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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Double-digit inflation

Inflation is spoiling the government's celebration of India's quick recovery from the effects of the global crisis. The Wholesale Price Index (WPI) figures for May point to three worrying trends. First, for the fifth month now, the aggregate annual rate of inflation as reflected in the month-on-month increase in the WPI has been near or well above double-digit levels. The figures for May put inflation at 10.2 per cent over the year. Secondly, the current inflation is particularly sharp in the case of some essential commodities, as a result of which the prices of food articles as a group have risen by 16.5 per cent and of foodgrain by close to 10 per cent. Finally, there are clear signs that what was largely an inflation in food prices is now more generalised, with fuel prices rising by 13 per cent and manufactured goods prices by 6-7 per cent.

The government's response is that while this is a matter for concern, the trend is likely to reverse itself with the onset of the monsoon. To the extent that any policy response is being spoken of, the reference is mainly to a tightening of credit and an increase in interest rates by the Reserve Bank of India. This ignores important structural influences on the pace of price increase in the current conjuncture. One is the long-term neglect of agriculture, which has affected the level and pattern of agricultural production to an extent where supply-side constraints are leading to inflation every time growth picks up. The sudden and sharp hike in the support prices for pulses announced recently is an acknowledgement of this problem by the government. However, given the likely lag in output responses, the immediate fallout of that price increase could be an aggravation of

inflationary trends. A second structural influence is the effect the policy of reducing subsidies, raising administered prices, and dismantling price controls has on the costs of production. Even when inflation is ruling high, the government is contemplating deregulation of the pricing of universal intermediates such as petroleum products. Finally, inflation is high and persistent, despite expectations of a normal or good monsoon, because the decision to give private trade a greater role in the markets for essentials has provided the basis for a new bout of speculation, which the government seems unable or unwilling to control. It is to corrections in these areas that it must turn when looking for a solution to the inflation problem — rather than merely look for relief from monetary policy adjustments.

EDUCATION

Class Act

K. Kannan

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 does not merely guarantee a right to admission and be educated in a school. It also guarantees against expulsion from school. Indeed, the right not to be expelled is a logical extension of the fundamental right to education. The act states in express terms that a child shall not be expelled from school till the completion of elementary education (Section 16) and shall not be subjected to physical punishment or mental harassment (Section 17). If compulsory education is targeted to weaker sections and disadvantaged groups, the right against expulsion shall be targeted for every child, whether he or she belongs to weaker sections or the disadvantaged. Two recent examples have brought this issue into focus. In one case, the child took her life through suicide after she was expelled from school, and when the state ordered an investigation, it was to ensure that such incidents did not happen in the future. In yet another case, all was not lost; an order of injunction by the high court against compulsory expulsion saved the day — and so too, the children's immediate future, when the school made mandatory the payment of tuition fees in one lump sum per term and refused to receive monthly payment with a threat of expulsion. We have lessons to learn from both.

In *Mohini Jain (Ms) v State of Karnataka (1992)*, the Supreme Court for the first time expounded the right to education as a fundamental right. It arrived at this result through the constitutional exordium of

justice, liberty and equality; referred to Article 21 of the Constitution that guarantees the right to life, which ought to include right to dignified life; and made use of the Directive Principles of State Policy in its endeavour to secure to its citizens free and compulsory education. In Unnikrishnan (1993), the court again gave an interesting dimension to the fundamental right to education as being available even against a private institution but took a beating in T.M.A. Pai (2002), insofar as the latter judgment recognised a greater autonomy for privately-run educational institutions. In P.A. Inamdar (2005), the Supreme Court said that unaided institutions (both minority and non-minority) could claim an unfettered fundamental right to choose the students for admission, subject to the procedure being fair, transparent and non-exploitative.

Hitherto, attention has always been on admission to colleges for students and the right to establish and administer colleges and the extent to which state intervention is possible in the context of the right to education. There was but one occasion in Bijoe Emmanuel (1986) when three students, who being Jehovah's Witnesses conscientiously objected to being compelled to sing national anthem, were expelled by virtue of administrative instructions from the state's educational authority. The SC intervened on behalf of the students by striking down the expulsion order and directing re-admission into their school. The court added that "our tradition teaches tolerance; our philosophy preaches tolerance; our Constitution practices tolerance; let us not dilute it."

