Ripples of reform in Dhaka

Bangladesh capital's transformation of the water services sector, that connects the urban poor to the piped network, has lessons for cities in India

CITIES AT CROSSROADS

BY ISHER JUDGE AHLUWALIA

C R Sasikumar

DHAKA, WITH A population of 12.5 million, is the sixth-largest megacity in the world. Indians often think we have little to learn from our neighbour Bangladesh, which has a per capita income in PPP terms less than 60 per cent of India's. But Dhaka has a lot to teach our megacities since it has one of the worst vulnerabilities to water of any urban setting in the world, and is handling it in an inclusive manner which is also financially sustainable.

Dhaka's water challenges are similar to what we experience in our megacities, only worse. Having polluted its rivers with industrial effluents and municipal sewage, the city remains heavily (80 per cent) dependent on groundwater for its drinking water needs. The temptation to source groundwater using deep tube wells is enormous, particularly since the water quality is good and is potable without any treatment. The water-table is at least 600 feet deep and it amounts to water mining from a resource that has accumulated over thousands of years. It has resulted in a rapid decline in Dhaka's water table at the rate of about two to three metres per year for close to three decades. Moreover, indiscriminate suction pumps installed beneath underground tanks in the city tend to reduce or choke off pressure elsewhere in the system causing backwater and stagnation, and hence contamination of water. Only a little over 10 years ago, the WHO had declared that the entire population of Dhaka was at the risk of cholera.

The long journey to transform Dhaka's water scenario began in 2005 — the same year that the Government of India launched its first national urban renewal mission, JN-NURM. In that year, the Government of Bangladesh accorded high priority to safe water and appropriate sanitation as part of its National Poverty Reduction Strategy. The Asian Development Bank rose to the occasion by offering support to the Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (DWASA) to carry out reforms in the water services sector and build its capacity, while at the same time connecting the urban poor through community mobilisation.

In 2007, the piped network for distribution of water in Dhaka was in a state of disrepair with innumerable (mostly unidentified) leakages and illegal connections. It functioned as an intermittent and low-pressurised system. Loss of water due to physical leakages in the pipes was more than 50 per cent. Less than 60 per cent of the homes had water meters. Only half of the water supplied to the networks was ever billed and only 62 per cent of the water bills were actually collected. Surveys showed that many of the slum-dwellers were either using DWASA-supplied water through illegal tapping, or paying local middlemen a much higher price for the water they needed. Only one-third of the water supplied by DWASA was paid for.

This is all beginning to change. Dhaka has managed to invest enough in its water distribution infrastructure to raise the coverage of water connections in the non-slum areas to close to 100 per cent. The replacement of the old pipes has resulted in reduced physical water losses in the range of 2-14 per cent at commission. In one-third of the city, this was done by introducing district metering areas (DMAs), each one hydraulically isolated, independent of the other areas in water pressure, quantity, and quality. Since each area has entry and exit meters to measure supply within the area, it enables close monitoring of water losses and leak detection. Trenchless technology for laying pipes allowed faster execution and reduced inconvenience to the residents, so commonly observed in trench digging works in most Indian cities.

Even more than technology, what has made a difference is leadership. Taqsem Khan was brought in to head DWASA from the private sector in 2009. As managing director, he has been able to transform the utility by improving its systems, processes and the manner of interactions with the residents while not losing focus on the infrastructure improvements. DWASA has built a state-of-the art training facility to organise regular training programmes for its staff to use smart water technologies to sustain the efficiency gains.

To ensure financial sustainability, there has been tariff increase of 5 per cent every year since 2007. Non-revenue water declined from 40 per cent in 2008 to 22 per cent in 2015. In November 2016, water tariff was further raised by 17 per cent for domestic users and 13 per cent for commercial users. Further gains in bringing down non-revenue water will require maintaining/ improving efficiency levels and strengthening the revenue collection mechanisms.

DWASA has successfully completed computerisation of the entire databases of approximately 3,00,000 connections, and monthly water bills are issued from this database. Payments of water bills can be made through the internet, mobile phones and banks. A citizens' grievance redressal centre has been established in each zone to resolve complaints regarding the services.

A significant feature of the Dhaka water transformation is that households living in slums (25 per cent of the population) are also being connected with a piped network, albeit at a much slower pace, and are paying for water without any cross-subsidy. For example, 2,100 communal metered connections were provided in 15 slum areas, each connection serving 15-25 households. Further work is going on to provide 35 slum areas with 5,000 communal metered connections. Since the slum population is projected to increase to more than 4 million by 2025, this large component of demand has been accommodated while planning for water.

