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CONSUMER

Indian consumers most eco-friendly, finds global survey

TNN

NEW DELHI: The rest of the world may well turn green with envy. India has the most sustainable consumption pattern, says a 17-nation survey on consumer behaviour and environmental impact.

Over the past two years, Indians have shown increasing environmentally friendly behaviour, the study, released on Thursday, shows. India scored 62.6 points in the overall green index to retain top rank. Brazil (58) came second, followed by China (57.3). The US, among the most energy-guzzling countries in the world, finished last with a score of 45.

The survey, Greendex 2010: Consumer Choice and the Environment — A World Tracking Survey, was carried out by National Geographic Society and international polling firm GlobeScan. First conducted in 2008, it is a comprehensive measure of consumer behaviour in 65 areas relating to housing, transportation, food and consumer goods.

Greendex 2010 ranked average consumers according to environmental impacts of their consumption patterns. It measured transportation patterns, household energy and resource use, consumption of food and everyday consumer goods.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Filling the information gaps

Mythili Bhusnurmath

The global financial crisis has been a wake-up call to policymakers the world over. The unprecedented scale and complexity of the crisis is such

that it is unlikely you will ever find experts agreeing completely either on the factors that led to the crisis or, more importantly, possible safeguards against a future recurrence.

Was it poor regulation? Overly loose US monetary policy? Underlying global imbalances? The use of opaque and complex credit derivatives? Faulty executive remuneration models? Blind faith in market forces, to list just some of the factors touted as responsible for the spectacular meltdown in the global economy witnessed since the Great Depression?

The jury is still out on the precise factors or combination of factors responsible for the crisis. But there is one issue on which there is rare unanimity among the wise men of international finance: the collateral damage caused by poor regulation of systematically-important financial institutions (SIFs). Following from this the next question is, what sort of information do we need about SIFs to ensure proper regulation?

The Bank for International Settlements (BIS) has identified information gaps in five areas as critical for better regulation of SIFs and containing future crises. Regulators, for instance, have little or no information

about the consolidated balance sheet of systemically important financial entities , their liabilities, their currency exposures , degree of interconnectedness and about non-bank financial entities such as off-balance sheet special investment vehicles , pension funds, insurance funds, etc.

Yet each of these has a vital bearing on the final outcome of any regulatory effort. For instance, cross holdings between companies are now the norm rather than the exception. However, most of the data collected and monitored by regulators is on individual companies.

The danger in this is that we could end up losing the wood for the trees. Thus, a financial conglomerate with interests in diverse fields such as banking, insurance, pensions, asset management and so on could well be submitting information on different aspects of its business to different regulators. And while an individual company may not be systemically important, the group as a whole could well be; but since it is not tracked as a conglomerate its importance is not fully appreciated.

Fortunately for us, the RBI, to its credit, has been alive to the dangers of this kind of a disaggregated approach. Hence its insistence on the holding company model for financial institutions; ring-fencing commercial banks to keep them immune from the consequences of the activities of related entities. However, the importance of consolidated balance sheets is yet to be fully appreciated even by the RBI.

This is relevant since over the years corporate structures have become more complicated . The ramifications of inter-connected dealings can best be assessed from consolidated balance sheets. As the BIS points out, 'the inability to "see" the consolidated balance sheet, either at the individual bank level or at the headquarter country level, means that the build-up of stresses at the systemic level cannot be monitored' .

Another information gap the crisis has highlighted relates to the

liabilities' side of bank balance sheets. In the past, analysts tracking the health of banks invariably focused only on assets — the quality of loan portfolios, share of NPAs, interest-sensitivity of investment portfolios and so on.

Little or no attention was paid to the liabilities' side of bank balance sheets. Nor was there any appreciation of the difference between banks that depended heavily on inter-bank deposits, non-bank money market funds and wholesale deposits from large companies as distinct from those that depended on retail deposits; until the former collapsed when short-term money markets froze. Northern Rock is a case in point.

HERE again, the RBI has been ahead of its counterparts in the developed world in emphasising the need for a good 'retail deposit base' and frowning on the dependence of foreign banks on the short-term money market. Yet we cannot really "see" any of these markets in our aggregate data. And when we cannot see them, we cannot assess the degree of maturity mismatch embedded in the system. But the trend in relying on money market liabilities and building a deposit base can be detected through regular off-site monitoring of banks.

The exposure of banks to different currencies especially off-balance sheet exposures is another challenge. In the past adventurism often went way beyond the dictates of prudence primarily on account of two factors. One, the pressure on managers to earn their bonuses and two, the fact that much can be hidden in off-balance sheet exposures.

The problem here is that the position is never static, so central banks will have to develop a 'sixth sense' and learn to recognise warning signals keeping in mind intangible aspects such as the culture of different SIFs. A Citi or ICICI Bank, for instance, is quite different from a State Bank of India and that difference will need to be kept in mind by regulators.

The degree of interconnectedness of SIFs is another key indicator for measuring systemic importance. Bilateral interbank liabilities and system-wide aggregate exposures to particular counterparties are indicators of the inter-connectedness . Collection of such data is a challenge, but realisation by central banks of the importance of this is a first step.

Pre-crisis , off-balance sheet entities such as structured investment vehicles (SIVs) obscured the build-up of stresses in the financial system and exacerbated the problems when they had to be moved back onto banks' balance sheets. Therefore , non-bank companies particularly, pension funds, insurance companies and large corporates — should not be excluded from systemic monitoring exercises. NBFCs are now on the RBI's radar and the bank does identify systemically important NBFCs and subject them to closer monitoring . But not large corporates. Is it possible to monitor such companies? Is it necessary to bail out non-banks ?

These are issues that are as yet unresolved . In the meanwhile even as central banks fill the information gaps identified by BIS they would do well to develop the skills needed to track and recognise warning signals . No amount of data can fill in for that!

What is true at the level of individual SIFs is also true at the national level. Statistics compiled by national authorities, the IMF, the OECD and the BIS do not provide a complete picture. For example, the flow of funds statistics, the balance of payments statistics, the IMF's Coordinated Portfolio Investment Survey and the BIS locational banking statistics all rely on residencybased data. Such data are insufficient for identifying vulnerabilities in any particular consolidated national banking system.