A child should never be faced with a prospect of being turned out of school even for non-payment of tuition. The fee shall only be taken as a debt to a school, which could be enforced as any other financial

obligation. The right of enforcement, could, if at all, be protected as a first charge against the assets of the parent. Should an errant behaviour of a minor student be a ground for expulsion? The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000, known as the JJ Act, provides for temporary care and custody of children who are in conflict with the law. A child that may have to be removed for extraordinary reasons of commission of offences shall be restored to mainstream schools as soon as favourable reports come in from monitoring agencies. The JJ Act already contains a provision for the parents' participation in sharing expenses for the maintenance of children for running children's homes — and, in case of indigent parents, requires the state to extend assistance. Will it not be apposite that the provision is amended suitably to cover also a situation of a parent not being able to afford continuation of education of children due to change in circumstances, such as loss of job for a parent or other causes of impoverishment?

A school that expels a student shall be made to do so at the peril of withdrawal of recognition and state grants, by suitable amendments to the respective state regulatory legislation for administering private schools. Even without legislative changes, the right to education, if it is seen as a fundamental right and what is more, a human right, expulsion of student from any school, for any reason whatever, shall soon be a forgotten expression.

**The writer is a judge at the Punjab and Haryana high court,
Chandigarh**

HINDU 16.6.10 EDUCATION

Making English language teaching effective

Hugo Williams

India's school education system stands on the threshold of real progress, if it has the courage to continue reform.

There is a nagging, uncomfortable question that must be addressed despite the optimism rightly created by the implementation on April 1 of the Right to Education Bill: it is not simply “can we get all of India's children into school?” but rather “will they learn something when they get there?”

The current system of state education in Tamil Nadu is vital in helping to provide an answer to this second question. One of the leaders in the “silent revolution” in Indian primary education, since 2007 it has introduced the progressive Activity Based Learning system (ABL) for standards 1-4, and Active Learning Methodology (ALM, a sort of big brother to the ABL system) to standards 6-8. These new teaching methodologies stress greater inclusion and interaction of children in the learning process, aiming to bring variety and enjoyment back into the classroom.

The state government, the SSA (“the government's flagship programme for delivering universalisation of Elementary Education”) and UNICEF have all been delighted with the impact of these reforms in Tamil Nadu. They have seen a marked improvement not only in the academic capabilities of primary school children under the new system, but also in their levels of confidence and their willingness to be involved in the learning process.

Following the success of the Tamil Nadu reforms, nearly all other states have followed suit, or are planning to, in implementing similar methodologies.

However, success in the state primary sector also serves to highlight the existing failure at secondary level, where teaching methods remain archaic. The learning experience for these children is passive and uninspiring. Frequently, the onus is placed overwhelmingly on passing exams, for which they need only memorise the contents of their textbooks, rather than actually teaching them the skills they need.

As an illustration of the outdated model, take the current system of English language teaching in the Tamil Nadu secondary sector, where the government directly runs 61 per cent of all schools.

Reading the IX standard English textbook provided by the state board is like travelling back in time. Students are instructed to match everyday words like “philatelist”, “numismatist”, and “ornithologist” to their correct meanings (I only managed one). One chapter explains at length the exact steps that need to be followed when sending a telegram, almost as vital a skill for the 21st century as knowing how to ride a penny farthing.

The book even refers to black people as “negroes” in one exercise, without providing adequate context for the uninitiated English learner, who would not know that the term is now widely considered a racial slur in the Western world (and has been for the past 20 years).

Supplying six million students every year with such outdated, error-strewn learning materials (even their title pages contain typos) is lazy and unacceptable, particularly when you consider that the 2009-2010 budget for secondary education in the state is a hefty Rs. 4,27,211 lakh. These textbooks are, after all, the predominant

teaching resources which are intended to prepare schoolchildren for their X and XII standard public exams — tests considered of such great importance that 2008 alone counted 264 exam-failure-related suicides across all state and private schools in Tamil Nadu.

