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# **BOOK REVIEW**

HINDU 28.9.10 BOOK REVIEW

## **Fractures in world economy**

C. T. KURIEN

A society that cannot take care of its poor will not be able to save its rich

**FAULT LINES** - How Hidden Fractures Still Threaten the World Economy: Raghuram G. Rajan; Collins Business, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, A-53, Sector 57, Noida-201301. Rs. 499.

After the global financial calamity struck in 2008, many analysts put the blame on the uncontrolled credit expansion in the United States that preceded it. But E.H. Carr reminds us that complex historical phenomena are rather like an accident that takes place during a misty night when a driver speeds along a slippery road, a pedestrian crosses it, and the brakes of the motor vehicle fail. What exactly caused the accident?

### Land of inequalities

The merit of Raghuram Rajan's work is that he traces the many fault lines that lay beneath the surface not only in the American economy, polity, and governance, but also in the increasingly distorted economic and financial relationships between nations. Rajan begins with the American scene. America is a land of opportunities, but they can be taken advantage of only by those who have the resources, physical as well as human. Because these resources are

unequally distributed, it is becoming a land of growing inequalities. In 1976, the top one per cent of households accounted for 8.6 per cent of income, but by 2007 this had shot up to 23.5 per cent. And in 2008, seven out of 10 Americans had stagnating incomes. Because of the strong commitment to the free enterprise system, the country is also rather backward in the safety net it provides for workers. But a democratic polity cannot completely ignore them, and there is something of a moral commitment to help the needy.

Under these conditions, the most seductive answer has been easier credit. “Politicians love to have banks expand housing credit, for credit achieves many goals at the same time. It pushes up house prices, making households feel wealthier, and allows them to finance more consumption. It creates more profit and jobs in the financial sector as well as in real estate brokerage and housing construction.” And everything was safe and good, for a while at least.

Taking risk was another of the goodies, again, for a while. The risks taken by individuals, bankers, brokers, government officials, the Fed, the regulators, were all rational, but nobody envisaged the systemic risks that were difficult to handle. There was a great deal of reliance on market forces, which work fairly well when conditions are ‘normal’, but reinforce panic when things go wrong. Similarly, it was thought that modern technology would make it possible for everyone to make informed decisions, but the opportunities the system provided to distort information were not adequately grasped. Those who took big risks were handsomely remunerated when profits were made, but there were no punitive measures to deal with failures. The knowledge that the government would intervene in the event of a crisis encouraged individuals and institutions to seek rewards for themselves.

## Global capitalism

Turning to the global level, it is well-known that the debt-fuelled domestic consumption of the U.S. was sustained by rapidly rising imports, especially from Asian countries. The economic and political conditions in Asian countries that resorted to an export-led strategy of growth — initially Japan, then South Korea, and now China — have been different from those in the U.S. and Europe. The engine of their growth was external demand, with the U.S. acting, for political reasons, as the “market of first resort”, as a commentator put it. But an import of goods and services sustained by high household and government indebtedness soon hits limits and necessitates adjustments all round.

The most crucial of these is the external value of currencies. Thus the U.S. made out a case that the Chinese currency was being deliberately kept undervalued to give that country a competitive edge in the international market, but China has been slow in making the necessary adjustments and for its own reasons too. Capital still flows into many developing countries, although the principles of finance, banking, and governments' role in them are very different from those in the capital exporting centres and countries. Thus, trade and investment policies, considerations of domestic sovereignty, and the role of international agencies are all involved — rather messily too — in what is frequently referred to as ‘global capitalism.’ If the global crisis is to be resolved, every one of them has to be addressed, and that is not going to be easy. Hence Rajan thinks the crisis is far from over.

## Comprehensive

While the book, thus, is more comprehensive in its approach than many others, Rajan does not go deep enough. There is no recognition that it is in the essence of capital to become centralised

and its control to pass into a few hands and that it is this tendency that finance now represents. It is for the same reason that inequalities within countries and across nations tend to grow, especially during periods of rapid and finance-directed 'growth', which, far too often, is nothing but increasing incomes and wealth for a few. And, when Rajan champions safety nets for the poorer sections, the argument seems to be based on the dictum that a society that cannot take care of its poor will not be able to save its rich. Surely, much deeper analysis is needed if the remedy for the present crisis lies in the creation of social orders informed by justice within countries and across nations.

# **CORRUPTION**

## HINDU 28.9.10 CORRUPTION

### **Power, privilege, corruption, hypocrisy**

K.S. Jacob

*The inextricable link among power, privilege, corruption and hypocrisy suggests the need for reflection and review at the level of individuals and systems.*

There is nothing to be proud of India's ranking in the Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2009. The country ranked low also in the Bribe Payers Index among emerging economic giants. The use of public funds for private gain is common. The misuse of power, position and privilege is widespread. Corruption seems to be a fact that affects all sections of society.

