An unequal platter

It is time the government finds a sustainable solution to the malnutrition crisis

SOUMITRA GHOSH & SARIKA VAREKAR

Development is about expanding the capabilities of the disadvantaged, thereby improving their overall quality of life. Based on this understanding, Maharashtra, one of India's richest States, is a classic case of a lack of development which is seen in its unacceptably high level of malnutrition among children in the tribal belts. While the State's per capita income has doubled since 2004 (the result of sustained high economic growth), its nutritional status has not made commensurate progress.

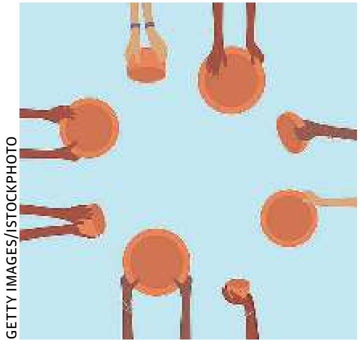
A comparison

A comparison of nutrition indicators for children under five years, using the third and fourth rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2015-2016 and 2005-06, shows this: though stunting has declined from 46.3% to 34.4%, wasting rates have increased from 16.5% to 25.6%. Further, the underweight rate (36%) has remained static in the last 10 years. This is worse than in some of the world's poorest countries – Bangladesh (33%), Afghanistan (25%) or Mozambique (15%). This level of poor nutrition security disproportionately affects the poorest segment of the population.

According to NFHS 2015-16, every second tribal child suffers from growth restricting malnutrition due to chronic hunger. In 2005, child malnutrition claimed as many as 718 lives in Maharashtra's Palghar district alone. Even after a decade of double digit economic growth (2004-05 to 2014-15), Palghar's malnutrition status has barely improved.

Results from a survey

In September 2016, the National Human Rights Commission issued notice to the Maharashtra government over reports of 600 children dying due to malnutrition in Palghar. The government responded, promising to properly implement schemes such as Jaccha Baccha and Integrated Child Development Services to check malnutrition. Our independent survey conducted in Vikramgad block of the district last year found that 57%, 21% and 53% of children in this block were stunted, wasted and underweight, respectively; 27% were severely stunted. Our data challenges what Maharashtra's Women and Child Development Minister Pankaja Munde said in the Legislative Council in March – that "malnutrition in Palghar had come down in the past few months, owing to various interventions made by the government."



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Scant diet diversity

Stunting is caused by an insufficient intake of macro- and micronutrients. It is generally accepted that recovery from growth retardation after two years is only possible if the affected child is put on a diet that is adequate in nutrient requirements. A critical aspect of nutrient adequacy is diet diversity, calculated by different groupings of foods consumed with the reference period ranging from one to 15 days. We calculated a 24-hour dietary diversity score by counting the number of food groups the child received in the last 24 hours.

The eight food groups include: cereals, roots and tubers; legumes and nuts; dairy products; flesh foods; eggs; fish; dark green leafy vegetables; and other fruits and vegetables. And 26% and 57% of the children (83% put together) had a dietary diversity score of two and three, respectively, implying that they had had food from only two/three of the eight food groups.

In most households it was rice and dal which was cooked most often and eaten thrice a day. These were even served at teatime to the children if they felt hungry. There was no milk, milk product or fruit in their daily diets. Even the adults drank black tea as milk was unaffordable. Only 17% of the children achieved a minimum level of diet diversity – they received four or more of the eight food groups. This low dietary diversity is a proxy indicator for the household's food security too as the children ate the same food cooked for adult members.

Such acute food insecurity in tribal households is due to a loss of their traditional dependence on forest livelihood and the State's deepening agrarian crisis. Besides these, systemic issues and a weakening of public nutrition programmes have aggravated the problem. For example, 20% of tribal families did not receive rations (public distribution system) in Vikramgad (in Palghar) as they did not have a card.

Analysis of the State's Budget shows that the nutrition expenditure as a percentage of the State Budget has drastically declined from 1.68% in 2012-13 to 0.94% in 2018-19, a pointer to the government's falling commitment to nutrition. It is no wonder then that our survey data show that nutrition schemes are not having the desired impact.

It is time the government looks at the root cause of the issue and finds a sustainable solution for tackling malnutrition. This is possible only when the state focusses on inclusive development by creating employment opportunities for the marginalised which would improve their purchasing power and, in turn, reduce malnutrition.

