

The imperative to offer refuge

Why India urgently needs a national asylum policy



PALLAVI SAXENA &
NAYANTARA RAJA

This month, it is five years since Nargis first arrived in Delhi. The Afghan journalist in Herat, Afghanistan had to flee her country after the Taliban threatened to kill her. But as a refugee in India, she has had no opportunity to earn a living and has been unable to rebuild her life.

Today, India is host to over 200,000 refugees like her who have been forced to flee conflict and persecution in their home countries. On World Refugee Day (June 20), there is a need to reassess India's approach to refugee protection, particularly in light of the regional refugee crisis after the mass exodus of the Rohingya from Myanmar.

Traditionally, India has hosted several persecuted groups such as Tibetans and Sri Lankans. While it is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has no domes-

tic asylum law, it has reiterated its commitment towards the protection of refugees at various international fora, including the UN General Assembly.

One of the most significant affirmations of this commitment was demonstrated by India becoming a signatory to the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, which was adopted by 193 countries in September 2016. In doing so, India has expressed its solidarity with those forced to flee and agreed that protecting refugees and supporting the countries that shelter them are shared international responsibilities that must be borne more equitably.

The Declaration sets the stage for a new framework for refugee protection – the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). The Compact is a coordinated effort to strengthen international response to protracted refugee situations and comprehensively addresses all stages of refugee protection, from reception to long-term solutions. Two of its key objectives are to ease pressures on host countries and enhance refugee self-reliance. The GCR recognises that certain refugee situations can last for decades and acknowledges that the

burden is borne largely by developing countries, that now host over 80% of the refugee population in the world. In light of this, it calls for support from the international community in the form of resources. It also seeks to establish forums to enable expertise-sharing to promote economic opportunities, decent work and job creation not just for refugees but also for the host community. Since the Declaration was adopted, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has been engaging with member states, UN bodies, and non-governmental organisations to develop a plan for its practical implementation; this will be finalised by the end of 2018.

Indian context

Although India has hosted refugees of varying nationalities for decades, the country has done little beyond providing asylum. There have been some attempts to introduce a refugee law in the country, the latest being the Asylum Bill 2015, introduced as a private member's bill by Shashi Tharoor. However, none has gone the distance and the government continues to adopt an ad hoc approach towards this group. Given that



AFP

most refugees have been unable to return to their countries, leading to protracted refugee situations, there is an urgent need for the government to develop a uniform framework for their management during their stay in India.

For instance, due to their unclear legal status and lack of uniform documentation, refugees have limited access to essential services and almost no avenues for livelihood. While some refugees have been able to generate income by working in the informal sector, many of them, especially vulnerable women like Nargis, are at the mercy of touts and traffickers even within their own community. At best, they are forced to rely on income from odd jobs which is an unsustainable livelihood option that often leaves them exposed to exploitation.

The solution to this may lie

within the GCR, which calls for States to identify gaps and opportunities for employment and income generation for refugees in a bid to enhance their self-reliance. Moreover, it specifies the need to include the host community in enabling mapping skills, vocational training and capacity-building among refugee populations, thereby fostering understanding and cooperation among the communities and paving the way for a socially cohesive approach.

India's commitment to refugee protection under the GCR is evident in its active participation in ongoing GCR consultations, where it has emphasised the need for a clear mechanism for the refugee response regime. Therefore this is an opportune time for India to reassess the need for a national asylum policy which is compliant with the principles laid down in the GCR. This will not only re-establish India's place as a democratic regional power committed to core humanitarian principles but will also provide refugees such as Nargis a chance to give back to the country that has adopted her.

