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AGRICULTURE

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Some States fight the trend but ...

P. Sainath

State	Farm suicides annual average		Difference (2nd Avg - 1st Avg)
	1995-2002	2003-2010	
Andhra Pradesh	1590	2301	+711
Assam	155	291	+135
Karnataka	2259	2123	-136
Kerala	1292	1071	-221
MP + Chhattisgarh	2304	2829	+525
Maharashtra	2508	3802	+1294
Tamil Nadu	992	866	-126
Uttar Pradesh	640	531	-109
West Bengal	1426	990	-436

The table only includes States whose annual averages have risen or fallen by over 100 farm suicides between the two periods. It also treats Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh as one unit for data purposes.

Source: NCRB Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India reports 1995-2010.

Five States did manage a significant decline in the average number of farm suicides between 2003 and 2010. However, more States have reported increases over the same period.

The television story was genuine and sensitive. At least 90 farmers, it said, had committed suicide in two months in Andhra Pradesh. These

were cotton growers. Actually, last year, Andhra farmers killed themselves at the rate of 210 each month on average, according to the National Crime Records Bureau. But it is heartening that somebody took note of what's going on. The more so when dishonest bureaucrats feed gullible sections of the press awful crud on farm suicides being at 'a 15-year low.' NCRB data show Andhra Pradesh has seen the *second worst increase* in farm suicides among all States (after Maharashtra) over the last eight years for which data exist.

However, five States *did* manage a significant decline in the average number of farm suicides each year between 2003 and 2010. Andhra Pradesh was not amongst them. Of those who did, only Karnataka is amongst the worst five States which account for nearly two-thirds of farm suicides in the country. On average, 2,259 farmers killed themselves each year in Karnataka between 1995 and 2002. In the next eight-year period, that figure was 2,123 — a fall of 136 in yearly average. But the fall is fragile, and the last two years 2009 and 2010 have seen the State's numbers rising again. And Karnataka remains the second worst State for farm suicides (in absolute numbers) after Maharashtra. It has seen 35,053 farmers kill themselves since 1995, according to the NCRB.

The NCRB data on farm suicides now cover 16 years. Let's divide that into two halves of eight years each. By comparing the first half (1995-2002) with the second (2003-10), we can figure out whether things are getting better or worse in the major States.

What qualifies as a significant decline? That's when a State's yearly average in the second eight years is at least 100 farm suicides less than in the first eight-year period. Tamil Nadu (-126) and Uttar Pradesh (-109) are two others in this bracket. But there's better. Kerala managed a drop of 221. And West Bengal pulled off the biggest decline among all States. Its 2003-10 average is 436 lower than its figure for 1995-2002.

Except Karnataka, all the Big 5 States show terrible upward spikes in their 2003-10 annual averages. The yearly average of farm suicides in Andhra Pradesh in this period was 711 higher than it was in 1995-02. In Maharashtra, the figure was 1,294 higher. Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh were one composite State for six of the 16 years and what has happened in that region is best understood by still treating them as one unit in terms of data. They show a rise of 525 in the second eight years.

But comparing the two eight-year periods doesn't work for the smallest States with very few farm suicides. For instance, Manipur's average for 1995-2002 was one farm suicide. It was two during 2003-10, a massive 'increase' in percentage terms — and quite meaningless. However, among small States that have seen farm suicides, Tripura brought down its annual average by 90 in the second half, a drop of 78 per cent.

The decline Kerala has managed (-221) is in many ways the most significant one. Kerala is perhaps India's most globalised economy. Its agriculture is hugely cash crop-based and fragile at the best of times. Cash crop prices are highly volatile, and often rigged by powerful corporations at the global level. This makes Kerala more vulnerable to price shocks than any other State in India. In the early years of the last decade, for instance, vanilla fetched Kerala farmers prices of up to Rs. 4,000 a kilogram. It then crashed to under Rs. 80 a kg or less (where it remains), wrecking farmers who had invested huge amounts of (borrowed) money in its cultivation. Most plunged into debt, several committed suicide in despair.

Price shocks have also hit Kerala in coffee, pepper, and other cash crops into which the State is deeply locked. The price of coffee, for instance, is controlled by about four major global corporations. These companies always seek to drive down the share of the original producers to boost their own profits. They will do that even more strongly as economic problems mount in Europe — to where much of our coffee is exported.

Across India, suicides amongst cash crop farmers are far higher than those amongst food crop growers. Cash crop farmers run far greater risks, incur much higher cultivation costs, and have to borrow a lot more money than their food crop-growing counterparts.

So that drop of 221 in Kerala's yearly farm suicide average is remarkable and came against the odds. The period from 2008 to 2010 was better for that State than any other in the entire 16 years for which data are available. Kerala set up a debt relief tribunal in 2005, raised support to the farm sector and took other steps to mitigate distress. Even its troubled food crop sector received a boost. Between 2005 and 2010, Kerala doubled the support price for paddy from Rs. 700 to Rs.1,400. Yet, the State will take a worse hit than any other due to the multiple free trade agreements the Union government has signed or will enter. And reports of rising farm suicides again in the cash-crop citadel of Wayanad signal which way Kerala is now headed.

