



Thoughts on Journey of Dharma & Human Rights from Vedic Age to Ramjanmbhumi Verdict

◆ **V.K. Beohar**

The credit of enlightenment with the current concept of Human rights goes to the western philosophers. The American Declaration of Independence drafted by Thomas Jefferson on 4th July 1776 mentioned that All men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain rights which are inherent and inalienable and they are right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness and for the security of these rights they have the right to alter the government and to institute a new government that would ensure their rights.

The next major development is the French Revolution on 14th July 1789 which symbolized the end of autocracy. The national assembly of France adopted the Declaration of Rights of Men and Citizen on 26 Aug. 1789. The declaration was truly international in its appeal and inspired revolutionary and democratic movement in almost every country of Europe and in central and South America and later in Asia & Africa. Its background was prepared by French philosophers like Rousseau, Voltaire and Mouatesque.

The French Revolution can be cited as landmark in the development of the concept of human rights. Accordingly to this the ignorance, disregard or contempt of the rights of man are the sole causes of public misfortunes and governmental corruption. The Assembly recognized the following rights of man and citizens:-

1. That men are born and remain free and equal in rights.
2. That the aim of all political association is to preserve the natural rights of man.

Bolshevik Revolution begins in 1917 in Russia, which emphasized the need for economic and social rights along with the civil and political rights. The signing of United Nations charter and the statute of International court on 26-6-1945, by the delegates of 51 nations, at San Francisco to maintain international peace, security and develop international economic and social cooperation United Nations came into existence on 24-10-1945.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10th Decemeber 1948 are the major development in the history of human rights. It proclaims that "All human are born free, equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason, conscience and should act towards one another in a friendly manner." All these modern development of Human Rights leads to a question as to whether there was something alike in India Civilization. The following narration gives an answer to it. About 5000 years ago, the ancient Indian legal philosophers and thinkers expounded a theory of height moral law embodying certain values of universal validity like.

Dharma (righteousness), Artha (wealth),



Kama (desires), Moksha (salvation), With a view to establish a harmonious social order by striking a balance between inner and outer, spiritual and material aspects of life.

The conception of DHARMA, which is not religion in true sense, and is righteousness which upholds, supports and nourishes the society and which governed in an integrative manner, of civil, religious & other actions of men in a society and was applicable to all, be it a king or his subjects. Every aspect of life was regulated by Dharma, the supreme law in ancient India.

This philosophy is nothing but a reinstatement of Natural Law with religious fervor to enthuse people towards the path of Dharma, enlightenment and unity. It is this higher law of morality, justice and righteousness which has been continuously guiding and directing Hindu thought, spirit and action. Thus the ancient Indians were not indifferent or unaware of human rights jurisprudence. The basis for human rights jurisprudence was Dharma, the ideal of ancient Indian legal theory was the establishment of socio-legal order free from traces of conflicts, exploitations and miseries. Indeed such a law of Dharma was a model for the universal legal order.

It is also apparent that protection of the rights and the individual was the main purpose for which the state existed. The rights of man were embedded in highly developed ancient Indian civilization. The study of Rigveda reveals that there was a rich jurisprudence in ancient India which provided an adequate frame work for the regulation of the behavior of ordinary persons as well as of the kings.

Referring the social responsibility of the king, Manu states :

"To end lawlessness, was created the

institution of the king, whose supreme duty was to protect his subject against disorder and anarchy." This was possibly the Human Rights enforcement system in its embryonic stage. As per Rig Veda, references to three kind of civil rights occur and they are: 1. Tana (body) 2. Skrdhi (dwelling place) 3. Jibhasi (life)

In the early times, the original state of nature was imagined to be the total anarchy where might alone was right. When people were oppressed by the law of fishes (matsyanyaya) according to which the bigger fish swallows the smaller ones. After it, Manu, the son of Vivaswat was made the king. They fixed one sixth parts of the grains and one tenth of goods and money as his share and the king was bound to ensure the well being of the people. It was Yogakshema which implies the idea of well being including the idea of prosperity, happiness and so on.

Kautilya, the author of Arthashastra, not only affirmed and elaborated the civil and legal rights firstly formulated by Manu, but also added number of economic rights. He described for the maintenance to the orphan, the aged, the infirm, the afflicted and helpless expectant mothers and also to the children they give birth to. However the high moral ideology of Dharma is associated with a social evil of hierarchy in castism.

There is however a downfall witnessed in post Vedic period. the rise of Buddhism and Jainism were certainly a reaction against the deterioration of the moral order as against the rights of privileged class. Ashoka protected most precious human rights particularly, right to equality, fraternity, liberty and happiness. He established a welfare state and made provision for "Freedom from hunger, health care, educational facilities, and certain other social,



economic and cultural rights and thus Ashoka was a champion of civil liberties."

Torture and inhuman treatment of prisoners were prohibited under Ashoka's administration which is also supported by the Oxford history of India. However, unfortunately the human rights jurisprudence witnessed downfall with the decline of Mauryan Empire.

The study discloses that since the decline of the Mauryan, India had been frequently invaded by the foreigners, the Greeks, the Partians, the Sakas, and the Yueh-chis. It was then Chandragupta II (Vikramaditya) who defeated the foreigners and united India under one Sovereignty. Gupta period is most glorious period in Ancient India History. It was an age of glory, greatness in every branch of national life. As per Hieuen Tsang, there was no forced labour, crimes were rare & king personally supervised the whole administration.

Harshvardhan was the last emperor of Hindu India. He never forgot that the aim of government was the welfare of governed was the welfare of governed. He provided food, drinks and stationed physicians with medicines for the poor persons without any cost. Men of merit and ability were patronized irrespective of their cast, colour or creed. After the break of his empire, whole India was split up and the society too had degenerated and the philosophy of human rights lost sight.

Human Rights in Islamic Era

Invasion of India by Muslim rulers and the downfall of Rajput gave rise to the Muslim rule in India and created new situation in the field of Human Rights, now the Muslim rulers or sultans started a policy of discrimination against Hindus the philosophical and ideological.

The medieval period were replaced by new idea of bravery, war and other heroic traditions which led to confusion and uncertainty. Significance of Muslim Rule in India was counterproductive to harmony, justice and equality. The advent of Muslim rule led to systems and ideals totally different from Hindu view of society and life. Muslim conquerors especially Mahmud Ghaznavi and others made frontal attacks on ancient way of life and religion.

The destruction of temples idols, large scale of conversion to Islam alienated the masses. However, at a later stage Muslim state in India became considerably modified in its form. But initially there was one law for the Muslims (faithful) and another for Hindus (kaffirs) and principle of equality was not given much importance. The state was deriving legal strength from fundamental law of shariat as laid down by the Holy Quran/Koran. Though Allauddin Khilji was most autocratic who said, law is what I say and not what Koran says.

The Mughal rulers especially with Akbar, a new era began in Mughal history of India in the field of Human Rights, with his policy of universal reconciliation and tolerance. He was earnestly concerned with his subjects. Various European travellers, who visited Akbar's empire, highly appreciated his regards for rights and justice. His justice loving tradition was followed by his son Jahangir, too.

Akbar himself respected all faith; He married a Rajput princess, who continued to enjoy freedom to worship. Akbar never used force to impose his Din illahi on his subjects. In fact Jains, Parsis, Hindus, Christians all took their share in the decision making process of the Akbar administration. He followed the



path of sulh-i-kal or universal tolerance or peace with all. The trend initiated by Akbar came to be reversed by Aurangzeb though the Marathas and Sikhs opposed and fought to the fanaticism of aurangzeb. The sheer indifference to human rights ultimately gave rise to Bhakti movement in India.

It revived and regenerated the old Indian value of truth, righteousness, Justice and morality. Great Saints like Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhava, Tulsidas, Kabir, Guru Nanak and others reinterpreted the Vedic Dharma to reestablish the supremacy of Indian Vedic Values over alien ideals and philosophy. this philosophy inclined people towards the path of Dharma, Enlightenment and Unit at a time when Hindu Society was dominated and divided by foreigners.

Human Rights in British India. Gandhi's Contribution towards evolution of Human Right concept. Gandhi condemned British Rule over India as satanic, Adharmik and coercively violent. Therefore he expounded the theory of peaceful resistance (Satyagraha) to fight British laws, for they deprived Indians a meaningful life, liberty and national independence.

Gandhiji's Freedom struggle cannot be viewed in isolation. If we look at the totality of his life, it was a struggle against injustice, in all forms, political, economic & social. From Gandhi, the leaders of freedom struggle got the inspiration for Sarcomata i.e. the freedom should be extended to all.

1945 - Sapru Committee is 1945 stressed on the need for written code of fundamental rights and constituent Assembly raised a forceful demand for inclusion of human rights in the constitution.

26-1-50 with the commencement of new constitution on 26 Jan'50. The Natural Law Rights have been incorporated in the Preamble, in chapter III & IV concerning Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of state policy.

With the above description it is clear that India has seen many up and downs in the field of human rights, the vedic, post vedic, Ashoka's Akbar's period have witnessed a glorious past.

Our constitution covers the entire ambit of the UDHR since the exercise of drafting the UDHR and Constitution of India were contemporary. However there seems a decline in the meaning and practice of Dharma now a days. Dharma the righteousness which upholds, supports and nourishes the society has now perhaps been limited to a method of worship only, and there seems to be a rivalry among the methods for declaring one's method superior and other's inferior.

Very recently a famous case of Ramjanambhumi has been decided by the High Court of Uttar Pradesh which is supposed to develop harmony among the Hindu and Muslim communities but the reaction of the religious leaders and so many political leaders of both the communities for verdict is seems to be unwelcoming.

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Narco Verdict : A new and ascending step in widening the horizon of human rights

◆ S. Ritam Khare

"The law hath not been dead, though it hath slept."

