

CONTENTS

BOOK REVIEW

Nitish Kumar And The Rise Of Bihar 3-4

CORRUPTION

Pyramid of corruption 6-7

MONETARY POLICY

RBI rate pause, no non-event 9-11

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

How much is too much democracy 13-16

The PM's last stand 17-20

In the year and now 21-23

More democracy, not 24-26

Before UP poll, opportunism to the fore 27-29

Rahul lacks sincerity 30-33

LOSER AT BOTH ENDS 34-38

SOCIAL JUSTICE

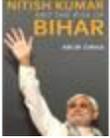
Not through haste 40-43

URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Celebrating the spirit of New Delhi 45-48

BOOK REVIEW

Review: Nitish Kumar And The Rise Of Bihar



Arun Sinha
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Biographies of serving politicians in India are a hazardous enterprise. Writing a definitive assessment of a public person whose position may evolve and whose affiliations may shift even while the manuscript is being prepared cannot be easy. Also, sometimes authors are guilty of reading the individual's past in the context of his current politics.

Arun Sinha's *Nitish Kumar and the Rise of Bihar* negotiates these pitfalls with honesty; to the degree possible, and avoids them. Nevertheless, the final chapters, describing Kumar's performance as chief minister after he won a landslide victory in 2005 and was re-elected with gusto five years later, are probably the least satisfying portions of the book. As an old college friend of Kumar's and a contemporary in the political hothouse and student unrest of Patna University in the early 1970s, Sinha understands his subject and where he is coming from, literally. As such, his detailed and meticulous retelling of those years leaves the strongest impression on the reader.

Kumar has been called the most enlightened product of the social justice movement and the generation of largely other backward class (OBC) politicians it threw up. Today his ability to build a rainbow coalition unites the traditionally privileged castes and the OBCs, and has his Muslim constituents voting for his BJP allies. Sinha goes back to the origins of Kumar's politics, to a time when his coalition-building appeal was not an asset but a handicap.

In the 1980 Bihar assembly elections, Kumar stood from Harnaut, which had a strong presence of his fellow Kurmis. He lost, however, to a Kurmi -bahubaliø (muscleman/criminal politician) who represented the aggressive face of OBC mobilisation. öThe paradox of Nitishø's identity in the election,ö Sinha writes, öwas that while the upper castes and the Yadavs saw him as a Kurmi, the Kurmis did not see him as a Kurmi. They saw him as a liberal who would not stand for the interests of the community.ö It took Kumar 25 years to convert this -disadvantageø into a badge of honour.

In the interim, Bihar went through the churning and the excesses of the OBC empowerment process and the Mandalisation project. Lalu Prasad Yadav, Kumarø's senior in student politics, came to symbolise this phenomenon. Kumar was by his side when he, Yadav, became chief minister. But a divorce was inevitable, at least to Sinha. In the book ö and this is perhaps where the clarity of post facto analysis comes in ö Sinha presents Yadav as the compromising pragmatist, right from his university days, as against the agreeable decency of Kumar.

The tide turned in 2005, when Kumar ended Lalu Raj with a resounding triumph. The Yadav chieftain was a bitter loser, delaying moving out of 1 Anne Marg, the CMø's residence in Patna that he and his wife and successor, Rabri Devi, had occupied for 15 years. öNitishø's aides who went round the premises after Lalu and Rabri left,ö Sinha writes, ödiscovered things that could be seen as signs of occult practice, which they presumed to have been undertaken to harm Nitish.ö

There were rumours that Yadav had hidden his ill-gotten wealth somewhere in the house: öThe staff was tipped by the grapevine that he was most likely to have concealed it in the swimming pool, underneath its floor tiles and behind its side walls. Pickaxes were brought and tiles were removed by labourersí After a good deal of digging they gave up, wondering where the lord of the poor had buried his treasure.ö The Nitish era had begun.

CORRUPTION

Pyramid of corruption

Bring lower bureaucracy under Lokpal's purview

The proposal to exclude Groups C and D Government employees from the ambit of the Lokpal demonstrates the Congress-led UPA Government's shallow determination to root out corruption at lower levels of babudom. The vast majority of the people are victims and continue to be victims of corruption at the hands of the lower bureaucracy, lower judiciary and lower police officials, with whom they have to interact on issues at regular intervals. They have to grease palms to get a legal water connection, a ration card, subsidised foodgrains, to lodge an FIR or to get their petition heard. The worst are the babus whose vice-like stranglehold over the masses across the country is shocking; existing laws, rules and regulations have done nothing to loosen their grip. This is essentially why people believe that the only way to make the lower bureaucracy, essentially Groups C and D employees, accountable is to place them under the purview of the proposed Lokpal. To that extent, anti-corruption activist Anna Hazare is right in insisting on the inclusion of these Government employees in the list of those who will be accountable to the Lokpal for their misdeeds. He also has a point when he says that the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Bill 2011, which has been introduced in Parliament, is meaningless for the masses unless it addresses their main concern – the harassment and worse they have to face at the hands of the lower bureaucracy. While it can be argued that there is no certainty that the lower bureaucracy will abandon its corrupt ways if it is placed under the purview of the Lokpal, the point remains that there is no harm in trying this option. After all, the Bill is meant to combat corruption and excluding the largest arm of the Government from the Lokpal's ambit does not make any sense. The Government will no doubt insist that the Lokpal will have a say in the affairs of the lower bureaucracy since it will have the powers to receive complaints against

Groups C and D employees and refer them to the Central Vigilance Commission. That is neither here nor there. If anything, it will make the Lokpal into a post office. Also, it is absurd to suggest that the CVC is adequately empowered to deal with corrupt lower level employees and should be left untouched. While the CVC may claim to be doing an exemplary job of dealing with corrupt Government employees, there is little or no evidence to prove it right.

There wouldn't have been such widespread corruption in bureaucracy at all levels had the CVC been diligent in fulfilling its responsibility. Over the years it has become just another department of the gargantuan Government machinery, happy to feast on public funds and serve as a parking lot for retired bureaucrats to whom the regime of the day owes a favour for services rendered. For evidence, look at the shameful manner in which Prime Minister Manmohan Singh tried to appoint a tainted babu as the Chief Vigilance Commissioner and almost succeeded in that dubious enterprise. But for the Supreme Court stepping in, Mr Singh would have got away with that appointment and a favourite babu of the Congress would have been rewarded with a post-retirement sinecure. Surely the CVC cannot be expected to play the role of an anti-corruption watchdog body under the tutelage of such individuals. Nor can a Government steeped in corruption from top to bottom be trusted to act against those who prop up the rotten system namely, those excluded from the Lokpal's purview.