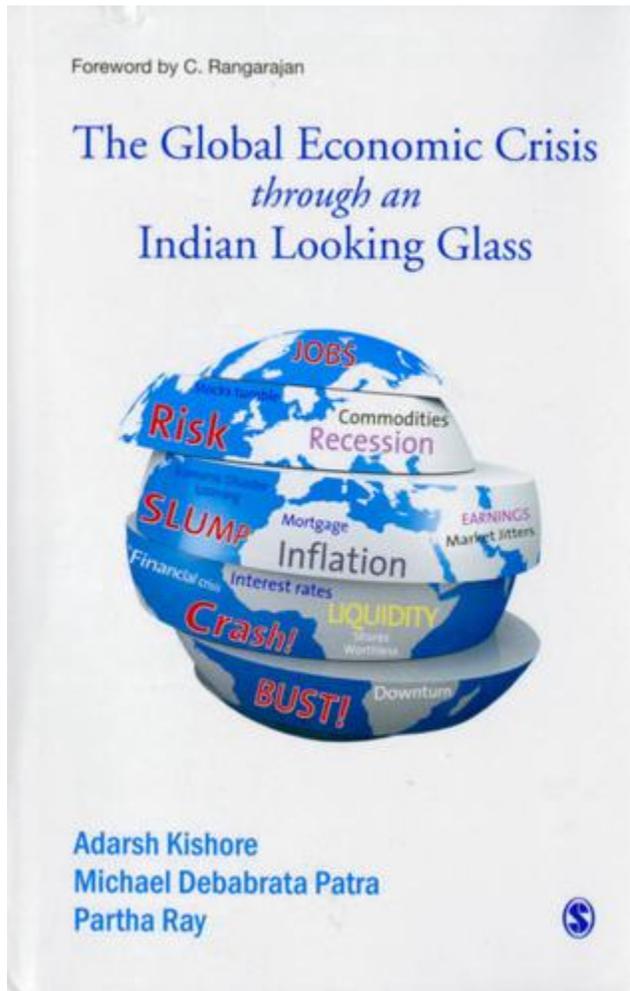
West Bengal's (-436) drop in farm suicide yearly averages is perhaps best understood in comparison with Maharashtra. Bengal has a smaller population (91 million) than Maharashtra (112 million), but is a more rural State and has many more farmers. Yet, the annual averages are starkly different. During 2003-10, almost four times as many farmers (3,802) killed themselves each year in Maharashtra. In West Bengal that figure was 990. Though Bengal has its own sharp concentrations of cash crop, it produces more food crop than Maharashtra and has been the country's largest producer of rice for some years. In the latter, cash crops continue to overwhelm food crop. In 2010-11, as Maharashtra's Chief Minister informed his colleagues at a kharif review meeting earlier this year, the area under cereals and pulses dropped further by about 3.7 million acres. ([BusinessLine May 28, 2011](#)). West Bengal had, in fact, begun procuring grain through the panchayats (a scheme derailed by the Centre) and pushed other measures to promote rice and vegetable cultivation.

Overall, 15 of 28 States showed worse averages in the second eight years. Across the entire 16 years from 1995-2010, more than a quarter of a million Indian farmers have committed suicide.

BOOK REVIEW

The missing Indian looking glass

K. Subramanian



The current economic crisis has a fatal attraction for economists. It creates in them an urge to write about it or some aspects of it. But then, the earliest victim of the crisis was the profession of economists. With all the sacerdotal wisdom at their command, they had failed to foresee it. Small wonder, there has been an explosion of writing on the crisis, though it has abated somewhat recently.

The book under review is by three economists who were working with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) during the worst years of the crisis, with Adarsh Kishore serving as India's Executive Director and the other two being his advisers.

Going by the rather tantalising title of the book that promises a view of the crisis “through an Indian looking glass,” this reviewer had hoped that the authors, having had the unique advantage of working with the IMF when the crisis was imploding, would offer an Indian perspective from their perch in Washington. Earlier, we have had the benefit of the views of the likes of Y.V. Reddy writing from Indian shores.

As it turned out, there is no Indian perspective in the book, except of course in the title. There is a chapter on “Impact on India”, which merely gives a descriptive account of the monetary and fiscal conditions prevailing before and after the crisis, and of the government's policy initiatives; it makes no evaluation.

The “Pre-Crisis Big Picture” depicts how India was “preparing for an acceleration of its growth trajectory on the basis of sound fundamentals and reasonable stability.” In the authors' assessment, the crisis is a hiccup which “appears to have been an interruption in the secular upward drift of the economy.” They hope for the restoration of healthy market institutions and “business as usual.” But they have gnawing doubts, and their ideological moorings are unclear — neither Left nor wholly Right, but somewhere in between.

Origin of crisis

The book has seven chapters, with the earlier ones discussing the origin and proximate causes of the crisis. The authors blame it more on global imbalances than on the failure of the free market or the “efficient market model.” There are references to the damage caused by derivatives, structured products, etc., but only a weak reference to regulatory failures. The “policy capture” made by Wall Street in deregulation finds

no mention. The approach the authors suggest is one of willing to hit, but unwilling to hurt. In all this, one finds no 'Indian looking glass'!

The chapter discussing the impact of global economic crisis on several countries provides the aggregates on GDP, etc., but leaves out the real side or critical parameters such as unemployment, poverty, and loss of income. What is on offer are watered down editions of IMF documents. There is no effort to examine the welfare indicators.

The chapter on 'Policy Response' describes the responses of many countries, groups and agencies, and they are drawn from secondary sources. While the authors provide a wealth of material, they make no attempt either to look at it in an integrated fashion or test the validity of the data against their own norms.

Lack of coherence

They dismiss the "new recipe for reforming globalisation" offered by the U.N. Commission headed by Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz for lack of coherence among the IMF, the World Bank, the G-20, etc., over the principles for reforming the international financial system. But they fail to admit that this lack of coherence was at the root of the crisis and needs to be remedied.

This book was written in 2009, when the crisis seemed to have abated somewhat and there were signs of "green shoots." At many points, the authors refer to signs of revival and hope of early recovery. They warn against the risks of early withdrawal of 'stimulus' and the need to strengthen banks through measures such as cleaning up toxic assets, and recapitalisation. These are IMF shibboleths that have been given up in the second round of the economic crisis, which threatens to bring down the euro and the European Union and destabilise the U.S. banks. The authors, who have made a feeble attempt to update the book to mid-2010, could have revised the earlier draft or added a postscript to cover some of these developments.

The last chapter is in the nature of reflections on the lessons learnt from the crisis. Some of the comments are valuable and provide an insight into the working of the IMF. However, they are stray musings, not properly integrated with an over-arching economic philosophy, Right or Left.