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Uniquely placed

The Finance Commission must heed the Northeast's challenges

ASHISH KUNDRA

The 15th Finance Commission (FC) is in the process of figuring out a fair formula for the distribution of net tax proceeds between the Union and the States, and among States.

The 14th FC had adopted a formula-based tax devolution approach, apart from grants-in-aid for local bodies, disaster relief, and post-devolution revenue deficit grants. The share of devolution to the States was enhanced to 42% from 32%, which gave the States considerable flexibility. However, it dispensed with sectoral grants for elementary education, the forest sector and renewable energy sector, among others. No State-specific grants were recommended. The assumption was that a higher level of devolution would offset other requirements.

The devolution formula, therefore, is central to the approach of resource transfers. The 14th FC accorded 27.5% weight to the population (of which 17.5% was of the 1971 population), 15% to area, 7.5% to forest cover and 50% to income distance. Larger States with larger populations have a greater requirement of resources. Income distance was adopted as a proxy for fiscal capacity, and forest cover was given weightage for the first time, underscoring ecological benefits.

A distinct entity

The Northeast represents a distinct entity for developmental planning and has a special category status. Low levels of human development indices, a low resource base, and poor connectivity and infrastructure pose a different challenge which must be taken into account in the devolution formula.

Central Ministries earmark 10% of their allocations for the Northeast. By the same logic, 10% of tax proceeds could be earmarked for vertical devolution to the region. A number of centrally sponsored schemes have been rolled out where the obligation of State share is huge, adding to revenue expenditure. Sometimes the real burden (as in the case of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) is far more than the mandated 10%. Many centrally sponsored schemes are discontinued midway, and the burden of employee salaries falls on the States. Maintenance of assets, such as rural roads under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, require huge expenditure, especially in hilly States. A 20% cost disability was allowed by the 13th FC while allocating grants for road maintenance.

The 13th FC acknowledged the different position of the Northeast while arriving at the formula for horizontal devolution. Its twin guiding principles were equity and efficiency. It accorded 47.5% weight to fiscal capacity distance. Per capita GSDP was taken as a proxy for fiscal capacity, but States were divided into two groups, general and special category States, given that the average tax to GSDP ratio was higher for the former. Three-year per capita GSDP was computed separately in these two groups, weighted means of tax to GSDP ratio obtained, and per capita tax revenue was assessed for each State. Fiscal distance was thereafter calculated on estimated per capita revenue with reference to the highest State, which was then multiplied by the 1971 populations to arrive at the share of each State. There was much merit in this approach, which was in contrast to the 14th FC which used per capita GSDP as an indicator of fiscal capacity uniformly for all States.

The revision of the base year to 2011-12 by the Central Statistics Office from 2004-05 also created complications. Arunachal Pradesh, for instance, saw a sudden spike in per capita GSDP. This was primarily on account of the fact that 73% of the GSDP was calculated on the allocation method as compared to 34% earlier. This saw a jump in gross value added in mining, construction, electricity, etc., even with a negligible industrial base.

Comparing apples with apples

The Northeast also bears a disproportionate burden of natural disasters every year on account of rainfall. The 14th FC disaster relief grants bore no correlation with vulnerability but were ad hoc extrapolations of previous allocations. The Energy and Resources Institute has computed an index of vulnerability of all States. The disaster vulnerability index is highest for the Northeast; this needs to be factored in while allocating grants. The region also has the highest forest cover and represents the largest carbon sink nationally. Allocating 10% for forest cover would encourage States to preserve the forests.

The Terms of Reference of the 15th FC also mention performance-based incentives based on improvements in GST collection, Direct Benefit Transfer rollout, etc. This would definitely infuse a spirit of competition. However, the performance of the Northeastern States must be benchmarked with other Northeastern States so that apples are not compared with oranges. The challenge for the Commission, as one member said, is "to strike a balance between those who need and those who perform".