Misappropriation of public funds and acquisition of ill-gotten wealth are clearly illegal. However, subtler forms of non-material corruption, coupled with abuse of power and misuse of privilege, are equally prevalent but not often debated.

Power corrupts: Lord Acton said: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." This aphorism is widely acknowledged as true. William Pitt, the Elder, a British Prime Minister, echoed similar sentiments when he said "unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it." Both seem to have based their observations on anecdotal evidence rather than formal research. The systematic enquiry and evaluation of evidence in social sciences were not standard in their times.

Corrupts absolutely: Recent research confirms Lord Acton's dictum that power corrupts. Contemporary research has focussed on issues

related to power and on the state of powerfulness and powerlessness; on how power affects people's behaviour and thinking. The evidence suggests that people who believe that they deserve their power and position are morally pliable and more prone to abuse their privileges. Studies have documented that power and hypocrisy go hand in hand as the powerful feel a sense of entitlement; their sense of privilege become private law. The culture of entitlement results in double standards, one for themselves, their family and friends, and the other for the general population. Such use of divergent values and principles by the individuals involved results in hypocrisy. One could argue that corruption and hypocrisy are the price society pays for being led by the privileged.

**Power attracts:** Anecdotal evidence also suggests that power attracts the corruptible. This may be particularly true when systems are steeped in or breed corruption. If organisational structures provide greater and illegitimate influence with the rise in status within institutional hierarchies, then loftier titles and higher ranks mean illicit power. Power will attract those who seek to use and misuse such licence for their own ends.

Power and corruption seem to have a complex and bidirectional relationship. In societies which accept corruption as part of life, power appears to attract the corrupt and those in power encourage corruption. These associations seem to work on the whole, with exceptions proving the rule.

**Privilege empowers:** Even a cursory analysis of the powerful clearly documents the fact that privilege is almost always the route to power. Privileged education, in private schools, provides the platform for future unassailable confidence, disarming sincerity, captivating charm and understated authority. It also makes for articulate and confident individuals with high self-esteem. The combination of parental aspirations, family resources and excellent

education lays a firm foundation for later success. Children's levels of achievement are usually closely linked to their parents' background. The privileged background of many elected representatives also argues that many advantages are inherited rather than inherent.

**Spectrum of corruption:** Corruption in its broadest sense is not restricted to financial irregularities. The abuse of religion, language, ethnicity, kinship, privilege and position also comes under this rubric. Such misuse is also a form of moral fraud. However, these may be in the form of “softer” violations which, though equally fraudulent, are much more difficult to recognise, quantify, track and document. While moral corruption may be universal, it tends to spread like wildfire when it is accepted as the norm at the top of an organisational hierarchy and within institutions and populations.

**Conflicts of interest:** It is widely recognised that related and unrelated interests can, directly or indirectly, influence decision-making; specific interests can prejudice appraisals and consequently bias judgments. It is always good policy that interests are declared and conflicts evaluated in people who are entrusted with impartial decision-making. The presence of conflicts of interest is independent of any execution of impropriety. Many organisations now mandate that such financial and other interests be declared prior to appointments to decision-making bodies. Removal, disclosure, recusal and third-party evaluations are different methods of managing them.

**Individuals and systems:** Power and privilege are usually institutionalised and are part of systems and organisations. Organisational support for unaccountable power often causes individuals who occupy top positions to fail to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate use of such power and privilege. The line between these is often very fine, with many individuals unable to see

the difference. Even honest individuals may unquestionably accept their positions and consequent power without realising its impact on their functioning. Their intelligence, diligence, strategic planning and hard work to reach the higher echelons of their organisation may propel them to believe that their position and privilege are well deserved. Such feelings of entitlement often result in double standards and consequent hypocrisy. Even the most scrupulous people can be caught in such situations when they come up with ill-conceived schemes and proposals, or when they want to rigidly maintain status quo, despite evidence of a need for change.

The corruptible actively seek power to enhance their position and privileges, and in pursuit of more unaccountable authority. Systems, which encourage corruption and which have normalised illegitimate power, support such people's sense of entitlement, thus furthering their original aims of acquiring public power for private gain.

Corruption and India: While no society is free from corruption, what is worrying is that such behaviour appears normalised in India. The licence raj of the past did not help. Capitalism, globalisation and liberalisation have also increased the pressure to succeed, achieve targets and acquire wealth quickly. The abuse of public power, office and resources for personal gain is common. A culture, which declares conflicts of interests and institutes systems to assess them, is rare and yet to take hold in India.

