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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

From disinvestment to privatization

Vijay Kelkar

Net profits are only 2.2% of their total assets for central public sector underakings, lower than for the private corporate sector. While the public

sector or the state-led entrepreneurship played an important role in triggering India's industrialisation, our evolving development needs, comparatively less-than-satis factory performance of the public sector enterprises, the maturing of our private sector, a much larger social base now available for expanding entrepreneurship and the growing institutional capabilities to enforce competition policies would suggest that the time has come to review the role of public sector.

What should the portfolio composition of the government be? It should not remain static at all times. The airline industry works well as a purely private affair. At the opposite end, rural roads, whose sparse traffic makes tolling unviable, have to be on the balance sheet of the State. If the government did not own rural roads, they would not exist. Similarly, public health capital in our towns and cities will need to come from the public sector. Equally, preservation and improvement of forest cover will have to be anew priority for the public sector assets.

Take steel. With near-zero tariffs, India is a globally competitive market for the metal. Indian firms export steel into the global market, which demonstrates there is no gap in technology. Indian companies are buying up global steel companies, which shows there is no gap in capital availability. Under these conditions, private ownership works best.

In the private sector, bankruptcy is taken seriously. In contrast, public sector managers tend to be relatively relaxed about the prospect. Drastic adjustments do not take place, as the managers know that there is no real danger of extinction.

Private ownership is clearly desirable in regulated industries, ranging from finance to infrastructure, where a government agency performs the function of regulation and multiple competing firms are located in the private sector. Here, the simple and clean solution — government as the umpire and the private sector as the players — is what works best. In many of these industries, we have a legacy of government ownership, where productivity tends to be lower, fear of bankruptcy is absent, and the risk of asking for money from the taxpayer is ever present. There is also the conflict of interest between government as an owner and as the regulator. The formulation and implementation of competition policy will be more vigorous and fair if government companies are out of action.

In natural resource based industries such as upstream hydrocarbons sector, there is a strategic issue as well as the issue of optimal appropriation of the underlying vast resources rent. Similarly, the role of government vis-à-vis universities is also complex. Barring such a few, but key, areas we can confidently set about reformulating the activities of the State in the following two crucial areas.

Firstly, the State should not be producing things that can be produced in competitive markets: this covers areas like steel or aluminium or cars. Second, the State should not be a player in regulated industries: areas like airlines, railways, shipping, telecom, banking or insurance.

Embarking on disinvestment is fine, but we have to think about the end-game which is privatisation, where the government fully gets out of the

picture. Two broad approaches that can be adopted for privatisation are strategic sales (where a controlling stake is sold to one buyer) or open market sales (where shares are sold to the public at large).

Three arguments favour strategic sales: the buyer brings in new technology or expertise; he can exert sound governance inputs into the firm, and has incentives to do so owing to the large stake, and third, he can decisively displace government as the controller. Other arguments in favour of strategic sales are suspect. Crucially, strategic sales increase the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few hundred families of the country. The other approach, open market sales, disperses share ownership, creates widely-held, professionally managed companies, and spreads shareholder wealth.

As per CMIE, there are 300 companies in India where promoters control below 10%. In each, the managing director and the rest of the top management team do not own a controlling stake, yet these companies continue to function without being captured by others.

The disinvestment or privatisation program could explicitly target conversion of the larger PSUs into widely held, professionally managed companies. There could be provisions in the disinvestment mechanism that creeping acquisitions would not be permitted for a few years. This would give time for the professional management team to develop modern corporate governance mechanisms. The approach can be also applied to disinvestment in our banking sector. Dispersal of share ownership amongst crores of households could have enormous economic and political consequences.

When shares are sold in India, they are accessible to foreign buyers through the FII route. This channel can be strengthened by further liberalising entry rules for FIIs and raising FII stakes in individual companies. The incentives of employees of PSUs could be influenced by

sale of shares and employee stock option plans to align interests of employees with those of owners. For companies where some shares have been divested and a clear secondary market benchmark price exists, there is no impediment to establishing a steady and ongoing mechanism for GOI to finally reach 0% shareholding.

Another instrumentality, particularly for partial disinvestment, relates to sale of under-performing or under-utilised PSU assets. Land, for example. Many PSUs have large tracts of valuable land. In cooperation with state governments, land assets can be leveraged by PSUs by making them available to new units. This will remove one of the new constraints faced by industry.

