

Reform the data ecosystem

Quality control and audits will align policy with ground reality

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has set up a task force under Arvind Panagariya, vice-chairman of NITI Aayog, to generate timely and reliable data on employment in India. Job data is mostly outdated, or incomplete and little information is available on the informal sector, which employs 90% of the workforce. That means there is no effective way to gauge the impact of policy on job creation.

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It is often said: If you can't measure it, you can't improve it. New data can help design effective policies to spur job creation and fight unemployment. But employment statistics are one aspect of a larger systemic problem. Experts have long argued that India's data collection system needs radical overhaul due to quality and coverage issues. It has been observed that different official data sources point to disparate conclusions. That needs to change. Manpower shortage for data collections is one reason which hinders India from taking up new surveys and increasing the sample size to improve quality. For instance, the National Sample Survey Office, the official source of key socio-economic indicators — including estimation of the poverty line — has around 24% positions vacant for ground level staff responsible for collecting data. Further, data at the national and state level is not enough as they provide a macro picture. Given the size and diversity of India, targeted interventions and smart policy design call for disaggregated district-level data, which is not readily available.

Another issue pertains to over-reporting of data for monitoring the performance of State schemes. When the staff putting the data together is aware that figures they are reporting will serve as a benchmark for their performance, they tend to fudge. This needs to be fixed. Independent quality control and audits of data that we are generating is need of the hour. Keeping statistics at the heart of decision-making is the only way to steer India's policy discourse towards ground reality and potentially staying away from ideological debates. Along with this renewed focus on jobs data, the government should focus on systemic reforms of the data ecosystem.

India can benefit from the Iran-Pakistan fallout

New Delhi has stepped up its ties with Gulf countries but it must tread cautiously

Pakistan's tightrope walk between Iran and Saudi Arabia has suddenly become a lot tougher. Tehran has warned it was prepared to carry out cross-border military strikes against Pakistan-based terrorists following the deaths of 10 Iranian border guards at the hands of Sunni militants.

Pakistan has traditionally had close security ties with Saudi Arabia but has sought to maintain cordial relations with Iran, despite the open hostility between the two Gulf countries. Pakistan seems to turn a blind eye to Saudi financing of extremist Sunni groups who carry out attacks into Iranian Balochistan, one of which, Jaish al Adl, is believed responsible for the killing of Iranian guards. Most of these anti-Iranian terrorist groups are the scions of the Sipah e Sahaba, a virulent anti-Shia terrorist group created years ago by the Pakistani military.

As Saudi-Iranian rivalry deepens, Pakistan's attempts to play both sides become increasingly difficult. Islamabad declined an earlier request by Riyadh to send Pakistani troops to fight a Sunni-Shia civil war in Yemen, much to the fury of the Saudis. India benefited as it helped persuade the Gulf Sunni monarchies, led by the United Arab Emirates that Pakistan was undependable and they should build bridges with India. Similarly, Iran's anger with Pakistan will make it more amenable to helping India in Afghanistan and building the North-South Transport Corridor, an important project for India's security interests. However, even while India may gloat a bit at Pakistan's dilemma it must also be wary of treading on the waters of the Persian Gulf. The government's "Link West" policy has now led India to become much more engaged with the major Gulf states, including both Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Of course, these contradictions are much easier to handle for India because New Delhi is not in the business of supporting terrorists based on its soil, a lesson that Pakistan should learn.

beyondthebite

RAJDEEP SARDESAI



Jyoti and Bilkis: Different daughters

Is 'justice' for a gang rape victim in a riot different from 'justice' for a gang rape victim in Delhi?

This is the story of two daughters of India, both victims of horrific sexual crimes. Jyoti Singh was a bright 23 year old, dreaming of a career in medicine that would lift her family out of poverty when she was brutally gangraped and murdered in the heart of the national capital in December 2012.

Bilkis Bano was just 19 and five months pregnant when she was gangraped while trying to escape the mob in her village in Gujarat's Dahod district during the 2002 communal riots. Bilkis's three-year-old child was killed in front of her while 13 members of her family were also murdered. Jyoti and Bilkis hold a mirror to the darker side of our society and yet their narratives do diverge, a separation that deserves serious introspection.

Last week, Jyoti Singh's killers were given the death sentence by the Supreme Court. It meant that within four-and-a-half years of the date of the original crime, justice had been delivered. Just a day earlier, the Bombay High Court affirmed the life sentences of 11 accused in the Bilkis case, while sentencing the six police officers and a government doctor who tried to cover up the case to three years jail. While Jyoti Singh's verdict was the top headline and received 24 x 7 carpet coverage across television channels, the Bilkis ruling did not attract screaming banner headlines or prime time debates.

The difference is not surprising. Jyoti Singh's sickening death occurred in the national capital where most television channels and newspapers are headquartered and barely a few kilometres away from parliament where our law-makers reside. Within hours of her death, thousands of people had converged on Rajpath, with constant live coverage magnifying the surge of protests. The anger echoed in parliament, the country mourned her death, leaders went and met her family members and eventually a high level committee was set up to examine the troubling issue of sexual violence.

