

ENGLISH DAILY PUBLISHED FROM GANGTOK

HIMALAYAN MIRROR

SEPTEMBER 13 2017 VOL 12 NO. 09

Death of a student

That a seven-year-old was killed within the precincts of an upmarket Gurgaon school is horrifying on several counts. Evidently, Ryan International School, Gurgaon, failed to follow several safety guidelines issued by the city's police department. According to reports, the bus conductor who allegedly murdered Thakur, used the same washroom as the students. This is in clear violation of the Gurgaon Police's Guidelines for Safety of Children in Schools: "For bus drivers and conductors, whether employed by the school or contracted out, access area must be limited to just the bus area, and specific instructions must be given to them on which areas are out of bound for them". Ryan International must also answer why it allowed the alleged murderer to bring a knife into the school premises.

The safety lapses in a well-resourced school in the National Capital Region raise serious questions on basic infrastructure and protocols — rather, the lack of them — in the country's schools. Students, who spend nearly a third of their day in school, must be provided clean and secure washrooms. It should also be incumbent on the school management to provide well-maintained toilets for its employees. But much like Ryan International, most Indian schools — many of which charge exorbitant fees — pay short shrift to this basic necessity. Schools also accord low priority to another essential requirement — safety audits. Last year, another student of a Gurgaon school died after being hit by a speeding car after the school bus — without an attendant — allegedly dropped her on the wrong side of the road. In August, a student died after he fell from the second floor of an upscale Ghaziabad school.

There have been expressions of public anger after every such incident. However, that schools can go on as usual, as if nothing happened, shows a worrying lack of regulatory oversight. The school inspection system has been defunct for decades. Parents' associations are toothless bodies. When the demand-supply situation with respect to school education is skewed against the school-goer, expressions of outrage by parents never set off more than an episodic ripple. The police have assured a speedy investigation of Pradyuman Thakur's murder. But without effective institutionalised corrective mechanisms, a safe learning environment will continue to elude the country's schoolchildren.

The write stuff

The computer keyboard has created a generation of illegibles who can no longer communicate by the written word, and university examiners have to deploy cryptographic skills to get to the bottom of scribbled answer scripts. But Cambridge University has chosen to face the problem with practical humanism. It is departing from a tradition centuries old, and may allow exams to be taken with laptops and tablets.

While liberal in principle, the move may have unintended consequences. Be prepared for lurid stories about hackers drilling into examiners' computers to improve on answers after the exam. Besides, the delete key — which pen and paper are not equipped with — does things to writing. Examiners appreciate clarity and organisation, which the lack of the delete key enforces. Before setting pen to paper, the writer must have a fairly clear roadmap, which may explain why teachers hold on to the archaic method. But the delete button makes planning redundant. Whatever is written can be a series of afterthoughts. Pen and paper, and the computer keyboard, produce very different texts.

Ages ago, it was feared that the electronic calculator would doom mathematics, and universities resolutely banned it from exam halls. Slide rules were grudgingly allowed, on the ground that the user had to understand logarithms, at least. However, math has effortlessly survived the calculator, and writing will weather the keyboard, too. Indeed, it is a preparatory step to cataclysmic change ahead, when examination candidates may be invited to directly upload their thoughts to examiners. If examiners complain of splitting headaches, the way out would be to hand over their role to artificial intelligences. An examination would amount to having a friendly chat with a computer, which may finally lay the demon of examination anxiety to rest. And writing would become a quaintly artisanal pursuit, like hand-glazed pottery.

The object of the superior man is truth.

--Confucius

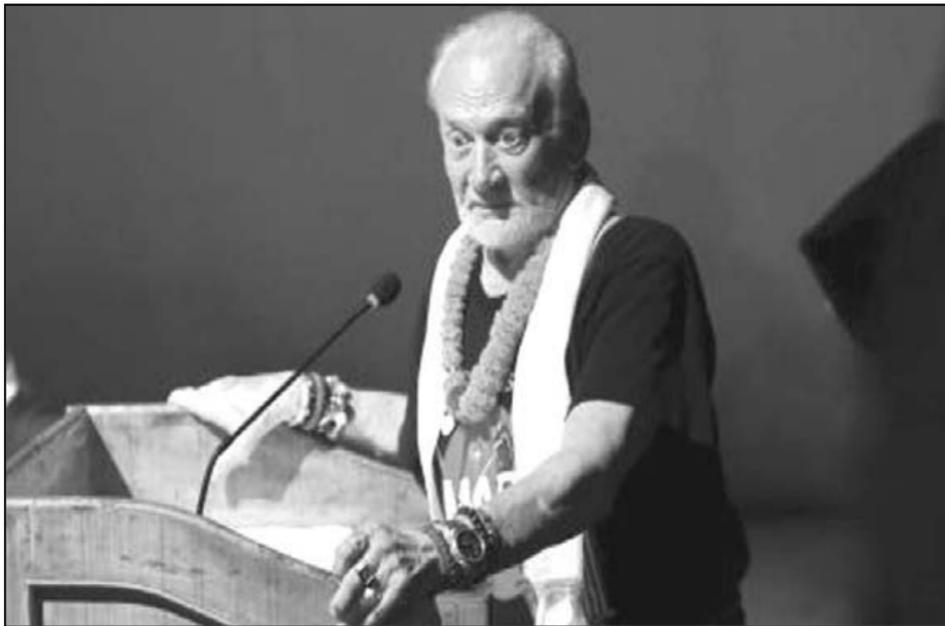
Scaling up core micronutrient interventions: It's \$12 bn vs \$574 mn