ECONOMIC TIMES 2.6.10 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

A welcome reform

ET Bureau

The Centre's move to draft a model law for the states to adopt, transforming the way land ownership is recorded by doing away with deeds and

directly registering the title to a piece of land, is a stellar piece of reform. When this is implemented, India will dump the cumbersome, antiquated system of establishing ownership through a chain of titles — a series of deeds that trace the change of ownership from the original transfer from the sovereign to the present — to the Torrens system of direct registration of title in a central registry. Under the proposed system, all parcels of land will be identified and entered into a register, with an owner specified.

The state would guarantee ownership. When the owner sells his piece of land, the name of the owner would change in the register. If there is a dispute, it would go to a tribunal. Clean, state government-guaranteed titles have remained a challenge so far. The Land Titling Bill, 2010, would fill this lacuna and provide compensation for losses arising from inaccurate property titles.

It would have a multiplier effect: reduce litigation across the country, ensure transparency, improve governance, revenues and productivity of capital. Industry will also find it easier to acquire land when ownership is not in doubt.

Land is a state subject and, therefore, state governments hold the key to implementing land market reforms. Some of them have already been captured in electronic form records of land ownership. But what have been electronically recorded are the deeds. Guaranteeing titles will take transparency to a new level.

The Bill requires every state to set up a Land Titling Authority to write rules, create and update the register of titles , assign a unique identity number to each piece of immovable property and provide valuation details, if need be. It would be useful for the authority to also compile data on users of land, even when these are not owners, such as forest dwellers. This would come in handy when issues of compensation arise on land acquisition.

Strong growth last fiscal

ET Bureau

Neither drought nor global crisis can hold the Indian economy down, reveal the latest output numbers released by the Central Statistical Organisation (CSO). Growth has not only gained momentum, but has overcome concerns of sustainability, with reinvigorated investment, particularly in the last quarter. Sustained strengthening of manufacturing through the four quarters of 2009-10, and particularly in the fourth, after a subdued performance in the preceding year, pushed growth to 7.4% for the full year, higher than the 7.2% forecast in the advance estimates. Manufacturing output rose 10.8%, helped a little by the base effect and in large part by the return of business and consumer confidence. But the rise in industrial output was initially a function of higher capacity utilisation, rather than of new capacity addition, till the investment surge of 17.7% in Q4.

Equally important was the one-time contribution of the mining and quarrying sector, which reported a huge 10.6% jump, thanks mostly to the KG basin fields which started pumping gas in April 2009 and the Barmer oilfield, which started producing crude in August. This hydrocarbon bounty will be part of the base when 2010-11 growth is

measured. Just as the Pay Commission payout was already built into the base for the 'community, social and personal services' sector for the latter half of the last fiscal, lowering growth in the last two quarters to 0.8% and 1.6% from 7.6% and 14% in the first two quarters. The better-than-expected performance of 'trade, hotels, transport and communication' as well as strong showing of 'financing, insurance, real estate and business services' show entrenched growth. The onset of the monsoon over Kerala on Monday too augurs well for growth, and for food prices.

Yet, there is no room for complacency. Inflation is a real risk, and hardening commodity prices can hurt growth without adequate policy intervention. The depth of the crisis in Europe remains an unknown. In such a situation, growth would need to be supported and the monetary measures to cool inflation, less than 5% economywide, would need to be used cautiously.

EDUCATION

ECONOMIC TIMES 3.6.10 EDUCATION

A matter of degree, not kind

Jaideep Mishra

It is notable that 175 years after Macaulay's minute on education, which led to monumental changes in pedagogy and learning here, things remain very

much in a state of flux. Now, in calling for changing the medium of public instruction from 'Sanskrit and Arabic' to english, and its contents metamorphosed from 'sacred books' to, generally speaking, 'the poetry of Milton, the metaphysics of Locke, and the physics of Newton,' Macaulay was of course prejudiced, conceited and plain biased. But it cannot be gainsaid that he was a public policy enthusiast with remarkable vision. As we contemplate path-breaking reform in the domain of higher education, holistic policy design needs to be the watchword. For instance, it is welcome indeed that the mavens seek to integrate the various streams under a single, overall umbrella for proper oversight and genuine cross-fertilisation of ideas.

However in tandem, there is no reason why all first degrees, across streams, need not be the BA, as is very much the norm in the ancient universities. Our educational institutes do need to aim at being world-class of course, and we cannot any longer afford to remain content with

a few holiest of the holy centres of learning which anyway contribute precious little to domain knowledge and thought. The point is to improve standards across the board, with stress on inculcating new knowledge and practices. But in tandem, we surely need uniform nomenclature for the first degree. It would bring about much-needed inclusiveness across disciplines. And with common degree certificates and honours grades, graduates can look forward to postgraduate education in law, business and medicine. The world's leading universities follow such a system.

It is also notable that Macaulay based his reasoning on facts and analysis, although the unabashedly superior tone in the minute certainly seems quite uncalled for. After all, it is a no brainer that higher attainments in industry and commerce also tend to show up in parallel literary achievements. In his note, he was, as chair of the Committee on Public Instruction, excised over what in today's parlance can be called the cost-benefit ratio of public education. There was a 'lakh of rupees' at the committee's disposal, we gather. But the expenses were thoroughly questionable, it is averred.

The policy hitherto had been to provide stipends to students enrolled in 'Arabic and Sanscrit' colleges. Macaulay cites the figure for December, 1833. 'The whole amount paid to them is above Rs 500 a month', it's surmised. And what is the fruit of all this? A petition was presented last year to the committee by several ex-students of the Sanscrit College, it is revealed. And the petitioners are said to have added, "we have but little prospect of bettering our condition without the kind assistance of your honourable committee..." They have wasted the best years of life in learning what procures for them neither bread nor respect, adds Macaulay. We might with advantage have saved the cost of making these persons useless and miserable, he concludes.

And those who learn 'English are willing to pay us,' the minute

enunciates. The amount realised from the 'out-students of English for the months of May, June, and July last — Rs 103', it is documented. The point made is the pressing need for up-to-date knowledge, skills and broad-based learning.

