

MESSAGE FORTODAY

A clever person solves a problem. A wise person avoids it.

— ALBERT EINSTEIN

The Assam Tribune

Razor's edge

Although the total ramifications are not yet clear, what the world at large has been dreading for the past couple of months appears to have finally happened – Russian troops have launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine! Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned the West not to intervene and reminded it that he had a nuclear weapons arsenal, a frightening statement which underlines the reality that currently the world is poised at a razor's edge. Early signs show that Russian troops are entering from Ukraine's east and west, and allegedly also from the north, indicating that Belarus too has joined in the fray. Not only has Putin dropped the initial "exercises" pretense to explain the abnormal buildup of Russian troops on Ukraine's border, now he seems to have abandoned the pretext of supporting pro-Russian rebels in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions to explain limited intrusion of his troops into Ukraine too, and has embarked on a large-scale invasion of a sovereign nation. With long-range cruise missiles striking Ukraine's capital Kyiv, as well as troop movements in Odessa to the south of the country, the contours of Russian intentions are becoming increasingly clear. No doubt Russia's Defence Ministry has denied attacking Ukrainian cities while asserting it is targeting only the latter's military infrastructure, air defence and air forces with high-precision weapons, but the rest of the world remains unconvinced.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky has declared martial law throughout the country while vowing that his people would defend the nation till their last breath. As had happened during the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia, much of the world has protested the illegal invasion of a sovereign nation, with India being a notable exception. While UN Security Council members are holding an emergency meeting amid mounting tensions, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has urged Putin to "stop troops from attacking Ukraine" and not allow to start in Europe what could be the worst war since the beginning of the century. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has condemned Russia's "reckless attack" on Ukraine and European Union Chief Ursula von der Leyen has denounced Russia and vowed to hold Moscow "accountable". Given that Russia's armed forces have 900,000 active personnel compared with 209,000 for Ukraine, an advantage of more than four to one, as also far greater superiority in terms of weapons, clearly it would be an unequal war if the former presses home its assault. This would entail that Ukraine must look to the US, UK and other NATO members for assistance, thereby drawing them into what could become World War III. Experts have been long predicting that such a war would be a nuclear weapons driven one! The implications are horrendous indeed, which renders imperative a renewal of diplomatic efforts to coerce Russia to pull the world back from the razor's edge.

Skill development

It is heartening to note that finally the State Government is initiating steps for skill development amongst the students. The officials from various departments of the State Government and representatives from the Indian Institute of Technology-Guwahati on Monday deliberated on ways to collaborate in various fields to usher in development of the region. The initiative is being directed to help young students by involving seasoned professionals in developing ways and means in the form of research and technical guidance to harness the abundant natural resources spread across the State. One of the major focus areas is in giving the much-needed thrust in the field of skill development. The IIT-G will provide necessary support on the varied aspects of skill development in multiple upcoming sectors. The State Government has also sought IIT-G's collaboration and support in the proposed plan to set up Assam Skill University. To empower the youth, the Assam Skill Development Mission has already been set up in the State. The mission is engaged in capacity building of unemployed youths and to deliver quality skill training to help open avenues leading to employment. The skill training centres will help in creating skilled manpower in varied fields. A pool of skilled manpower will help not only in generating employment but will also play an important role for the all-round development of the State.

Unemployment is today emerging as a major problem for the State. Lack of employment avenues is only making the matter worse. In fact it is getting more acute with every passing day. Apart from being unemployed, most of the youths of the State are unemployable. In this context, if the students from the school level itself are imparted lessons on skill development and entrepreneurship it will help them in coping with the challenges later in life. Even if they fail in the job front, they would be prepared to do something worthwhile on their own. This in turn would make them a job creator from a job seeker. Inculcating the spirit of entrepreneurship among the students holds the key to tackle the problem of growing unemployment. And being skilled in a particular trade or vocation will boost the confidence of the students. States like Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, with little resources are doing very well because they have succeeded in transforming their economy into vibrant ones through entrepreneurship. Inculcating skill development among the students will definitely go in a long way in motivating them to chart their own course instead of wasting their time and money in search for the elusive secured government job.

Lessons from Dholpur for the rest of India

■ Nachiket Mor

In 2017, Rajasthan's Dholpur district launched a programme titled 'Udaan' to educate adolescents about their sexual health and quickly ran into some stiff opposition. The immediate reactions were captured in remarks like: "You are spoiling our girls..." or "there is no need of teaching them everything in such detail," and "we won't allow this." Such responses were quite common.

