

I am not a product of my circumstances. I am a product of my decisions.

—Stephen Covey

Edit

Investing in Ladakh's tomorrow

The inauguration of 70 public libraries across Ladakh is much more than the opening of new buildings with books, computers and reading spaces. It is an investment in the minds of the people and a recognition that the real strength of any society lies in the quality of its human capital. Since Ladakh became a Union Territory, the Centre has placed considerable emphasis on strengthening its physical infrastructure. Roads, bridges, tunnels, power projects and better connectivity have remained at the centre of the development push. These are essential for a region like Ladakh where geography and harsh weather have traditionally created major challenges. But development cannot stop at roads and bridges. A progressive society also needs institutions that nurture knowledge, creativity, critical thinking and character. The inauguration of 70 public libraries, 35 each in Leh and Kargil, shows that the development vision for Ladakh is gradually moving beyond physical infrastructure towards building a stronger and more capable generation. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the initiative. A library may appear to be a simple institution but its impact can be far-reaching. For a young student in a remote village of Ladakh, access to books, computers and a quiet place to study can open doors that may otherwise remain closed. It can provide an opportunity to prepare for competitive examinations, pursue higher education and acquire knowledge without having to leave home. The modern facilities provided at these libraries are equally significant. Heating systems suited to Ladakh's difficult climate, well-stocked bookshelves, computers and dedicated reading spaces can make these centres accessible throughout the year. More importantly, they can create a culture of reading in a region where educational opportunities have often been limited by geography. The Centre's focused attention on Ladakh is therefore visible not only in infrastructure projects but also in initiatives that seek to empower its people. These libraries represent that broader approach. They are public institutions where students can study but they can also become places where ideas are exchanged, skills are developed and communities come together. For this to happen, however, the libraries must not become silent buildings that remain active only during examinations. The parents, teachers, village education committees and civil society organisations must take ownership of these institutions. Reading circles, career guidance programmes, literary events and community learning activities can turn these libraries into vibrant centres of learning. Students should also be encouraged to look at libraries as more than examination centres. Reading beyond textbooks can improve their language, imagination and ability to think independently. In an increasingly competitive world, these qualities matter as much as academic qualifications. The 70 libraries are therefore not merely another addition to Ladakh's educational infrastructure. They are investments in its future. Roads may connect villages to the outside world but libraries can connect young minds to the world of ideas. If these institutions are nurtured properly, they can help create a generation that is better informed, more confident and better prepared to compete at the national level. That is the kind of development that builds not just a stronger Ladakh but a more enlightened and empowered India.

■ Critical Agri Challenge

EL NINO MAY HIT SITUATION

■ DHURJATI MUKHERJEE

The agricultural sector is expected to be affected in most districts due to deficient rainfall at the right time and other factors. As per government data, about 45 percent of the net sown area is rain fed and due to a weak monsoon in around 380-400 districts, production is sure to decrease. It is understood that the total acreage under three crop categories has fallen sharply – coarse cereals, pulses and oilseeds by over 40 percent. This doesn't augur well for a country which ranks 102 of 123 in the 2025 World Hunger Index, scoring 25.8 placing it in the 'Serious' hunger category.

As is well known, pulses are a key source of protein and India imports a fifth of its requirement. The fall in production will result in increased imports, affecting the economy. But what is most disturbing is the fact that pulses, which are the poor man's source of protein, will affect this section as prices are expected to rise.

For edible oil, about 53 percent of requirement is normally met through imports and the present situation is not quite encouraging. Meanwhile, reports confirm that domestic urea manufacturing has been hit in the West Asia crisis with production falling to 18 lakh tonne in March from an earlier average of 24 lakh tonne. It is well known that the Gulf region accounts for around 20-25 percent of India's urea exports, 30 percent of diammonium phosphate (DAP) and 50 percent of LNG. The crisis has pushed up costs of inputs such as LNG, ammonia and sulphur, besides increasing freight charge.

However, the government maintained there is adequate stock of fertilisers and has been tapping alternative sources to boost supplies, even as urea units had taken annual maintenance shutdowns. The Centre asked states to monitor any abnormal spike in fertiliser sales during the current 'lean season' to prevent stockpiling and black marketing. On diversification of sources, ministry officials noted a global tender has been floated and long-term arrangements have been tied up with countries such as Saudi Arabia and Oman. In addition, sourcing is proposed to be expanded to countries including Russia, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Canada.