Bilkis Bano, by contrast, was languishing in a refugee camp for riot victims in Dahod, a tribal-dominated district of southern Gujarat, about 200km from Ahmedabad. Bilkis had attempted to register a case with the local police station who chose to ignore her pleas and threatened her instead to drop the charges. It was only with the support of highly committed NGOs, the National Human Rights Commission and a strong legal team that Bilkis managed to get the Supreme Court to direct the CBI to take over the investigation and transfer the case out of Gujarat.



The Bilkis Bano ruling didn't attract screaming banner headlines RAJ K RAJ/HT

For over a decade, Bilkis fought her case bravely even as she had to move home repeatedly and couldn't return to her village out of sheer fear that her attackers were still around.

Bilkis's case slowly became just another Gujarat riots case even as the Jyoti Singh case became a cause celebre, a symbol of the fight for gender justice. Those who supported and fought for Bilkis were accused of being pseudo-secular "jholawallah" liberals only seeking to malign the government in Gu-

arat. Those who took up the Jyoti Singh case were seen as being at the vanguard of redefining rape laws. Global documentaries were planned in memory of Jyoti Singh's courage, hardly anyone wanted to visit Bilkis and her family.

While the accused were punished in both the cases, the judges' final orders reflected the contrasting public mood. Describing the Delhi gangrape case as "demonic", the judges saw it as a "crime against humanity" and ruled that it was a "rarest of rare" case that deserved the death penalty. In the Bilkis case, the judges rejected the conspiracy charge, claiming that the crime had occurred on "the spur of the moment" even while admitting that the accused were "hunting for Muslims". While rejecting the death penalty for the rapists, the judges said, the "accused were boiling with revenge" after the Godhra train burning.

Ironically, when I asked Bilkis if she was satisfied with the verdict, she softly replied: "I always wanted justice, never revenge!" My counter-question to the world at large is simply this: Is 'justice' then for a gang rape victim in a communal riot different from 'justice' for a gang rape in a bus in Delhi?

Post-script: Bilkis is now 34. The child she was pregnant with when she was gangraped is now 15. "He wants to be a lawyer", she tells me with a smile. Maybe, he will one day be able to tell 'new India' the true meaning of justice.

Rajdeep Sardesai is senior journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

FARCICAL DEMONSTRATION



In the Delhi assembly, AAP lawmakers show how EVMs can be rigged HT PHOTO

Paper trail EVMs are no guard against tampering

Changes in software and inspections by political parties will help restore faith in the voting mechanism



OMESH SAIGAL

After the farcical demonstration on a dummy in the Delhi Assembly, chief minister Arvind Kejriwal reportedly said: "Give me the EVM for 90 seconds and I'll change the mother board." It is akin to asking in case of voting by paper ballot: Give me the ballot box for 90 seconds and I'll stuff it with ballots stamped in my favour.

Fortunately, the system evolved by the Election Commission (EC) ensures that no unauthorised person ever handles the EVM. I had raised the red flag in 2009 on EVMs because our study revealed that, despite all the precautions and checks prescribed by the EC, the possibility of tampering exists.

The 'mind' of the machine is the chip on which is a programme which controls the machine. The programme is neither written by EC officers nor is the programme 'fused' to the chip in their presence. Having public sector companies writing it is no safeguard since ultimately a minister can control them. Moreover, since the programme is fused abroad and it is 'unreadable' once fused, how can the Election Commission be sure that a 'trojan' programme hasn't been written instead?

The 'trojan' programme can remain dormant when various checks are being carried

out in the presence of the parties and candidates and can be activated, let us say, at the time of voting or counting. It will follow the commands of a 'controller' who can then rig the polling in whichever way he likes. It is not relevant that our EVMs are 'standalone' machines: the 'trojan' programme can be activated by remote control means, as I've demonstrated in various forums.

I'm glad that since then a number of safeguards have been introduced, especially the gradual introduction of the VVPAT (Voter verified paper trail), better known as 'paper trail'. All EVMs in the recently-held Goa assembly polls and 35 randomly selected constituencies out of 117 in Punjab had VVPATs. Out of the 42.64 lakh votes polled in 35 constituencies with VVPAT in Punjab, AAP got 10.54 lakh and the INC 22.41 lakh; this means that the AAP got 24.7% and INC 42.6%. In all 117 constituencies, out of 154.4 lakh votes cast, AAP got 36.6 lakh and the INC 59.5 lakh; this is 23.7% for AAP and 38.5% for the INC respectively. I do not find the difference statistically significant to indicate any major fraud.

In my letter to then chief election commissioner SY Quraishi in 2010, I had suggested that the existing chip be replaced with another chip with an 'embedded one-time programme (OTP) non-volatile memory' and then get a 'sentry' programme fused into the chip. By enabling parties to 'check sentry software through an open standard specification', it will generate confidence and also fulfill essential conditions of 'public scrutiny of elections'.

