

Afghan attacks

Nearly two years after the Taliban swept to power in Afghanistan, the country's women and girls continue to lead precarious lives. While they have struggled to find ways to work and study, and mostly been thwarted, these efforts have now begun to have serious consequences. The poisoning of nearly 80 schoolgirls, all of them primary students in the northern province of Sar-e-pul shows that the pursuit of education in Afghanistan gets more dangerous by the day. While Taliban authorities say someone with a grudge paid a third party to carry out the attacks on two adjacent primary schools, it is difficult to understand what animus anyone could bear against young girls studying in Grades 1 to 6.

The attempt could only have been aimed at thwarting the girls' attempt to acquire an education, however rudimentary, and to scare parents into keeping them at home. In any event, girls are not allowed to study beyond Class 6. The children fell sick and were hospitalised; mercifully, they are reporting to be recovering. Parallels have been drawn with similar attacks on schoolgirls in neighbouring Iran, ruled by nearly as obscurantist a regime, but at the root of such attacks lies a misogynist mindset that dominates the discourse.

The attacks come within a few days of the appointment as Prime Minister of a man who played a key role in the Doha talks. The appointment of Maulvi Abdul Kabir has been projected by some commentators as a positive development, one that could lay the ground for the West to re-engage with the Taliban regime. These commentators feel it is a sign that the Taliban is taking incremental steps towards meeting the commitments it had made in Doha, particularly in respect of allowing women the right to education and work. But why the Taliban needs to take baby steps over a period of nearly two years to meet obligations it should have honoured immediately after assuming power is not explained. These apologists have sought to explain the positions the regime has taken since assuming power in 2021 by saying these were necessary to assuage the feelings of hardliners who make up its numbers. They say that with increasing confidence in its ability to govern the country, the Taliban may be getting ready to engage with the world, and that Maulvi Kabir's appointment is a sign of this desire.

Regional and Western interlocutors would do well not to accept such thinking; indeed, it was the belief among Western leaders, principally former American President Donald Trump, that the Taliban had turned over a new leaf which led to the Doha engagements, and the withdrawal by the West. It is time the world stopped treating the Taliban as recalcitrant children whose whims must be indulged, and who may be allowed to claim rewards for small acts of good behavior. Unless the regime in Kabul accepts a role for women and girls in Afghan society, nations that believe in gender equality must refuse to engage with it. A bully must be ignored.

Up and up

As the Ministry of Civil Aviation sits back and watches the mayhem, domestic air fares in the country are going through the roof. While seasonal increases are not unknown, especially in the school holiday season, and while some capacity has been cut with the withdrawal of operations of one airline which at its peak had nearly 8 per cent of the market, these factors still do not justify a scenario where the cheapest next day ticket on the Kolkata-Mumbai route costs upwards of Rs 14,000, or connections between Kolkata and the three southern metropolises set a passenger back by more than Rs 12,000.

The situation is similar on most domestic routes, including those that feature in the government's regional connectivity plans, and when one considers that airlines such as Indigo, the market leader, charge additionally for pre-booking a seat, for the snacks and beverages they sell, and for services such as priority boarding and faster delivery of checked-in baggage, the cost of travel could go up by an additional Rs 1,500 per passenger. The suggestion that the increases are only seasonal, and will come down once the holiday season ends may not be with basis; last winter, for instance, spot airfares had seen an increase of upwards of 40 per cent on some routes. The aviation industry offers various reasons for the exorbitant fares, and these include higher fuel costs even though they have now moderated. But it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the greed of airlines is beginning to rapidly outstrip the needs of passengers.

Not surprisingly, the International Air Transport Association (IATA), which represents more than 300 airlines in 120-plus countries, has projected that the industry will earn net profits of close to \$10 billion this year, twice as much as forecast earlier. Revenues are projected to exceed \$802 billion, the first time they would reach this figure since 2019, and passenger loads have almost touched pre-Covid levels. IATA members suffered a loss of \$183 billion between 2020 and 2022, and the reasoning appears to be that they are entitled to make hay while the sun shines. With rail passengers in India, especially in premium classes, approaching surface travel with some trepidation following the horrific accident in Odisha and thus likely to switch to flights, air fares may rise further in the days to come. Little can be expected from the government.

