



Caught in the crossfire

India and Pakistan must ensure that fishermen are not victims of a deterioration in ties

An Indian fisherman was killed in firing by the Pakistan Maritime Security Agency (PMSA) off the Gujarat coast on November 7. This is the first such killing by the PMSA in the last six years though conflicts over fishing rights are not infrequent along the International Maritime Boundary Line between the two countries. Six other fishermen have reportedly been detained, while one injured person managed to return to Indian shores. India has termed Pakistan's action deplorable and "in contravention to all established international practices and bilateral understandings". On Monday, the Ministry of External Affairs summoned a Pakistani diplomat who was asked to investigate the incident and instruct its forces to refrain from unprovoked firing. According to the Gujarat government, a total of 345 fishermen from the State were lodged in Pakistan jails as on December 2020. In April 2020, Pakistani forces opened fire on two boats off the Gujarat coast injuring one person, and in 2019 they sunk an Indian boat in which six of seven fishermen onboard were rescued. One person went missing. Fishermen often get caught in the fluctuating fate of the bilateral relations between the two countries, which is currently at a low.

According to the National Fishworkers Forum, there are 558 Indian fishermen in Pakistani jails, and 74 from Pakistan in Indian prisons. The Forum calculates that 1,200 Indian fishing vessels are in Pakistan's custody. The families of these imprisoned people are in penury. Consular access to those in prison is difficult. Only 295 of the 558 prisoners in Pakistan could have their nationality verified. In 2007, both countries formed a joint judicial committee comprising eight retired judges — four each from India and Pakistan — to facilitate the exchange of civilian prisoners. The mechanism has been defunct since 2013, and attempts to revive it in 2018 did not bear fruit. Civilians along international borders often get caught in disputes between countries, and India has several such hotspots, on land and in sea. Even fishermen venturing near the India-Sri Lanka maritime border often fall victim though both countries maintain cordial bilateral ties. Many Indian villages along the borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh also become theatres of conflict, as communities often find it difficult to reconcile with international borders that divide their traditional spheres of economic and social activities. Pakistan has aggressively sponsored violence in India, and terrorists trained by its agencies sailed in a hijacked Indian fishing boat in 2008 to Mumbai. It is a tragedy that ordinary people could end up in a foreign prison while trying to earn their livelihood. India and Pakistan must consider this as a humanitarian crisis and work towards resolving it. And, both countries must avoid any escalation in tensions on account of the latest incident.

Overlapping interests

The U.P. police are making heavy weather of the task of probing farmers' deaths fairly

The Supreme Court of India continues to question the tardy progress in the ongoing probe into the October 3 violence during a farmers' protest at Tikonia in Lakhimpur-Kheri district, a situation that reflects poorly on the Uttar Pradesh police and administration. In its latest expression of dissatisfaction, the Court has indicated that it would like a retired High Court judge to monitor the investigation and has sought the State government's response. The Court's apprehensions are not without basis. A large number of witnesses coming forward ostensibly to help the police have ended up giving "exculpatory evidence", that is, their statements are in favour of some suspects. Another source of doubt about the fairness of the probe is that an overlap is being sought to be created between two FIRs registered in relation to the incidents: one relating to the mowing down of four farmers and a journalist covering the event by vehicles suspected to be part of the convoy of Ashish Mishra, son of Union Minister Ajay Mishra; and another concerning retaliatory violence by the crowd, in which three persons were killed. Counsel for the State government has confirmed at the latest hearing that Raman Kashyap, reporting for a television channel, was indeed run over by a car, with the Court pointing out that an impression was sought to be given earlier that he was lynched by the mob. The idea of having a retired judge to monitor the probe seems to be prompted by the Court's keenness to ensure that the two crimes are not mixed up.

It would be in the public interest to have a judicial mind monitoring the probe. It would also have a salutary effect on the investigation as a precautionary measure against any attempt to dilute or derail the case. It is noteworthy that the judges on the Bench appear to think that some of the developments redound to the benefit of a particular accused. It seems to be an oblique reference to the influential Ashish Mishra. Such an impression will persist as long as the probe seems tardy, and the gathering of evidence is marshalled towards exonerating someone. Both the Union government and the ruling BJP are silent on the continuance of the suspect's father as a Union Minister, a factor that casts a shadow on the investigation. The Court is also not inclined to hand over the probe to the CBI, and is possibly right in holding that view. Recording the statements of witnesses before a judicial magistrate, certifying the electronic evidence available so far, and piecing together the evidence to make a strong case for the prosecution may be a time-consuming job, but what is expected of the State police is not a herculean task. There can be no excuse for allowing the fairness of the probe to come under a shadow of doubt.