Fast-forward to the here and now, and it is indeed welcome that the proposed National Commission for Higher Education and Research is to replace the stodgy UGC and the corruption-ridden All India Council for Technical Education. It also makes perfect sense to include purview for medical and legal education in the commission.

In the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the first degree remains the BA, never mind if one reads history, land economy or engineering. There is certainly a case for professional bodies to retain accreditation functions. But the idea of a uniformly termed first degree, with a common system of markings, grades and 'classification,' cannot really be faulted. Besides, we do need to set up new institutes where students can read various subjects all under one roof. In this day and age, when knowledge is a clear source of competitive advantage, compartmentalisation just makes no sense.

ENVIRONMENT

TIMES OF INDIA 5.6.10 ENVIRONMENT

How Green Is Our Growth

Jairam Ramesh

Environment and development must go hand in hand. Who can disagree with this? But what is good in theory becomes contentious in practice. Sometimes a project will receive a "yes" from the ministry of environment and forests (MoE&F). Sometimes, the response will be a "yes, but" with safeguards being stipulated for the project to proceed indeed the large majority of the projects receive one of these responses. But there will be occasions when a definitive "no" will have to be said.

Over three decades ago, Indira Gandhi, unarguably the greatest environmentalist we have had in our political class, was loud and clear on Silent Valley. But thereafter such instances have been few and far between. With India now on a high economic growth trajectory and with the need to ensure that we stay on that path, safeguards, conditions and even Silent Valley-type trade-offs are coming into increasing

prominence. No longer can we take solace in what S Radhakrishnan had once pithily summarised as the essence of our culture: "Why look at things in terms of this or that? Why not try to have both this and that".

How do we address such situations where deliberate and difficult choices are imperative? While i believe that no generalisation is possible since each case of environmental or biodiversity impact is sui generis, certain principles and guidelines can certainly be adopted.

First, we need to move to rules-based approaches and rely less on discretion-based decision-making. A good example of this is what has been initiated for identifying the prima facie "go/no-go" areas for coal mining. Nine major coalfields have been analysed and digitised maps showing their overlap with forest areas have been put in the public domain. The exercise is aimed to facilitate rules-based, transparent and objective granting of forestry clearance to coal blocks based on a "go/no-go" concept in the future. This exercise is being extended to other coalfields and other mineral sectors, particularly iron ore.

Second, we need massive institutional strengthening of the entire environmental governance system. Parliament has passed the National Green Tribunal Bill recently. This will function as a dedicated and specialised environmental court system accessible to all citizens. A national environmental protection authority to strengthen field-level monitoring and compliance capabilities is on the anvil as is the technical and organisational strengthening of the Central Pollution Control Board and its counterparts in states. In the MoE&F itself, steps have been taken to clean up internal processes, whether they relate to the composition of the environmental clearance committees or the process of decision-making or strengthening the scientific capacity of the ministry.

Third, we need to embrace proactive transparency in a major way going well beyond what is required under the RTI. All information from within the MoE&F policies, new proposals, monitoring reports, impact assessment is today put on the website almost immediately. Directions

have also been issued to ensure that local elected bodies and local civil society groups have the information they are entitled to as a matter of right and not as a favour being done to them. The public is our best monitoring mechanism keeping us accountable to our targets and ensuring enforcement and compliance at the grassroots, where we are weak. Such actions greatly strengthen the hand of the public in its monitoring function.

Fourth, the trade-offs, wherever they arise, must be made explicit and a larger consensus created on the best way to move ahead. In deciding on the future course of action on Bt-brinjal, for instance, we followed this approach laboriously, having a series of large, inclusive public and expert consultations before announcing a decision on its commercialisation. The entire set of facts, opinions, communications, proceedings, etc, related to the decision was made public. The decision has received both bouquets and brickbats but that is inevitable.

Fifth, we have to think of innovative financial mechanisms that marry the imperatives of growth with that of ecological security. In 2002, we made a great start when the Supreme Court intervened and directed the constitution of a Compensatory Afforestation Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA). CAMPA is a 'vehicle' created to encourage reforestation, by asking project proponents to deposit with the government a certain amount equivalent to the social and economic value of the forest land being diverted for the project. A total amount of Rs 11,000 crore has been collected in this manner over the past seven years. A more recent, but equally important example of a similar innovation is of the national clean energy fund announced by the finance minister in his Budget speech this year. The underlying proposal is to levy a clean energy cess on coal, at a rate of Rs 50 per tonne. This money will be used for funding research and innovative projects in clean energy technologies and also for environmental management of critically polluted areas. In an address at the national conference of ministers of environment and forests in New Delhi last August, the

prime minister had rightly observed: "We are still at early stages of industrialisation and urbanisation...We can and we must walk a different road, an environment-friendly road." We must persevere on this road in spite of the opposition it is bound to generate only then will high growth also be sustainable and inclusive growth.

The writer is Union minister of state for environment and forests.

INTERNATIONAL RELATION

TIMES OF INDIA 4.6.10 INTERNATIONAL RELATION

Partnership Of Democracies

HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

This week, a delegation from India's government arrived in Washington for the first-ever strategic dialogue between India and the United States. This was no routine meeting. It was the culmination of years of intensive engagement between our countries engagement that will grow even deeper as we confront the urgent global, regional and local challenges of this era.

India is the world's largest democracy, one of its fastest growing economies and a rising power in Asia and beyond. It has vibrant democratic institutions, a free press, robust civil society, an innovative private sector and tens of millions of citizens whose talents have yet to be fully realised. It is also a model of democratic development that has lifted millions of people out of poverty by widening access to the tools of opportunity education, healthcare, food, water and jobs.

India's rise is a defining storyline of early 21st century. And as President Barack Obama has said, India is an indispensable partner to the US. Given the complexity of the challenges we face and the values we share, the US-India partnership is critical to our mutual progress.

Through our strategic dialogue, we are expanding our cooperation on global issues on which India can and must play a leading role, including climate change, nuclear non-proliferation and food security. Already, India has taken important steps. Last year, it helped shape the Copenhagen Accord and pledged to lower its greenhouse gas emissions intensity by up to 25 per cent by 2020. During Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Washington in November, he and President Obama launched the partnership to advance clean energy, to bring Indian and American scientists together to develop and deploy technologies that reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.