The questionable benefits of the Tamil Nadu examination system call to mind the story of Dr. Yip, a Malaysian who has committed to memory the entire 57,000 word Oxford English-Chinese dictionary. The fascinating thing about Dr. Yip is that although he knows many more words than the average native speaker of English, he can't actually speak the language any better because of it.

The same logic can be applied to the average Indian secondary student. Instead of memorising a dictionary, they memorise a textbook. Learning the meaning of a “philatelist” (a stamp collector in case you're still guessing), and being able to recite poems and stories by heart in no way guarantees, or even makes it more likely, that you will end up being able to communicate in English. A recent ASER study backs up this conclusion: it found that a quarter to a half of 8th standard children in Tamil Nadu could not read or understand even very simple English sentences. However, in failing to test the actual language skills of children, state exams do little to flag up these huge shortcomings.

Of course, the problems of the secondary system, and this includes matriculation and Anglo-Indian schools, extend far beyond the teaching methodology alone. Many, but by no means all teachers, simply do not have the required level of training that is necessary to handle a more interactive, inclusive teaching style. Deviating from the textbook is a frightening prospect unless you are completely comfortable with your subject.

As the lingua franca of the international community, and as the only language that links all the states of India together, the benefits of

teaching Indian children to speak English are huge. The ever-increasing BPO sector, the largest employer in the private-sector economy, constantly bemoans the insufficient English language skills of Indian graduates, an elite minority themselves, claiming that only 15 per cent have the required level to work in business services without first undergoing major additional training.

If it is to really mean something, The Right to Education Act must include in it the Right to Decent English Teaching, given the social, educational and career benefits that proficiency in the language can bring.

In a very promising recent development, the Tamil Nadu government has drawn up fresh plans to collaborate with the SSA and The British Council in providing English language teacher training for all state schools across standards VI-VIII. This would be in addition to the English language project already underway for the V standard, for which 60,000 teachers have already been trained up (training for the next 60,000 will be undertaken this year).

Tamil Nadu is finally starting to eschew the archaic and ineffective approach to language teaching that has prevailed for so long. It is now looking to replace it with one which concentrates on communicative as well as literary aspects of language, and so better addresses the modern educational needs of Indian schoolchildren.

The next step is for it to extend these changes once again, this time all the way up through the secondary system. If it does this, Tamil Nadu will become a paradigm for how English language teaching should be carried out in India. If quality English teaching can permeate the Indian school system, the economic and social benefits for the country will be incalculable. India will be able to capitalise on its youthful population, and leave the rest of the world behind in its tracks, gasping for breath.

E-GOVERNANCE

Putting India on higher bandwidth

Ajith Athrady

When the Central Government enunciated the National Broadband Policy in 2004, with the high aim of taking all services to the doorsteps of the people of rural India through the e-governance route, it was seen as a boon to the country.

But the achievement fell short of expectations and the policy initiative turned out to be a flop show. Against the government target of 20 million broadband subscribers by 2010, only 8.75 million connections have been provided by March end, 2010.

According to latest data released by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), the watchdog of the telecom sector, though a number of companies are providing broadband services, the net broadband addition per month is just 0.1 million to 0.2 million in contrast to 18 million mobile connections per month. The broadband penetration is just 0.74 per cent compared with teledensity of 52.74 per cent.

Indeed, the government's hopes ran high while announcing the policy six years ago as it worked on the premise that greater the penetration of broadband, greater would be the transformation in various sectors in the country. But poor infrastructure coupled with lack of proper policy initiatives have forced the government to take a re-look at its 2004 policy.

Internet and broadband services, besides helping take e-governance to the villages, enable growth in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), which would in turn help the country become a competitive knowledge based economy.

Broadband and GDP

Research has proved that broadband services help increase the GDP. The World Bank report says, a 10 per cent increase in broadband penetration accounted for 1.38 per cent increase in per capita GDP growth in developing economies. This is much higher than the impact of mobile telephony growth on GDP.