Overall, this book is a pedestrian contribution that hardly advances our understanding of the complex issues.

Review: Pakistan – Identity and Destiny



Here's a three-time former Pakistani minister trying to help Indian readers better understand his country. The intent is laudable, but the book meanders through too many reasons to justify why Pakistan is Pakistan.

Launched by Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani earlier this year, it says in a specially written preface for India that this is “a small step towards getting to know each other a bit better”.

The author has certainly succeeded in highlighting Pakistan's strengths and does not shy away from discussing the weaknesses. However, his contention that Pakistan's origins represent “the most unique set of factors to shape the formation of a new nation-state” does sound a bit stretched.

An important chapter, “What is so special about Pakistan”, gets wrapped up in just two pages, leaving the reader wanting more.

But the next discusses in over 20 pages the six categories of nation states, a chapter that reminds one of the monotony felt on a long hot afternoon spent in a classroom as the good professor speaks without a break.

Jabbar, who has served under Benazir Bhutto, Meraj Khalid and Pervez Musharraf, seems to have got a bit carried away in projecting a country that grabbed international headlines much of this year due to a string of terror attacks and the May 2 killing of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

Sixty strengths of the country have been diligently penned by Jabbar.

Pakistanis are lauded for being hardy and resilient as well as practical and pragmatic. The author writes that Pakistan is the first Muslim nation to develop and test nuclear weapons.

The country conducted five nuclear explosions May 28, 1998, and the book says that “Pakistan was obliged to develop these weapons only as a defensive reaction to the introduction of nuclear weapons into South Asia by India”.

An interesting nugget of information is that cricket-obsessed Pakistan has produced some of the finest bridge players in the world.

The book highlights a strong and independent judiciary and points out that 85 million out of the total population of 170 million are youthful and energetic as they are below 21 years. Calling women the backbone of society, it says several women have achieved global recognition for their outstanding abilities.

Listing 40 weaknesses, the book touches upon severe income disparities, grinding poverty and systemic inequalities. Then there is misgovernance and rampant corruption, besides weak enforcement of the law.

The book discusses the persecution of non-Muslims by fanatics and says: “Christians and Hindus have also been victims of attacks by extremists.”

Jabbar admits that intelligence agencies operate beyond the law. “With its weak democratic institutions, the executive arms of civil governments in Pakistan and armed forces have tended to misuse intelligence agencies to promote varying interests...”

The book in its final pages discusses factors that lead towards what it calls Pakistan’s unique destiny. It admits that “democracy remains imperfect and is a perpetual work-in-progress” and adds that it demands infinite patience and perseverance.

Jabbar's book would have been more engaging had he avoided a pointwise format.

**Welcome FDI in retail
It is a win-win situation for India**

S.S. Johl

PARLIAMENT is debating the issue of the Cabinet decision on multi-brand foreign direct investment (FDI) in the retail market in cities with a population of one million persons and above. Direct investment in economic reckoning is labelled as good investment because it is stable investment and better than the fly-by-night kind — portfolio investment which is liberally allowed in our stock markets. The FDI is considered good investment because it goes, if not wholly, at least partly into the creation and development of infrastructure and cannot be taken out easily. The investor gains and suffers with the economy of the host country and has, therefore, interest in the growth of the economy.

Portfolio investment, on the other hand, can cause serious problems at the time of slump in the stock market. The volatile behaviour of investors can make the stock market go spinning in downslide, specially if the country does not have enough foreign exchange reserves to protect itself against the flying-out capital. Thus, the first aspect of FDI that needs to be appreciated is that it is a stable investment which endures with the economy in its thick and thin phases. Now we are faced with the question of this investment in the retail market and that too in multi-brand retail and with 51 per cent share-holding.

It is little realised that apart from the demand and supply gap, which may be there or not, the retail market, dominated by small shops and vendors, is the major culprit in giving vent to escalating inflation in the country and it needs to be disciplined through the creation of effective competitive alternatives. Corporate food stores and multi-brand stores for other products can be the only alternative in a free economy. When farmers were hardly able to get 60 paisa per kg of muskmelon in the

wholesale market recently, the vendors in Ludhiana did not lower their retail price below Rs 10 per kg. Here it is a more than 17 times margin which cannot be justified by any standard. Today, in several wholesale markets of Punjab, potato is being sold by farmers at less than even Re 1 per kg. Yet the vendor sells it at Rs 10 per kg. In a Reliance store the price is Rs 5 per kg.

Just another example from the NCR — cauliflower in corporate stores sells at Rs 5.80 per kg and in the unorganised market the price is between Rs 8 and Rs 9 per kg depending upon quality. Comparative figures are Rs 6 and Rs 15 per kg for spinach, Rs 18 and Rs 25 for carrot, Rs 120 and Rs 150 for apple, and Rs 28 and Rs 40 per kg for mosambi in corporate stores and the unorganised market respectively. In fact, the unorganised market is a misnomer. It is so highly organised, in spite of a large number of vendors, that they are united to charge almost the same price for the same quality of the product. Prices may differ somewhat due to the quality differences. Even the vendors sell the products door to door at the same price.

Is it not an irony of fate for producers that after investment and the tiring effort for four to six months for vegetables and for a full year for fruits, with all the production risks suffered, they should hardly receive 10 per cent and the maximum 20 per cent of the consumer price! The retailer with no risk and only with a small place advantage with least investment should appropriate 80 to 90 per cent of what the consumer is forced to pay! Here the middleman does not do any processing to convert the produce into a new product. He sells the same raw produce and fleeces both the producer and the consumer with impunity because he has monopoly through a virtual cartel of small shopkeepers and street vendors in the absence of effective competitive alternatives.

The retailer in the country is such a bad conductor of the pulses of demand and supply that the benefit of high prices is not allowed to flow to the producer and that of low prices to the consumer. Breaking this

unwholesome nexus will be possible only through the reduction of profit margins on the strength of a high volume of business by corporate stores in place of high margins on low volumes charged by vendors and small shopkeepers. What is true in the case of vegetables is equally true for other commodities, including food and non-food items.