One of the block coordinators reported that they were threatened by school faculty and the local community. Many sessions could not be conducted as a result.

The process of change in the area of sexual health was slow but persistence, persuasion, empathetic listening and constant counselling were able to build a safe zone to deliver some of the learnings. As classes began, it also helped address doubts, clear myths, and transform resistance to acceptance.

As one of the schoolteachers who had initially opposed to the programme said later: "I had my reservations as these sessions were in (graphic) detail. I thought it will mislead the students and girls might get active sexually. But when I attended the sessions, I understood how important it is to learn about these issues. We ignore adolescent health, but learnings in a school setting helped make our students future ready."

The entire Dholpur school district covered a total of 282 secondary and senior secondary schools to reach out to about 78,000 adolescents.

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story but it holds important lessons for the rest of India and offers ideas and pathways which can help break barriers and broach a topic that is sensitive and often considered not desirable in the context of India and prevailing attitudes on sexual health.

The importance of sexual and reproductive health education for adolescents cannot be stressed enough as this is a crucial but extremely confusing time for young people. Investing in their health and well-being has the potential to shape their future. It is in recognition of this that the Central Government launched the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (National Adolescent Health Programme) in 2014 hoping to comprehensively address the health and development of 243 million adolescents (the population then). The objectives included improved nutrition and improved knowledge, attitudes and behaviour in relation to sexual and reproductive health (SRH). Not much has been heard of the programme since then. But the government of Rajasthan has set out an example that India can and must follow.

Let us consider how Rajasthan achieved this. Young people between the ages of 10 and 19 years comprise about 23% of the Rajasthan population. Adolescence is a phase that is marked by both biological changes and mental maturation, both of which need atten-

tion. The State government simultaneously focused on their mental and physical health. Small investments at this critical time like this carry the potential to shape an entire life of the person and of a nation eventually.

In the area of health, the government has implemented a number of structural interventions under the RKSK. These include, for example, the launch of adoles-

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cent focused "Ujala" health clinics, the weekly distribution of iron and folic acid supplements, and ensuring the easy availability of free sanitary pads. However, while these structural interventions are very important, their impact can be fully experienced only if they are coupled with well-designed behavioural interventions which specifically focus on the sexual and reproductive health of these young people because often, even when these health services become available, their utilization is low because of, among other things, social norms. Evidence shows that the

knowledge levels of even the older adolescent regarding sexual and reproductive health issues is low and often inaccurate, and that behavioural interventions have the power to not only inform but also change behaviour relating to early pregnancies, gender norms, and sexual health in general. This time period is associated with several life-altering changes in the lives of these young people.

If their concerns are not properly understood and addressed this can lead to inappropriate behaviour, depression, acceptance of sexual abuse, and even attempted suicide.

While there are several venues at which these interventions may be delivered, schools represent a safe, trusted, and effective space within which they can be offered. Before schools can be chosen as an effective location for communicating these messages there are, however, a few barriers that need to be overcome, the most important one being the concerns of teachers, parents, and the community at large at how appropriate this type of education would be for these young minds and what effect it is likely to have. It is well known and reported that programmes like these do not lead to, for example, increased sexual activity but instead, by addressing their natural curiosity in a matter-of-fact way, it takes away some of the fascination with these issues that can lead to inappropriate ex-

perimentation and behaviours. This evidence needs to be shared with caregivers.

High quality school-based sexual health education programmes are taught by well-trained teachers and school staff, using strategies that are relevant and engaging for all students. They can help connect students to healthcare services, and effectively engage parents and the community. There are examples of successful school-based programmes right here in India. Arpan, a Mumbai-based NGO, for example, working with teachers as educators, offers an effective Personal Safety Education programme in about 250 schools and shelter homes in three districts of Maharashtra. Evaluations have pointed out that the internalization of these messages by the children receiving them, boosted their self-esteem and feelings of comfort with their own bodies and their personal safety. Dholpur remains a classic study in the same context, achieved with the help of the non-profit, Manjari Foundation.

The boys and girls who have participated in this programme, have reported a higher sense of comfort with the natural changes occurring in their bodies, reduced feelings of inadequacy and depression, and a stronger sense of empowerment and agency allowing them to express their views more forcefully and with greater conviction. When asked, one of the boys said: "I learnt that my sister cannot live on my leftover vegetables and pickles. The programme widened my perspective."