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● AGNOSTIC MARKETS

IN RECENT YEARS, MARKETS HAVE FACED AN UNUSUALLY LARGE SET OF UNCONVENTIONAL POLITICAL MANOEUVRES. BUT, FOR THE MOST PART, THE RHETORIC HAS NOT BEEN TRANSLATED INTO REALITY

Markets and political pundits **disagree on the G7**

MOHAMED A EL-ERIAN

Chief economic adviser at Allianz, former chairman of US president Barack Obama's Global Development Council

TO SAY THAT this month's summit of G7 leaders in Canada was an unusual one would be an understatement. A traditionally friendly and predictable gathering of like-minded countries was marred by finger-pointing and disagreement, resulting in an inability to achieve consensus on a final communiqué. But, while political analysts were quick to declare the end of the G7's coherence, integrity, and usefulness, markets were unfazed. In fact, the longer-term outcome may well prove markets right, albeit with some important qualifications.

Participants at the G7 summit reportedly clashed over issues like climate change and the possibility of readmitting Russia. But, the highly publicised discord was fuelled mainly by disagreements over the effects of trade among the members. Those disagreements—amplified by persistent differences on basic facts—impeded progress in other areas where greater consensus might have been possible, including Iran, some other Middle-East issues, North Korea, migration, and refugee relief.

Representatives of the United States accused the other G7 members of "unfair trade practices," which they claim have disproportionately harmed the US economy and its workers. The rest of the G7—all traditional US allies—confronted president Donald Trump with data that they hoped would prove that trade had been highly beneficial to all countries.

But, the US held firm to its stance. Without concessions from its trading partners, including more reciprocity, the US, its government representatives unequivocally declared, would implement new tariffs on imports from Canada, the European Union, and Japan.

This approach marks a sharp departure from the past, and another shock to the establishment and expert opinion. While some tweaks to trade relations are needed, in the past, such changes would have been pursued in an orderly and cooperative fashion—not under constant and growing tariff pressure. Instead, the major economies of the geopolitical West seem set to engage in a tit-for-tat tariff dispute that could escalate into a full-blown trade war harming all of its members.

But, it is not only other Western economies that had the US up in arms. The Trump administration is pressuring China to address intellectual-property theft and to reduce non-tariff barriers (such as joint-venture requirements). Here, all other G7 members agree that America's grievances are legitimate, and that they are being harmed as well.

Yet, given conflict over intra-G7 trade, the group was unable to unite on a comprehensive and coordinated response to China. The summit was followed by an escalation of the trade dispute between China and the US, compounding the uncertainty now jeopardising a synchronised growth pickup that, owing to insufficient policy reforms, is already running out of steam in many countries other than the US.

The failed G7 summit dealt a very public blow to a once-powerful grouping that had already been challenged by global economic re-alignment, the emergence of the more representative G20, and new forms of regionalism. So, it is perhaps not surprising that some political scientists have declared the end of the G7. Yet, when markets opened on Monday morning, they were utterly unaffected by the weekend's developments; for them, the G7 summit had essentially been a non-event.

The disparity can be explained by the fact that G7 infighting will have only a narrow impact on growth, especially compared to factors like monetary policy

On one level, this disparity can be explained by the fact that G7 infighting will have only a small and narrow impact on growth, especially compared to factors like monetary policy. More fundamentally, markets have been conditioned to postpone significant price adjustments until there is overwhelming evidence of negative economic and financial effects.

In recent years, markets have faced an unusually large (and expanding) set of unconventional political statements and manoeuvres. But, for the most part, the rhetoric has not been translated into reality, and what actions have been taken proved largely inconsequential for economic activity and asset prices.

That was true of Trump's rhetorical sparring match last year with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, which some political analysts predicted would lead to armed conflict. It was also the case with rising Russian revanchism, which some viewed as a precursor to a disruptive new cold war, and the electoral success of Eurosceptic and populist parties in the European Union, which some declared would lead to the EU's dissolution.

For markets, waiting for strong evidence of an economic impact, rather than reacting to every statement or event, has proved profitable. That is likely to be the right approach for the G7 summit, too—and not just because the body's impact on global outcomes has diminished in recent years. Given the large number of long-standing economic, financial, institutional, political, and social links among the G7's members—all of which act as stabilisers—this month's summit may well be followed by a more congenial and constructive one.

The G7 has not been dealt a fatal blow; it still can and will play a role on the global stage—albeit a less important one. But, that does not mean that the debacle in Canada will be cost-free. G7 members lost a valuable opportunity to develop common positions on issues about which they could agree, and the rest of the world was shown more evidence that the global system's long-standing core-periphery relations are no longer reliably buttressed by unity among established economic and financial powers. At a time of considerable political and social fluidity, destabilising the remaining anchors represents a risk to the system as a whole.

