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E-GOVERNANCE

Nandan Nilekani's new deal

Samar Halarnkar

In less than a week, the Unique Identification (UID) project, or Aadhar as it is officially called, will roll out in an impoverished corner of tribal Maharashtra, heralding the most ambitious attempt yet to transform the way the Indian State reaches its citizens.

There are two things unique about Aadhar (appropriately, it means 'the foundation'): how it's run and what it will do.

First, how is it run?

For a project that will eventually provide identities to 1.2 billion Indians, the number of people at work on one of India's most far-reaching government projects ever, is remarkably small: around 120. They are spread across Aadhar's headquarters in a Delhi office tower, its main centre in a Bangalore technology park and in seven states where Aadhar is close to launch. These people form a small, smart, flat and fast team, extracted from India's state and private sectors.

Aadhar's 2S2F (small-smart-fast-flat) model is unsurprising. It was created by the man who — through a best-selling book of the same name by the American writer Thomas Friedman — gave the world the term 'The Flat World'. As chief of Aadhar, Nandan Nilekani, co-founder and former CEO of the iconic tech company Infosys, brings to the government skills he honed riding the waves of opportunity to the distant shores of a world flattened by technology, democracy and openness.

Nilekani has now created an organisation that is a precursor to tomorrow's government. At Aadhar's offices, you will find IAS officers from Jharkhand, techies from multinational giants like Intel, Cisco and Google and former investment bankers from everywhere. Some are employees, some are paid by their companies, a few are volunteers.

Second, what will Aadhar do?

This is where it gets trickier, as one might expect with a project of this scale. Strictly speaking, Aadhar's job is, as Nilekani likes to say, "to generate a 16-digit identification number for every Indian". But simply producing numbers is very limiting to Aadhar's talents. So, he's pitched Aadhar to handle projects as diverse as a national-highway toll-collection system, a technology backbone for the forthcoming Goods and Services Tax (GST) and reform of the vast public distribution system (PDS) for subsidised food. Nilekani's expertise is project development and management; troubleshooting for the government and transforming its inefficient programmes should be up his street.

Of course, it isn't quite that simple.

Change, especially of the 2S2F variety, is never easy in eternal India. Officials resent Aadhar because its structure and brief challenges their world and work. This isn't very worrying. They can slow some bits of Aadhar, but they cannot stop it. The opposition from intellectuals is trickier. The bulk of it comes from the influential National Advisory Council (NAC), whose members are currently tasked with reforming some of the same national programmes that Nilekani and his team hope to handle, like the PDS. The NAC's chief is Sonia Gandhi, and she can stall Aadhar.

Intellectual challenges to Aadhar chiefly focus on concerns that Aadhar is, as NAC member and economist Jean Dreze put it, "a national security project in the garb of a social policy initiative". Given India's dodgy

track record on civil liberties, this is a legitimate concern, but it is misaddressed. These are questions for the government, not Aadhar.

Other concerns focus on the benefits and efficiency of Unique Identification (UID) and technology in general as a solution for poverty. “I have seen technology really work wonders for the poor,” said NAC member Harsh Mander. “One of the big reasons for the popularity of YSR (Reddy) in Andhra Pradesh was that old people got pensions on the first of every month. The worry I have is that a lot of India’s poor survive by keeping out of the way of the State, from tribal forest encroachers to urban slum dwellers. I do wonder how UID will reach them.”

The questioning will keep Aadhar open, democratic and innovative, pushing it to respond to issues as they emerge. Persuasive, affable and networked, Nilekani is no novice in Delhi’s corridors of power. He’s spent many days meeting and making presentations to UID’s opponents and trying to win over high-power support. As another outsider, Sam Pitroda, the prime minister’s advisor on national information infrastructure — a fibre optic network that will be vital to connecting UID’s computers and hand-held devices — told me, “The resistance is part of the process.”

The need for Aadhar is undeniable and urgent.

Proving identity is an insurmountable task for millions of Indians, particularly migrants, poor farmers and landless labour, who comprise most of the 400 million people who live below the global poverty line of \$1.25 a day. These are people who often lose their history the moment they step out of their villages, cut adrift from the extensive social security schemes on which India will spend Rs 1.18 lakh crore this year. A fourth to half that amount never reaches its beneficiaries. As a start, the UID should be able to replace 19 documents that are variously accepted as proof of identity today — but incredibly hard to obtain — ranging from a ration card, passport or PAN card.

