



Overdue

The Eshwarappa resignation brings back into focus the corruption blight in Karnataka

After being booked by the Udupi Town police in a case relating to abetment to suicide of a contractor, the continuation of Karnataka's Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Minister K.S. Eshwarappa in his post was untenable. The contractor, Santosh Patil, had alleged that he and other contractors had taken up some work for a temple fair in Belagavi district after the Minister had asked some gram panchayat members to proceed with the project and that the Minister's aides had demanded a commission of 40% when approached for payment of the bills. While Mr. Eshwarappa has denied this, citing the lack of work orders as evidence, the allegations that were made by the deceased contractor are in line with what the Karnataka State Contractors' Association (KSCA) has been suggesting: an "unprecedented 40% kickbacks" in State government contracts and also several complaints against Mr Eshwarappa in particular, and other Ministers and MLAs in the State. These allegations are not new either. In July 2021, in a letter to the Prime Minister, the association had made the same point — that government machinery led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was extracting kickbacks of up to 40% for government contracts and the clearance of contractor bills, and that the rot was systemic, including elected representatives and the bureaucracy. There was a change of guard in the government (a new Chief Minister) after these allegations were made and this was followed by an announcement of committees headed by retired judges being formed to probe tender estimates and conditions. But if the KSCA's views are accurate, little seems to have changed on the ground.

It is also evident that kickbacks have been a systemic political problem considering that the KSCA's concern was about the high rate of commissions rather than just the existence of these kickbacks to grease an official's palm. But the brazenness of the bribery and commission demands by those in power is there for all to see. This should not surprise anyone again as the BJP managed to gain power by weaning away legislators from other parties and the new recruits to power would not have had the incentive to shift but for lucrative gains. If anything, the BJP and the Sangh Parivar affiliates in the State have sought — and rather successfully — to distract people from the issue of corruption by raking up communal issues which in turn have affected public order. But the death of Patil and the resignation of Mr. Eshwarappa have been a jolt to the ruling party. The developments have brought the focus back on corruption and poor governance, which should be a blight on the State that hosts India's own version of the Silicon Valley and is a key engine in India's economic growth.

Take two

The pursuit of two courses simultaneously in physical mode is problematic

The dual degree academic programme, a work-in-progress, and the subject of much litigation for years, has finally been given legal sanctity by the University Grants Commission. The higher education regulatory body's notified guidelines will enable students to simultaneously pursue two academic programmes at multiple levels except for PhD courses. It has projected it as a logical extension of the National Education Policy 2020, with its emphasis on facilitating multiple pathways to learning using formal and non-formal modes. The UGC has proposed a three-way choice involving a combination of offline only; offline with distance mode; and distance/online only modes for dual programmes. The UGC has done well to mandate that open/distance learning and online mode courses should be pursued only in higher education institutions recognised by statutory bodies. This would also eliminate dubious players in the online education segment.

Granting students the liberty to enhance their skills and scope of employability through an additional degree is welcome. But the guidelines call for critical evaluation given the nature of competition, accessibility and academic-cum-physical infrastructure issues in colleges and universities. The UGC has said a student can also pursue two full-time programmes in physical mode. This is problematic as it might prompt students, who are academically proficient or with the economic wherewithal, to corner seats in two in-demand courses. Such a situation is best avoided in the context of the country's poor college density — colleges per lakh population (in the 18-23 age group). In the All India Survey on Higher Education Report 2019-20, the national average college density stands at 30. The UGC's Faruq Qamar Committee, which a decade ago recommended dual programmes with a second degree in open/distance mode, had ruled out offering simultaneous degree courses under regular mode "as it may create logistic, administrative and academic problems". Against this backdrop, the UGC may reconsider its guidelines for the physical mode option, while implementing the other two choices, strengthening and streamlining the open/distance learning courses in parallel. Alternatively, it may look at its 2004 document for initiation of double/multiple degree programme in engineering disciplines, where it had proposed a "gap" before an engineering degree holder could enrol for an additional or add-on degree course. That approach is pragmatic as it also sought to reduce the duration of the add-on degree by eliminating about 33% to 38% (52 to 60 course credits) of the "common curriculum" of the BE/B.Tech course (a total of 160 credits). This logic could be applied to allied courses in arts and science and reduce the duration of the second degree for students who desire pursuing dual programmes in physical mode. The more practical a policy, the better its results.

Sri Lanka stares at bankruptcy or redemption

The IMF agreement and fallout will be the central point of contention between the elite and the working people



AHILAN KADIRGAMAR

All eyes are on Sri Lanka as it endures its worst economic crisis since Independence. Millions of families are struggling to put food on the table. Long lines of people queuing for fuel or gas are a common sight across the country. Sri Lanka's doctors are running out of medicines for patients. Schools have run out of paper to conduct examinations. The large majority of the people are protesting with single focus, demanding the Rajapaksa brothers, who are in power, go home.