When one includes such land assets of departmental enterprises such as Railways and Port Trusts, a mind boggling amount of resources will be available for the government for restructuring its balance sheet and for further industrialisation and alleviating housing constraints. This is also true for the state level public sector enterprises.

(Edited excerpts from the author's 26th Sir Purshotamdas Thakurdas Memorial Lecture delivered on January 29).

EDUCATION

HINDU 6.1.10 EDUCATION

The healing power of books

Clare Allan

A literacy project is being described as the most significant development in mental health practice in the last ten years.

On January 8, I am going to Liverpool, north western England, to take part in a conference organised by Get Into Reading, a hugely inspiring outreach literacy programme run by The Reader Organisation, a charity dedicated to bringing about “a reading revolution”.

Get Into Reading is the brainchild of Jane Davis, founder and director of the Reader Organisation. As an 18-year-old single mother living on state benefits, Ms. Davis discovered her local library, and never looked back. She believes “books can save lives” — believes it so passionately she has, in less than ten years, created an extraordinary movement, with 150 groups now meeting weekly in hospitals, prisons, refugee centres, children’s homes, libraries, YMCAs, day centres and homes for older people. They are spread throughout the north-west of England and in London, with more springing up around the U.K. and a recent commission to develop the project in Australia.

These are not “book groups”, where people come together to discuss a book they have read; they are reading groups, led by trained Get Into Reading project workers, who read the texts aloud, with group members joining in as much or as little as they wish. Interruptions are encouraged and often lead to spontaneous sharing of life

experience.

Texts include novels, short stories, poems, plays and works of non-fiction. And there is no dumbing down: Shakespeare, Chekhov and Milton have all been devoured, as well as works by contemporary writers such as Mitch Albom and Frank Cottrell Boyce.

And while nothing is prescribed, or proscribed, the emphasis is on “great” literature — Tolstoy, say, rather than Agatha Christie.

Nothing wrong with Agatha Christie, but the aim is to banish the sense some people have that great literature is not for them, that it belongs to academics in English departments.

That is why the term a “reading revolution” is wholly appropriate. The storming of what Doris Lessing has described as “a treasure house of literature” is every bit as significant as the storming of the Winter Palace. Time was I might have thought this an overstatement. We have free public libraries, after all. There is nothing to stop people reading great books. Or is there?

As a child of academic parents, it would never have occurred to me that I needed permission to read any book (TV was a different matter), but the mental health system is packed with people who have suffered their whole lives from the failure of others to recognise and respond to them as thinking, feeling, intelligent human beings. Parents, teachers and society in general have repeatedly reinforced the message that the doors to the treasure house are barred to the likes of them. Unfortunately, much mental health treatment does little to challenge it.

Thankfully, there are signs this is starting to change. David Fearnley, a forensic psychiatrist at Ashworth high security hospital on Merseyside, Liverpool, runs a Get Into Reading group with patients. Books read include (delightfully) *One Flew Over the*

Cuckoo's Nest.

Dr. Fearnley — the Royal College of Psychiatrists' 2009 Psychiatrist of the Year — is unambiguous about the benefits. “Get Into Reading is one of the most significant developments to have taken place in Mersey Care [health board] and mental health practice in the last 10 years,” he says.

Last word, though, should go to a dementia sufferer, who commented on reading poetry: “It moves you. I mean, it hits you inside where it meets you and means something.” It is a line the greatest of literary greats would rightly be proud to come up with. —
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(Clare Allan is an author and writes on mental health issues)

ENVIRONMENT

HINDU 2.2.10 ENVIRONMENT

ADB to fund climate change study in Northeast Asia

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is to carry out a comprehensive study on the economics of climate change in Northeast Asia, Manila-based ADB said in a press release on Monday.

The study's aim is to help regional and country-level decision makers address the issue of climate change and to develop low-carbon growth strategies in their countries and the region, the ADB said. The study, Economics of Climate Change and Low Carbon Growth Strategies in Northeast Asia, is being financed by a technical assistance grant of \$1 million from ADB, and \$800,000 of grant from the Government of the Republic of Korea. It will cover four countries — China, Japan, Republic of Korea and Mongolia. “The purpose of this assistance is to raise awareness about the urgency of climate change challenges in the region,” said Tae Yong Jung, study team leader and Senior Climate Change Specialist in ADB's East Asia Department.