Thus, the corporate sector must be freely allowed to enter the retail market in the interest of producers as well as consumers. Second, since the retail market is extensive and requires billions of dollars to provide quality services to consumers, it is essential that the necessary infrastructure must be developed to reach small producers and consumers to provide a sustainable connect. Also, modern technology and infrastructure for an efficient conduct and performance of the market are a must to efficiently operate in the domestic and international markets.

Our corporates alone are not as yet in the financial and knowledge position to operate single-handed. Collaborative retail market projects can be of tremendous value for us to improve our retail market conduct to fulfil the aspirations of the consumers in the emerging economy of the country. The government in this respect has played its role very diligently and within safe margins. The mandatory provision of investment in infrastructure, including cold stores and warehouses as well as cold chains, etc, will improve not only the retail sector but also wholesale markets on a stable basis. Further, the condition of more than 30 per cent purchase of commodities from small producers is the right decision and a good safeguard. As markets develop, this provision of 30 per cent will automatically increase as producers get accustomed to and trained in quality production as demanded by corporate stores.

As to the fate of small shop owners and vendors, they have their niche markets where customers are used to do bargaining and are treated on a personal level. Nowhere in the world have small shop owners and vendors gone out of business in the presence of corporate openings so

far. It is a misplaced fear. The only change that has occurred so far is that an element of price discipline has entered into their approach, which needs to be increased significantly through the creation of an alternative competitive market on an extensive scale.

One wonders why the government is restricting the spread of corporate retail and foreign direct investment to the cities having one million and more population only! It is unfortunate that opposition parties in our system of democracy are attuned to opposing any move by the government, howsoever good it might be for the public. Opposition for the sake of opposition is not good for any stakeholder. But who listens to logic in a vote-bank-oriented polity!

The writer, a former Vice-Chancellor of Punjabi University, Patiala, is a well-known agriculture economist.

Dearth of a salesman

Rajdeep Sardesai

‘Many said that Kentucky [Kentucky Fried Chicken] will drive the dhabas out of the market. The dhabas have driven out Kentucky. The Indian sherbet is still there despite Coca Cola and Pepsi. Don’t underestimate India.’ That was former NDA finance minister Jaswant Singh in 2004 when supporting FDI in retail.

“Fifty per cent of our population, comprising small traders, street vendors and the self-employed, sustain themselves through retail businesses. The UPA government wants to deprive them of livelihood by allowing FDI in multi-brand retail.” That was another former NDA finance minister Yashwant Sinha last week while protesting FDI in multi-brand retail.

What has really changed between 2004 and 2011 for two former finance ministers of the NDA to adopt such contrarian positions? Frankly, little. Except the fact that in 2004 the NDA under Atal Bihari Vajpayee was an alliance in power; now the NDA is a coalition in opposition, desperate to return to power at the earliest and looking for any opportunity to embarrass the ruling UPA. If in UPA 1, the NDA did a somersault on the India-US nuclear deal, thereby undermining the Vajpayee legacy on foreign policy, in UPA 2 it’s the economic agenda of the Vajpayee years that is in danger of being abandoned. The NDA alliance which in government pioneered the opening up of the economy in key areas to foreign investment now threatens to turn its back in opposition on the very reforms it once originated.

In a sense, the shift only exposes how contemporary politics is now almost entirely driven by convenience, not conviction. The logjam in Parliament highlights this. The Left, for example, has made common

cause with the BJP. Still recovering from the mauling it received in the West Bengal elections, the communists are trying to recapture their traditional ideological space by projecting FDI in retail as an ‘anti-poor’, Washington-dictated agenda. The fact, though, is that the Left’s street-fighting abilities have diminished with time. Its tired slogans and predictable rhetoric make it look increasingly like the party of the past rather than one with any stake in the future.

But while the Left may be a prisoner of ideology, what of the BJP, a party that right through the Vajpayee years had shown a refreshing willingness to balance its ideological moorings with a pragmatic approach to governance? When a Uma Bharti threatens to burn down Walmart stores, when its UP leadership attempts to revive the Ram Mandir campaign, when its national leaders have fanciful notions of bringing back black money to India, when even its reform-friendly leaders warn of dire consequences of enhancing foreign investment limits, then you begin to wonder if the BJP is being pulled back into the emotive and destructive politics of a previous generation.

The Congress, on the other hand, is also in a bind. Having scored a series of self-goals, from 2G to Anna to Telangana, an embattled Congress leadership has been looking to finally break free. As a result, it hastily pushed through the FDI in retail proposal without making any serious attempt to take either the Opposition, its coalition partners or even its own MPs into confidence. To have done so in the middle of a crucial winter session of Parliament was a move always fraught with risk. Political mismanagement and poor communication — the twin banes of UPA 2 — have now returned to haunt the government.

As for the regional parties, they have mastered the art of political brinkmanship. Take the DMK. In 2002, it was its commerce minister in the NDA government, Murasoli Maran, who had pushed for 100% FDI in retail. Today, with the 2G scam having grievously wounded the party,

the DMK is opposing FDI only to remind the UPA leadership that its support cannot be taken for granted.

Similarly, Mamata Banerjee knows that she may not be a permanent resident of the Delhi durbar. So while she has the clout, she is determined to leverage it. Banerjee isn't going to get into a polemical debate on FDI. Her constituency only knows one language: that of a 'paara' (neighbourhood) fight. And so for her too, the retail revolution is about the eternal search for an 'enemy', in this case the 'videshi' store. So, you have the absurdity of West Bengal finance minister Amit Mitra, who was lobbying for retail FDI as Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (Ficci) secretary general now doing a flip-flop in his new avatar.