Pallavi Saxena and Nayantara Raja are refugee lawyers based in New Delhi



ILLUSTRATION: ROHNIT PHORE

CHANDRA
BHUSHAN

Deputy director-general, Centre for Science
and Environment@Bh_Chandra



● THE REAL MAINSTREAM

India's own Dust Bowl

AS DELHI AND parts of the Indo-Gangetic Plains were getting engulfed in a thick cloud of dust last week, a question kept coming to my mind: Is there any similarity between the recent dust storms in India and the dust storms that hit the Great Plains of the United States (US) in 1930s and turned it into a Dust Bowl? I will stick my neck out and say that there are. Let me elaborate.

The Dust Bowl, considered one of the greatest man-made ecological disasters, was a period of severe dust storms that lasted nearly a decade, starting 1931, and engulfed large parts of the US. The dust storms originated in the Great Plains—from states like Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado and Kansas. They were so severe that they choked everything and blocked out the sun for days. Sometimes, the storms travelled thousands of kilometres and blotted out monuments such as the Statue of Liberty. Citizens developed “dust pneumonia” and experienced chest pain and difficulty in breath-

ing. The storms damaged the soil in around 100 million acres of land, leading to the greatest short-time migration in the American history, with approximately 3.5 million people abandoning their farms and fields.

Obviously, we have not yet experienced similarly high levels of the ecological disaster in India. But, can we say that we will not experience it in the future?

Dust storms are an annual weather pattern in the northern region of India comprising Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan and Punjab, as also in the Sindh region of Pakistan. But, they are normally low in intensity and accompanied by rains. In fact, people welcome dust storms as they bring down temperatures and herald the arrival of the monsoons. But, the dust storms that have hit India since February this year have been quantitatively and qualitatively different from those in the past. They are high-powered storms travelling long distances and destroying properties and agricultural fields. Since February,

they have affected as many as 16 states and killed more than 500 people. Cities like Delhi were choked in dust for days, with air quality level reaching the “severe” category on most days.

So, is this the beginning of a Dust Bowl in India? To answer this, let’s compare the conditions that led to the Dust Bowl in the US with the situation in India.

The Dust Bowl areas of the Great Plains are largely arid and semi-arid and prone to extended periods of drought. The ecology of the area originally supported grasslands and a large bison population. The US federal government encouraged settlement and development of large-scale agriculture by giving large parcels of grasslands to settlers. Waves of European settlers arrived at the beginning of the 20th century and converted grasslands into agricultural fields. At the same time, technological improvements allowed rapid mechanisation of farm equipment, especially tractors and combined harvesters, which made it possible to operate larger parcels of land.

For the next two decades, agricultural land grew manifold and farmers undertook extensive deep ploughing of the topsoil with the help of tractors to plant crops like wheat. This displaced the native, deep-rooted grasses that trapped soil and moisture even during dry periods and high winds. Then, the drought

struck. Successive waves of drought, which started in 1930 and ended in 1939, turned the Great Plains into bone-dry land. As the soil was already loose due to extensive ploughing, high winds turned them to dust and blew them away in huge clouds.

Does this sounds familiar?

The dust storm regions of India and Pakistan too are largely arid and semi-arid. But they are at a lower altitude and hence less windy compared to the Great Plains. But, as we will see later, this too is altering due to climate change.

Though settled agriculture was always practised in this part of India, it was subsistence in nature. This began to change post the 1880s, when the British introduced large-scale canal irrigation in the region. The Punjab Canal Colonies were settled by the British in Western Punjab, now in Pakistan, to bring large swathes of land under cultivation. A dense network of canals built in Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh to divert

water from the Ravi, Satluj and Yamuna irrigated millions of acres of land. The region became the largest producer of food grains, like the Great Plains of the US. And, like the Great Plains, this area is in the throes of an ecological disaster.

Over the last 50 years, chemical- and water-intensive agriculture has replaced the traditional low-input agriculture. Canal irrigation has been overtaken by the groundwater irrigation. In addition, mechanised agriculture has led to deeper ploughing, loosening more and more topsoil. The result has been devastating for the soil and groundwater. In most of these areas, the soil has been depleted and groundwater levels have fallen precipitously. In Delhi, Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana, groundwater extraction far exceeds the recharge.