The study will provide the region's policymakers with the latest information on mitigation and adaptation strategies, and suggest policy responses to cope with and counter future climate change impacts. — *Xinhua*

INTERNATIONAL RELATION

PM fixated on Pakistan

Ashok Malik

After weeks of hint, suggestion and manufacturing media consent, the Government has finally announced the recommencement of talks with Pakistan. The Foreign Secretaries of the two countries are likely to meet next week and, in a sense, restart the composite dialogue, even if some other nomenclature is used this time.

To be fair, the resumption of a ‘normal relationship’ — the term is used very advisedly, with ample caution — with Pakistan could not have been wished away forever. After 26/11, India attempted coercive diplomacy but, in the absence of war and of further terror attacks, had to get back to talking at some point.

True, there has been ambiguity and confusion in the UPA establishment on precisely how to engage Pakistan. In 2009, the Prime Minister publicly snubbed President Asif Ali Zardari — seen as conciliatory towards India, though a lightweight in Islamabad. Only weeks later, he befriended and agreed to a controversial joint statement with the relatively hawkish Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani.

If this was a tactical inconsistency, there were also strategic questions. Should one talk to the Pakistanis at a time when the American plans for Afghanistan (or for AfPak as a whole) were undecided? What were the long-term objectives of such talks? Was Pakistan stable enough as a country and was anybody in Islamabad in a position to deliver on a deal, any deal? What were the red lines Pakistan would need to cross to demonstrate it was genuinely shutting down *jihad* factories and working towards mainstreaming

itself?

These questions have not gone away and, to a degree, they never will. Equally, it would be unfair to pin these conundrums solely on the UPA Government. Its predecessors — and probably its successors — as well as large sections of India's security and foreign policy establishment, its political class and its public intellectuals, and even civil society in the wider sense of the term, have been equally divided and ambivalent (or multivalent, if that term could be used here) on what to do with Pakistan and how to do it.

What does all this add up to? At a basic level, there is no harm talking to Pakistan. It gives India some insight and leverage into the thinking of stake-holders in Islamabad. Also, it conveys the accurate impression to the world that India is not the problem, and New Delhi is willing to go the extra mile. If the UPA Government is clear about this limited framework, frankly one doesn't see a problem.

However, there would be cause for concern if key members of the UPA Government develop an exaggerated idea of what is achievable. It is here that signals from the Prime Minister's Office require some decoding. They offer glimpses of Mr Manmohan Singh's grand strategy doctrine.

It is understood the Prime Minister believes India will never realise its full potential till it settles its frontier disputes with its immediate neighbours, specifically China and Pakistan. As a principle, this is unexceptionable. It will require a genuine effort at cartographic delineation. However, underpinning any map-making must be mutual political will and the ability of leaderships to sell a sense of realism and compromise to their individual societies.

What does this mean in the context of talks with Pakistan? Thus far, traditional Western pressure has been on India to talk and, particularly, talk Kashmir. Perhaps Mr Singh wants to turn that force on its head and convert it to pressure on Pakistan to settle and, particularly, settle Kashmir.

India has long been reconciled to making the Line of Control an international border. If India formally puts this on the table, it is conceivable the United States, the West and other regional powers may push Islamabad — or some Government in Islamabad — into agreeing. At least that may be the calculation in South Block.

There are three caveats to be entered here. First, there is no guarantee that Mr Gilani, or whoever sits across the table, will be an honest negotiator or have the capacity to persuade others in Islamabad to buy his version of “peace with honour”. Certainly, there is no reason to believe the military Generals in Rawalpindi or the various strands of Islamists will easily accept, to borrow a phrase from history, a ‘moth-eaten’ Kashmir.

In the end, India may be left with nothing more than a signature on a piece of paper without any broader security from terror attacks or assurance of good neighbourly conduct. Nevertheless, if a Pakistani Government formally agrees to view the LoC as the international frontier, then it will suggest an advance. That piece of paper will be useful.

The second caveat is more troublesome. What will India be required to give up or otherwise relax restrictions on? It would be understandable if Pakistan sought some sort of an open border between the two Kashmirs, with free movement of goods, families and people. This in itself may seem fair and harmless but several doubts could emerge.