William Shakespeare

The Supreme Court of India on 5th May while deciding a petition challenging the legality of the Narco Analysis on the accused of any offence had nodded for the petitioners holding that Narco Test on any accused without his consent violates Article 20 (3) of the Constitution and hence is unconstitutional. Article 20 (3), commonly known as Right to Silence or alternatively Right against self incrimination, reads:

"No person accused of any offence shall be compelled to be a witness against himself"

Reading of this Constitutional provision draws following inferences:

- (i) Right against self incrimination is only available to the accused in any criminal trial and to no one else including the witnesses therein .
- (ii) The scope of this Article is not limited merely to the oral evidence or the statements given/signed by the accused but also to the extraction of incriminating documentary evidence so obtained .
- (iii) The voluntary statements given by the accused are admissible in Court of law, it is only the statements made under any compulsion that are hit by this constitutional provision .
- (iv) This provision does not only make the evidence so drawn inadmissible but makes the whole process unconstitutional.

The Apex Court however going a step ahead

of the protection as accorded by Article 20(3) of the Constitution has extended it to any person whether an accused, a witness or a suspect by reading the provision along with Article 21 and opining that involuntary subjection of such tests is an infringement of personal liberty when carried out without the consent of the accused as unconstitutional firstly because Narco analysis or any such kind of test actually induces the subject to give statement under influence of drug which can be incriminating himself and secondly, the Article 20(3) of the Constitution does not speak of the admissibility of such statements/evidences in the Court of law, rather it prohibits for any accused to be compelled to undergo any such exercise. The Supreme Court in Nandini Satpathy's Case while discussing the parameters of Section 161(2) of the Code of Criminal Procedure and the scope of Article 20(3) has held:

"We are disposed to read 'compelled testimony' as evidence procured not merely by physical threats or violence but by physical torture or violence, atmospheric pressure, environmental coercion, tiring interrogative prolixity, overbearing and intimidatory methods, and the like - not legal penalty for violation..... Frequent threats of prosecution if there is failure to answer may take on the complexion of undue pressure violating Article 20(3). Legal penalty may by itself not amount to duress but the manner of mentioning it to the victim of interrogation may introduce an element of tension and tone of command perilously hovering near compulsion."

However this verdict will have a major



impact on the techniques of investigation in India which was actually given a bit of long required technological advancement by such tests. i.e. firstly it would be never practically possible to get the consent of any person to be put to these tests and so there will be no such tests onwards and secondly this verdict does not only bar the 'Narcotest' it will bar all such tests e.g. Brain mapping, which would be a major setback not only for few of the major cases that are pending trials including Stamp Paper scam, Arushi murder Case and many others. It was also being demanded for the Gujrat Riots Case.

However even before this verdict from the Supreme Court, reports of these tests were inadmissible as evidence in the Court of law but they provided a very effective tool sometimes to get a breakthrough in any investigation. The US Supreme Court has accepted the use of 'truth serum' as an investigative technique . The US Supreme Court had held the view that "in cases of special government need beyond the normal requirements of law enforcement a warranty requirement and even the requirements of suspicion may be dispensed with. The pin prick involved in delivering the truth serum [sodium pentathol] is likely to be viewed as minimal intrusion involving virtually no risk, trauma or pain, and given the special government need to fight terrorism might be justified without probable cause or a warrant ." In India particularly there is a wide felt need of modern methods of investigations and likewise the Law needs to develop according to the needs of the society. The application of such absolute constraints against the modern technological investigative techniques overlooking the need for weighing analysis of the prevailing relevant laws in other reputed democracies result in the undue reliance on the outdated modes of prosecution that too ill equipped for the technically updated and innovative criminals thus lopsiding the balance in favour of the law

breakers. Arushi Murder Case is a burning example among the many others despite having being investigated by even the CBI, which is supposed to be the highest investigative agency.

In assessing the propriety of this judgment on the touchstone of societal upliftment the argument in favour on one hand asserts the very high potential of our Constitution in advancing the liberty of the individual and consequently the human civilization to the farthest limits, while on the other it follows the established view that every innovation with the departure from the system in vogue, invites difficulties, but as the critical stage is crossed over, it begins to prove its utility. This angle of vision supports the view that the time was mature for this judgment to be passed for extracting due benefits for societal upliftment.

The counterview states that total departure from any outgoing system and that too in its developing stage should not be made unless a better alternative system to replace it has been found. The alternative means could be to encourage the studies and research on parapsychological methods as followed in many countries; the developing of discretion or judiciousness among the masses with regard to moral and ethical values through formal and informal i.e. media education, the seeds of which lie sleeping in Indian genetic structure. Also some human methods should be tried on the suspects keeping them in segregation till the completion of investigation. In the absence of such alternatives the judgment in question shall spare for us no other option but to go back to redeem our past inhuman methods or to make us natural to act but let happen what may.

Now the ball is in the Court of the Legislators to pave out a balancing way through the tools responsibility and authority provided to them.

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What is in a name ?

Caste names are an impediment to social justice and holistic development.

◆ **Anbumani Ramadoss**

Public dialogue or deliberations on the 'C' word, albeit 'Caste', are never a straight forward exercise. The word 'Caste', with its various connotations and social implications, is cast about regularly, to every imaginable extent political, academic and economic ambit. Never has a word been bandied about with as much fervour or aversion as 'Caste'.

Social division and discrimination are not unique to India, nor is the practice restricted to any part of the globe. In any given society, people are invariably divided along social, religious, communal and economic parameters. Karl Marx divided society into two classes – the bourgeois (the wealthy class) and the proletariat (labourers/working class people). The slave system, the clan system, the class system are no different or less venomous than our own caste prejudices. But caste is the longest and most formidable of all forms of oppression still prevalent in the history of mankind.

The word caste derives from the Portuguese 'casts' meaning race, breed or Kind. In India, it is popularly referred to as 'jati' or 'jaadhi'. The original purpose of the caste system was social stratification according to occupation so that society could function in harmony. But gradually it became exploitative, giving rise to social injustices and inequality among the people.

Caste is a mantle or membership we acquire by birth. As we all know, we not only inherit our genes from our parents but also our caste from our forefathers. How then do we eliminate caste from the mainstream of our

society? It would be naive to think we can just wish it away.

A lot has been said and written about the vagaries of the caste system. I am particularly perturbed by one of the commonest forms of discrimination that has been largely ignored at the least and denied at the worst – that is the practice of tagging caste or clan suffixes to given names like Sharma, Verma, Nair, Iyer, ect.

The effect of a name should never be underestimated. What is in a name, one may wonder? Well, what isn't? The first thing we learn about a person after greeting him or her is his or her name. Names not only reflect our personality but also give us the first inkling of the religion, race or community we belong to. We are named after our ancestors, family members, after popular icons, clan, occupation, religion or even the locality we are from. There is a confusing array of names, surnames, middle names, nicknames, given names. You name it, it is there. But what concerns me most are the adhesive caste names the so-called intellectuals go by while vociferously demanding that casteism be abolished.

I am deeply intrigued when Mani Iyer or Ravi Verma or Rahul Shashtri talks or writes about a casteless society, or labels others as being caste fanatics. Their intellectual posturing is exposed when they stubbornly refuse to let go of these commonly used suffixes which are purely caste, sub-caste or sect names. Their blatant flaunting of their caste is indeed ironic in itself and most devious simply because it is



so subtle, and on the surface unapparent.

There have been numerous instances in the education and job sectors where examiners and interviewers have been favourable to candidates of their own community be just glancing at the caste suffix names of vindictive to candidates whose community they loathe. This name-dropping has the tacit connivance of the teaching faculty which poses a challenge to the concept of equal opportunity.

It is, however, not my contention that for a casteless society, we need a nameless one (however tempting is the notion of Abhishek Bachan's 'Idea Cellular' phone advertisement putting forth identification by numbers instead of names). My only request is that names should be just generic.

My great-grandfather's name is Aanai Gounder, my grandfather's name is Sanjeevaraya Gounder, where 'Gounder' denotes a caste name. My father's name is S. Ramadoss, while mine is Anbunani Ramadoss, which is just a patronymic, generic name.

This social revolution of eliminating caste names began two generations ago in Tamil Nadu. The dropping of the caste tags of Mudaliar, Nadar, Gounder, Thevar, Iyer, Pillai, Vanniyar, etc, in the last 30 years or so is a great social change that needs to be acknowledged and followed in all parts of the country.

In the West, the earliest names were related to a physical attribute of the person or circumstance of birth. Today, many of these survive as surnames. Then came family names for purposes of identification (i.e. Robert becoming Robertson – son of Robert). Names often reflected what the individual did for a living (e.g. Potter, Baker, ect.) The majority of European surnames or family names originate

from a geographical location, occupation or appearance. The Scotts are also famous for their clan names (i.e. Mac Donald).

In India we have names according to different States, languages, castes, etc. Kerala: Menon, Nair, Nambiar; Karnataka: Gowda, Shetty, Hegde, Raj; Andhra Pradesh: Reddy, Naidu, Rao; Orissa: Patnaik, Hota, Panda; Maharashtra: Naik, Shinde; Gujarat: Patel, Shah] Desai; west Bengal: Chatterjee, Mukerjee, Bannerjee, Sen, Das, Roy. In the BIMARU States, the names are endless—Sharma, Dayal, Choudhary, Gupat, Thakur, Sinha, Singh, Dutta, Yadav, Paswan, Meena. These are all invariably caste, sub-caste, clan or sect names. The minority religions are a different matter altogether.

Sone of India's founding fathers like pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhai patel, Moraji Desai also had names which subscribed to caste or community. Caste names are an impediment to social justice and to the holistic development of India. A welcome trend in recent times is the increasing adoption of neutral generic names that do not pertain to and religion or caste.

It would be naive to assume that dispensing with caste names will lead to a casteless society. Caste names are only part of the problem rather than the solution. There is no pat solution for this dilemma. The adoption of generic names would be a small but definite step to wards eradicating caste from this society.

To bring about a caste-free society, not only caste (brand names) but also the mindset of the developed sections towards their less fortunate brethren should change. Social justice can be achieved only when all sections of society have a level playing-field socially, educationally



and economically. To bring about this change, we need to acknowledge the centuries of discrimination faced by the oppressed sections. For significant progress to be made, in our quest for social equality, the developed class should cease looking on in amused contempt of and derision towards its less developed counterparts.

It is easy enough to dismiss a name or rather the implications of a name as being unimportant and preposterous. But let us not be ostrich-like.

A debate on caste has been democratic, hysterical, one-sided, vulgar, tainted, insane or simply inane.

