



## Another warning

Landslips in Himachal Pradesh point to the need for a new development paradigm

A landslide has struck again in Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh killing at least 14 people and burying several others, just over a fortnight after a similar disaster killed a group of tourists. This time, the catastrophe has been even more severe, with mud, rocks and debris raining down on vehicles including a State transport corporation bus on National Highway 5. Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur has said that 60 people may have been buried and multiple agencies including the ITBP, National and State Disaster Response Forces were frantically trying to rescue survivors. Himachal Pradesh, a picturesque western Himalayan State that has made progress on social developmental indices, faces rising instability from environmental factors such as climate change and heavy monsoon rainfall. Landslips have become a familiar feature, and seismic events threaten to increase their frequency and aggravate the impact. The same NH-5 was similarly blocked by falling rocks in the wake of heavy rain in August 2019, along with several other roads, and the season witnessed a significant loss of life, particularly in Kinnaur. There is considerable scientific literature now arguing that Himachal's mountain slopes are experiencing not just seismicity and rain-induced stresses but also man-made pressures to exploit hydropower and build more roads, and are being rendered even more fragile.

Much of Himachal Pradesh is in the high risk zone for landslides, calling for great caution in pursuing disruptive projects, particularly hydropower. The Landslide Hazard Zonation Map of India marks over 70% of the State as 'high risk' and 14% as 'severe' to 'very high risk'. The threat of earthquakes remains potent, as the mountains here are young in geological terms and therefore active, and about 32% of the State is categorised as a high damage risk zone for seismicity. A developmental model that prioritises heavily engineered structures such as dams and hydropower that involve rock blasting, tree felling and inundating large spaces clearly jeopardises the integrity of mountain slopes; roads developed along the slopes face the brunt of the impact, as the Kinnaur landslides show. In some cases, the roads themselves have been destroyed. A decade ago, the action plan on climate change published by the State identified some key hazards and wanted to take long-term remedial measures. It is time for an update, going beyond disaster management, and the recurring disasters only add to the urgency. There is wide support among local communities for sustainable tourism and an expansion of the farm-based economy, particularly apple growing. But these can progress only when environmental losses are halted. With greater rainfall and cloudburst activity, Himachal Pradesh is bound to face greater uncertainty. Maintaining the status quo can only make the ghastly episodes of falling boulders and lost lives a more frequent feature.

## Eye in the sky

ISRO must open itself to public gaze, and not shy away from sharing its successes, failures

Anything that is related to space science, failure or success, is larger than life; for this is a new frontier for achievement and conquest within the realms of science and technology. The recent attempt by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to place an earth observation satellite (EOS-3) in a geosynchronous orbit using the Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV-F10) ended in failure due to a 'performance anomaly' – a malfunctioning of the trusted rocket launcher. All seemed to be well as the stage two and three separated as planned, but when the time came for the cryogenic third stage to light up, there appeared to be a failure and an ensuing deviation from the expected path, as seen in the control panel. There was an immediate disruption in the telecast which had been showing a view of the control panel, and the camera veered towards troubled faces, discussion and probably efforts to salvage the mission. Finally, Dr. K. Sivan, Chairman of ISRO, announced in a short sentence that the mission could not be accomplished. Speculation may run rife about the reasons for this unexpected failure, after many successful launches since 2017. ISRO had fewer launches during the pandemic in 2020 than it did in earlier years. This particular launch had originally been planned for March 5, 2020 and was called off because of a technical glitch a few hours before the launch. It is also to be mentioned that the cryo engine in question is of a Russian design originally, unlike that of the GSLV Mark III rocket, which is indigenous.

The failure of this mission is worrying not only because it breaks a long, successful run, but because there are several important missions in the pipeline: Aditya-L1, the sun watcher, and the Gaganyaan mission, which will carry humans to space, are slated for the coming years. Thursday's failure will increase the stress on ISRO scientists to doubly make sure the chances of success in these missions. In the meantime, the impact of this failed mission is being kept away from interested citizens for now. For some time at least, there will be no official word on what actually happened and how the mission failed, and this owes in no small measure to the propensity of ISRO to cover up and enshroud events in mystery, especially mishaps. Admittedly, the stakes are high, in terms of investment and national pride, but scientists, of all people, should wear the belief that failure is as much part of the game as success. From a culture of warding off eyes, the organisation should embrace the limelight. ISRO indeed has many stories to tell of scientific endeavour, the method and the manner of progress; and as it opens its doors to the public gaze, it can only rise to the skies.