MONETARY POLICY

RBI rate pause, no non-event

C. R. L. NARASIMHAN

In its mid-quarter monetary policy review on December 16, the Reserve Bank of India did not change the policy interest rates, the repo and the reverse repo rates. They remain unchanged at 8.5 per cent and 7.5 per cent, respectively. Nor did it tinker with the Cash Reserve Ratio, which stays at 6 per cent.

The repo rate is the rate at which the RBI lends to banks while the reverse repo is the rate at which it takes money from banks, both against securities.

The repo rate has emerged as the key reference rate. The reverse repo is pegged at one percentage point below it. Those significant changes were introduced in the annual policy statement of May 3, which also saw the introduction of the marginal standing facility whose rate is fixed at one percentage point above the repo rate.

Understanding the intricacies

The absence of changes in the interest rates does not make the policy announcement a non-event. One tends to assume that headline making interest rate moves are the whole of monetary policy. Everything else does not seem to matter.

It ought to be mentioned here that a monetary policy announcement does not cause the same level of excitement, which, say, a budget announcement does. Until recently, monetary policy issues were presumed to interest bankers (to whom it is generally communicated in the first instance) rather than the common man.

To a large extent that was true: for the man on the street there was little to relate to interest rate or exchange rate policies. But the paradigm is surely but steadily changing. Ordinary citizens develop a vested interest — they may own a house bought with a bank loan or financed their children's education through an educational loan. Many, of course, travel abroad making them aware of the intricacies of foreign exchange transactions.

For them and many others, there is a growing need to understand the intricacies of official policies. The list can go on and on but suffice it to say that to the extent official policies are made more accessible, it is in everyone's interest.

Making official policies accessible

The latest mid-quarter review is one of the eight policy statements by the RBI in a year. The increased frequency — one every 45 days — helps the central bank keep in constant contact with the financial markets. It is also part of a process of demystifying official policies.

However, one outcome flowing from the frequent announcements is that the monetary policy statements have become predictable. There are pros and cons in such an approach. On the plus side, there is greater transparency as well as continuity in policy. Important issues discussed just 45 days ago will not be forgotten. For instance, in the quarterly review (October 26), the RBI more than hinted of a soft monetary policy ahead when it said that the possibility of a rate review in the December statement was 'relatively low' and that henceforth the monetary policy will have more room for addressing short-term concerns.

The flip side, of course, is that the central bank probably loses its surprise element when it wants to take the market participants by surprise. However, on December 15, the RBI sought to impose curbs on speculation in foreign exchange forward contracts as part of its gambit to

stem the rupee's slide against the dollar. The rupee rebounded sharply on the next day. All these show that there is still room for surprise announcements in between policy dates.

Effectively, the RBI had announced a change in its stance in the last policy announcement itself. On the eve of the latest statement, the consensus among money managers and others was that the RBI will maintain the status quo neither reduce the interest rates nor hike them. However, in the days prior to the policy announcement, there were strong arguments for and against a rate hike. Inflation continues to be a main worry, although the RBI is hopeful of containing it within its projected target of 7 per cent by March, 2012. On the other side, growth concerns have begun to occupy the centre stage. "While inflation remains on its projected trajectory, downside risks to growth have clearly increased," the RBI said.

"From this point on, monetary policy actions are likely to reverse the cycle, responding to the risks to growth," it said.

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

How much is too much democracy?

Ashok Kapur

Mahathir Mohammed, the respected former Prime Minister of [Malaysia](#) and now an elder Asian statesman diagnosed some of the ills that seemingly afflict [democracy](#) in India. He recently addressed a gathering of national leaders, leading citizens, intellectuals and media personalities in the capital at a [Leadership Summit](#) organized by a leading national daily. The deliberations at the summit were broadcast live throughout the country.

He has ascribed most of the current "problems" facing us to the reason that we have "too much democracy". He added that we need a "strong" Central leadership to overcome the present difficulties and restore some "order" so that unhindered progress can take place. The overdose of democracy holds back India from emerging as one of the leading players on the world stage.

Mahathir's diagnosis is negated by recent experience of the modern nation states the world over and the lessons of history. One does not have to delve deep into history to draw the appropriate lessons from it. The last century itself is replete with examples of nations that broke up and disintegrated because they limited [the practice](#) of democracy in order to enforce "discipline" and attempted to bring about rapid economic growth.

India is a federal republic with one of the most liberal forms of democracy. The Constitution was aptly described by [Pt. Nehru](#), one of its main architects as a strong federation during normal times but with provision for converting it into a unitary structure in times of

emergency. The Founding Fathers were visionaries with great foresight. They realized that for a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual society, a federal structure was the only viable form of government.

A liberal democracy is the bedrock of federalism. The history of twentieth century world that we live in brings home this stark lesson to all of us. Nation upon nation, all federal republics that limited democracy in favour of "strong" central leadership broke apart and could not survive as unified states. Ethnic and linguistic minorities and regions seceded, often violently and at great human cost. Paradoxically, a "strong" central leadership invariably proved counter-productive.

The example of former [Soviet Union](#) is a well-known. Also falling in the category of failed states are former [Republic of Yugoslavia](#), [Indonesia](#) and nearer home, former East and West Pakistan. All these were federal republics that experimented with variants of democracy. They convinced themselves that somehow too much democracy is not good for their people and it must be limited for people's own sake. The leader knows best what is good for his "subjects".

Thus, both the Soviet Union and [Yugoslavia](#) practised 'socialist democracy' or 'democratic centralism'. Admittedly, the ideology was suffused with idealism, all in the name of "the people" and their beloved fatherland. Full guarantees were extended to all minorities and regions-but only on paper. Believe it or not, the Constitution of the former Soviet Union had conceded even the right of "secession" to the various ethnic regions.

Indonesia similarly experimented with "guided democracy". The central leadership imposed their will on far-flung [islands](#) comprising several dozen major linguistic and tribal groups, with deadpan uniformity. They had virtually no voice, not to talk of role in governance. They were completely alienated from the central leadership. One cannot say with certainty if the final act in the Indonesian tragedy has played itself out. It

may yet break up further.

Pakistan's case is all too well known to merit detailed analysis. The Army Generals who overthrew a civilian government experimented with "basic democracy" as they felt that universal adult franchise was a luxury that [Pakistan](#) could ill-afford. Democracy was limited to selected individuals who were supposed to be literate in the 3Rs. The federal unit of East Pakistan was reduced to the status of a poor cousin. Like Indonesia, Pakistan's tragedy may be still unfolding, looking to [the situation](#) in the federal unit of Baluchistan and other federal provinces.

A "strong" central leadership is the soul mate of limited democracy. And such leadership almost invariably passes on to the armed forces of the modern nation state. The generals and the air marshals assume charge in the name of "order and discipline". They have an in-built disdain for the "bureaucratic state" and the "bumbling democracy". They buy themselves a one-way ticket to power till such time as the state collapses under their heavy boots.

