken an unapologetic stand on almost every issue, which is quite evident in the interview, "Not asked to move to Delhi: Yogi" and "If anyone has broken the law, my govt. has come down heavily on them" (Page 1 and Inside pages, August 4). His answers when asked about the mind-numbing spectre of bodies floating in the Ganga and the implementation of laws only make those of us who follow U.P. politics feel bad about the State's situation

under his rule. His self-righteous indignation is palpably evident across the interview.

AYYASERI RAVEENDRANATH, Aranmula, Kerala

Answers needed

On Pegasus, one is at a loss to understand why the Opposition insists that only the Prime Minister or the Home Minister should speak for the Government while the Prime Minister and Home Minister, for reasons known to them, are silent on the issue. The Government has equal responsibility in the developments, if not more

than equal to that of the Opposition. If snooping took place, what was the Government's role? And what are the next steps to prevent such incidents? These are the questions everyone is anxious to get answers for, from the Government.

P.R.V. RAJA, Pandilam, Kerala

Opposition unity

The recent visit of Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal, to Delhi appears to have worked as a catalyst for the Congress to convene a meeting of the Opposition parties to forge

joint and coordinated action on issues plaguing the nation (Page 1, "Let's unite voice of people, Rahul tells Oppn. leaders", August 4). For the Opposition parties to respond with seriousness to invitations for such meetings, the Congress should first put its house in order and elect a new President who leads the party effectively from the front and exude confidence to mount an energetic fight for the people on the pressing issues. The Congress should realise that it has the unique distinction of being the only Opposition party

that has an all India presence. The fact is that 2024 is so near, but Delhi is far, far away.

KOSARAJU CHANDRAMOULLI, Hyderabad

Board results

The CBSE Class 12 and 10 results are out, with most students passing with decent grades on account of their internal assessment marks. They indeed have had a rub of the green. But

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In a report headlined "SC offers mediation in Krishna dispute" (Aug. 3, 2021) there was an incorrect reference to the Assam-Manipur violence. It was actually between Assam and Mizoram.

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at the same time, students should understand that the job market is tough and they do need to hone their skills. This would mean that they would need to attend bridge courses to ensure they are solid in the basics. Academic institutions should extend help to them in this connection.

S. RAMAKRISHNASAYEE, Chennai