India needs to woo Seychelles back

After the naval base agreement, New Delhi must cultivate the neighbour's domestic constituencies

SWARAN SINGH

China's high-speed mega-infrastructure projects are luring India's neighbourhood adrift at India's peril. After reviving its traditional axis with Pakistan and cementing partnerships with Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives, it's beginning to show impact on Seychelles-India relations.

Since the early 2000s, China was seen building Seychelles Supreme Court, other law courts, its national assembly, polytechnic institutions, housing colonies and so on. The two had signed a defence pact in 2004 and there were reports since 2011 of China negotiating for a naval facility as well. It was overlooked by UPA as a mere replenishing facility for China's anti-piracy operations as India-China navies were building their jointmenship for fighting piracy in Gulf of Aden.

President Xi Jinping's policies have since accelerated the pace of China currying favours with India's neighbours. Deputy Chief of the Joint Staff Department of China, General Wang Guanzhou's November 2016 visit to Seychelles and China's opening up its first naval base in Djibouti last August had again fired up speculations about China building a naval facility in Seychelles as well.

It is in this backdrop that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Neighbourhood First' policy, driven by the strategy of countering Gwadar with Chabahar, saw his March 2015 visit to the Maldives and Seychelles heralding his vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) as both respectively agreed to India developing naval facilities at their Agalega and Assumption Islands. Since then, while China has inaugurated Gwadar and Hambantota ports in Pakistan and Sri Lanka and opened naval base in Djibouti, India has got increasingly entangled with local opposition to India's projects. This is partly seen as ignited by China's growing indulgence with these nations.

During President Danny Faure's visit to India this week, the two countries agreed to work on the stalled Assumption Island Project keeping each other's interests in mind. But it is still to be ratified by his national parliament dominated by the Opposition. Last October had witnessed political turmoil following general elections resulting in opposition coalition Linyon Demokratik taking control of Seychelles parliament. This had triggered public protests over President James Michael's failure to redress economic disparities making him resign, and Faure was sworn in as president.

The then foreign secretary, S Jaishankar, had to rush mid-October 2016 to Victoria to renegotiate India's March 2015 agreement. India has since agreed to grant access to local Coast Guard forces, setting up Coastal Radar Surveillance system, limiting India's access to 20 year term, promising never to use these facilities for war purposes, gifting three fast-track patrol boats, and even agreeing to allowing these facilities for use by third country. This revised text was finally clinched in January and saw Jaishankar spend his last working days in Victoria. But the fact that the current foreign secretary, Vijay Gokhale, had to rush to Seychelles again last month indicated how even now not all was well in India-Seychelles relations.

■ **PM Narendra Modi with Seychelles President Danny Faure, June 25** PTI

On June 5 , President Faure announced how he will not be placing this agreement for parliamentary ratification and that this issue will also not be on agenda for any further discussion during his coming visit to India. This may have dented India's enduring defence cooperation with Seychelles yet India cannot afford to give up as it still trains 70% of their military forces and accounting for over half of their defence equipment.

So, to rescue this relationship and especially this $550 million project for reviving an old air strip and a jetty and housing for Coast Guards on Assumption Island, India is gifting two more Dornier aircraft to Seychelles. Reports of Seychelles and France exploring to replace India is making the country propose a trilateral India-France-Seychelles formulation. March this year had seen president Emmanuel Macron's India visit resulting in 14 pacts.

But India also needs to understand the country's domestic dynamics where combined opposition and environmentalists have accused President Faure of a 'sell out' and of exposing their 93,000 population to China-India rivalry and to environmental disasters. Leader of Opposition, Wavell John Charles Ramkalavan, who is of Indian origin, had earlier agreed to support the agreement on the development of Assumption Island but has since reneged on it.

This makes them vulnerable to China's overtures. Apart from assuaging their fears about breach of sovereignty or environment, India will need to strongly advertise other advantages to Seychelles, especially how it will enable Seychelles to keep a watch over its 1.3 million square kilometer EEZ across southern Indian Ocean which is infested by illegal fishing and drug running and negatively impacting their development.

Having been assured by Faure about the development of naval facilities on Assumption Island, India must now cultivate Seychelles' domestic constituencies to ensure this is ratified by the national assembly.