No organisation is immune to the abuse of power. The intense desire to leave lasting legacies and to make significant changes in institutional direction and function often result in decision-makers short-circuiting standard procedures. The culture of sycophancy, common in our culture and society, aids and abets in such corruption. Double standards in public life are accepted; hypocrisy is tolerated and is the norm.

## The way forward

We need to focus on power and highlight the abuse of privileges. Corruption does not necessarily imply financial fraud. All of us need to examine ourselves as individuals to identify, minimise and eliminate double standards and hypocrisy. We need to audit our systems and institutions to change the culture, which breeds such corruption. The task is to identify power, which comes with position, to recognise conflicts of interest and to detect feelings of entitlement, which turn the privilege of office into private law. The struggle is not a one-time affair in the lives of individuals, systems and communities but a constant quest, a journey. Society should allow for greater social mobility for wider social participation and greater equality.

There is need to re-examine our culture, which has normalised corruption in its many different forms. We in India need to acknowledge the need for introspection on our acceptance of the abuse of power. The “Seven Nolan Principles of Public Life” — selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership by example — should form the standards for holding public office. There should be regular and independent reviews of individual and organisational functioning. The challenge is to inspire and change individuals and to transcend and transform societal norms.

*(K.S. Jacob is Professor of Psychiatry at the Christian Medical College, Vellore.)*

# **JUDICIARY**

## **The wheels of justice grind far too slowly**

Paranjoy Guha Thakurta

It is said that the arm of the law is long, that justice delayed is justice denied. It is also contended that the wheels of justice grind slowly. There is much that is rotten about India's criminal justice system that acts expeditiously in favour of the rich and powerful and works at an excruciatingly tardy pace when it involves the poor and the underprivileged. But the system sometimes acts in a discriminatory manner even against a person with some influence, one who is not exactly down-and-out. Such indeed is the perversity of the country's legal system.

When it comes to complaints against those who are the representatives of the people, a familiar refrain is that these are "politically motivated". But here's an instance of a fellow journalist based (not in some remote rural area but) in the National Capital Region, against whom a criminal case was lodged more than eight years ago in an apparently "politically motivated" manner who is still being "harassed" — that's the appropriate word — despite the assurances of important individuals in positions of power and authority. The evidence against this investigative reporter is tenuous at best. What is especially unfortunate is that after having spent six-and-a-half months in jail, he has had to appear in court once a month every month over the last six years, just to register his presence and establish that he is no absconder in a case where trial is yet to begin. The complaint against this journalist was lodged — and continues to be pursued — by India's premier police investigating agency, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

On June 26, 2002, ironically the 27th anniversary of the imposition of Emergency, the CBI raided the offices of tehelka.com. The website had a few months earlier conducted a sting operation that had not just

exposed corruption in the defence services and had sought to implicate associates of the then defence minister George Fernandes in corrupt deals, but which had also caught on a hidden camera the then president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Bangaru Laxman accepting wads of currency notes. The way in which the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government went after Tarun Tejpal and Aniruddha Bahal — who were then heading tehelka.com and had masterminded the sting operation — has been well-documented. What is less well-known is that on the day the premises of tehelka.com were searched, CBI officers raided the residence of another journalist who worked for the website, Kumar Baadal. He was then 29 and his son two-months-old when cops “barged in and ransacked” his home.

He was arrested and lodged in prison after first information reports were lodged with the Biharigarh police station in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, in May 2002. The police registered a case under the Wildlife Protection Act accusing Mr Baadal of abetting poachers to illegally trap and kill leopards for the purpose of videotaping. The case was then transferred to the CBI.

Mr Baadal was released on bail from judicial custody in January 2003 on the intervention of the Supreme Court. The person who argued his case before the apex court was none other than Kapil Sibal. The bench of the Supreme Court that rejected the CBI plea to keep Mr Baadal under detention comprised Justice N. Santosh Hedge (now Lokayukta or the people’s ombudsman of Karnataka) and Justice B.P. Singh who told the CBI lawyer that if the agency wanted to finish its investigation into the case, it could have done so in 24 hours and if it really did not want to pursue the case, it could let it drag on for 24 years!

The journalist has written evocative accounts of the time he spent in jail: the pitiable conditions of prisoners, how he was stripped naked, how he became popular by writing a 100-odd applications for other inmates and how his fellow prisoners wept with joy the day he was granted bail. His son is now eight-years-old. He and his wife have another child. It appears strange but Mr Baadal started his career in journalism as a tentative freelancer writing on — hold your breath — fashion models.

