



Needless escalation

Violence in Lakhimpur Kheri will increase trust deficit between farmers and Government

The deaths of eight people, four of whom were mowed down by a vehicle that was part of the convoy of Union Minister of State for Home Affairs and BJP MP Ajay Kumar Mishra, in Lakhimpur Kheri in north-central Uttar Pradesh, marks an escalation of violence in a movement that has tried to remain peaceful. While the agitators and the BJP have traded charges on who is responsible, the incident has also worsened chances of a rapprochement between the farmers protesting against farm laws introduced last year and the Union government. There has been little headway since January this year, when the Government agreed to a few demands and also promised to keep the farm laws in abeyance, and after the Supreme Court stayed their implementation. But the distrust between the unions representing the agitators and the Government has remained high, with the farmers refusing to budge from their maximalist position seeking a repeal of the three laws passed last year – the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act.

The farmers are also willing to continue the protest indefinitely, with its intensity increasing after the harvest season even as their methods have come to the unfavourable notice of Supreme Court judges. A Court-appointed committee to facilitate dialogue with the farmers submitted its report on the laws in March but it is yet to be made public. The experience of the economic reforms since 1991 has shown that rushing them through without political consensus – even if they have merits – by ignoring crucial stakeholders creates severe discontent. Farming in much of India has largely been dependent upon State subsidies, procurement and support pricing – and any sudden change in these inputs may jolt the sector, which has been prone to crises in the last few decades, even if the Government claims that liberalising the farm sector will enhance agricultural incomes. It is true that the protesting farmer unions are concentrated in Punjab, Haryana and western U.P., where the involvement of the State in agricultural procurement, awareness of minimum support prices and the presence of *mandis* is more robust. But it is also true that institutional redress mechanisms to take into account farmers' concerns have not been put in place. After all, the laws were passed without sufficient deliberation through parliamentary committees and public hearings even as the Bills were rushed, by voice votes, in the Upper House of Parliament. This, no doubt, is the reason for the lingering trust deficit. The U.P. government must impartially investigate the incident in Lakhimpur Kheri but it is also imperative for the BJP-led Union government to restore mechanisms of procedural democracy to bridge the trust deficit. Restarting talks with the unions will be a good beginning.

Mamata's march

The West Bengal Chief Minister has reinforced her image as a leader willing to take on the BJP

The victory of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in the Bhabanipur by-poll in West Bengal has come as no surprise but the margin of the victory and the little resistance put up by the Opposition parties including the Bharatiya Janata Party have come as a shot in the arm for the ruling Trinamool Congress. Ms Banerjee's record winning margin of 58,832 votes is more than twice the margin of victory secured by the TMC candidate at the same constituency, located in the heart of Kolkata, five months ago in the State's Assembly polls. The ruling party won all the three seats that went to the polls on September 30 in the State. In Jangipur, the margin of victory for the TMC candidate was over 92,000 votes and at Samsanganj, the Trinamool Congress nominee won by over 26,000 votes. In two out of three seats, the BJP was the main opposition to the TMC but in Samsanganj, the Congress nominee secured about 70,000 votes, pushing the BJP to the third position. Though Ms. Banerjee could not win the Nandigram seat in the Assembly election early this year, her decision to contest that seat considerably boosted her party. With her election as an MLA just in time to meet the six month deadline, Ms. Banerjee has capped her party's impressive victory in May.

The outcomes also reinforce her positioning as a leader who has the gumption to confront the BJP that had left no stone unturned in its attempt to unseat her. The BJP stands further tamed after the by-poll outcomes. It put up a political greenhorn, Priyanka Tibrewal, to contest against the charismatic and popular Ms. Banerjee. The West Bengal BJP, which found it difficult to get the right candidates to contest against TMC nominees in the Assembly polls, continues to grapple with the same challenge five months later. The BJP central leadership stayed away from the campaign unlike earlier this year. The State leaders of the party were no match to the Trinamool Congress, in strategy or popularity. The State unit of the BJP was hoping that the Election Commission of India (ECI) may not announce the polls within the six-month deadline that the Chief Minister had to meet. Apparently taken by surprise, they spent time challenging the ECI decision in the courts rather than campaigning on the ground. The TMC government's focus on cash transfer and other welfare schemes continues to draw the support of the electorate, while the issues of violence and corruption raised by the BJP did not strike a chord with them. The results also point to the continuing resistance to the BJP's polarising tactics in West Bengal, and the party's difficulty in tailoring a politics that is suitable for the region.