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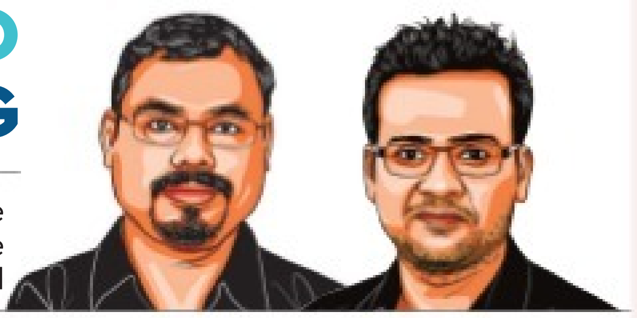

US FED & EMEs

What the US monetary tightening means for India

It is hoped that the Fed rate hike will have short-term implications for the Indian market, but corresponding monetary policy tightening by RBI in response to future Fed hikes may not be an ideal step

AFTER FOLLOWING QUANTITATIVE easing and zero interest framework since the global financial crisis in 2008 till 2014, the United States Federal Reserve raised its benchmark short-term interest rate for the seventh time, and the second time in 2018, by 25 basis points to a range of 1.75-2%. The US economy has been steady and is growing with well-achieved objectives—the inflation rate of 2.9% in May 2018 was higher than the targeted rate of 2% and the economy had the lowest unemployment rate of 3.8% in the last two decades. The Fed officials aim for two more hikes this year to stabilise the inflation to around the target of 2%, and strengthen job market through wage gains. Although the Fed hike was anticipated and already factored in by most of the emerging market economies, including India, the recent hike in rate and the expected hikes by the end of this year bear important implications for India and emerging market economies in terms of increased liability on dollar-denominated debt, capital flows, exchange rate appreciation and inflation.

In fact, the low rates since 2008 in the US were followed by Japan and countries in Europe, which led investors into emerging market economies, including India, in search of higher returns, albeit at a higher risk. The current hike and further expected hikes by the Fed would be likely followed by other developed countries, as financial markets are well-integrated. For emerging market economies, including India, a rise in the Fed's interest rate will weaken their currency against the US dollar.

Furthermore, the resulting increase in the US government securities rates will put pressure on these economies' government bond yields.

In the short-run, equity investment will move out from these emerging market economies and towards the US market because of the hike and the increase in investors' confidence.

The foreign institutional investor, or FII, inflows to India are mostly driven by interest rate movement along with growth prospects, and with an increase in the interest rate in the US with a stable and safe financial market, investment will flow back to the US, resulting in a slowdown of dollar inflows into the Indian equity market. As the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) data shows, there was a sharp decline in net portfolio investment to India after the last hike in March 2018. In fact, the net portfolio outflow is of $3,133 million versus the net portfolio inflow of $1,159 million between March and April 2018.

The slowdown of short-term capital inflows along with an increase in the current account deficit—increased from 0.6% of GDP in FY2017 to 1.9% in FY2018—would put pressure on the Indian rupee to depreciate. The value of the rupee already has depreciated by around 5% since the last Fed's hike in March in order to meet the demands of the dollar outflow, and now it is expected to fall further against the dollar. A weaker rupee means a lower rate of return and, therefore, foreign investors would be less willing to invest in the Indian equity market.

A weaker rupee with sticky import baskets means a higher import bill and imported inflation due to exchange rate pass-through. The only silver lining is that a weaker rupee may improve price competitiveness of Indian exports—and the growing US economy, which was the largest importer of Indian goods and services in the past decade and the largest importer in 2015-16 with a share of 15.3%, will see more demand for India's exports. As India's trade is mostly carried out in the dollar, either a stronger dollar or a weaker rupee might help reduce India's trade deficit.

An increase in interest rate by Fed and an anticipated increase in policy rates by RBI could mean fewer new jobs in India—a decrease in overall production would result in companies refraining from hiring new workers

In addition, higher interest rates in the US will lead to a pressure on emerging market economies to increase their interest rates to secure investment inflows. The monetary tightening by hiking the policy interest rate—by a quarter of a percentage to 6.25%—by RBI in the first week of June can be understood as a decision prompted by an anticipated Fed hike as well as achieving a medium-term target for consumer price index (CPI) inflation of 4% within a band of +/-2%. It was the first hike by RBI since 2014. The hike in Indian policy rate would restrict some of the portfolio outflows, thereby reducing the pressure on the rupee to depreciate. While the tightening of the monetary policy (in the form of raised interest rates) by the central bank can reduce inflation in the Indian economy since money will be more expensive to borrow, but, at the same time, the tightening can also result in a slowing of the overall economic activity by hindering investment activity, which has slowed down since 2008 and is still weak.