When Aadhar officially launches in backward Nandurbar on September 29 or 30, 10,000 Indians would already be enrolled in Andhra Pradesh, their faces and fingerprints recorded in what will eventually be a vast national database. Despite the hurdles, Aadhar's small team is racing ahead, hoping to enroll 100 million Indians by March 2011. Nilekani is offering India's reform process a new deal. It is a fine idea to embrace.

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print/603455.aspx>

GOOD GOVERNANCE

Don't blame democracy for bad governance

Tavleen Singh

This is a week when I feel especially hopeless about India's future. A week in China has caused this gloomy mood. I have just returned from the World Economic Forum's 'Summer Davos' in the city of Tianjin. I had not heard of Tianjin till two weeks ago and, because I was told that it was near Beijing, expected an obscure dormitory town. So when I found myself in a magnificent, modern city of shiny skyscrapers, spectacular bridges and fine boulevards, I was stunned. Even more so when I heard that the city has been built in the past decade and then I found myself reduced to speechless wonder when I heard that Tianjin's amazing, futuristic Convention Centre took just nine months to build. There were Indian officials and businessmen at the meeting whose mouths fell open when they heard.

We chattered amongst ourselves in Hindi about why such a Convention Centre would take ten years to build in India and agreed that it could be because democratic processes take longer than totalitarian ones. Then we went to Tianjin railway station to take the high speed train to Beijing and we stopped making excuses for the Motherland. Tianjin railway station looks like Delhi's new international airport and the train that covered the 130 kilometres to Beijing in thirty minutes is faster and more modern than any I have ever been on. When we got to Beijing, the Indians I was with, were as angry as I

was at how far India had been left behind by a country that till the seventies was at least twenty years behind us.

There are those who blame democracy for this and they are wrong. If there is one thing that makes us better than China it is democracy, but to come back to India and find our biggest political leaders, and the whole of our media, absorbed by ancient political problems only added to my gloomy mood. What is the point in discussing Kashmir if all we can come up with is the idea of sending yet another all-party delegation to the Valley? What for? We have been doing this for decades. And, what is the point in all this sudden new excitement over Ayodhya when we know that the issue does not fall in the realm of reasoned debate or judicial solutions. What difference can next week's court judgment make to a problem that is caused by religious hysteria and not historical facts?

Why are we discussing temples and mosques at all when we know that the biggest political problem in India is governance? If China has overtaken us in infrastructure, in urban development, education, sanitation and healthcare, it is because China has understood that the key to delivering these things is governance. It is not the fault of democracy that we have bad governance, but the fault of our political leaders. Of the present lot, only the Prime Minister understands that India cannot hope to become a fully developed country in this century unless we begin a massive process of administrative reforms, but he does nothing about it.

Our ruling family appears to have no interest in governance at all and prefers to fritter away their years in power by taking us back towards an economic model that caused us to get left behind in the first place. In 1978, when Deng Xiaoping realised that Mao's Marxist economic model had served mostly to keep China poor and starving, he made dramatic

changes that we should have paid attention to. If we had, we might have kept pace with China. We did not and so we wasted another two decades investing in a totalitarian economic model that gave enormous power to the public sector and killed private enterprise. Only when we changed course in the nineties did things improve. Today we can be proud of a middle class of more than 200 million people and Indian companies that are recognised as world class. But, there is a huge section of Indian public opinion, led by the ex-novelist, that hates what has happened. In yet another one of her lengthy diatribes last week, she praised Sonia and Rahul Gandhi for being on the right track. If I were them, I would be more worried about this endorsement than anything else. There is a growing impression in the business community and among those who understand economics better than the ex-novelist does, that our ruling family is moving us back towards socialism Indian 'ishtyle'.

Meanwhile, the country from which our Lefties, Liberals and Maoists get inspiration, has moved with spectacular success towards a market economy. When I twittered about this, someone twittered back that perhaps we should lease India to the Chinese for the next 200 years. It might come to that if we do not buck up.

POLICE

Honour among cops

Pratap Bhanu Mehta

The all-party delegation to Kashmir will, doubtless, be hearing complaints about police and paramilitary forces. But the issue is wider than Kashmir. Nothing exemplifies the contorted character of our civic commitment more than our attitudes to our police. Our future depends on this institution. The state of our democracy will be measured by the safety of citizens in the presence of the police. In a modernising society, the nature of the police will determine whether society has crime and repression or safety and freedom. Indian society will occasion many protests. But whether those protests are artfully handled, or degenerate into violence, creating their own vicious cycles of resentment, will depend on the police. And as we have seen from Kashmir to West Bengal, policing has become our single biggest national security challenge.