The Civil Aviation minister has shrugged off the discomfiture of passengers by saying the industry is deregulated. He has limited his intervention to a suggestion that airlines should increase capacity on busy routes in order to reduce fares. In addition, Mr. Jyotiraditya Scindia has asked airlines to self-regulate, but that may be like asking the fox to guard the hen house.

Sustainable future

To ensure plastic waste management is a success in India, infrastructure related to collection, sorting, recycling and disposal needs to be overhauled. More focus should be laid on the life cycle approach to reduce the environmental impact of the packaging product. There should be more investment in efficient waste management systems. There seems no role of consumers in this plastic waste management programme in India which makes its management less effective



Global plastic production and consumption have experienced exponential growth over the past 70 years, reaching 430 million metric tons annually, with a majority ending up in landfills and causing pollution, including greenhouse gas emissions. This rapid expansion has turned plastic into a lucrative industry valued at \$522.6 billion, projected to double by 2040. However, the environmental and health impacts of plastic production and pollution are significant, contributing to the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

To address this crisis, the Global Plastics Outlook Report highlights the importance of recycled plastics markets, technological innovation, domestic policies, and international cooperation, including financing. Recognizing the urgency, this year's World Environment Day theme aims to curb plastic production, and the United Nations is working towards a binding agreement to end plastic production by 2024.

Plastics contribute to climate change. Yes they do, and it is evident. As plastics are manufactured using petrochemicals, their extraction, transportation, refining and manufacturing and post-consumer management emits GHGs. Across its lifecycle, plastic is responsible for generating 1.8 billion tonnes of GHGs a year. By 2050, GHG emissions from plastics is projected to reach 6.5 gigatonnes accounting for 15 per cent of the total carbon emitted (WWF Report).

At the end of their lifecycle, a major share of plastics end up in the ocean negatively affecting its productivity, leading to biodiversity loss, reducing the ecosystem services, and also affecting livelihoods. It is estimated that by 2040, 50 kgs of plastic will be found per meter of coastline. In monetary terms, a study by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), suggests that plastic produced in 2019 will incur a cost of 3.1 million USD in its lifetime due to a reduction in ecosystem services provided by marine ecosystems. It is not only affecting our environment but also harming our health. Numerous studies indicate that large, small, and micro-plastic can contaminate the food chain by concentrating in soil and water. Microplastic contributes to inflammation, genotoxicity, cancer, cardiovascular diseases, inflammatory diseases, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, chronic inflammation and auto-immune disorders. Plastic presents a significant burden for all economies as they are trying hard to set things right by addressing those issues.

India is one of the major contributors. India produces around 3.5 million tonnes of plastic annually and is the third largest consumer of plastic. Per capita consumption is 13 kg in comparison to 27 kg globally and only 30 per cent of the plastic used is recycled in India. Plastic waste with some value i.e., PET (Polyethylene Terephthalate), HDPE (High-Density Polyethylene) is collected by informal and formal collection stakeholders and enters the recycling or recovery stream.

On the other hand, low or no-value i.e., single-use plastics (SUPs) or non-recyclable materials are dumped into landfill sites or used in Waste-to-energy (WTE) power plants. India has banned manufacturing and use of SUPs w.e.f 1 July 2022 and also prohibited the manufacturing, import, stocking, distribution, sale, and use of plastic carry bags (thick-

ness less than 120 microns w.e.f 31 December 2022. For the plastics that can be reused, recycled and recovered, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) has been introduced, along with other mechanisms.

