



Back at school

The nascent reopening of schools can be sustained with a commitment to safety

State governments have taken the difficult decision to reopen schools for some classes, encouraged by a consensus among public health experts that the benefits to students and society at large outweigh the risks of a COVID-19 surge. A week after many of them reopened, mainly at the secondary and higher secondary level, infections among teachers and students have not triggered an alarm, although general social attitudes towards the pandemic have turned negligent. Data from Tamil Nadu show that post-reopening, about 30 students and teachers have tested positive, to which the State has responded by tracing contacts and testing, while keeping the institutions open. Kerala, which has struggled to contain the infection rate and continues to report about 25,000 cases a day, is venturing only to reopen residential higher education institutions and final-year college classes within a bio-bubble of at least single-dose vaccination; resumption of schooling continues to pose a dilemma. The crippling absence of education for millions in the country has raised the question of whether governments have shown alacrity to limit the harm from prolonged closures. A study by economists in August showed that a mere 8% of students in rural areas had regular access to online learning and 37% were not studying at all. It also found that only a minority of students with smartphones, i.e., 31% in urban areas and 15% in rural settings, received regular instruction. This crisis has remained neglected for over a year, and the findings underscore the need for in-person teaching to resume.

Among the major concerns surrounding reopening of schools is possible transmission of the virus on campuses, with implications for vulnerable individuals in the students' home. Here, the advocacy of the European Technical Advisory Group on schooling during COVID-19 – smaller class sizes, wider spaces between desks and staggered breaks at school – is worth considering. The panel underscores the importance of evolving a follow-up protocol, when a cluster of cases leads to school-wide testing. Many public health experts argue that younger children, typically in the 6 to 14 age group, have the lowest risk of moderate or severe COVID-19 infection, while this is also the cohort that needs good foundational teaching. Most of these students are not eligible for vaccination. WHO recommends that for these pupils, the approach towards reopening should be caveated: risk based, and taking note of community transmission, ability to maintain physical distancing and good ventilation. Vaccination of teachers and school staff and eligible students, and free testing for all are other major factors. Hesitancy or refusal should be firmly countered. Governments should end their populist indulgence of unsafe behaviour in public spaces to prevent community-level spikes that can jeopardise the nascent return of schooling.

The lag between jabs

Kerala HC order on allowing earlier second dose flags need to review 84-day gap

The Kerala High Court's intervention regarding the time lag between the two doses of Covishield vaccine is both interesting and unusual. It has asked the Government to allow the scheduling of the second dose four weeks after the first for those who want it. A single judge has held that the relaxation in the 84-day norm for some categories of people, when it is normally not open to the public to get their second jabs earlier, amounts to discrimination. The direction that CoWIN, the national vaccination portal, should allow scheduling of the second dose after 28 days – the period initially fixed – for those who want early protection is likely to be questioned on appeal, even though it has its own logic. The petitioners are two companies that have purchased vaccines for their employees and their family members and did not want to wait for the current mandatory 12-16 week period to administer their second doses. Pointing out the relaxation from the minimum 12-week rule for some categories among those travelling abroad, the petitioners wanted the same relaxation for employees availing of paid vaccination. The court has countenanced this argument favourably and termed as discriminatory the denial of "early protection" to those who wanted the second dose after 28 days.

The court framed it as an issue over "better protection" offered by the scientifically validated 12-week gap between two doses, and "early protection" favoured by individuals. The Union government argued that the relaxation was to meet unavoidable contingencies, and an earlier second dose could not be claimed as a matter of right. The court based its order on what it believed to be "discrimination" in favour of some sections but refrained from deciding the question "whether a person is entitled to make a choice between early protection and better protection" while accepting the Government's free vaccine. It is fairly obvious that a delayed second dose enables reaching more people for their first dose. This means the order to allow earlier administration of the second dose could impinge on the public health objective of giving some protection to more people rather than full protection to fewer people. To that extent, the court's intervention in a policy matter may invite an appeal. However, it also raises the issue whether the policy of an 84-day gap between doses should continue, given the increased pace of vaccination. Despite being approved by experts, the change from the four-to-six weeks norm to the current 12-16 weeks may have been dictated as much by higher efficacy as by the extent of vaccine availability then. The time may have come for the Government to review the norm and allow a shorter gap based on the availability of vaccines and COVID-19 prevalence in a given geography.

Farmers' stir, the new dimension in U.P.'s politics

Its retrieval of the old secular political language openly counters the BJP's divisive and communal politics



SATENDRA KUMAR

On September 5, 2021, in Uttar Pradesh, lakhs of farmers gathered at Muzaffarnagar's government inter-college ground for the kisan mahapanchayat organised by the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM). At the mahapanchayat, Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader Rakesh Tikait reiterated the farmers' demands to repeal the three farm laws and for the "legal guarantee of MSP [Minimum Support Price]." Mr. Tikait and other farmer leaders present declared their determination to oust the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Uttar Pradesh in the upcoming 2022 State legislative elections. The farmer leaders unanimously appealed for communal harmony while chanting 'Allah Hu Akbar' and 'Har Har Mahadev' together with an estimated three to four lakh farmers.