The Rajapaksa indeed must take the lion's share of the blame. It was their authoritarian rule, arrogance and myopic policymaking that aggravated the economic downturn. The Government recently announced two major decisions — one, to default on its U.S.\$51 billion external debt, in the process tainting the country's unblemished record, and two, negotiate a support package with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as the country "restructures" its debt.

Policy choices too

How did this situation come about? Sri Lanka is in crisis, not only because of the blunders of the Rajapaksa government but also because policy choices over decades have left the economy with little strength and resilience to bounce back. The Sri Lankan elite wanted the country to become a Singapore, but today the country is begging to put meals on people's plates. This is a national shame that must shake the ruling establishment. And yet, the country is once again opting for the same, formulaic remedies, showing no indication of having learnt any lessons from its disastrous path of unrestricted imports and rolling over debt with more borrowings. In fact, Colombo's economic top

brass seem rather pleased with themselves, for pushing a debt default and restructuring through an IMF agreement that the Government has now made its chief responses.

Amidst the great upheaval with the protests to dislodge the ruling regime, the elite opposed to the regime are thinking primarily of constitutional and legal solutions, with no serious economic alternative beyond an IMF package that might, at best, bring in a few billion dollars in the short term. But the real cost of such a "reform" package will be much higher, and invariably borne by the working people.

While it is economic hardship that has brought the masses out on the streets, the Government's next moves in line with the IMF only foretell greater economic agony for the poor, as taxes rise and social spending for public goods and services face the axe. As seasoned technocrats take up the reins to work with the IMF, there is no recognition that it was lopsided development and glaring inequalities in access to resources, income generation and wealth that resulted in dangerous political consequences for the country.

Defaulting, debt restructuring

Sri Lanka's strategy of defaulting on its external debt, timed less than a week before negotiations with the IMF in Washington, could not have come about without the Fund's nod. Default not only taints the country in the international lending scene but also creates a desperate reliance on the IMF, giving it all the power to unilaterally determine loan conditions. In effect, the IMF is in the driving seat to steer the economy or, Sri Lanka will see a deadly crash with bankruptcy.

There is no guarantee that an IMF agreement will lead to even financial stability, going by Sri Lanka's past engagement as well as the volatility of financial markets today. The logic of default and debt restructuring with austerity is bound to face many hurdles. Financial markets are far too erratic to accept so-called orderly de-



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faults, and the weeks ahead are likely to be tumultuous. Sri Lanka may find it hard to make international financial transactions including those for imports of essential goods. Certainly, the neoliberal dream of accessing international capital markets again to continue the binge of commercial borrowings is a tall order, as default has made the country far less creditworthy.

The IMF Staff Report, that was made public in March 2022, outlines a number of recommendations likely to be entrenched in the upcoming agreement: revenue-based fiscal consolidation through increasing tax rates and energy pricing reforms; restoring debt sustainability; near-term monetary policy tightening towards inflation targeting; a market-determined and flexible exchange rate; and targeted social safety nets.

Significantly, many of these recommendations are already being implemented by Sri Lanka. The exchange rate has been floated, passing on the higher costs of imports to the consumers; interest rates have been doubled to 14%, putting at risk small business and the livelihoods of rural producers, and energy price hikes, for example of petrol and cooking gas, have been transferred to consumers.

The most stringent of those conditions to come are also mentioned in the IMF Report, which calls for "growth-enhancing structural reforms, including increasing female labour force participation, reducing youth unemployment, liberalising trade, developing a wide-reaching and coherent investment promotion strategy, and

reforming price controls and state-owned enterprises". Forcing women into the workforce, further liberalising trade, removing price controls and privatising state-owned enterprises where public services become unaffordable, are going to stifle households and tear apart the social fabric.

Technocratic solutions

During its postcolonial history, Sri Lanka has gone through 16 IMF agreements, most recently an Extended Fund Facility of U.S.\$1.5 billion in June 2016. Before this it was a Standby Arrangement of U.S.\$2.6 billion two months after the civil war ended in May 2009. These recent agreements were crucial for Sri Lanka to undertake commercial borrowings; for example in July 2016, a month after the last IMF agreement, Sri Lanka borrowed U.S.\$1.5 billion in sovereign bonds; U.S.\$500 million of that was just repaid in January this year.

In this context, the reforms in the upcoming IMF agreement are likely to be far more impactful and perhaps on the order of the Structural Adjustment Program taken forward after 1977 with the IMF. The launch of those neoliberal policies, called the "open economy" reforms locally, set off policies that are in fact the long underlying causes of the current crisis.