Further, an increase in the interest rate by the Fed and an anticipated increase in policy rates by RBI could mean fewer new jobs in the Indian market. In other words, a decrease in overall production would result in higher unemployment rates as companies will refrain from hiring new workers, rather they might even reduce the workforce in some cases.

While RBI is factoring in the expected future hikes by the Fed, still the former needs to be pragmatic before further increasing interest rates as it could severely affect the economic engine of the country.

Moreover, RBI is already keeping a close watch on external factors by maintaining the real interest rate differential and is well placed to intervene to keep the exchange rates in check while maintaining its domestic goals of inflation stability. Therefore, it is hoped that the Fed rate hike will have short-term implications for the Indian market; however, corresponding monetary policy tightening by RBI in response to future Fed hikes may not be an ideal situation. Higher interest rate in the US could result in higher domestic inflation in emerging market economies via the depreciation of their domestic currencies and, thereby, likely trade surpluses in their favour. So, US President Donald Trump's protectionist measures and a trade war are here to stay.

SIMPLY PUT QUESTION & ANSWER

Trees vs 'development' in Delhi

Why do thousands of trees in the heart of polluted, dust-choked Delhi have to be cut?

MALLICA JOSHI
NEW DELHI, JUNE 25

How many trees are being felled in Delhi, where, and why?

Buildings in seven residential colonies cutting a swathe from south-central to south-east Delhi — Sarojini Nagar, Nauroji Nagar, Netaji Nagar, Mohammadpur, Kasturba Nagar, Sriniwaspuri, and Tyagaraj Nagar — where central government employees live, are in poor condition, and will be redeveloped by state-owned builder NBCC Ltd and the Government of India's Central Public Works Department (CPWD). The number of flats over the 500-acre project area will nearly double from 12,970 to 25,667, and a large commercial centre called the World Trade Centre will come up in Nauroji Nagar.

The project will require around 14,000 trees to be cut, according to fresh estimates. Permission has been given to cut 3,780 trees; the rest are in process. Most of the trees have to go so that underground parking space for 70,000 vehicles can be created, NBCC chairperson A K Mittal has said. So far, 1,100 trees in Nauroji Nagar and close to a 100 in Netaji Nagar have been cut. Delhi High Court Monday directed NBCC and CPWD to cut no more trees until July 4, the next date of hearing.

When was the plan to cut the trees cleared, and by whom?

The permission to cut trees in Nauroji Nagar, in November 2017, and Netaji Nagar, in May 2018, was granted by the Lieutenant Governor after endorsement by the Delhi Environment Department, the L-G's office claimed Monday. The Delhi Environment Minister had raised concerns over the large number of trees being cut and had suggested they be transplanted, but had not refused permission for the felling. NBCC has already paid the Forest Department close to Rs 23 crore for compensatory plantation.

Permission to cut trees in the other colonies, too, was sought, but has not been granted. The largest number of trees that NBCC had sought permission to cut was in Sarojini Nagar — 11,000. After the Forest Department said no, NBCC asked to cut 606 trees in "phase 1". But in the absence of a clear compensatory plantation plan, this, too, was refused. The latest proposed figure for all of Sarojini Nagar is over 8,000 trees; the NBCC chief, however, has said this is not the final proposal.

Trees felled in New Delhi Monday. *Amit Mehra*

FACING THE AXE

To cut trees in an area larger than a hectare (10,000 sq m), the L-G's word is final. However, he does not sign off on any project that has not been endorsed by the Delhi Environment Minister, his office said in Monday's statement.

In September 2017, the National Green Tribunal had directed NBCC to plant trees before they cut any. In a press conference Monday, Mittal said 250 trees had been planted in Nauroji Nagar for the 1,100 that had been cut. He gave no plantation figure for Netaji Nagar.

Could these areas have been redeveloped without cutting their trees?

No — if the parking area is to be built the way it has been planned as of now. NBCC has earlier built around trees, in one case even including it in the design. While building New Moti Nagar, it had been given permission to cut 62 trees, but it managed to save 33. In New Moti Nagar, *peepal*, date and *ashok* trees stand in the middle of roads, with reflective markings. In East Kidwai Nagar, which too, is being redeveloped by NBCC, 1,852 trees were cut. However, NBCC has said it also saved more than 30% of full-grown trees, some of which were transplanted in the same area.