An alphabet soup New Delhi needs to sift through

India needs to reconsider the plethora of alliances it is in and rationalise them after a reality check



T.P. SREENIVASAN

The current ruckus over AUKUS – the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, which was announced on September 15, 2021 – has revealed the hazards of group diplomacy, which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had anticipated when President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh proposed a regional organisation for South Asia.

The SAARC years

Apart from its reservations about the reference to security in the draft charter for SAARC, or the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, India was in a dilemma – that not joining the forum would look as though India was against regional cooperation. And if it joined, it faced the possibility of its neighbours ganging up and using the SAARC institutions to pressure India on various regional issues. One other concern was that the proposer of such a group would be suspected of aspiring to the leadership of a region.

On balance, India joined the Association with a number of conditionalities such as the exclusion of bilateral issues, decision-making by voting, and holding of meetings without all members being present. But despite the imperative for cooperation in vital fields, SAARC became an arena for India bashing, particularly by Pakistan. It was bilateral diplomacy in the guise of multilateralism and it became moribund as India did not attend the last summit. SAARC became a liability as it was clear that the region was not mature enough to have a regional instrumentality.

Today, the world has a whole spectrum of groups – from the European Union at one end to the

African Union at the other – with varying shades of cooperation. Groups with acronyms such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and numerical groups from a notional G-2 to a real G-77 which has more than a 100 members, exist.

Many of them do not have regional, ideological or thematic homogeneity to lend them a reason for forming a group. The time, the money and the energy spent on convening not only summits but also a whole paraphernalia of ministerial, official and expert level meetings do not seem justified. Bureaucracies, with United Nations salaries and perks, grow around these bodies, developing vested interests to perpetuate them. Such groups which do not have “sunset” clauses continue even after they diminish in importance

Searching for an agenda

Finding the agenda for these organisations and groups is another difficult exercise. The growing agenda of the United Nations includes everything from peace on earth to celestial bodies and even UFOs. When India decided to remain in the Commonwealth even as an independent country, the nature of the affinity to the British Crown changed and its agenda expanded beyond the concerns of the former British colonies. The only way it could survive, after Zimbabwe became independent and apartheid disappeared in South Africa, was by duplicating the agenda of the United Nations and repeating pronouncements of member-states made in other organisations. The role of the Commonwealth was reviewed, but the members reached the conclusion that it had continuing relevance.

The rationale of some of the other new groups was unclear even when they were formed. A Goldman Sachs economist found similarities among fast growing economies such as China, Russia, India and Brazil and recommend-



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ed massive western investments in these countries. The countries concerned formed an intergovernmental group called BRIC and later BRICS, with South Africa added as a representative of the African continent. At that time, it was feared that, with the presence of China and Russia in it, it would be construed as an anti-American group. As expected, China quickly assumed the leadership of BRICS and tried to seek changes in the international economic system by establishing a bank, with the possibility of credit for its members. The result of this development was undermining the relevance of another, less ambitious, group of India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA), which had several common interests. As candidates for permanent membership of the Security Council, they had specific ideas on UN reform and on South-South cooperation.

On Afghanistan

The recent BRICS summit had Afghanistan on its agenda and the diverse group was able to reach a conclusion only with different caveats. Russia and China were more sympathetic to the Taliban than the others. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit, delegations found some common elements of concern with dramatically different approaches. The SCO started off as a friendly group of China and some of the former Republics of the Soviet Union, but with the addition of India, Pakistan and Iran, it became a diverse group and it could not reach agreement. Pakistan naturally

sounded triumphant, but even Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan could not gloat over the unshackling of the Taliban in the face of a looming humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan. Whether the Chinese presence in these summits and the meetings between Wang Yi and S. Jaishankar (the Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister and India's External Affairs Minister, respectively) made any difference to the standoff in Ladakh is yet to be seen. But we know that frequent meetings with the leaders of China do not necessarily mean a meeting of minds as Beijing's trajectory of thoughts and actions are highly unpredictable. Those who saw China's President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in conversation in Mamallapuram (near Chennai), at the second informal summit between India and China, in October 2019, would never have thought that they would ever be in an armed conflict.