Banerjee is not alone. The 15th Lok Sabha, represented by as many as 37 parties, has many streetfighters who choose rhetoric over reason. The result is that Parliament is in real danger of being reduced to a comatose institution. The statistics are frightening. In 1996, the 11th Lok Sabha saw just 9% of the total discussion time in Parliament being lost due to disruptions. The current Lok Sabha now has the distinction of being the most disrupted, with almost 25% of its sittings being stalled. In the 23 days of the 2010 winter session, the Lok Sabha met for seven hours. It's feared that the 2011 session may well be no different.

Is it any wonder then that a paralysed Parliament has sparked off a populist 'no work, no pay' chant among the chattering classes? Our MPs may not realise it, but there is a dangerous cynicism among the electorate that is threatening to spiral out of control.

We had a trailer of it during Anna Hazare's agitation in August when Parliament was besieged by street protests. That should have served as a warning that Parliament needs to get its act together, revive its legislative muscle and become a synthesiser of differing opinion rather than an arena of perpetual conflict. The time for grandstanding and

obstructionism is over. Remember, Anna is already threatening us with a sequel!

Rajdeep Sardesai is editor-in-chief, IBN 18 Network

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

On-line content delivery: changing landscape

J. Murali

New innovations are taking place in the realm of on-line content delivery. This edition of NetSpeak discusses the latest developments in this segment.

Our hunt for support resources begins the very moment we start learning a subject. In the pre-Net days, our options were limited to consulting a few experts in the neighbourhood and accessing text materials available in the local library.

For a student of this age, such restrictions do not apply. Now, she has multiple means to facilitate her learning endeavour (free text materials — textbooks, handouts, a plethora audio/video tutorials and several free on-line courses to cap it all).

To refresh your memory on the potential and depth of such materials, take a look at the 'Teacher Resources' section at the 'The U.S. National Archives' site <http://www.archives.gov/education/>. Here, you can locate a good collection of primary historical documents.

For instance, if someone is doing research on 'great depression', she may find document set 'Depression and World War II' (<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/depression-wwii.html>) immensely useful.

Though we witness a variety of learning resources, only a miniscule proportion of it is used. It seems, the concept of diminishing marginal utility comes into play here too.

This means, the value of each of the new units (here pedagogic content) is declining and that too with an alarming speed.

One common handicap of the current teaching aids is that they do not offer much room for the learner to interact with content. This lack of facility to practice/interact makes the learning process less exciting. Hence there is a need for radical changes in content delivery mechanism.

Content integrated with a built-in feedback mechanism could be one alternative. Along with the usual content, the creator should provide for checking if the learner has achieved the desired outcomes. It seems many providers have started realising this need.

The lecture videos and review questions pertaining to some of the free on-line courses from Stanford University (example: course on 'Machine Learning'- <http://www.ml-class.org/course/class/index>) represent this trend. Here, after introducing a concept, the video pauses, displays questions relating to the topic discussed and waits for an answer from the viewer. Of course, though these videos may not be ideal representations of interactive content, they are attempts in the right direction.

Codecademy

A little bit of programming knowledge is becoming a necessary skill to thrive in the modern age. In fact, this requirement cuts across almost all professions. For instance, many professionals these days own a blog. Given the availability of several free blogging platforms, floating a blog is not a big deal. However, if one wishes to customise the blog or enrich it with more features, a little bit of programming knowledge could come in handy.

The Net is agog with programming related resources; still many hesitate to learn this essential life skill. One reason for this apathy could be, as discussed above, the lack of interactive learning resources.

Being an applied subject, programming skills can be acquired only by regular practice. By simply reading a textbook or viewing a lecture

video alone one cannot learn the nuances of a programming language. We need a learning system that allows one to learn a subject by doing it. This is the context in which the new service Codecademy (<http://www.codecademy.com/>) chips in.

Codecademy (learn programming by coding) strives to facilitate learning 'how to program' by delivering the course in an interactive fashion. From the first session itself you start learning the topic by doing it. The course content is designed in such a way that you cannot move a bit unless you do some coding. This type of content delivery is certainly a deviation from the past — it helps you internalise the subject being learnt in a natural, effortless fashion. In addition, to motivate the student, the service offers rewards such as achievement badges and the like too.

Currently the site hosts only a few lessons on JavaScript. However, as per Zach Sims, one of the architects of this innovative service, new courses (such as the one on programming language 'Python') are in the offing. The Codecademy deals only with programming related topics; but this interactive method of content delivery can certainly be extended to other subjects as well.

Free music

Depending on one's state of mind she prefers to listen to a certain type of music. If you are a music lover, you may enjoy listening to the music streaming service stereomood (<http://stereomood.com/>) that allows you to listen to music that is in sync with your current mood.

Pointless - and showy

Srijana Mitra Das

Stating that our MPs need tablets to save on paper used in parliamentary communication is laughable. MPs seem to have come up with a much better way to save the environment - not doing much parliamentary work. Little paper gets used when you're stating 'House Adjourned' rather often. So, meriting an iPad at 50,000 rupees a head - paid for by you and i - just to cut down on those few words doesn't really wash.

For those who think [iPads](#) will help MPs access voluminous data easier, please note - across seven sessions since 2009, only 57 of the government's planned 200 Bills have been passed. Clearly, MPs have invented a better way to handle work challenges.

A [tablet](#) in hand would suit western-style politicians since they do remain in close touch with constituents, trying to address daily troubles and needs. For our MPs though, communication with the electorate is accomplished through an odd mix of regal tradition and impersonal modernity - long-winded public speeches heavily embroidered with self-praise, snaking queues of supplicants waiting outside their offices or short and snappy online tweets.

As most honourable members seem to be managing well on all three fronts - many even packing in chatty TV sessions every night despite such hectic days - an iPad each doesn't seem essential.

Finally, an iPad for our hierarchy-conscious public servants - already demanding a privilege upgrade to flashing red lights on their cars, thereby having citizens step humbly away from their convoys - will only add to an obsession with status.

