



Learning safely

As schools prepare to reopen, the focus has to be on vaccination and safe behaviour

The Centre's move to allocate two crore coronavirus vaccine doses for universal coverage of all teaching and non-teaching staff in schools by Teachers' Day (September 5) adds a measure of confidence that resumption of face-to-face classes from September is not fraught with high risk. Several States are preparing to reopen schools, mostly for Class 9 and higher, next month. Some, including Haryana, Telangana and Gujarat, have announced that they will allow of-line classes even for younger children. Amidst fears of a third wave of the pandemic, epidemiologists, academicians and policymakers have been wrestling with the question of a low-risk trade-off, balancing protection from the virus with some bridging of the learning deficit caused by prolonged school closures that are crippling future prospects of millions of children. It is encouraging that half of the 97 lakh teachers in the country have already been immunised, by official estimates, making it feasible to reach the rest by September 5. The risk of infection to children in schools remains, however, and must be addressed with utmost seriousness, particularly with fast-transmitting virus variants present in all States. This calls for a coherent response that incorporates the best learnings from epidemiology and centralises decision-making to the districts based on local circumstances. It is, of course, a step forward that a vaccine, the three-dose ZyCoV-D, has been approved for the 12-18 age group, but this is to be administered only from October. The reversion to physical classes will, therefore, have to be carefully calibrated.

Vaccination of children over 12 years of age has been allowed in some countries, but the pandemic's course has remained unpredictable. In Israel, one of the most vaccinated countries with an estimated 78% coverage of the over-12 population, the Delta variant swiftly caused a spike in infections as distancing norms, the mask mandate and travel bans were eliminated. In one instance, an entire class of students was infected by one unvaccinated child who had been on vacation. This cautionary tale serves to emphasise the importance of priority vaccination of children, starting with those who may have other health conditions, maintaining safety protocols, and adopting low-cost non-pharmaceutical interventions such as good classroom ventilation and open-air instruction wherever feasible. Credentialed studies in the U.S. indicate that these are effective measures, along with vaccination. It is vitally important for the Centre to share information on the school reopening experience with all States and issue alerts in real time to enable decision-making. An empirical approach will also enable organisations such as the National Institute of Disaster Management collate useful insights. Parents must be convinced by transparent official measures that the health and education prospects of their children are in safe hands.

Risks and rewards

The asset monetisation push needs careful calibration to evade future hazards

Following through on the Budget's plan to monetise public assets in order to fund fresh capital expenditure on infrastructure, the Government has released an exhaustive list of projects and facilities to be offered to private investors over the next four years. What distinguishes it from the new public sector disinvestment policy is that a change of ownership is not envisaged. The Government estimates these assets – airports, coal mines, highway stretches, even urban tracts, stadia and hotels – to fetch around ₹5.96-lakh crore through structured leasing and securitisation transactions. This, in turn, could help fund the National Infrastructure Pipeline with new projects worth ₹100-lakh crore, although the Government has said fiscal constraints are not the trigger for this plan. As Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has emphasised, these assets or the land therein will not be sold but private players will be asked to pay for operation and management rights and expected to modernise assets that are either languishing or are simply under-utilised. An infrastructure investment trust (InvIT) structure has already been used this year by the PowerGrid Corporation to raise funds against its transmission lines network and could be used for highways, gas pipelines and railway tracks, including the Dedicated Freight Corridor. For ports, mining, railway stations, concession agreements laying out the contours for a PPP are proposed.

About ₹88,000 crore is expected from the National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP) in this year itself, in addition to the ₹1.75-lakh crore already estimated in the Budget from the sale of public firms such as Air India and BPCL. While this Government is yet to complete a single PSU sale, the risks of adverse audit paras about valuations and processes hang over monetisation deals too. However, post-transaction troubles in outright sales can be of a limited nature. With proposed concession periods running up to 60 years for some assets, NMP deals, by contrast, could pose a long-term headache if they are not structured with end-user interests in mind, balancing the profit and utility motives. The sharing of risk and rewards between the public and private partners needs to be weighed carefully for each sector. Checks and balances are needed for actual infrastructure usage versus projections at the time of bidding. If the Government had implemented its 2014 Budget promise to set up an apex body to devise new PPP models, learning from past mistakes, India's institutional capacity for the NMP would have been more mature by now. Just like disinvestment deals during a downturn could crowd out new investments and risk the tag of 'fire sales', revenue projections for PPP assets could be deflated now leading to lower bids followed by super-normal gains for the operator in the future. Getting the nitty-gritty right is critical for this grand plan.