The government spent Rs 70,709 crore, nearly 40 percent of the fertilizer subsidy allocated for the current fiscal in the first three-and-a-half months, indicating the bill is set to exceed the budget estimates due to West Asian conflict. Out of the allocation of Rs 1.8 lakh crore, it is felt it may have to be increased due to global price levels of soil nutrients. The government informed through the Rajya Sabha that the fertiliser department has taken several measures to diversify import sources by engaging with Indian missions in several countries to identify additional suppliers and strengthen the fertiliser supply chain. Meanwhile, urea continues to be sold at Rs 266.50 per 45 kg bag against the global prices exceeding Rs 4000 a bag. Despite global price fluctuations, the retail price of DAP is maintained at Rs 1350 per 50 kg for farmers.

Some agro economists are of the opinion that the government should increase the cost of urea by 50 percent and compensate farmers with PM Kisan payout. Around 89 percent cultivators are yet to benefit. The danger of late and deficient rainfall, which is now projected of being 21 percent as in July-end, may

soon become a water-stressed country, affecting not just the agriculture sector but also domestic and industrial output as well as the domestic sector.

However, it may be pointed out that India's economy has become less reliant on monsoon than commonly perceived with ex-

shifting to hardy crops and vegetables that require less water. Latest government data shows acreage under sunflower jumped 61.6 percent from a year earlier while the area sown under mung, kharif (horse gram), jute and methas also rise by over 8 percent, 15 percent, 2 percent and 3.7 percent respec-

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not have much effect on the farming community, more so since there may be improved rainfall in south peninsular rainfall. It is predicted that the possibility of a positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) could offset the negative impact of El Nino. Though there may be an inflationary spiral, the effect as of now, may not be much.

Keeping in view the monsoon situation, some of the decline is possibly unavoidable. But measures need to be taken to ensure that groundwater depletion should be kept at the minimum level. Moreover, there should be efforts to promote dryland farming and incentives need to be given for such crops that need very little water.

On the other hand, water conservation measures must be intensified through sensitising farmers at the grass-root levels. In fact, like fertilisers, water is indeed a key input vis-à-vis agricultural production and productivity is concerned. However, per capita water availability is declining every year and India may

panding irrigation networks and changing cropping patterns, according to the brokerage firm, Bernstein. It stated that the traditional narrative that nearly 60 percent of India's agriculture depends on monsoon rainfall no longer reflects the ground realities, arguing that the country's relationship with rainfall has undergone a 'structural reset'.

Though the argument per se is debatable, it is a fact that dependence on monsoon rainfall has considerably reduced. Historically, deficient monsoon often translated into sharp declines in agricultural output and rural incomes. In 2002, for instance, rainfall fell to 81 percent of the long-period average, leading to a steep drop in foodgrains production and a severe contraction in rural disposable incomes. This situation may have changed and in 2018-19 and later in 2023-24, India registered rising foodgrains production despite below-normal monsoon, the brokerage noted.

As per latest reports, it is encouraging to note that acreage under staples is increasingly

tively. Seed companies are witnessing the change in demand. Farmers are increasingly opting for short-term vegetables, prompting companies to import additional seeds of coriander, cabbage and temperate cauliflower.

The dependence on water as well as fertilisers needs to be reduced for which there has to be a shift in cropping pattern towards crops that need low water. Experiments need to be carried out by Indian Institute of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and others such as IITs and sensitise the farmers, keeping in view their incomes. But the thrust on research is somewhat piecemeal, considering the large number of people involved in farming, directly or indirectly.

If one considers the aspect of productivity, most emerging economies are far ahead of India as research in those countries have been successfully translated to field practices. Not that India has not made any tangible progress, but a greater thrust is necessary in the coming years. ---INFA

Moving Beyond Junk Food: Building a Healthier Childhood, a Stronger India

■ LALIT GARGG

The dream of a Developed India cannot be realized merely through modern infrastructure, rapid economic growth, artificial intelligence, digital innovation, or world-class technological advancement. The true strength of any nation lies in its children. When childhood is healthy, value-oriented, energetic, and mentally resilient, the future of the nation is naturally secure. Conversely, if children grow up burdened by obesity, diabetes, malnutrition, and unhealthy eating habits, the very foundation of national development becomes fragile. Therefore, children's health is not merely the responsibility of the Ministry of Health; it is a matter of national development, educational progress, economic sustainability, and social responsibility. The Maharashtra Government's decision to prohibit the sale, distribution, and promotion of junk food in all schools and within their surrounding areas is a significant reflection of this broader vision. It is not simply an administrative directive but a profound declaration of responsibility toward future generations. It courageously acknowledges that the health of children is far more valuable than commercial profits. If implemented effectively, this policy has the potential to become a model for the entire nation.

