



Pragmatic step

The Kerala government wisely cuts its losses by relaxing restrictions on bar licences

The Kerala government's new liquor policy is a pragmatic step that may help boost its revenue and retrieve lost ground in the tourism sector. More important, it will end the discrimination in favour of five-star hotels. Kerala's erstwhile United Democratic Front government had restricted bar permits to five-star hotels alone, resulting in more than 700 hotels of other categories losing their bar licences. Under the new policy, hotels in the three- and four-star category may also have bars that serve Indian Made Foreign Liquor. Two-star hotels are permitted to serve wine and beer. At the same time, the Left Democratic Front government in the State has sought to give a boost to the traditional toddy business by allowing hotel bars to sell toddy too. To partially offset criticism, it has raised the legal drinking age from 21 to 23. The new excise policy is, of course, no surprise as the LDF election manifesto had made it clear that it does not favour prohibition and would rather emphasise on voluntary abstinence. In a State that has a high per capita alcohol consumption, there is a case for a vigorous campaign about the ill-effects of being addicted to alcohol, as opposed to one that makes liquor scarce and encourages bootlegging. The government has waited for a year before unveiling the changes it wanted, lest it be seen as acting in undue haste. Politically, the LDF is on firm ground. The UDF regime's hardline liquor policy was the result of an internal game of one-upmanship between factions, and that decision did not help it return to power.

Some opposition to the new policy is expected from influential religious groups as well as opposition parties. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has justified his decision to liberalise the sector by describing the earlier policy, which had received the Supreme Court's approbation as well, as a 'iasco', as the restrictions on the sale of liquor had brought down tourism traffic, caused job losses and led to a spike in drug abuse. He will now have to ensure that the purported positive outcomes, such as revitalising the tourism sector and the hotel industry, boosting employment and ending the brewing of hooch are actualised on the ground. The big challenge lies in pursuing this policy without violating the Supreme Court's ban on having liquor outlets within 500 metres of national and State highways. News that a 1983 document of the Indian Roads Congress has said all highways automatically become arterial roads or sub-arterial roads while passing through urban areas gives a new dimension to the highway ban. State governments may now consider examining this aspect to get the Supreme Court to relax its highway ban in respect of hotels located within towns and cities. As protests mount against relocating bars from highways to interior residential areas, the situation calls for a pragmatic and holistic solution.

Comey's case

The former FBI director's Senate testimony on Russiagate sharpens parallels with Watergate

The dramatic three-hour hearing of James Comey before the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee on June 8 has dragged President Donald Trump deeper into the Russia scandal, which he desperately wants to get out of. Mr. Trump once called Mr. Comey, who he fired as the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation last month, a "nut job" and the probe into allegations of Russian intervention in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections a "witch-hunt". But Mr. Comey's testimony, under oath before the Senate, lends credence to arguments that the administration's handling of Russiagate was problematic from the very beginning. Mr. Comey, who questioned the President's integrity and accused the administration of spreading "lies, plain and simple", has torn into the White House narrative on both the Russia probe and his firing. He confirmed reports that Mr. Trump had asked him to let go of the investigation on Michael Flynn, the initial choice as National Security Adviser who was fired for lying to the Vice President over his own Russia links. This assertion directly counters Mr. Trump's claim that he had not asked Mr. Comey to back off on the Flynn probe. Mr. Comey also said he was fired over the Russia probe, not over any mishandling of the investigation, as claimed by the White House, into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server while Secretary of State.