Arguments about iPads being user-friendly, democratic personal knowledge instruments will only hit the wall when, like the typewriter and telephone, we'll find MPs' flunkys managing their iPads too. For every iPad, there'll be a 'You-Assistant'. Are you easy with paying hard-earned [tax](#) money towards all this? I know i'm not.

It will boost efficiency

Members of the Indian Parliament are notoriously [inept](#) when it comes to technology, many of them finding it difficult even to operate the personal computers they are provided. And that, counter-intuitive as it may sound, is why the decision to provide all of them with an allowance of Rs 50,000 to purchase tablet devices is a good idea.

The USP of [tablets](#) - the reason why they have become hugely popular in a span of just two years - is their extremely high level of user-friendliness, such that people who might not otherwise be comfortable with [technology](#) can pick one up and start using it without much difficulty. This being the case, surely it is worth the expense if it helps our legislators to do their jobs more effectively.

Granted, it's taxpayer money that will buy those tablets, and there is public discontent with Parliament's failure to function properly. But in the grand scheme, the expense is not very much at all. And that political manoeuvring is slowing down policy implementation doesn't mean that we should condemn politicians as a whole and refuse to provide them the tools they need to do the job we want them to.

The amount of documentation an MP must deal with - files, reports, debates, question lists - is massive. Mountains of paper accumulating in legislators' offices is not the best way for Parliament to function. Providing access to all of that in a slim hand-held device would streamline the entire process considerably and even incentivise our netas to do their homework. Their tech-wariness is also related to their refusal to adopt a modern approach to life, in general. Giving them a user-friendly device might just ease them into a logical, 21st century way of doing things.

INTERNATIONAL RELATION

Politics in Asia-Pacific
US makes impressive moves

T.V. Rajeswar

THE 6th annual East Asia Summit in Bali (Indonesia), held recently, witnessed the return of the US to the Asia-Pacific scene in a big way. By marking his attendance at Bali, President Obama became the first US President to attend a summit of East Asian leaders, a region that China sees as its rightful sphere of influence.

Since the end of World War-II, the US has always been at the centre-stage of Asian affairs but in recent years China has emerged as a regional power with worrying assertions in many areas, giving rise to serious apprehensions on the part of Asian nations. Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia have maritime as well as territorial disputes with China. China's unreasonable claim over the South China Sea has alarmed not only the Asian nations but also other powers which have a stake in Asia. It is in this context that President Obama's visit to Bali to attend the East Asia Summit was important. It signifies Washington's readiness to play its role as a strategic partner with countries like Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia.

President Obama and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced a security arrangement under which 250 marines — their number would be subsequently expanded to 2500 — would be stationed at Damien, at the northern-most part of Australia.

Before heading for Bali, President Obama was in Australia where he entered into a strategic pact with an agreement to station American forces at Australian forward bases like Darwin in the extreme north of

the country. The location of forces in Darwin would supplement and add extra muscle to the presence of American forces at Guam, south of China, where about 12,000 US marines are permanently stationed. The Guam base supplements the Okinawa base where the US has a larger force of marines, stationed ever since the end of World War-II.

President Obama said the agreement with Australia reflected the US stepping up its commitment to the Asia-Pacific region and it was not targeted at China. He went on to say that the notion that America feared China was mistaken. However, China showed its reservations and expressed the view that an increase in military alliances with the US would not be in the interest of the countries in the region. China also warned Australia that it risked harming its economic ties with China, which is Australia's largest trade partner, especially in respect of its minerals.

The US Defence Secretary, Leon Panetta, said that the goal of the new security pact was to signal that the US and Australia would stick together in the face of any threats. Panetta disclosed that in addition to the extended marine presence in Australia, more US aircraft will rotate through Australia as part of an agreement between each nation's air force. Australian Prime Minister Gillard said the increased air presence would allow the US and Australia to more effectively respond to natural disasters and humanitarian crises in the region. Obama told the Australian Parliament that the US intended to deter threats to peace in the Asia-Pacific region.

He also promised to help the Philippines with a second warship next year. It is noteworthy that Obama unveiled a plan for an expanded US marines' presence in the Pacific region and advocated a new free trade area that left out China and called on Beijing not to disturb the current world order. China responded by saying that the US was over-reacting. An analyst commented that China felt bewildered by the Obama initiative.

Moving Westwards, towards the crucial West Asian region, American presence in Afghanistan is now almost certain to continue beyond 2014 in one form or another. President Obama had announced long back that the American forces would be completely pulled out of Afghanistan by 2014. However, the US and Afghanistan are now entering into a strategic partnership which might come into effect when the US pulls out most of its forces. Limiting the US-Afghanistan strategic pact which would continue beyond 2014 was outlined by Afghan President Hamid Karzai before a “loya jirga” which consisted of 2200 elders from the various provinces and regions of Afghanistan.

Before the day-long jirga commenced on November 16, President Karzai told the elders that Afghanistan was looking for a long-term US troop presence after the NATO combat forces, including US troops, left the country. He said he wanted Afghan-US relations to be those of two independent countries and assured the neighbours like China and Russia that a long-term deal with the US would not affect Afghanistan’s ties with them. In his address to the jirga, Karzai said, “We want our national sovereignty and we want it today, and henceforth our relationship with America would be one of two independent countries.”

President Karzai said Afghanistan was willing to host US troops on a long-term basis since it would be in Afghanistan’s interest. Afghan forces would be trained and financial help would also be forthcoming.

The US insistence that it is not staking a permanent military presence and instead it is looking for ways to help Afghanistan’s security forces with intelligence sharing, air power and logistics beyond 2014. US officials said that a deal might involve shared facilities.

It is 10 years since the US-led NATO combat forces entered Afghanistan to deal with Al Qaida and Taliban forces. After the elimination of Osama bin Laden and containment of the Taliban, to a considerable degree, in Afghanistan as well as in the adjoining tribal region of

Pakistan, the larger military objective of the US has been, by and large, fulfilled.