Secular vs the divisive

This retrieval of the old secular political language openly counters the BJP's divisive and communal politics that has gripped the local and the national scene after the 2014 general election. Women and young farmers across religious and caste lines, from Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttarakhand and other States attended the mahapanchayat in Muzaffarnagar. It is a surprise that the ongoing farmers' movement has been openly engaging with gender and environmental issues and has provided them their rightful space.

By enabling the convergence of different farmer organisations and

space for the voices of marginalised groups, the Muzaffarnagar Kisan Mahapanchayat has not only reclaimed the language of secularism and communal harmony but also shows cautious potential to challenge the BJP's politics and hegemony in the legislative assembly elections due in five States next year (Punjab, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Goa and Manipur).

Message of harmony

Muzaffarnagar had communal riots in 2013 which polarised the western Uttar Pradesh region along religious lines. The BJP local leadership converted a caste dispute into brutal communal riots which ended up benefiting the BJP in the 2014 and 2019 general elections, across Uttar Pradesh, as this was the local script used at the State and the national levels. The communal polarisation not only caused fissures in the social fabric but also impeded the farmers' identity and unity that was traditionally the support base of the BKU under the leadership of the late Mahendra Singh Tikait in the 1980s.

Realising this social and political loss, his son, Rakesh Tikait, and his supporters, over the last couple of years, began to revive the BKU's old legacy of secularism. However, these attempts have only gathered momentum since January 2021 when the BJP government forcefully attempted to remove the protesting farmers including Mr. Tikait from the Ghazipur border of Delhi. An emotional appeal by an overwhelmed Mr. Tikait mobilised both Hindu and Muslim Jat farmers, changing the epicentre of the farmers' protest from Punjab to rural western Uttar Pradesh and Haryana.

The SKM has spectacularly reasserted the secular language particularly in the post-2014 socio-political environment. Its act of courage in the Muzaffarnagar Kisan Maha-



REUTERS

panchayat is a reminder to the 'timid' political Opposition and other political parties to do their constitutional duty in maintaining India's political legacy. In their appeal for communal harmony, Mr. Tikait and other farmer leaders have categorically said no to communal violence in the region. Mr. Tikait and other farmer leaders accepted being swayed by communal divisiveness and have vowed to counter the hatred and violence. "They talk of dividing, we speak of uniting. The hallmark of the BJP is the hate politics", Mr. Tikait declared loud and clear.

More importantly, Mr. Tikait and the BKU's activists have been visiting village after village and organising collective meetings with Hindu and Muslim farmers. In numerous street corner meetings, BKU activists have been attempting to recreate a common platform for farmers across religious and caste divisions by reclaiming and reasserting religious and caste unity among the farmers to heal and repair the damage caused by the Muzaffarnagar riots.

Mission 2022 and hope

The Muzaffarnagar Kisan Mahapanchayat has transformed the ongoing farmers' protests into a national movement. With the BJP government's lack of acknowledgement and response to the movement, farmer leaders under the SKM have decided to connect the sufferings of farmers with electoral politics directly with the announcement of 'Jaso ke dam nahi, to vote nahi' (no vote, if no legal

guarantee of MSP) and pronouncing their method as 'vote ki chot (hit by vote)'. The SKM and its leadership will campaign against the BJP in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections due next year. In addition to spreading the message of peace and communal harmony, farmer leaders including Mr. Tikait have announced that they will go to every home in the villages to educate farmers about the three farm laws and the ways in which these laws will destroy farmers and farming. Using the idioms of *kheti, kisan* and *bhaichara*, the BKU and its leadership will also inform them about the BJP's betrayal of farmers through its pro-corporate policies.

Besides the farm laws, several other proximate factors have set the stage for broad electoral mobilisation that may convert angry farmers and labourers into politically conscious voters when they face continued agrarian distress, the doubling of electricity charges, and the rising cost of diesel and fertilizers. More importantly, the unpaid dues of sugarcane mills to farmers have severely affected farmers and labourers across generation, caste and religious lines.

Furthermore, in Uttar Pradesh, the Yogi Adityanath-led BJP government's stringent anti-cattle slaughter measures have devastated already broken farmers as stray cattle continue to plunder fields and ruin crops. The COVID-19 epidemic has not only struck another major blow against the rural economy but has also highlighted the fragility of urban jobs. The participation of young farmers in large numbers explains in one go the ongoing agrarian crises and jobless growth that has created a big class of rural-urban precariat.