The aforesaid are but some of the few examples of large federal states that experimented with limited democracy and failed. The malady does not discriminate, and seems to afflict smaller states as well. It appears to be endemic to the region. [Sri Lanka](#) has just survived a brutal civil war and is barely intact. [Afghanistan](#) is a house divided against itself between the Pashtuns and the Uzbeks, held together for the time being against the common threat from [Taliban](#).

[Burma](#) is apparently a paper entity and a geographical fiction as a nation. Some of the longest

civil wars of the last century, largely forgotten by the outside world have spilled over to the present century. The state is fighting its own minorities who have, de facto, carved out for themselves their own sub states-the Kachins, the Karens and the Shans. Their respective territories

are 'no go' zones save for the Burmese military in large numbers.

Among these disintegrated and disintegrating states one can witness the solitary splendour of a standing and functioning federation with a liberal democracy. There are no prizes for guessing the right name. And this has been possible as the basic democratic structure of the state has not been [disturbed](#), whatever the provocation. Not that we have not been afflicted with our own set of centrifugal forces. But we have contained them through dialogue and discussion. A liberal democracy is the most resilient form of government.

Unity in Diversity is the lofty principle of the Indian society and a federal democracy is its actual form. A limited democracy and its counterpart of "strong" leadership is the antidote. The latter tries to impose a certain Uniformity in Diversity which has proved to be a recipe for disaster. This is the abiding lesson of the history of the last century.

Much is made of the fact that Indian democracy is much too "noisy" for orderly progress and a marketable brand. But the argument overlooks the fact that debate and discussion are the [essence](#) of good governance, as conflicting ideas and varying opinions get churned and what emerges is often the optimum solution. As someone rightly said, what may sound noise today is the music of democracy in the long run. Solzhenitsyn was right-the only alternative to debate and discussion is the Gulag.

Mahatir Mohammed's prescription for India, with respect may, paradoxically enough, turn out to be a remedy worse than the disease. Indeed, it may prove fatal for the health of our federal democracy.

The PM's last stand

Samar Halarnkar

Sometime in November, Rahul Gandhi, Congress general secretary and heir to the Gandhi legacy, called for a debate at his heavily guarded colonial-era bungalow, tucked away in a secluded, shady New Delhi lane. The three people summoned were not a little bemused, wondering if they were going to participate in a real-life version of the fractious debates on news television.

The participants were economist Kirit Parikh, Chief Economic Adviser Kaushik Basu and National Advisory Council Member Harsh Mander. The three men were to debate the National Food Security Act (or Food Bill as it is popularly called), the costliest most ambitious legislation of the UPA's current tenure.

Parikh and Basu, advocates of fiscal caution, especially at a time of falling economic growth, lean towards the economic right. Mander, one of those who wrote the Food Bill and believes it is unconscionable that India has more hungry people than any other country, leans to the left. Versions of their seemingly irreconcilable positions have polarised the public debate over providing cheap food to India's poorest people.

Rahul wanted to put Parikh, Basu and Mander in one room and see if some of their differences could be reconciled. As it emerged, Parikh and Basu did not have major disagreements with Mander.

All three agreed it was a good idea to provide direct government assistance to the poorest, roughly about 700 million people, so they never went to bed hungry. The points of disagreement were minor. Parikh and Basu favoured direct cash transfers, while Mander wanted to use the existing public distribution system (PDS), about 500,000 'fair-

price' shops, after reform (about 60% of foodgrain released through the PDS does not reach intended beneficiaries, according to the World Bank).

Rahul's little exercise revealed that putting everyone in one room can help - sometimes.

If only it was as easy to address the deepening ideological differences and turf wars that stall governance and threaten new ideas, including the Food Bill, at the highest levels of his party's government.

One of the biggest opponents of the Food Bill - though his government has cleared it and now awaits Parliament's approval - is Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who has been having a sometimes tense backroom tussle with his boss, UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi. On Singh's cue, many ministers, in recent cabinet meetings, have expressed disquiet over the Food Bill, which will cost India Rs 27,000 crore annually, though this will not kick in immediately or uniformly, in addition to the existing national food subsidy of Rs 70,000 crore. Extra money may need to be spent on an upgrade for and creation of farming and grain-distribution infrastructure (this is no bad thing).

According to those who have heard his views, Singh believes subsidies must not grow in inflationary times; if India helps markets and controls State expenditure, jobs will be created and everyone will prosper. Whatever the merits of this argument, it conflicts with those of Sonia and the NAC. It finally took a diktat from Sonia before Singh and his Cabinet acquiesced to the Food Bill.

Now, thanks to the party's inherent political dissonance the new law's implementation is already in jeopardy, thanks to a critical, unresolved detail: who is poor?

The government has not decided how it will select beneficiaries. Will it use the flawed, existing lists that leave out millions of rural and urban

poor and include millions of not-so-poor? The NAC suggests identifying the urban poor using three types of vulnerabilities: residential (homeless people-obviously poor; slum dwellers-high chances of being poor); occupational (rickshaw pullers, construction labour, domestic help, beggars etc); and social (households with no able-bodied male aged 18 to 60). In rural areas, where it is harder to decide who is poor, it may make sense to follow socio-economic categories - single women, disabled people, old people, scheduled castes/tribes. This approach may include some undeserving people (such as rich widows), but it is less likely to exclude the poor.

I dwell on these details because they must be considered soon. It will require a hitherto unseen consensus within and attention from the UPA to actually deliver food to the poorest.

Choosing a method to select the poor has ramifications for a related issue, the Unique Identification Authority (UID), the world's largest programme to bestow biometric identities and use these to plug multi-billion-dollar leaks, reach out to the destitute and overhaul the delivery of subsidies to those excluded from the Indian dream. The UID is on the verge of stalling because chairman and former Infosys CEO Nandan Nilekani has run into opposition from the Planning Commission and the home ministry. Nilekani spends much of his time lobbying for his beleaguered programme, a political job that should be the responsibility of the government, which commissioned him to change the old ways.

With little political influence over his party, the prime minister is unwilling to intervene. Nilekani can only appeal to the Gandhis. Sonia, say those who have spoken to her, is unwilling to intervene unless absolutely necessary. Rahul will listen, but it is hard, even for him, to call the home minister to a let's-sort-it-out meeting.

The experts and professionals who deal with the house of the Government of India are like its plumbers and painters. The members of

the household must decide what is to be done with the billions they intend to spend. There is just so much the plumbers and painters can do.