In April 2004, the CBI filed a supplementary affidavit against him, adding a new list of witnesses, after the special CBI court had finished cross-examining most of those mentioned in the first list of witnesses. The magistrate hearing the case then got transferred. Mr Baadal's lawyers contested the CBI's supplementary complaint in the high court at Allahabad and obtained a stay the following year. At least one important witness, a forest conservator, who said Mr Baadal was the wrong person identified by the CBI, was allegedly pressurised to change his testimony and this has been formally recorded in court. Another witness summoned by the CBI was abruptly asked to discontinue deposing.

In July 2003, S. Jaipal Reddy said in the Lok Sabha that the manner in which the NDA government had treated Mr Baadal was "clinging" evidence of its "fascist character". In December 2004, Mr Baadal received a letter from an officer of the National Advisory Council (NAC) stating that Sonia Gandhi had noted the contents of a representation he had sent the NAC. Veteran journalist Inder Malhotra spoke about Mr Baadal's case to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who reportedly said that "grave injustice" had been committed to him. Mr Sibal has said that he had spoken to Prithviraj Chavan, minister of state for science and technology, about the case. Congress spokesperson Janardan Dwivedi too has sounded sympathetic towards Mr Baadal's predicament. Last Friday (September 24), the Delhi high court quashed criminal proceedings against two journalists, including Mr Baadal's former colleague Mr Bahal, who had conducted a sting operation in the cash-for-questions scam against members of Parliament. But the CBI has given no indication that it wants to close the criminal case against Mr Baadal whose fate keeps him in contact with criminals more than six years after he walked out of the gates of Dasna Jail in Ghaziabad. He rubs shoulders with them once a month when he has to register his presence in the special CBI court. He's lost count of the number of visits he has made to the court. Is it 70, or is it 72?

Paranjoy Guha Thakurta is an educator and commentator

# **POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT**

## ASIAN AGE 26.9.10 POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

### **Common woes**

Arun Nehru

The 2010 Commonwealth Games crisis has pushed several crucial “emergency” situations into the background. Sadly, as a nation, we will be criticised for an event that should have actually gone in our favour and reinforced the India brand. We can build an airport terminal in record time, we now have the Delhi Metro that can compete with the best in the world, and yet we have a manmade disaster in the Games.

While everyone will indulge in a blame game, the fact remains that though the decision to host the Games was taken in 2003, no work commenced till 2008. This issue, like many others, was consigned to a group of ministers (GoM) and, predictably, ministers squabbled and all plans remained in the files. Then suddenly, at the 11th hour, various agencies were asked to produce a “miracle” under a tainted chain of command and ministers known for poor decision-making.

All these factors have contributed to creating the catastrophe but the establishment is in denial and insists “all is well”. All is certainly not well and the everyday problem faced by the aam aadmi and those who live near the CWG village and Games sites are seriously frustrated with government apathy and corruption. The United Progressive Alliance has suffered a severe setback and its credibility is at stake. It is time for a reality check and not to take public opinion for granted anymore.

Should we be surprised to see stray dogs and cattle, poor standards of hygiene and garbage and filth everywhere? The people of Delhi, rather the entire country, suffer the same problems that are being highlighted in the Games Village.

We still have a few days to go and it would be a pity if 99 per cent of the work done is wrecked by a few residential blocks that have been recently completed and not cleaned properly. This should be done on a war footing. Is it not reasonable to expect sports minister M.S. Gill and urban development minister Jaipal Reddy to be present on the premises on a 24x7 basis and get the job done? I sincerely hope the Games go well and the “cleaning” process is completed in time.

The anger regarding the Games mess is rising because it hurts our pride. Over the last decade India has proved that it is capable of bigger and greater things. Indian talent in every field has made its presence felt in the global community. Our eight per cent gross domestic product growth not only reflects on our immediate past but also pays tribute to our foresight in creating sound foundations for growth.

The world is watching India because it holds a lot of promise and presents wonderful opportunities for the rest of the world. We must look into the controversy surrounding the Games in this context. If we had started work in 2006 instead of 2008, we could have completed everything a year in advance and tested everything over a six-month period.

This kind of mediocre and half-hearted effort, which shows us in bad light, is unacceptable. Action must be initiated and this must start from the top. We have achieved a great many things but we also have miles to go. With greater exposure and a better understanding of issues by our youthful demographic pattern, we will need a better political response in the future than we have had in the past. The Games mess holds many lessons. They must be learnt and the mistakes never repeated.

As Prime Minister Manmohan Singh talks tough, chief minister Sheila Dikshit and her team has rushed in people to clean the residential areas of the Games Village. Though this is not the time to discuss the question of political accountability, the country’s image cannot be held hostage by a few individuals in authority. The “buck” has to stop at the political level.

I hope that better sense will prevail and no country will pull out at the last moment. I also hope that the small number of athletes who have

withdrawn from the Games will change their minds and attend. We must not blame the media for negative publicity as it is not the job of the media to dole out positive news when none exists.