While the emerging broad alliance and solidarity generate hope and a new grammar of politics, competitive party politics and existing socio-economic divisions

continue to pose several challenges to Mission 2022. The ongoing farmers' movement does not show any sign of converting itself into a political party. In this case farmer voters depend on the existing political parties that have already lost steam and failed in the face of the BJP's propaganda, organisational skills and politics. In fact, some of them have started imitating the BJP's style by adopting a softer version of the Hindutva.

U.P. politics today

In Uttar Pradesh in particular, Opposition political parties such as the Congress, the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Rashtriya Lok Dal are competing for the same pie. Hence, it is too early to know how these competing parties will compromise their interests and put up a united opposition. Besides, the Jats are no longer a politically united group as they were in the 1970s and 1980s. The emerging political competition led by the aspiring middle class within the Jats has produced new leaders such as Sanjeev Balyan that has opened a chasm to be exploited by the BJP's style of politics. Moreover, farmers from the most 'backward' castes such as Morya, Nishad and Gaderiya have hardly been an ally of the BKU and a part of the 'kisan' identity popularised by Charan Singh.

By projecting these farmers as the victims of the dominant landowning farmers the BJP has weaponised them as new warriors of Hindutva. Despite these limitations, the Muzaffarnagar Kisan Mahapanchayat has shown the way to reclaim the Indian Constitution and the legacy of secularism by simultaneously linking socio-economic injustices to environmental and gender issues.

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Green hydrogen, a new ally for a zero carbon future

It holds promise as an alternative, truly clean fuel and in aiding the world's decarbonisation goals



PRITAM SINGH

Scientists and technocrats have for years been engaged in the quest of discovering alternative fuels to fossil fuels which are responsible for the production of over 830 million tons per annum of carbon dioxide, in turn catalysing human-induced global heating. The latest studies by a battery of scientists representing about 195 countries have signalled the crucial issue of climate vulnerability, especially for the Asian countries. The forthcoming 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow from November 1-12, 2021 is to re-examine the coordinated action plans to mitigate greenhouse gases and climate adaptation measures.

In order to achieve the goal of an alternative source of energy, governments are placing large bets in the hope of adopting a multi-faceted practical approach to utilise 'Green hydrogen' as a driving source to power our industries

and light our homes with the 'zero emission' of carbon dioxide.

Energy-rich source

Hydrogen is the most abundant element on the planet, but rarely in its pure form which is how we need it. It has an energy density almost three times that of diesel. This phenomenon makes it a rich source of energy, but the challenge is to compress or liquify the LH₂ (liquid hydrogen); it needs to be kept at a stable minus 253°C (far below the temperature of minus 163°C at which Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) is stored; entailing its 'prior to use exorbitant cost'.

The production techniques of this 'Energy-Carrier' vary depending upon its applications – designated with different colours such as black hydrogen, brown hydrogen, blue hydrogen, green hydrogen, etc. Black hydrogen is produced by use of fossil fuel, whereas pink hydrogen is produced through electrolysis, but using energy from nuclear power sources.

'Green hydrogen', the emerging novel concept, is a zero-carbon fuel made by electrolysis using renewable power from wind and solar to split water into hydrogen and oxygen. This 'Green hydro-



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gen' can be utilised for the generation of power from natural sources – wind or solar systems – and will be a major step forward in achieving the target of 'net zero' emission. Presently, less than 0.1% or say -75 million tons/year of hydrogen capable of generating -284GW of power, is produced.

The obstacle of cost

The 'production cost' of 'Green hydrogen' has been considered to be a prime obstacle. According to studies by the International Renewable Energy Agency (IREA), the production cost of this 'green source of energy' is expected to be around \$1.5 per kilogram (for nations having perpetual sunshine and vast unused land), by the year 2030; by adopting various conservative measures.

The global population is growing at a rate of 1.1%, adding about 83 million human heads every

year on the planet. As a result, the International Energy Agency (IEA) forecasts the additional power demand to be to the tune of 25%-30% by the year 2040. Thus, power generation by 'net-zero' emission will be the best solution to achieve the target of expert guidelines on global warming to remain under 1.5°C. This will also be a leap forward in minimising our dependence on conventional fossil fuel; in 2018, 8.7 million people died prematurely as result of air pollution from fossil fuels

A power hungry India

India is the world's fourth largest energy consuming country (behind China, the United States and the European Union), according to the IEA's forecast, and will overtake the European Union to become the world's third energy consumer by the year 2030. Realising the impending threats to economies, the Summit will see several innovative proposals from all over the world in order to reduce dependence on use of fossil fuels.