By Amit Kapoor

Buzz Aldrin, the second man on the moon, was quoted as saying: "If we can conquer space, we can conquer childhood hunger." Sadly, even today 248 million children across the globe are suffering from one or the other form of malnourishment — stunting, wasting and obesity. It accounts for 45 per cent of child deaths.

The significance of the problem is relatively higher in India as, with 20 per cent of the world's child population, it has one of the world's highest malnutrition rates. The root of the problem lies in gross negligence of public investment in healthcare facilities, let alone a focused intervention in child health amenities. Public expenditure on health, as a percentage of total health expenditure, has hovered between 25 and 30 per cent in the last decade, while the world average stood at 60 per cent. As a matter of fact, only 16 countries have a lower public expenditure on healthcare than India.

The inadequacy of government intervention is clearly reflected in the country's performance on child health indicators. As an extension of the fact that the country has the highest levels of malnutrition, India also has the highest number of stunted children in the world. The other aspects



of malnutrition are no better off. A high proportion of children with anaemia, low weight, lower levels of breast feeding and evolving problems of obesity are also equally of concern. The percentage of anaemic children, although depicting a declining trend, is still at 58.4; the percentage of overweight children increased to 6.1 in 2014; and finally, there has also been a rise in wasted children by 1.2 percentage points during the last decade.

Over the years, India has suffered heavy economic losses due to such

absurd levels of malnutrition. Any aspect of malnutrition directly impacts a person's productivity levels, affecting his economic viability. According to World Bank estimates, productivity losses due to malnutrition are more than 10 per cent of lifetime individual earnings or about 2-3 per cent of the GDP. Annually, India loses over \$12 billion in GDP to vitamin and mineral deficiencies.

This is because children who are undernourished show lower activity levels and reduced atten-

tion. Studies show that low weight at birth and stunting can reduce a child's IQ by five points. In addition, anaemia and other deficiencies can have irreversible damage on a child's ability to learn. A recent World Bank study found that stunting among children in India reduces their per capita income by 13 per cent. Since two-thirds of India's current workforce was stunted in childhood, the economic losses that the country has borne due to it through generations is unimaginable.

The issue gets even more complicated for

nutritional deficiencies in a girl child. Malnourishment in a girl, combined with the Indian trend of early marriage, has a cascading effect of health complexities across generations. Data by National Family Health Survey suggests that 26.8 per cent of the women in India are married before 18. Childbearing at an early age can cause nutritional deficiencies in the womb and increase the risk of death by 2-10 times. Moreover, 41.4 per cent of the mothers do not receive any antenatal care during their first

trimester. This induces other risks associated with mineral deficiencies in the womb such as blindness, dwarfism and also chronic diseases like diabetes in adulthood.

There is also a tendency among Indians to avoid hospitals due to the high out-of-pocket expenditure during delivery. The average out-of-pocket expenditure per delivery in a public healthcare system in rural areas is almost Rs 3,000 (\$47), where 75 per cent of the population earns less than Rs 5,000 a month. Such excessive costs of child and maternal care lead to a widespread inclination to evade hospitals for childbirth, which results in health complications among children and even death.

The potential gains from addressing these issues will far exceed the costs incurred. As against the \$12 billion that the country loses to nutritional deficiencies each year, scaling up core micronutrient interventions would cost less than \$574 million annually. Research suggests that \$1 spent on nutritional interventions in India could generate \$34.1 to \$38.6 in public economic returns, three times more than the global average. This makes boosting nutrition levels across the country one of the biggest low hanging fruit in the Indian public policy sphere.

(Courtesy: IANS)

BRICS crafts new mantra of diplomacy

By Rajendra Shende

The BRICS meeting in Xiamen in China last week was a timely opportunity for both India and China to end the high-altitude and potentially high-voltage stand-off at the Doklam plateau. Many political observers around the globe feared a spark, ignition and even a war. Concurrent "cross-continent" threats by North Korea aimed at the US brought the situation to the brink.