Would free movement from Pakistani Kashmir into Indian Kashmir inevitably end up in free movement of Pakistani non-Kashmiris to India outside Kashmir? What would be the implications? How would India reconcile a soft Kashmir frontier with an otherwise hard Radcliffe Line, with Indian business not allowed access to Pakistani markets?

A combination of determination, hard bargaining and astute thinking can get past some though not all these issues. However, all that is presuming Indian negotiators are not being given, say, a two-year deadline and then told to work backwards.

Finally, if he is indeed keen to push such a settlement through, just how much energy and bandwidth will the Prime Minister end up expending in convincing his own party and other sceptics within the Indian political and security system? Will this enterprise consume all his precious political capital? Will it leave him time and leverage for unfinished domestic business: Restructuring Indian agriculture; creating a genuine land market for farmers who want to sell and industry that wants to buy, and so rationalising the mess that is land acquisition; overhauling India's command-control education system? These are only samples of reforms that face entrenched political challenges.

In other words, is mission Pakistan essentially a cop-out? Those who hoped the stable mandate of 2009 would lead to purposeful governance at home must wonder.

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INTERNATIONAL TRADE

HINDU 6.1.10 INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Turnaround in foreign trade?

It would be premature to think of a sharp turnaround in India's foreign trade based on just one month's figures. However, given the continued fall in both imports and exports for nearly 12 months in a row, the trade figures for November 2009 released recently by the Director-General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics, give room for optimism, especially in exports. In that month, exports at \$13.19 billion were 18 per cent higher than a year ago (\$11.16 billion). Imports too have fared better, registering only a modest 2.6 per cent decrease, which is in sharp contrast to the double-digit decline witnessed through the current fiscal year till October.

Positive export growth helped along by the decline — though slower — in imports resulted in the narrowing of the trade deficit to \$9.69 billion, as against \$12.32 billion in November 2008. While as a rule, a narrower trade deficit ought to be welcomed, the circumstances leading to it matter as much as the trade figures for one month. Even over an eight-month period, April-November 2009, exports and imports on an aggregate basis are well below the levels during the corresponding period of the previous year. Exports are down by 22 per cent and imports by over 27 per cent. The overall trade deficit during this period stands at \$66.18 billion, down from over \$100 billion the previous year.

An urgent task before the policy-makers is to help sustain the positive trend in exports over the remaining months so that the annual target of \$165-170 billion is achieved— the same level as in 2007-08. The decline in exports was due to the sharp fall in demand

in the principal overseas markets — the United States, the European Union, and Japan. With the worst of the recession behind them, these countries would be able to import more from India. Export organisations have urged the government to continue extending support, particularly for the labour-intensive export segments such as leather, handicrafts, gem and jewellery, and agro-industries. A strengthening rupee has been another area of concern for the exporters but the scope for intervention by the Reserve Bank of India is limited at this juncture. A fall in both oil and non-oil imports has contributed to the continuing decline in imports. Petroleum prices have remained relatively low since October last year, though they have been rising more recently. The drop in non-oil imports by nearly 24 per cent till November is a cause for concern, reflecting as it does the lower investment in capital goods.

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

Who'll stand up to this big bully?

Vir Sanghvi

Two interesting things about Bal Thackeray that you may not know. One: in 1966 when the Shiv Sena first exploded on the scene, Indira Gandhi had only just become the Prime Minister of India and Rajiv Gandhi was yet to marry Sonia Maino. Of today's senior leaders, Pranab Mukherjee was a young academic who had not even joined the Congress. Sharad Pawar had not yet been elected to the state assembly. In that sense, Bal Thackeray is probably the most senior of all active politicians in India today.

The second interesting thing: though he has been around for over four decades, Thackeray has never once propounded a progressive agenda for Maharashtra or laid out his vision of how the state can flourish. All of his politics have been essentially negative: hate this community, beat up another ethnic group and burn the homes of a third.

When Thackeray launched the Shiv Sena, he did so with the support and blessings of such Congress strongmen of that era as V.P . Naik and S.K. Patil. In the mid-60s, the Congress worried that the Communists were gaining a foothold in the industrial units of north Bombay. The Shiv Sena's job was to fight the Communists (by any means necessary) and to protect the Congress bastion.