A noteworthy development is that the slum residents organised themselves into community-based organisations and ensured that all water bills were paid on time. Such community mobilisation was supported by DWASA to overcome the deeply-entrenched interests of private vendors extorting unreasonable profits from the residents. The emphasis on connecting the slums demonstrated that the urban poor are a viable market to be taken seriously. The slum dwellers' monthly usage of water puts them in lifeline consumption, a level that attracts the lowest tariffs, allowing the utility to have a pro-poor and inclusive approach. In Delhi, those not connected to the distribution network do not benefit from lifeline water since they remain at the mercy of the "official" tankers.

The results show on the ground. As Azharul Islam Khan, Chief Physician and Head of Hospitals at ICDDR, puts it "In the last couple of years we have not seen huge peaks in the pre- and post-monsoon months, as we usually did". Mohammed Moir Hussain Khan, Health Facilitator at the Mary Stopes funded community health clinic in Shattola proclaims, "Before the water situation in this area improved, we would see 50 patients with cholera or severe dysentery each month. Now only five to seven patients come for that".

As with megacities in India, highly inadequate drainage and sewerage networks, and lack of sewage treatment continue to pose major challenges — 70 per cent of the city has no form of sewerage and there is little sewage treatment. As DWASA's efforts have gathered momentum, a number of other donors have stepped forth to be a part of the movement. The World Bank is currently engaged in supporting work on sewerage and sewage treatment for Dhaka. Finally, the shift from groundwater to surface water will have to be planned and implemented. It will be a long haul, but as Lao Tzu, the Chinese philosopher, put it, "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step".

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The writer is chairperson, ICRIER, Delhi, and former chairperson of the high-powered expert committee on urban infrastructure and services

Transplanting best practices

Public hospitals must be brought into the loop for deceased donor programmes

SANJAY NAGRAL

Heart transplantation has always been in the public eye right from the time Christiaan Barnard performed the first successful human heart transplant in 1967, in Cape Town, Africa. Therefore, controversy in India over a large percentage of foreign nationals receiving cardiac transplants from deceased donors in India is not surprising. This follows a report published by *The Hindu* (June 12, 2018) based on a leaked WhatsApp message from the head of the National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organisation. However, the debate around it is vital because it is a marker of the fault lines in transplantation policy in India that need immediate correction.

The senior surgeon, Mohamed Rela, wrote an article last week on the need for transparency in the organ allocation process (*The Hindu*, Editorial page, "Heart of the matter", June 19). He is right in saying that Tamil Nadu's deceased donor programme is one of the best in the country and that public credibility is key to its continuing success. But it is also important to address certain key drivers behind foreigners getting cardiac transplants.

It may be pertinent to note that one of the first cardiac transplants in the world was attempted back in 1968 at Mumbai's King Edward Memorial Hospital by P.K. Sen (the world's fifth and sixth heart transplants). What is relevant to the debate is that Dr. Sen's transplants as well as India's first successful cardiac transplant in 1994 (by P. Venugopal at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi) were performed in public institutions.

Market pressures

Along the way, organ transplantation in India (this includes Tamil Nadu) largely became a private sector activity. Hence while the act of donation is a public act and the organs a public good, from that point onwards whatever happens is largely under the private sector. The rules of market medicine thus dictate who the organs go to. And hospitals that invest large sums in transplantation programmes

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which include huge payouts to surgeons look for returns.

Unlike the liver and kidneys, a heart transplant cannot be performed with a living donor. Incidentally, around 20% of living donor liver transplants performed in some of the large centres in India are also on foreigners. So patients with advanced heart failure from certain countries which do not have a deceased donor programme have no option but to try their luck in India. As these are largely performed in corporate hospitals, the costs in India are well beyond a large majority of the local population. This is where foreigner nationals who are often able to pay such sums fit in.

Cardiovascular practice in India is largely dominated by bypass and stenting for ischemic heart disease partly because this is a cash cow. Treatment of ailments such as valve problems and advanced cardiac failure has been sidelined. For example, in Mumbai city while there are at least 30 cardiac centres with advanced expertise, only one hospital has chosen to start and support cardiac transplantation. As one who has been associated closely with deceased donation in Mumbai (especially the first few years) I often saw perfect hearts of young deceased donors remaining unutilised for the lack of recipients. Cardiac surgeons with training in transplantation who were appointed for this purpose did not have enough referrals and chose to leave or focus their attention on bypass. As has been pointed out, this may change in the future.