The forests and natural vegetation have also diminished over the years. Being arid and semi-arid, this area had thorny, dry, deciduous forests and thorny shrubs that held the soil during long, dry months. But rampant clearing for agriculture, cities and mining have reduced the forest cover significantly. Haryana, Rajasthan and Punjab have forest cover in less than 5% of their geographical areas; most of these are plantations, not forests.

On top of the man-made ecological destruction, the natural climatic cycle along with climate change is affecting the weather pattern of this region.

First, this area too is prone to prolonged drought. In fact, large parts of Haryana, Punjab, Delhi and western UP have experienced mildly dry to extremely dry conditions in the last six years. The Standardized Precipitation Index (SPI), which specifies the level of dryness or excess rains in an area, of large parts of Haryana, Punjab and Delhi has been negative since 2012. Rajasthan, on the other hand shows a positive SPI or excess rainfall. But an analysis of the rainfall pattern indicates that most of the rainfall in Rajasthan has occurred in very few days; most parts of the year were without any rainfall.

Second, this area is experiencing increasing temperatures. Over the past 100 years, the average annual temperature has increased by about 1oC. But the seasonal temperatures have increased even more. In fact, there seems to be a strong correlation between the dust storms and the rapid increase in temperature. Maximum temperatures across northern and western India have been far higher than normal since April this year.

Last, climate change is affecting the pattern of Western Disturbances (WDs), leading to stronger winds and stronger storms. WDs are storms originating in the Mediterranean region that bring winter rain to north-western India. But because of the warming of the Arctic and the Tibetan Plateau, indications are that the WDs are becoming unseasonal, frequent and stronger.

Now, let’s join the dots. Conversion of arid and semi-arid areas into intensive agriculture; unsustainable agricultural practices, and large-scale clearing of forests and natural vegetation that loosened the topsoil; frequent dry conditions, increasing temperatures and rapidly declining groundwater that reduced soil moisture; and stronger winds and storms that picked up loose soil and blew them away in huge clouds. This is pretty much what happened in the Great Plains in 1930s. It is what is happening in India today.

The Dust Bowl led the US government to initiate a large-scale land-management and soil-conservation programme. Large-scale shelterbelt plantations, contour ploughing, conservation agriculture and establishment of conservation areas to keep millions of acres as grassland, helped halt wind erosion and dust storms.

It is time India too recognises its own Dust Bowl and initiates a large-scale ecological restoration programme to halt it. Else, we will see more intense dust storms, and a choked Delhi would be a permanent feature.

It is time India too recognises its own Dust Bowl and initiates a large-scale ecological restoration programme to halt it



HUMA HASAN

WITH SAVIOURS LIKE THESE

Those ‘rescuing’ Muslim women are also the ones undermining their agency

IS FEMINISM being co-opted by the right-wing forces? Do Muslim women need saving? Through *behen beti bacho* and anti-Romeo squads, do Hindu women need protection from Muslim men? These are some of the questions that need to be answered in the wake of the Law Commission’s renewed debate on Muslim Personal Law reform, started by the latest round of consultations for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) late last month.

In recent years, it has been noted that the direction of political discourse — which includes judicial pronouncements, civil society activism, government policy and the media debate — has veered towards selectively focusing on issues of Muslim women and the need to “rescue” them. Further, when it comes to the construction of the cause for these ills, the discourse has narrowly focused on religion — Islam or Islamic law — as being the source of all problems related to Muslim women and on Muslim men as being the sole perpetrators. A brief purview of the political discourse, especially under the present government, shows that gender equality in cultural and religious terms is represented as a problem already solved for all women, except Muslim women. This is a problematic account of the state of gender justice in the country on several counts.