That may be a good message to take to all our young boys and girls across India.

(The Billion Press)

Deciphering BJP's 'development' agenda for NE

■ Pradyut Bordoloi & Evita Rodrigues

In November 2021, the Uttar Pradesh Government lit a record 12 lakh diyas in Ayodhya to mark Diwali, praised by PM Modi as "Ayodhya getting back its glory". What followed, however, shed light on the economic reality of the poor in India – as children and their families were captured on video, collecting mustard oil from these diyas in cans and taking them home to use – as even something as basic as cooking oil had gone beyond the reach of India's poor. The price of mustard oil rose from Rs 70 per litre in 2017, when the Yogi Adityanath-led BJP Government came to power, to Rs 200-265 per litre in 2021. Regardless of the numbers the Central Government may conjure, underneath the facade of monumental statues and mega highways – this is the irrefutable human face of economic devastation in India under the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Uttar Pradesh serves as a crucial reminder of how the economy does not solely run on economics – politics has a crucial role to play too. Over the past five years, the UP model of governance has demonstrated how politics of hate inevitably undermines economic growth and development. Even before the pandemic in 2019-20, UP's per capita income was half the national average, and second-lowest in India. The state consistently performs abysmally on most development indicators, whether

public health, education, rural development, or employment. As per data from NHRC, Uttar Pradesh tops the list in terms of human rights violations cases now for the third consecutive year and has consistently recorded high rates of gender violence, especially caste-based.

Despite efforts of the UP Government to conceal the devastating reality, the scale of Covid mismanagement was in the open for everyone to see – police confiscating oxygen cylinders from desperate citizens, booking youth for appealing for medical help online, overflowing crematoriums and dead bodies floating in the Ganga. While these gory sights shook the moral conscience of the country, and the world, it was perhaps only natural for a government that has failed to prioritize public welfare from the get-go. At the end of five years of a ruthlessly divisive regime – unemployment, lawlessness and collapsed public infrastructure have come to characterize the UP Government, which has deprived its constituents of dignity both in life and in death.

Unfortunately, Assam is closely following in the direction of this divisive regime, and if unchecked, a similar fate awaits other states in the Northeast too. One cannot help but observe striking parallels in the modus operandi of UP's Yogi Adityanath and Assam's Himanta Biswa Sarma. Both leaders pursue a model of 'development' based on po-

larizing communities on religious lines and furthering the 'Hindutva' ideology – fundamentally at odds with the inclusive and secular social fabric envisioned by our Constitution framers. Whether the rising trend of fake encounters, decision to rename places, rampant and violent evictions or increasing rate of crimes against women and minorities – the similarities are stark.

Divisive politics premised on brewing hatred, while a harmful end in itself, also has spillover effects on the economy. It erodes trust, creates an atmosphere of insecurity and instability, ultimately hurting investment and any scope for economic growth. Under the BJP rule, Hindutva or religious nationalism has become a smoke-screen, disguising poor development and abysmal job creation, and thereby masking widening inequalities. The effect of the UP regime's divisive agenda on the state's economic activity is evident in the resentment brewing on the streets, for instance in the case of protests by youth aspiring for railway employment.

This must serve as a wake-up call for all those who care about the Northeast and are concerned about the direction in which we are headed. Especially in light of the Budget 2022 announcement of Rs 1500 crore under the PM-DevINE (Prime Minister's Development Initiative for North East Region) scheme, we must ask some crucial questions: How many jobs has pre-

vious capital expenditure translated into under the BJP regime? Why has the North East (Northeast) Development Scheme (NEIDS) introduced in 2017 (replacing the far more effective NEIIPP 2007) failed to bring in any substantial investment? Why has there been no tangible improvement in flood control in the Brahmaputra valley following the discontinuation of the erstwhile flood management programme in 2014?

Examine the case of Assam itself which is entering its seventh year under the BJP leadership. As per the Economic Survey 2022, Assam ranks third last in the NITI Aayog Sustainable Development Goal Index, and has one of the highest proportions of multidimensional poor households, as per the NITI Aayog Multidimensional Poverty Index. Whether in terms of sanitation facilities or household access to clean cooking fuel, Assam remains well below the national average. Although PMKVY, the BJP's flagship skill training scheme, has failed nationally in terms of missing training and placement targets, it has been a particular failure in Assam with the state recording the lowest placement rate (of trained people) among large states as of January 2022 – simply because there are not enough jobs being created. Even pre-pandemic, as per the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), Assam saw the sharpest rise in unemployment between June 2018 and June 2019.