THE BIHAR elections will no doubt generate a great deal of activity. In fact we already see some movement from the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP). This is understandable as the Congress is moving into the main frame and may well double its tally from the existing 10 seats to 20-plus. If this happens, the Congress will be the main challenge for the alliance of the Janata Dal-United (JD-U) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the next elections.

My knowledge of caste calculations in Bihar is not very good, but as things stand the reputation of chief minister Nitish Kumar dwarfs everyone else in the state. Along with his high integrity there is the additional factor of real work being done in rural areas, including new roads, six to eight hours of electricity supply and an improved law and order situation. The figures that I had given last week in my column were based on conventional anti-incumbency trends but the public is always ahead of all calculations and we may well see the JD(U)-BJP combine gaining along with the Congress at the expense of the RJD-LJP. Rahul Gandhi threw a few political punches and received a few in return and this is a good sign as there is no other way to recover lost ground in Bihar. The same position exists in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu where the Congress has ceased to exist as a cohesive force. The challenges in these three states are very similar to what the Congress faces in Uttar Pradesh.

We all talk of change but we tend to cling to conventional political wisdom. Few parties have concentrated on membership drives to generate votes. Considering that major political changes can be brought by a swing of just two to three per cent, the policy of the Congress general secretary may well yield the electoral space the Congress is looking for in these four critical states.

Arun Nehru is a former Union minister

# **POVERTY**

HINDU 23.9.10 POVERTY

## Millennium Development Goals: challenges and the way ahead

Kofi Annan

*The achievement of the goals is not optional, but an essential investment in a fairer, safer and more prosperous world.*

– PHOTO: AP



**TARGET:** This borehole in Dertu, Kenya, may look no different from thousands of villages that dot the landscape of sub-Saharan Africa. But it is one of the 'Millennium Villages' envisioned as launch pads for a mass leap out of poverty.

People often ask me what I consider to be the highlight of my career with the United Nations. While there were many wonderful moments, hosting the largest collection of world leaders ever assembled to sign the Millennium Declaration in New York is certainly among the top. The can-do-spirit in the room was infectious. And, for once, the gulf between rich and poor, between countries often at loggerheads with each other,

seemed to be bridged by a genuine partnership among nations and people. Development issues were finally elevated to the highest political level. And, for the first time, developing countries were challenged to translate their development vision into nationally-owned plans.

### The eight goals and the results

There is no doubt that the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and their framework of accountability have served the world well. They have not only provided a much-needed sense of direction to national plans and international cooperation, they have also delivered measurable results. We have seen primary school enrolment rates double in Ethiopia and Tanzania. Countries like Malawi and Algeria transform themselves from food importers to food exporters. We have seen HIV infections fall significantly in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the number of reported malaria cases halve in high-burden countries such as Rwanda and Zambia. All around the world, we have seen efforts to achieve MDG-based targets improve the lives of millions of people.

However, we are still far from achieving what we set out to do. Too many people remain caught in extreme poverty, too many remain hungry and sick, too many mothers die in childbirth, and too many children still do not go to school. We are also not yet doing enough to meet basic needs and fulfil basic rights, to protect the environment, to build effective international partnerships for development, or to harness private entrepreneurship to deliver public goods and services to those in need.

The challenges are still great and the circumstances have not become any easier since the Millennium Summit. Back then, there was palpable confidence that the world's problems could be addressed collectively and an open acknowledgement that, in a world of plenty and astounding technological progress, the poverty, hunger, and relative deprivation that so many of our fellow human beings still faced was intolerable.

That confidence has now faded, and the international consensus on development is in danger of crumbling under the weight of successive crises and a changing world order — even as the true significance of our growing interdependence is becoming increasingly obvious. The disappointing Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen was an unfortunate example of this paradoxical trend. On the one hand, the appreciation that global problems cannot be solved in one country or continent alone is growing. On the other hand, this is not translated into decisive action and overdue reform of global governance. Lack of concerted leadership and cumbersome institutional arrangements on the international level and a growing array of financial and political pressures on the national level are proving to be formidable obstacles.

### Serious investors needed

I am worried that these obstacles risk may have made the September 20-22 MDG Review Summit in New York a futile exercise, characterised by grand speeches and carefully-worded promises, but followed by little meaningful action.

Several important donors have already reneged on their commitments, or at least relaxed their development efforts. They have used a variety of justifications ranging from concerns about aid efficiency to the need for a more comprehensive approach to achieving development objectives. As a result, the latest projections predict an aid shortfall of around \$21 billion against the global targets. While I agree that a more coherent and results-oriented approach to development is needed, this should not be used as an excuse to cut financial assistance at the first sign of difficulties. The MDGs do not need fair-weather friends, but serious investors in for the long haul.