In U.P., a missing tango and the BJP's waltz

If an SP-Congress tie-up fails to materialise, both parties might come to rue the price to pay next year and in 2024



ASIM ALI

In many ways, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Indian National Congress in Uttar Pradesh make for natural alliance partners. Their social bases complement each other, they do not have too dissimilar an ideological outlook, and have displayed a large degree of consonance in terms of campaign issues. Yet, both parties are presently in the midst of a bruising feud, each accusing the other of colluding with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The SP has termed the Congress as the flip side of the BJP, part of the saffron strategy to confuse the voters, while the Congress has charged the SP with being too afraid of the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Enforcement Directorate to take on the BJP.

Incentives for a link

So there is the one fundamental question to ask: why are these two parties so hesitant to commit to a potentially mutually beneficial alliance? The answer to this question might help illuminate the state of Opposition politics in both the State and the country, shaped in fundamental ways by the BJP-dominant system. First, let us evaluate the case for the alliance from the point of view of both the parties.

The incentives for the Congress are relatively straightforward. If the last two elections in U.P. are anything to go by, the Congress has been reduced to a 6% vote-share party, with barely any pockets of stronghold. The evidence from the Assembly bypolls and the panchayat elections since then have only reinforced this impression, not to mention the steady stream of Congress leaders exiting the party for greener pastures. A

failure to get into an alliance with a larger party could well mean electoral decimation, in the manner of Delhi and West Bengal. Being the face of the U.P. campaign, it might also irrevocably damage the image of Priyanka Gandhi Vadra — the last remaining 'trump card' of the party. It might be instructive here to remember that the first time Rahul Gandhi became seared with the image of a political novice was after leading the disastrous 2012 campaign in Uttar Pradesh.

The draw for the Samajwadi party is no less compelling. The thrust of the Samajwadi campaign so far has been to make the fight for U.P. a bipolar contest. The trouble is that a direct duel with a party possessing a much larger social base is a losing proposition, minus a wave of massive anti-incumbency which has not surfaced so far. The BJP in Uttar Pradesh is a political behemoth, with a social catchment area ranging from upper castes, non-Yadav Other Backward Classes and non-Jatav Dalits. In a sense, the social base of the party in U.P. is roughly equivalent to a combination of the BJP and the Janata Dal (United) in neighbouring Bihar. The SP, meanwhile, is hamstrung by its traditionally narrow social base, anchored by Yadavs and Muslims.

The SP knows this, and its leader Akhilesh Yadav has spent much of his political career pushing his party to embrace a new umbrella avatar. Even so, the party has not done the hard yards of long-term social engineering: building up community leaders, cultivating caste alliances at the ground level, or immersing itself in new socio-political movements. It has now gone for the quickest available route: stitching up alliances with an array of smaller parties. This would, the party hopes, not only boost its electoral arithmetic, but also aid the social acceptability of the SP among the specific caste and community constituents of the smaller parties. Hence, it makes intuitive sense for the SP to clasp the Congress's hand which



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does represent, in a sense, the biggest of the smaller parties of U.P.

What, then, explains the jitters at the prospect of coming together? There are three reasons, all of which reveal one aspect of the electoral and ideological dominance of the BJP.

The Congress's decline

First, the decline of the Congress, accelerated as it has in the Narendra Modi era, has reached such a state where, in many States, it is not even a reliable junior partner. The Congress's recent record in grand alliances hardly commends it to any potential suitor. In last year's elections in Bihar, while the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the three Left parties won more than half the seats they contested, the Congress proved to be the fatal weak link. This was not an aberration as the Congress has been the laggard alliance partner in several State elections, from Tamil Nadu in 2016 to Maharashtra in 2019. Of course, Akhilesh Yadav has had personal experience of this phenomenon in the last elections, where the Congress fared considerably worse than the SP.

Meanwhile, the Congress, as a party slowly approaching a condition of existential crisis, fears it can no longer remain trapped in a state of low equilibrium. The mood in the party harks back to the Pachmarhi resolution of 1998, which declared that only those coalitions will be considered which are "absolutely necessary" and that "will not weaken the party". A long running thread in Congress thinking holds that the only way for the party to revive its so-

cial base and rejuvenate its organisation is through a period of expansive struggle directed against both the regional parties as well as the BJP.

The BJP's dominance

Second, the BJP's ideological dominance on the issues of religion and nationalism has ensured that success for Opposition parties in State elections depends on the extent to which they can neutralise the salience of 'national' issues and make the election about 'local' issues. The presence of a national party such as the Congress in an Opposition alliance, particularly one which has been the most forthright ideological opponent of the BJP under Rahul Gandhi, hampers such a strategy.

The Gandhi siblings display none of the caution of regional leaders such as Akhilesh Yadav in terms of challenging Mr. Modi and making him into an electoral factor. After all, the Congress leadership likely views the U.P. elections, in part, as a springboard to building itself up as the national alternative to the BJP in the next general election.