In those days, Thackeray's agenda was to rid Bombay of the communities that he claimed were oppressing the Maharashtrian people: South Indians and Gujaratis. What the Shiv Sena rarely reminds us is that, till 1960, there was no such state as Maharashtra. The state was called Bombay and included much of what is now Gujarat. Maharashtra

was created in 1960 and naturally, Bombay still had a largely non-Maharashtrian ethos. As Maharashtrians from other parts of the state came flooding into the city (contrary to what he may claim, even Thackeray's own family is not from Bombay), the Shiv Sena treated them as its natural constituency.

Since those early beginnings, Thackeray's agenda has hardly wavered. It has been based on telling Maharashtrians that they are being discriminated against and that only the Shiv Sena will fight for their rights. All that changes are the targets of Thackeray's ire. He forgave Gujaratis fairly early on but till the late-70s was still aggressively anti-South Indian. In the 80s, he sensed the makings of a Hindu backlash and promptly shifted to an anti-Muslim agenda. That drove the Sena closer to the BJP but in recent years as diminishing returns have set in on that agenda, Thackeray has decided to pick on people from UP and Bihar who, he claims, are stealing the jobs meant for Maharashtrians.

It is instructive that at the end of over four decades in existence, all of them with Thackeray as its supreme leader (no other Indian party has been led for so long by a single individual), the Shiv Sena still has no positive agenda or dreams of glory to inspire Maharashtrians. The most that Thackeray can offer his people is this: I can get you jobs as taxi drivers if we stop these Biharis from coming to Bombay. In 21st century India, that is hardly an inspiring or glorious dream to sell.

Despite 40-plus years of hatred, the Shiv Sena has only won office for a single term and that too, as part of an alliance with the BJP. And now, no matter how much Thackeray raves and rants, political power seems far away. Worse still, as his age catches up with him, his legacy (such as it is) also seems in danger of slipping away. When Thackeray does ultimately ascend to that shakha in the sky, the Sena will wither and die. Its place will be taken by the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, the breakaway organisation founded by Thackeray's nephew Raj.

We need to understand all of this to make sense of the events of the last fortnight. What we are seeing are the last desperate power plays of a fading patriarch who seeks to use violence and intimidation to fool himself into believing that he is still relevant even as his party suffers electoral reverses and his political clout sinks to a new low.

One reason why Raj succeeded in making a relatively strong showing at the last election was because he adopted his uncle's old strategy. He appealed to unemployed Marathi youth and capitalised on the frustrations of the Maharashtrian middle class. Had Maharashtra been left behind? Were Maharashtrians being marginalised in Bombay? Had North Indians taken all the jobs? And so on. All this was accompanied with a certain level of media-friendly violence (his cadres timed their assaults depending on the availability of TV crews to film them) and such a devastating impersonation of his uncle in his younger days that often Raj came across as Mini Me, the midget clone of Dr Evil from the Austin Powers movies.

Stung by his nephew's success and dismayed by the failure of his son and heir apparent, the generally soft-spoken Uddhav, to mobilise the Marathi masses, Thackeray decided that the Shiv Sena needed to return to the intimidation of old. Just as it had in 1966, the Congress rode to its rescue. The genesis of the current crisis lies in Chief Minister Ashok Chavan's moronic decision to demand that all taxi drivers speak Marathi. When Chavan was told off by Delhi, he appeared on television to reverse his stand and to claim that he had been misunderstood.

This was the opening that Thackeray needed. Even the state government was not allowed to stand up for Maharashtrians by Delhi, he suggested. Maharashtrians were being ignored in their own city. Once he had commanded the attention of the media with this stand, Thackeray followed his practice of the last four decades and looked for a situation he could exploit with the threat of mob violence. He found it in some innocuous statement made by Shah Rukh Khan about Pakistani players

and the Indian Premier League. Khan has a movie coming up for release. So what better way of intimidating him than by threatening violence in the cinemas where the film will be showing?

There is only one way to deal with a bully. The state government needs to protect the cinema halls and turn the screws on Thackeray, arresting his cadres and rigidly imposing the rule of law. Sadly, the current CM has shown no inclination to do so. Perhaps Rahul Gandhi's visit will force him to finally pull Bombay out of the mess that he created with his taxi-driver statement.