Finding India's voice on Afghanistan

In a world of hard geopolitical realities, New Delhi must leverage its unique strengths in remaining engaged with Kabul



SUHASINI HAIDAR

In the chaos that has followed the Taliban takeover of Kabul on August 15, noisy recriminations in the international community and the desperate appeals of Afghans who want to leave the country, India has been relatively silent. On the ground, the Narendra Modi government chose to speak with its feet, ordering the full evacuation of the Indian embassy and all Indian personnel within hours of Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani's departure from the 'Arg' Presidential Palace. At the UN Security Council (UNSC) in New York and UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, India has expressed its worries about terrorism, human rights and refugees, but has not mentioned the Taliban itself even once by name. And in India, the Government appears to be equally mute, as thousands of Afghans clamour for visas, and get no reply, focusing instead on the task of bringing a few hundred Indian nationals back home.

When India led

The silence is in sharp contrast to the past, particularly the last 20 years, where India had been at the forefront of discussions in Afghanistan and on Afghanistan. India's role strengthened over the tenure of three different governments in Delhi in three areas: in terms of infrastructure building and development assistance, encompassing all 34 provinces of the country; in terms of building democracy, helping script the Constitution and hold elections; and in terms of educational investment, allowing thousands of young Afghans to study, be trained as professionals and soldiers, and become skilled in India.

India was the first country that

Afghanistan signed a strategic partnership with, the only country that undertook perilous but ambitious projects such as Parliament, the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, and the Chabahar port project in Iran for transit trade, and by far the one country that polled consistently highly among countries that Afghan people trusted. It seems inconceivable that the Government can choose to simply walk away from such capital, regardless of the developments in Afghanistan, domestic political considerations in India and geopolitical sensitivities. The Government must consider all its options in remaining engaged with Afghanistan for its future.

A marginalisation

To begin with, it is necessary to acknowledge the hard truth that no other power from the west to the east has considered India's interests while charting its course on Afghanistan. India has found itself cut out of several quadrilateral arrangements: the main negotiations held by the "Troika plus" of the United States-Russia-China-Pakistan that pushed for a more "inclusive government" including the Taliban; the alternative grouping of Russia-Iran-China-Pakistan that formed a "regional arc" that has today seen them retain their embassies in Kabul; and the connectivity quadrilaterals formed by the U.S. and China, respectively, with Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan, that depend heavily on Taliban protection and Pakistani port access.

Neither India's traditional strategic and defence partner, Russia, nor its fastest growing global strategic partner, the United States, thought it important to include India or insist that their envoys Zalmir Kabulov (Russian President Vladimir Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan) and Zalmay Khalilzad (U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation) briefed their counterparts in New Delhi about the details of their negotiations with the Taliban leader-



ship. If New Delhi was unable to feel its staff would be secure from Taliban militia and their Pakistani benefactors in order to keep diplomats in Kabul, nor to negotiate a diplomatic outpost at Kabul airport that would allow it to place a core team with the U.S., the United Kingdom and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries, it is time to accept that India is in need of a new diplomatic strategy. While the Narendra Modi government found it inconvenient to vocally protest the talks with the Taliban and the extended line to Pakistan to facilitate the talks with these "friendly" global leaders thus far, it is necessary for it to publicly decry an outcome that has clearly worked against India's interests now.

Action under the UN umbrella

In order to do so, India needs to begin by rallying the United Nations, to exert its considerable influence in its own interest, and that of the Afghan "republic", which is an idea that cannot be just abandoned. At the UNSC, India must be more vocal about its abhorrence of a Taliban-run Afghanistan that seeks to reverse the gains of the past two decades. A considerably diluted statement that India drafted as UNSC president on August 16, that did not even mention opposition to an "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" was a disappointment in this regard.

Next, India must take a leading role in the debate over who will be nominated to the Afghan seat at the UN, and whether the Republic's appointed current Ambassador will remain, or the seat declared "vacant" or even

"suspended" depending on the new regime in Afghanistan committing to international norms on human rights, women's rights, minority rights and others. As Chairman of the Taliban Sanctions Committee (or the 1988 Sanctions Committee), India must use its muscle to ensure terrorists such as Sirajuddin Haqqani and other members of the Haqqani group responsible for brutal suicide bombings on Indian embassies and consulates must not be given any exemptions: on travel, recourse to funds or arms.

Mr. Modi's speech at the UN General Assembly scheduled for September 25 will be an apposite occasion to express India's position on the future of Afghanistan and challenge the rest of the international community to refuse to legitimise the Taliban regime unless it is willing to negotiate on all these issues. As the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has said, the Taliban's desire for international recognition this time around "is the Security Council's only leverage to press for inclusive government and respect for rights, particularly for women, in Afghanistan".