Could the new living quarters for government employees have been built elsewhere in the capital?

Activists have criticised the central and Delhi governments for starting such a massive project in the heart of Delhi, a city already reeling under dust and vehicular pollution. Anil Sood, who has moved the NGT, said, "How will the increased demand for water and electricity in these areas be fulfilled? What about the increased traffic congestion because of the commercial centre?"

Many have said the new quarters could have been built in Rohini, Dwarka, Narela or Bawana in the city's west and northwest. The first two are connected by the Metro, whose phase IV will connect the other two as well. Experts say these areas do not have dense green cover, and building there would not have resulted in mass tree-felling. It would also lead to better development of these areas in terms of connectivity, green cover, and commercial complexes.

However, no one seems to have a clear answer to the question of what would then happen to the crumbling colonies of south Delhi.

How successful are transplantation and compensatory plantation?

As per rules, for every tree cut, 10 have to planted as compensation, preferably on site. Since such large areas are not available at the same site, these are planted at vacant plots, usually on the outskirts of the city.

Transplanting trees is not always successful. Full grown trees are vulnerable to shock once they are removed, and require great care in transportation and after being transplanted.

Compensatory plantation, too, is not always successful. Internal audits of the Forest Department show that a survival rate of 30% for these trees is considered good; in many cases, barely 10% survive.

"The concept of compensatory plantation is fundamentally flawed. The land usually has poor-quality soil — the reason why it is vacant in the first place. And the agencies are only interested in meeting targets," Pradip Krishen, author of *Trees of Delhi*, said.

The agencies also lean towards planting fast-growing ornamental plants that often don't have a large canopy, which is needed to combat air pollution. In many cases, saplings of native Delhi trees are not available in nurseries. For the redevelopment of the Ridge, which has been overrun by the non-native *vilayati kikar*, plants are being sourced from Haryana, Gujarat and Rajasthan.

A SPREADING GREEN

Protests against felling of trees in Delhi signal a possibility — of a broader ownership of environmental issues and concerns

ON MONDAY, DELHI High Court put on hold a project that requires the cutting of more than 14,000 trees to make way for a government officers' housing complex in the capital. The two-judge bench was responding to a petition which argued that tree culling would worsen Delhi's pollution problems. The events leading to the stay order, however, do not follow the recent script of the judiciary intervening in the interests of the environment. For all their troubles with bad air, Delhi's residents have been remarkably stoic, even when when they have disapproved of the way the city's authorities manage the environment. Individual petitioners or NGOs, have, most often, ploughed a lonely furrow. But three days before Justices Vinod Goel and Rekha Palli delivered the stay order, environmental concerns took centrestage on the streets of Delhi in a new and unprecedented manner. Activists and hundreds of residents, including school children, hugged the trees threatened with the axe in South and Central Delhi. Social media and online signature campaigns went viral.

"Can Delhi afford the cutting of so many trees today?" The two-judge bench asked. The question has resonance beyond its immediate locale. As the country pursues its development goals, policymakers will increasingly be called upon to strike a balance between the imperatives of economic growth and conservation. This would require a lively political debate on the environment. However, while India has been at the forefront of international environmental deliberations for the past 10 years — including treaties on climate change and biodiversity — green issues are scarcely more than a token presence in the manifestos of political parties. The state of water bodies, sewage disposal and preservation of urban lungs have been matters of concern for at least two decades, but rarely has a political party turned them into election issues. Indian cities routinely end up among the worst performers in global pollution rankings. However, there is hardly ever an election campaign in which toxins in air — that affect the health of every voter — are discussed as volubly as the problems of inflation or joblessness.

Civil society activism has, in a few cities, tried to make up for this deficit. Bengaluru, for example, has had a vibrant movement to restore its water bodies. Waste management endeavours by resident welfare associations in Pune, Mysuru, Panaji and Alappuzha have shown the way for other Indian cities. But with political parties failing to be the catalyst for mainstreaming the environment, very few civil society activities transcend niche circles. Delhi's environment minister, Imran Hussain, did address the city's protestors. But the trading of charges between Delhi's two political parties, the AAP and BJP, and their constant refrain that the issue should not be politicised, has once again thrown light on a familiar failure of politics in the country to make space for green issues.