People say they should be judged by their character not by caste; merit, not too? The democratic pretensions of the so-called intellectuals (India's who's who list) would be exposed as being hollow when you catch a glimpse of the fascinating array of caste names trailing them.

There should be a healthy discussion on caste names around the country with Karan Thapar, Barkha Dutt, Prannoy Roy, Rajdeep Sardesai, Shekhar Gupta, Arnab Goswami along with all my other friends in the media who have these suffixes taking part.

I Know I will be rubbing a lot of sensitive people up the wrong side with my opinion. On the one hand I will be perceived as offering advice on how to tackle the complexity of caste issues, and on the other, as a politician I will be perceived justice. I am aware of the irony of the subject I have chosen.

I am also aware there is an increased chance of misunderstanding by one or the other. This article is not meant to be abrasive or hurt other's sentiments but only for people to introspect on what can be a possible, positive step towards a caste-free future.

If Tamilnadu can do it, why not the rest of India? The Eskimos had nearly 52 names for snow because it was so important to them. What importance do these innumerable caste name have for us?

Mathematics is the art of giving the same name to different things; Poetry is the art of giving different names to the same thing. Let us not guise caste into an art, should we?

A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. I am sure all you intellectuals out there would agree with me and tweet.

(Dr. Anbumani Ramadoss is former Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare.)

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Crown Prince Rahul cannily turns left

◆ **M.J. Akbar**

Has Rahul Gandhi launched a campaign against Congress? More Precisely, has the heir presumptive, affectionately dubbed a modern Lord Krishna by his more fervent fans, begun to undermine the Congress establishment, at the pinnacle of which sits Manmohan Singh and his home minister P Chidambaram?

This makes some political sense. Having milked the right-of-centre to the point of exhaustion, the Rahul Congress is steering towards left-of-centre. Meanings, of course, have changed. As the centre has shifted in the last two decades, 'right' and 'left' have moved along with it. 'Left' now represents populism, rather than ideology. Marx died in the 1990s and even his ghost cannot escape from the effective burial given by comrades Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping.

The sabotage of big-ticket investment in order to fence the tribal vote in Orissa is only part of the developing story. The official catechism describes Naxalites as the biggest threat to India. If Chidambaram had his way, the air force would be bombing them. He must be a bit deflated at the sight of Lado sir force would be bombing them. He must be a bit deflated at the sight of Lado Sikoka, a Naxal, preceding Rahul Gandhi at an Orissa public meeting around the same time that Manmohan Singh was urging, from a dais in Delhi, police chiefs to fight the good fight against Maoists. Sikoka had been arrested by this police on August 9 and beaten up, before being released so that he could welcome Rahul Gandhi with a garland at Niyamgiri.

It has always been clear to Delhi insiders that Digvijay Singh opened a front against Chidambaram with Rahul Gandhi's permission. Outsiders now have confirmation. Since politics has very marginal room for sentiment, Chidambaram could become the first casualty in a Rahul Gandhi cabinet. It would be a sad end to a fizzing career were Chidambaram to end up as governor of Chhattisgarh, the better to counsel his supporters in the BJP on how to tackle Naxalites without help from the air force. Indeed, it cannot have been very helpful to our ambitious home minister that the most laudatory references now come from BJP leaders. Perhaps he raised the issue of "saffron terror" to pick up some long overdue brownie points from his own side.

No prizes for guessing who would become home minister in a Rahul Gandhi government.

The ultimate success for a ruling party is that delicious bipolar ability to occupy both government and opposition space. The British in India perfected the art of functioning through a loyal opposition. The Muslim League was so loyal that not a single League leader went to jail during the three decades of our independence movement. The Congress tended to be less loyal, but always recognized limits, until Mahatma Gandhi liberated the Congress and enough Indians from either fear or temptation. One cannot think of a Congress leader who did not go to jail.

Democracy, but naturally, induced a variant. Jawaharlal Nehru ignored the feeble right and absorbed the non-communist left into



the Congress in periodic stages. His own leftist credentials were impeccable, which helped. Indira Gandhi artfully split the left and right, until the Emergency united the rest against Congress. Their common antipathy lasted, more or less, until the NDA gave Congress and the left common cause. The new element is the sudden implosion of the Left in Bengal, which threatens to convert vacant space into a vacuum. Even as Congress and Mamata Banerjee seek to destroy the CPM, they know the value of Marxist sentiment in the country's polity.

It is axiomatic that a largely impoverished nation needs a political party that the poor can identify with. The Congress has set out to be the party of the poor in daytime, and of the rich at night. Its sunlight policies will enable it to govern. This is an extremely clever act whose opening scenes are being played out for a new generation that is vague about Indira Gandhi and amnesia about Nehru. The hero of this drama must have the charisma to dazzle the poor and the flexibility to keep the rich onside. That is

the challenge before Rahul Gandhi. His avowed role is to be the guardian of the poor in Delhi, which means that the poor need protection from Delhi. He is at home with the elite in the evening and is now making the effort to capture the sunshine hours.

However, regional parties have been there, done that. They continue to do so. Naveen Patnaik understands the trap of governance. He has been forced to take a position on one side or the other of the day-night constituencies; and he does not have a Manmohan Singh to play the foil. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya could not manage this contradiction, but others have learnt. Patnaik, Nitish Kumar, Mayawati or Chandrababu Naidu will not be pushovers.

Paradox and problem intersect in any country; India's size and potential make the challenge more complex. We will see whether Congress has the agility to use power to transfer power to yet another generation.

Courtesy : Sunday Times of India - 2.9.2010





Come together to shape a future

◆ **Sushreeta Mohapatra**

A child is truly understood in his life by two sets of people—his parents at home and his teachers at school. and what better than when the two come together to ensure that their ward makes it to the outside world with flying colours. bhopal plus takes a look at parents teachers associations

Ashok Thakur, principal of school, defines the PTA best when he says that "the term parents Teachers Association refers to a body which looks in totality at the towards the development of the child. "Thakur exudes pride as he talks of the PTA of his school. "We as a school have a well-defined system under the PTA whereby we call parents before and after any and every examination, and also have routine meetings where the syllabus is discussed and any doubts are dispelled. For Board classes, interactions are conducted at a personal level by me. Various written messages are also conveyed to the parents from time to time to aid in the improvement of the child. We believe that the role of the parents in a child's education is pivotal. Their efforts and contributions, together with that of the teachers, have contributed to the 100 per cent success of the school."

While Thakur may be proud of its rather well-organised PTA, not all schools in the city can boast of the same, and this applies to some rather reputed schools as well. Beyond the regular run-of-the-mill meets for declaration of results, and those for discussion of examination syllabus in some rare exception, there are no meets where the parents and teachers sit together not just to evaluate the child's regular Progress but also discuss issues that can have a major impact on the life of the students. welldefined PTA can go a long way in ensuring the all round development of the child.

Most teachers believe that a strong PTA can do wonder not only for the children but for the school as well. As Garima Jain, a teacher for 12 years now, says, "It is important that the parents and teachers come together for a better understanding of the child for which a few paltry minutes during the result meet or in the lunch break as most parents and teachers are want to take, are insufficient. PTAs grant the best opportunity to ensure that the needs of the child are understood and in providing for them, the school is also able to cater for other children with similar needs."

PTAs in schools are aimed to provide a forum for increased interaction between parents and teachers. A lot of parents have complaints about the way their children are being taught or how they are concerned about the development of their child in the school. These and many such other concerns of parents can be addressed through PTA meets where parents and teachers come face to face. Through PTAs, any



communication gaps that exist between parents and teachers can be ignored out.

But teachers also feel that not all parents are that enthusiastic about PTA meets. "They don't even turn up for the routine result declaration meet after exams, PTA meets are a far shot. And if the child does not perform up to the mark they complain about how something must be wrong with the school or the teacher, when something could also be lacking in the efforts of the child or some other such problem. To find out about such things there needs to be interaction between the parents and the teachers, between who the child spends maximum time of his day. This precisely and rather unfortunately, is not happening," elaborates Rajeev Ranjan, a teacher for secondary school students.

While that point is definitely true, as most teachers will recall from memory, and most parents will agree to sheepishly, there are those too who are gung-ho about the PTA and also have

suggestions to make. "Education and academics need not be the only agenda of the PTA. If efforts are made in the right direction, parents can also contribute their points towards smooth functioning for the administration and how schooling can be a made a much better experience for children. In fact, parents can coordinate with teachers to make any events and undertakings of the school a far more memorable experience for all involved," feels Shraddha Juneja, a parent.

As with all public bodies, or in this case, a coordinating association of schools, there are hitches to overcome. But once they are cleared, the interests will be rewarding for all. After all, the main party of interest here are the children who just need the right push and hand of encouragement, at the right time, and which can be provided best by parents and teachers. And their future cannot be compromised with for any sake.

Courtesy : The Times of India - 4.9.2010





A triumvirate of ills

Among three factors that undercut India's progress and development, corruption in public institutions emerges as the kingpin.

◆ **Raj Gandhi**

As the national flags are furled up after Independence Day until the next occasion for leaders to fill the air with patriotic speeches listing progress and achievements, a candid assessment of the state of the nation makes for grim reading. Kashmir is rocked by civilian unrest, with the gains of the inclusivity achieved by the last State elections practically nullified. The Maoist guerilla movement now spans the entire eastern flank of the country. Assam, Nagaland and Manipur face their own separatist fires. Complementing this violence and unrest at sickeningly regular intervals are fresh revelations of multi-crore-rupee scams resulting from the nexus among politicians, criminals and profit-hungry corporate entities. These are but reminders that as this country touts its cultural, religious and spiritual past and invites the world to visit "Incredible India," it remains one of the most poverty-stricken, strife-ridden and corrupt nations in the developing world.

Is this development?

As a people, many Indians feel proud of the undeniable economic progress the country has achieved over the past decade and the attention it now gets on the global stage. This is largely because it offers multinational companies a market comprising an affluent middle-class, which, in number terms exceeds the entire populations of many, if not most, countries.

As India aspires to sup at the hightable of

nations, it will make sense to assess if the new-found development conforms to the true meaning of the word. And, concurrently, it should reflect on and understand the significant connection among the three factors that threaten to thwart these aspirations: deep-rooted corruption in government, mass-violence and unrest in an increasing number of States, and alarming levels of poverty and hunger in marginalised but numerically significant segments of the population that seem to have completely missed the progress train of which the rest of the people are proud passengers.

