

PILLARS OF PROGRESS

Health and education are universally recognized as the twin pillars upon which the foundation of any prosperous and progressive society rests. These sectors not only define the quality of life of individuals but also determine the socio-economic development and future trajectory of nations. A healthy, educated population is more productive, innovative, and capable of contributing meaningfully to the growth and stability of a country.

Health, as the cornerstone of human well-being, directly influences an individual's capacity to learn, work, and contribute to society. Without good health, access to other opportunities becomes limited. Healthy citizens are more likely to participate in the workforce, pursue education, and lead fulfilling lives. Investments in public health infrastructure, clean water, nutrition, maternal and child care, and preventive healthcare lead to reduced disease burden, lower mortality rates, and higher life expectancy.

Education, on the other hand, is a transformative force that empowers individuals, reduces inequality, and promotes sustainable development. An educated population is better equipped to adapt to change, harness technological advancements, and innovate solutions to societal challenges. Education fosters critical thinking, civic responsibility, and social cohesion. From primary schooling to higher education and vocational training, each level plays a role in shaping informed, skilled, and responsible citizens. Moreover, education helps break the cycle of poverty, especially when girls and marginalized communities are given equal access to learning opportunities.

The interdependence of health and education is undeniable. A child in good health is more likely to attend school regularly and perform better academically. Similarly, educated individuals make informed choices about hygiene, nutrition, and preventive healthcare. This positive feedback loop between health and education accelerates overall human development.

From an economic standpoint, countries that invest in health and education enjoy a demographic dividend. Their workforce becomes more competent, creative, and competitive in the global market. These investments drive innovation, enhance labor productivity, and reduce public expenditure on welfare in the long run. Nations like Finland, Japan, and Singapore are prime examples where sustained focus on healthcare and education has resulted in exceptional levels of development and prosperity.

Health and education are not just social services-they are strategic investments.

NITI Aayog's Human Capital Revolution

■ RAO INDERJIT SINGH



In a country as vast and varied as India, the true measure of progress lies not merely in GDP figures or infrastructure milestones but in how well a nation nurtures its people. Human capital-our education, skills, health, and productivity-is not just an economic asset but a moral imperative. Over the last ten years, a quiet yet formidable revolution has taken shape under the stewardship of India's premier policy think tank, NITI Aayog, reshaping how the country invests in its most valuable resource: its citizens.

In a nation where over 65% of the population is below the age of 35, the demographic dividend presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity. But the sheer scale of this young population brings enormous responsibility. The challenge lies in converting youthful energy into a force for economic growth and national development. This is where NITI Aayog has emerged as a visionary catalyst-charting a roadmap not just for today's progress but for tomorrow's prosperity.

Over the last decade, NITI Aayog has evolved from a think tank into a reformist engine and an execution partner, known for bold ideas backed by data, collaboration, and human-centered design. It has transformed policymaking from a top-down exercise to a dynamic process of cocreation with states, private players, global institutions, and civil society. Its strength lies not just in planning, but in listening-and turning those insights into action.

Education, the bedrock of human capital,

has witnessed a complete reimagining under its guidance. Recognizing that access alone isn't enough, NITI Aayog pushed for quality and equity. The National Education Policy 2020, where it played a pivotal role, ushered in a new era-shifting from rote learning to critical thinking, flexibility, and vocational integration. It emphasized early childhood education, mother-tongue instruction, and seamless transitions between disciplines. Through initiatives like the Atal Innovation Mission, it ensured both accountability and imagination-embedding innovation in over 10,000 Atal Tinkering Labs that now dot the country.

Skilling India's youth for the 21st century has been another cornerstone of its mission. From backing the Skill India Mission to ensuring that vocational programs reach the heart of underserved districts via the Aspirational Districts Programme, NITI Aayog has helped bridge the gap between classroom and career. Under Skill India Mission, more than 1.5 crore youth have been trained through initiatives that blend technology, industry linkages, and demand-driven curricula. It didn't just train for training's sake-it mapped sectoral needs and designed programs that opened real economic doors for India's rural and urban youth alike.

In parallel, it championed a dynamic, inclusive labour market. It supported the rationalization of 44 central labour laws into four simplified codes-on wages, social security, industrial relations, and occupational safety. These reforms balanced employer flexibility with worker protection, particularly benefiting informal sector workers who make up the majority of India's workforce. By simplifying compliance and encouraging formalization, the workplace became not only more productive but also more humane. Healthcare, often seen as a cost, was reframed as an invest-

ment. NITI Aayog helped architect the shift from reactive treatment to proactive wellness. The flagship Ayushman Bharat scheme, backed and monitored by NITI Aayog, provided over 50 crore Indians with health insurance, while more than 1.5 lakh Health and Wellness Centres took primary care to the grassroots. Programs targeted nutrition, maternal and child health, mental well-being, and noncommunicable diseases-aiming not just to heal the sick, but to keep people healthy. The COVID-19 pandemic tested the resilience of India's health system like never before. In this crisis, NITI Aayog stood tall-partnering with the Ministry of Health and ICMR to model infection patterns, ensure equitable medical resource allocation, and roll out platforms like eSanjeevani for telemedicine. Its post-pandemic vision emphasized not just recovery, but readiness-pushing for public health management cadres and modern digital health infrastructure.