Our nations are advancing global security by working together on counterterrorism and nuclear non-proliferation, building on the US-India civilian nuclear cooperation initiative. At the nuclear security summit in April, Prime Minister Singh announced that India will create a Global Centre for Nuclear Energy Partnership to train scientists from other countries in nuclear safety an important contribution to our common security and to achieving a world free of nuclear weapons.

India and the US are also working together on the challenge of global hunger and food insecurity. Fifty years ago, India's Green Revolution saved millions of lives and transformed India's economy. A similar transformation is needed today in other parts of the world, especially Africa. Indian and American scientists are developing new seeds and pesticides to boost crop yields, which will save lives and lift farmers' fortunes including in India's rural regions.

Meanwhile, India is as an anchor of stability and economic growth in

Asia. Its leadership will be critical to solving regional challenges most urgently, securing Afghanistan's future. India, the US and countries worldwide have a stake in a stable Afghanistan. India has provided \$1.3 billion in assistance to Afghanistan; India is building the new parliament building; and Indian and American groups are working together to help Afghan engineers bring 24-hour electricity to Kabul.

India is an Asian power, and a secure, prosperous Asia is critical to a secure, prosperous world. The US wants to work with India to create an open and inclusive regional architecture that makes it possible for all countries in Asia to rise and prosper. Toward that vision, we are called to promote trade, protect vital sea lanes and respond to natural disasters.

Apart from our cooperation on global and regional issues, the US also remains committed to a strong bilateral relationship with India, built on the ties that connect our governments, private sectors, civil societies, universities and citizens.

One example is education. More than 1,00,000 Indian students study in the US. We want an equal number of Americans to study at Indian universities, and for the educational partnerships between our nations to expand. To that end, we have nearly tripled the number of Fulbright-Nehru Fellowship scholars during the last two years. The new Obama-Singh 21st Century Knowledge Initiative will build partnerships between Indian and American universities. And India is now poised to undertake a significant educational reform: allowing foreign universities to open campuses in India.

Our economic and financial partnerships are also growing, helping India move closer to its development goals. To deepen these ties, Washington and New Delhi are called to emulate the entrepreneurial spirit of Manhattan and Mumbai by reducing barriers to trade and investment, which will open markets and create jobs in both countries.

The relationship between India and the US goes back generations and has enriched the lives of millions of our people. Today, our partnership of democracies is shaping the world of the 21st century. Together, we can achieve great things for our citizens and for people everywhere. This is our opportunity and our responsibility.

The writer is US secretary of state.

MASS MEDIA

Manipulating Media - Ten Easy Tips

Santosh Desai

The stronger media gets, the easier it becomes to manipulate it. For all the screechy aggression, we see particularly on television, it works on some rudimentary principles. Here are some easy ways to use television to your advantage.

1. Use strong language and splutter frequently with contrived rage. This makes for intense television, and gives the audience a vicarious sense of power. Sock it to 'em, viewers intone with glazed eyes as a panelist rubbishes another. Intemperate language is a must if you want to be on TV. Ask Varun Gandhi. When was he on our screens before or after?
2. Don't worry about the content of what you say, just speak very loudly and be sure to interrupt the moderator. Remember, his or her primary role is to interrupt the other panelist loudly and frequently and this is war. Nobody will remember what you say in any case, they will only remember how noisy you were. If you do not let others be heard, you win. Of course, the moderator will always win.

3. Use twitter. The same thing said on twitter needs fewer words, little knowledge of grammar, no justification and is for some reason, very cool and new age. You will attract many followers and in the event of the mournful demise of your career because of a twitchy twitter finger, you will be hailed as a new age politician or sports administrator. If you are a celebrity, make sure that the twitter-twitter of your messages includes other celebrities. If you do this, media gets two celebrities for the price of one in a headline.

4. Give television channels something to show. Filling up hours of time is not easy and there are only so many film star spats to cover in slow motion. It helps of course if you are attractive, or a celebrity, but if you are not hang out with those who are. In the worst case, do something that can be shot. Break some windows, if no other ideas spring to mind. Conversely, if you are the subject of a controversy, make sure you give channels nothing interesting to show. Dry up visuals and the story will sooner or later, die.

5. Get outraged easily and publicly. Call yourself an organization, give it a righteous sounding name and launch attacks on cricketers, film stars and any new film. You have to do very little to be on all national channels- maybe rough up a few completely innocent people, file a case in an obscure court thirsting to issue warrants to Sania Mirza, Mandira Bedi or Khushboo or announce a boycott, if you cannot rustle up a fatwa. Don't waste your time getting outraged about things that actually matter- nobody wants to cover thousands protesting against lack of drinking water, but four people talking about the insult to bhangra make for better television.

6. Say nothing deep on television. In particular, do not appear as if you are thinking about you are going to say. Blurt out the first thing that comes to your head and make sure to speak continuously without any pauses. Thinking is dangerous and has extremely limited visual appeal. Besides, it takes up too much time.

7. Always blame someone. Focus on people not issues. Television is about people, not things. And it is about blame, not understanding. Who is responsible, the moderator will thunder. Thunder back. When someone attacks you for something wrong you have done, do not attempt to respond. Instead attack them for whatever wrong they have done. If they bring up Gujarat, it is foolish to try and reply. Bring up Delhi 1984 instead. The fun thing about this game is that it can go on endlessly. After all, both sides are hardly likely to run out of ammunition.

8. Deny wrongdoing stoutly. It doesn't matter if you are caught accepting a bribe on camera, or have slapped a junior officer in public, or have described the minority community in inappropriate terms on national television, dismiss it as a conspiracy. Thanks to the rumours about the progress made by digital technology, we no longer believe our eyes or ears. It can all be attributed to technological manipulation. If for some reason, you have to apologise, remember you can get away by saying anything as long as you use the word 'sorry' in the sentence. "I am sorry about the way my remarks were misconstrued and I regret the offence caused by any misunderstanding that might have occurred", for instance is a great way of seemingly apologizing while calling everyone else idiots for not understanding what you said.

9. When attacked, do not defend yourself on the substance of the attack. Seek refuge instead in an emotionally resonant collective identity. This is a good time to remember that you are a dalit, a woman in a man's world or a Malayali proud of his heritage. An attack on you is an attack on your collective. It works even better if you can use some local word like manoos or asmita.