While governments in India proclaim the significant rise in per capita gross domestic product (GDP) as evidence that poverty levels are decreasing, the indicator of economic well-being is quite inadequate as a measure of the level of actual economic deprivation in a population. Being poor also means having low levels of education, being disproportionately vulnerable to loss of health or curtailment of income, natural disasters and crime. It includes being genuinely voiceless and powerless, feeling discriminated against and mistreated by state institutions, and lacking status under and recourse to the law. Additional indicators are low daily caloric intake and levels of female literacy.

Within this multi-dimensional context for viewing poverty, its correlation with corruption in government institutions becomes more transparent. Corruption erodes and cripples the



capacity of the government to provide the public services that would mitigate the poverty-inducing factors listed above. Tax evasion by offering bribes lowers governmental revenue, and further reduces its capability to offer infrastructure support to the poor. Corrupt governments at the State and Central levels tend to focus spending of public money on high-tech capital goods and equipment purchases, since bribes and illicit gains are large in such transactions. Public spending on health, education and access to law and justice consequently becomes a lower such services the most. Money from existing schemes is leaked and siphoned off all the way down the line until only a trickle reaches the intended beneficiaries.

Deep-rooted corruption in the public institutions thus perpetuates poverty. It seriously impacts the poor in the socially groups, alienating them further and strengthening their perception of being left out of the progress being made by the rest of the populace. It is this feeling of isolation and helplessness that triggers support for and participation in conflict. Discontent and exclusion thus act as catalysts for mass unrest and violence as witnessed in many parts of the country.

Corruption, poverty, violence

This connection between corruption and chronic poverty coupled with marginalisation and violent uprisings, is exemplified in the Maoist movement.

The fertile ground for support among the local people for the violence in Jharkhand, for instance, is in no small measure due to the two-year reign of a certain Chief Minister who allegedly looted the State of the equivalent of almost a billion dollars. Unchecked and massive

expansion of mining operations without regard to tribal or environmental concerns was allowed, setting in motion a process that in the next five years will have tragically displaced half a million of the State's poorest and most deprived tribal people, who depend on the fast disappearing forest land for a livelihood.

The story is repeated, with minor variations, in some other eastern States. It is thus no coincidence that maps of India's richest mining territories (which have witnessed massive public corruption), chronically poor forest tribal populations and militant Maoist activity would all cover the same regions and look almost identical when superimposed on each other.

Low-level

One need not always look at multi-crore-rupees scams to see the lamentable consequences of corruption. There is a correlation between even low-level extortion and deep human tragedy. A newspaper ran the story of 14-year-old Aditya Dube of Allahabad, who, on his way to school at 6.30 am. was crushed to death by a speeding truck. A city ordinance forbids trucks from plying there after 6 am. because the road that connects to the highway at either end of the city also runs through the school district. But policemen routinely allow trucks to enter, and stop them to collect a bribe of as usual that morning too – except that this one driver decided not to pay, and, in his haste to dodge the policemen, ran over the child.

In the same copy of the newspaper, on the page opposite to the one carrying that story, is a report of how several infants died within a short time after being administered a vaccine at the anganwadi of a village. Government health



centres often stock medicines and vaccines supplied by fake drug dealers, which are ineffective at best, or, as perhaps in this case, deadly at worst.

Thus, in the triumvirate of ills that have undercut genuine progress and development of India, corruption in public institutions emerges as the kingpin. It exacerbates chronic poverty and increases the marginalisation of the most vulnerable in society. The resulting feelings of discontent, deprivation, lack of choice and helplessness then prepare the ground for those who would organise and mobilise these groups, inciting them to violence. Corruption in public

institutions is India's own Osama. It does not hide in the mountains, but is out in the open and permeates the very core of daily government functioning. Its reach is phenomenal, and its consequences tragic. We can continue to ignore it only at great national peril.

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Courtesy : The Hindu - 7.9.2010





Untouchability : a sin and a crime

Untouchability was not so much a sin as a calculated crime. But it is easier for everyone, even some victims, to treat it as a sin, for acceptance of moral culpability costs nothing.

◆ **M.S. Prabhakara**

The recent walkabout (padayatre) of Basavananda Maadara Channaiah Swamiji, head of a Dalit matha (gurupeetha) in Chitradurga, in a predominantly Brahmin-inhabited agrahara in Mysore, and the cordial, indeed reverential, welcome he received highlight the changing formal perceptions about the substance and practice of untouchability in Karnataka.

The Swamiji, by birth a madiga, was received, according to media reports, with all the traditional honours given to heads of well-known Brahmin mathas. Photographs showed him having his feet washed (pada pooje) by women and men of the Brahmin community. During his walkabout, he was accompanied by large crowds of local residents.

This Brahmin-Dalit interaction has been initiated by Swami Vishvesha Theertha of Pejawar Matha, Udupi. Once a leading light of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, he has also been campaigning on the dangers that Hinduism, the Sanatana Dharma, is facing through conversions. Though proselytisation is not unique to the so-called monotheistic faiths, and Hinduism too has engaged in conversion (See, "A natural process of transformation," The Hindu, November 7, 2008), the belief is widespread that Hinduism is peculiarly vulnerable because it is a non-proselytising faith, unlike Christianity and Islam, seen as engaged in a systematic campaign

to draw people away from the Hindu fold. To counter conversions of Dalits into Christianity or Islam, Swami Vishvesha Theertha has undertaken such walkabouts in Dalit villages, more accurately described by their residents as 'holegeri,' meaning localities inhabited by the holeya, the word itself meaning something that is dirty, besmirched, telling more about the reality of everyday life and experience of dalits than these symbolic walkabouts.

Clearly, among traditional Hindu religious leaders there is awareness that the practice of untouchability is damaging the faith, driving Dalits away, and some alarm over its implications. Dalits who may (or may not) have at one time passively accepted the practice as part of the natural ordering of caste hierarchies of the varnashrama dharma, have been restive for generations. Along with several non-Brahmin castes, Dalits too are now establishing the so-called jathi mathas, headed by persons of their kind, bearing all the outward symbols and accoutrements of the heads of traditional Brahmin mathas. Superficially, perhaps even in a fundamental sense, these mathas have appropriated all the visible symbols and the essential evils of Brahminism in practice. According to one scholar, there are at least a hundred such non-Brahmin mathas in Karnataka, most of which came up in the post-Emergency political churning of the State.



However, the correctives being applied, like demonstrative walkabouts by Brahmin leaders in areas one shunned as literally dirty and polluting, and by Dalit leaders in areas formally barred to Dalits, or the washing of the feet of a Dalit guru by Brahmins, are driven by a fundamentally flawed perspective that sees untouchability as a 'sin.' Thus the symbolic atoning by those who provided the ideology, the 'upper' caste Hindus like Brahmins – for it was the Brahmins who wrote the texts. These attempts to weld a common Dalit-Brahmin platform, united in symbolic acts of unity and togetherness, also make those Dalits who are going along with such a compact complicit in their historic diminishment and exclusion.

The problem with such gestures is that the practice of untouchability was not so much a sin as a calculated crime, part of a social structure constructed by those who controlled the resources to facilitate the accumulation of surplus and profits in the process of material production. However, it is easier and more comfortable to everyone, even some of the victims of that crime, to give untouchability the spin of being a 'sin,' for acceptance of moral culpability costs nothing. If, on the other hand, one were to see the practice as a calculated crime for which one has to eventually pay, those who have perpetrated such crimes could, under a proper system of justice, be sent to prison.

Comparison with apartheid

A comparison with the practice of apartheid in South Africa which, despite historic and cultural differences, had remarkable similarities with the practice of untouchability in India will amplify the point made above. It should be noted that although formally apartheid – an elaborate system of separation of races on

the basis of colour covering every aspect of life in South Africa, from the womb to the tomb and even beyond – was legislated by the Nationalist Party government in 1948, the ideology itself went back to the very beginnings of racial discrimination was introduced by the English settler regime, long before the Afrikaner settler regime perfected it and implemented it in to.

In apartheid south Africa, apartheid was the norm for the minority of whites, barring honourable exceptions who went to the trenches and paid with their lives fighting against it. However, when democratic South Africa was faced with the task of tackling its tormented past, it created through legislation a structure and an instrument called Truth and Reconciliation commission which was tasked to establish, to the extent possible, the 'truth' about south Africa's apartheid past and enable the 'reconciliation' between the victims and perpetrators of the apartheid system. According to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Chair of the TRC and the principal driver of the system, even those who were part of successive apartheid regimes. "We are a deeply wounded people, we all need to be healed," was one of his frequent observations.

The overwhelming majority of the victims did not buy into this approach. For them, apartheid was an instrument devised and contrived to make the majority of South Africans un-persons in the country of their birth, a necessary tool to keep the production process on, but with no rights to have a share in the fruits of their labour. However, when the time for reckoning came with the advent of a democratic government in April 1994, the instrument devised to take stock of the past, the TRC, chose to see apartheid as 'sin'; and when the criminality of the regime could not be ignored, this crime



was enlarged to become "a crime against humanity," for humanity's shoulders are broad enough to carry any crime, instead of a specific crime against the majority of South Africans punishable under the law.

This Perspective is similar to the one that views untouchability as a 'sin' for which those responsible for evolving its theory and implementing it must 'atone' by "washing the feet" of the victims of the practice. Interestingly, one of the most feared flunkies of the apartheid regime, Adrian Vlok, minister for law and order under P.W. Botha, who had tried to get Frank Chikane – a leading churchman opposed to apartheid from a Christian perspective—murdered by getting his underwear laced with poison, three years ago publicly apologised to Chikane and, as an expression of remorse, "washed the feet" of his once-intended victim in his office in the Presidency. Where Chikane was Director-General.

To say that apartheid and untouchability by their policy of exclusion and diminishment deny equal rights to the majority of the people is to state the obvious. The question is: Why? Why did they do it? To explain the practice as a moral sin against god and man is to take the easy way out. On the contrary, if one were to see these practices as crimes, one has to seek a more rational explanation. These practices deny their

victims equal rights and practise exclusion because only thus can those who practice untouchability and apartheid ensure a permanent, cheap, virtually free supply of labour, which the minority can exploit to enrich itself.