First, Muslim women are not a homogeneous lot. Today, in India, Muslim women also belong to the most persecuted minor-

In the political discourse, culture or religion is projected as the sole reason for their backwardness. Here too, the discourse projects that only Muslim women need to be saved from oppressive personal laws and patriarchal Muslim men. In the same discourse, there is a normalisation of violence against Muslim men and of sexual violence against all Indian women. For instance, the same discourse calls for the dilution of sections of the IPC, which resist the recognition of marital rape as a crime.

ity, whose right to citizenship, life, livelihood and other basic socio-economic rights are constantly under threat from an extremist form of majoritarian nationalism. However, this oppression that they face, along with Muslim men, is never taken into account when reflecting upon their gender-oppressed status.

Second, in the political discourse, culture or religion is projected as the sole reason for their backwardness. Here too, the discourse projects that only Muslim women need to be saved from oppressive personal laws and patriarchal Muslim men. In the same discourse, there is a normalisation of violence against Muslim men and of sexual violence against all Indian women. For instance, the same discourse calls for the dilution of sections of the IPC, which resist the recognition of marital rape as a crime.

During and in the run-up to the Uttar Pradesh elections in 2016-17, under the garb of gender justice, the triple talaq issue was extensively used by the star campaigners of the BJP. After the recent bypoll losses, it seems the need for Muslim Personal Law to project the myth of Muslim “otherness” has returned. The UCC seems to have become a time-tested electoral tool to polarise the masses. It is instructive to bear in mind that the right-wing forces originally gained ascendancy to political centrestage after the communal polarisation caused by the Shah Bano debate in the mid-1980s. The demand for a UCC has figured in the BJP manifesto

ever since. Noted legal scholar and activist, Flavia Agnes, has also made a similar observation, adding that “...Until then, and more particularly in the 1950s when the debate around the Hindu Code Bill was raging, it was the Hindu law that was projected as ‘archaic and anti-women’”.

Illustrative of some of the dark sides of such a skewed pursuit of gender justice is the much-publicised Hadiya case. This case involved the conversion and later marriage of an adult Hindu girl to Islam. There was a concerted effort at multiple levels of the political, judicial and social spectrum to deny the woman her agency. On one hand, the so-called harbingers of gender justice are weaving the myth of “love jihad” in order to oppress and control Hindu women, while, on the other, they are pretending to be saviours of Muslim women.

This selective appropriation of feminism needs to be challenged by the women’s movement, as it is rendering Indian women more vulnerable to violence and patriarchal control. Communal polarisation under the garb of gender justice is a time-tested formula used by the ruling dispensation — the latest efforts by the Law Commission to reform Muslim Personal Law needs to be viewed as a part of this agenda, rather than a step towards achieving genuine gender justice.

The writer is assistant professor at the Centre for Women’s Studies, Aligarh Muslim University

India's pivot to Eurasia

When you have complicated ties with neighbours, it makes sense to strengthen ties with your neighbours' neighbours



P.S. RAGHAVAN

Sandwiched between U.S. President Donald Trump's acrimonious public exchanges with other leaders at the G-7 (group of seven industrialised countries) summit (June 7-8) and the headline-hogging U.S.-North Korea summit (June 12), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Qingdao, China (June 9-10) attracted little international attention. It was the first SCO summit attended by India as a full-fledged member (It has been an observer since 2005.)

The SCO grew out of the Shanghai Five grouping – of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – which was set up in 1996 to resolve boundary disputes between China and each of the four other members. It admitted Uzbekistan in 2001, re-christened itself the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and broadened its agenda to include political, economic and security cooperation. It admitted India and Pakistan as full members in 2017.

The SCO opportunity

The admission of India and Pakistan has expanded the geographical, demographic and economic profile of the SCO, which now has about half the world's population and a quarter of its GDP. Its boundary extends southwards to the Indian Ocean.