Omesh Saigal is former chief secretary, Delhi. The views expressed are personal

The Jadhav case in ICJ changes the goalposts

This is a change from India's reluctance to approach multilateral legal forums on bilateral disputes so far



TCA RAGHAVAN

The approach to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on Kulbhushan Jadhav goes against conventional thinking in India to date of

keeping disputes with Pakistan out of international fora. This was the lesson learnt from the fate of the application to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in January 1948 on the Pakistani invasion of J&K. Since then, the government of India's approach has been to try and limit exposure of bilateral issues to outside influences, legal or otherwise. The Simla Agreement further reinforced this point of view. In the three decades since Simla for instance, India preferred to deal with contestations over the Salal hydroelectric project and the Tulbul navigation project bilaterally with Pakistan. This was often to its cost but was still the preferred option rather than go in for the dispute resolution mechanisms provided for in the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) itself. India's only reference to the ICJ was defensive one and to prevent Pakistan from raising the overflights issue in 1971 in another multilateral body - the International Civil Aviation Organization.

From 2005 the approach to the IWT changed with India agreeing for the first time to approach, jointly with Pakistan, the World Bank to appoint a 'neutral expert'. Thereafter the use of the dispute resolution mechanisms of the IWT has become more frequent. The current move however represents a more significant change since it is not an engineering dispute of the kind covered under the IWT. It is seeking the ICJ's intervention in a consular matter and human rights matter, more specifically the death sentence awarded following a court martial, and for violation of procedures and provisions of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (VCCR).

Clearly if Jadhav's life had to be saved,

THE TREATMENT OF PRISONERS OR UNDERTRIALS OF THE OTHER COUNTRY HAS LONG BEEN UNSATISFACTORY IN THE INDIA PAKISTAN CONTEXT. BILATERAL ATTEMPTS TO IMPROVE THIS HAVE NOT BEEN EFFECTIVE

something needed to be done. The fact that both India and Pakistan are signatories to the VCCR and non-compliance with its provisions can be appealed to the ICJ provided the opening. There is also the fact that India's acceptance in 1974 of the ICJ's jurisdiction was made subject to a number of exceptions. These have precluded Pakistan from bringing in issues pertaining to J&K or others before the ICJ. The expectation now therefore is that the focus will remain on the consular case alone and no precedent will be set outside the consular domain.

For Pakistan, this move represents a challenge. First, this is a change from India's reluctance in approaching multilateral legal fora on bilateral disputes. Second, it will be on the defensive since a retrograde military court martial has been used to summarily award a death penalty to a foreign national. Most of all it will be in a quandary on whether to contest the Indian move on grounds of jurisdiction or similar procedural basis. To do so will mean diluting its longstanding position that third party or international mediation can help in settling disputes with India. Then, Pakistan will consider whether it should present the evidence it claims it has for scrutiny before a more impartial process. This too is risky given the lengths it has gone to convince its public that an Indian hand explains all its travails in Baluchistan.

The treatment of nationals of the other country who are prisoners or undertrials has long been unsatisfactory in the India Pakistan context. Various bilateral means attempted to improve this situation have not been very effective. Involving the ICJ to uphold provisions of the VCCR is therefore a novel step and may lead to establishing and raising standards in this difficult area and ensuring consular access, legal representation etc. Nevertheless, the present case has wider implications. The mainstreaming of military courts in Pakistan is a symptom of the civil-military imbalance which periodically erupts in Pakistan. That the ICJ hearings will coincide with this ongoing tussle in Islamabad adds more dramatic force to the proceedings. Secondly, Pakistan's efforts to bolster its international image as a crucible for terrorism have involved blaming India for the backlash it has inevitably suffered. This too will now come under scrutiny. Most significantly, however, the case represents an India Pakistan contestation on an international platform where India has taken the initiative to go to save the life of one of its citizens. In itself the step opens up many possibilities from different points of view in the otherwise repetitive terrain of India Pakistan relations.

TCA Raghavan is a former Indian high commissioner to Pakistan. The views expressed are personal.

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MEDITATION CAN TRANSFORM OUR LIVES AND GIVE US RELIEF AND SOLACE

Sant Rajinder Singh

It is said that the loss of health results in four things: The first is being ill; the second is a pill; the third is the bill; and the fourth, in some cases, is the will. I'd like to add an option to provide a healing effect for an illness — and that is to learn the art to be still. This can be done through meditation.

Our minds are often agitated by pressures. Life has become complicated. People have too much to do and not enough time to do it. People snap — they become irritable,

off-balance, and "stressed-out." Medical researchers have linked certain illnesses to our state of mind and emotional condition. When we undergo mental stress or emotional pain, our physical resistance to disease drops. Many studies have found consistent reductions in anxiety in meditators. Several stress-related conditions have demonstrated improvement during clinical trials of meditation including: hypertension, insomnia, asthma, chronic pain.

Now that you believe that meditation can heal our physical body by healing our mind

and our emotional state, here's the process. It involves viewing our lives from a clear angle, then recognising the root of our pain, and solving the problem.

Sitting in meditation also fills one with peace, calm, and joy. Spending time daily in meditation can transform our lives and give us relief and solace for a happy life.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers. The views expressed are personal)

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