In the year and now

Ramachandra Guha

The Republic of India has a billion (and more) citizens who, at any given time, are involved in a thousand (and more) controversies. Knowing which controversy is the most significant is always hard, and often impossible, to judge. Even so, we can be fairly certain that 2011 will go down in Indian history as the year of the Great Lokpal Debate, just as 1962 was the year of the war with China, 1975 the year of the Emergency, 1991 the year the licence-permit-quota-raj was first undermined, 1992 the year the Babri Masjid was demolished.

Vigorous arguments still rage on the causes and consequences of the China War, the Emergency, economic liberalisation, and the Ramjanmabhoomi movement. How then does one judge the import of events as they are unfolding? The eight months since Anna Hazare's fast in Jantar Mantar have, even by Indian standards, been very contentious indeed. This coming week, the debate on the Lokpal Bill in Parliament and the threatened -jail bhara andolan will complicate the picture further.

It may be decades before a proper historical judgement is passed on the principal characters and events in this controversy. Living through the tamasha myself, I have been successively and sometimes simultaneously bewildered, confused, and exasperated. The first two emotions cannot be explained, but I should perhaps say something about the third.

I have been exasperated by, among other things, the repeated invocation by -Team Anna and their television cheerleaders of the name and legacy of Mohandas K Gandhi. The distance between Hazare and the Mahatma in terms of moral courage and political understanding is roughly equivalent to the distance, in terms of cricketing ability and

understanding, between this writer and Sachin Tendulkar. In fact, Hazare is not even a Gandhian. He has both preached and practised violence, and has never seriously pursued such quintessentially Gandhian projects as the abolition of caste distinctions, women's emancipation, and Hindu-Muslim harmony.

The distance between Hazare and Mahatma Gandhi can be judged if one juxtaposes Mukul Sharma's book *Green and Saffron* (the first serious study of the Ralegan Siddhi experiment) to Louis Fischer's classic *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. The distance between Hazare and Gandhianism can be judged if one visits the cooperatives and banks run in Gujarat by the Self-Employed Women's Association, whose founder, Ela Bhatt, has successfully nurtured ideals of caste and gender equality, and religious pluralism, among lakhs and lakhs of previously sectarian Indians.

I have also been exasperated by the attitude of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Through 2011, the BJP undermined the dignity of Parliament by regularly disrupting its proceedings. Comments by senior BJP leaders endorsing Hazare left it unclear whether the principal Opposition party believed that it was the Ramlila Maidan, rather than Parliament, which should decide how laws are to be framed and when they are to be passed. Meanwhile, the sister organisation of the BJP, the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), aggressively supported Hazare's movement. (One hopes it is only by oversight that, in his recent speech in Bangalore, Hazare did not speak of the by no means insubstantial corruption promoted by the BJP-run state government.)

Finally, I have been exasperated by the behaviour of the ruling dispensation in New Delhi. A young journalist told me that "while Gandhi became a Mahatma through his own efforts, we in the media have made a village patriarch a Gandhi." In fact, the government has done its bit in inflating Hazare's significance. For in the winter of 2010-11, the prime minister had stayed silent while the Commonwealth

Games and 2G scams broke. This is a key reason behind Hazare's appeal. Cabinet ministers met with five men nominated by Hazare in a Joint Drafting Committee. In sanctioning this move, the prime minister placed this unelected activist above the leader of the Opposition.

On the eve of Anna Hazare's second fast in New Delhi, the government made the colossal error of sending him to Tihar Jail, and then, after a public outcry, releasing him. This elevated his status even further. When the fast eventually commenced, the media took over the job of reputation inflation, by repeatedly showing a split screen of Hazare on one side and the prime minister on the other.

This was a face-off with only one winner. For in the winter of 2010-11, the prime minister had stayed silent while the Commonwealth Games and 2G scams broke. This is a key reason behind Hazare's appeal.

When I expressed these serial disenchantments to the sociologist André Béteille, he remarked that while Hazare had a right to be stupid, MPs and ministers did not. As an ordinary citizen, Hazare could say what he wanted. However, the Opposition parties had betrayed their mandate by their contempt for Parliament. The Congress had undermined Parliament too (by dealing directly with Team Anna). Cabinet ministers have behaved like boors at times. And through this action or, more often, inaction, of its current incumbent, the office of the prime minister had been most diminished of all.

Here, then, is my interim judgement on 2011 — that in the year now ending, Indian democracy has been debased by an opportunistic Opposition on the one side and a corrupt and incompetent government on the other. I wish readers of this column a less bewildering and less exasperating 2012.

More democracy, not

Baijayant 'Jay' Panda

There is a widespread belief among certain categories of Indians that India suffers from too much democracy. Business tycoons have long envied China, attributing its superior economic performance to the policy clarity that can only come from a government unburdened by democracy. Now our middle class, never enamoured of politics in the first place, has become so disenchanted with our systemic shortcomings as to question the system itself.

Before deconstructing our democracy, some myths relating to non-democratic systems need to be dispelled. The late Field Marshall [Sam Manekshaw](#), whose popularity rivalled Indira Gandhi's for a while after Bangladesh's liberation - and whose name occasionally cropped up as the possible leader of a military coup - believed that India couldn't even be held together, let alone governed, without democracy.

Studies have also shown a lack of correlation between a country's system of governance and its long-term growth rates. For every [Deng Xiaoping](#) or [Lee Kuan Yew](#) who put their countries on a growth trajectory, there have been plenty of [Joseph](#) Stalins, Mao Zedongs and Idi Amins who achieved the opposite. Corruption is also extremely pervasive in authoritarian systems. Then there is Amartya Sen's famous conclusion that only democracies manage to avoid gigantic catastrophes like the Bengal famine of 1943 or China's famine of 1958-61.

In this year of democratic aspirations triggered by the Arab Spring, it is worth asking how ours can be improved. India is too large and diverse to thrive on the Westminster parliamentary model we now have; the British version evolved for the needs of a homogeneous and much smaller

population (only 1/30th the number of voters per constituency compared to us). Some have argued that we should change over to a presidential system. That idea has surfaced at various times, but has never acquired traction. Looking at the legislative paralysis in the US, despite President Obama's landslide victory in 2008, one has to wonder whether a complete change of Constitution would be worthwhile.

So what can be done to make our parliamentary system more responsive? The answer lies in adopting a few important features from other democracies and tweaking our system. Here are five such tweaks that would immensely improve our model. They are by no means comprehensive, and other changes could be useful, but these are likely to provide the biggest bang for the buck. Though hardly easy to achieve, these changes are far more realistic than a total change of Constitution, and could be implemented incrementally.

