

After a hanging

Questions about application of death penalty

The early-morning hanging of Yakub Memon last Thursday, who was convicted of participating in the conspiracy that led to the placement of bombs in Mumbai in 1993 that killed 257 people, was preceded by considerable last-minute drama in which a bench of the Supreme Court met at 3 am — unusually, in the court premises, and to an attentive audience — in response to a petition filed by Memon's lawyers. It is difficult to argue that the Indian judicial system did not give every

impression of paying close attention to this case. However, it is also true that much controversy attaches to this case, and to Memon's execution. What leaves a bad taste in the mouth is the revelation, late in the day and through a posthumously published column, that the late B Raman, an intelligence operative who had participated in the operation that led to Memon's arrest, had misgivings, and felt that national security would be compromised by executing him. The concerns related to this execution also ran deeper, to

basic principles about the application of the death penalty. Was this really one of the "rarest of the rare"?

There is no question that the 1993 bomb blasts were a hideous crime. However, there is also the question if Yakub Memon's crime, of being a bit player in a terror conspiracy — the accountant at that — is really a crime that fits the idea of the "rarest of the rare". You do not need to be a strict abolitionist when it comes to the death penalty to raise these questions — after all, they were not raised when Ajmal Kasab, the convicted 26/11 attacker, was executed. This case, instead, reflects the concerns raised when Afzal Guru, convicted of participating in the conspiracy to attack Parliament in 2001, was executed. In both the Parliament and the bomb blast cas-

es, relatively minor cogs were hanged — and, remember, these were two of the four people hanged by the Indian state in the past 13 years. Genuine questions therefore can and should be asked about how the death penalty is being applied. Does it reflect the nature of the overall crime? Is this in keeping with the "rarest of the rare" concept? Death penalty opponents will point out that such questions are always being asked about the application of the penalty: there is much subjectivity attached to a decision that is claimed to be objective. And others will worry that, when subjectivity is perceived in such high-profile decisions, there are political implications that could attack the foundations of the Indian state. This was the fear that many felt when they saw the thousands-

strong crowd at Memon's funeral.

Certainly, there is something wrong when the Indian judiciary seems intent in filling out death row even when the judicial system never seems to get around to carrying out these sentences. According to data published by the National Crime Records Bureau, only three people were hanged between 2004 and 2013; but 1,303 capital-punishment verdicts were handed out in those years. Worse, more than twice that number of death sentences were commuted to life in prison. Clearly this is a systemic problem. The number of commutations, in addition, calls into question the assumptions underlying the original judgments. The entire death penalty debate needs to be revisited taking these basic questions into account.

Delhi's children deserve quality education

Schools in the national capital lag even the generally dismal quality of India's primary and secondary education

RITIKA KATYAL & ASHOKA MODY

In the recently announced Delhi government budget, the newly elected Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) — the self-styled representative of the common man — has increased by 50 per cent the funds allocated to education, raising the proposed outlay for the coming year to ₹980 crore.

But a shortage of money has not held up educational advancement either in Delhi or in India more generally. Delhi's education budget has risen steadily. Indeed, the worry is that the increased budget will once again be hijacked by glamorous but wasteful projects, including in higher education. Successive national and state governments have been seduced by higher education, and — while some achievements have been valuable — the nation's educational foundation has remained shaky.

Primary education is the foundation of a country's progress. The East Asian growth miracles ensured education for all from the very start, which was central to their phenomenal economic development. Today, China boasts of some of the best schools in the world. But nearly 70 years after independence, high-quality primary education is out of reach for a vast majority of India's population. Today, over 40 per cent of Indian children drop out before finishing primary school.

Delhi's shame

In spite of its advantages, being the nation's capital and the location of its elite colleges, Delhi's schools lag even the generally dismal quality of India's primary and secondary education. In 2013, Delhi's Class III students were significantly below the national average in language achievement and in mathematics, according to the National Achievement Survey conducted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (see accompanying chart). For Class VIII students, the performance of Delhi students was well below the national average in mathematics, science and social science. Delhi is lag relative to Kerala is stark. These differences almost entirely reflect the quality of education in government-run schools.

Other surveys corroborate Delhi's poor standing. A 2014 survey by the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) found that only 55 per cent of Delhi's government school children in Classes III-V could read at least a Standard I-level text. Only 24 per cent of children in Classes III-V could subtract. Even in Patna, the capital of a state often considered the symbol of stunted development, not only government-but even private-school children performed substantially better than in the national capital.

In the ministry of human resource development's Educational Development index, Delhi was ranked 31st on outcomes at the primary school level. In fact, central Delhi was included in the list of 419 special focus districts (SFDs) characterised by educational backwardness for 2012-13 under the National Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

The AAP challenge

The AAP government plans to appoint 20,000 new teachers, install CCTV cameras in all classrooms, build 236 new schools and improve education quality by focusing on teacher training and developing replicable



"model schools." If this is to be more than words, here are some guideposts.