The SCO's relevance for India lies in geography, economics and geopolitics. Its members occupy a

huge landmass adjacent to India's extended neighbourhood, where India has important economic and security interests. Its Central Asian countries border Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. A narrow sliver of land separates southern Tajikistan from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. When you have complicated relations with your neighbours, it makes sense to strengthen relations with your neighbours' neighbours. With Pakistan joining the Organisation and Afghanistan and Iran knocking on the doors for membership, the logic of India's membership becomes stronger.

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the optimal development of India's relations with Central Asian countries has been constrained by lack of overland access through Pakistan and Afghanistan/Iran, because of political and/or security reasons. With new multimodal transport corridors now envisaged through Iran, there are again prospects of invigorating trade and investment links with this region (provided fresh U.S. sanctions on Iran do not stymie this effort).

In the formative years of the SCO, Russia pushed strongly for India to join it, to somewhat balance China's economic dominance in Central Asia. The Chinese were not responsive. China has since consolidated its energy and economic foothold in the region, where ambitious infrastructure and connectivity projects are envisaged as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It has secured the simultaneous admission of Pakistan into the SCO. India has to carve out a political and economic space for itself in Central Asia, alongside Russia's role as net security provider and China's dominating economic presence. The Central



Asian countries would welcome India breaking into this Russia-China duopoly.

The India-Pakistan interaction was closely watched in Qingdao. The handshake and exchange of pleasantries between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistan President Mamnoon Hussain were noted, as also the absence of bilateral altercations. It allayed apprehensions, expressed in the run-up to Indian and Pakistani accession, that SCO deliberations would get bogged down by India-Pakistan squabbles. It also respected the etiquette of international organisations: countries join them to promote shared objectives, not to settle bilateral scores.

The India-Pakistan track

Russian President Vladimir Putin has suggested that harmonious cooperation in the SCO may pave the way for an India-Pakistan rapprochement, recalling that SCO membership had facilitated resolution of China's boundary disputes with Russia and Central Asian countries. Chinese officials have also expressed this hope. The circumstances are not comparable. China made substantial concessions to settle its boundary disputes with Russia and Central Asia, in pursuit of larger strategic and economic objectives in the region. India-Pakistan differences

extend well beyond a boundary dispute, flow from different historical circumstances and are located in a different geopolitical environment.

The SCO will, however, nudge both countries to cooperate in sensitive areas. One example is the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the SCO, which coordinates cooperation for security and stability, through intelligence-sharing on criminal and terrorist activities. India and Pakistan, which exchange mutual recriminations in such matters, have to find ways of cooperating in the RATS. Defence cooperation is another tricky area: enhanced linkages between armed forces is an SCO objective. India has agreed to participate in the SCO's counter-terrorism military exercises in Russia later this year, when Indian and Pakistani troops will operate together. Reconciling Indian and Pakistani perspectives in the SCO's initiatives on Afghanistan would be yet another challenge.

The expansion of SCO has diluted its unanimity on hitherto shared perspectives. Tacitly accepting the fact that India and Pakistan are not signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Qingdao declaration confirms the compliance of the SCO's NPT signatories to its provisions. India's reservations on China's BRI are accommodated by excluding it from the list of SCO members that endorse it (all except India). The boilerplate formulations on terrorism accommodate the concerns of various members, without offending any. The essence of a functioning multilateral framework is focusing on shared objectives and underplaying divergences.

Besides expanding opportuni-

ties for India in Central Asia, the SCO is a platform for articulating a non-Western – as distinct from anti-Western – perspective on global issues. This includes opposition to selective advocacy of regime change, self-serving homilies on human rights and intrusive advice on domestic policies. It suits India that the SCO is not stridently anti-West in its pronouncements. The U.S. cultivates relations with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to ensure logistical support for its Afghanistan operations and to gradually wean them away from Russian influence. These countries welcome the room for manoeuvre that this gives them. Russia and China also carefully avoid strong anti-West postures in the SCO, preferring to deal with differences quietly and bilaterally.