There have been endless reports on police reform. But we need to more deeply diagnose the shamelessness with which we refuse to move on any of these reports. It was observed as early as the 1902 Police Commission Report that the nature and support for policing depends a lot on wider social attitudes. So what does our shamelessness reveal? First of all it reveals a warped and often paradoxical sense of nationalism. Strangely enough, we often loathe the police, but are also too often, under the guise of national interest, willing to stand behind its excesses. But the only thing we are not willing to do is create the conditions under which

our contempt for the police and defence of its excesses both become unnecessary. And creating those conditions will require a measure of political commitment and investment in resources and thinking through new institutional architectures.

Second, the police, of all the state institutions, exemplifies the tenuousness of equal citizenship in India. The lives of policemen and paramilitary forces are cheap in every respect, as if they were simply an army of surplus labour. A state that does not take the lives of those who discharge its sovereign functions seriously is unlikely to be able to send a signal to anyone else in society that it takes their lives seriously. But the complex relationship between inequality and the police has another dimension. Recently, there was a horrendous incident of a female SP being dragged for almost a mile by two junior policemen when she challenged their bribe-taking. There was almost surely a gender dimension to this incident. But it also exposed a sociological fact that is going to make policing even more difficult in years to come.

Within the police forces, there is often pretty open class warfare. What we are not realising is the extent to which the standard police hierarchies of command and control can no longer be taken for granted. The idea that a senior IPS officer can give an order and it will be pursued by someone at the level of the SHO is simply gone. Part of this is due to the fact that, often, lower-level police officers feel more beholden to politicians than they do to their professional superiors. But part of this is also due to the fact that there is a growing sense of resentment at the social distance between senior IPS and rank-and-file policemen. Caste was always an issue in police-society relations, particularly as far as Dalits were concerned. But new forms of caste consciousness and conflict, now often exacerbated by the practice in some states of

recording the castes of all complainants, is giving the lie to the idea that we have a unified police force, instead of a myriad social groups playing out their aspirations and resentments inside the force. Police reform that does not address the complex sociology of the police will not be worth the paper it is written on.

Third, like all institutions, the police have also become victims of self-fulfilling scepticism. It is difficult to maintain a sense of professional identity without social support. Many studies, including one by former IPS officer Arvind Verma show that the police are driven often by their sense of social norms. Encounter killings, for instance, draw succour from the sense that they have social approval. But this puts the police in a vicious circle: they often act indiscriminately because they are weak; we condone their excesses because that is a way of getting policing on the cheap; but once you condone excesses, it corrodes the whole professional structure.

On the positive side, a generalised scepticism often makes it hard to reinforce esteem for jobs well done. Think of numerous instances where the police have delivered, albeit not perfectly: controlling violent crime in Mumbai, facilitating social participation to prevent riots in Bhiwadi, or more recently, securing successful convictions against the Ranvir Sena in Bihar. But it is difficult to piece these stories together in any way that reinforces the positive self-esteem of the police.

Fourth, the state has treated the police in unconscionable ways. On any measure of state support, whether it is as simple a thing as buying reliable bullet-proof jackets, to training and providing for better means of crowd control, the state has failed. The CAG Compendium of Performance Audit Reviews on Modernisation of the Police Force catalogues every shortcoming you can imagine. In states like Bengal and

Bihar, live training was not imparted to police forces, UP has slightly over a fifth of the required vehicles it needs for normal patrolling, the incorporation of new technologies was abysmal. States like Rajasthan took less than half of their Central allocation; many spent only a fraction of their allocation. The housing crisis for policemen is dire. A lot of this is the characteristic inefficiency of the state. But it sends a powerful signal about how cheap we think policing is, in both a social and a financial sense.

The debate on police reform has focused on simple institutional remedies. Supreme Court directives concentrate on professional control of recruitment and transfers, etc. But these are limited measures. They are not linked to any serious strategic assessment of police needs. It does not address the fact that the crisis of the police is symptomatic of a wider social crisis. You have two levels of challenge: convincing the people that the police can be made credible. But the police also need to be sent a signal that state and society are going to make credible commitments to them, or else they have no incentive to cooperate. Our sullen policing is generating more national security crises than any external power could dream of. All-party delegation on this, anyone?

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POVERTY

Hungry for action

Harsh Mander

India has long been simultaneously a country of enormous wealth and desperate poverty. In recent decades, the distance has only grown between those who enjoy living standards comparable to the finest in the world, and the millions left far behind. Even as Indians crowd the lists of the world's richest dollar billionaires, an estimated 200 million people sleep hungry. Half our children are malnourished and nearly a fifth severely so. This means starkly that their brains and bodies can't develop because they lack adequate nourishment.