For the Northeast, it is not just the region's economy and delicate social fabric that needs protection from the BJP's political agenda, but the environment and ecological balance. The region is particularly vulnerable to the BJP's crony capitalist model of governance, as a biodiversity hotspot that is witnessing a worrying decline in forest cover and increasing vulnerability to climate change. Whether deliberate weakening of environmental regulation, rampant illegal coal mining and oil exploration in forest reserve area or the proposed oil palm expansion which threatens biodiverse forest and jhum lands – it is clear that the Government is pursuing 'development' projects that are fundamentally anti-people as they fail to recognize the intrinsic relationship between communities, wildlife, and natural habitats.

We must pay heed to the Uttar Pradesh Model, for the warning signs it provides of how politics of hate and self-serving gains adversely affect social harmony and economic development, including ecological balance especially in the Northeast. There is a need to preserve the delicate but crucial relationship between society, economy, and the environment – the three pillars of sustainable development – something that is clearly beyond the BJP's narrow imagination of politics and governance.

(Pradyut Bordoloi is a Lok Sabha MP from Assam and Evita Rodrigues is a LAMP Fellow)

Letters to the EDITOR

Sir, – We have come to know that GMC election is going to be held shortly. Over the last 13 years, a false promise is being made by all the political parties that pure and safe drinking water will be supplied to all parts of Guwahati shortly. Unfortunately, a large part of the city still remains uncovered by the water supply schemes of the GMC and other authorities concerned, even though the citizens are paying their dues to the government regularly.

Although, the Guwahati Jal Board has claimed that 70 per cent work on the new water supply scheme has been completed, we have not seen any development like laying of pipelines in Basistha Chariali and Kundinagar. We have failed to

Drinking water supply in Guwahati

understand how long the authorities would take to get the work completed. We urge the authorities concerned to announce a deadline for completion of the project before the GMC election, failing which a large section of city residents may abstain from casting their valuable votes. We have observed that the present government has taken this matter seriously and therefore we request the department concerned to give a deadline by which the long-pending issue will be resolved. Yours etc., SN MISRA, Kundinagar, Guwahati

TET teachers
Sir, – Health and education are indicators of a state's progress. Why then are the burning issues related to the education sector never addressed? The woeful working conditions of contractual teachers of Assam clearly point at this. In order to map out the roles and responsibilities of the Centre

and States, and to bridge the gaps in their education systems, the RTE Act was passed in 2009.

In accordance with the norms set by the act and to maintain the teacher-pupil ratio, for the first time professionally trained teachers were recruited in government schools. It was a turning point for the schools that lay in a shambles prior to that. Initially, their selection on merit basis though a completely transparent process motivated them to take things in their stride. However, today frustration and uncertainty hovers in their minds, as even after 10 years of service, no initiative has been taken by the Government to regularize their services. In fact, according to the Assam Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Rule 2011, these teachers were supposed to have been appointed under professional and permanent

cadre, but on the contrary they were appointed as contractual teachers under SSA. Despite repeated demands, their services have not been regularized even after 10 years. The government has also been brushing aside the minutes of the Project Approval Board of the Union Human Resource Development Department, published annually since 2013, which has been directing the State Government to do away with the dual cadreship of these contractual TET teachers working under SSA and bring them under the umbrella of Directorate of Elementary Education. A Cabinet decision of 2020 that the TET teachers could continue in service till 60 years with salary and allowances at par with regular teachers and Assam Governor Jagdish Mukhi's order stating that apart from other benefits, they would also be entitled to medical

reimbursement to the tune of 5 lakh, gratuity, pension benefits, bank loans, etc., have been nullified. Contrary to these lofty claims, not a single clause has been implemented in spirit. Instead, they face deprivation at every step. To cite one instance, while the State Government employees are entitled to DA at the rate of 31%, which these teachers are getting it at 17%. Such indifference from the Government has compelled these teachers to stage protests. Through your esteemed daily, I urge our Education Minister to pay heed to their legitimate demands immediately and provide a proper resolution. Yours etc., AN AGGRIEVED TEACHER, Guwahati.

Articles (within 1000-1100 words) and Letters to the Editor for publication in the editorial page may be sent to the email ID: editor@assamtribune.com.