The question is: can Ashok Chavan guarantee law and order in Bombay? Can he stand up to the sort of bullying that we have come to know so well over the last 40 years? History shows us that each time Thackeray has found an opponent who fights back, the Sena backs down. The only language Thackeray understands is strength.

Sadly, that is not a language that Ashok Chavan speaks. And Bombay pays the price.

Yet again.

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The views expressed by the author are personal

It's just not Mumbai anymore

Pratik Kanjilal

Mumbai is delightfully different. At Davos, Mukesh Ambani says that Mumbai is for everyone, while Anil Ambani had earlier declared his admiration for Narendra Modi's Gujarat, which wants to keep certain people out on pain of death. Rahul Gandhi chimes in and is threatened by the Shiv Sena which, in the meantime, has been told off by the national right for threatening pan-Indian unity. Amitabh Bachchan does an Anil Ambani and is warned off by the Congress which says, with unusual heat, that Modi is a tropicalised Milosevic. And the good, the bad and the ugly are all out in force and dominating our TV screens.

But do we need to debate civil rights at all? It only offers mileage to needy people like Uddhav Thackeray and Narendra Modi. Modi desperately needs an image makeover now that communal politics is passé. And the people of Maharashtra have expressed their views on the Thackerays through the ballot box, not allowing them to lead a government after the 1994 elections, when they capitalised on the 1992-93 Mumbai riots.

Civil rights are unambiguously defined in the Constitution. Mumbai's Senas and the Gujarat government have impugned that Constitution, which guarantees rights to life, liberty and freedom of speech. We should indeed applaud Mukesh Ambani, Rahul Gandhi and Shah Rukh Khan for taking a stand. When business and political interests trump ethical and human concerns, speaking the truth is indeed a radical act. But should we not also ask, what has the law been doing all this while? It comes down on you like a tonne of bricks if you trivially disrespect the tricolour, though it is just the symbol of India.

Nothing much happens if you disrespect the Constitution, the founding document of India. Why are the Gujarat cases allowed to linger? Why do convictions for the Mumbai riots show a communal bias? And why is the law so slow to move against the Thackerays?

The issue about Mumbai's cabbies having to know Marathi raises a contrary question: is it unreasonable for Marathis to expect their state capital to be recognisably Marathi? The metros are going multicultural because of increasing labour mobility. Twenty years ago, it was execrable to be Marwari in Kolkata, aggravating to be a 'Madrasi' in Delhi and impossible to get by without kunja Tamil in Chennai. That is no longer the case, but Chennai remains Tamil, Kolkata is unimpeachably Bengali and Delhi is butter chicken north Indian. Mumbai, on the other hand, has been culturally contested territory from the days of the Marathi-Gujarati language riots, and of the very first mafias. In fact, its cosmopolitan diversity is a microcosm of an incredibly variegated nation.

How does one square growing metropolitan multiculturalism with the linguistic basis of states which supports the idea of a single predominant regional culture? Should the major cities stand apart from the states they govern, islands of multicultural churning rising from monoculturally flat hinterlands? A lot of people in Mumbai believe this has already happened, and they are willing to defend their new habitat from the violent, monocultural Senas through political debate. But when civil rights are attacked, debate becomes redundant. Mumbai should rather insist on legal action, with the vehemence with which it demanded security after 26/11.

Pratik Kanjilal is publisher of The Little Magazine

The views expressed by the author are personal

Tharoor, the politician, at odds with the Twitterer

Rajdeep Sardesai

If the twitterati were India's voting class, then Shashi Tharoor would be the 'supreme leader...'

A few weeks ago, when Tharoor's tweet on the government's visa policies generated much fuss among his ministerial colleagues, I had jocularly tweeted, "Maybe, Tharoor should quit politics and join journalism. He would have greater freedom as an edit page writer than as a 'neta'!" Within minutes, I was hit by an avalanche of angry Tharoor followers on Twitter, suggesting that I had committed the ultimate 'sin' by questioning their twitter icon's credentials to hold public office.

Unfortunately for Tharoor, his parliamentary constituency of Thiruvananthapuram is not quite the Twitter universe while his Congress party workers reserve their blind adoration for only one family. Which is why Tharoor the politician is at odds with Tharoor the twitterer.