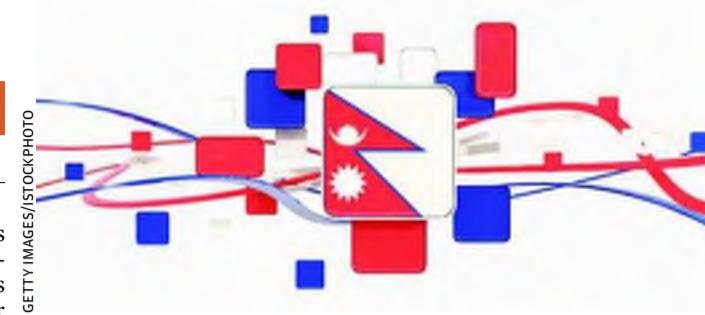
In short, Mr. Comey did not directly accuse the President of trying to obstruct justice – when asked he said it is up to the Special Counsel to understand what the President's intent was. He tactfully presented a timeline of their interactions: Mr. Trump first asks for Mr. Comey's loyalty, tells him to drop the probe on his aide Mr. Flynn, and later fires Mr. Comey. Mr. Trump is still adamant on his earlier positions. He has called Mr. Comey a liar and dismissed his Senate testimony. But the Senate hearing has already shifted the contours of the Russia probe. It is no longer only about Russian intervention in the presidential election, but also about whether the President of the United States tried to obstruct justice in his country. Here, the parallels between the Watergate scandal that led to President Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974 and Mr. Trump's current predicament are striking. It is still not established whether Nixon ordered the break-in at the Democratic party office in the Watergate complex in Washington that triggered the crisis, but he had to go over his interference in the FBI probe into the Watergate case. It is up to Special Counsel Robert Mueller to find out if Mr. Trump tried to obstruct justice by asking the FBI chief to let Mr. Flynn go and whether he lied to the American public over Mr. Flynn, Mr. Comey and Russiagate. While the investigation will take time, its widening scope and the new revelations pose greater difficulties for a President who appears to be clueless on how to tackle the issue.

'Neighbourhood First' in Nepal

India needs to help Prime Minister Deuba clear the way for elections under the new Constitution



RAKESH SOOD



Last week, on June 7, just days before he turns 71, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba was sworn in as the new Prime Minister of Nepal, marking his fourth term as Prime Minister. Yet compared to the rather turbulent politics in Nepal which makes him the 24th Prime Minister since the beginning of multiparty democracy in the country 27 years ago, this transition was singularly straightforward.

His elevation comes as part of the deal struck between Nepali Congress (NC) and the Maoist party (CPN-Maoist Centre) last July under which Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' became Prime Minister in August, with NC support on the understanding that after nine months, during which his government would conduct the local body elections, he would hand over charge and support NC leader Deuba's claim to the post.

Prachanda delivers

Mr. Prachanda upheld his end of the bargain, and in contrast with his first term as Prime Minister which ended ignominiously with his resigning after nine months in 2009, following the controversy around arbitrarily dismissing the Army chief Rookmangud Katawal, his second nine-month tenure was productive.

Domestically, he tried to build bridges with the Madhesis and the Janjatis who had been alienated by his predecessor K.P. Sharma Oli's highhandedness, by promising them a consultative process and a constitutional amendment that would address their concerns. In keeping with this assurance, his government tabled a constitutional amendment proposal which goes a long way in addressing the Madhesi reservations. That it has

not been passed is because of opposition from Mr. Oli's party, the Communist Party of Nepal (UML), and the difficulty in mustering the two-thirds majority necessary.

Externally, Mr. Prachanda also set about repairing relations with India which had reached a low during the tenure of Mr. Oli, who blamed India for stoking the Madhesi agitation and imposing an economic blockade. Mr. Prachanda's early official visit in September 2016 followed by a second one during the BRICS outreach event in October, and reciprocal visits by President Pranab Mukherjee and Nepali President Bidya Devi Bhandari, helped restore the relationship.

As promised, he held the first phase of the local body elections for municipalities and village development councils on May 14, in three of the seven federal provinces. These elections were last held in 1997. At present, there are 744 local bodies in Nepal and the first phase covered 283 local bodies in three predominantly Pahadi provinces, including metropolitan areas of Kathmandu and Pokhara.