Beyond these domains, NITI Aayog has been a lighthouse for entrepreneurship and innovation. Programs like Start-Up India, Stand-Up India, and the Atal Innovation Mission created a fertile ecosystem for ideas to flourish. Thousands of start-ups in fintech, EdTech, agrotech, healthtech, and clean energy are thriving today because they had policy support, incubation, and mentorship at crucial stages. These are not just businesses; they are job creators and problem solvers, contributing to a resilient and self-reliant India. But perhaps its greatest achievement lies in how it has institutionalized a culture of evidencebased policymaking. By leveraging big data, artificial intelligence, real-time dashboards, and rigorous monitoring frameworks, it ensured policies remain adaptive, accountable, and aligned with ground realities. Whether it was launching India's first SDG Index, guiding states on performance

metrics, or using behavioural insights for policy design, NITI Aayog brought scientific thinking to the heart of governance.

Its ability to convene and coordinate across ministries and sectors made it more than an advisory body-it became the conscience-keeper of development. It encouraged healthy competition among states through performance-based rankings, worked with civil society to amplify voices from the margins, and engaged global partners to bring the best practices home. India's rising position in the Global Innovation Index and the praise from institutions like the UN, World Bank, and UNESCO reflect the world's recognition of this effort.

More than just achieving targets, NITI Aayog has focused on creating systems that are sustainable, inclusive, and future-ready. Its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals is evident in every initiative-from clean energy transitions to green mobility, from digital public infrastructure to gender equity in workplaces.

India's rise as a knowledge economy is no longer a distant dream-it is a work in progress, propelled by policies that see people as the nation's greatest asset. What NITI Aayog has done is elevate the discourse around development, reminding us that true progress is measured not by the tallest buildings or biggest factories, but by the strength, health, and dignity of its people. In doing so, it has become more than a think tank. It has become the pulse of a young, aspiring Indian India that dreams, dares, and does. And at the heart of this story is the quiet confidence that when you invest in people, you build not just a better economy, but a better nation.

(The author is Minister of State (Independent Charge) Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation; Planning and Minister of State, Culture)

Rural Empowerment through Krishi Vigyan Kendras

■ DR. BANARSI LAL

Every year 16th of July is celebrated as the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) Foundation Day. This year ICAR will celebrate its 97th Foundation Day. On this day achievements of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) are highlighted for the growth and development of the farmers. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) is an autonomous organisation under the Department of Agricultural Research and Education, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Government of India.

The ICAR is one of the largest national agricultural systems in the world with its spread across the nation. The ICAR with its strenuous efforts helped to provide the self-sufficiency in food grains and nutritional security in India.

The ICAR links agricultural research, education and technologies developed by the ICAR and its institutions.

Presently the ICAR has established 731 KVKs across the nation and these KVKs are mitigating the scientific agricultural needs of the farmers and are helping in human resource development in agriculture and allied sectors through capacity building programmes.

The ICAR plays a significant role in promoting excellence in higher education in agriculture. The ICAR plays a pioneering role in ushering Green Revolution and subsequent agricultural developments and research across the country.

The ICAR has contributed immensely to increase the food grain production in India. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) has started innovative agricultural science-based institutions called as Krishi Vigyan Kendras (Farm Science Centres) in the country.

The National Commission on Agriculture and the Planning Commission have strongly recommended its implementation. In order to work out the details of the Krishi Vigyan Kendras, a committee under the chairmanship of Dr. Mohan Singh Mehta



was constituted by the ICAR in 1973.

The Krishi Vigyan Kendras are mainly designed to impart need-based and skill oriented training to the practicing farmers, in-service extensional personnel and to those who are interested for self-employment.

The Krishi Vigyan Kendras are implemented through State Agricultural Universities, selected ICAR institutes, central universities, voluntary organisations and State Governments. The first Krishi Vigyan Kendra was established in 1974 at Pudducherry under Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore. The Krishi Vigyan Kendras are concerned with agricultural technical literacy, the acquisition of which does not require as a precondition to read or write.

These Kendras cater the needs of those who wish to be self-employed or those who are already employed. There is no particular syllabus for the Krishi Vigyan Kendras.

The programmes and syllabus of Krishi Vigyan Kendra are tailored according to the needs, resources and potential for the agricultural growth in a particular area.