10. If everything fails, wait. The media gets bored easily. Either offer them tedious explanations or just lie low. You will be forgotten, and even better be remembered only for being once famous. The more brazen you are, the more you will be respected. In this country everybody gets a second chance. You can be captain of your cricket team, fix matches and still get to be fielded successfully as a candidate for the Parliament. Who could I be talking about? Can't remember.

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

TIMES OF INDIA 6.6.10 POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

BJP needs to convert the modern Hindu woman

M J Akbar

The BJP seems caught in a bit of bind. It is beginning to look like the punter who lost a flutter on the football match and then a fortune on the action replay. Its original mistake was a misconception; its contemporary error is a misperception.

The historic flaw is its belief, at some gut level, that India is a secular country because the minorities want secularism. Indian Muslims do have a vested interest in secularism, since it ensures equality and democratic power, but that is less than half the story.

In 1947, a politicized Indian Muslim elite partitioned India to create Pakistan. Over the last six decades Pakistan has been unable to live with fellow-Muslims who happened to be Bengalis, driving them into a separate nation; marginalized minorities and turned the country into the Islamic Republic of Bloodistan. The obverse does not work in India, however much Rama Sene-style zealots might salivate at the prospect. The reason is quite simple. India is a secular country because Indian

Hindus, who constitute the majority, and therefore have a proportional impact upon the political ethos, have created and defended a Constitution that is a remarkable triumph of reason over the temptations of sectarian passion. India is secular not because Muslims need it, but because Hindus want it. There is nothing new about it. The Hindu Mahasabha did not win a single Hindu seat in 1937, even in an age of separate electorates, and did not do much better in 1946 despite the fact that Muslim League swept the Muslim seats in an environment darkened by raging communal storms.

Logic suggests, therefore, that if the BJP wants to define itself as a “Hindu” party, it should tread the middle road of coexistence rather than the extreme path of discord. Harmony requires more courage, commitment and moral consistency than conflict.

The misperception arises out of a peculiar inability to comprehend the dimensions of an extraordinary Indian cultural revolution that has seeped across divisions of caste and community, with its epicenter located in Hindu society. The new Indian woman is all around us, seeking a place on a college campus, en route to the workplace; participating in television as activist, audience and artiste; on the sports field; on the street; she is everywhere you look — most of all, at home.

The revolution is not limited to the urban rich. A week ago we were forced, by that inedible curse called the traffic jam, to take a secondary road through villages from Dehradun airport to the academy in Mussoorie. Women, compelled by circumstance and male prejudice, were carrying large utensils of water on their head from source to home. The younger women were in jeans, or some variation of it. Women

everywhere share the common aspiration for modernity and economic success.

The more ardent flag-wavers have missed this pervasive and continuing emancipation, which started tentatively in the 1980s but has acquired an unstoppable momentum now. There is change wherever the eye falls, in whatever the senses pick up: dress, public icons, shifting sexual mores — and examination results, where women are asserting their will to be future leaders. The new Indian woman has claimed the mantle of independence as the means of empowerment. She wants freedom, to choose, at a life-changing level; career above marriage if she so desires; or, at an incidental level, a pub over the confines of home. She is demanding the prerogatives of men.

Cinema, that persistent barometer of behaviour, has long abandoned the image of a sati savitri naari at the feet of her pati parmashwar. The new Indian woman is increasingly contemptuous of any cage, gilded with gold or paste, in the name of tradition or any spurious ism. She barely bothers to hide her contempt. Fear, or trepidation, might make her hesitate occasionally, but this is a circumstantial restraint. Check her inner will.

One is not suggesting that this is true of everyone; but this is the role model that is influencing attitudes of decisive numbers. You cannot chase this generation out of a pub without sending a nationwide signal advertising your gender bias. The girls in the Mangalore pub did not go to drink senselessly; they went there to exercise the right to go there. Those who attacked the pub, incidentally, had the full support of conservative reactionaries from all religions. While reactionary politics

might persist among some ethnic groups, it is becoming malodorous to the young. Religion remains an important aspect of Indian life; the Hindu young celebrate Durga Puja, Holi and Diwali with as much joy as their elders. But their faith, regrettable exceptions apart, is socially inclusive, not aggressively exclusive.

As India becomes an increasingly younger country, it is this culture that will tip power towards one party or another. If the BJP cannot get the vote of the young, modern Hindu woman, it has no future.

A brain graft for the ruling alliance

TK Arun

WHY does the ruling coalition need the services of a National Advisory Council? Because politics obsesses about power to the exclusion of everything else, including to what end that power. The ruling coalition needs an advisory body to tell it what to do. The NAC as an institution is standing testimony to the bankruptcy of our political parties (not just those who belong to the ruling United Progressive Alliance), to the distance they have acquired from the common people and to their abdication of the responsibility to find new solutions to new challenges in India's fast-changing economic landscape.

This might seem completely uncharitable, considering the identity of the members of the NAC and the contribution the body made to formulating policy in the UPA's previous stint. There is no gainsaying that the NAC members are all extremely decent people, most of whom have made sterling contributions to improving Indian society, contributions far more robust than any newspaper columnist who presumes to sit in judgement over them can hope to make. And there is no gainsaying that the ideas that came out of the NAC in its earlier avatar were sound in theory and practice. The problem is not with the NAC or its members. The problem, rather, is that our political parties should outsource their core activity to any agency, howsoever

meritorious.

What is the purpose of politics? In the desperate scramble for power, in the midst of Machiavellian moves to form and break coalitions, to buy a party nomination for an electoral contest, to cut a rival down to size and induce a wavering independent to defect, while staring in awe at the fortune some successful politician has amassed, while gloating over the queue of businessmen and their lobbyists bearing blandishments, politicians have forgotten why they are where they are in the first place.

Their job is to pursue the commonweal, to act as the link between the people and the state, to mediate power to solve the citizen's problems. This does not mean just representations and petitions. It could well mean mobilising the people to enforce their rights before a reluctant administration. It could mean making the people aware of their rights in the first place. It could mean imagining new solutions to age-old problems, creating new institutions and laws to tackle the new challenges of unprecedented growth and the wrenching social change associated with it.