First, governments need stable tenures in order to go about their business confidently, which parliamentary systems cannot assure. This is even more pronounced in this era of coalitions. One way to instill greater stability would be to adopt the German model of a "constructive vote of no confidence", which requires voting for a specific new leader rather than just challenging the incumbent (which is our present system). Our model fosters uncertainty, and encourages would-be challengers hoping to benefit from [muddy waters](#) or midterm elections. The German model would make challenges to the government's continuance far rarer and, even when it occurred, would eliminate both uncertainty and premature elections.

That improved stability must have safeguards against irresponsible and arrogant governance. Thus, the second tweak should be to amend our obsolete rules of parliamentary procedures, which require consensus between government and opposition on which debates can have voting. That need for consensus effectively gives a veto to the government to stonewall any voting motion that could embarrass it. This has been the

single-most frequent reason for disruptions in Parliament. Consensus should be replaced by clear rules, for instance if 33% of MPs demand a voting motion, there ought to be one. With stability assured, the government should no longer be diffident about voting in Parliament.

A related objective is the need to reverse the trend of concentrating authority in parties' leaderships, at the cost of their MPs, which discourages thinking and encourages herd behaviour. An example of the law of unintended consequences, this has happened through such otherwise well-meaning measures as the Anti-Defection Act. The third tweak would restrict party whips to only no-confidence motions and money bills - the two essential parameters of a government's ability to govern - thus restoring a healthy balance of power between parties and their MPs. The second and third tweaks would force governments to proactively sell their agenda to [Parliament](#) and the nation, which is an essential part of modern democracies. Fourth, overturn the convention restricting private members' bills from being passed, and remove the requirement for individual MPs to seek prior approval of the president before introducing such bills. Such paternalism has no place in a democracy; its removal will get MPs to initiate and engage in lawmaking, instead of just supporting or opposing.

Fifth, require direct elections to the Rajya Sabha. This is what the US did in 1913 with the 17th amendment to their Constitution, prior to which their Senate also used to be elected from state assemblies. Part of the cleansing reforms of their so-called Progressive Era, this broke the system of backroom factional deal-making, and also compelled senatorial candidates to appeal to broad, statewide constituencies rather than niche groups. India would benefit from similar moderation and centrism. All these tweaks encourage more transparency and participation, but also incorporate the pragmatism that would help relieve our systemic logjam.

Before UP poll, opportunism to the fore

Kalyani Shankar

Ajit Singh has been with nearly every political formation that has ruled the country in the last two decades. With Assembly election close in Uttar Pradesh, he has now joined the UPA. Who is the winner?

It was a good move for both the Congress and the Rashtriya Lok Dal when the latter joined the UPA recently and RLD chief Ajit Singh was rewarded with a Cabinet berth in the Union Government on Sunday. In fact, Uttar Pradesh, which plays a significant role in the formation of a Union Government, had been left out of the UPA, with neither the BSP nor SP — the two major groups in the State — being part of the coalition, although they support it. The RLD is now the 15th constituent of the UPA, and is the first party to join then alliance after the 2009 election.

Mr Ajit Singh has done a complete circle when he decided to join the UPA. Earlier, he had served as a Minister in different Governments led by VP Singh, PV Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and was associated with different coalitions like the National Front, Congress and the NDA.

Why did the RLD join the UPA and why did the Congress woo Mr Singh? It is simple, as both wanted to gain an electoral advantage. With the Uttar Pradesh Assembly poll round the corner, both are naturally looking for better prospects. The RLD leader has always capitalised on the loyal Jat votes. He has nurtured Chief Ministerial ambitions. His

demand for a separate Harit Pradesh in western Uttar Pradesh is a shrewd political calculation.

The RLD has influence in western Uttar Pradesh and is expected to swing the dominant Jat votes in favour of the Congress-RLD alliance in the Poorvanchal, Bundelkhand and Awadh regions. The Muslim votes are also expected to consolidate behind the alliance at least in western UP, which has some 150-Assembly seats. Mr Singh is hopeful that the Muslims and some upper caste votes of the Congress will get transferred to his candidates, while the Congress expects that the Jats will vote for it. The Congress had received a boost recently when prominent Muslim face and former Union Minister Rasheed Masood quit the Samajwadi Party and joined it. Since the Congress has only 22 and the RLD has 10 seats in the present Assembly, the two parties hope to emerge as òking-makersö in case of a splintered verdict. The Union Government is getting ready to grant reservations to Jats in the central list of Other Backward Classes, and the announcement is expected in the next days.

Mr Singh, son of late former Prime Minister Charan Singh himself is now in his sixth term as MP and represents the family bastion Baghpat. With the addition of the five RLD seats in the Lok Sabha, the strength of the UPA will now go up to 277.

This cushion will strengthen the UPA when the TMC and the DMK are keeping the Congress on tenterhook on some issue or the other. It is a good move for the congress to enlarge the UPA as polls come nearer. It is a question of number game now and the alliances alone would help reach the magic number. The NDA too is looking for new allies.

In seat-sharing, the RLD would get 45 to 50 seats out of the 403 in the State Assembly but Congress strategists believe that the RLD influence extends beyond these numbers. For Mr Singh, the gains of the alliance have already begun to flow in, as he has not only got a Cabinet berth, which will ensure his being in power until 2014, if election is not held earlier, but also increased his bargaining power. Also, the dominant Jat

farmer community has not had a proper representation at the Centre for a long time.

The Congress had come fourth in the last Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh in 2007 but bounced back in the Lok Sabha with a stunning number of 21 seats. However, as the State's voters exhibit different trends in the Lok Sabha and the Assembly elections, the Congress has been keen on the alliance with the RLD to repeat its Lok Sabha performance.

Will the RLD-Congress combine succeed in denting the votes of the BSP and the SP? There are some who believe that it may not be so for alliances have helped Mr Singh in the past, but he has not been able to transfer his vote to other parties — like Chief Minister Mayawati is able to do.

The present ground-level position in Uttar Pradesh is like this: Ms Mayawati and SP chief Mulayam Singh Yadav are the two leaders who have kept in touch with all the districts. Mr Rahul Gandhi too has been visiting the State but at intervals. Although he attracts crowds it is not clear how much the Congress would be able to encash his popularity. The Muslims have returned to the Congress but they are also supporting the SP and the BSP.

The BJP's problem is that it does not have any big name in the State, so the party does not want to project a leader as the Chief Ministerial candidate.

Rahul lacks sincerity

Surya Prakash

Despite trying hard for seven years to find his place in politics, the scion of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty is getting nowhere.

It is now seven years since Mr Rahul Gandhi made a formal entry into national politics after successfully contesting the Lok Sabha election from Amethi constituency in Uttar Pradesh in 2004. Three years later, he was formally inducted into the Congress high command when he was appointed general secretary of the party. Over these years Mr Gandhi has been trying to find his place in politics, but the political dividends accruing to the party do not appear to be commensurate with his labour. Unlike his father Rajiv Gandhi, who caught the imagination of the nation with his 'Mr Clean' image when he entered politics, the response to Mr Rahul Gandhi's political forays in Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere has been nothing more than lukewarm.