India is a land of villages and most of the people residing in the villages are farmers. Agriculture is the major occupation of the people and around 60 per cent of the population is directly associated with agriculture.

Agricultural development is helpful for the overall growth and development of the country. Agriculture is the mainstay of the people as it provides employment to more than half of the population of the country. This sector contribution signifies the dependency of the country on agriculture. The green revolution increased the agricultural production of the nation and India became self-reliant in many agro-commodities. But a lot is needed to improve the condition of the farmers as they are really the

backbone of the country.

Judicious use of land is necessary to mitigate the growing needs of the increasing population by keeping the sustainability of soils, ecosystems and environment in view.

Agricultural growth is the prime goal of the Krishi Vigyan Kendras. Priority is given to the weaker sections of the society like small, marginal, tribal farmers, agricultural labourers, drought prone areas, hilly areas, forest areas, coastal areas etc. and work-experience is the main method of imparting training. The first objective of ICAR is to cover the entire country with one Krishi Vigyan Kendra in each district and priority is given to the backward areas. As there is a great demand for the improved agricultural technologies by the farmers so there is great demand of Krishi Vigyan Kendras throughout the country. Farmers need not only the knowledge of the technologies but also more skills in the agricul-

tural operations for adoption. Now the effectiveness of Krishi Vigyan Kendras has been enhanced by the addition of on-farm testing and front line demonstrations on the agricultural technologies.

The four major functions of Krishi Vigyan Kendras are (i) To impart training to the farmers and extension functionaries. (ii)To organise long-term vocational training for the rural youths in order to generate the self-employment. (iii)To layout front-line demonstrations at farmers field to generate the production data and also to get feedback from the farmers. (iv)To conduct on-farm tests, refinement and documentation of agricultural technologies. Needs based trainings are designed for different types of farmers. The training courses are designed on the basis of information received from village survey through Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) or Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) methods and characterise the human and physical resources. The farming system of the farmers is taken into account while designing the courses of the programmes. All methods and means to develop the skill among the farmers in their areas of interest are taken into account. Basically the trainings starts from the farmers production units such as farmers fields, dairy units, poultry units, goat units, sheep units etc. and terminates with discussion. No certificate or diploma is awarded to the farmers for the trainings. Follow-up extension programmes are conducted after trainings in order to get the impact of the trainings on the trainees.

The KVK staff is comprised the sixteen members team. The Krishi Vigyan Kendra is headed by Senior Scientist&Head. The subject Matter Specialists (SMSs)/scientists from the different discipline like Agricultural Extension, Horticulture, Agronomy, Home Science, Animal Science and Fisheries forms the scientific staff of the KVK. The programmes are assisted by a Programme Assistant. Farm Manager takes care of KVK farm which is mainly used for demonstration purpose. The agricultural universities KVKs are headed by

the Director Extension (DE) and at zone level KVKs are monitored and guided by Director Agricultural Technology Application Research Institute (ATARI). At central level KVKs are headed by Deputy Director General (DDG). The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) provides guidelines to KVKs and conducts periodic supervision. KVK is having its own buildings, demonstration farm, vehicles, and farmer's hostels for scientific staff. KVK executes its activities with the help and guidance of local management committee. The KVKs are provided 100% financial assistance from the ICAR.

Krishi Vigyan Kendra plans and conducts survey of the operational areas to identify the training needs of the farmers. It compiles all the recommendations for the district to utilize in the training programmes. KVK conducts need-based, production oriented short and long-term training courses both on and off campus. KVK maintains the farm on the scientific basis for the demonstration purpose in order to provide the work experience to the farmers and also to disseminate the latest agricultural technologies. KVK also imparts some general training to the rural illiterates and school drop outs in order to convert them as the good farmers. KVK also provides trainings to the women for home making and nutrition education for rural community and also on other areas like cottage industries home crafts etc. KVK undertakes on-farm testing of the agricultural technologies and allied aspects for their suitability and also to identify the constraints. KVK helps to implement all the schemes of the ICAR and other related organisations. KVK demonstrates the various technologies to recommend for their adoption for maximizing the yield or income per unit time in different resource conditions. Really Krishi Vigyan Kendras which are catering the agricultural needs of the farmers across the nation and are transforming the rural areas through the agricultural innovations.

(The writer is Chief Scientist & Head of KVK Reasi SKUAST-J)

Kashmir Watches: Modi's normalcy or INDIA bloc's rifted integration?

■ TUSHI DEB



What binds Bengal to Kashmir today? Not geography. Not culture. But a tenuous political thread woven through the INDIA alliance-a coalition that increasingly resembles a sartorial patchwork of frayed egos and fractured ambitions. The recent meeting between West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and Jammu & Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah in Kolkata has set the political circuit abuzz.