President Karzai badly needs the US forces based in Afghanistan to beat back the Taliban, the Haqqani network and other insurgent groups operating out of their sanctuaries in Pakistan.

In the US itself, many are asking if it is necessary for America to prolong its costly and ineffectual military involvement there. However, even many in the Republican Party are saying that the US troops must stay on in Afghanistan until the job is done. Before the next round of international conference on Afghanistan in Berlin, Washington hopes to conclude a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan.

Taking a holistic view of the US presence in the Asia-Pacific region, it is almost certain that the US and possibly a section of the NATO military forces would continue to remain in Afghanistan in some form with no time limit — whether it is for training purposes or for sharing intelligence. The base in Afghanistan is indispensable for the US. In the Asia-Pacific region, the US has made its return in an effective manner and this is likely to continue without any time limit. All countries in Asia as well as the Asia-Pacific region welcome the US presence, with the sole exception of China, which is understandable.

The writer, a former chief of the Intelligence Bureau, was the Governor of UP and West Bengal

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

Ailing Parliament

Disruption of proceedings not part of MPs' duty

P.D.T. Achary

WE, the people of India, have given ourselves a Constitution which represents the societal consensus on the philosophy, direction and instrumentalities of governance of the republic. Parliament is the pre-eminent institution created by this Constitution which symbolises the will and aspirations of the people of India. This hallowed institution was instrumental in ushering in a social revolution in this tradition-bound country through epoch-making pieces of legislation. This is the forum where a thousand flowers of ideas should bloom. This is a forum where the clash of ideas and concepts should stimulate the minds.

Today, Parliament is grappling with the problem of its not being allowed to function. Society has expressed its serious concern over this state of affairs. However, the two Houses remain paralysed essentially because of a perceptual distortion characterised by a strange belief that debate and discussion are perhaps not the effective methods to highlight a problem and that disruptive action will yield better result. The result is that Parliament remains dysfunctional and the public disenchantment with this institution is growing.

What has gone wrong with our Parliament? This question is being raised from all corners of the country day after day. Parliament is the shining symbol of democratic India and it is entrusted with reshaping the destiny of over one billion people. A member of Parliament, before taking his seat in the House, has to take an oath which requires him to solemnly state, "I will fully discharge the duty upon which I am about to enter." The duty he has to perform involves participation in the solemn work which the Constitution entrusts Parliament. Disruption of the proceedings of the House is certainly not a part of the duty of a member

of Parliament. In fact, it violates the solemn undertaking a member gives to the people before taking his seat in the House.

Members coming to the well of the House, shouting slogans and forcing adjournment of the House were unheard of in earlier times. We have witnessed scintillating debates by eminent men and women adorning the benches on both sides of the Houses. We have seen men of outstanding intellect locking horns, producing more light than heat. We have seen an abundance of goodwill for each other even when political affiliations bring them face to face in the House. There was always a consensus on the need to run the House. Even in the midst of bitter and uncompromising fight on issues, this consensus seldom broke down.

The phenomenon of disruption and forced adjournment of the House became more and more visible since the late eighties. Perhaps the growing aggressiveness and intolerance in politics, changing power equations, resulting in the emergence of new political formations without a pan-Indian appeal, a growing perception about what is often called the unresponsiveness of the establishment — all these and many more complex factors influenced the minds of our law makers to leave debate and resort to direct action to make their point. Very often it has been found that the leadership of political parties would decide that the House should not function on a particular day and ask their members not to allow the House to run on that day. But it must be said “in fairness” that some party leaders meet the presiding officers in advance and inform them that they would not allow the House to function on that day. Even a four-member party in Parliament can force the adjournment of either of the two Houses for the day although a majority of the members want the Houses to function. There is a strange kind of helplessness all around which one is unable to comprehend.

Management of Parliament is an extremely difficult job which requires a great deal of maturity, tact and wisdom. When there are more than 37 political parties represented in Parliament, it calls for exceptional skills

to bring them round and ensure peace in the House. There have been serious debates in many forums on how to deal with the frequent disruptions of Parliament. However, these debates and other efforts have not led to any visible impact so far. In 2010 an entire session of Parliament was washed out on the issue of the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) which, of course, came to be formed subsequently. According to a calculation made by the Secretariat of the House of the people, disruption of the House for a day costs the public exchequer Rs 1.57 crore. Apart from the monetary cost, the cost in terms of important legislation which could not be made and other constitutional or procedural measures which could not be taken is enormous.

How can Parliament be salvaged from this mess? One suggestion which came up in this context was that the members who force the adjournment of the House should suffer monetary loss. It, somehow, did not find favour with political parties. A penalty of this kind, perhaps, does not suit Indian parliamentarians. We pride ourselves in being a mature democracy although the legislators' conduct at times raises serious doubts about this claim. Large-scale suspension of members who disrupt the proceedings does not seem to be a workable option. What is required first is to restore the consensus on the need to run the House. There is at present an unexplainable pride in bringing the House to a standstill or forcing its adjournment. This mindset needs to be changed.

The House has the genius to synthesise contradictions. This needs to be re-discovered. In fact, an in-house mechanism could be thought of for dealing with the problem of disruption of the House. Members have to be brought back to the path of debate. Such a mechanism could be in the nature of a special committee with the presiding officer of each House as the chairman and leaders of all political parties represented in Parliament and representatives of the government at senior levels as member to deal with the issues which lead to disruption of the Houses. Collective pressure can be brought to bear on the party or parties which are planning to disrupt the House.

The offices of the Prime Minister, the Speaker and the Leader of Opposition are invested with great moral authority which should be harnessed for restoring the consensus. The Prime Minister may also attend a meeting of this committee whenever it becomes necessary. This will have a tremendous psychological impact on the leaders. A proper response from the government on the issue which is likely to lead to disruption, assurances about an opportunity for discussion in the House under appropriate rules, pressure from political leaders, judicious intervention by the Prime Minister, persuasive pressure from the presiding officer of the House concerned, etc, will have an impact on the parties which have a plan to disrupt the House. This mechanism can be given a try. Of course, it may take some time for the members to change their thinking and get back to orderly debate. But ultimately the House will have to come back to the path of debate and discussion as on the day of reckoning the members will have to tell the people what they have done for them.