Revisit policy

While ensuring the credibility of the process in the public eye lies at the heart of deceased organ donation, we need to go beyond just general calls for transparency. We will have to demonstrate that organs will go to those who need them the most rather than to those who can pay for them. This will

mean considering hard policy changes that include strengthening the capacity of the public sector, subsidising transplantation and perhaps enabling affirmative action in the allocation process in favour of public hospitals. Thus every fifth or sixth organ could be mandatorily allotted to a public hospital or the private centre can be asked to perform a certain proportion of transplants free.

As Tamil Nadu has led the way in deceased donation and also has a good record of public medicine, it could lead the way here. One of the secrets behind Europe's high donation rates is public trust in their respective nationalised health schemes.

While India has enthusiastically embraced the idea of a liberalised economy and immediately applied it to health care, many countries have insulated their healthcare systems from the ravages of the market. This too is at the heart of this matter.

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COMCASA: Why US, India can't connect

SUSHANT SINGH
NEW DELHI, JUNE 26

A US military negotiating team was in Delhi last week to respond to Indian objections and formulate a mutually acceptable text for the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement. What is the COMCASA?

Military agreement

COMCASA is meant to provide a legal framework for the transfer of communication security equipment from the US to India that would facilitate "interoperability" between their forces — and potentially with other militaries that use US-origin systems for secured data links. The general agreement signed by the US is called the Communication and Information on Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) but the name was changed to COMCASA to reflect its India-specific nature.

It is part of a set of three military agreements that the US considers "foundational" for a functional military relationship. In August 2016, India had signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which allows the military of each country to replenish from the other's bases. Negotiations on the third agreement, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA), have not yet begun.

Current status

Teething issues will need to be resolved before India signs. The two sides could, however, make an announcement of the intention to sign the COMCASA during the inaugural 2+2 meeting between their Defence and Foreign Ministers in Washington on July 6.

The American push

US officials contend that COMCASA will facilitate the use of high-end secured communication equipment to be installed on military platforms being sold to India, and fully exploit their potential. India's armed forces, they argue, are currently dependent on less secure, commercially available communication systems on high-end American platforms like C-130Js and the P8I maritime surveillance aircraft. These platforms are, therefore, unable to share data in real time with other friendly militaries using American platforms, besides creating problems of interoperability during training exercises and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.

The signing of COMCASA, however, becomes imperative if India is to get the armed version of the Sea Guardian drones from the US. New Delhi has been intimated by the American officials that the high-end drones are critically dependent on a highly secure data and communication system link. The US granted India the status of Major Defence Partner in the final days of the Obama administration to facilitate transfer of high-end defence technology. Signing the foundational agreements would underline that status, beside making the transfer of American defence technology possible to India.

India's concerns

New Delhi is believed to be concerned about intrusive American access to Indian military communication systems, and about the violation of Indian sovereignty due to visits by US inspectors to Indian bases to inspect the COMCASA-safeguarded equipment. There is also a fear that a lot of Russian-origin and indigenous Indian military platforms may not be compatible with COMCASA.

It is also a politically sensitive issue in India. The signing of LEMOA had earned a lot of criticism for the BJP government from the opposition parties. Moving into an election year, with India-US relations on a somewhat less strong footing, the government may be hesitant to sign the agreement now.

INDIA-US DEALS

Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)
SIGNED IN AUGUST 2016

Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA)
BEING NEGOTIATED

Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA)
TO BE NEGOTIATED

Modi govt's initiatives: An analytical frame

Govt's key schemes can be packaged into three categories of inclusive growth, human development and security

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ASK ANYBODY ABOUT the Narendra Modi government's performance in the last four years and the answer could be highly variable—from stellar to awful to mediocre. Yet all would agree on one point that the government has launched numerous new programmes during its tenure. Even a serving, seasoned bureaucrat may not be able to give an exact count. I remember attending a meeting where a policy observer got confused, momentarily though, between Ujjwala Yojana and Ujala Yojana—the first is meant to provide free LPG connections to the BPL households, while the second is aimed at encouraging the use of LED light bulbs. Admittedly, the number of initiatives are far too many for anybody to be able to remember, let alone comprehend those.