Today the country produces sufficient food, and if it chooses, the government can afford to spend what it takes to reach this food to each of its billion-plus people. But for this to happen, the government must first believe that this is where it should spend its money. Economists caution the government that it must restrain public spending, that it should invest in promoting work rather than distribute food, and that cheap or free food will disincentivise farmers from production. I wish that at such times economists think more from their hearts and pay heed to an alternative 'economics as if people matter'.

The key word in today's world is 'investment'. But what better investment can there be than in our people? Our demographic dividend will multiply manifold if young people were nourished sufficiently to grow to their full physical and intellectual potential. A legal guarantee of reaching food to all will require the government to purchase the produce of all farmers at remunerative prices wherever they offer it. This will protect farmers from the uncertainties of price fluctuations. At present, the government purchases most of its grain from two-and-a-half states:

Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. A food guarantee will require the government to penetrate its procurement to all parts of the country, and thereby extend a safety net to farmers as well. This will be the best incentive for them to produce more. And if people have to spend less on food, they can invest on other needs, which again could spur growth.

But the key argument for a legal food guarantee is not economic, or even political (that it will fetch votes). It is, above all, a moral imperative: to end the enormous suffering associated with the inability to feed one's children, and to fill one's stomach. In many years of work among people who live with hunger, I have witnessed destitute people cutting back to eating just one meal a day or consuming poisonous tubers and grasses only because these come free. And hunger generates desperate choices — offering oneself in bondage, sending small children out to work, distress migration and accepting oppression.

The first claim of a Right to Food legislation would be of these people who routinely live — and die — of hunger. The greatest numbers are of children. Therefore, the law must guarantee supplementary nutrition to every child below the age of six and free school meals to all older children. It must ensure facilities to prevent and effectively treat severe malnutrition. Pregnant and nursing mothers should similarly be guaranteed both supplementary nutrition, as well as maternity benefits and crèches at workplaces to enable them to breastfeed their children and rest.

Apart from children, I have encountered the greatest hunger among destitute people, mainly households without any able-bodied male member — single women and their dependents, the abandoned aged, disabled people, households of persons with tuberculosis, leprosy and HIV/Aids — and the homeless. I believe that the law must guarantee to all such destitute persons who seek it, at least one free hot cooked meal daily. In the past, free feeding was organised by religious charities but

they have declined drastically with modernity. The State must fill the vacuum — as it indeed is done in many parts of the world. Such people must also be guaranteed pensions. Starvation deaths are also endemic among the most vulnerable tribal and Dalit communities like Musahars and Sahariyas. They require intensive food coverage. Urban homeless people and migrants require not free but affordable food in community canteens.

Apart from special food and pension guarantees for these most-disadvantaged people, the law should guarantee subsidised food to a much larger population, ideally to all or most households. The cheapest food must be for the destitute, to Scheduled Castes and Tribes, landless agricultural workers, small farmers, artisans, fisher-folk, homeless people and slum residents. But food deprivation and malnourishment extends far beyond the numbers, which the government economists identify to be poor. If the government purchases food at remunerative prices from farmers across the country, there will be much more available to distribute. This grain should be offered to all people who seek it at half the price at which the government purchases the grain from farmers. It would then be possible to actually cover all or most households with affordable food.

If we get the Food Rights Bill right, it can change India. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) altered the destiny of millions by guaranteeing them work. This law can create not one but many such legally enforceable guarantees, of direct feeding, pensions, maternity entitlements and subsidised food. Another India — where children are not stunted because there is no food; and where grain does not rot when people sleep hungry — would then become a reality. Food is essential for life and, thereby, citizenship. Surely, no price tag or limits can be imposed on life and citizenship.

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RIGHT TO INFORMATION

Dangerous nexus to bully RTI activists

S. Viswanathan

Next month, the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, one of the most powerful laws enacted in independent India, completes half a decade in the cause of transparent and accountable administration. It enables, on demand, access to information the State and Central governments have in their possession. It empowers Indian citizens to ask for and get specific information, subject to certain norms, from a Public Authority, “thus making its functionaries more accountable and responsible.” Democracy, proclaims the Act, “requires an informed citizenry and transparency of information which are vital to its functioning and also to contain corruption and to hold the governments and their instrumentalities accountable to the governed.”