It is true that the presiding officers of the Houses are vested with all the necessary powers to ensure their smooth functioning. But taking a larger view of things, they have generally refrained from using those powers which include summary suspension of the members who disrupt the House. They seem to have taken the view that what happens in many Assemblies should not happen in Parliament. However, it cannot be anybody's case that continuous disruption of the Houses of Parliament has the approval of society. So, a certain approach will have to be devised to bring back normalcy in the two Houses in case collective efforts fail.

As a matter of fact, disruption and forced adjournment constitute a violation of the privileges of members in the sense that they are being prevented from discharging their parliamentary duties. It is a moot point whether such cases can be referred to the Privileges Committee of the House for an appropriate recommendation. The House in its collective wisdom can take action accordingly to ensure its smooth functioning. It

is a wrong notion that it is the duty of only one section of the House to do so. It is the responsibility of each party and each member to see that the House functions because only then can they perform their duty which the Constitution has entrusted them with. And they are oath-bound to do so.

The writer is a former Secretary-General of the Lok Sabha.

Real leaders have become rare

Shashi Shekhar

In a democracy, there is never a shortage of 'leaders'. But most of them do not have either the vision or the conviction to translate their vision into reality.

They are caught up in parochial politics of caste and religion and fail to take bold decisions that are good for the country. The few who have transcended these petty considerations are the ones who will be remembered for their positive contribution to the nation

Former President APJ Abdul Kalam's remarks this week to a group of civil servants at the Union Public Service Commission's Foundation Day make an interesting point on the kind of political leadership India needs. Speaking on why 'creative leadership' was the key to delivering on the promise of good governance, Mr Kalam in his speech went on to list nine traits of leadership that he felt characterised a creative leader. That list of nine traits is instructive not just for what was in the list, but also for how little of that list is visible in New Delhi's political circles.

The irony of that deficit in creative leadership was perhaps not lost on the former President, as his speech went on to draw reference to various leaders as role models for each of the nine dimensions of leadership his speech dwelt on. He named technocrats like MS Swaminathan and E Sreedharan, and scientists such as Vikram Sarabhai. But just two political leaders, both former Prime Ministers, figured in his list. One of them is dead and the other is no longer active in politics.

It is a different matter that a third, unnamed politician, the only one currently in office, who is not based in Delhi, got all the press, and

predictably so, as Mr Kalam went on to highlight that leader's initiative as an example of transparency in leadership.

It is worth enumerating that the former President's list of nine traits characterising 'creative leadership' reminded us on how low we have set the bar on leadership. Mr Kalam's list starts with the need for a vision followed by a need for passion to realise that vision. While there is no dearth of those who claim to have a vision, the past seven years of UPA governance have revealed few leaders with the passion and energy to motivate others mobilise what it takes to realise their stated vision.

Next in Mr Kalam's list is the need for leaders who are not afraid of exploring unfamiliar terrain. The defensive play-safe manner in which the BJP leadership has conducted itself since the debacle in 2004 is a reminder of how critical this leadership trait is in making the difference between winning and losing. It is no surprise that Mr Kalam goes on to put a high premium on the ability to manage both success and failure as a critical component of effective leadership. The conduct of the BJP's central leadership over the past few years when it comes to economic issues, including the recent reactions on the issue of foreign direct investment in retail, is a reflection of a serious deficit on this count.

The former President then goes on to list out the need for a creative leader to be able to take bold decisions while being noble in managing the consequences of his or her decisions. It must be said that Mr Kalam is perhaps the only person with stature in the country who can rise above the partisan divide to point to statesmanship without being accused of sycophancy.

It is fitting that he chose to highlight former Prime Ministers PV Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee for their boldness and statesmanship. One may dismiss this praise as being primarily on account of his having served in both of those regimes. But there is a deeper significance, in that both were grassroots achievers like Mr

Kalam, who did not owe their success to lineage or family. Of the three remaining traits that includes integrity and transparency, it is on the dimension of transparency that Mr Kalam's speech takes a curious turn, with its reference to a unique initiative by the Government of Gujarat on taking development to rural India without quite naming its chief architect, State's Chief Minister Narendra Modi.

Mr Kalam goes on to conclude his speech with some inspiring words from Rishi Patanjali on why one must be inspired by a sense of purpose to breakthrough inhibitions and obstacles. Five years on since he demitted office, Mr Kalam continues to be an inspirational figure with his unique personality that blends the modern with the ancient while transcending the petty communal identity politics that have plagued India for over six decades.

His absence on the national scene was acutely felt a few months back when Delhi was held hostage by agenda-driven blackmailers. It is a reflection on how low the bar was set on his successor that one has little to say or quote of her lackadaisical term in office that thankfully should end in a few months.

While Mr Kalam remains a figure who stands tall far above the partisan divide, his speech in Delhi on the UPSC Foundation Day event has a deeper political message. Post-independent India has seen broadly four types of leaders emerge.

First, we have many leaders who were products of agitational politics, many of who continue to dot leadership positions in Delhi with little to show by way of institution building or creative contribution in the sphere of governance. Then, of course, are many generations of leaders who owe their station to family and lineage, and who will be remembered for having inflicted the greatest damage on institutions. The third ones are the products of identity politics of the caste, language or regional variety that are icons of political empowerment but have mostly failed to

transcend identity fault-lines.

Lastly we have a few grassroots achievers who have been able to make the transition from agitations to institution building to make lasting contributions in the sphere of governance.

As Mr Kalam speaks of creative leadership and its nine dimensions, it is clear that he is subtly referring to, not by name but by example, that this fourth type of leadership is the acute need of the hour.