In showcasing its performance, the government has chosen to package its schemes into 11 focused areas: Accelerating Growth, Commitment to Social Justice, Development for All, Eliminating Corruption, Harnessing Yuva Shakti, Healthy India, Infrastructure for New India, Putting Farmers First, Speed and Scale in Transformation, The World Sees a New India, and Women-led Development.

This way of packaging is useful insofar as it is positively framed and identifies some focused areas with large beneficiary groups (farmers, women, *yuvas*). Further, the number of focused areas conveys an impression of progressing India and of the government playing an important role therein. While this way of classifying programmes/initiatives may appeal to the general public (or the voters), it is not very revealing to a discerning mind. For those

analysts who would like to have a better frame for understanding the key programmes/initiatives, the following classification may probably come handy.

The government's key programmes/schemes can also be packaged into three distinct categories:
a) Accelerated and inclusive growth;
b) Human development;
c) Equity, security and resilience.

Each of these is represented by a circle (see graphic). Almost all flagship programmes of the government can be placed in one or more of these categories. That is why there are overlapping or intersecting circles. Further, all three circles are circumscribed by a boundary that characterises two key principles: (1) honesty, transparency and accountability, and (2) sustainable development.

Accelerated and inclusive growth: Accelerated growth has to do with programmes/initiatives to improve invest-

ment climate as well as ease of doing business in the country. Inclusive growth, on the other hand, has to do with democratising economic growth by encouraging micro, small and medium enterprises and also promoting self-employment through programmes such as MUDRA aimed at collateral-free loans to small businesses. Further, various sectoral policies such as for tourism, textile, leather, aviation sectors and so forth are framed with the view to accelerating growth and, therefore, belong to this category, even though these are not listed in the figure.

Human development: It has to do with initiatives aimed at realising India's potential demographic dividend. This group includes initiatives designed to make India's population healthier, skilful and more productive. Promotion of yoga among the masses as well as initiatives such as Khelo India are aimed at improving physical fitness of the people. At the
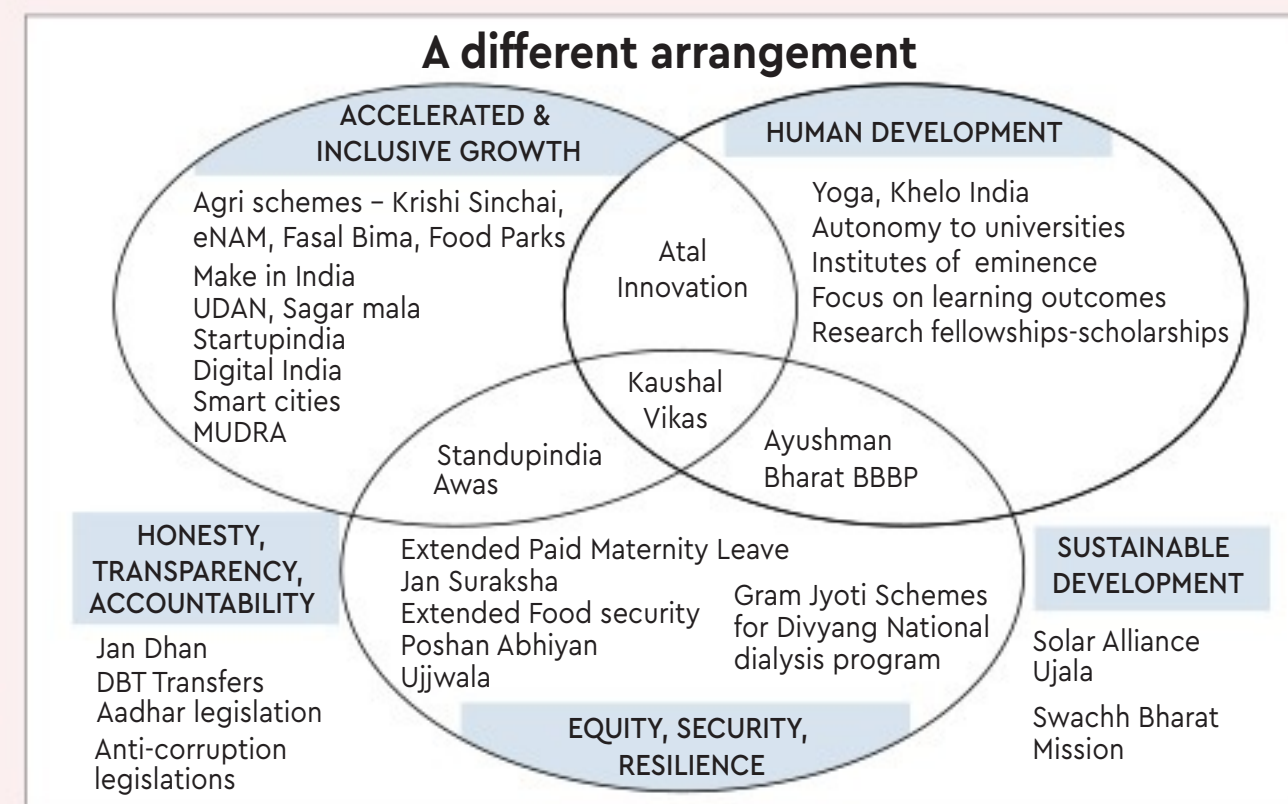
same time, through a series of initiatives, the government is trying to improve the quality of education at all levels. In this tech age, it is laying emphasis on inculcating innovative thinking among students early on while they are still in school.