Under the new Constitution promulgated in 2015, seven provinces have been created and significant decentralisation of powers has taken place. Consequently, the local bodies now enjoy extensive financial powers. It is estimated significant that more than \$5 billion will now be spent by the local bodies on infrastructure and delivery of social services. Historically, given the centralised character of the Nepali state, all political leaders have gravitated towards Kath-

mandu. The enhanced powers of the local bodies will enable the creation of a much needed new political leadership.

Deuba's challenges

Mr. Deuba's fourth term as Prime Minister will be a short one, even shorter than his previous terms. None of these had lasted two years. The second time in 2002, he was sacked by King Gyanendra for 'incompetence', and after his 2004-5 term, he was placed under house arrest by the same monarch. This time, he has the opportunity to ensure a happier ending for his fourth term. He has already announced that his primary responsibility is to ensure that provincial and parliamentary elections are held before January 18, which gives him a tenure of under eight months.

Mr. Deuba's immediate challenge is to conclude the second phase of the local body elections scheduled for June 28 in the four remaining provinces. These provinces include the two Terai-based provinces (Provinces 2 and 5) and the far east and the far west provinces (Provinces 1 and 7). Madhesi have a significant presence in the two Terai-based provinces. They had demanded that unless the constitutional amendment addressing their concerns was passed, they would not participate in the local body elections.

Given the UML's stand, it is clear that the Deuba government cannot muster the two-thirds majority needed. Mr. Deuba has, however, committed that once the local body elections are concluded, he will exert all possible efforts to get the constitutional amendment

through.

Except for a small number, most Madhesi leaders who have strong roots in the Terai see the political logic in participating in the local body elections. They sense the public enthusiasm reflected in the high turnout, and realise that their boycott will not prevent the elections from going ahead but make them appear 'spoilers'. Second, if they are cut out of local politics for the next five years, it will be difficult for them to maintain their cadre base, necessary to ensure a good showing in the following provincial and parliamentary elections.

In the 2008 elections for the first Constituent Assembly, the three Madhesi parties emerged as a credible political force for the first time, with 84 seats. Internal squabbling and power politics fractured the three into a dozen, and in the 2013 elections, they were down to 40. Realising the need for unity, some Madhesi parties came together in April to form a new entity, Rastriya Janata Party Nepal (RJPN). The first decision of the Deuba government was to amend the Local Level Election Act, on June 8, which provides recognition of the RJPN and its election symbol, enabling it to join the June 28 elections in its new avatar. Earlier, some were thinking about fighting the elections under their old symbols, but with this change, any reservations should be set aside because now the RJPN can put up a united front. The two other major Madhesi groups led by Upendra Yadav (Federal Socialist Forum Nepal) and Bijay Gachhadar (Nepal Democratic Forum) have already indicated that they will be joining the elections, thus ensuring a good Madhesi presence in the local bodies in the Terai.

Restoring goodwill

Mr. Oli's nine-month tenure which ended in July last year marked a low point in India-Nepal relations. It increased ethnic polarisation within Nepal and as always happens at such times, enabled him to don the mantle of Nepali nationalism and blame India for interfering

in its internal affairs, of imposing an economic blockade and supporting the Madhesi agitation. Significantly, it eroded the significant goodwill that had been generated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's historic visits to Nepal in 2014. With Mr. Prachanda withdrawing support from the Oli coalition and forming his coalition government with NC support, it gave both Nepal and India an opportunity to step back.

Meanwhile, China has been stepping up its presence in Nepal. Miffed with India, Mr. Oli had signed an Agreement on Transit Trade which is now being developed along with an examination of a possible rail link. For the first time, joint military exercises were held in early 2017, after the first ever visit by the Chinese Defence Minister to Nepal, promising a military grant of \$32 million. Work is under way to restore and upgrade the Rasuwadi-Syabrubesi road link with Tibet. Nepal has also signed on to the Belt and Road Initiative and a special economic zone has been promised. A 1,200 MW hydel project on the Budhi Gandaki river was awarded on EPCF (Engineering, Procurement, Construction, Finance) basis to the Gezouba group.