On the surface, it appeared cordial- two stalwarts of the INDIA bloc coming together post the Pahalgam massacre to project unity and reaffirm the vision of normalcy in Kashmir. Mamata urged Bengalis to travel to Kashmir, calling for joint cooperation in tourism, culture, and trade. Abdullah echoed optimism, declaring that "tourism is bouncing back." But scratch the

surface, and deeper contradictions emerge.

With Mamata Banerjee encouraging Bengali tourists to visit Kashmir, the question here stands clear. The irony is hard to miss. Both Mamata and Omar appear to be borrowing heavily from Prime Minister Modi's post-370 Kashmir doctrine-especially his use of soft-power diplomacy through aggressive tourism marketing.

Modi called Kashmir a "peaceful and user-friendly zone." Now, INDIA bloc leaders are echoing the same narrative, albeit without acknowledgment-repackaging Modi's script under a new authorial brand. Their shared message? Kashmir is open for business. Their shared strategy? Economic pacification. But their fractured delivery only highlights the alliance's internal discord.

Banerjee has pushed for "joint coordination in tourism, culture and trade" in an unusually cooperative tone.

She stated, "We will support Kashmir in every way possible-not just politically, but economically too." Looking beyond this conducive

statement, it appears that Banerjee is positioning Bengal as a partner in the national narrative of "rebuilding Kashmir."

But this expression of empathy starkly contrasts the haunting silence in Murshidabad, West Bengal, where the widows of Haragobindo Das and Chandan Das mourn in isolation. What binds Operation Sindoor in these two cases is the dastardly killings of innocent Hindu lives and the loss of sindoor from the foreheads of Hindu women. What binds these events is a shared grief, but what divides them is Trinamool's selective response. Mamata Banerjee's criticism of the word "Sindoor" stems from what she claims is an attempt to saffronize military action. She sees the term as another extension of BJP's cultural domination campaign and has, in her characteristic style, refuted the narrative outright, branding it as "divisive."

In stark contrast stands Omar Abdullah, who openly backed "Operation Sindoor" and stated, "I think the Government of India and Indian defense forces have gone out

of their way to ensure that no military and civilian targets were hit in Pakistan." This acknowledgement is not just politically bold; it is a strategic realism from a leader of the INDIA bloc and acceptance of Modi's nationalistic doctrine that national security cannot be sacrificed at the altar of political posturing. In this way, he has isolated Mamata's reaction as an aberration. The clashing reactions to "Operation Sindoor" also expose a deeper malaise within the INDIA alliance. Furthermore, while Mamata opposes BJP and its ideological frameworks, she clearly mirrors and broadly emulates Modi's economic pacification through tourism strategy but seems to be reframing it as a cooperative narrative of the INDIA alliance. Similarly, Omar Abdullah had stated, "Tourism is bouncing back in Kashmir-despite the challenges, people want to come." From a political perspective, it looks like he's working primarily with his INDIA alliance partners like West Bengal to decentralise investment and tourism alliances. However, he's prejudiced to render credit to the Centre for

these developments and instead has been highlighting regional efforts. If we connect the Abdullah-Banerjee meet in Kolkata, it appears Mamata and Omar are borrowing Modi's playbook, particularly soft power optics like tourism and trade, but they are rewriting the authorship. This is less about ideological agreement and more about counter-narrative building. Now the question arises, will the Abdullah-Banerjee cusp or the once blinking-once fading INDIA bloc be successful in restoring a terror-free Kashmir, walking much on the path of federal unity/cooperation? Despite their shared platform under the INDIA umbrella, both leaders have positioned themselves as 'above the fray,' often publicly dissenting and refusing to compromise on their regional pride. The fractured image and the ongoing submissive discord of the INDIA bloc have surfaced with time. In Indian politics, optics often trump substance. Alliances are built on photo ops more than ideological common ground. And nowhere is this more prominent than in the INDIA alliance-a bloc forged in the face of BJP's national triumph but

internally fractured by contradictions, ego battles, and unresolved histories. Banerjee and Abdullah hence stand today as vivid reminders of how similar political glitches and mutual distrust can undermine any unified front.

Despite appearing under the same banner, their leaderships have been marred by a shared tendency towards impulsiveness, tactical reversals, and personalised politics, leading to frequent dissent within the alliance framework itself. Hence, unless they and others like them choose clarity over convenience and alliance over arrogance, the INDIA bloc may collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. Hence, if the INDIA alliance wants to stand for something greater than electoral arithmetic, Kashmir must become its moral and strategic proving ground. Kashmir stands at a crossroads today. Will it see Modi's doctrine of firm peace prevail? Or will it witness the INDIA bloc falter under the burden of its own contradictions? The valley awaits the answer!

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