Put simply, the ideological foundation of apartheid and untouchability was economic, not any perversely conceived and articulated "divinely ordained moral law." If one were to view these practices as a 'sin,' the road leads directly to feet washing, public embrace, eating together and all that. In the era of the most casteist and racist of persons will gladly shake hands, embrace, and share food with those who deep down they despise if this huge reserve of virtually free labour were to be available on tap. Only this explains the eagerness with which the Hindutva forces are embracing, actually initiating, these meaningless gestures.

If, on the other hand, one were to see untouchability as a crime, not merely in a legal sense which it is, but as part of an arrangement to ensure the continued enrichment of a minority, one can see such gestures as feet-washing for what they are – a theatre of high moralism and low, calculated cunning.

Courtesy : The Hindu - 20.9.2010





Degrading our achievers

If India is to become the 21st century's knowledge-provider to the world, scrapping examinations in schools, not recognising winners, clubbing disparate results into bogus grades, and not acknowledging the achievements of gifted students are all giant steps in the wrong direction. Should we then persist with such meaningless reforms?

◆ **Gautam Sahni**

India's educational system is crying for reforms, but not for reforms based on subjective faith systems or pure whimsy. Unfortunately, some of the initiatives that have been announced by the Ministry of Human Resource Development Minister Kapil Sibal thus declares, "Henceforth students shall not have their results in examinations given in marks and specific percentages achieved, but will be awarded grades", and this measure, he is confident, will revolutionise the learning process across the length and breadth of the country.

What is starkly evident here is that this measure fails entirely to focus on the real crises confronting Indian education, and engages, instead, in an exercise in futility on a national scale. This exercise would also end up cheating excellence of its just rewards even as it fails to address the needs of the less talented with adequate alternatives. What we have in place now is a Classified Educational Communism, with Comrades Grade A, Comrades Grade B and Comrades Grade C.

These grades are arrived at by marking the papers of the students with numerical values. Crucially, each grade still carries a certified percentage value: A1 at 91 to 100 per cent, A2 at 81 to 90 per cent, B1 at 71 to 80 per cent,

and D at 33 to 40 per cent, leaving one wondering what this grading system sets out to achieve besides obfuscation.

The apparent motive of the substitution of the grading system for the stresses of 'excessive competition'. This compounds another initiative for 'destressing' the children: The abolition of exams, including the CBSE Board, till the Class 12 level. [That children will be subjected to unprecedented stress, for which they would then be entirely unprepared, at the Class 12 Boards, is safely ignored].

Without going into the question of whether the Minister's alternative 'Continuous and Comprehensive System' would end up putting the children under the continuous and comprehensive stress of arbitrary assessments by teachers, it is necessary to note that there is nothing new here. These are ideas that have played out for decades, ruining education theory and systems in the West. It is useful to see what precisely the grading system does.

At one end this system denies any difference in the achievement of the student scoring 100 per cent and the student scoring 91 per cent. Nevertheless, it very definitely finds an unbridgeable difference between 80.99 per cent and 90.01 per cent. This is not how the real world works; Saeed Anwar scored 194 runs in a



One Day International, a mere three per cent less than Sachin Tendulkar's 200, but the record books will forever show Sachin as the first man to score books will forever show Sachin as the first man to score an ODI double century.

Excellence in the classroom, when justly rewarded, sets milestones for others and becomes the inspiration and motivation for better performances, and for excellence to be justly rewarded it has to be clearly shown in the degree achieved. Conversely, when not so rewarded, as will happen in the grading system, it promotes mediocrity and a sense of resentment in the high achievers. Recognising academic excellence through roll of honour and public awards encourages excellence in students and gives team a justified sense of pride in their achievements.

Ms Leta Hollingworth pioneered research in the education for gifted children, and discovered that there were also susceptible to extraordinary stresses. An experiment conducted by her on high achievers revealed that stress isn't just generated through exams, but mainly because the rest of the class tended to regard them as an oddity. However, when these students were segregated and put into a class that had all high achievers, they quickly adjusted to what was normal for them – which was excellence. And the atmosphere conducive to their talents was a stepping stone to greatness: The Greeks as they are known today have been instrumental in shaping the future of the world. Hollingworth advocated considering these gifted children as National Assets.

Some object to such segregation as detrimental to achieving an equitable platform in the classroom, something the grading system pretends to secure. But, as Bertrand Russell

observes, "Bookmakers are not obliged to live with Clergymen, nor Clergymen with Bookmakers." What occupation a person follows, determines who he or she will fraternise with in general. Rocket scientists with rocket scientists, doctors with doctors and traders with traders... this is not creating an unfair society. These segregations or fraternising patterns already exist and have always existed. Special courses with the relevant infrastructure, for high achievers are the answer. The grading system, sage: Schools in India do not want winners.

On the other side of the spectrum, immediate remedial measures are certainly required to provide a better chance to the less talented. All children have an innate sense of curiosity and desire for learning. However, having a diminished aptitude for learning or, in most cases found at the bottom of the class, a differential aptitude to learning, requires special methods for teaching, consistency at a higher level, sensitivity and flexibility to understand the child's unique needs, and steps to ensure that children do not lose faith in their natural ability to learn. As in the case of high achievers, special courses and, in particular, specially trained teachers would be the answer.

An education is intended to best prepare children for the world, not to insulate them from its realities. Critiquing similar 'reforms' that had wrecked American education, Bill Gates, the world's top geek who created Microsoft, declared: "Your schools may have done away with winners and losers, but life has not. In some schools they have abolished failing grades and they will give you as many times as you want to get right answer. This does not bear the slightest resemblance to anything in real life".

In an address to the Central Board of



Secondary Education, the Human Resource Development Minister said, "We should create knowledge that will be used by other people. Now we are a recipient of knowledge, in the future we should produce the knowledge."

If India is to become this knowledge-provider to the world, scrapping exams, not recognising winners, clubbing disparate results

into grades, and not acknowledging the achievements into grades, and not acknowledging the achievements of gifted students, are all giant steps in the wrong direction.

(The writer is Director, Mindsprings, an NGO that outreaches educational support to underprivileged children.)

Courtesy : The pioneer - 9.9.2010





Population ageing : an area of darkness

It is a challenge for policymakers, care providers and society as a whole.

◆ Dr. Ennapadam S. Krishnamoorthy

Currently, there could be around 100 million 'senior citizens' in India.

The problems

Studies have shown that elderly people in India suffer a double-whammy effect; the combined burden of both communicable (usually infectious) and non-communicable (usually chronic and lifestyle related) diseases. This is compounded by an impairment of special sensory functions like vision and hearing that decline with advancing age. Thus, elders have a considerable burden of both infectious diseases such as diabetes mellitus, ischemic heart disease, and cancer. Indeed, a survey of elder health in Kerala showed that over a third of all elders suffer from chronic diseases and have a medical consultation or admission necessitated by illness in each year. Notably, the majority prefer to use private health-care services, even though they are more expensive, service quality being an important reason for such a preference.

It is also clear that disability and frailty accompany aging, especially after the seventh decade. Thus 25-27 per cent of Indian elders have visual impairment; 12-14 per cent are hearing deficit; eight per cent are immobile and confined to home or bed, this figure rising to 27 per cent after 80 years, women being more vulnerable. Falls are a common problem causing disability; with over half of all the elderly in some studies having suffered a fall with or without serious injuries like fractures and dislocations. While aging is not synonymous with disability, a large proportion of the Indian

The elderly in India suffer a double-whammy effect – the combined burden on infectious and lifestyle related diseases

There is little doubt that the care of the elderly must remain vested within the family unit.

The organisation and delivery of elder health care must be approached with enthusiasm, altruism and generosity.

Population ageing has emerged as the grand challenge of this century; for policymakers, care providers and society as a whole. A review of India's population census is insightful. In 1961, the population of the elderly was placed at 24 million; it increased exponentially to 43 million in 1981; 57 million in 1991; and about 77 million in 2001. The proportion of the elderly in the total population also rose from 5.63 per cent in 1961 to 6.58 per cent in 1991 and to 7.5 per cent in 2001. India has thus joined the rank of "Growing nations" with over seven per cent of its population in the 60-plus years segment. A United Nations report has predicted that India will have 198 million 'Old' (60+) people in 2030 and 326 million in 2050.



aged population is disabled, the severity of disablement increasing with age: 36 per cent in the young-old (60-64); 42 per cent in the middle-old (65-69); 51 per cent in the older-old (70-74) and 61 per cent in the oldest old (75 and above).

No safety net

The absence of a safety net for the elderly has exacerbated the problem. Traditionally, the joint family in India took care of its elderly. These traditional care arrangements have been lost in the context of rapid urbanisation and an exodus of people from rural to urban areas and from urban areas to foreign countries. In the absence of such community support in the form of kinsmen or the extended family, and an inability to continue to earn their living, the elderly are often rendered destitute, if not financially, from a pragmatic perspective. While these problems plague most traditional societies that are in transition, their rapidly enlarging scope and scale, demand and necessitate an urgent response from our policy makers.

The Government India, supported actively by civil society unveiled its National policy on Older persons (NPOP) over 50 years after Independence. A comprehensive document covering every aspect of the elder's life, ambitious, with a clear cut action plan, it proposed a role for the State in the elder care: health, shelter, financial security and protection against abuse. It recognised the need for affirmative action favouring the elderly, viewing them as national resources, creating opportunities for their development. Training, empowerment and partnership with elderly were seen as important in providing equality and dignity to all groups of elderly. Unfortunately, a decade later, the NPOP awaits complete

implementation in all States and Union Territories of India, much of its promise remaining unfulfilled, prompting the Government of India to seek its revision to suit contemporary needs.