India needs to support Mr. Deuba's efforts to conclude the local body elections followed by the passage of the constitutional amendment, which will clear the way for the provincial and parliamentary elections under the new Constitution. This will go a long way in bringing political stability to Nepal which, during the last quarter century has gone through a Maoist insurgency and transitioned from a monarchy to a republic. Importantly, India needs to ensure speedy delivery of the generous pledges of over a billion dollars committed during the last two years to make good on Mr. Modi's 'neighbourhood first' policy.

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Leave them students alone

For a system blamed for being exam and textbook-oriented, it is strange that public exams are being piled on



DEVI KAR

The Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE) has gleefully foisted two more board examinations on unsuspecting students from next year. The council has always claimed to be "student-friendly", so officials have hastened to point out that these examinations would be "application-based" and would not require preparation.

The question is this: wouldn't children have to master the matter that is required to be applied? The inclusion of Sanskrit as an optional language from Standards V to VIII is nothing new – but it will certainly please "the powers that be"; as will the introduction of mandatory yoga from Standard I.

Schooling them and now

The USP of the CISCE was the freedom it afforded to every school to design its own curriculum till Standard VIII. Guidelines have been available in abundance and schools derived great pleasure in researching, comparing, collating

and adopting best practices in India and abroad. Another instance of that freedom was in selecting textbooks. Only literature texts were prescribed for the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education and Indian School Certificate (ISC) examinations. The ISC examination was an adaptation of the Cambridge General Certificate of Education 'O' level examination. So in the good old days, the philosophy of not ranking students, not mentioning the aggregate or precise marks was strictly followed; only subject-wise points were indicated. The vile element of senseless competition over a mark or two was deliberately avoided. But sadly, we as people are obsessed with rank and status even in academics, and, sadly, the council gave in.

Ironically, the CISCE website announces as its ethos: "minimum monitoring; allowing schools to evolve own niche (sic); giving freedom to experiment with new ideas and practices". It is disappointing to see that the CISCE is deviating sharply from its stated ethos of "minimum monitoring". It is now attempting to take control of the entire school curriculum. We hope that it will not start prescribing textbooks next. This would result in promoting the racket of publishers vying for business and adding to the dubious tribe of textbook



writers. We must wean our children away from textbook-oriented learning altogether. The bane of the Indian education system has always been this crippling dependence on the textbook. Children must be shown that the pages of a specific textbook do not contain all the answers and that learning happens everywhere.

Focus on the teacher

The council's main objective in introducing these new tests, according to various dailies, is to assess the standard of teaching and thus keep schools on track.

However, examination results can never indicate the quality of school teaching accurately; the focus should be on teacher training and teacher development. External assessment of schools for benchmarking and self-evaluation is required but certainly not in the form of periodic board exams. Some schools voluntarily offer external tests at the junior and

middle school levels. These tests are optional, non-threatening and constructed by experts in the field. Important feedback (leading to effective "feedforward") is received by these schools from the experts. The council, it has been said, will outsource the testing at these lower levels. In that case, why shouldn't the schools be left to choose the tests they wish to administer, just as they should be left to prescribe their own textbooks? Incidentally, it is undesirable to measure aptitude at a young age.

Those in favour of these additional exams feel that such tests would enable children to take the board examinations in their stride in future. It is rather odd that some consider success in the board examinations to be the objective of school education. Putting it mildly, our current board examinations leave much to be desired. Examiners follow the marking scheme rigidly and many bright students have suffered because they have expressed themselves differently. Time and energy should be spent on improving the administration of these important exams instead of invading new areas which will only result in the dilution of existing services.