The success of Twitter is built on the idea of having an open and constant conversation between a mix of anonymous and influential people and is designed to bridge social divides. Indian politics, by contrast, thrives on being an exclusive club of the power elite, with minimal contact with the masses. Notions of transparency which the twitter world claims as its defining badge are alien to those who reside in the forbidding corridors of Lutyens Delhi.

The Congress party increasingly resembles a closed shop, with little space for internal debate and dissent. When was the last time we knew

what exactly transpired in a Congress working committee meeting? When did a post-election Congress legislature party meeting result in anything other than a one line message authorising the ubiquitous high command to decide leadership issues.

Tharoor, of course, faces another peculiar problem. As a first time MP who has been catapulted into a ministership, he arouses envy and insecurity among his contemporaries. For the many 'netas' waiting in the queue, the fact that a 53-year-old electoral debutante has taken the elevator to political success is enough for them to look for ways to cut him to size.

Lateral entrants are still a novelty in Indian politics: the many years that Tharoor spent as a UN diplomat count for little in the heat and dust of Bharat. An anglicised, accented, foreign returned Tharoor is almost a caricature for a vast majority of 'netas' who derive their legitimacy by claiming to be genuine desi 'sons of the soil.'

In a sense, by turning to Twitter, Tharoor is seeking to legitimise himself amongst a constituency he more naturally identifies with: the youthful, urban, English-speaking middle class. This is the class which uses social networking as a weapon to express its solidarity against a 'system' it has lost faith in.

Near, yet far away

Just as a candle has become the preferred symbol of middle class activism, the 140 character limit of Twitter is perfect to express a strong opinion without having to actually get involved in the muck of public life. For this chattering class which despises the traditional dhoti-kurta politician, Tharoor is a role model: an educated Indian who 'sacrificed' professional comfort to plunge into the uncertainty of political life.

As India's first twitter hero, one can appreciate just why Tharoor feels

this incessant urge to reach out to this large constituency. If a Lalu and a Mulayam have their caste alliances, a Rahul has the family name, a Narendra Modi has a Hindutva appeal, for someone like Tharoor with no mass base, Twitter is integral to his brand recognition in the political marketplace.

And yet, there are limits to Twitter power that Tharoor must come to terms with. For a film star like a Sharukh Khan or a Priyanka Chopra, being on twitter adds to their celebrity quotient and perhaps promotes their films. For a journalist like me, twitter is another means with which to engage with the viewer and share news breaks.

Tharoor is neither a glamorous film personality nor is he a journalist. At the end of the day, he is a minister in the government of India, bound by the oath of secrecy and the principle of the ‘collective responsibility’ of the cabinet system. He does not have the same freedom that an ordinary citizen would have in sharing information or expressing an opinion in a public space like Twitter. The opaqueness of the state may infuriate us but to expect Twitter to effect a radical transformation in government functioning is to overestimate its capacity.

Moreover, Tharoor in the end will be judged not by the number of followers he has on Twitter (or for that matter, the number of books he releases), but simply by the work he does for his constituency and his achievements as a minister. For example, as a minister of state for external affairs who is responsible for the Gulf region, why doesn't Tharoor take up the issue of working conditions for migrant workers? A tweet on his actions might earn him more goodwill than telling us who he lunched with!

(The writer is editor-in-chief, CNN IBN)

Constricting coalitions

Inder Malhotra

THE way the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government Mark II has functioned since its inspiring victory in the Lok Sabha elections over eight months ago is most disappointing. It has not only belied all hopes of it being more cohesive and effective in discharging its functions this time around but also aggravated the main contradiction in Indian polity: the inevitability of coalitions in New Delhi for the foreseeable future and the utter lack of coalition culture that is showing no signs of developing either. Under these circumstances how can the country's languishing governance be rescued?

Whatever might have happened in the states since the fourth general election in 1967, at the Centre the Congress had ruled by itself, despite its fractiousness and inner turmoil, for 30 years since Independence, its dominance of the national political landscape having become all the more impressive since 1971 after Indira Gandhi attained supremacy within both the Congress and the country.

The Janata Party that defeated her in 1977 largely because of her folly of imposing the Emergency pretended to be a single unit but was, in fact, a coalition of four constituents with different agendas and outlook.

Despite its complacent belief in its durability, the Janata government collapsed in less than three years under the weight of clashing ambitions and irreconcilable conflicts between its three top leaders. The crowning irony was that Charan Singh brought down Morarji Desai's government by seeking the support of Janata's archenemies, Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay. He lasted less than a month.