### Political will

Revitalising the political will to achieve the MDGs, and scaling up proven interventions, is the linchpin to success. As instigator and

guardian of the MDGs, the U.N. has an important role to play in this process and the High Level Advocacy Group created by Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon is a welcome step in the right direction.

The primary responsibility, however, rests with national leaders. Their challenge is to re-articulate a compelling case for global solidarity and equitable growth. One that embraces but goes beyond aid. One that addresses the growing inequalities between male and female, rural and urban, rich and poor. One that does not measure development and progress purely in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) but also of the quality and sustainability of growth. The message must be that the achievement of the MDGs is not optional, but an essential investment in a fairer, safer and more prosperous world.

But achieving the MDGs is only the first step. For even if we succeed and meet all the eight goals by 2015, almost a billion people will continue to live below the poverty line. Hundreds of millions will remain hungry. Millions will continue to die from preventable diseases or unnecessary complications.

We will certainly need to take the MDGs to the next level after the initial deadline. While there is some scepticism about the utility of naming specific goals as basis for development strategies and institutional arrangements, I remain an advocate. After all, who can argue with an objective as simple and powerful as access to food and clean drinking water, jobs, health care and education for everyone?

( Kofi Annan was U.N. Secretary-General between 1997 and 2006. He now chairs the Africa Progress Panel ([www.africaprogresspanel.org](http://www.africaprogresspanel.org)) and the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa ([www.agra-alliance.org](http://www.agra-alliance.org)), and heads the Kofi Annan Foundation ([www.kofiannanfoundation.org](http://www.kofiannanfoundation.org).)

# **RIGHT TO INFORMATION**

## **Information as a right**

N. Bhaskara Rao

*Five years after the enactment of the Right to Information Act, awareness of the law, its provisions and potential appears to be very low.*

Marking the completion of five years, in September 2010, of the enactment of the Right to Information Act, the Central Information Commission (CIC) held the fifth annual convention on “RTI: Challenges and Opportunities,” in New Delhi on September 13 and 14. It was largely a gathering of Information Commissioners from the States and the Centre.

The five technical sessions had presentations by Commissioners and other experts. I had actively taken part in the earlier four annual conventions organised by the CIC more or less on similar lines. Six things stood out at this latest meeting.

First, the key leadership role played by Wajahat Habibullah, as the Chief Information Commissioner, in ushering in the RTI regime was acknowledged and he was credited for ensuring the independent standing of the Commissions.

A second outcome was that the fact that Section 4 of the RTI Act has not received the kind of attention it deserves in order to sustain the right to information regime — Mr. Habibullah himself has highlighted this aspect more than once — was echoed on both the days, but no specific suggestions emerged. Governments at the Centre and in the States need to do more in this regard than what the Information Commissions themselves could do.

Third, most participants reiterated that awareness about the Act, its provisions and potential was very low, and that more serious efforts are required. Also, efforts to sensitise the functionaries concerned were not good enough.

A fourth and more sensitive question that became evident during the deliberations was who, between the Commissions and civil society, has taken the Act to the people and are responsible for prompting the imagination of the people. Surprisingly, the divide in this regard was open. The Commissioners ought to have acknowledged the active role played by civil society and reiterated the need to work together even more in the future. The keynote speaker and other speakers expressed their concern about certain “belligerent tendencies” on the part of individual activists. Such isolated instances should not weaken the critical role played by civil society groups on this front.

#### Threats to activists

Fifth, the convention expressed concern over threats that some activists faced in the course of their work and condemned the killing of certain RTI activists that have occurred. In this context, Union Minister for Law and Justice M. Veerappa Moily, who inaugurated the convention, confirmed that the Union Cabinet was determined to bring forward the whistleblowers bill [‘The Public Interest Disclosure and Protection to Persons making the Disclosure Bill, 2010’] in the coming session of Parliament.

Sixth, the delay in disposing of applications and the backlog in the process that the Commissions are confronted with was yet another issue that was deliberated upon. But no options or alternatives came up. It was agreed that the RTI Act had kept the bureaucracy on its toes. But a general view was that the pile-up of applications was caused by the fact that the government and its agencies were not forthcoming in providing information promptly. One of the sessions

dwelt on how the judiciary, the subordinate judiciary in particular, was largely apathetic and non-cooperative in responding to RTI petitions.

According to a PTI news report, the Minister who inaugurated the event said “RTI should not be a casualty of corrupt bureaucrats.” Shailesh Gandhi, a proactive Central Information Commissioner with the distinction of having been an RTI activist himself in Maharashtra before becoming Commissioner, said later in his presentation that the RTI Act need to be guarded from three potential threats — from the government, the judicial processes and the Commissions themselves.