Dealing with the regime

Next, the Narendra Modi government must determine the nature of its engagement with the new regime in Afghanistan. While a tactical engagement, dealing with the safety of Indians and Indian interests, overflight rights and other coordination seems inevitable, the question of whether India should convert its furtive back-channel talks with the Taliban and with Pakistan in the past few months into something more substantive remains to be debated. This becomes more important as India now faces a "threat umbrella" to its north, including Pakistan's cross-border terrorism, Afghanistan's new regime and China's aggression at the Line of Actual Control. The Government's *modus operandi* over the last few years, of running foreign policy by stealth

and surprise, would be counterproductive here. A more broad-based and consultative process of engaging all political parties would be required instead. While not directly dealing with the Taliban, India must ensure stronger communication with those who are dealing directly, including leaders such as former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai and former High Council for National Reconciliation chief Abdullah Abdullah, who have lived in India and retain close links, to ensure its interests. As a part of its engagement, New Delhi must consider whether to revive its assistance to the resistance, which at present includes Ahmad Shah Massoud Jr., Amrullah Saleh, Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Mohammad Noor, all well known to India and aligned to a great extent with India's objectives in Afghanistan.

People outreach

Finally, the Government must embrace its greatest strength in Afghanistan – its relations with the Afghan people – and open its doors to those who wish to come here, just as previous Indian governments have done in the past. The Government's efforts, thus far, have been woefully inadequate, with only a few hundred Afghans evacuated or allowed to enter; the Ministry of Home Affairs decision to cancel all pre-issued visas, due to security concerns, is a step in the wrong direction. In particular, India must continue to facilitate medical visas for Afghan patients and extend the education visas for students who are already admitted to Indian colleges.

In a world of hard geopolitical realities, it is India's soft power, strategic autonomy or non-alignment principles and selfless assistance to those in need, particularly in its neighbourhood, that has been the strongest chords to its unique voice in the world. The moment to make that voice heard on Afghanistan is now.

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Covering the gaps in the game of data

The 'statistical vacuum' in India can be bridged with decentralisation and if States build their own quality databases



KRIPA ANANTH PUR

The new show in town is the game of data. Running for a while now, it is keeping the audience on edge with its volatile and shifting rules. If one season negated a whole body of data leaving the audience nonplussed, the next brought joy to certain quarters with its data reinterpretation. The latest season has shocked the audience as an entire body of data has gone missing. The article in *The Hindu* (Editorial page, August 19, 2021), "The significance of the 'there is no data' answer", which is an incisive review of the latest season of missing data, is enlightening.

On data politics

Data politics is not new. The interconnectedness of power and knowledge and its use by States to control populations has long been expounded by Foucault, Bourdieu and others. Rapid technological innovations in information and communication technologies have further complicated the issue where, through Internet connectivity, both subjects and objects of data are now inextricably intertwined. The spur towards evidence-based policy making or evidence-based budgeting by governments points to the amass-

ing of large, granular level data about citizens by States.

Data-based policymaking or budgeting is meant to facilitate the use of evidence to inform programmatic funding decisions. The goal is to further invest in what works to improve outcomes for citizens. Data-based decisions can redress inter and intra-district inequalities through targeted resource allocations. However, data-based governance pre-supposes the existence of reliable, rigorous and validated data with or without demonstrated impact or outcomes. If governance decisions are to be data centric, there is a need to ensure a good, robust and reliable database.

Data-based policy making

States collect enormous amounts of administrative data. However, these administrative data are often not validated. For example, it is well known that the flow of funds below the block level is often opaque and the data that is submitted by local bodies are generally not validated. The task of trying to match funds with functions at the panchayat level is rather challenging. While there is a critical need to link the databases of various departments, it is not easy as territorial jurisdictions and household-level identifiers are likely to vary from department to department. There is a need to bring some mechanism to homogenise these various data sets with a single identifier; but more importantly, there is a need to validate these data sets through urban local bo-



dies and rural local bodies.

Accurate collection, measurement and interpretation of data are critical for data-based decision making to be successful. However, this is fraught with challenges for as much as data is used, it also gets misused, abused or even manipulated. For instance, absence of data in certain domains does not necessarily indicate better governance. During the novel coronavirus pandemic, some States were not testing enough. Consequently, the data on COVID-19 positive cases were interpreted to seem that some States, especially in South India, were unable to control COVID-19 cases compared to their North Indian counterparts; some with much poorer health indicators as well as infrastructure. In such cases, making resource allocations and decision-making based on data are likely to have adverse impacts.