If a political party served as a live link between the people and the state, it would know what to do, it would attract the intellectual resources to forge appropriate strategies and would not have to outsource policymaking to any third party.

Unfortunately, a dearth of politics imagined as mediating power for the welfare of the people has left our political parties bereft of ideas and ideals, of talent and reforming zeal. In that situation, a body like the NAC is most welcome, indeed.

But is such outsourcing of political imagination to non-political bodies inevitable? Interestingly, there are two trends, albeit weak, which show promise.

One trend is represented by the Naxalites, distinct from the Maoists. The Maoists are nihilists bent on overthrowing the Indian state and believe nothing useful can be done till such violent overthrow is achieved. The Maoists are enemies of democracy and have to be vanquished.

Even as the mainstream Left has moved away from the people and

now see the people moving away from them (and how!), sections of the Naxalites have given up their armed struggle and now focus on finding solutions to concrete problems within the framework of democracy. These Naxalites are attacked by Maoists, as also by the police. In the climate of hostility to left wing politics created by the Maoists, security forces have been clamping down on Naxalite trade union leaders and activists. Such suppression of grassroots political mobilisation hurts democracy and makes our politics authoritarian.

The other redeeming trend is within the Congress, represented by its first family. Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi display certain characteristics alien to the average Congressman, such as an ability to stay aloof from office. While Ms Gandhi's own political convictions seem limited to the need to keep India secular and the Congress, together, Rahul Gandhi displays a desire to understand Indian reality by experiencing it, rather than merely through data analysis. His visits to Dalit homes and commitment to inner-party elections hold out more than public relations. If he cannot so much bring Congressmen close to the people as create Congressmen out of the people who need political mobilisation the most, there is still hope for politics.

Till then, we might as well make the most of the talent available in the NAC. Outsourcing, after all, is increasingly a hallmark of Indian existence.

POVERTY

TIME OF INDIA 7.6.10 POVERTY

Shift The Target

DIPANKAR GUPTA

The best way to fight poverty is not to plan for the poor. The moment one singles them out for special services, absurdities, and worse, begin to abound. This is especially true when their numbers are large. Targeted policies work best when they are aimed at a small minority. It is not possible to have special programmes that affect anything between 50 and 70 per cent of the population. In which case, one might as well have a revolution!

If that is a death wish no functioning republic would like to entertain, it should think differently about poverty. As poor-seeking programmes leave the better off untouched, they are always subnormal in their performance. The famished have neither voice nor energy to protest. Their bodies are just about stitched together.

This lesson should have been apparent from the fact that schools, hospitals and food for the poor are always way below standard. Also, poor-oriented services are a natural magnet for graft and corruption. A study by the National Council of Applied Economic Research shows that though ration shops are strictly for Below Poverty Line families, not all their provisions go to the right address. A chunk regularly finds its way to more affluent homes, year after year. In fact, N C Saxena figures

that 17.4 per cent of the richest quintile possesses ration cards.

Yet, as the emphasis is always the targeted poor, we end up playing with numbers. If poverty estimates were like batting averages, it would roughly stand at 50 per cent. When Arjun Sengupta's committee is at the crease the poverty figure touches 77 per cent, but when the Planning Commission takes over it drops to roughly 29 per cent. Suresh Tendulkar took the score up to 41 per cent and that seemed very impressive till Saxena hit the average at 50 per cent. This would mean half the country's population cannot purchase the minimum recommended caloric requirements. Current consensus is around Saxena's finding for it is believed Tendulkar probably doctored the pitch. He pegged the minimum calorie intake at a level well below that posted by the Indian Council of Medical Research.

But do we really need poverty statistics to tell us that India is poor? How does it help if Sengupta is a bigger hitter than Tendulkar or the Planning Commission? No matter which way you look at it, between 10 and 15 crore families can barely feed themselves. If Abhijit Sen is to be believed, about 80 per cent of rural India faces chronic starvation. With numbers as large as this, can there be special programmes for a targeted group?

As these initiatives for the poor do not affect the well-to-do, the resources needed for them balk administrators. When the Tendulkar committee announced the poverty figure at 41.9 per cent, the Planning Commission and the ministries of finance and social welfare choked on their tables. So much money would now have to be put away for those other people who are not like us. The food subsidy would now cost Rs 47,917.62 crore and not 28,890.4 crore, as estimated earlier. That was still high, but the government could probably live with it. Naturally, when Saxena came up with 50 per cent, nobody in the administration wanted to hear about it.

Such exercises with numbers don't really help when the targeted group is almost the entire society. In such conditions, there are only two options. Either we let revolutions step out of history books or we get real about poverty eradication through democratic means. If it is to be the latter, we can and should learn from prosperous states. Sweden, Denmark, Finland, even Spain and Singapore, did not begin rich, but became rich because they did not devise programmes for the poor. Their emphasis was to frame policies that affected the entire society, and not this or that section of it.

One could object to this suggestion by hiding behind our awesome population figures. With a billion-plus on the census rolls, how could we possibly look like Europe? Are we then destined to remain poor? From Antyodaya to NREGA, our poverty rates keep spiking year after year. Isn't it time we changed tack and started to think the way prosperous societies do?

All across the western hemisphere, one finds more things in common than differences. From public transportation to garbage disposal, health to piped water or electricity, the similarities between rich countries are striking. Children don't die of malnutrition, people don't turn up late for work. Banks may crash in Iceland, even volcanoes can go up in smoke, but babies will be born healthy and hospitals will still be clean.

To look the way rich countries do, we must pay attention to their processes and systems: the results come later. Where there are no short cuts or package deals, poverty figures don't count. Affluent societies have become what they are because they did not succumb to pretend altruism and design services for the poor. As this put policymakers and policy receivers, the rich and the indigent, in the same boat they all made it to the other end together. This is why all rich countries look alike but poor countries look different in their own ways!