Equity, security and resilience: This category includes wide-ranging interventions—from providing food, nutrition and income security to preventing the households from falling into poverty trap due to different shocks. Programmes such as Food for All and Poshan Abhiyan provide food and nutritional security, while Suraksha Bima Yojana, Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana, National Health Protection Scheme and the like are meant to insure them against different risks, and AMRIT and Jan Aushadhi Pariyojana are meant to protect the people against the rising healthcare

costs. There are a number of programmes aimed at protecting and promoting the welfare of lower-income households.

A few deserve special mention as they span more than one category.
◗ Atal Innovation Mission is aimed at promoting a culture of innovation as well as tech-entrepreneurship. Hence, it is common to both 'growth' as well as 'human development' categories.
◗ PM Awas Yojana is aimed at promoting Housing for All, and is also meant to spur the housing industry given its scale and, hence, it overlaps two categories.
◗ Stand-Up India is aimed at promoting entrepreneurship specifically among certain disadvantaged sections of society. It spans both the categories of 'inclusive growth' and 'building (income) security'.
◗ Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao is aimed at not

only on improving the sex ratio at birth, but also improving education of girls. For this reason, it spans the category of 'equity' and 'human development'.
◗ Ayushman Bharat is designed to not only make curative (hospital) care accessible to the poor through the National Health Protection Mission, but also to make promotive and preventive care available to all. Because of its promotive health components, it spans 'human development'.
◗ Kaushal Vikas Yojana, or Skill India, spans all three categories. Skill-building directly promotes 'human development', contributes to 'inclusive growth', and also provides 'income security'.

It is noteworthy that Poshan Abhiyan, though an important programme to build nutritional security for children, women and adolescent, is meant to raise human resource potential and not in the realisation of that potential. So, it doesn't span the category of 'human development'.

Not only are the programmes governed by the two broad principles of honesty, transparency, accountability as well as sustainable development, but also there are specific enabling initiatives to uphold these twin principles. While Aadhaar legislation, Jan Dhan and the like are meant to promote transparency and accountability, initiatives such as International Solar Alliance, promotion of renewable energy, Swachh Bharat Mission are aimed at promoting sustainable development.

This, then, is another frame to look at the various schemes of the government. There is no claim that this frame is better than the one put forward by the government, only that some audience may find one frame more useful than the other.

A different arrangement

- **ACCELERATED & INCLUSIVE GROWTH**
  - Agri schemes – Krishi Sinchai, eNAM, Fasal Bima, Food Parks
  - Make in India
  - UDAN, Sagar mala
  - Startupindia
  - Digital India
  - Smart cities
  - MUDRA
- **HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**
  - Yoga, Khelo India
  - Autonomy to universities
  - Institutes of eminence
  - Focus on learning outcomes
  - Research fellowships-scholarships
- Atal Innovation
- Kaushal Vikas
- Standupindia Awas
- Ayushman Bharat BBBP
- **HONESTY, TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY**
  - Jan Dhan
  - DBT Transfers
  - Aadhar legislation
  - Anti-corruption legislations
- Extended Paid Maternity Leave
- Jan Suraksha
- Extended Food security
- Poshan Abhiyan
- Ujjwala
- Gram Jyoti Schemes for Divyang National dialysis program
- **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**
  - Solar Alliance
  - Ujala
  - Swachh Bharat Mission
- **EQUITY, SECURITY, RESILIENCE**