Similarly, a 2012 academic study on assessing the quality of governance across States had an indicator under a 'Law and Order' variable that aimed to measure

police behaviour, and the indicator was "Complaints against Police behaviour". How should such an indicator be measured? What would be an ideal score – low or high? The answer is not simple: it is complex and context-specific and, therefore, should not be interpreted in isolation.

A low score in a poor, backward State does not necessarily indicate that police behaviour is exemplary; it could indicate that people are scared to complain against police behaviour for fear of reprisals. A high score in a State with high literacy and human development index (HDI) can mean that people have enough confidence in the judiciary and the State to complain against police behaviour, thus becoming an indicator of a better quality of governance. Similarly, an issue such as mental health, that comes with enormous social stigma in India, needs careful measurement as higher incidences of mental health (from institutional sources) can indicate better access to institutional care as well as a social context that is less beset with stigma.

Tamil Nadu's education data

In the same vein, the recent data on education released by the Union government that shows Tamil Nadu having around 27 educationally backward districts, is baffling. Despite these figures, elsewhere, the same report ranks Tamil Nadu fourth in educational attainment. The literacy rate in Tamil Nadu in Census 2011 was higher at 80.1% compared to the national figure of

73%. While there were inter-district variations in literacy, Dharmapuri district, with a literacy rate lower than the national average, still had 68.5% literacy in 2011. It is problematic to imagine that there has been such a downward slide in the last 10 years as some recent State-level studies have shown further improvements in literacy across districts compared to 2011. Clearly, in this case, the measurement of district-level educational backwardness needs close scrutiny. Such interpretations also highlight the need to supplement the quantitative data with smaller qualitative studies to capture processes, subjectivity, and contextual factors.

As the game of data shows, we are in a data-driven world. While on the one hand, there is a move towards data-based governance and decision-making, on the other, concerned about the 'statistical vacuum' due to a number of national statistical bases getting eroded either through delays or data suppression, scholars like Jean Drèze and others have been calling for decentralised systems of data collection processes, with States building their own databases. This requires States to invest heavily in both human and technical infrastructure with built-in quality control measures to ensure an interesting twist to the game of data that is now ongoing.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Vaccine drive
With studies showing waning protection within six months from the AstraZeneca vaccine, it is important to vaccinate school staff and non-teaching staff as fast as possible. The recent warning by experts to increase the pace of vaccination assumes greater significance as a large proportion of the population is still vulnerable to a potential third wave. The availability of the ZyCoV-D vaccine for secondary school students will also help enhance

protection for children who have been learning remotely and through online classes thus far.
Dr. THOMAS PALOCAREN,
Vellore, Tamil Nadu

Political conduct
The recent and reprehensible conduct of two key politicians in India should not come as a surprise. Those who lead the nation sitting in Delhi have a responsibility to personally set the right example before the public including the party rank and file. But, if they themselves start indulging

in name-calling and roguish behaviour, this culture is bound to spread throughout the system and become par for the course. Since 2014, many statements emanating from our leaders have plumed new lows. Today, even senior Ministers at the Centre forget that they are expected to be role models for their countrymen. The social media cells of the offending parties do not lag behind either, spreading the abusive culture. Political parties may come and go, but those who lead them need to be mindful of

the kind of legacy they are going to leave behind.
G.G. MENON,
Tripunithura, Kerala

Gail Omvedt
Gail Omvedt's literal work drew focus to some key discriminatory practices in India, while supporting the cause of Dalits, women's rights, deprived sections and the rights movement. She gave a voice to the unheard/less privileged.

KIRTI WADHWAN,
Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh

■ Gail Omvedt was a rare public intellectual who

moved effortlessly between the library and the field, activism and academics, each feeding the other. She will continue to inspire generations of researchers and activists.
S.S. PAUL,
Chakkdaha, Nadia, West Bengal

■ The country has lost one of its prominent public intellectuals. The uniqueness of her writings lies in the exploration of intersections of class, caste and gender to produce fresh insights and new perspectives.

M. JEYARAM,
Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

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When Salem led

It is interesting that even as early as August 1921, Salem district of the Madras Presidency was anti-drink and refused to bid when toddy shops were put up for sale, disappointing the Deputy Collector of the Raj (OpEd page, 'From the Archives', August 24). It is no wonder that Salem was in the vanguard of prohibition and the first district chosen by Rajaji for its official implementation in 1937.
N. RAMA RAO,
Chennai