There could be many reasons for the absence of the 'Rajiv Gandhi magic' and the indifferent public response. One can explain this away by saying that the present political environment is extremely hostile to the Congress and this could be reducing his chances of success. But, apart from the external environment, two aspects of his personality which could be contributing to his limited success are lack of conviction and lack of courage.

Let us take a look at Mr Gandhi's conduct and utterances over the last seven years and see whether he scores on any of these points - commitment, sincerity and courage - qualities that endear politicians to people.

Mr Gandhi declared some years ago that if a member of his family had been the Prime Minister in December 1992, the disputed Babri Masjid structure would not have been razed to the ground. He was being downright dishonest because it was his father Rajiv Gandhi who had ensured the opening of the locks on the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi structure when he was Prime Minister. Again, it was his father who had sent Home Minister Buta Singh to Ayodhya to participate in the *shilanyas* ceremony for the Ram Mandir just weeks before the Lok Sabha election in November 1989.

In other words, Rajiv Gandhi enabled Hindus to offer prayers at the site and thereafter put his Government's stamp of approval on the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's idea of building a 'Bhavya Mandir' for Ram. After all this, Rahul Gandhi wants us to believe that if Rajiv Gandhi had been Prime Minister in December 1992, the Babri Masjid structure would not have fallen. This is an attempt by the scion of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty to fool the Muslims, to portray PV Narasimha Rao, the Prime Minister in 1992, as a villain, and to pretend as if members of his family had no role whatsoever in the events leading to December 6, 1992. This is a crude, dishonest attempt to falsify history.

More recently, when the scams relating to the Commonwealth Games, Adarsh Cooperative Housing Society and 2G surfaced, people across the country were horrified at the extent to which public servants could go to feather their own nests and rob the nation of its wealth. The youth were particularly exercised over these scandals and became vocal participants in the anti-corruption movement spear-headed by Anna Hazare. While all this was on, the nation's 'youth icon' and the Congress's heir apparent virtually went off the political radar.

Mr Gandhi was reluctant to speak up against corruption because if he did, he would be seen as speaking against his own Government. Had he spoken up, he would have fallen foul of the Congress's allies like the DMK. Also, he would have had to face uncomfortable questions vis-à-

vis Bofors and other scandals. Yet, this was a risk worth taking because it would have put him in the vanguard of the anti-corruption movement. But this was not to be. Instead, it is Anna Hazare who holds the reins of the anti-corruption movement and has caught the imagination of the youth. Mr Gandhi has been reduced to reading out written speeches hailing Mr Hazare and demanding the establishment of a strong Lok Pal.

Apart from lacking in sincerity and courage, he is given to making bizarre statements when he is caught off guard or when he strays from the written text. Some years ago, when a correspondent of a weekly magazine caught up with him in Amethi, he claimed that he could have become Prime Minister when he attained the age of 25 but he had chosen not to because he "did not want to shout at his seniors". In recent times, he has strayed from the script and landed in trouble, like when he asked his audience at Phulpur how long would they go to Maharashtra to beg. The people of Uttar Pradesh felt offended by this remark because a majority of those who migrate from the State are skilled workers who pick up well-paying jobs in other parts of the country.

Mr Gandhi is also given to making strange claims about his interventions. For example, after reading out the text of a prepared speech in the Lok Sabha on the Lok Pal issue, he told mediapersons outside Parliament that his statement was "a game-changer". Is it not strange for someone to make such a claim about his own speech? Is he naïve or disingenuous? The jury is still out.

Another aspect of his persona which has now come to notice is his disrespect for Parliament. Although he is one of the younger MPs, he seems to take Parliament for granted, something which even parliamentarians of the stature of Indrajit Gupta or Mr Atal Bihari Vajpayee never did. Mr Gandhi's disrespect for this institution came through when he set off on a five-day *yatra* of Uttar Pradesh beginning November 22, the opening day of the Winter Session of Parliament.

Finally, a word about sycophancy. It must be admitted that sycophancy had come down substantially after Ms Sonia Gandhi took over the reins of the Congress. Compared to the heyday of Mrs Indira Gandhi when Congress president Dev Kant Barooah declared "Indira is India and India is Indira", the times have changed. Yet, there is no shortage of people who try this old trick to catch the attention of the Nehru-Gandhis. At the recent Youth Congress convention, a member of the Congress Working Committee hailed Mr Gandhi for leading the biggest youth movement, the kind which had not been seen even in China or Russia. As Mr Gandhi prepares for a bigger role in the party, are we in for a return of sycophancy as in the 1970s?

LOSER AT BOTH ENDS

- After the FDI farce, the UPA government has lost credibility

Ashok Mitra

A government can perhaps carry on even if it loses respect. It is a different matter when it loses credibility. India descends a further eight places in the international listing of least corrupt countries. A key member of the government's think tank is glib enough to butt in: no worry, all that needs to be done to weed out corruption is to drop bribe-giving from the roster of criminal offences. Another key individual in government is in an equally playful mood: increase the price of petroleum products; inflation, he suggests, will immediately come down. Per capita calorie intake of the two bottom deciles of the population has, according to official data, declined over the past quinquennium; the same very important person jumps to the conclusion: India's poor are getting prosperous, so much so that they are moving away from consuming rubbish foodgrains and raising their intake of fish, meat, poultry and milk. The more plausible explanation that soaring foodgrain prices are forcing the poor to buy and consume less grain, does not occur to him. Consider, too, the spectacle of topmost policymakers in government quibbling in public over whether growth in gross domestic product this year will be 6.8 or 7.2 or 6.9 or 7.1 per cent, as if the very existence of the nation is at stake on the precision of the forecast. There is no end to such frivolities. The finance minister makes a great ceremony of the fact that, as he had predicted, the rate of inflation has come down in December; everybody, however, knows that the *kharif* crop begins to arrive in the market during this month, cooling down prices.

Move to a different plane. The prime minister rushes half-a-dozen of his

ministerial colleagues to the airport to accord an obsequious reception to a sly, money-loving, religious preacher. Not two days pass: a midnight police raid is organized to rough him up. The quixotic Gandhi is alternatively deified, sought counsel from, disagreed with, vilified, arrested, once more mollified, again differed with, conceivably at the next phase will be taken for a ride. It is an administration which, all evidence indicates, does not know its mind, asserts something today to repudiate it with robust zest before day breaks tomorrow.