Discussion among civil society groups and concerned senior citizens in the run up to a re-organised NPOP, reveal many consensus points for the future organisation of elder health care. There is little doubt that the care of the elder must remain vested within the family unit and based within the community the elder residents in. Incentives for families that care for their elders are necessary; as are the development of community health-care resources; doctors, nurses and paramedics specialised in elder health care; and rehabilitation facilities for those with disability. The importance of Government and civil society partnerships needs to be underscored here; as is regulation of such elder health-care services for quality and cost. While the focus is of ten on inpatient (hospitalisation) care, there is a clear need to develop other models relevant to the elder: out-patient care, day care, palliative care, rehabilitation care, respite care and step down care. Developing community level health-care worker pools that will both screen the elderly for risk factors, disease and disability; and provide simple home based interventions is necessary; as is tiered access for the elderly to a range of professionals: from generalist to specialist doctors. Most importantly, perhaps, those working in this area feel the need for unitary, sustainable and replicable models of screening and assessment: health checks that would address apart from routine risk factors like hypertension and diabetes, areas of potential disability: vision, hearing, falls, bone and joint, respiratory and cardiac disease an that



looming public health challaning; brain degeneration and dementia!

The five 'A' test

A second area of concern for those engaged in this sector is that of healthcare costs. A survey in 2001 revealed that nearly two-thirds of all elderly persons are illiterate and dependent on physical labour; 90 per cent existed in the unorganised sector with no regular source of income; one third living below poverty line. In sum, the majority of Indian elders are in potentially vulnerable situations without adequate food, clothing, or shelter. Providing health care that passes the "Five 'A' Test" (Availability, Affordability, Accessibility, Acceptability and Accountability) to such a large vulnerable group, is a challenge that has to be confronted. Insurance cover that is elder-sensitive is virtually non-existent; insurance premiums increase in an unsustainable manner with age and there is rampant age-discrimination in the health insurance sector. Further, pre-existing illnesses are usually not covered, making insurance policies unviable for the elder. Indeed, senior citizens point out that they pay far more for health insurance than their utilisation justifies; and that elders end up subsidising the care of younger citizens, who from the bulk of health insurance consumers. Government sponsored comprehensive cover for those living below poverty line, and in elderly and destitute homes is necessary; as is family based insurance cover that addresses comprehensively, the unique health care needs of the elder.

Most importantly, perhaps, is the need for sensitivity and sensibility in making these plans. The elder citizen is a national treasure; one who has contributed to both national growth and family development. As they approach the autumn of their lives, they experience diminishing ability to generate income, increasing vulnerability to illness and disability, and increasing dependency on their families and communities. Rather than view this dependence as a burden to be endured, we must as a society embrace it whole-heartedly, as a pay back opportunity; to thank senior citizens for their many unconditional contributions. The organisation and delivery of elder health care must therefore be approached with enthusiasm, altruism and generosity. Mature health policy for the elder combined with a generous dose of pragmatism in organising, delivering and funding health care services is the need of the hour. World Alzheimer's Day has just passed – September 21, 2010, and we should be reminded about the challenge of population ageing; the looming burden of elder disability; and the need of a comprehensive and pragmatic National Policy for Older Persons.

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Courtesy : The Hindu - 22.9.2010





Putting the smallest first

VISHAL, the son of a farm labourer in the west Indian state of Maharashtra, is almost four. He should weight around 16 kg (35lb). But sooping him up from the floor costs his nursery teacher, a frail woman in a faded sari, little effort. She slips Vishal's scrawny legs through two holes cut in the corners of a cloth sack, which she hooks to a weighing scale. The needle stops at just over 10 kg – what a healthily plump one-year old should weigh.

The teacher nods and puts Vishal back on the floor, where he sits listlessly before a jigsaw puzzle. That his teacher does not look perturbed is unsurprising. Nearly half of India's small children are malnourished: one of the highest rates of underweight children in the world, higher than most countries in sub-Saharan Africa. More than one-third of the world's 150m malnourished under-fives live in India.

That makes the sight of small, skinny children depressingly routine. Vishal's rural village is not especially impoverished; 120 km (75 miles) from Mumbai, India's financial centre, it offers factory work as well as the farm labour most country people do. But the battered register in Vishal's nursery, a government run centre known as an *anganwadi* (literally, courtyard), shows that close to half the children are malnourished, a handful chronically so. "It's always been this way," says Sunanda, the *anganwadi* teacher, who has weighted the children in her care every month for 25 years. "Nothing has changed."

Almost as shocking as the prevalence of malnutrition in India is the country's failure to reduce it much, despite rapid growth. Since 1991 GDP has more than doubled, while malnutrition has decreased by only a few percentage points. Meanwhile, the chasm between lucky and unlucky Indian children is growing: under fives in rural areas are more likely to be underweight than urban children, lowcaste children than higher-caste children, girls rather than boys. And the disparities are growing. India seems certain to miss one of its key Millennium Development Goals: Solving malnutrition by 2015.

Malnutrition places a heavy burden on India. It is linked to half of all child deaths and nearly a quarter of cases of disease. Malnourished children tend not to reach their potential, physically or mentally, and they do worse at school than they otherwise would. This has a direct impact on productivity: the World Bank reckons that in low-income Asian countries physical impairments caused by malnutrition knock 3 per cent of GDP. Why, then, has India done so little to reduce it?

There are many reasons. Most fundamentally, poor parents find it hard to buy enough food; but that is by no means the only factor. Impoverished and rural families are also less likely to go to a doctor when their children fall sick, which they do a lot, thanks to dirty water and poor hygiene. Inadequate nutrition lowers the immune system, increasing the risk of infectious disease; illness, in turn, depletes a child's nutritional stocks. Tara, a two-year-old



in Chandan, a village in the northern state of Rajasthan, has yet to bounce back from a bout gastroenteritis that put her in hospital a year ago. Since then, any weight gain has been offset by frequent bouts of diarrhoea, says her mother, Maya Devi, as she holds her limp child on her lap. Tara weighs a pitiful seven kilos.

Cow's milk and water

Even the children of wealthier families suffer surprisingly high rates of malnutrition. Government data show that show that third of children from the wealthiest fifth of India's population are malnourished. This is because poor feeding practices—play as big a role in India's malnutrition rates as food shortages. Here lies an opportunity: educating parents about how to feed their children should be more quickly achieved than ensuring that the 410 million Indians who live below the UN's estimated poverty line of \$1.25 a day have enough to eat.

The government, however, has largely failed in both areas. Two big, expensive schemes designed to reduce malnutrition—a public distribution system (PDS) that provides subsidised food to the poor and a vast mid day-meal scheme, to which 120 million school children are signed up — are hampered by inefficiency and corruption. But the government's main effort to tackle child malnutrition, the Integrated Childhood Development Service (ICDS), has failed for rather different reasons.

The ICDS, launched in 1975, is the world's biggest early-childhood scheme. It provides, in theory, an anganwadi centre with one teacher and an assistant for every 1,000 people. Each centre is responsible for providing nutritional care to pregnant women and all children up to six, the

age at which Indian children start school. Anganwadi centres also provide daily pre-school child care and education, as well as keeping a dozen-odd registers recording everything from children's weights to financial accounts. Overburdened by this long list of responsibilities, anganwadi workers have tended to focus on the group they see every day: children over the age of two whose mothers take advantage of free child care and daily meals offered by the centres. While these meals — suppose providing each child with an extra 500 calories a day — are certainly beneficial, they do not replace the nutritional guidance the parents of young children need. More seriously, this emphasis on older children means that the under-two and pregnant women barely get a turn.

Unfortunately, this is precisely the group the government should be targeting. Most growth retardation occurs by the age of two and is irreversible. Often, it starts during pregnancy. More than half the women of childbearing age in India are anaemic — a condition that can be much improved by fortifying food — and 30 per cent of Indian children are born underweight. In healthy infants, this could be corrected with six months of exclusive breastfeeding. But especially in rural India, where women often go back to the fields mere days after giving birth, babies' diets are often supplemented with cow's milk and water, which exposes them to infection.

That risk increases after six months, with the introduction of solid food. The quality and reach of ICDS centres varies from state to state: the most impoverished states, with the highest rates of malnutrition, also have the lowest numbers of centres. But countrywide the scheme suffers from the usual ailments of public services in India. Recently the production of daily meals served at anganwadi centres was



taken out of the hands of pilfering contractors and given to groups of local women. A complicated system of payments, however, means that even in a state like Maharashtra, which has done more than most to improve ICDS services, centres must wait four months for cash to but pay food bills. The two meals served at Vishal's anganwadi—a pate of puffed rice dotted with a few nuts and a serving of sprouted moong dal—seem unlikely to give him 500 calories. Vandana Krishna, the state's secretary of women and Child Development, says the funding gap could be solved by giving village panchayats, or local governments, a special fund to make loans to anganwadis. But this would need a lot of money.

So too would any significant improvement in the government's efforts to fight child malnutrition – with one exception. Fortifying the food handed out by the PDS would be an economical and effective way to lower rates of anaemia and increase nutrition. So far India has rejected that idea. But most experts agree that the country will make a serious dent in child malnutrition only when it focuses on pregnant women and the very young, perhaps by providing an additional worker in each anganwadi centre to make home visits. "India has missed its big window of opportunity by not giving priority to mothers and the under-threes," says Victor Aguayo, chief of Unicef's nutrition programme in India. "It cannot afford to do so any longer."

Courtesy : The Indian Express - 29.9.2010





Road Safety: a Public Health Challenge

India's hurried quest for development and its disregard for road safety have resulted in a major public health problem that demands serious thought and action.

◆ **K.S. Jacob**

The high mortality and morbidity associated with road traffic injuries are a major public health challenge worldwide. Every year, road traffic crashes kill an estimated 1.2 million people. The figure for the injured is over 50 million. Significant increases in these estimates are projected over the next decade. However, the scale of individual tragedies rarely attracts media and world attention.

Ninety per cent of such injuries occur in the developing world. India has had the dubious distinction of high rates and a steady increase in road fatalities over the past three decades. The poor and the vulnerable (pedestrians and cyclists) bear the brunt. The majority of the victims are men aged between 15 and 40 and economically active. Road accident injuries often overwhelm emergency and casualty departments of most hospitals, whittling down their load. A significant proportion of non-fatal injuries results in traumatic brain damage and substantial disability. Deaths of breadwinners often push families into poverty. The social and economic costs are massive and often difficult to quantify.