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RIGHT TO INFORMATION

TRIBUNE 1.6.10 RIGHT TO INFORMATION

No RTI for Cabinet papers? Bar not doors that are not open yet

Maja Daruwala and Venkatesh Nayak

THE Union Government's latest move to amend the Right to Information Act (RTI Act) to make Cabinet papers more inaccessible reminds us of Kautilya's 1500-year-old advice to the despotic Mauryan monarch: "All kinds of administrative measures are preceded by



Illustration: Kuldeep Dhiman

deliberations in a well-formed council. The subject matter of a council shall be entirely secret and deliberations in it shall be so carried that even birds cannot see them." (Arthashastra - I:15).

Secrecy that benefits non-representative forms of government is ill-considered in the age of participatory democracy where voter-taxpayer citizens are the source of the sovereign authority of the state. Unlike Kautilya's people who were subjects of a monarch, Indian citizens have the fundamental right to be informed about all decisions taken in their name. This principle is reflected in Parliament's intent of exempting Cabinet papers from disclosure only until deliberations are not completed. Today, under the RTI Act, all Cabinet decisions must be made public along with reasons and the materials that formed their basis, after the matter is complete or over. Nevertheless, the government has admitted in Parliament that it is again looking to tighten this exemption

and make it harder to get other information as well to enable the “smooth functioning of the government”.

The sugarcoated reply of the Minister for Personnel alludes to the possibility of holding stakeholder consultations before dismembering the Act. The government has tried this before but was stymied by public objections. Nonetheless, the juggernaut political establishment is not to be easily turned from its purpose of holding as much information to itself as it can. Outside of the tidbits released to the media, little information about Cabinet deliberations is let out and that too after a battle. Absurdly, even the very rules prescribing the procedure for Cabinet meetings are being deemed confidential and denied to the public. This matter is lying for determination before the Central Information Commission. We, the people of India, do not have the right to know, automatically, what topics are discussed by the very ministers who represent our interests in weekly Cabinet meetings. Access to their papers, post-deliberation — guaranteed in the RTI Act — remains a far cry. This Kautilyan state of affairs persists despite sage advice tendered by the Cabinet Secretary to all ministries during the initial days of UPA-II. It was made mandatory for all Cabinet proposals to show how information tools will be used for “ensuring transparency and accountability as well as reporting in the public domain”. Let alone monitor adherence to these guidelines, the Cabinet Secretariat has done little to practice within its domain what it preached.

The only exception to this continuing regime of secrecy is the publication of the Government’s Transaction of Business Rules — albeit five decades late. What purpose would be achieved by further restricting access to Cabinet information, we do not know. Did RTI ever reveal sensitive Cabinet information to the detriment of the security of the state, the babus will not tell. Public statements from on high evidence the fact that obfuscation rather than candour is the preferred tactic to keep citizens hanging while the government goes about dismantling this most valued of laws bit by bit. In June last year, the government made

the President of India tell Parliament that the RTI Act would be amended to strengthen disclosure of information in non-strategic areas. A public data policy was to be developed so that all this information would come easily into the public domain. Yet, when quizzed at the civil society consultation held in March this year, senior representatives of the Department of Personnel and Training had to admit that they had not even begun their homework to deliver on this promise. Why would they, when there are strong moves afoot to reveal as little as possible?

Few people outside of the government know of the existence of a virtual body that exercises enormous influence on decision-making processes in the government at the Central and state level. Next only to the Cabinet in the hierarchy of decision-making, the Committee of Secretaries is perhaps the most inaccessible of entities to ordinary people. There is doubt whether it is even a juridical entity because no law, rule or regulation is available in the public domain that tells us anything about this body. Like the subatomic particle tachyon which is detectable only in motion but has no rest mass, this committee is known only through its decisions if and when placed in the public domain. Yet, all Cabinet notes must pass through this filter before reaching the Ministers. All agenda matters sent to their meetings by various Ministries are classified secret.

Their meetings are not advertised nor are their minutes available to the taxpayer citizen who foots the bill for their salaries, the vehicles that ferry them to the meetings and the stationary and refreshments they use while doing their work. Is this indicative of the government's "trust deficit" in its own paymasters?

In India, no legislation or order compels the government to consult with the people before drafting laws they are required to obey. Barring a few spectacular examples of public consultation like that initiated by the Union Ministry of Finance on the Draft Direct Tax Code Bill, all lawmaking exercises take place within the Ministries in great secrecy.

When a department thinks it has drawn up a draft law fit for the mandatory consultation with other ministries, it is circulated as a draft Cabinet note. That labeling keeps the entire legislative proposal out of bounds for citizens even under the RTI Act because it attracts the exemption granted for Cabinet papers. This secretive draft becomes public only when it is placed on the website of Parliament.

The bureaucracy believes that people must voice their comments on any Bill through Parliament because that is the place for public debate. What public debate can take place if something as significant as the Prevention of Torture Bill, 2010 is passed within an hour of introduction in the Lok Sabha with less than 10 per cent MPs present and voting at 10 p.m.? We need more spaces to influence law making and policy framing than the bureaucracy is willing to open up for us. RTI is not merely about opening up government files to satisfy the hunger of the middle class for more and more information as a senior politician of the ruling coalition put it a few years ago. It is a means for creating a knowledgeable citizenry that is equipped to participate in the making of decisions that affect them.

So when the second highest decision-making body in the country gets into a knot over how strong or weak the proposed legislation to protect whistleblowers should be, it is advisable to open it up for public discussion. Instead discussions are happening at ministerial levels with utmost secrecy while their colleagues get busy crafting proposals to amend the RTI Act for making Cabinet papers more and more inaccessible. With a host of negative emasculating amendments on the anvil, a powerful political establishment, annoyed at the people's temerity in asking for it to be accountable, is determined to make this revolutionary legislation pay for its amazing successes. We, the people, must resist the darkening of portals that are not adequately illuminated yet.

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TERRORISM

HINDU 4.6.10 TERRORISM

This is not zero tolerance, Mr. Prime Minister

Siddharth Varadarajan

The Central government's professed commitment to human rights is worth nothing so long as it won't allow the soldiers indicted for murdering innocent civilians in Kashmir to be prosecuted for their crimes.