Maharashtra's rushed ban

War on plastics needs careful planning

The Maharashtra government's decision to ban the manufacture, use, sale, distribution and storage of plastic materials is unexceptionable in terms of intent. This must be done to mitigate the generation of toxic waste. Though India has a low per capita consumption, it is still a major contributor to global toxicity due to poor waste management practices and the sheer size of the population. Apart from choking India's landmass, contaminating drinking water, killing animals, plastics flowing down India's rivers are estimated to contribute as much as 60 per cent of global ocean contamination. As such, it is imperative that alternatives be found, given the multiple associated health and environmental hazards. Although the industry says it will see up to 300,000 job losses and adverse impacts along the whole value chain, a cleaner environment will lead to lower health costs for all, apart from protecting the biosphere for future generations. Moreover, as eco-friendly alternatives such as jute and recyclable categories of plastics replace toxic "thin" plastics, new employment opportunities will surely be created. Carry bag production using cloth can create more jobs than machines using plastic pellets.

The implementation and success of this measure will be a test case, even though Maharashtra is the 25th Indian state to impose a ban on plastics. As a large, highly industrialised state, Maharashtra is responsible for generating the largest quantity of plastic waste — 460,000 tonnes per annum. The compliance record in most Indian states is very poor and the bans exist only in name. However, there have been success stories. Sikkim, for example, has greatly reduced plastic usage after imposing a ban way back in 1998. Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand also claim reductions in plastic use. Any policy that aims to reduce plastic use must be well designed to induce behavioural changes at several levels— from usage to disposal. Countries in the European Union use carrot-and-stick taxation policies, imposing heavy taxes on certain categories of plastic while offering incentives to make and use eco-friendly substitutes. They have also developed superior waste-management methods.

India has done none of this even though the prime minister made a pledge on this year's World Environment Day that the country would do away with all single-use plastics by 2022. But this goal is not yet backed by a holistic action plan. The policy framework in Maharashtra is also far from ideal. The government offered a three-month "grace period" to eliminate existing stocks and find alternatives. It now intends to impose drastic penalties, including large fines and potential jail terms for violations. However, there is much confusion amongst the general populace and user-industries, as to which categories are permissible and which are banned. Clearly, there was scope for much better public outreach — especially, in terms of possible alternatives — and consultations with all the stakeholders to ensure that the ban was implemented smoothly. Educating consumers about the need for the proper disposal of all sorts of wastes, including plastics, is the only way such a ban can be sustainably executed. But this demands patience. The toxic plastics problem will not go away overnight as it can take years to change public behaviour patterns. Maharashtra has taken a good initiative, but it must be backed by a sensible policy prescription.

Undermining media freedom

TN govt using state control of cable to silence opposition

The Tamil Nadu government has not shown itself in the past to be a stalwart defender of the right to free expression. Even in a country in which law and administrative precedent is are not particularly friendly to dissenting speech, the state government's actions in the past have been particularly harsh. Now, however, the state administration's attempts to stifle free speech have taken a new and even more dangerous turn. The proximate cause for this new controversy was a ruckus during the recording of a discussion show on the news channel Puthiya Thalaimurai on recent protests in the state such as those against the Sterlite plant in Tuticorin. The discussion, being filmed at a private college in Coimbatore, was disrupted — apparently by right-wing cadre — following remarks by two of the participants on the programme, the writer-director Ameer (who goes by just one name) and U Thaniyarasu, a member of the legislative assembly who is technically a member of the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)-led alliance but has been cosying up to the opposition Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) of late. In response, the police did not book the protestors but instead filed charges against the director, the member of legislative Assembly (MLA) and the news channel — even before the programme had been broadcast. A local court has now granted anticipatory bail to Mr Ameer, pointing out that using the law to control political speech on TV was "something new".

What is also new and worrying is the direct action against the news channel. Not only has an FIR (or first information report) been registered against the management and a reporter of Puthiya Thalaimurai, but the channel itself has faced punitive action from Tamil Nadu's major cable network provider, Arasu Cable. This is, of course, a consequence of the specific circumstances of Arasu Cable's ownership structure: it is a state-run enterprise, which former Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa revived with injections of government money. Using subsidised rates, Arasu Cable expanded quickly to a majority of households and now provides the government with the power essentially to cut off access to news channels it deems problematic to its preferred political narrative. This is apparently exactly what has happened with Puthiya Thalaimurai. On Arasu's digital package, the channel's slot was suddenly changed and made hard to find; it has vanished entirely from the analogue bundle in some areas. Earlier this month, the Arasu management directed its officials to stop the transmission of all 25 channels belonging to the DMK-linked Sun TV group. Other channels have also been arbitrarily taken off air for hours or days, allegedly after they broadcast programmes that displeased the government.