First world highways and third world context: The last decade saw many new national and State highways connecting different parts of the country. These modern marvels have shortened transit times, thanks to greatly increased speeds of travel. However, the designs

of these highways did not take into account the local reality. They were built on existing roads, which connected small towns. These motorways now go through towns; they bisect villages. Pedestrian crossings, near towns and villages, make for killing fields. Lack of fencing around and elevation of the highway allow animals to encroach upon the road, setting the stage for crashes.

The absence of overbridges, underpasses and alternative roads for village traffic means that speeding vehicles compete with slow-moving farm and rural traffic (cycles, rickshaws, hand and animal-drawn carts and tractors). It is common to see rural and farm vehicles travelling in the wrong direction on dual carriageways. In addition, alcohol outlets along the highway and the absence of routine checks by highway patrols encourage drunken driving and add to consequent disasters.

Quick-fixes with one master plan: Flyovers and elevated roads dot many major Indian cities. However, these are essentially quick fixes. Most cities do not have long-term master plans for transport and traffic. Ad hoc and non-uniform solutions to local road situations are common. The absence of traffic lights and roundabouts at most road junctions results in ambiguity over the right of way. Routing heavy vehicular traffic through densely populated areas, and poor and non-standardised road signs and markings also



compound the problem. The location of bus stops and traffic lights often leaves much to be desired.

Lackadaisical enforcement: There is a basic lack of knowledge of road safety rules among users. Driving tests in India never examine the actual driving skills on regular roads. "Mirror-signal-manoevre" is unheard of, overtaking on the left is the norm and red traffic lights are considered suggestions rather than absolutes. Periodic tests for the safety of older vehicles and drivers are non-existent. Vehicles with just one headlight on or those with misaligned high beams are a common sight. They make driving after dark a hazardous experience.

Slow vehicular traffic hogging the fast lanes is a common sight on highways; so are heavy vehicles parked on slow lanes, with no tail and emergency lights. Seat belts in cars and crash helmets for pedal and motorcycles are not used regularly, increasing the risk of serious and fatal injury. Excessive speed, novice drivers with no knowledge of road safety and those with high blood alcohol levels contribute to serious road crashes. The failure to maintain adequate distance between vehicles also makes driving on Indian roads perilous. Vehicles overloaded with people, produce and products go unchecked. In addition, those identified for breaking road safety rules are often a source of additional income for enforcement personnel.

Different rules for different vehicles: Traffic rules are more often observed in the breach. Vehicles have a right of way over smaller vehicles. Flashing headlights imply an immediate claim to right of way. Idiosyncratic signalling is common among truck drivers (for example, the use of the right turn indicator to allow

overtaking) and this increases ambiguity and risks of crashes.

Fragmented responsibility: The design, construction and operation of different classes of roads lie with different government agencies, resulting in a fragmentation of responsibility. The rural-urban and the legislation-implementation divides, and the lack of coordination among different authorities result in road results in a lack of accountability. The consequent lack of leadership in the area of road injury prevention adds to the difficulties.

Social issue and equity. The extent of a society's civilisation can be judged by its regard for pedestrians' rights. In India, there is little respect for such rights. Road injuries disproportionately affect the poor. The burden of such injuries, harm and consequent and those who use pedal and motorcycles. Large sections are at risk for such injury, making it an urgent social issue. The increase in vehicular speeds on unsafe roads raises concerns about equity, justice and fairness for a large section.

The way forward

India needs to aim for safe and sustainable road systems. Research and development over the past few decades in the West have proved that a range of interventions exists to prevent crashes and injury. India has many good intentions, rules and statutes on its books but the gap between what is known to be effective and what is actually practised on the ground is often wide. A commitment to injury prevention is lacking. Mobile ambulance and curative health services are no substitute for prevention. As with all public health approaches, road injury prevention requires effective management to put in place sustainable and evidence-based measures and overcome obstacles to



implementing safe practices.

India does not seem to have a road injury surveillance system. Under-reporting of road injuries is common and hides a major public health problem; police and health data only provide partial accounts of the magnitude and nature of the issues. This is particularly true of non-fatal, yet severely disabling, outcomes. There is need for accurate data collection systems. These will aid in planning interventions and designing better and more appropriate road systems.

There is also need to seriously examine and correct lapses and inadequacies in road design and planning. Periodic fitness certification for all motorised vehicles, universalisation of road sign and enforcement of law and safety regulations are crucial. Driving tests should be made more stringent and should test knowledge in addition to driving skills. They need to be conducted on regular roads. Refresher training and re-testing should be introduced. We should have zero tolerance of underage drivers. India needs to consider severe penalties for violations; cumulative penalties for recurrent infringements should result in temporary withdrawal of licences or a permanent ban on driving.

Road traffic systems are highly complex and can be dangerous to human health. Injury prevention requires an extremely coordinated effort on the part of the government and society. It mandates a "systems approach;" understanding

the system as a whole, the interaction between its elements, and the identification of points of intervention. Road safety is a shared responsibility. It requires political will and administrative commitment from the government, industry, public works departments and law-enforcement and health agencies. Government need to identify lead agencies to guide the effort, research the problems and policies, prepare the strategy and action plans, allocate human and financial resources and implement specific interventions. Non-governmental and community organisations can play an important role by highlighting the issues, studying local problems, educating and informing the general public and suggesting solutions.

A combination of legislation, enforcement of laws and education of road-users can significantly improve compliance with key safety rules, thereby reducing injuries. While strategies from developed countries can be adopted, there is also need to study the local context and implement relevant interventions and plans to improve road safety. The current rates of morbidity and mortality due to road injuries are both unacceptable and avoidable. Road safety should be high up on the political, administrative and community agenda.

(Professor K.S. Jacob is on the faculty of the Christian Medical College, Vellore)

Courtesy : The Hindu - 20.10.2010





Realigning the Matrix of development

To create a fair and sustainable social order we need to remove the roadblocks for developing nations. Since economic growth may not guarantee development, the answer lies in bringing about inclusive growth worldwide

◆ **Vinayshil Gautam**

We are living in an era where finance is merely the front end of a much larger realignment of powers that is taking place globally and indeed internally in India.

The jostling can be seen in the goings on of the WTO, nuclear energy activities, the satellite and the space related competitiveness to name a few.

India is well poised to play a key role in the world, if it is able to marshal its resources along with its capabilities in a focussed manner. We are already a member of the exclusive International Thermo Nuclear Experiment Reactor Club, if we can call it so. The use of fusion energy on commercial basis will happen largely in the future. It is likely to take a few years still, but being a part of the select group of seven is an important breakthrough. Being associated with the Galileo Project of the European Union is another important step towards a genuine recognition of our reduce table competency. If we can couple it up with the demographic advantage, which is increasingly being talked about, we are likely to play a major role in the realignment of global powers.

Essentially this would mean focusing on all the segments of the generation about to touch 30. This requires a major re-examination of the paradigms of education that govern several IITs, IIMs, Indian Institutes of Science & Research, NIITs and Central Universities, not to forget the

polytechnics. What is not very clear is the kind of backward linkage that is envisaged to create the knowledge were or administrative man power to run these institutions and the creation of the critical mass of faculty to teach. Budgetary allocation is an important prerequisite, but to deliver it in operational terms is another matter.

One would strongly recommend widening the role of the National Institute of Educational Planning and Research, which already has a deemed University status but needs to replicate itself in many ways. Similarly, a focussed view of the Technical Teachers Training Institutes is called for. There is an equally urgent need to widen its ambit of operation to cover aspects of management education in its entirety.

The United Nations has to recognise, along with other world bodies such as the IMF and World Bank, that special caution has to be exercised by not creating a regulatory regime that artificially creates barriers in the development of the developing nations.

The landmines are many. Skillfully used, labour welfare, environment, multilateral trading systems can all be labels to create roadblocks for developing nations in the name of creating a healthy planet.

An obvious way of negating the negative impacts of misplaced emphasis on such dimensions is to prevent, if not totally negate, the possibilities of using trade barriers for



punitive purposes. There are huge yawning gaps in the WTO system that needs to be plugged. Illustratively, an obsession with trading to the negation of production control is a dangerous situation. Similarly, sustainability of development cannot be one way street. This is not going to come easy. It requires a sagacity and wisdom, which must have as its touchstone the future of the planet itself. This will happen only with the organised efforts on the part of the developing countries; they need to put their act together and create a network of intensive collaboration. Besides persuasion and collective efforts, a concerted action plan would be required.

Then there is the danger within, it is yet to be universally recognised that economic development, if it is to be sustainable, has to be

development for all. Economic growth may not necessarily lead to development. However, the reverse is true. If there are social, technological and other developments for all, the people will definitely contribute to economic growth, A person who is sitting in front if he comes across a friend on the Internet, he is most unlikely to ask him about his caste, colour or creed. He is more likely to ask him which are the websites he visits, what are his areas of interest and what interesting things he has found when browsing. With development, some of the social evils, such as parochial mindsets, may vanish.

The time to create a fair and sustainable social order is now. That requires an ability to create an environment of equality of opportunity and communication with integrity amongst and within nations.

Courtesy : The Pioneer - 25.10.10





Time to consider alternates

◆ **Dharmendra Nath, IAS (Retd.)**

Over the years the Public Distribution System (PDS) has become some kind of an article of faith with us. In the public mind it might be synonymous with corruption but for the policy makers it is a sacred cow, something beyond question, irrespective of whether it delivers or not. It could be revamped and re-targeted but its essentials must remain the same. Whereby, this mind set is blinding us to alternative approaches to meet the same objective.

True, our goal is food security. But the PDS in its current form cannot be the only approach. If in all these years it has not performed (according to a widely publicized estimate it delivers only 30 paise out of one rupee) we should be seriously considering other alternatives.

Importantly, men will never be angels to make the PDS work. Nor will any amount of vigorous re-loading ever fill such a leaky pot. It will only oblige the beneficiaries of the spillage. The leaks are too many and too wide-spread to be amenable to any cure and they cover the entire gamut of the Government from the centre to the States to the local bodies and their agents. Clearly, if we are not interested in the spillage it is time to roll back and finally wind up the scheme.

The PDS, as it exists today, aims to provide some minimum quantity of food grains at subsidized rates through Government licensed shops to the weaker sections of society who are spread out far and wide. They hold BPL (below poverty line) Cards. These Cards coexist with a large number of unauthorized Cards. No amount of checking and rechecking has been able to

eliminate ghost BPL Cards and other BPL Cards held by persons not entitled to them.