Third, the BJP's dominance has converted Muslims into a uniquely radioactive political community. The SP party understands that any alliance with the Congress would be painted by the BJP as an 'unholy alliance' cynically aimed at consolidating the 'Muslim votebank'. Even as the Congress has long claimed to have retained a base among Brahmins and non-Jatav Dalits in U.P., it has all but evaporated now. In the 2019 elections, only 6% of Brahmins and 7% of non-Jatav Dalits in Uttar Pradesh backed the party, almost exactly in line with its 6% aggregate vote-share in the State. The only really sizeable support base of the Congress remains among Muslims, with 14% overall choosing the party in 2019, and especially so in seats where the Congress stood a chance.

This is perhaps the most important reason why Akhilesh Yadav

has privileged allying with smaller parties such as the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party (SBS), Janwadi Party and Mahan Dal over the larger Congress. Since the social base of these parties extends to one or more Hindu caste groups, the SP can cobble them together and portray itself to be the larger 'Hindu alliance'. This alliance strategy is also in harmony with the SP's recent political outreach, where it has aggressively courted non-Yadav OBC castes, the Scheduled Castes, and the Brahmins, but has extended only the most rare and indirect gestures towards Muslims. The political logic behind this approach is that once the party has proven itself to have a support base among Hindus rivaling the BJP, Muslims would automatically flock to it over a third alternative, as shown by the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi and the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal.

Of course, there is a possibility that the present rift between the two parties might represent nothing more than adroit jockeying for a larger share in an eventual alliance. In this interlude of brinkmanship, the Congress might be establishing itself as a major player and the SP might be demonstrating itself as the only alternative pole.

However, if this marriage actually fails to materialise, both parties might come to rue the price to pay. A recalcitrant approach from the Congress could prove fatal not just in these elections but also for its hopes of stitching up a joint opposition against the BJP in 2024. The SP, meanwhile, could consider the range of middle-ground options between a no deal with the Congress and the bad deal it had struck last time. For a party that has never broken its 30% vote-share ceiling, facing the BJP in a seemingly bipolar contest, it scarcely has the luxury of spurning partners.

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India needs to sign up for life-course immunisation

The COVID-19 vaccination drive is a reminder that the benefits of many vaccines have yet to reach the adult population



CHANDRAKANT LAHARIYA

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most people linked and associated vaccination with children only. The fact is that vaccines — ever since the first vaccine against smallpox became available in 1798 — had always been for a far wider age group, including for adults. However, soon after smallpox eradication and the launch of the Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI) across the world in the 1970s — and in India in 1978 — there were concerted efforts to increase vaccine use and coverage in children. Scientifically, the benefit of most vaccines are greater if administered earlier in life — infancy and childhood — a reason children are usually prioritised and vaccines recommended for every child. For the remaining age groups including adults, vaccines are recommended for specific sub-groups such as older people or those with specific health conditions.

The COVID-19 vaccines are exceptions in some sense. These are the first vaccines which have been recommended for all adults, who have been given priority over children. In fact, the jury is still out on whether, which age sub-group and when children should receive COVID-19 vaccines.

The importance of vaccines, which are considered to be among the most cost-effective public health interventions, has been recognised globally. Yet, the full benefits of vaccines do not reach all children and other age groups. There are wide inequities in vaccine coverage in children by geography, gender, parent's education and family's socio-economic sta-

tus, and other stratifiers. The coverage of most available vaccines in adults in India is sub-optimal. The COVID-19 vaccination drive is an opportunity to take stock of the status of adult immunisation and the future ahead.

Need for adult vaccination

Following the outbreaks of Japanese Encephalitis (JE) in 2005-06 — in the years that followed — India had conducted mass scale JE vaccination in the endemic districts, which included the adult age group. Then, there had been a limited use of Swine Flu vaccines for health workers during the H1N1 (2009) pandemic in 2009-10. Other than that, there has been limited focus on the systematic efforts for adult vaccination in India. The first and only national vaccine policy of India, released in 2011, had no mention of adult vaccination. The National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (NTAGI) in India, on a few occasions, discussed adult immunisation but stayed away from any recommendation for the general population except for the vaccination of health workers as high-risk groups, for hepatitis B vaccine, etc.

Outside the Government, professional groups such as the Association of Physicians of India and the Indian Society of Nephrology have released guidelines on adult vaccination; however, as these are voluntary and the private sector share in vaccination in India is very small, understandably, the impact remains unknown and is likely to be low.