This is a severe threat to media freedom, free speech, and the democratic structure itself. The Editors Guild of India has pointed out that recommendations of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of India disallow a government from owning a television channel distribution company — for this precise reason. These regulations should be implemented. To retain its regulatory status, Arasu Cable should be privatised; there is no economic or social welfare justification for public ownership of a cable TV distribution network. The regulator should step in quickly and firmly or this is a malaise that will soon spread from Tamil Nadu to other states.

Modi is more Indira than Nehru

There's unhappiness against his government, but his personal popularity, is by and large, intact

Unrelated coincidences have brought two past titans of Indian politics back in the debate: Indira Gandhi, because of the Emergency anniversary, and Jawahar Lal Nehru after former Congress minister Saifuddin Soz's claim that he saved Kashmir for India while Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was "adamant" on letting it go to Pakistan.

Both have also come under fresh criticism from the BJP. Indira Gandhi more than her father. Because Narendra Modi has made Emergency the centre-piece of his counter-attack on the Congress: Your grandmother imposed the Emergency, and you have the cheek to call me a dictator!

After Nehru and Indira, Modi is our first all-powerful national leader. We aren't counting Rajiv Gandhi and Vajpayee here. One lost his sway too soon in his tenure, the other, although much loved and respected, didn't have real power, within his own party. Modi is no Vajpayee. No two public figures could be so different, but let's leave that discussion for another day.

Four years into his tenure now, it is evident that Modi is more Indira than Nehru. There is, however, a bit of both in him. That is why he continues winning elections like the other two. He has drawn from both, and not necessarily the best of their qualities. On the other hand, he might have picked some of their worst.

Modi does not look like he is about to lose 2019. There is a lot of unhappiness against his government, but his personal popularity is, by and large, intact. Globally, you call politicians Teflon-coated if scams, criticism, even blunders do not stick on them. Modi, I prefer to describe as cast in Titanium instead. Distant as he might look from that 282 for 2019 at this point, once he goes seeking votes for himself, it will take something extraordinary to defeat him. Just like Indira and Nehru, at re-election time, he is making it a one-horse race.

He has drawn much from their playbooks to protect his personal popularity, but has that been the best for India? Nehru's best attributes were his personal liberalism, respect for institutions, intellect and curiosity. He was a voracious reader and interacted globally with men and women with minds better than his. He was tolerant of disagreement, although not necessarily in his own party, and deeply respectful of parliament and media freedoms. He also had a sense of ideology and morality (as he saw it) in his foreign relations. As a result he built institutions, had India punching above its weight until 1962, and restored social cohesion after the killings of 1947.

Nehru's biggest negative was his woolly-headed Left-of-Centre view of the economy, an exaggerated notion of his own moral authority at home and in the world, obsession with global summiteering and smiling at cameras with fellow heads of state. He showed surprising inability to differentiate India's strategic interests from optics. He was chasing the utopia of Panchsheel while the Chinese were grabbing Indian territory: not salami-slicing as is the norm now, but gulping down big chunks like Diwali ki mithai.

Indira Gandhi's best qualities were her deeply secular instinct, ability to redefine Indian foreign policy predominantly in terms of its immediate strategic interest in the neighbourhood. She inherited Nehru's scientific temper and fully supported the Green Revolution. Which, you wonder, could have been possible in these paranoid times when Dr Manmohan Singh's Congress-led UPA government shunned the latest breakthrough – genetically modified seeds which are to global farming what hybrids were 50 years ago. On national defence, she was a big picture leader. That's why she waited until she was ready to win decisively in 1971 instead of rushing in and making day-to-day tactical issues with Pakistan central to her domestic political rhetoric. She wasn't open to criticism, but was never talent-averse. That's why she built a
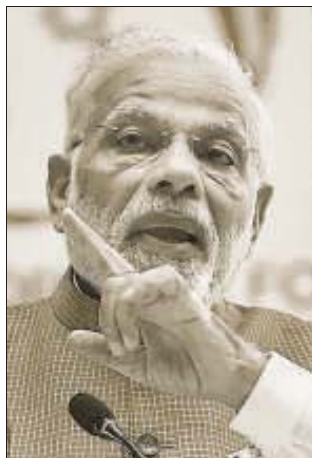
■ Modi's economics is more socialist than Nehru's, almost as populist as Indira's

stellar team of advisors, until most fell out because of the Emergency.