The Indian education system is constantly blamed for being too exam and textbook-oriented. The refrain is that our children should

be questioning, imagining and creating instead of preparing set answers to set questions. Therefore, it is all the more puzzling why more and more public examinations are being piled on. Why have we suddenly forgotten the examination-related suicides that occur every year without fail? No board examination can be stress-free and we have no right to overburden our children and make anxious parents even more distressed. Guidelines from the council are most welcome – not constricting mandates.

Alas, we never learn from our own experiences or from those of others. Frequent testing does not improve learning. The II-plus examination that is held in England annually is widely criticised. "The exam reduces everything to English, Maths and reasoning at an age where children's minds ought to be opened to the wonders of the world and to the fascinating possibilities of science," says an outspoken, but highly respected, headmaster. I do wish that we in India would concentrate on educating our young instead of preparing them for "competition".

Indeed many are deeply disturbed about the pressures that are about to be put on our 10 year olds by the demand for ticking boxes.

Devi Kar is Director, Modern High School for Girls, Kolkata

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.

Describing Gandhi

At a time when the nation faces challenges of an unprecedented nature, BJP President Amit Shah's description of Mahatma Gandhi as a 'chatur bania' is not only in very poor taste but also disappointing. There is no doubt that the remark has been made in order to win over certain segments of the population ahead of the Assembly polls in Chhattisgarh early next year. On its part, for the Congress party to raise a hue and cry over Mr. Shah's comment is ludicrous given that it abandoned the Mahatma's ideals a long time ago ("Cong. demands apology for Shah's 'chatur bania' remark", June 11).

The Prime Minister would do well to advise Mr. Shah to refrain from making such insensitive remarks as they only hurt the sentiments of a majority of citizens who still

hold the Mahatma and his ideals in high esteem due to their timeless relevance.

K.R. SRINIVASAN,
Secunderabad

It's about marketing
While farming practices, agro-climatic conditions and crop selection differ from State to State, a common problem faced by our farmers has been the volatility in prices for produce. A record price for a crop in a season attracts more farmers to cultivate it, causing a glut which drives down the prices. Governments cannot extend the minimum support price mechanism to cover all the crops. Indian agriculture that has overcome production crises is now facing a marketing crisis. Policymakers will have to look at marketing solutions. The UPA government started the farm loan waiver

culture by introducing the 'mother of all waiver schemes' in 2008 in order to retain political power. What should be the last resort has now become the default response of governments which want to be seen as pro-farmer ("Fault lines in the fields", June 10).

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Tiruvananthapuram

Food safety
The "plastic rice" scare appears to be spreading across India, fuelled by social media. Reports of it having some kind of harmful substance is only adding to the panic. The common man has no way of knowing how to differentiate between a genuine product from a harmful one. The Ministries of Health and Family Welfare and Food and Public Distribution need to assuage our fears as

the health of people is very important, and there has to be stringent punishment for food adulterers.

SRINIVASAN B.,
Chennai

Promoting geotourism
I believe that what 82-year-old Mohansingh Sodha has done in his life so far boils down to one important thing – serving the nation in the interests of future generations (The Hindu Magazine – "The Bone Collector of Kutch", April 29). I feel there is certainly a strong need for us to mull over the options of enhancing the potential of geotourism. Gujarat, Assam, Meghalaya, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand and Kerala are some regions that are home to fascinating geological wonders – from preserved fossils to mountains of interest – which should be showcased.

As a student of earth sciences, I am confident that people from most walks of life would be interested in having a structured approach to the subject.

ABHILASH BORAH,
Nadia, West Bengal

Uncovering a scam
It is shocking to note from the investigation done by The Hindu into Chennai's garbage scam that contractors are mixing construction debris with municipal garbage in order to increase tonnage ("Ill-gotten gains: making wealth out of waste", June 11). The

laxity on the part of private contractors to collect garbage is palpable as one can see huge heaps of waste lying uncollected in several parts of the city. The Chennai Corporation often ignores complaints and the common man has learnt to live with such indifference with no time and resources at his disposal to take on the strong contractor-official nexus.