Balance of forces

The challenge for India – besides that of security and defence cooperation with Pakistan – may come from increasing Chinese dominance of the SCO. This could happen if Russia-U.S. relations worsen further, leading Russia to an even greater dependence on Chinese political and economic support. Another possible game-changer could be the fallout of the much-heralded U.S.-North Korea summit. If, as Mr. Trump has hinted, peace in the Korean peninsula leads to reduced American military presence in the region, it would dramatically change the balance of forces in the Asia-Pacific in favour of China. This would transform Eurasian dynamics, with an inevitable impact on SCO.

*P.S. Raghavan, a former diplomat, is
Convenor of the National Security
Advisory Board. The views expressed are
personal*

When Governors ruled J&K

The collapse of the PDP-BJP coalition sets Jammu & Kashmir on course for its 8th spell of Governor's rule. A look back at the previous spells, ranging from as short as 15 days to as long as 6 years

NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN
CHANDIGARH, JUNE 19

THE FOUR-DECADE chequered history of Governor's rule in Jammu and Kashmir began, as is likely again, with the party in power at the Centre pulling support for the government of the day. And while Kashmiris have protested Governor's rule many times as a subversion of democracy, the likely imposition of an eighth spell of Governor's rule after the PDP-BJP coalition's collapse is not upsetting anyone.

The first time was March 1977. Two years earlier, in 1975, Sheikh Abdullah had taken over as Chief Minister of a Congress government after signing the historic 1974 accord with then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. He remained in power through the Emergency. Five days after lifting the Emergency on March 21, 1977, Indira pulled support for Sheikh Abdullah's chief ministership.

After 105 days of Governor's rule under L N Jha, a Cambridge-educated economist and ICS officer who served as RBI Governor prior to his J&K appointment, elections were held in June 1977. Sheikh Abdullah had revived his Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (which had earlier merged with the Congress), won the election and formed the government.

The 1980s were a period of great political instability after the Sheikh's death in 1982, as his son Farooq fought off rivals within the NC and revived the alliance with the Congress through an accord with Rajiv Gandhi in 1986.

In this time, Jha was succeeded as Governor by B K Nehru, who lasted just three years. In his memoir *Nice Guys Finish Second*, he wrote that his disagreement with Indira on her plan to dismiss Farooq Abdullah led to his being shunted out. He was succeeded by Justice V Khalid, who had the shortest tenure as J&K Governor — just 12 days. Indira then sent her trusted lieutenant Jagmohan for his first stint as Governor of the state. A split was engineered in the NC, Farooq was dismissed, and his estranged brother-in-law Ghulam Mohammad Shah was installed as Chief Minister.

Governor's rule was imposed in March 1986 for the second time when the Congress withdrew support to Shah. The Farooq-Rajiv accord was on the anvil, and after it was sealed and signed, Farooq was reappointed Chief Minister.

The 1987 Assembly election, contested jointly by the National Conference and Congress, went down in Kashmir history as



Jagmohan swears in Farooq Abdullah as CM in 1986. Jagmohan oversaw two spells of Governor's rule. *Swadesh Talwar/Archive*

one of the most fraudulent with allegations of open rigging. Kashmir's tryst with militancy is often traced back to this election, which Kashmiris accuse Delhi of stealing.

In 1990, two days after the government reappointed Jagmohan as Governor to deal with the huge upsurge in protests, the Gawkadal massacre, in which CRPF personnel shot dead at least 50 protesters on a bridge in Srinagar, prompted Farooq Abdullah to resign as Chief Minister. Around the same time, the exodus of Pandits began from the Valley, amid incidents of killings of members of the community by militants. What followed was six years of Governor's rule, the longest period without an elected political leadership, which also coincided with the period when militancy was at its height.

The NC won the 1996 election, and its government became the first to last its six-year term. The 2002 elections threw up a hung Assembly. Governor Girish Chandra Saxena took charge after Farooq Abdullah refused to continue as "caretaker" Chief Minister after losing the elections. This spell

of Governor's rule lasted 15 days, from October 17 to November 2, the shortest in the state, until the PDP, the Congress and independents cobbled together a government.