EPR for plastic is an emerging phenomenon seen in various countries where the plastic packing industry pays a fee in the market which is used to collect, sort, recycle the material and is based on the 'Polluter Pays Principle'. It can be helpful in achieving the circularity targets of economies. On 16 February 2022, the Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) notified guidelines on EPR on plastic packaging. These guidelines specified mandatory targets



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on EPR, recycling of plastic packaging waste, reuse of rigid plastic packaging, and use of recycled plastic content. It prescribes levying environmental compensation on producers, importers and brand owners (PIBOs), and plastic waste processors if they fail to fulfil EPR targets.

These guidelines cover four categories of plastic packaging i.e. category I (rigid plastic packaging), category II (flexible plastic packaging with one or multiple layer), category III (multilayer plastic packaging) and category IV (plastic sheets used for packaging). The implementation of EPR on plastic packaging is mandated through a centralized online portal developed by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) which allows tracking and monitoring of EPR obligation and enhances ease-of-doing business for companies. The plastic packaging waste which is collected under EPR has to undertake a minimum level of recycling along with reuse of recycled plastic content. These guidelines also allow the sale and purchase of surplus extended producer responsibility certificates for the first time, setting up a market mechanism for plastic waste management.

Plastic certificates, similar to carbon credits certificates, is a market-based mechanism aimed at incentivizing and promoting responsible plastic waste management practices. The concept behind plastic certificates is to assign a certain value to the proper collection, sorting, recycling, and disposal of plastic waste with legal backing. While the introduction of legal requirements plays a crucial role in creating a market for plastic certificates, it may not be sufficient on its own to ensure the long-term success and viability of the market. To develop genuine market

features and encourage broader participation, additional factors can be considered such as tracking and verifying the collection with a transparent system, defining clear standards and criteria for plastic management to ensure consistency and comparability across entities. This also includes developing appropriate market infrastructure, to have a more mature and dynamic market such as price discovery through futures market, and market benefits such as tax benefits and recognition programs, for engagement of a broader range of stakeholders beyond the legal requirements.

PIBOs have to ensure that the amount of packaging waste they generated has been recovered and recycled to meet their obligation of recycling. Recycling can be done by recyclers, waste-to-energy plant operators, cement co-processors, users utilizing plastic, or exporters. Producers and processors may also exchange plastic credits for financial transactions at a price negotiated between them. They may also operate various schemes e.g. deposit refund system, buy-back schemes or any other model to prevent mixing of plastic packaging waste with solid waste.

In its recent report, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) found that plastic pollution can be reduced by 80 per cent by 2040, if required multidimensional policy and market shifts are taken. It also highlighted the need for systemic change to address the problems related to plastic pollution and asked for three key shifts i.e., reuse, recycle and reorient and diversify. This categorically emphasizes on collaboration for innovative solutions, sharing best practices and working together to reduce plastic waste among different entities. Countries have already been doing 'Reuse' and 'Recycle'. But reorienting and diversifying would require systemic change as it focuses on shifting the market towards sustainable plastic alternatives. This needs globally recognition of the challenges of plastic pollution and fostering international cooperation.

To ensure plastic waste management is a success in India, infrastructure related to collection, sorting, recycling and disposal needs to be overhauled. More focus should be laid on the life cycle approach to reduce the environmental impact of the packaging product. There should be more investment in efficient waste management systems such as waste-to-energy plants. There seems no role of consumers in this plastic waste management programme in India which makes its management less effective. Public participation and engagement are necessary for the success of policies where consumers are important stakeholders, as their behaviour towards plastic and the environment will shape the demand and supply of plastics. It is important to have more awareness among consumers about the negative impacts of plastics on the environment and human health, especially in a situation where microplastics are everywhere.

By adopting zero-waste policies and considering the wider scope of this market, the goals of establishing a sustainable future in plastic waste management can be successfully achieved. Last but not the least, developing a comprehensive market, both spot and futures, India has the potential to become a global leader and set a benchmark in plastic waste management for a sustainable future.

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Addressing risks of going cashless

A study released last week by leading credit card company Visa showing that more Filipinos are using digital modes for their transactions is proof that the country is moving toward the cashless society envisioned by the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP). Its Consumer Payment Attitudes Study found that for every 10 purchases, cash payments were down to 6.4 last year compared to 7.8 in 2021. As for the most preferred cashless payment options, 89 percent used mobile wallets such as GCash and Maya, while 70 percent went for credit and debit card payments.