“The primary inhibitors for broadband growth in the country are the lack of affordability and suitable infrastructure. The recent BWA (broadband wireless access) auctions are likely to enhance penetration of broadband across the country as it will overcome the limitation of high wireline infrastructure costs,” says Romal Shetty, Executive Director and National Head (Telecom) of KPMG.

The government can address the affordability issue by allowing private operators to leverage the infrastructure of public sector telecoms like BSNL/MTNL to ensure greater coverage at efficient costs, he says.

Currently, most of the broadband proliferation is taking place in the urban areas. There are 36.96 million wireline connections at the end of March 2010, out of which about 26.87 million connections are in urban areas.

In the market, as many as 104 service providers are providing broadband services.

Apart from Internet Service Providers (ISPs), Unified Access Service Licensees (UASLs), Cellular Mobile Service Providers (CMSPs) and Basic Service Operators (BSOs) are also permitted to provide broadband

access under the existing licensing framework.

However, top ten service providers have occupied more than 95 per cent of market. Of this, 70 per cent of market is occupied by the state owned companies BSNL and MTNL underscoring the fact that majority of the service providers are unable to penetrate into the market.

Indeed, because of high investment and expected low returns, operators are hesitant to invest in small cities and villages or remote areas. In terms of infrastructure alone, TRAI believes that a rural fibre infrastructure to connect 3,75,552 villages will need a total investment of Rs 32,295 crore.

It is also a known fact that low literacy is a major concern for improving broadband utilisation. As per government data, the total English literate population is only 91 million and the total computer literates are only 87 million. Nearly 25 per cent of Indian population stay in cities, out of which, 32 per cent are computer literate.

“People in rural areas are not aware of how useful internet can be to them. Educating people and creating awareness about the benefits of computers and bringing in user friendly applications, may be in local languages, can also help,” says Deepti Chauhan, Senior Manager (Research) from Asit C Mehta.

Consultation paper

TRAI has sought suggestions from industry stakeholders with regard to simple software to enable the common masses to use the latest devices. Once a common user is exposed to broadband, there can be numerous applications to encourage masses to adopt broadband, says a consultation paper released by the TRAI.

Despite high utility and considerable demand, broadband services are not available to many citizens due to non-availability of required infrastructure. Though operators have created networks in the big cities, they were shunning the small cities and villages due to high investment and low returns.

“The quality as well as the speed of internet connections also needs to be improved. Of course, the WiMax auctions would help improve the broadband penetration. One of the key factors limiting the growth of broadband in India has been the constraint of last mile access. Therefore, unbundling last mile is what needs to be changed. Also alternative technologies need to be identified and efforts made to implement them,” says Chauhan.

Strategic plan

The Department of Telecommunication (DoT), which recently completed the Wireless Broadband Services auction, is now working on a strategic plan to increase the growth in this sector further.

“The government has decided to prepare a strategic plan for the DoT for the next five years. The plan will include key areas like various licensing issues, effective strategies for increasing broadband penetration, including in rural areas,” said Telecom Minister A Raja.

Pointing out that the growth of broadband will increase with the launch of 3G (third generation) and BWA (broadband wireless access) services, the TRAI consultation paper projects 5%, 20% and 40% households in the country to have broadband connections by 2010, 2012 and 2014, respectively.

National Broadband Plan

TRAI’s consultation paper on National Broadband Plan is posted on its website (www.trai.gov.in). All stakeholders may send their comments, preferably in electronic form, on the issues raised in the consultation paper by July 7, 2010. Comments will be posted on TRAI’s website and counter comments may be sent by July 15, 2010.

Initiatives in other countries

Australia: Government invested \$ 3.8 billion in national broadband plan. Around 90 per cent of population shall be provided broadband

access of 100 Mbps speed with fibre based network.

UK: Government invested \$1.6 billion for development of network in rural areas.

Aim is to bring superfast broadband to 90 per cent of population. Private investment is expected to cover 70 per cent of optical fibre cost by 2017. Part funded by proposed landline duty of \$ 0.8 per month on all fixed line in country.

USA : There is a national broadband plan to provide nationwide broadband, including rural areas. Government to provide \$ 11.6 billion under various broadband programmes. Further \$ 2.5 billion is made available for grants loan and loan guarantees.