Teachers' incentives are crucial. Teachers do not show up. When they do show up, they do not teach. And, if they do teach, are they good teachers? The AAP initiative of installing CCTV cameras in schools will bring teachers to class — but who is going to monitor the CCTV cameras?

Economists Lant Pritchett and Rinku Murgai propose a "career ladder" so that teachers — appropriately screened at entry — compete for the better paid permanent posts. Appraisal and rewards based on 360-degree feedback from students, parents, supervisors, and peers would help keep teachers focused on performance. A school management committee or another independent body could carry out random checks to increase accountability. An online database of teachers, where they can be rated anonymously, could create necessary social pressure.

At the same time, giving teachers time and targeted training for professional development, and keeping teacher morale high by acknowledging good performance, both in monetary and non-monetary terms, will help. A mindset change in how teachers in India are perceived and how they perceive themselves is essential.

Similarly, students require incentives to study. Mid-day meals, better infrastructure and motivated teachers can get students to the

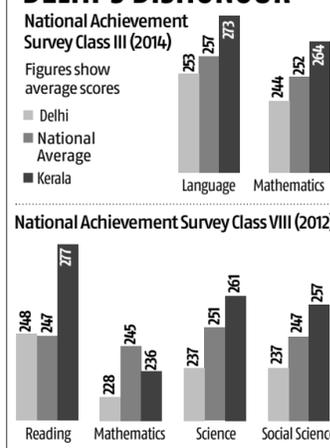
classroom, and, to some extent, create incentives to learn. But more ambitious effort is needed. A Unesco 2014 study finds that India has one of the lowest frequencies of curriculum reform, having updated its curriculum only three times since 1950 as compared to eight times in South Korea. An updated curriculum with a more practical and learning-by-doing orientation can help make school fun. Contract teachers can be hired for remedial after-school teaching to underprivileged children, with (performance-based) opportunity to progress to a permanent job.

Finally, AAP's lemming-like pursuit of higher education initiatives is a mistake. In 2010, Delhi's colleges and universities awarded 17 per cent of all PhDs across India. Yet, the focus on higher education — in Delhi and in India — seems to have run into low and diminishing returns. The amount of original research being carried out in Indian academic institutions is abysmally low.

The stakes are high

AAP represents the yearning of Delhi's citizens for relief from the daily indignities of life. But its leader, Arvind Kejriwal, has acted repeatedly to dash those hopes. After AAP was first elected to power on a wave of popular protest in December 2013, the new government made irresponsible populist promises that would have hurt rather than helped Delhi. The government then resigned, after being in office for 49 days, when its anti-cor-

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ruption bill was blocked by the opposition in the state assembly. At that point, instead of regrouping, Kejriwal chose to contest a national election, in which his party was rightly obliterated.

But such is the revulsion against the traditional parties that AAP was voted back into power in Delhi in February 2015 with the kind of majority that only dictators in rigged elections can aspire to. But once again Mr Kejriwal and the AAP leaders are intent on throwing away the opportunity with self-indulgent infighting.

AAP's emergence comes at a critical juncture, and history is trying to convey an urgent message. Delhi has the opportunity to plant a seed that could flower across the country.

After decades of neglect, a stronger primary education system will lead to superior student achievement, the ability to pursue higher education, and quality domestic research and entrepreneurship. 'Make in India' will become more than a slogan. More widespread opportunity for primary education will create a playing field for competitive medical, engineering, and other entrance tests, which — for better or for worse — are life-altering opportunities for Indian students. Economically disadvantaged children will finally have real reason to believe in a better future.

Primary education may be the single policy initiative that can do as much for growth as it does for equity. Education is also the only real antidote to the corrosive daily humiliation of corruption and the despicable sense of civic responsibility.

If AAP's only achievement with its stunning mandate is to promise a serious start in life to every child in Delhi, it would have honoured the aspirations that brought it to power. The winners will be not just the children of Delhi, but millions of children throughout the country as the governments of other states are compelled to follow. Does Mr Kejriwal understand why the stakes are so high?

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IMF gets smart about Greece

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By hesitating to play a full financing role in the latest bailout programme for Greece, the International Monetary Fund risks alienating both the Greek government and its European partners. Yet the institution's approach isn't just warranted; it could well hold the key to the success of the challenging task of restoring Greece's growth and financial viability within the euro zone.

The IMF, although willing to join in the creditor negotiations with Greece, has indicated that its willingness (indeed, ability) to participate in a new funding arrangement depends on progress on some important and long-standing unfinished business. It wants to see a comprehensive pro-growth economic reform programme for Greece; progress in its implementation; guarantees for the country's financing needs; and debt relief.

The IMF is right to insist on these four conditions. Without them, the latest bailout agreement would face the same fate as the previous two, which bought some time for Greece and its euro-zone partners but at a high cost. Those bailouts neither reversed the damage to the country's languishing economy nor relieved the great hardship for Greece's long-suffering citizens.