Mr. Gandhi wanted Information Commissions to take an initiative on issues with wide-ranging and long-term implications: it would be too late to do anything if the Commissions have to wait. He himself had asked the Delhi government to put all its contract agreements concerning consultancy arrangements for the Commonwealth Games in the public domain within a week.

Gajendra Haldea of the Planning Commission, in a presentation on the Public-Private Partnership model, theorised that 20 years from now a third of the land in India would be in the hands of a few private corporates, going by the manner in which Special Economic Zone agreements were being entered into (with public scrutiny).

Mrinal Pande, chairperson of the Prasar Bharati Board, wanted the media to be brought under the preview of the RTI Act. (This was a suggestion that this writer had made at the second annual convention in 2007 and has been advocating since then, without success.)

The session should have deliberated on the media's role and acknowledged the sustained interest taken by some media outlets such as the Telugu newspaper Eenadu and NDTV, and the

difference they have made to the situation.

The convention failed to note that women in sufficient numbers are not taking advantage of the provisions of the RTI Act, or what steps could be taken to correct the situation. It also failed to look at why the academic community has not been taking a real interest in studying the impact of the RTI Act and in promoting it.

There was no evidence of annual reports of Information Commissions in these four years ever having been discussed in Parliament or in State Assemblies. How is it so? It should be examined how many Commissions could not come up with their annual reports and why even the annual reports that were available did not make any difference.

In his valedictory address, Minister of State in the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology Sachin Pilot talked about the shift in the balance of power and the equitable growth that the RTI Act should strive for. He wanted the RTI movement to take advantage of communication technologies.

#### Conventions and sessions

The CIC has been holding annual conventions in Delhi as an “official programme,” attended mostly by Information Commissioners, their staff, one or two Ministers and bureaucrats. The participation of civil society representatives has been marginal: those who did come were mostly from the National Capital Region. There has not been any acknowledgement of the role of civil society organisations in taking the RTI movement forward. At all the five conventions in Delhi, access was controlled. The CIC, nevertheless, deserves praise for holding the conventions.

This writer had the opportunity to take part in all the five official CIC conventions held in New Delhi as well as in organising five

Open House sessions on the RTI in Hyderabad. The Social Audit Council of Andhra Pradesh, comprising a group of civil society organisations and backed by CMS, has been holding annual Open House meetings over the last five years on the implementation of the RTI Act. These were open to anyone but were attended mostly by RTI activists from the districts. The deliberations were based on their presentations and insights to realise the potential of the Act. At least one activist from each district gave such a review. A couple of bureaucrats concerned with the implementation of the RTI Act were specially invited to the Open House. V.S. Ramadevi, former Governor of Himachal Pradesh and Karnataka, was the chief guest in 2006. Wajahat Habibullah, Shailesh Gandhi, C.D. Arha and freedom fighter Purshotham Rao were the chief guests in the subsequent years. The State Information Commissioners were invited to all the five events, although only one or two chose to attend. Each year the Open House sessions honoured activists, officers and mediapersons for their initiatives in taking the Act forward.

The Fifth Open House session in Hyderabad on August 23, 2010, came up with some specific suggestions on the threats against and the killing of activists. It decided to prepare a directory of activists district-wise, form a network of activists, create a website, start counselling centres in districts and launch a helpline.

The sixth convention in 2011 in New Delhi should be an Open House. The participants should be predominantly from civil society, and include academics and women's groups in particular.

*( Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao is the Chairman of CMS based in New Delhi.)*

# **TERRORISM**

## **Colours of terror**

Kancha Ilaiah

Union home minister P. Chidambaram's recent quip on "saffron terror" has triggered a major debate on "religion and colour", so to say.

Questions were raised on whether he was referring to Hindus in general or specifically to the Hindutva forces that don saffron robes and use terror to hit out at Islamic extremists and Muslims.

Obviously, Mr Chidambaram used "saffron terror" to refer to Hindutva fundamentalist forces that have been using bombs and lethal weapons to attack people.

It is pertinent that he used that phrase in a conference of DGPs/DIGs who were supposed to work out a strategy to control lawlessness and terror in several parts of the country.

Some Congress leaders — including Digvijay Singh — have opposed the usage "saffron terror" though Hindu fundamentalists do use terrorist methods like bomb explosions to finish off their enemies.

The Malegaon bomb blasts were planned and executed by a group of saffron-robed Hindu fundamentalists and they are under trial. Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur and her team have been accused of engineering that operation exactly on the lines of the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba.

Several Hindutva intellectuals across the country have attacked Mr Chidambaram ever since he used this phrase on August 25, though they had praised him when he attacked Maoist violence as "red terror".