Singapore: Next Generation Broadband plan started in 2006 with government subsidy of \$ 0.7 million.
(Source: TRAI)

TIMES OF INDIA 21.6.10 E-GOVERNANCE

State govt push to e-governance

Ashish Roy

NAGPUR: The general administration department has directed all departments to spend 0.5% of their budget and non-plan allocation on e-governance to provide services to citizens from 2010-11.

The directive has been issued to 34 departments, government-run companies, corporations and boards.

Companies like MSEDCL would have to spend 0.5% of their total revenue on e-governance. The departments and corporations have been asked to create a separate head of e-governance in their record books and record the expenditure incurred.

GAD has prepared a vision document for implementation of e-governance. This lists the citizen centric services to be provided online by each department. Chief secretary JP Dange said in the GR that departments should not just purchase hardware and then delay developing software for e-services. This defeated the purpose of the project. To avoid this, estimates for hardware and software should be prepared together, the GR said.

TIMES OF INDIA 21.6.10 E-GOVERNANCE

State to showcase e-governance move at Centre's meet

Sanjeev Kumar Verma

PATNA: From a laggard to the one which can now share its achievements with other states, Bihar has made a turnaround in e-governance.

Probably the country's first state to have introduced an SMS-based system of monitoring the progress of development and welfare schemes, Bihar would showcase the innovative step at a conference of states on e-governance, organized by the Centre in Jaipur later this month.

Not that the state would be sharing such an innovation with others for the first time. Many of Nitish Kumar government's other e-governance initiatives, including the `Jaankari' helpline for RTI applicants and the biometric cards for NREGA beneficiaries, have won nationwide accolades. The `Jaankari' initiative in fact fetched an award for the state.

A team of senior Bihar officials — personnel and administrative reforms department principal secretary Dipak Kumar, IT department principal secretary Arun K Singh and public grievance cell secretary C K Anil — would represent the state in the conference. "We would make a presentation on the SMS-based monitoring system," Kumar told TOI.

Launched in December last year, the system helps the government keep a tab on the day-to-day progress of works related to NREGA schemes, Indira Awas Yojana allotments, construction of roads and bridges and distribution of bicycles/dress among students distribution, to name a

few.

State's field officials have to send an SMS every evening about the work done by them on the day. The number to which they have to send their SMSes is linked to a central server.

Using the convergence technology, the data received at the server is converted into a graph which, along with the block-wise data, is uploaded on the official website of the district concerned.

One more feature was recently added to the system; that is, uploading of targets given to the field officials under different schemes.

"From next fiscal year, the annual confidential reports of the field officials would be written on the basis of their achievements against the target," a top state official said.

HUMAN RIGHTS

HINDU 20.6.10 HUMAN RIGHTS

Autonomous NHRC has no say over funds allocation

Vinay Kumar

NEW DELHI: The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which reflects the country's concern for protecting and promoting human rights, is waging a lone battle to protect its own rights.

A statutory body, the NHRC enjoys full functional autonomy and has its own investigation team to probe allegations of human rights violations. But in this case, it can only be a mute, hapless spectator to its financial freedom being curtailed by the government.

Well-placed sources indicated that the NHRC was faced with a reduction in its annual allocation of funds for 2010-11. "From an allocation of Rs.24 crore, it has gone down to Rs.18 crore for 2010-11," the sources said.

The allocation for the NHRC is approved by an expenditure committee, which is headed by the Commission's Chairperson and includes the Secretary (Expenditure). The sources said that though the panel recommended an allocation of Rs.24.10 crore, the government slashed it to Rs.18 crore.

The NHRC gets its financial allocation from the Consolidated Fund of India. According to the Protection of Human Rights Act 1993, which bestows powers on the Commission and governs its functioning, "the Central government shall, after due appropriation made by Parliament by law, pay to the Commission by way of grants such sums of money as the Central government may think fit for being utilised for the purposes of the Act."