On the flip side, she was dictatorial and driven by power. She finished most of the political talent, older and young within her party -- K. Kamraj to D.K. Barooah as party president underlines this. She was cavalier in her approach to institutions, unleashed awful economic populism, took the peak income tax rate to 97 per cent and turned Nehru's already gooey idea of mixed economy into a pucca licence-quota raj, nationalising large sectors, from finance to coal to petroleum, and played with the agricultural economy (and burnt her fingers). She also left an unhappy, insecure and resentful neighbourhood.

Take a close look at Modi's four years now. Check where he looks like Nehru or Indira and where he doesn't. He certainly looks as personally popular as both at this point in his tenure. He has great global presence and first-name acquaintance with many world leaders. His personal integrity is beyond reproach. In a broader sense, he

has the same magisterial sway over pan-national public opinion as the other two. He's given India a new confidence, Indians have a renewed swagger.

At the same time, his economics is more socialist than Nehru's, almost as populist as Indira's. He hasn't nationalised any sector (although he has failed to denationalise Air India), but he is renationalising much, in a manner of speaking. He is simply getting one public sector company to acquire another, thereby using these as his off-balance sheet milch cows. If the economic statistics do not look good, he isn't disinclined to have them dressed up. Like both Indira and Nehru, he is deeply statist. He believes nothing is wrong with the government, if you know how to run it: like him. The government, therefore, is becoming bigger, more intrusive.

His chief ministers are hand-picked nobodies, the party is fully dependent on him for votes. His obsession with summiteering rivals Nehru's but his approach to foreign relations is transactional. It hasn't worked. Our big-power ties are wobbly. Our neighbourhood is stressed again and we are left with just one friend: Bangladesh.

Further, if UPA bowed to a Left Luddite gallery on GM seeds, he is surrendering to the loony, xenophobic swadeshis of the Right. We aren't sure he reads very much, or has time for people with intellect and fame in their specific fields. His government is the most talent-averse in our history yet, even having got rid of the few good, professional economists it had. Most problematic: our political discourse has degenerated into non-stop abuse and accordingly, social cohesion is stressed.

Draw a line at the bottom of this balance sheet, add and subtract, assign what weightage you wish to each factor. I leave it to you then to decide whether Modi has drawn the best, or the worst attributes of Nehru and Indira. I must qualify again, the best qualities in a leader do not necessarily win you a re-election. Check out the fate of Vajpayee circa 2004.

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Scrutiny**SCORN**

The present dispensation is repeating the blunders of its predecessor, with its new vetting process for govt appointments

THE GOVERNMENT'S SEVEN-STEP process for vetting appointments at key government-run organisations and institutions may not strictly be illegal, but, it smacks of a perversion of democratic ideals. As per a report in The Economic Times, the scrutiny now involves sifting through a candidate's social media comments and views on the ruling dispensation, government policies and even current issues. As per the report, not only will any "strong" criticism of the ruling dispensation or government policies mar chances of appointment, even comments by a candidate's friends and associates will lead to elimination. The present government will also probe professional, personal and ideological associations with the previous government. To be sure, an employer, whether government or private, is well within its rights to check if a prospective employee can ably execute its vision. In fact, the All India Service (Conduct) Rules forbids members from criticising the Union/state government policy or action in an adverse manner, or in a manner that "embarrasses" the federal structure or the country's international relations. It also forbids them from taking part in politics and makes them responsible for discouraging family members from any activity that is deemed subversive of the government by law.

That said, making candidature contingent upon criticism of the ruling dispensation—that too, not just by the candidate—is narrow, even divisive. Not only does it stifle liberal democracy that should let multiple voices be heard, but it also is dangerous for bridge-building and dialogue in times of increasing polarisation. In effect, it means that if one aspires to a government job, she should not befriend and interact with people who are ideologically opposed to the ruling dispensation. The ruling party must learn from the past, given how it continues to highlight "political untouchability" practised by previous dispensations. It should remember that when it stood with Ashok Khemka, an IAS officer in the Haryana government—who exposed gratuitous abuse of power by the Congress government in the state—it had acted in the interest of the common man. Also, keeping talent hostage to ideology will do untold damage. Keeping ace nuclear scientist Anil Kakodkar's appointment as chairman, IIT Roorkee, hanging, even after this was cleared by the president, because he was an UPA appointee is corrosive.