India and other groupings

India has also had experience of taking initiatives to encourage groups without the participation of Pakistan, knowing well that Pakistan's presence is a sure recipe for trouble. One of them is the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), an international organisation of seven South Asian and Southeast Asian nations which are dependent on the Bay of Bengal: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. The group remained dormant for many years till it was revived a few years ago as an alternative to SAARC. Though it has an ambitious agenda for sectoral cooperation, it has not gained much momentum.

Another group which India has championed is the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). The organisation was first established as the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative in Mauritius in March 1995 and formally launched on March 6-7 1997

(then known as the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation). It also drags on without any significant progress.

On the other hand, the two active groups, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), have eluded us even though we have major stakes in them. We campaigned actively for membership of these two bodies, but gave up when we made no headway. In the process of working with the U.S. on a bouquet of groups such as Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), NSG, the Wassenaar Arrangement and the Australia Group, we ended up with membership of Wassenaar and the Australia Group, in which we were not interested.

The Quad and AUKUS

The Quad had a chequered history of India flirting with it for years till the Chinese threat became real in 2020, but New Delhi's reluctance to call a spade a spade has driven the U.S. to new alliances such as a second Quad and then AUKUS as the U.S. wanted to fortify itself with allies against China. But the reaction of France to AUKUS has raised the issue of loyalty among allies even though AUKUS has made it clear that it was meant only to enable the U.S. to transfer nuclear propelled submarine technology to Australia.

The proliferation of alliances and groups will be a matter of close scrutiny by many countries in the light of the new trend initiated by the U.S. Collective bargaining is the strength of group diplomacy but it cannot be effective without commitment to a common cause. It stands to reason that India should also reconsider the plethora of groups we are in and rationalise them after a reality check.

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Taproots to help restore India's fading green cover

In forest restoration, the participation of local communities and adequate financing and incentives are essential



MOHAN CHANDRA PARGAIEN

Covering nearly 30% land surface of the earth, forests around the globe provide a wide variety of ecosystem services and support countless and diverse species. They also stabilise the climate, sequester carbon and regulate the water regime. The State of the World's Forests report 2020, says that since 1990, around 420 million hectares of forest have been lost through deforestation, conversion and land degradation. Nearly 178 million hectares have decreased globally due to deforestation (1990-2020). India lost 4.69 MHA of its forests for various land uses between 1951 to 1995.

Despite various international conventions and national policies in place to improve green cover, there is a decline in global forest cover. This is the prime reason for forest restoration activities including tree planting to become increasingly popular and declaring 2021-2030 as the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration for improving environmental conditions and enhancing human communities.

Restoration in laymen's terms is bringing back the degraded or deforested landscape to its original state by various interventions to enable them to deliver all the benefits. Building and maintaining activities help to improve ecological functions, productivity and create resilient forests with multifarious capabilities. India's varied

edaphic, climatic and topographic conditions are spread over 10 biogeographical regions and four biodiversity hotspots, sheltering 8% of the world's known flora and fauna.

However, dependence on forests by nearly 18% of the global human population has put immense pressure on ecosystems; in India, this has resulted in the degradation of 41% of its forests. To combat this, India joined the Bonn Challenge with a pledge to restore 21 MHA of degraded and deforested land which was later revised to 26 MHA to be restored by 2030. The first-ever country progress report under the Bonn Challenge submitted by India by bringing 9.8 million hectares since 2011 under restoration is an achievement. However, continued degradation and deforestation need to be tackled effectively to achieve the remaining target of restoration by addressing various challenges.

Key challenges

Local ecology with a research base: forest restoration and tree planting are leading strategies to fight global warming by way of carbon sequestration. However, planting without considering the local ecology can result in more damage. Similarly, planting a forest in the wrong places such as savannah grasslands could be disastrous for local biodiversity. Luckily recent research has shown that naturally regenerated forests tend to have more secure carbon storage. Being less tech-sensitive, cost-effective and conserving more biodiversity, natural forest restoration is becoming more widely accepted. However, it is fundamental to consider the local eco-



M. SATHYAMOORTHY

gy before implementing any restoration efforts to retain their biodiversity and ecosystem functions.

Restoration, being a scientific activity, needs research support for its success. Whether one goes for active restoration which includes planting or passive restoration with more focus on halting environmental stressors or adopting an intermediate approach of aided natural regeneration, it needs critical examination before putting restoration interventions into practice.