Set up in October 1993, the NHRC is currently headed by the former Chief Justice of India, Justice K.G. Balakrishnan, and has four members, all of whom enjoy the status equal to that of a sitting Supreme Court judge. The Commission has been graded in the prestigious 'A' category by the accreditation committee of the International Coordination Committee, a United Nations body which meets every year in Geneva.

Security cover

In another development, the Centre has initiated a move to downgrade the security given to the NHRC members who get round-the-clock security guards at their residences and a personal security officer.

It is learnt that the Home Ministry recently carried out a comprehensive review of the threat perception and security cover to the NHRC members. Though the security cover has not been withdrawn, the sources said, the Ministry is likely to take a decision on it soon, adding that the status of the NHRC members as Supreme Court judges would have to be kept in mind during the security review.

POVERTY

DECCAN HERALD 23.6.10 POVERTY

**South Asia has highest rate of child malnutrition, says UN report
Extreme poverty still pervades India**

South Asian countries, including India, are far behind in meeting the millennium development goals of halving extreme poverty by 2015.



The “Millennium Development Goals: 2010 Progress Report” says that while India is expected to reduce its poverty rate from 51 per cent in 1990 to 24 per cent in 2015, progress in the rest of South Asia was slow and not sufficient to cut poverty to half.

Efforts to achieve a double digit rate of growth by 2012 are on but this achievement will not enable us to reduce poverty as per the millennium goals.

The report released on Wednesday reveals that South Asia has a large percentage of people in “so- called vulnerable employment characterised by inadequate earnings, substandard working conditions and a lack of formal work arrangements and benefits.

South Asia has the second largest rate of vulnerable employment among all regions, next to sub-Saharan Africa,” poorest part of the world.

Slow progress

The MDG report said that South Asia has made a slow progress against hunger and the prevalence of hunger in the region actually increased between 2000-2002 and 2005-2007 from 20 to 21 per cent.

The report reveals that South Asia has the highest rate of child malnutrition in the world with 51 per cent of children younger than five years underweight in 2008, down a negligible 5 percentage points from 51 per cent.

“In India, too, the percentage of undernourished population could be reduced from 24 per cent to 21 per cent only,” it said.

However, the report noted that that South Asia has performed better as far as reduction child mortality is concerned. The number of child deaths per 1,000 live births dropped from 121 in 1990 to 74 in 2008. In India it reduced from 83 in 1990 to 54 in 2007.

Primary education

South Asia has done its best in providing universal primary education. It has reached 90 per cent in 2008 and it will achieve the goal by 2015.

In primary education, girls are catching up, but in secondary and tertiary education the gender inequality is still there with 87 and 76 per boys enrolled respectively, in 2008.

“In South Asia, gender inequality in education is mirrored by inequality in the labour market. Only 20 per cent of those employed outside agriculture are women. And only 9 per cent of senior or managerial positions are held by women,” said the report.

The millennium goals are too distant for the region even in ensuring environmental sustainability. No progress could be made in this direction, according to the report.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Municipal musings

Yoginder K. Alagh

Large Indian cities are doing reasonably well. Ahmedabad, where I stay, has been voted one of the ten most attractive towns in India and once the adjoining panchayats became a part of the municipal corporation, it's a great place for a morning walk. The same is true for many other metropolises work might take you to. But I go to smaller towns, when the economics fraternity calls me; I travel to rural areas in Maharashtra, UP and Punjab, to name a few places where my work carries me.

Invariably some of the small towns I stay in, were a few years ago, large villages whether Kim, Rahata, or a taluka place between Lucknow and Barabanki.

They have grown from a population of around 20,000 to 1 lakh or more. The growth is usually around the industrialisation of a metro or a large town, or agro processing/marketing, as in Surat, Nashik, Ahmednagar or central UP. The household size is not large, for there is a large migrant population. The migrants are happy, for even with a little skill they would get around Rs 300 a day, in post-NREGA India. So are the local traders, well-off farmer families, the college principal — for everyone loves prosperity and rising capital values.