BRICS diplomacy, including its extremely well thought-out and carefully drafted declaration of 71 articles showed not only the mature intentions of five countries — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — in the messy world, but the skillful subtlety of India and China in avoiding a flash war in the Himalayas.

But diplomacy can never be a long-term winner. As Henry Kissinger famously said: "It is a mistake to assume that diplomacy can always settle international disputes if there is good faith and willingness to come to an agreement. For diplomacy to sustain the win-win framework, it has to go beyond the apparent faith and trust. It has to be backed by the mutually beneficial implementation of the strategy."

Fortunately, there is a game-changing and long-term win-win opportunity for both India and China whose time has come. Though the BRICS declaration is multilateral, India and China can take away the potentially strong bilateral messages on collaborative approaches on a number of issues that would make both countries lead global development.



Such opportunity should not be allowed to be overshadowed by relatively trifling issues like territorial conflicts, trade wars, NSG admission and international naming of terrorists and, above all, by media hype. Yes, border-protection is important, but more crucial is the protection of the people's future that they want in both the countries.

Having disengaged from the Doklam plateau, China and India should now engage in availing themselves the huge opportunity of constructive and positive collaboration on Sustainable Development and Climate Change. There are three key reasons that offer high takeoff points for Xi and Modi to engage in a strategy that benefits people of both the countries.

First, both of them have shown similar approaches to address the common challenges facing them on international platforms. Unprecedented air pollution, life-threatening climate change, resource-draining energy depen-

dence, restless youth, serious unemployment, fast-urbanising population, the eroding agricultural base and terrorism are the common challenges that the two largest- and fastest-growing countries have to face squarely.

In the UN General Assembly, President Xi in September 2015 talked of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): "The dream of the Chinese people is closely connected with the dreams of other peoples of the world. We cannot realise the Chinese dream without a peaceful international environment, a stable international order and the understanding, support and help from the rest of the world. The realisation of the Chinese dream will bring more opportunities to other countries and contribute to global peace and development."

At the same forum, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid out India's philosophy of "vasudhava kutumbakam" — the world as one big family —

and noted that the country has always raised its voice for rights of justice, dignity, opportunity and prosperity not just for itself but for others. He went further to state that development of India's people "mirrors" the SDGs.

Second, the personal chemistry between Modi and Xi is perceived to be conducive for longer-term cooperation. They come from totally different family and education backgrounds. But their visits to each other's home states early on when Modi's government came to power had set a harmonious tone. The BRICS Summit was significant and, politically, simply amazing. Even when the Indian and Chinese battalions were facing each other on the Doklam plateau, Modi and Xi were facing each other in Hamburg on the margins of G-20 summit to discuss preparations for Xiamen. Both showed praise on each other's national efforts in economic and social development and

resolved to address the issue of terrorism.

Third, both countries have already collaborated smartly to institutionalise efforts on critical issues like clean energy, sustainable development, infrastructure and finance. Apart from their skilled strategies to leverage the BRICS platform — which is neither regional, nor economic and represents 40 per cent of world population and 25 per cent of world's GDP — there are two more excellent enabling initiatives of China, fully supported by India as major shareholder, i.e., the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) based in Beijing and New Development Bank (NDB) based in Shanghai, with a capital of \$100 billion each.

With these three enabling ecosystems, India and China can take global positioning through strategic collaboration. Collaborative innovations — which the Xiamen Declaration refers to 12 times — in reducing carbon emissions through

clean energy and implementing the Paris Climate Agreement and SDGs, to which both countries are passionately attached, could prove to be the most rewarding strategy for both. US President Donald Trump's decision to pull out of the Paris Agreement will prove to be the pushing-in prospect for India and China by being technology leaders in clean energy and sustainable development — to which the Xiamen Declaration refers to 23 times.

Indeed, China and India account for 60 per cent of incremental world energy demand at present. Coal-dominated and oil-dependent energy structures are the drivers of energy insecurity. Use of fossil fuels and inefficient use of biomass burning are responsible for air pollution that causes premature deaths of 5.5 million people in the two countries together (China's share being 4.3 million), as per the World Health Organisation.

Strategic collaboration would lead to a healthy and pollution-free life for their people. It is of interest of both countries to enhance energy efficiency and rapidly increase the share of renewable energy in its total energy mix and reduce the dependence on coal. China's strengths in manufacturing of renewable energy and India's strengths in energy management systems could complement each other to create a new world free from global warming threats.

Moving away from "assaulting with stones" to "building with BRICS" could be the new mantra for India and China. The timing favours those who dare to act despite challenges and differences. The BRICS meeting in Xiamen is that time. (Courtesy: IANS)