The greatest concern today is not that children are eating less food, but that they are consuming less nutrition and far more ultra-processed foods. Colourful packaging,

persuasive advertising, cartoon-brand marketing, social media influence, and the easy availability of fast food in every neighbourhood have transformed children's food preferences to such an extent that wholesome home-cooked meals often appear dull and unattractive. This shift is not merely a change in dietary habits; it is gradually affecting children's physical growth, cognitive development, and behavioural patterns. Scientific studies consistently demonstrate that foods high in unhealthy fats, excessive salt, and refined sugar significantly increase the risk of obesity, hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, hormonal disorders, and impaired concentration among children. Even more alarming is the fact that diseases once associated with middle age are now emerging during adolescence and even childhood. This is not only a public health crisis but also a serious threat to the nation's future productivity and human capital.

During childhood, nutrition—not taste—is the most essential requirement. It is the period when both the body and the brain undergo their fastest development. A balanced diet rich in fresh fruits, green vegetables, milk, pulses, whole grains, and other natural foods supports optimal physical and mental growth. Junk food, by contrast, may satisfy momentary cravings but fails to provide the essential nutrients required for healthy development. Consequently, many children who appear healthy externally may actually suffer from hidden nutritional deficiencies. Unfortunately, junk food today is no longer just a category of food; it has evolved into an

aggressive commercial culture. Through sophisticated marketing strategies, children are made to believe that packaged and processed foods symbolize modernity and status. Popular athletes, film stars, and digital influencers, often unintentionally, encourage children to consume products that are detrimental to their long-term health. Under such circumstances, it would be unfair to place the entire responsibility on families alone. Governments, industries, schools, parents, and society must all share accountability.

Schools are not merely centres of academic learning; they are laboratories where lifelong habits and values are shaped. If schools provide nutritious meals, integrate nutrition education into the curriculum, establish kitchen gardens, and encourage children to cultivate plants while understanding the value of natural food, the impact will be both meaningful and enduring. Mere prohibition cannot solve the problem. Healthy alternatives must also be made appealing, affordable, accessible, and enjoyable. India's traditional food culture is widely regarded as one of the most balanced and scientifically sound dietary systems in the world. Millets such as bajra, jowar, and ragi, along with pulses, buttermilk, curd, sprouted grains, seasonal fruits, fresh vegetables, and home-cooked meals, have long been the pillars of healthy living. Rather than abandoning this rich culinary heritage in the name of modernity, we must reintroduce it to children in innovative and attractive ways. School cafeterias offering nutritious regional and tradi-

tional dishes can gradually help children develop healthier food preferences.

The issue of junk food extends beyond health; it also carries profound economic implications. An unhealthy childhood translates into increased healthcare expenditure, reduced workforce efficiency, diminished productivity, and long-term economic losses. Investment in children's nutrition should therefore be viewed not as expenditure but as one of the most rewarding investments in nation-building. Every rupee spent on child nutrition today yields multiple returns in the form of healthier, more capable, and innovative citizens tomorrow. Parents also play an indispensable role. If homes are regularly stocked with packaged snacks, sugary beverages, and highly processed foods, children will naturally consume them. Children imitate what they observe. When families embrace balanced diets, eat together, and involve children in preparing meals, they cultivate lifelong appreciation for wholesome eating and healthy living.

Governments, too, must adopt a comprehensive strategy extending beyond school campuses. Strict regulation of misleading advertisements targeting children, clear front-of-pack nutrition labelling, easy identification of foods high in sugar and salt, expansion of playgrounds and sports facilities, regular health screenings, nutrition awareness campaigns, and active community participation are all equally important. A coordinated effort between the health and education sectors can produce far more effective and sustainable outcomes. The chal-

lenge posed by junk food should not be addressed merely through restrictions; it must evolve into a nationwide movement promoting healthy lifestyles. Just as the Swachh Bharat Mission transformed cleanliness into a people's movement, healthy eating and nutrition should become a national public awareness campaign. Children must understand that true energy and vitality do not come from attractive packets but from foods that are fresh, natural, and close to nature.

The Maharashtra Government's decision deserves special appreciation because it recognizes that children's health must take precedence over political and commercial interests. It is now imperative for all states across India to demonstrate similar courage and foresight. The foundation of a developed nation is not only smart cities or advanced technologies but healthy children. If childhood is protected, the nation's future is protected. If every child's plate is filled with nutritious food, the country's progress will also be balanced and sustainable. The India of tomorrow will be defined not merely by technological excellence but by a generation that is healthy, disciplined, responsible, and enlightened. The greatest national commitment of our times should therefore be to create an environment where every child learns to value health over taste, nutrition over convenience, and long-term well-being over momentary temptation. That is the true path to an enriched childhood—and the strongest foundation for a truly Developed India.