Although Greece and its European partners like different parts of the IMF's conditionality, neither is happy with the whole; and all worry that a less-than-fully committed IMF spells huge trouble for the third bailout. Without the IMF, some creditors (such as Germany, the European Central Bank and other European financial institutions) would face trouble getting their leaders to back giving large amounts of new funding to Greece. And without the IMF, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras would find it hard to mobilise the internal unity needed for the successful implementation of unpopular domestic economic

reforms, including those that cross the his party's "red lines."

These are risks worth taking for the IMF.

In the two earlier bailouts, the IMF was forced by political pressures (mainly from Europe but also from the US) to participate in programmes that, in addition to facing design flaws and considerable implementation uncertainties, violated two of its long-standing conditions: first, "financial assurances" that underpin domestic implementation with sufficient external funding; and "debt sustainability" to ensure that growth isn't undermined by the persistence of excessive debt. In the process, the IMF risked its own credibility and effectiveness while exposing its members' funding to considerable Greek default risk down the road.

This time the IMF is insisting on better analytical and operational anchors for a new arrangement for Greece. And it is right to do so, since it isn't only the integrity of the institution that is at stake. Its brave stance, including the four conditions that it is insisting on, is critical for the success of this expensive third bailout.

Almost 14 years ago, the IMF was bullied into lending yet again to Argentina when it was clear to many that the best its involvement could do is buy a few months for the country — concerns that painfully played out when, just three months later, Argentina defaulted and its economy imploded.

This time around, the IMF is seeking to abide by the harsh lessons of its own past and avoid making yet another costly mistake. In the process, it is pointing to one of the very few ways that this third Greek bailout can succeed.

Others should follow the IMF's lead, especially if Greece is to avoid a fate similar to Argentina's.

The writer is a Bloomberg View columnist. This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

OTHER VIEWS

Rainfall better than expected, bringing some rural respite

But it will take more to relieve the pressure on farm incomes

It seems now that 2015 won't be a drought year similar to 2014, despite a developing El Nino event on par with, if not stronger than, the one of 1997. The most heartening feature of the monsoon this time has been its distribution, both temporal and spatial. Rains have so far been normal to excess in almost three-fourths of India, which includes the vulnerable pulses, oilseeds and coarse cereals-growing tracts of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. The fear of a back-to-back drought receding even with a "strong" El Nino does not, however, imply an end to rural distress. A normal monsoon can, at best, deliver a production rebound. But farm incomes are a function of both output and prices, which are at present lower than last year for most crops, barring pulses and onions. In many farm commodities — sugar, cotton, basmati rice or maize — there is actually a crisis of over-production, reflecting a collapse in global prices and export demand. Rural incomes are likely to remain under pressure even assuming agriculture growth returns this year.

The reduced upside risks to price increases, especially in pulses and oilseeds, should embolden the RBI to slash interest rates in its next monetary policy review on August 4. The



nearly \$10-per-barrel drop in prices of crude imported by Indian refiners since the last review in early June only strengthens the case for a significant cut in policy rates.

The Indian Express, August 1

Citizenship at midnight

Pact on Teesta must be next step

A seminal event took place in a few forgotten parts of India and Bangladesh at the stroke of midnight. India and Bangladesh transferred 162 enclaves, ending the sub-human existence of over 50,000 stateless people. By a quirk of history, there were "111 Indian territories" in Bangladesh and 51 "Bangladesh territories" in India. The enclave formations produced extremely unacceptable outcomes: the 50,000 denizens of these enclaves had never voted, were dependent on quacks, had no electricity and criminals had a free run of the place.

The transfer of enclaves, one of the three main features of the agreement — the others are demarcating the 6.5-km border and transferring

"adverse possessions" or enclaves along the border — will help quickly operationalise many other initiatives. Indian cargo vessels will be able to use the Chittagong and Mongla ports in Bangladesh instead of going to Singapore. Indian goods will transit through Bangladesh instead of being transported to the North-East through the roundabout Chicken's Neck corridor. But both governments have their tasks cut out: to resolve the problem of undocumented migration, smuggling and human trafficking, Mr Modi also has to sign the Teesta river water sharing pact, another hugely emotional issue in Bangladesh.

The Tribune, August 1

Threat of bogus degrees

Vigilance mechanism needed

Fake lawyers are bad for the legal system, fake engineers may be the reason why some structures are crumbling, and fake doctors are a menace to the good health of society itself. The threat of unqualified people getting degrees and jobs as professionals is too serious a matter to jest about. The greatest danger to the country is being posed by the number of fakes getting embedded in the system after bribing their way through college exams or simply purchasing a degree. There is no vigilance mechanism to regulate the entry of millions of graduates every year into various professions, and not all of them have a separate professional entrance test. The damage fakes do will be the greater depending on how

crucial the profession is. Those contributing the most to the mushrooming danger are fly-by-night institutes issuing bogus certificates.

The need to get a national register of graduates going is urgent. This system to authenticate degrees must be funded by the government and supported by all universities, including deemed ones. This database should be the standard point of reference for any employer or authority handing out a licence to practice a profession. When we can spend billions of rupees on a national data bank of people's identities, why not extend the operations to cover this crucial area of authenticating professionals?

The Asian Age, August 1