# Squaring up to India's education emergency

In making up for months of lost formal learning, there needs to be action on the education, health and livelihood fronts



SAJITHA BASHIR & ANVAR SADATH

During the COVID-19 pandemic, India enforced among the strictest, most generalised and continuous school and university closures creating in the process the largest education emergency in the world. Federal countries such as the United States and Brazil implemented a variety of school closures and remote/in-person education policies in different jurisdictions. Not so in India, where all States, irrespective of the pattern of evolution of the novel coronavirus disease, followed a uniform policy, with fewer variations.

### Policy and indicators

The global Stringency Index, created by the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (<https://bit.ly/3iH0p8y>), has tracked the closure of educational institutions across all countries since the beginning of the novel coronavirus pandemic. This indicator is one of eight "containment and closure" indicators and a health information indicator used to calculate the index. Indicators are coded according to the level of strictness of the policy.

In India, the school closure indicator shows that of the 503 days, between March 5, 2020 and July 20, 2021, 404 days were characterised as being at the most severe policy response (requiring closure of all types of educational institutions); 62 at level 2 (with closure of some types of institutions) and only 37 days at level 1 (when closure was either only recommended or school opening was allowed with precautions). As a result, about 265 million schoolchildren have been taught exclusively through so-called "remote learning", the largest number in any country for the longest period of time.

This approach contrasted with the response in many other countries. Within a few months of the first lockdown of schools in March 2020, pandemic-hit Europe began resuming in-person schooling for certain groups of children or cer-

### School Closure Indicator - Stringency Index

The table shows the level of strictness of school closures in selected countries, according to the Oxford COVID Government Response Tracker



Country	Total days from March 5, 2020 to July/August 2021 (latest date for which data are available)	'3' - require closing all levels of education	'2' - require closing only some levels or categories, e.g. just high school	'1' - recommendation of closing or all schools open with alterations	'0' - no measures	
					Year	Days
India	503 (July 20)*	404	62	37	0	0
Brazil	495 (July 12)*	406	77	0	12	0
Uruguay	516 (Aug. 2)*	140	127	240	9	0
Vietnam	510 (July 27)*	212	82	216	0	0

BASED ON DATA DOWNLOADED ON AUGUST 7, 2021 FROM [HTTPS://BIT.LY/3JMMLXF](https://bit.ly/3JMMLXF)

tain localities. Evidence was mounting of the harm caused to children and young adolescents – learning losses as well as socio-emotional stress – by prolonged school closures and of the ineffectiveness and inequalities of remote learning, even in technologically sophisticated environments.

The Oxford Stringency Index shows that less affluent countries such as Uruguay and Vietnam, also took a more measured approach, imposing the severest policy responses in education only for 140 and 212 days, respectively. (Table 1). India's education policy response was similar to that of Brazil – surprisingly so, as the severity of the pandemic outbreak was much less here during 2020 than in Brazil.

### Schooling strategies

When "hybrid" schooling models (i.e., a combination of in-person and remote teaching) were introduced, countries prioritised children of younger ages, of essential workers and those with special needs, for in-person learning. When the school closure policy was relaxed in a few Indian States during January-March 2021, only high schools were allowed to function to conduct public exams.

By March 2021, 51 countries had resumed in-person education. In

another 90 countries, including many in Africa, multiple modalities, rotation of children for in-person classes and part remote/part in-person options were being offered. Similar strategies were not systematically tried in India, even when relaxations were made for public gatherings at festivals and elections, prior to the second wave of the pandemic. India is, therefore, less prepared for school re-openings than many other countries. The trauma of the second wave has generated even more fears of schools becoming the epicentre of the next wave, though the recommendations of the Indian Council of Medical Research to reopen primary schools from July 20, 2021 and the gestures of some of the States now are promising.

### The Indian experience

During these hundreds of days of almost continuous lockdown, the youngest and the poorest among Indian children – Dalits, tribals and others, and lacking devices and electricity – struggled with online classes. Attendance data are neither available nor defined. Many have just given up – especially those who had learnt little in schools. Existing education inequalities will increase.

The national Digital Infrastruc-

ture for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA) portal of teacher resources claims that usage increased to 3.17 billion "learning sessions" and 37.85 billion "learning minutes", by the end of May 2021. The educational significance of these metrics is not clear. Meanwhile, many studies and reports from the field by numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and individuals engaged with the recently formed National Coalition on the Education Emergency indicate that teachers, unprepared for remote teaching, forward social media links to their hapless students. Children are expected to submit homework and assessments also through WhatsApp or text.