According to the study, Filipinos use mobile wallets for speed and convenience when settling payments. However, the fast pace of adoption by consumers without the requisite safeguards from providers of the digital platforms and the users themselves can create a risky situation. Cyber-criminals seem to always be a step ahead, crafting newer, more sophisticated ways to steal people's money.

This increasing use of digital payment apps has unfortunately widened the hunting grounds of scammers. From 2019 to 2021, the BSP noted that some P2 billion had been lost to digital banking fraud such as hacking and phishing, based on consumer complaints it received. These incidents increased at an alarming rate during

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

the pandemic as consumers were forced to shift to digital financial channels because of mobility restrictions.

Among the well-publicized scams include the "Mark Nagoya" bank hacking that affected more than 700 clients of BDO Unibank in December 2021. Then there are the cases of unauthorized transactions in the Land Bank payroll accounts of several teachers and staff of the Department of Education and the latest GCash fiasco on the unauthorized deductions in account balances of several users.

As Visa country manager Jeff Navarro has noted, this necessitates the need to further educate users to protect them from cyber scams, and for digital platform providers to boost investments for protection.

In its 2023 State of Omnichannel Fraud Report released last April, credit agency TransUnion noted the Philippines was among the countries where cyber threats remained pervasive. It reported that 8.7 percent of digital transactions were suspected to be fraudulent last year, the third highest among all countries included in the study. "[The] Philippines' digital fraud rate still stands at a much higher level than the global average, leaving no room for complacency," said Amita Mitra, chief operating officer at TransUnion Philippines.

"As fraudsters become increasingly sophisticated, businesses must continue to equip themselves with the proper tools to detect fraud at the first warning sign without inhibiting the consumer journey." The mandatory SIM (subscriber identity module) card registration will also not totally cure the problem.

Last February, cybersecurity firm Fortinet warned against hackers finding other attack methods as they shift away from phishing attempts via mobile messages. "Instead of using SMS (short message service) phishing, they (hackers) will use Telegram, they will use WhatsApp, they will use email more," Jonas Walker, director at Fortinet Labs of Fortinet, recently told the Inquirer. "It is just using the same techniques but in different channels."

The solution, according to Walker, is to raise awareness against phishing as this is still the best way to go for subscribers to protect themselves.

IN MEMORIAM

BOSE (nee RAKSHIT) BITHIKA — Formerly Head, Dept. of Chemistry, Lady Brabourne College, Kolkata. With reverence and loving memory. — Keka.

spective, the protest was timed to perfection. While the 'temple of democracy' was being inaugurated, the scenes outside had all the

trappings of a police state. The irony was lost on no one.

Yours, etc., Ritu Khanna,

New Delhi, 5 June.



Pushing boundaries of protest

SIR, By questioning the conduct of the wrestlers who, in marching to parliament, apparently tried to disturb the 'sanctity of the occasion', K V Seetharamiah (Ill-timed action/ 4 June 2023) demonstrates a failure to understand the essence of protest. Protesters want to be heard, and when this does not happen, they have no option but to shout louder. Protesters will push boundaries. Did we not when fighting for our independence? Did South Africans play strictly by the book in their struggle against apartheid? And whose book, one may well ask.

The letter suggests that with FIRs having been filed, we should let the law take its course. We have seen how the police has dragged its feet, oversight committee reports have not been made public, letters to the leadership have gone unanswered and the accused is being allowed to threaten and intimidate.

It would indeed be a grossly

naive person who still believes in a fair and thorough investigation. Ultimately, the ham-handed police action on 28 May backfired spectacularly.

The world watched, as India pinned her elite athletes to the ground. It gave the wrestlers much needed international publicity. It is claimed that '28 May was a happy occasion for government and participants in the ... opening ceremony'. But parliament is for the people, is it not? From this per-

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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