For the thousands of social and political activists across the country committed to clean and corruption-free governance, the Act came as a powerful tool. They could drag to the courts anti-social elements such as smugglers, miners, land grabbers and, more particularly, corrupt government officials, through public interest litigation petitions and bring them under judicial scrutiny on the strength of the information they get under the RTI Act. Corruption is a gigantic problem in India. About 25,000 cases filed under the Prevention of Corruption Act were pending in the trial courts across India in 2008. A study has found that it would take three to four years and 200 special courts to clear this backlog. Besides social activists, journalists have been increasingly using the RTI route to dig out relevant documents in pursuit of investigative stories.

But the real potential of the Act is yet to be realised. Chief Information Commissioner Wajahat Habibullah pointed out at a recent convention that a major challenge before the transparency regime was monitoring

the implementation of Section 4 of the RTI Act, which has made proactive disclosure of information by various government departments mandatory.

Another point highlighted by the CIC with deep concern was “the emerging threat of murder” of those who tried to take on persons with vested interests in different States. He wanted “the RTI brotherhood” to devise a defence mechanism to deal with this menace. The press has reported that at least eight RTI activists were murdered and a ninth found dead in the last eight months. Union Law Minister Veerappa Moily, while inaugurating the convention, announced that a law to protect RTI activists would be brought in soon. He also said that under a draft Bill cleared by the Cabinet, the onus of protecting the identity of such whistleblowers would be on the CIC.

Whistleblowers killed

The news media, particularly NDTV and CNN-IBN, played a significant role in bringing to light the brutal murders of the RTI activists when they exposed or sought to expose the misdeeds of several wealthy and highly connected persons on the strength of the documentary evidence they could get, thanks to the RTI Act. The latest victim was Ramdas Ghadegavkar, a Shiv Sena leader based in the district town of Nanded in Maharashtra. He was found dead on August 27 under mysterious circumstances. An RTI activist, Ramdas made a number of successful interventions in complaints of corruption in the functioning of the Public Distribution System and in the distribution of fuel. He was also active in exposing the powerful sand mafia; his complaint led to initiation of action by the district administration against the mafia.

A month earlier, on the evening of July 20, 2010, another RTI activist and environmentalist, Amit Jethwa (33), was shot dead by some unidentified men on a motorcycle outside the High Court of Gujarat.

His crusade against illegal mining in the Gir forest is suspected to be the reason of the murder. A few weeks prior to this incident, the High Court of Gujarat, on a petition from Jethwa, had cancelled the promotion of J.K. Vyas as Director (Environment) on the grounds that it was unconstitutional. The first arrest in the case was made only seven weeks after the murder. The arrested person, Pratap alias Shiva Solanki, is related to an Opposition Member of Parliament. Social activist Aruna Roy, a key campaigner for the Right to Information Act, told NDTV that whistleblowers faced the biggest threat from the nexus between corrupt officials and the mafia. Vishram Laxman Dodya (50), a Surat-based shopkeeper, was killed on February 11 for refusing to withdraw his RTI application for information on illegal electricity connections in Surat. Dodya was called to the police station, where officials unsuccessfully tried to persuade him to withdraw the application. He was shot dead when he was returning home. In another incident early this year, Satish Shetty (38), a Pune-based activist, was killed because he refused to give up exposing land scams by invoking the RTI Act. He had been unmindful of the repeated threats to him and his family. He was murdered on January 13, when he was out on his morning walk. Satish Shetty rose to prominence when he exposed corruption in land deals a decade ago when the work on Mumbai-Pune expressway was in progress.

Besides these killings, there have been a series of attacks on RTI activists seeking information from the government. These attacks only point to the dangerous nexus built between the corrupt officials and the police on the one hand, and politicians and the mafia on the other, to stifle the voices of the voiceless. The Central and State governments cannot be absolved of their responsibility to protect the RTI activists. Significant sections of the news media, TV channels in particular, have done a good job of spotlighting the cases and the issues. This effort needs to be scaled up and sustained.

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SOCIAL JUSTICE

Population ageing: an area of darkness

Dr. Ennapadam S. Krishnamoorthy

Population ageing has emerged as the grand challenge of this century; for policymakers, care providers and society as a whole. A review of India's population census is insightful. In 1961, the population of the elderly was placed at 24 million; it increased exponentially to 43 million in 1981; 57 million in 1991; and about 77 million in 2001. The proportion of the elderly in the total population also rose from 5.63 per cent in 1961 to 6.58 per cent in 1991 and to 7.5 per cent in 2001. India has thus joined the rank of "Greying nations" with over seven per cent of its population in the 60-plus years segment. A United Nations report has predicted that India will have 198 million 'Old' (60+) people in 2030 and 326 million in 2050. Currently, there could be around 100 million 'senior citizens' in India.