In Colombo's elite circles, the refrain now is that "we will have to go through much suffering before it gets better". But, the elite will be the last to suffer as austerity will mostly hit Sri Lanka's working people. In fact, the IMF agreement in bailing out external lenders is also bailing out the elite classes in Sri Lanka, as much of the external debt and the related projects and conspicuous consumption served them more than anyone else.

The proposed solution is about being able to borrow more in the capital markets after the green light of the IMF agreement; but that, if achieved, will only increase the debt stock, making a future crisis inevitable. The other more contentious move will be to sell the family silver, in the form of privatising state enterprises and

institutions built over the decades to pay up the external debt.

Start with a wealth tax

The idea that, somehow, Sri Lanka can get through this crisis in a short period of say a year, and that the people who are already in dire straits can take on more economic suffering in the months ahead are likely to backfire. While the spotlight is on growth and recovery, Sri Lanka's worst fear at the moment is a likely food crisis, where starvation or even a famine are real possibilities.

The neoliberal technocrats are proposing to buy over people affected by austerity measures with cash transfers. However, working people are far more committed to their social welfare entitlements as evident from how they have fought hard to protect free education and universal health care over the decades. Indeed, there will be tremendous resistance to privatising state services and utilities. If anyone has to pay for this crisis, it must obviously be the wealthier classes in the country; the imposition of a wealth tax, for example on property and vehicles accumulated over the years, would be a starting point.

The great democratic strivings of the people, both in the electoral realm and through the extra-constitutional means of protests, have ensured that repressive regimes and oligarchies have been consistently overthrown in Sri Lanka. It is the failures of Sri Lanka's elite for their narrow interests that have allowed for polarising and destructive regimes to emerge time and again. The IMF agreement, its conditionalities and its fallout, are going to be a central point of contention between the elite who are trying to manoeuvre this crisis and the working people who have generated this political opening. It is such ideological and political struggles amidst this crisis that will determine whether Sri Lanka chooses bankruptcy or redemption.

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The food vaccine as right, more so for TB patients

Without addressing undernutrition, the goals of reducing the incidence of TB, and mortality, in India, cannot be reached



K.R. ANTONY

In the past, there was a belief that every ill had a pill and the pill killed the germs that made you ill. That germ could be a bacteria, virus or a parasite. Factors such as genetic and metabolic causes, hormonal imbalance and altered neuro-chemical transmitters causing illnesses were less known then. But there was fairly good knowledge of how good air and nutrition reduced consumption illnesses such as tuberculosis (TB).

History and a perspective

This is why sanatoriums/sanatoria were set up in mountain terrain, with fresh air, pure water and good food, in the quest for a cure for TB. There were no drugs for TB till the discovery of streptomycin in 1943. With improved wages, better living standards and the accompanying higher purchasing power for food, the TB mortality rate came down from 300 people per 1,00,000 population to 60 in England and Wales. TB disappeared from socio-economically developed countries long before the advent of chemotherapy. After the Second World War, in 1946 G.B. Leyton reported a 92% reduction in the incidence of TB among British soldiers who were fed an additional Red Cross diet of 1,000 calories plus 30 grams of protein

when compared to Russian soldiers who were fed only a camp diet. This historical importance of good nutrition was ignored by the modern therapist who tried to control TB initially with streptomycin injection, isoniazid and para-aminosalicylic acid. In the ecstasy of finding antibiotics killing the germs, the social determinants of disease were ignored.

Not patient-centric

With more drug arsenals such as rifampicin, ethambutol, pyrazinamide, the fight against TB bacteria continued, which became multi-drug resistant. Sharper bullets were fired into the frail body of patients. It was bacteria targeted, not patient-centric. The regimes and the mode of delivery of drugs were changed to plug the loopholes of alleged "non-compliance of illiterate and irresponsible patients". Blister packs of a multi-drug regime were provided at the doorstep, and the directly observed treatment/therapy (DOT) mechanism set up. There was little done to try to understand where patients lived, what work they did for a living, how much they could afford to buy food, and how much they ate.

Many of the poor discontinued blister-packaged free drugs thinking that these were "hot and strong" drugs not suited for the hunger pains they experienced every night. They coughed up virulent bacteria from their emaciated body to infect many around them. It is no wonder that TB was never brought under control.

Let me narrate this example. I was defending a project proposal



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to provide nutritional supplementation of additional rice, dhal and cooking oil for TB patients in the tribal areas of Bastar-Chhattisgarh as part of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) plan in 2009-10. But it was rejected twice by the central technical team as 'an intervention without proven benefit'.

Nutrition status and TB risk

"The nutrition of the individual, is the most vital factor in the prevention in tuberculous disease," said Dr. J.B. McDougall of the World Health Organization (WHO), in 1949. And, Dr. René J. Dubos in the Journal of the American Medical Association, in 1960, said, "It is most unlikely that drugs alone, or drugs supplemented by vaccination, can control TB in the underprivileged countries of the world as long as their nutritional status has not been raised to a reasonable level."