Little Sparta of the Gulf

UAE has been punching above its weight in strategic matters. On defence cooperation with Abu Dhabi, Delhi has barely scratched the surface

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BY C RAJA MOHAN

THE UNITED Arab Emirates, whose foreign minister, Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan, is in India this week, is not the only country to punch way above its weight. Norway and Singapore in the east readily come to mind. Cuba during the Cold War had an image and influence that was larger than life.

More recently, the tiny state of Qatar has had an outsized impact on the Middle East and beyond. But few small states have matched the scale of the Gulf kingdom's strategic ambition and the breadth of its reach — in financial, political and strategic affairs.

Thanks to the special personal bond between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the rulers of the UAE, the bilateral relationship with the Gulf kingdom has been radically re-framed in the last four years. But Delhi is a long way from realising the full potential of the strategic partnership with Abu Dhabi.

But first to the political chutzpah of a kingdom with an indigenous population of barely 1.5 million. The UAE is awash in oil. But what marks it apart from other petro-states is a rare purposefulness that has turned it into a strategic actor of consequence in our western neighbourhood.

Foreign minister Sheikh Abdullah will spend much time in Delhi explaining the kingdom's air, sea and naval operations in Yemen. That a small nation is intervening so boldly in Yemen's civil war comes as a surprise only to those who have not been paying attention to the rise of the Emirates.

The Iraqi annexation of Kuwait in 1990 and the intensity of the American military effort needed to liberate it from Saddam Hussein perhaps convinced Abu Dhabi's rulers of one thing — without a measure of military strength it will be at the mercy of larger neighbours and great powers. Since then, the UAE focused on building strong military forces. And the watershed events of 9/11 and the Arab Spring reinforced Abu Dhabi's determination that it must act boldly to survive amidst the regional turbulence.

Consider for a moment the defence budget of the UAE. Some reports put it around $22 billion, which is nearly 40 per cent of India's defence spending of about $52 billion. The UAE was the fourth-largest importer of weapons during 2013-17. It has built a mean air force, impressive special forces, and invested massively in the combat training of its forces. A small contingent of the UAE troops reportedly made quite an impression in Delhi when they marched on Rajpath during the Republic Day celebrations of 2017.

Since the early 1990s, the UAE forces joined a number of US coalition operations ranging from Somalia to Kosovo and Afghanistan. They also participated in the Anglo-French military effort to oust Muammar Gaddafi from power. The UAE also took a leading role in anti-Daesh coalition in the Middle East.

It is this military activism that led the then US Centcom commander, General James Mattis (now the US Defence Secretary) to call UAE the "little Sparta". The comparison of the UAE to the warrior city-state from ancient Greece might have been over the top, but the moniker has stuck.

As it embarked on expeditionary operations, it was perhaps inevitable that the UAE would look for military bases in its neighbourhood. It has developed the Assab military base in Eritrea, from where its forces have conducted operations in Yemen. The UAE is also developing other strategic port facilities in Berbera in Somaliland and Bossaso in Puntland, both provinces of Somalia.

But why in the world is the UAE trying to do the kind of things that major powers do? Three reasons stand out. One is the threat that it faces from Sunni extremist forces like the Taliban, al Qaeda, Muslim Brotherhood and the Daesh. Even as it cracks down hard on these forces at home, Abu Dhabi has bet on confronting them across the region. Fighting for "moderate Islam" is not a mere slogan for the UAE, it is an existential necessity for the Emiratis.

Second, the UAE has long been wary of Iran ever since the Islamic Republic was founded in 1979. As Iran's influence grows across the Middle East, the UAE has accused Tehran of intervening in the internal affairs of the Sunni kingdoms. Confronting the Iran (Shia) challenge has become a major objective for the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Third, the UAE and other Gulf states, which entirely depended on the US in the past to secure the region, now worry that the US is in retrenchment mode. Diversification of security partnerships has become an important national objective for the UAE. And that precisely is where India comes in.

The UAE, of course, wants to sustain the partnership with the US and the West to the maximum extent possible. At the same time, it has stepped up strategic coordination with Saudi Arabia. It has also reached out to India with an ambitious agenda of defence cooperation. While Delhi has begun to build on the synergies with the UAE on counter-terrorism and long-term strategic economic cooperation, it has barely scratched the surface of what is possible in the domain of defence.

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