Food grains flow from a Central agency to a State agency which then transports them to far flung areas of the State and makes them available to its licensed shops for distribution. At all these levels the supply chain is impacted by powerful political and administrative influences. There are hardly any effective checks and balances. In the circumstances neutralising these influences has never been possible.

He intended ultimate beneficiary is largely ignorant and sits at some remote place. He is in no position to stand up for his rights. All others involved in the process are smarter than him. Knowing these limitations it should be our effort in the interim, to devise a mechanism that is not purely a Government show but has some reasonable checks and balances built into it.

Today, the entire PDS show is Government run; it is essentially politico-administrative and monopolistic. The Government handles the grains, selects the shopkeepers and fixes the timings of shops. There is just one licensed shop for an area. Other shopkeepers and the beneficiaries have no choice.

Thus, a Government licensed shop fully exploits this situation. More often than not, the shopkeeper is a party worker whose main job is to arrange party shows. And the PDS grains are his wherewithal. He is also hand in glove with the official machinery or if he is powerful enough the official machinery is mortally afraid of him and his lobby.



Undoubtedly, there is talk of public-private partnership in various spheres now a days. Yet that does not touch the PDS. Hence there is a pressing need to involve private initiative in this massive task. The Government could continue to be in the business of the minimum support price (MSP) based procurement and storage. That would assure the Government's position as a market leader.

However, there are problems galore on the distribution side and most often mischief takes place there. To begin with instead of the Government licensing the shops, all shops should be made eligible. They could still be supervised by Government agencies. Beneficiary entitlements could also be decided by the Government.

Whereby these shops would supply government fixed quantities to the beneficiaries at Government fixed rates (call the scheme a variation of the Food Stamps scheme, if you will) and recover the difference in price from the government. Thus, much casual handling, diversion and wastage of stocks could be avoided as the stocks would belong to the shopkeeper and he would take proper care of them.

Besides, many more distribution points would become available to the beneficiary. The beneficiary would have the freedom to retain his relationship with his current or chosen shop. In addition, the problem of viability of PDS shops could vanish as an existing shopkeeper would be taking on this responsibility. there might be some competition but the whole thing would become people-friendly.

Needless to say, it might not have been possible to adopt this approach in the early years of the PDS as the financial, commercial and physical infrastructures to run it would not have been adequately available. But today, with

increased availability of banking, better transport and communication facilities and a broad expansion of the retail sector the picture has changed. We should be utilizing this resource for running a better PDS.

Significantly, this could be the first stage of the change over. And gradually we should be moving towards a full wage system. Given that many Government schemes these days offer wages. The Government fixes the minimum wages too. Questionably, what is the point if after receiving minimum wage one is still poor? Why pay less and then subsidise rations? Why not be more direct and pay full wages — a living wage — in the first instance.

If we start moving in this direction our wage bill would go up but our subsidy bill with all its problems and leakage would go down. Moreover, the exercise would be budget neutral. As higher wages would have a multiplier effect on rest of the economy. Even incomes of the self-employed would go up as wages and incomes would get spent and re-spent.

Further, this would also assure true honour to the worker and establish dignity of work. Think. What kind of honour is it, when after putting in a honest day's work the worker still finds himself in a queue for subsidy? It is unfair and demoralizing to the worker and his family. The sooner we get out of it the better. As at this stage the PDS would become irrelevant.

In sum, the only losers would be those who profess to serve the poor and their hangers-on. Whom will they serve if there are no poor? It is a testimony to the strength of this lobby that so little real reform of the PDS has taken place in all these years.

Courtesy : Central Chronicle, Friday - 29.10.2010





Millennium Development Goals & India

◆ **K.S. Jacob**

India's vast population, its diversity, the variability of services and the differing baselines across regions complicate the achievement of the MDGs.

The Millennium Development declaration was a visionary document, which sought partnership between rich and poor nations to make globalisation a force for good. Its signatories agreed to explicit goals on a specific timeline. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set ambitious targets for reducing hunger, poverty, infant and maternal mortality, for reversing the spread of AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria and giving children basic education by 2015. These also included gender equality, environmental sustainability and multisectoral and international partnerships.

The 10th anniversary of the declaration was used to review progress and suggest course corrections to meet the 2015 deadline. The glittering banquets, the power lunches and the rhetoric at the formal meetings, attended by many celebrities, ambassadors of different nations, international charities and the media, in New York belied the stark reality in many poor countries. While the declaration and the MDGs were a clarion call and mobilised many governments into concerted action, a review of the achievements to date and projections for

2015 suggest some success and much failure. Most rich nations failed to meet the targets on promised aid. While progress has been made, much more needs to be done.

Government of India claims that the country is on track to meet the MDG targets by 2015. It argues that the number of people living below the poverty line has reduced. It claims that child and maternal mortality rates are reducing at a pace commensurate with its plans. It maintains that many government-sponsored schemes have increased public resources in several key sectors. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme has increased rural employment. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, a national policy to universalise primary education, has increased enrolment in schools. The Reproductive and Child Health Programme II, the Integrated Child Development Services and the National Rural Health Mission have resulted in massive inputs in the health sector. It states HIV rates are low and that deaths due to tuberculosis and malaria show downward trends. It asserts that the Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission and the Total Sanitation Campaign address crucial MDGs.

It is, however, difficult to endorse the government's confidence and optimism. Experts argue that the poverty reduction claims are the result of a sleight of hand, which employs debatable measurements and methods for assessment. The existing rates of malnutrition, affecting half of all children under 5, do not support the claims of hunger reduction.



While many agree with the figures for reduction in maternal mortality, they feel the target set is unachievable, as are those for reduction of child mortality and for universal primary education. Gender equality remains elusive. The emergence of an extremely drug-resistant tuberculosis and the high incidence of malaria in certain regions are worrying.

The impressive growth and the creation of wealth with economic liberalisation have not resulted in social development, what with stagnation in key social indicators, particularly among the disadvantaged. There has been an uneven expansion of social and economic opportunities with growing disparities across regions, castes and gender. While India's Gross Domestic product argues for its middle-income nation status, it also hides massive poverty and much inequity. The challenge to convert India's commitments and resources into measurable results for all its citizens, especially those belonging to socially disadvantaged and marginalised communities, remains gigantic and unmet.

Illusory measurements

The Millennium Declaration, unlike many other documents, set out measurable aims instead of the usual vague platitudes of many international agreements. The MDGs focus on specific and measurable outcomes. However, employing proxy and surrogate variables to measure the country's success may not reflect actual progress. The focus on the massive inputs related to the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) while discussing child and maternal mortality, for instance. Most NRHM documents describe in detail particulars of the increased funding, new infrastructure, additional health personnel are silent on their impact on the health

of people. The Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), a conditional cash transfer scheme for safe motherhood, is operative and is part of the drive to increase institutional deliveries. The impressive number of women who have given birth to children in hospitals and the amounts utilised under the scheme measure its success. However, the system does not collect and collate data on the number of safe deliveries, the number of live births and measures of the health of mothers and babies. Data on the person who actually conducted the delivery, post-delivery centres and the status of the mother and child are not available. System failures related to transport, functioning of facilities, referral and emergency obstetric care are not rare but go undocumented.

While there is no doubt that the NRHM has made a positive impact on primary and secondary health systems, we need proof of improved functioning in addition to evidence of enhanced infrastructure and increased personnel. Specific measurements of outcomes will allow for course corrections and targeted inputs.

Similarly, while enrolment rates have improved, the question of retention of girls in primary education is yet to be established, posing a threat to meeting the targets for universal education. While the figures for hunger reduction look better, those for malnutrition in children suggest otherwise. The figures for poverty reduction are contested. Patriarchy is firmly established and shows little signs of change, especially in rural India, making gender equality and justice elusive. Many reports suggest that environmental sustainability of many development projects is not adequately evaluated.



While there are many gains, the question to be answered is: "India on track to meet the MDGs in 2015?" Its vast population, its diversity, the variability of services and the differing baselines across regions complicate the achievement of the MDGs. There is evidence that while some States are on track, many others lag behind and will lower the country's overall achievement. This demands a more detailed assessment of the impact of the many schemes introduced rather than the use of only input variables to predict MDG outputs.

Rhetoric-reality divide

India's vast geography and its diversity are major reasons for significant variations across regions. They mandate the need for separate targets, governance, a focus on public health and changes in social structures. The variability across regions mandates dedicated goals and specific targets tailored to regional baseline rates, for both specific regions and marginalised populations. Periodic assessments of specific outputs required to meet the MDGs are necessary rather than highlighting of new inputs. The many new schemes need to audit their actual, rather than their presumed, impact.

Any survey of regional data clearly documents that poor outcomes are in regions with poor governance. While the NRHM divides the country into high-focus and non-high focus States, the inputs to improve the situation are not directed at improving governance. The federal structure means that improving local governance is the responsibility of individual States. Many States have not fully exploited the increased funding and the newer schemes. Good governance is an effect multiplier and will have

a much greater impact on the country's MDGs than just increases in finance, infrastructure and health personnel. Corruption is a deadlier disease which needs urgent attention than people.

The focus on improvement in health continues to employ perspectives of curative medicine rather than concentrate on public health approaches. Clean water, sanitation, nutrition, housing, education, employment and social determinants seem to receive a lower priority despite their known impact on the health of populations.

Feudal social structures continue to oppress millions of people. Health and economic indices of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes show much lower rates of health and greater poverty. Patriarchal society places much burden on girls and women, especially in rural India. Without changes in social structures, improvements in health and economic status will remain a distant dream of the many millions who live on the margins of a resurgent India.

The 10th anniversary assessment of the MDGs and its rhetoric left many wondering if they were just warm words, business as usual. Millions live in poverty, hunger is common, half the children under-five are malnourished, maternal mortality is unacceptably high, and a significant number of girls will not receive primary education. The sense of urgency, born of the moral conviction that extreme poverty is unacceptable in our interconnected world, should not be lost. The time for action is now.

(Professor K.S. Jacob is on the faculty of the Christian Medical College, Vellore.)

Courtesy : The Hindu 20-10-2010