The scale of interest for 'plucking the low hanging fruit' can be gauged by the fact that even oil-producing nations such as Saudi Arabia where the day temperature soars to over 50°C in summer, is

prioritising plans to manufacture this source of energy by utilising 'idle-land-banks' for solar and wind energy generation. It is working to establish a mega \$5 billion 'Green hydrogen' manufacturing unit covering a land-size as large as that of Belgium, in the north-western part of the country.

India is also gradually unveiling its plans. The Indian Railways have announced the country's first experiment of a hydrogen-fuel cell technology-based train by retrofitting an existing diesel engine; this will run under Northern Railway on the 89 km stretch between Sonapat and Jind. The project will not only ensure diesel savings to the tune of several lakhs annually but will also prevent the emission of 0.72 kilo tons of particulate matter and 11.12 kilo tons of carbon per annum.

It is high time to catch up with the rest of the world by going in for clean energy, decarbonising the economy and adopting 'Green hydrogen' as an environment-friendly and safe fuel for the next generations.

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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.

On the Taliban

The newly announced interim government in Afghanistan is a disappointment and is certainly non-inclusive (Page 1, September 8). If it is composed of UN-designated terrorists and has a stamp of Pakistan all over it, one cannot expect peaceful, prosperous, progressive and friendly rule. Given its doubtful credentials and fanatic history, there is bound to be trouble. Pakistan may be the only nation that is satisfied with the turn of events as it can fish in troubled waters. The international community should act as one without any bias in dealing with the new rulers of Afghanistan. There cannot be a sprouting of terrorism again.

D. D.V.G. SANKARARAO, Nellimarla, Andhra Pradesh

■ The suggestion that the world community should

strive to restore peace in Afghanistan, which would include putting pressure on it in the form of imposing conditions on financial grants which the Taliban badly require, is welcome. But international pressure, without sufficient military backing, will have little impact on recalcitrant groups such as the Taliban. Besides, every nation engaging with the Taliban in Afghanistan has its own agenda to fulfil. The question is who will bell the cat dispassionately?

DHARMAARAJAN A.K., Thalassery, Kerala

■ We are indeed struck by the incongruity of the situation in Afghanistan: those who have been in the 'wanted lists' with multi-million dollar bounties announced on their persons now take up leading roles in the new Taliban government. The tasks of launching an insurgency and sustaining it for two decades and running

a government require different commitments, skills and priorities.

The Taliban have to reinvent themselves as an organisation that respects human rights, divergent opinions and ways of life, women's autonomy and prioritises economic renewal above religious agenda if they are to succeed as a government and gain international recognition.

G. DAVID MILTON, Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

■ It is clear that Pakistan now wields tremendous influence. The cabinet formation in Afghanistan is sure to be dominated by or controlled back stage by the Haqqani faction. Therefore, it is time to bid farewell to the idea of an all-inclusive government. The situation now is going to be very dangerous and will ensure that terror casts its dark shadow over the whole region. The puppet string master, Pakistan's

Inter-Services Intelligence, must be forced to withdraw.

PANKAJ G., Panchkula, Haryana

■ For the U.S., Afghanistan was too distant till the falling of the Twin Towers in 2001, by inspired terror elements. It then stormed into Afghanistan with massive troop strength in revenge. In these two decades it has suffered some losses with no palpable economic or political gains except for a macho image. It is Pakistan that has thrived all the while on big U.S. grants while China has quietly built its politico-economic web around the region which it would like to encash. In delayed wisdom, the U.S. has now walked away and could well suffer criticism, domestic and international. But time will vindicate U.S. President Joe Biden's pragmatism and resolve.

R. NARAYANAN, Navi Mumbai

■ One of the aspects of the U.S.'s long and disastrous war in Afghanistan is its "gifting away" a vast amount of military gear and equipment "that have made the Taliban better armed than ever". Reports say that the Taliban and its associates are believed to control sophisticated armoured vehicles, military drones and other high-technology hardware and ammunition. The havoc all this can cause in the wrong hands is unfathomable. There is also the factor of China in all this which would be waiting to reverse engineer much of this sophisticated technology. Is the U.S. planning to do something about this?

ANUVANSH RAWAT, New Delhi

■ Referrals, not refining The reservation policy needs reforms and not merely refining as the article (OpEd September 8) "Refining the reservation policy",

proposes. Reservation today, is more a political instrument than a social justice tool. The makers of the Constitution never intended that the reservation pie should expand infinitely. A farcical regime of affirmative action will create a new underclass of discontents. If we go on creating more backward classes years after Independence, there is something wrong with society and our notion of progress because it presumes backwardness persists across generations. Limiting the reservation scheme to two generations is the least one can think of in infusing a degree of fairness into the principle of compensating for historical injustice. The argument that economic advancement has no impact on social status is questionable.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN, Thiruvananthapuram