The problems

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

preference.

It is also clear that disability and frailty accompany aging, especially after the seventh decade. Thus 25-27 per cent of Indian elders have visual impairment; 12-14 per cent are hearing deficit; eight per cent are immobile and confined to home or bed, this figure rising to 27 per cent after 80 years, women being more vulnerable. Falls are a common problem causing disability; with over half of all the elderly in some studies having suffered a fall with or without serious injuries like fractures and dislocations. While aging is not synonymous with disability, a large proportion of the Indian aged population is disabled, the severity of disablement increasing with age: 36 per cent in the young-old (60-64); 42 per cent in the middle-old (65-69); 51 per cent in the older-old (70-74) and 61 per cent in the oldest old (75 and above).

No safety net

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

The Government of India, supported actively by civil society, unveiled its National Policy on Older Persons (NPOP) over 50 years after Independence. A comprehensive document covering every aspect of the elder's life, ambitious, with a clear cut action plan, it proposed a

role for the State in the elder care: health, shelter, financial security and protection against abuse. It recognised the need for affirmative action favouring the elderly, viewing them as national resources, creating opportunities for their development. Training, empowerment and partnership with elderly were seen as important in providing equality and dignity to all groups of elderly. Unfortunately, a decade later, the NPOP awaits complete implementation in all States and Union Territories of India, much of its promise remaining unfulfilled, prompting the Government of India to seek its revision to suit contemporary needs.

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

disability: vision, hearing, falls, bone and joint, respiratory and cardiac disability; and neurodegenerative disorders — strokes, Parkinson's disease and that looming public health challenge; brain degeneration and dementia!

The five 'A' test

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

Most importantly, perhaps, is the need for sensitivity and sensibility in making these plans. The elder citizen is a national treasure; one who has contributed to both national growth and familial

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

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Untouchability: a sin and a crime

M.S. Prabhakara

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

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

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

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

Vishvesha Theertha has undertaken such walkabouts in Dalit villages, more accurately described by their residents as 'holegeri,' meaning localities inhabited by the holeya, the word itself meaning something that is dirty, besmirched, telling more about the reality of everyday life and experience of Dalits than these symbolic walkabouts.

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

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

The problem with such gestures is that the practice of untouchability

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

Comparison with apartheid

A comparison with the practice of apartheid in South Africa which, despite historic and cultural differences, had remarkable similarities with the practice of untouchability in India will amplify the point made above. It should be noted that although formally apartheid — an elaborate system of separation of races on the basis of colour covering every aspect of life in South Africa, from the womb to the tomb and even beyond — was legislated by the Nationalist Party government in 1948, the ideology itself went back to the very beginnings of colonial occupation; and the policy of racial discrimination was introduced by the English settler regime, long before the Afrikaner settler regime perfected it and implemented it in toto.

In apartheid South Africa, apartheid was the norm for the minority of whites, barring honourable exceptions who went to the trenches and paid with their lives fighting against it. However, when democratic South Africa was faced with the task of tackling its tormented past, it created through legislation a structure and an instrument called Truth and Reconciliation Commission which was tasked to establish, to the extent possible, the 'truth' about South Africa's apartheid past and enable the 'reconciliation' between the victims and perpetrators of the apartheid system. According to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Chair of the TRC and the principal driver of the process, all South Africans were

victims of the system, even those who were part of successive apartheid regimes. “We are a deeply wounded people, we all need to be healed,” was one of his frequent observations.

The overwhelming majority of the victims did not buy into this approach. For them, apartheid was an instrument devised and contrived to make the majority of South Africans un-persons in the country of their birth, a necessary tool to keep the production process on, but with no rights to have a share in the fruits of their labour. However, when the time for reckoning came with the advent of a democratic government in April 1994, the instrument devised to take stock of the past, the TRC, chose to see apartheid as a ‘sin’; and when the criminality of the regime could not be ignored, this crime was enlarged to become “a crime against humanity,” for humanity's shoulders are broad enough to carry any crime, instead of a specific crime against the majority of South Africans punishable under the law.

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

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

has to seek a more rational explanation. These practices deny their victims equal rights and practise exclusion because only thus can those who practice untouchability and apartheid ensure a permanent, cheap, virtually free supply of labour, which the minority can exploit to enrich itself.

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

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