The prime minister's assurance that foreign direct investment in retail business will, in the ultimate round, benefit both farmers and consumers as well as be employment-creating, therefore, does not impress the ordinary householder. He does not sound credible. It is difficult to believe him for another reason too: he is not his own master. For instance, he was, documents now published prove, aware of the shady goings-on over the allotments of the 2G spectrum; but he was incapable of intervening. The credibility of the prime minister is not by any stretch enhanced when one of his cabinet colleagues openly opposes the cabinet decision on FDI in retail trade and an even more important cabinet colleague publicly warns the government of the perils of going against public sentiment. The situation is made even more awkward by a state government presided over by his own party declaring its resolve to keep out foreign interests from retail trade in its territory: one or two members of parliament belonging to the party are no less rebelliously vocal on the issue. With such wobbly support within his own fold, the prime minister is not such a fool as not to guess why he is not believable to others as well. Yet, for at least the best part of a week, there is every indication the prime minister this time will brook no opposition and is determined to fulfil his heart's desire. Suddenly, it is reverse gear: the matter is indefinitely on hold.

The manner the decision to back down reaches the public betrays a nervousness that hardly adds to the dignity of the regime. The West Bengal chief minister owns 19 votes in Lok Sabha; she perhaps asks for

Rs 19,000 crore at one go as price for casting these votes in favour of FDI in retail trade. The prime minister needs these votes, but discretion prevails over temptation, and for two reasons. The doughty mademoiselle is likely to keep demanding repeats of the packet every occasion from now on that the government faces a crisis of existence. Moreover, other chief ministers will not take it lying down if West Bengal is granted a freebie of whopping magnitude while they are left sucking their thumbs. Implications, particularly for the impending poll in Uttar Pradesh, have to be thought of. No deal, therefore, with the West Bengal chief minister, who threatens to walk out of the United Progressive Alliance without further ado. Follows the frantic appeal to her not to do any such thing, the FDI decision, she is promised, will be reviewed. Not any Central minister, a state chief minister is the first to inform the world that the Union government has chosen to unsettle a settled decision.

The farce is for the present ended. It is still worth probing what lies behind the prime minister's sudden extra exertions crammed into those few days to ensure Walmart's entry into the country. Is not the underlying factor his firm belief that a gesture is desperately called for at this moment to convince the United States of America that India is waiting in the wings to serve the interests of God's Own Country?

The mess the Americans have created for themselves in Pakistan can have unpredictable consequences. It may even radically transform the global geo-political picture. The current regime in our neighbouring country has, for dear life, been outspoken against the US; a furious nation would otherwise have turned it out. A few tacit and not so tacit messages must have also been exchanged with Beijing, emboldening the strategy-makers in Islamabad. Pakistan's minister for external affairs has started warning the US administration in the stern terms that were, some 50 years ago or thereabouts, the intellectual property right of India. The circumstances, the prime minister in New Delhi has possibly assessed, are tailor-made for him and his country. If India is smart enough and

resolute enough to carry out the US will in different spheres, windows of opportunity will be wide open. The coming decade is bound to see a developing confrontation between a steadily diminishing US and a growingly aggressive China pulsating with economic and military prowess. Once ensnared by imperial grandeur, it is awfully difficult to get out of it. China's challenge will, therefore, not be left unresponded to by the Americans. An economically enfeebled US has to have allies who are both dependable and capable of contributing substantially to the Western cause. Pakistan, riven by internal chasms, has exhausted the possibility of filling that role. India will be a vastly superior bargain. It has an emerging middle class sold on the American dream of scaling the furthest heights of economic affluence; it has a stockpile of sophisticated technological skills alongside a widely diversified industrial base; it is keen to add to its resources of nuclear technology with a helping hand from the West, it has a promising infrastructure of Sinophobia. Its weak point is an administration awash with corruption and ideological heterogeneities which often render it incompetent in carrying out commitments.

Our prime minister wishes to erase the black spot on the country's reputation. The US administration has to be persuaded to believe that India from now on means business. There is no better way to do so than allowing American investors unrestricted entry into the luscious terrain of retail trade. Once our credentials are firmly established with the Americans, why, even the sky will cease to be the limit for India: increasingly closer interaction in different economic activities with American capitalism will pave the way for even more dazzling prosperity for India's topmost strata. The only prerequisite is satisfying the US of India's credibility; FDI in retail trade presents a lovely opportunity to pass that test.

That is what it is all about. Even if by weakening credibility within the country it is possible to win credibility in Washington, D.C. the government has to go for it: the prime minister might have implored to

his party. At one point, the supreme decision making authority in the party okays his prayer and he goes ahead with the cabinet seal of approval on the FDI proposal, never mind the cacophony of domestic protest and the risk factor related to the UP election. All is not though well that does not ends well. The domestic compulsions, it has been reckoned at the last moment, are much too much. This government is now bereft of credibility both at home and among capitalists let down overseas.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Not through haste

Between the lines

Legal experts have pronounced that the government's step to give reservation to religious minorities is unconstitutional.

At a time when civil society is arguing feverishly over the details of government's move to set up the Lokpal machinery to deal with corruption, reservation can be dynamite. So let the proposal of such a step be analysed carefully. What it means is that in the 9-member panel, 50 per cent of persons will be from the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, women and backward classes.

This is the first time since independence when the principle of reservation has been extended to top positions. Tomorrow a similar demand may be made on the appointment of judges in high courts and the Supreme Court. This principle, pernicious enough, stops the best talent from the country being chosen for top jobs. Instead, anyone can be brought as long as he or she fulfills the qualifications.

This approach has already forced the country to lower the standard of education and the quality of government service. Yet nothing anybody can do even to fix the time limit for reservations because any suggestion on the subject creates furor from the interested groups.

All political parties are slaved to reservations because they link them with their electoral prospects. The ruling Congress too has fixed its eyes on elections in January-March 2012 in five states including UP, Punjab and Utrakhand. Reservations may influence the dalits who have turned their back on the party.

Yet, something more acrimonious happened when the bill was

introduced in the Lok Sabha. Members belonging to the OBCs demanded a quota for muslims. The government gave in because it also has the muslim electorate to placate. Although muslims have been allotted 4.5 per cent from the 27 per cent of reservations provided in the Constitution, the BJP is up in arms and has threatened a civil war if the quota is given to muslims.

The quota is probably illegal because the Constitution forbids any reservation on the basis of religion. Cases are pending before the Supreme Court from Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka where a quota has been given to religious minorities, muslims and christians. Legal experts have pronounced that the government's step to give reservation to religious minorities is unconstitutional. But, in the meanwhile, the atmosphere of parochialism is affecting different communities and creating an embarrassing situation for civil society. The Congress could not have hit the ethos of pluralism more severely than it has done by introducing reservations in top positions.