No wonder Indira Gandhi returned to power in January 1980 and she and later her son Rajiv ruled the country for the next 10 years, to the dismay of those opposed to single-party dominance and yearning for a multi-party coalition. Their hopes started being revived, however, when Rajiv Gandhi began to lose his phenomenal popularity, especially after the Bofors affair. By then the former finance and defence minister in his Cabinet, V.P. Singh, had become the rallying point of all the political forces opposed to Rajiv and the Congress. The talk then was that coalitions would be a "blessing" because by giving all parties, big and small, due representation they would make the government "genuinely democratic". Unfortunately, something quite different happened.

The V.P. Singh government, elected amidst great goodwill and dependent on the opposite poles of the political spectrum, the Left Front and the Right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was at sixes and sevens from the word go. It fell in 11 months flat. Chandrashekhar did to V.P. Singh what Charan Singh had done to Desai, but within 120 days Rajiv Gandhi pulled the plug on him, too.

With Rajiv Gandhi's assassination and Sonia Gandhi's refusal to step into his shoes dawned P.V. Narasimha Rao's moment. For full five years he ran a minority Congress government. This speaks well of his political skills but his methods were so appalling that he became the first former Prime Minister to be hauled to courts on criminal charges. After the defeat of Rao's government in the 1996 election began the current coalition era that hasn't done either India or the concept of coalitions any good. Atal Behari Vajpayee's first government proved to be a 13-day wonder because no other political party or group backed it. The story of the "historic blunder" that prevented the towering Marxist leader, Jyoti Basu, from leading the United Front government is so well known that it needn't be recounted. This conferred the office of Prime Minister on the darkest of dark horses, H.D. Deve Gowda. Since the United Front government was also dependent on the support of the

Congress, both Mr Gowda and his successor, the likeable Inder Kumar Gujral, were ousted in just over a year.

In the election that followed, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), headed by Mr Vajpayee, came to power. He showed welcome capacity to keep together a motley crowd of 24 parties but his second government was brought down by Tamil Nadu's imperious chief minister, J. Jayalalithaa, who withdrew support because Mr Vajpayee didn't withdraw the corruption cases against her, initiated by M. Karunanidhi's government preceding hers. In 1999 the Kargil War contributed to the NDA's victory with a larger majority that made the Vajpayee government stable. But on at least a dozen occasions it was forced to roll back important decisions because of opposition from its allies, including Cabinet ministers. The most important ally, Chandrababu Naidu, without having any representation in the Union Cabinet, dictated to Centre over telephone. Six of BJP's allies left the NDA, not after its defeat by UPA-1, but before it.

Neither the plight nor the performance of UPA-1 was any better. The Left Front that backed the Manmohan Singh government from outside broke with it with maximum acrimony over the Indo-US nuclear deal. The Samajwadi Party of Mulayam Singh Yadav, that saved the government during the confidence vote in October 2008, lost little time in turning against it. Most notably several of the regional parties that were happily ensconced in the Vajpayee government had become members also of the UPA-1 and continue to be of the UPA-2. These allies ran their ministries like their fiefdoms. Some Congress ministers too did not acknowledge the Prime Minister's captaincy of the team.

This state of affairs was expected to change during the UPA's second innings but hasn't. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam is no longer the second-largest constituent of the coalition; Mamata Banerjee's Trinamul Congress is. But her persistent and blind hatred of the Left Front ruling her state has often caused trouble and embarrassment to the Congress leadership. She runs the nation's railways from Kolkata, not from Delhi.

Mr Karunanidhi's elder son M.K. Azhagiri runs his Central ministry from his bastion, Madurai. The newspapers have been so full of Sharad Pawar's shenanigans in relation to soaring prices and other issues that there is no need to dilate on them. Each of the three most senior Congress ministers is said to be pulling in a different direction. And despite the best of relations between Mrs Sonia Gandhi and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the Congress Party distanced itself from Sharm el-Sheikh and is now doing so from the award of Padma Bhushan to the controversial NRI hotelier, Sant Singh Chatwal. As if the mishandling of the Telangana issue wasn't enough, the Congress has done something as bizarre as having four chief ministers in Meghalaya. One hopes it is not a precedent for other Congress-ruled states, or the Centre.