But life is bad. There is no public water supply. In fact in most such places, even in the “good” local hotel, it is quite common for muck to come in the bathroom tap that’s fed from groundwater. There is a networked input-output system; there is no drainage and open defecation is common. Housing is coming up apace and the BOD — a polite name for shit — goes back in the open plots and percolates through in time. It is sometimes pumped back into the aquifer. Apart from the traders and farmers the local doctors are also obviously happy. If you raise these issues you are considered grumpy.

The Eleventh Plan has a very sage sentence on the “coverage of urban population with water supply facilities had not been very impressive”. Ahem. It is also unhappy on sanitation and, living up to the planners’ reputation for being practical, gives some statistics to show that the smaller a town is the worse off it is. They say that in 1994 there was an accelerated water supply programme for small towns.

The plan now is in a PPP mode. There does not seem anything special seen for small towns. I suspect what is called the viability gap is much larger there. Everybody is so happy making money for the first time in their civilisational history that I am not quite clear who will lead the PPP brigade. Where is the water going to come from anyway? Land use planning in the sense that transport and other infrastructure should be built up where it is possible, and habitations around it — is infra dig, being relegated to “socialist mindsets”. In some of the towns I went to and raised these questions asking for initiatives (PPPs), I get a mouthful: “You know sir, the real problem is that those who come from outside are not interested. When they come they say they are vegetarians and don’t drink, but soon spoil our culture.”

The problem is in a sense getting more acute. This column has argued that urbanisation has moved much faster than anticipated: 1.1 million persons in Gujarat, for example, live in places which have all the characteristics of towns in 2001, but are not declared as such. This was happening slowly; now it is an avalanche. It is of some importance that we anticipate the movement of workers from villages to cities. The process may not be benign as I want it to be, but it should at least not be cruel. I am an unrepentant admirer of NREGA and food security, but when that poor mother comes to a small town with her girl child she must have the conditions where what she gets from the food she earns go to her vitals.

There is the environmental angle too, but we can't push too many things at one time. Suffice it to say that many of the lakes and rivers which gave towns small and big, water for drinking and sanitation are now drains, as the pollution guys tell us every year with frightening data. And like me if you love to go to the backwaters at least every odd year, here is what Dr S. Anbumani and his gang at the Indira Gandhi Centre of Atomic Research have to tell us on the cytogenetic damage in "fishes" inhabiting the backwaters of Kalpakkam: "DNA damage due to chronic low dose exposures to chemicals and other environmental mutagens through erythrocyte cytome assay." They too have the

Bengali failing of saying that the plural of fish is fishes, but don't say they did not warn us.

The writer, a former Union minister, is chairman, Institute of Rural Management, Anand

TERRORISM

Amending AFSPA

Humane laws can't weaken fight against militancy

THE critics of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) must be feeling elated over the Union government's move to amend the controversial piece of law to make it humane. The AFSPA has been described as a draconian law as it gives the armed forces some special powers which can easily result in the violation of an individual's human rights or the security forces indulging in excesses. The law empowers Army personnel on duty in Jammu and Kashmir or in the Northeast to make arrests without any warrants, or search the premises of a person without following the established procedure. Prosecution can be launched against erring Army personnel but only after having the Central government's sanction which is not easy to get.

The armed forces have been opposed to any change in the law on the plea that they need the protection of special laws when their men are deployed for anti-terrorist or anti-insurgency operations. In their opinion, it is not easy to achieve success in the fight against an invisible enemy in difficult terrain without the protection of special laws. The nature of this special assignment is such that the security forces can make mistakes, but that is while pursuing the larger interests of the nation. Thus, the outright rejection by the Army of any amendment to the AFSPA is understandable.

It is true that nothing should be done that weakens the cause of the fight against terrorists. Even if infiltration from across the border has come down considerably, the security forces have to remain vigilant always and ready to take on the enemy whenever and wherever he raises his

head. However, those opposed to any dilution of the AFSPA must not forget that even a small mistake leading to the death of an innocent person causes incalculable harm to the task of eliminating terrorism or insurgency. Many such cases have happened in the past. Whatever the compulsions, draconian laws cannot be justified in a democracy. This was the reason why Prime Minister Manmohan Singh some time ago assured the people of a thorough review of the AFSPA. Any step that is for the good of the country must be taken.