I am unable to make out why the Congress withdrew its support at the last minute to the draft bill which had got the near consensus at the all-party meeting at the prime minister's residence. The hitch may have been because of the reported opposition by Congress president Sonia Gandhi who has said that they are ready to take on Anna Hazare. The last time it was her son, Rahul Gandhi, who had diluted the bill finalised by the Parliament Standing Committee. Its chairman Abhishek Manu Singhvi has admitted that he met the Congress high command on the eve of the bill's finalisation.

Political purpose

The government has not in fact taken Lok Pal bill demand seriously from the beginning and has not understood how infuriated the civil society is. Even then, the bill it has brought before Parliament under pressure gives control of CBI to the Personnel department at the centre. CBI has been

used by different governments for their political purpose. Retired directors of CBI have written about their experience, how they were asked to move or not to move against such and such person.

Even the appointment of apex body to select persons for the Lokpal machinery the panel is that of the prime minister, the Opposition leader and the Chief Justice of India. How can the Chief Justice be on the selection committee when the appeal against the wrong or motivated appointment lies with the Chief Justice? It is however good to note that both the government and Anna Hazare have agreed to keep the judiciary out of ambit of Lokpal. But the appointment of Judicial Commission, sought through a bill, requires more teeth. Also the Commission should have some eminent public men as its members. It seems that the bill has been drafted in haste and probably with the purpose that it should fall either in Parliament or in the court.

True, the government has accommodated Anna Hazare on many points but if one were to analyse the provisions it would be clear that what the government gives by one hand takes away by another. Yet I wish the Lokpal bill had the constitutional authority which the BJP has unthinkingly forced to fall in the Lok Sabha for not being able to get the required two-third majority.

Against this backdrop I can understand the pressure by Anna Hazare to pass the bill but I was unable to appreciate his fast when Parliament had already taken up the bill. In any case he had given the call for jail bhara (fill the jail) from January. His enunciation is to propagate against the Congress in the five states Assembly to defeat the party is suspect. This unnecessarily gives strength to the allegation that the whole movement is political and meant to help the BJP and some other opposition parties.

The country is going through political and economic crises. Any wrong step by government or by civil society can harm the nation and unwittingly support the parochial and desperate elements. I recall the

words of US president Jefferson from his inaugural address "Let us reflect that, having banished from our land that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have yet gained little if we countenance a political intolerance as despotic, as wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions."

URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Celebrating the spirit of New Delhi

Great cities are known by the rivers that flow past them. It's time to revive the Yamuna and build a proper riverfront in New Delhi

IRA PANDEY

WITH the winter chill finally settling in, Delhi is well and truly into its winter cultural season. Centre stage is naturally occupied by events to celebrate the centenary of the Delhi Durbar to mark the shift of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi, held a hundred years ago on December 12, 1911. The new city was named New Delhi, to distinguish it from Old Delhi or the erstwhile imperial seat in the Mughal city of Shahjahanabad.

Predictable debates were held for months, on where the grand celebrations ought to be held and what they should be all about. Even more predictably, everyone had a different point of view. Some neo-imperialists felt the honour should go to the original site of the Durbar, Coronation Park, which is now a forgotten and rather forlorn piece of land and where the statues of the erstwhile rulers lie in a dusty pile.



The river Yamuna is now resembles a sewer around Delhi.

Some nationalists opposed this proto-colonial suggestion and wanted the Red Fort and a -Bharat mata ki jai-kind of event. Meanwhile, like the proverbial cat that ran away with the piece of roti two crows were fighting over, Anna Hazare decided to register another note into this

cacophony. His timing, impeccable as always, distracted attention on the eve of the centenary by introducing the birth of a newer Delhi at Jantar Mantar, and sealed it with a holy fast and fervent crowds. Guess where all the media attention was directed?

These are the times we live in: an age where the best and the worst can exist in happy discord. When it became obvious that no one wanted another controversy over where and how, some went ahead with their business as usual. So the Delhi Tourism Department set up a Street Food Festival in the Connaught Circle area, where the famous street food of Old Delhi is available. How this celebrates the founding of New Delhi is a moot question but as there is no surer path to winning crowds than good food, this is presumably a sort of hors d'œuvre to the real broth, which is still being stirred by many cooks.

A book to treasure

Meanwhile, the Delhi Government and Roli Publishers got together and brought out a fine publication, titled Delhi: Red Fort to Raisina, and edited by JP Losty, with contributions by Salman Khurshid, Ratish Nanda and Malvika Singh. The four essays paint a lively portrait of the culture and people to present a chronicle of the shift from one imperial age to another. The book has my vote as the perfect way of celebrating the city's centenary.

Ratish Nanda is a reputed conservation-architect who works with the Aga Khan Foundation and has been the guiding hand behind the renovation and conservation work in Humayun's Tomb and the urban revival project of Nizamuddin basti; Salman Khurshid is a suave Muslim voice and Malvika Singh is the city's best known hostess, whose salon would shame Ottoline Morrell or Gertrude Stein. Between them, they paint as lively a picture of New Delhi as you can wish.

What this book offers are also some of the most exquisite illustrations one has seen of this grand city. Sourced from all over the world (the

British Library, the Bibliotheque Nationale de France; the V&A Museum, among others), these paintings, photographs and rare maps are a collector's dream. An exhibition to celebrate this book and its contents is now on view at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA).

The coming months will, one hopes, build on other ideas to celebrate the city's spirit. Its residents are, however, spoiled for choice. Virtually no week passes without some art exhibition, book launch or discussion, musical recital or dance performance on offer. Often the venues are so magical that the ambience alone is worth soaking in. The Qutb area, the grand ruins of Purana Qila, the tranquil serenity of Nehru Park - these are the sites of festivals that regularly present the country's finest talent. Yet they all pale before the milling crowds at the annual Trade Fair in Pragati Maidan, when almost the whole city seems to descend in a frenzy of buying and gawking at new products.

The riverfront

There is such a lack of imagination about sarkari celebrations that it would be nice to do it differently. How about reviving the riverfront of New Delhi? Would it not be wonderful if the Yamuna, once a river and now a sewer, can once again be made the thread of blue water that glistened on Delhi's shores? The self-esteem of a capital would be restored and a sense of pride will surely emerge to inspire more community effort.

A citizens' campaign to revive this river could be the best way to bring disparate social groups together. Moreover, the lethargy of the government's efforts would be exposed if New Delhi's residents took this up as a challenge. It would make citizens feel that this is their city, and that if we wish to improve it, we have to stop waiting for someone else to do something about it.

Remember what they did for the Commonwealth Games? If only Anna would stop chastising politicians and teach us how to make a model capital city out of an urban mess, I can vouch that all of us nay-sayers would join him with triumphant brooms in our hands.