Then followed a period of relative stability, and decrease in militancy. India and Pakistan began the LoC ceasefire in 2003. Dialogue followed in 2004, after the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-Pervez Musharraf joint declaration in January that year in which Musharraf committed that Pakistan and PoK would not be used for terrorist activities in other countries. The first Congress led-UPA government also initiated the Kashmir roundtable dialogues. There was an outreach to the Mirwaiz Umar Farooq-led faction of the Hurriyat.

Under the PDP-Congress agreement, Chief Ministers switched halfway through the term. After Mufti Mohammad Sayeed's three years, it was Ghulam Nabi Azad's turn in 2005, and he continued until the PDP withdrew support in June 2008 over the Amarnath land row. N N Vohra replaced Lt Gen SK Sinha as Governor at the end of June 2008. Two weeks later, the state came under

Governor's rule for the fifth time from July 11, 2008 until January 5, 2009.

Vohra's two terms have seen three periods of Governor's rule until now. After the one in 2008-2009, the next imposition of Governor's rule was after the 2014 elections, which once again threw up a fractured mandate. The BJP had won 25 seats, and as the PDP worked up the courage to make an alliance "between the North Pole and the South Pole" in Sayeed's words, Vohra ran the state for 51 days from January 9 to March 1, 2015.

Chief Minister Mufti Sayeed's death at the end of 2015, and his daughter Mehbooba's resistance to the alliance with the BJP and the delay in her taking over as Chief Minister necessitated another period of Governor's rule for 87 days, from January 8 to April 4, 2016. During these four months, Vohra pushed the administration to keep working and ensure delivery on the ground. Such was the unpopularity of the alliance in Kashmir, and the partners had such a strained relationship, that there were voices demanding Governor's rule even back in May 2017.

Lateral entry will galvanise the IAS

But hiring just a handful of outside talent is akin to rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic

RAVI VENKATESAN



Despite the many concerns and predictably strident objections, the government's decision to cautiously experiment with bringing 10 lateral hires into the hallowed Indian Administrative Service (IAS) is important and necessary but in my opinion, insufficient.

Few institutions are as urgently in need of renewal as our civil service. While there are plenty of extraordinary and upright officers, the prevailing view is that the IAS has failed to keep up with the needs of modern India and has become increasingly self-serving with too many of its officers seen as corrupt and compromised.

In this context, the lateral hiring of 10 joint secretaries is an important experiment. Past success stories of lateral induction — such as Mantosh Sondhi, Vijay Kelkar, Manmohan Singh and Raghuram Rajan — have been occasional rather than systematic. It is important that an institution as vital and complex as the IAS has a way to both continuously induct new talent and develop internal talent at all levels. Done right, this will ensure a continuous injection of new perspectives and energy. Every successful organisation and species needs the continuous and selective intro-

duction of new DNA to remain vigorous and relevant.

However, lateral hiring at a senior level is notoriously difficult and uncertain even in the private sector.

Even when the new hires are competent and accomplished individuals, fitting into an established culture is not easy. A lot will have to be done to make this attempt at grafting new talent into the IAS successful.

The most important is careful hiring. The new hires will have to be real leaders who are motivated to help build the nation, not merely those attracted by the prestige, power and perks of the job.

They will need to possess a healthy dose of urgency, courage and tenacity to remain independent and accomplish things in the face of many obstacles.

Humility and good people skills will be crucial. The skill to lead by influence matters far more than the expertise they are ostensibly being hired for.