There is very limited data on the burden of vaccine preventable diseases (VPDs) in adult age groups — in most settings including India. Lately, review of available data has pointed that the increased childhood vaccination coverage has resulted in proportionately higher cases of VPDs in the older age groups. It is known that the bur-



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den of VPDs in adults (in comparison to children) is relatively low; the larger adult population renders a greater social impact in terms of absenteeism from work (due to illnesses) and the associated costs of health care seeking and hospitalisation.

There is emerging scientific evidence on waning immunity and the need of booster doses in the adult age group for the vaccines administered in childhood. The vaccines which have become available in the last two decades (which adults had not received as children), have potential to be beneficial. As an example, there are more deaths due to pneumonia in adults than in children. A proportion of those illnesses, hospitalisations and deaths — in all age groups — can be prevented by increasing coverage of currently licensed vaccines which prevents pneumonia and related complications. Fortunately, these vaccines have become part of childhood vaccination programmes; however, the coverage and benefits need to be expanded to the identified high-risk adult population. The available evidence has resulted in the global stakeholders agreeing to 'the Immunization Agenda 2030' (<https://bit.ly/3qIKnH1>) which has emphasised that countries should consider extending the benefit of vaccines to all age groups.

An opportunity in hand

The COVID-19 vaccination drive has drawn our attention to the possibilities of adult vaccination, which should be used effectively.

The initiatives should be taken to educate public, health-care pro-

viders and members of professional associations about currently available vaccines for adult age groups. This can help people to make an informed choice and healthcare providers to share information with citizens. Various training programmes and graduate and postgraduate teaching curricula should be revised to have content on adult vaccination.

The current discourse should be used to plan and develop a national adult vaccination strategy and road map for India. It can be done through a few coordinated efforts.

The steps to take

First, the mandate of NTAGI needs to be expanded to adult vaccination. NTAGI may start with a review of available scientific evidence and providing recommendations on adult vaccination in India. These recommendations can be regularly revisited and revised once additional data become available. A NTAGI subgroup on adult vaccination can also be constituted to facilitate the process.

Second, the VPD surveillance system and the capacity to record, report and analyse data on the disease burden and immunisation coverage need to be strengthened. The focus has to be on analysing immunisation coverage and VPD surveillance data by age and other related stratifiers.

Third, the capacity of research and academic institutions to conduct operational research including the cost benefit analysis and to guide evidence-informed decisions needs to be boosted. Such analysis and evidence can be used by NTAGI in decision making processes.

Fourth, the process for developing and drafting a road map, possibly India's national adult vaccination policy and strategy should be initiated. Any such policy should factor-in the learnings and lessons

from the ongoing COVID-19 vaccination drive as well. In fact, policy questions in need of the answers should be identified now, and the process to generate evidence started. Otherwise, we may be at risk of asking policy questions 10 years down the line which can be answered in a few years from now.

Fifth, on a more operational level, the shortage of life-saving rabies vaccine in India in 2019 is a reminder of the risk and vulnerability in vaccine supply. To ensure vaccine security and be future ready for adult vaccination, the existing public sector vaccine manufacturing units in India should be revived and more need to be set up.

Vaccination policy for adults

The childhood vaccination programme is amongst the best performing government health programmes in India. In COVID-19 vaccination, it was the government facilities which have delivered 93%- 95% of total vaccine shots. The COVID-19 vaccination is a reminder that the benefits of already licensed vaccines are yet to reach the adult population. It is an opportunity for health policy makers in India to institutionalise mechanisms to examine the need, take policy decisions on adult vaccination and empower adult citizens to make informed choices on whether they wish to get currently available vaccines. It is time to plan for and expand the benefits of vaccines, for all age groups as part of the Universal Immunization Programme Plus in India. Drafting and developing a national adult vaccination policy and strategy for India could be one such concrete step in this direction.

Chandrakant Lahariya, a physician-epidemiologist, is a vaccines and health systems specialist. His forthcoming book is 'The Lighthouse of Peergarhi: What We Need To Prevent Diseases And Protect Health'

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.

Court on probe

In view of the murderous attack on the hapless farmers and the violence that erupted subsequently at Lakhimpur-Kheri, it is paramount on the part of the investigating agencies to act with conscience and see

that the inhuman murderers are given exemplary punishment without falling victim to the dictates of the powers that be. This becomes very important in view of the clout and influence the

main accused wield.

THARCIUS S. FERNANDO,
Chennai

Cities and flooding

Every Indian city with a dense population faces the risk of getting inundated with rainwater. This is

principally due to poor stormwater drainage which gets clogged because there is no periodical cleaning. If open drainage is no longer permissible, the government of the day must ensure that no waste gets accumulated. Even the

underground sewerage meant for households poses problems during 'non-monsoon' months. In fact, there is no inspection of the drainage system by the authorities concerned. If one heavy shower overnight followed by

incessant heavy drizzle can throw life out of gear, we need the expertise of a foreign expert to set things right!

V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

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