The fact is that 90% of Indians exposed to TB remain dormant if their nutritional status and thereby the immune system, is good. When the infected person is immunocompromised, TB as a disease manifests itself in 10% of the infected. India has around 2.8 million active cases. It is a disease of the poor. And the poor are three

times less likely to go for treatment and four times less likely to complete their treatment for TB, according to WHO, in 2002. Scientists like Rudolph Virchow (before 1902), Sir William Osler (before 1919) and Dr. Dubos (from 1960) have been saying the same thing.

The work and the findings of a team at the Jan Swasthya Sahayog hospital at Ganiyari, Bilaspur in Chhattisgarh established the association of poor nutritional status with a higher risk of TB. In the period 2004-09, among the 1,695 pulmonary TB patients they treated, men had an average body weight of 42.1 kg and a body mass index (BMI) of 16. For women, the average body weight was 34.1 kg and a BMI of 15. With these levels of undernutrition, there was a two to four-fold rise in the mortality associated with TB.

In 2014, research led by Dr. Anurag Bhargava (professor of medicine) showed that undernutrition in the adult population was the major driver of India's TB epidemic. Subsequently, the central TB division of the Ministry of Health came up with a "Guidance Document - Nutritional Care and Support for Patients with Tuberculosis in India" after a national workshop held in February 2016 at Yenapoya Medical College, Mangaluru, Karnataka. The 2019 Global TB report identified malnutrition as the single-most associated risk factor for the development of TB, accounting for more cases than four other risks, i.e., smoking, the harmful use of alcohol, diabetes and HIV.

Beginning with the JSS, a number of organisations began providing eggs, milk powder, dhal, Ben-

gal gram, groundnuts and cooking oil to diagnosed patients along with anti-TB drugs. Chhattisgarh also initiated the supply of groundnut, moong dhal and soya oil, and from April 2018, under the Nikshay Poshan Yojana of the National Health Mission, all States began extending cash support of ₹500 per month to TB patients to buy food; this amount needs to be raised. Without simultaneous nutrition education and counselling support, this cash transfer will not have the desired outcome.

'Syndemics'

According to Dr. Bhargava, "undernutrition and TB" are "syndemics", and the intake of adequate balanced food, especially by the poor, can work as a vaccine to prevent TB. This vaccine is "poly-valent, acting against many gastrointestinal and respiratory tract infections; orally active, that can be produced in the country without patent rights; dispensed over the counter, without prescription and without any side-effects; safe for children, pregnant and lactating women, and of guaranteed compliance because it brings satisfaction and happiness".

The food vaccine is a guaranteed right for life under the Constitution for all citizens, more so for TB patients. Thus, the goals of reducing the incidence of TB in India and of reducing TB mortality cannot be reached without addressing undernutrition.

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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.

Restore peoplehood

It is distressing that India, as a nation, is losing cherished values by sliding into religious division (Editorial page, April 15). Violence in the name of religion appears to be spreading with impunity with the peculiar silence of the political leadership as licence. The series of controversies seem to be getting stoked to keep the communal pot boiling. All

secular parties with influence should work to fight divisive forces.

J. ANANTHA PADMANABHAN, Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu

Governor's reception

The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister could have attended the function hosted by the Tamil Nadu Governor, and reiterated the State's stand on NEET (Page 1, "CM boycotts Governor's 'At Home'

reception", April 15). The Chief Minister, with a good record so far, could have proved that he is above petty politics.

S. PARTHASARATHY, Chennai

DAP fertilizer

The IMD has predicted 'normal' monsoons, but this generosity from the heavens could well be offset by ongoing human contradictions. We could

well be staring into empty bins of fertilizers, particularly DAP. We had been struggling, in 2021-22 with shortages. The Ukraine conflict has hugely disrupted the supply chain as the troubled region counts for sizeable production. While the landed cost today of imported DAP is ₹1.1 lakh a ton, the farmer pays ₹27,000 a ton. Without clear policy enunciation on

assistance, importers are yet to place orders.

R. NARAYANAN, Navi Mumbai

Fodder cultivation

The livestock sector remains a key engine of growth. The rise in the cost of meat, milk and fish adds to inflation and feed cost, which in turn is determined by the feed ingredients. As a solution, the area under maize cultivation needs to

be increased. Fodder cultivation practice has to be promoted. Livestock farmers should be encouraged to grind their own livestock feed. This was very successful when implemented under the erstwhile Pudhuvaazhvu project, a rural livelihood programme in Tamil Nadu.

Dr. V. PURUSHOTHAMAN, Chennai

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