I asked Prime Minister Manmohan Singh an unfair question during his big press conference last month. How could he speak of zero tolerance for human rights violations in Kashmir when his government would not allow the prosecution of army officers and jawans charge-sheeted by the Central Bureau of Investigation for the murder of five innocent civilians at Pathribal in Kashmir in 2000? The question was unfair because there was no reason to expect India's chief executive to be aware of the status of an individual case, no matter how gruesome. Or to know why one branch of his government had made out a case for murder against a group of soldiers only to have another branch, the Ministry of Defence, do its utmost to ensure that the indicted men never stand trial.

Like many other questions that day, therefore, mine also went unanswered. I wasn't surprised or disappointed because the reason I asked it was to extract a commitment from the Prime Minister. You see, 10 years ago, I visited a woman named Raja Begum in Anantnag. She was the mother of Zahoor Dalal, one of the five men murdered in Pathribal. Throughout the time I spent in her house, she wept quietly in one corner and didn't say a word. All the talking was done by another relative. As I left, I made one last attempt, asking her whether there was anything she wanted to tell the people of the country. "Zahoor can't come back but those who did this should be punished before my eyes," she replied. "Why did they pick up an innocent man and murder him? If there is a government, if there is justice, the people who did this must be punished."

I wrote about Pathribal and its aftermath countless times but wanted to make another push for justice in this case. My question to Dr. Singh, then, was really Raja Begum's, the partial discharge of a debt journalists accumulate as they run from story to story. And as expected, the Prime Minister promised to look into the matter. I have no idea what enquiries or exertions he has made on the case since then but the facts themselves are quite simple. And, in the context of the recent exposé of fake encounters in Machhil in Kupwara, they reveal a pattern of impunity that ordinary Kashmiris will be condemned to endure until India gets a Prime Minister brave enough to put a stop to it.

A group of terrorists, most probably from the Lashkar-e-Taiba, arrived at the Chattisinghpura village in Anantnag district in the dead of night on March 20, 2000. They made all the Sikh men assemble and gunned them down in cold blood. Five days later, L.K. Advani, who was Union Home Minister at the time, told a nation still recovering from shock that the heinous crime had been solved with the killing of five "foreign militants." In an FIR filed on March 25, officers from the Rashtriya Rifles and the Special Operations

Group of the State police said they had managed to corner and kill the five terrorists in a fierce encounter at Pathribal-Panchalthan. The bodies of the men, which had been burned beyond recognition, were buried in a common grave.

Unfortunately for the army, the five men killed were not terrorists or foreign nationals. They were civilians who had been picked up in and around Anantnag on March 24. Apart from young Zahoor, the others named were Bashir Ahmad Bhat, Mohammed Malik, Juma Khan and Juma Khan. Such was the randomness of the operation that it had actually netted two men of the same name from different villages. As the families of the five men searched frantically for their missing relatives, suspicions grew that the “terrorists” buried in the common grave may not be whom the authorities claimed them to be. Protests were held demanding exhumation of the bodies. The demand was rejected, leading to an ugly incident in Brakpora on April 3 where the Central Reserve Police Force opened fire on unarmed protesters, killing nine.

The bodies were eventually exhumed and positively identified by the families of the five missing men. But the government balked at the implications and insisted on DNA matching. Blood samples were collected, which all turned negative. This was because the police and local doctors, acting on whose instructions it is still not known, switched the samples. When the tampering was exposed in March 2002, fresh samples were collected which conclusively established that the five “terrorists” killed in that so-called joint operation by the Rashtriya Rifles and the police on May 25, 2000 were none other than Zahoor and the others who had been abducted by the security forces the night before.

The State government then ordered a CBI investigation into the killings. The agency took four years to come to the conclusion that the five men had indeed been murdered. It filed a charge-sheet in the

court of the Chief Judicial Magistrate, Srinagar, against Brigadier Ajay Saxena, Lt. Col. Brijendra Pratap Singh, Major Sourabh Sharma, Major Amit Saxena and Subedar I Khan of 7th Rashtriya Rifles, accusing them of murder under Section 302 of the Ranbir Penal Code. That was in July 2006. Four years on, the trial has yet to begin.

With the full backing of the Army brass, the Ministry of Defence and the Government of India, the five soldiers challenged their indictment on the grounds that the government had not granted sanction to prosecute them. The CBI took the view that the requirement of prior sanction mentioned in Section 7 of the Armed Forces (Jammu & Kashmir) Special Powers Act 1990 was only for protection of persons acting in good faith and that abducting and murdering innocent civilians could by no stretch of imagination be considered something “done or purported to be done in exercise of the powers conferred by this Act.” The Principal District and Sessions judge in Srinagar before whom the case was committed offered the Army the option of trying the soldiers in a court martial. But the Army refused, and the matter went to the High Court which ruled in favour of the CBI in July 2007 that prior sanction was not required. At this stage, the Army (represented by the General Officer Commanding, 15th Corps) moved the Supreme Court, which admitted the appeal in September 2007 and stayed further proceedings before the trial court. Since then, the matter has not moved at all. For some reason, notice to the Jammu and Kashmir government, listed as a co-respondent to the CBI in the GOC's petition, was only served in December 2009.

If the Central government was really serious about ensuring justice, it could have done one of two things at any stage after 2006. It could have granted sanction to prosecute the five army men, ending the legal wrangling over the CBI's indictment there and then. Or it could have gone along with the CBI's rational argument that the

protections contained in the Armed Forces Act (and indeed in Section 197 of the Criminal Procedure Code) cannot be extended to cover blatant criminal acts like the murder of innocent civilians. But, no, none of this was done, for the promise of “zero tolerance” of human rights violations is just an empty slogan.

If the Prime Minister feels I am being unfair, let him end the sickening litigation that is preventing Raja Begum and countless other mothers and fathers and sons and daughters of people wrongly killed by the security forces from getting justice. But ending impunity is not just about righting the wrongs of the past. It is also about deterring future criminals. If the men responsible for murdering Zahoor Dalal and four others at Panchalthan had been tried, convicted and punished, I am certain the soldiers who kidnapped and murdered three young Kashmiri men in Kupwara on April 29 in order to claim cash rewards for bravely killing three “terrorists” would not have so easily done what they did. A case against the army officers has now been filed but if Pathribal is any guide, that too will not go anywhere.

The Prime Minister is going to Kashmir next week. When he is asked questions about these cases, he will have to do more than simply promise to look into them.