Such leaders are extremely rare anywhere; why then should they be motivated to join this risky experiment? A mere advertisement won't likely suffice. Ideally, this experiment needs a senior sponsor, perhaps even the cabinet secretary or principal secretary, who will help select and mentor the

IDEALLY, THIS EXPERIMENT NEEDS A SENIOR SPONSOR, PERHAPS EVEN THE CABINET SECRETARY, WHO WILL HELP SELECT AND MENTOR THE NEW HIRES



■ Raghuram Rajan is one of the success stories of lateral induction MINT

new hires, monitor progress and provide crucial aircover when necessary.

Another risk is dispersing the new talent across many ministries.

To succeed, it is often helpful to have a critical mass of new talent concentrated in a few areas so that there is a mutual support network. Most of all, this attempt to infuse talent should be seen as what it is: an experiment. There must be a conscious attempt to learn from this and make course corrections when necessary. Merely hiring 10 individuals and leaving them to swim or sink will accomplish little more than making future attempts even harder.

Good and necessary as this experiment is, it is insufficient to change an entrenched institution like the IAS.

Thoughtful retired IAS officers have cor-

rectly pointed to the need for more fundamental administrative reforms.

The IAS continues to attract very bright young talent through a fair and competitive examination. If these high potential youngsters systematically fail to live up to their potential and if the known inadequacies of the service have great persistence, then it is the very fundamentals of the system that must be examined and reformed.

The hiring of a few joint secretaries, no matter how extraordinary these individuals may be, is not going to fix what has led to the systematic weakening of this institution. Numerous administrative reforms commissions have made specific recommendations to strengthen the administrative service which successive governments have largely ignored.

As with every other complex organisation, elements of the solution as well as the people who can reform the system already exist inside the Indian Administrative Service. There are still many extraordinary leaders within the system who are waiting for the call to unleash a transformation from within. However, unless there is the political will to address the well-known and documented systemic issues that cause the IAS to underperform, the hiring of a handful of talent from outside will be tantamount to rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic.

My final point is this. India has become a low-trust society of vested and conflicting interests. We must learn to temporarily suspend our entrenched views and suspicions about every intended action of any government, and conduct intentional experiments which allow us, as Deng Xiaoping once put it, to "cross the river by feeling the stones."

*Ravi Venkatesan is chairman of Bank of Baroda and former chairman of Microsoft India and Cummins India
The views expressed are personal*

DeathODDS

Now that AI can predict a patient's likelihood of dying, how should we look at this?

GOOGLE'S AI HAS already proven more accurate than even doctors at predicting the probability of a patient's death—the company published research in May that cited the case of an unidentified, late-stage lung cancer patient in the US. The hospital's analysis of the patient's health records and diagnostics gave her a 9.3% likelihood of dying during the course of her stay at the hospital. Google AI analysed over 175,000 data points on the patient, and pushed up the likelihood to 19.9%. She died within days of admission. Of all the potential use of AI in healthcare, this is perhaps the one that is fraught with the most complex ethical, moral, and legal questions. There are many implications, including potential abuse by patients' families, insurance providers, even hospitals. But, the need is also to look at where such use of AI scores—cold, hard data, could enable better decision-making. It could help free up limited hospital resources for giving timely treatment to those with a better shot at surviving. It could offer many a hard-pressed family relief from crushing medical-expense burdens—incurred, even when the outlook is “terminal”, out of misplaced hope or guilt. Most importantly, it could give the patient a dignified end.

That said, if they are to be used in the interest of rationality, death prediction tools must get quite accurate. For instance, just reading off a patient's data-points can't be judged enough. The neural networks Google's death-prediction used must factor in all available data on progress in similar cases elsewhere, alternative treatment/therapies, emerging treatment methods, among others, before they predict the chances of survival or otherwise. Policy will also need to respond to such technologies with appropriate regulation. A review of the prediction figure and any decision based on the same by a team of competent professionals should be made a must. Adequate checks against manipulation/breach of data must be provided for. Lastly, while Google AI may eventually be used to inform the decision on pulling the plug, the actual decision should be left to the discretion of the patient/her family and medical professionals.