Kerala provided basic access to remote learning by June 2020 to its four million students through the KITE VICTERs educational TV channel, which broadcast classes for all subjects in each grade. It was made clear that such 'digital classes' are not an alternative to regular classes, but to bridge the academic gap. It mandated further continuous follow-ups by teachers. The State leveraged investments made over the last two decades in information technology for schools, including capacity building of teachers and teacher developed digital content. Nevertheless, the universal switch to 'online' mode has proved challenging.

The Brazilian State of Sao Paulo gives some clues about the possible impacts of remote learning on India's locked out children. A recent study published by the Inter-American Development Bank concludes that students in the State "had learned only 27% of the in-person equivalent under remote learning". The risk of dropout increased by a factor of 2.5. Significantly, however, even a partial reopening of some high schools to allow in-person classes for a few weeks increased students' test scores by 20%, relative to a control group.

Tragically, for tens of millions of Indian children, the difficulties of remote learning may be the least of their troubles. With families ravaged by disease and job losses, teenagers are caring for the sick and younger siblings, or working for pay.

Interruptions in child health services, early nutrition and mid-

day meals have affected the growth and development of young children. Ironically, closed schools are seen as a commitment to children's safety, while the higher risk of disease transmission by working children or the increase in malnutrition is ignored.

As schools reopen, offering a few standardised "bridge" courses and "remedial classes" may seem like a facile antidote to the months of lost formal learning. Resuming the teaching of "the syllabus" – even a watered down version – and pushing children through to the next grade means kicking the can down the road. In designing appropriate programmes, the experiences of stakeholders will be invaluable.

### A complete change is needed

India's education emergency demands action on the education, health and livelihood fronts. It requires focusing on every child as an individual. Each school should prepare a safe school opening and child support plan, and should receive technical help for this. Teachers must be prioritised for vaccinations. Local adaptations and flexibility are essential. An 'Education Emergency Room' should be set up in every district to coordinate, implement and monitor local plans. Many activities have to be coordinated: develop health and sanitation measures in schools and protocols for public transportation; encourage children who were not engaged with schools over the last year to come back; develop tools to help teachers make quick diagnoses of students' learning gaps; train teachers to use this as a guide to support children's recovery; offer additional classes or activities; implement school health and nutrition; develop tools to accompany the educational trajectory of each student. Technology should be deployed safely for such purposes that identify and respond to children's needs.

After months of lockdown, will India's children now luck out?

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# Parliament is abdicating its oversight role

The monsoon session which has ended is another example of Parliament being quite ineffective in all its functions



M.R. MADHAVAN

The monsoon session of Parliament which ended on Wednesday was a disappointment in several ways. This was the fourth straight session that ended ahead of the original schedule – other than the cancelled winter 2020 session. This meant that many important issues had not been discussed such as the COVID-19 response and strategy, the Chinese incursion into Ladakh, the economic situation, rising prices of many essential items, and farmers' problems, to name a few. And of course, the news of snooping using the Pegasus system broke out just ahead of the session.

### Shrinking work time

But Parliament hardly functioned. Both Houses were frequently disrupted as the Government and Opposition parties could not agree on the topics to be debated. The Lok Sabha worked for just 19% of its originally scheduled time, and the Rajya Sabha for 26%.

The Government pushed through 20 Bills, mostly without any discussion. Of the 18 Bills passed by the Lok Sabha, only one saw discussion over 15 minutes. While the Rajya Sabha crossed this low bar for most Bills, only two

Bills were discussed for over an hour. In 15 of these Bills, not even one member of the Lok Sabha spoke; each Bill was passed after a short statement by the respective Minister. The Lok Sabha proceedings show one Bill – the Scheduled Tribes (Order) Amendment – as being discussed for 10 minutes within which seven members spoke, two Ministers intervened, and the Minister replied.

Every Bill introduced during the session was passed within the session. This means that there was no time for any scrutiny by members. While we have seen such behaviour in State Assemblies (in 2020, 91% of all Bills in 19 Assemblies were passed within five days of introduction), this is a new development for Parliament. In the period of the Fifteenth Lok Sabha (2009-14), 18% of the Bills were passed within the same session. This rose to 33% in the Sixteenth Lok Sabha and is at 70% halfway through the current Parliament.