Situation in India

Nearly 5.03% of Indian forests are under protection area (PA) management needing specific restoration strategies. The remaining areas witness a range of disturbances including grazing, encroachment, fire, and climate change impacts that need area-specific considerations. Further, much of the research done so far on restoration is not fully compatible with India's diverse ecological habitats hence warranting due consideration of local factors. So, the relevance of local research duly considering ecological aspects, local disturbances and forest-dependent communities is vital to formulate guidelines for locally suitable interventions and to meet

India's global commitment.

Though India's increasing economic growth is helping to eliminate poverty, there is continued degradation and a growing scarcity of natural resources. The intricate link between poverty and environmental degradation was first highlighted by India at the first UN global conference on the human environment in Stockholm. Out of its 21.9% population living under the poverty line, nearly 275 million people including local tribals depend on the forest for subsistence.

Fundamental to the strategy

Further, encroachment of nearly 1.48 MHA of forest and grazing in nearly 75% of forest area is also linked to the livelihood of local communities. Linked with the degradation of forests, this dependency, along with various social-political and economic factors, complicates the issue manifold. The participation of local communities with finances for incentives and rewards is essential to redress this complex riddle.

There have been remarkable initiatives to involve local people in the protection and development of forests by forming joint forest management committees (JFMC). More than 1,18,213 JFMCs involving around 20 million people manage over 25 MHA of forest area.

However, a review of their functionality and performance is essential to make them more dynamic and effective to scale up their involvement.

Therefore, negotiations with a wide range of stakeholders including these committees for resolving conflicts and fulfilling restoration objectives are a must and a chal-

lenging feat to reach a suitable trade-off.

Adequate financing is one of the major concerns for the success of any interventions including restoration. The active approach of restoration which includes tree planting and the involvement of communities seeks incentives and rewards and make the whole affair quite cost-intensive. The contribution of corporates in restoration efforts so far has been limited to 2% of the total achievement. Hence, alternate ways of financing such as involving corporates and dovetailing restoration activities with on-going land-based programmes of various departments can help to make it easy for operation.

Apart from these specific challenges, the common barriers to restoration as identified globally also need critical review before placing the required methodologies and area-specific strategies in place. The involvement of multiple stakeholders in forest restoration is bound to cause a conflict of interests among different stakeholders; along with low priority and insufficient funding, it becomes even more challenging.

Active engagement of stakeholders including non-governmental organisations, awareness and capacity building of stakeholders with enabling policy interventions and finance can help a lot to achieve the remaining 16 MHA restoration objectives for India. The need of the hour is an inclusive approach encompassing these concerns with the required where-withal.

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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.

No common ground

It is quite distressing that the deadlock between the Union Government and the protesting farmers is nowhere near any sort of resolution; matters seem to be worsening every day (Page 1, "Four farmers killed as car in Minister's convoy runs amok", October 4). No amount of compensation will bring back the lives lost and animosities could only rise further.

Unfortunately, the silence of the judiciary is also quite baffling. The political class has collectively failed the nation as it only pursues vote bank politics. The loss of man hours due to the prolonged agitations does not seem to concern governments. While farmers' leaders are also expected to act with responsibility in handling the agitation, the Government cannot

abdicate its responsibility in settling the issue amicably. It is too late already.

BRIJ B. GOVAL,
Ludhiana, Punjab

The narcotics trail

The Narcotics Control Bureau may have uncovered another case of drug peddling and consumption, but this may not have the desired results unless it is able to strike at the source from where the narcotic products come.

They are grown in farms, produced in labs or sourced from outside the country. The activities of the rich and the famous may make headlines (Page 1, "8 held after drug raid on cruise ship", October 4), but one also expects stringent action in other cases such

as Mundra (Inside pages, "DRI pursuing leads on heroin seizure", October 4).

KALZAD B. IRANI,
Pune

■ The ship raid and the Mundra port seizure only show the unchecked flow of narcotics into the hands of

those who want it. The NCB should track the sources and suppliers. Leaders, teachers and parents have a key role to play in curbing India's growing drug menace.

M. PRAVDYU,
Thalikkavu, Kannur, Kerala

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

A front-page (October 2, 2021, some editions) standalone picture caption had an erroneous reference to World Senior Citizen's Day. It was actually International Day of Older Persons, observed annually on October 1 to address the issues and challenges that elderly people face (https://bit.ly/3otQw3D). World Senior Citizen's Day is celebrated on August 21.

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