### No scrutiny

None of the Bills was referred to a parliamentary committee for examination. These committees provide a forum for parliamentarians to engage with experts, stakeholders and government officials to understand the implications of Bills. They deliberate on the consequences of various provisions, and recommend amendments. In recent years, we have seen significant changes made in Bills such as the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code and Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Bill as a result of the recom-



mendations made by parliamentary committees. There has been a sharp downward trend in Bills being referred to them – from 71% in the Fifteenth Lok Sabha to 27% in the Sixteenth, and 12% in the current one till date.

There was an amendment moved in the Rajya Sabha to refer the Tribunals Reform Bill to a select committee of that House, and the motion was rejected by 79 votes to 44. Given that there are currently 232 members, this indicates that nearly half the members were absent during the vote.

Thus, we see that Bills are being passed without any serious examination by parliamentarians. They are most often not being referred to committees, there is hardly any discussion on the floor of the House, and in most instances, Bills are passed within a few days of introduction.

### Crucial Bills

There were some important Bills passed this session. The Constitution was amended to allow States to identify backward classes (i.e., Other Backward Classes) for the purpose of providing reservations. A recent Constitution Amendment

has converted the National Commission for Backward Classes from a statutory body set up by an Act of Parliament to a constitutional body. That amendment also specified that the President of India shall specify the list of OBCs. Recently, the Supreme Court of India had interpreted this provision to imply that the State government cannot issue the list of backward classes. The Amendment passed this session clarified that States have the power to do so.

In 2012, the Income Tax Act was amended with retrospective effect from 1961 to cover certain transactions. A Bill passed this session reversed this provision of retrospective taxation. Famously, Vodafone was required to pay a large sum under the now repealed provision.

The Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation insures all bank deposits against default (currently up to ₹5 lakh). The Act was amended to require an interim pay-out within 90 days if a bank was going through a liquidation or reconstruction. The General Insurance Business (Nationalisation) Act was amended to enable the Government to bring its shareholding in general insurance companies below 51%.

The Tribunals Reforms Bill was passed. The Bill replaced an ordinance which specified the process of appointment of members and their tenure and service conditions. It retained two provisions struck down last month by the Supreme Court: the four-year tenure which the Court changed to five years, and a minimum age of 50

years for judicial members which the Court revised to allow lawyers with experience of 10 years. It would be interesting to see whether the Act is challenged in court, and how the Court reacts.

There was no discussion in Lok Sabha on any policy issue. The Rajya Sabha had just one such discussion on the management of COVID-19 which lasted nearly five hours. The supplementary demand for grants for ₹23,675 crore was passed by the Lok Sabha without any discussion.

### Course correction needed

To sum up, Parliament appears to be quite ineffective in all its functions. The reason for having a legislature separate from the executive is to have a check on executive power. This session, the Government got every Bill that it introduced passed as an Act, without any debate, and without any scrutiny by committees. Question Hour hardly worked. There was just one debate in the Rajya Sabha and none in the Lok Sabha on policy issues. A large supplementary Budget was passed in less than 10 minutes without even one member speaking on it.

Parliament will have its 70th anniversary next year. Parliament also plans to move to a larger building. We will see many speeches celebrating these occasions. They will be just empty words in a brand new building unless parliamentarians get their act together.

M.R. Madhavan is President of the PRS Legislative Research, New Delhi

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Warning on warming

The latest IPCC report, while being gloomy, is elusive on some inevitable questions. With the club of emerging markets expanding and the global population booming, it is inevitable that the demand for energy and resources will skyrocket. As per the

International Energy Agency (IEA), India's energy consumption is pegged to double by 2040. While the developments in green energy, including the Indian-led International Solar Alliance, offer some respite, the fact remains that renewables alone may not cater to this massive

demand. In order to avoid a difficult trade-off between development and climate change, our leaders need to be pragmatic and kinder to other solutions.

PAUL JOM,  
Thiruvananthapuram

■ In the absence of national or international climate

policy direction, cities and local communities around the world will have to and have been focusing on solving climate problems on their own, like 'working to build flood defences, installing water-permeable pavements to better deal with floods and storm water, and improving water storage

and use'. We must think globally and act locally.  
R. SIVAKUMAR  
Chennai

### White Paper

Fiscal management is going to be difficult for the Tamil Nadu government as tough measures would make the new government unpopular.

It should concentrate on "extravagant expenditures", incurred by the State.

Measures to promote fiscal discipline must not restrict the operational efficiency of the government.

RAJEEVA. A. RASHEED,  
Chennai

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