Once violence crosses the boundary of self-defence and is used to "punish" others for perceived crimes, it becomes terrorism. Hindu or Islamic or any other religious ideology cannot and should not be treated as an exception to this.

As there are several shades among the Hindu social forces, there are also several shades within the Communist socio-political forces.

Right-wing intellectuals use the phrase “red terror” to refer to all kinds of Communist violence, even in the context of Kerala and West Bengal, but they take offence at the very mention of “saffron terror”.

Mr Chidambaram’s usage has historical and contemporary significance. During the freedom movement, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr B.R. Ambedkar subscribed to the non-violent mode of agitation though they differed in their other ideological positions.

But the Hindu stream of nationalists always believed in violent attacks. In fact, Hindu Mahasabha and its ideologue Savarkar preached violence to overthrow the British.

Let us not forget the fact that while being anti-British, they also consistently remained anti-Muslim. While a difference between Hinduism as religion and Hindutva as an ideological agency is being drawn on the ground of violence and non-violence, such a line becomes thin if violence keeps expanding into every sphere.

Mr Digvijay Singh feels that Hinduism as a religious entity could also be referred to as “saffron” and he thinks Mr Chidambaram was wrong in tagging terror with it. He tried to draw a categorical dividing line between Hinduism and Hindu fundamentalism.

But the problem is that the relationship between a terrorist group that operates in the name of a particular religion and the traditional religious forces that operate within that same religion always criss-cross.

The discourse around the world is about where to draw a line between Islamic terrorists and Islam as a religion. Interestingly, the very same Hindutva intellectuals do not want any line to be drawn between Islamic terrorists and Islam as a religion.

Because the colour saffron is Vedic in origin, while constructing an alternative religion Gautama Buddha had used a slightly different colour. However, Buddhism as a religion has always kept away from using violent methods against enemies even in the worst of conditions. That is how Buddhism is different from other religions.

Though philosophically Buddha followed what is known as the middle path between Vedic methods and Jain methods, he remained firm in opposing violent resolution of conflicts.

Interestingly, Buddhism avoided the white colour of Jains but chose a colour that is very near to saffron — light maroon. To prevent confusion, Dr Ambedkar chose blue as the colour of Navayana Buddhism. But even Buddhist monks who accept Dr Ambedkar as the new avatar of Buddha do not use blue robes nowadays.

Gail Omvedt, an expert on Dalit-Buddhist ideology, says that Mr Chidambaram should have used the phrase “Hindu terrorism” instead of “saffron terrorism” since saffron is also used by Sri Lankan Buddhists.

One of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ideologues also wondered whether Mr Chidambaram would dare to use a phrase like “green terrorism” to refer to Islamic terrorists. Obviously, such a usage might invoke strong reactions from the Muslim world.

The symbolic expression of a religious ideology through a particular colour has become a norm.

Religions like Christianity and Judaism do not speak through a particular colour but religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam use a particular colour. In this context it is better to use very specific language while referring to a particular sect within a religion.

Perhaps Mr Digvijay Singh does have a valid point. But the same logic should also come to play when we use phrases like “red terror” and “red corridor”. Logic is logic after all.

# **URBAN DEVELOPMENT**

## **Food insecurity in urban India**

Venkatesh Athreya

*Considerable sections of the urban population may face serious food insecurity even while the urban economy grows. There is a need for urgent action on this front.*

Over the two decades of rapid growth of the Indian economy, the urban economy is generally perceived as having done very well. However, high urban economic growth need not by itself imply improved living standards for all urban residents. In particular, the recent and continuing phenomenon of rising food prices reminds us that considerable sections of the urban population may face serious food insecurity even while the urban economy grows rapidly.

Evidence from the National Sample Surveys of 1993-94, 1999-2000 and 2004-05, ably marshaled by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS), has shown that the rate of growth of employment in urban India fell sharply between 1993-94 and 1999-2000 as compared to the period 1987-88 to 1993-94, but it picked up smartly in the period 1999-2000 to 2004-05. However, practically the entire growth of employment in this latter period was in informal work, and the quality of employment, as indicated by wage/income levels, insecurity, other conditions of work and coverage in terms of social protection, was extremely poor. This has serious implications for urban food insecurity, since a large segment of the urban working population is mostly without productive assets and relies primarily on wage or marginal self employment to survive. In other words, a large segment of the urban

population faces food insecurity in terms of access to food. Such employment-linked food insecurity is especially severe in small and medium towns which have been largely bypassed in the urban growth that has occurred.

Rapid growth of the urban economy, largely unplanned, has also meant haphazard growth of urban centres and proliferation of urban slums lacking in basic amenities such as decent shelter, safe drinking water and toilets and sanitary facilities. This has implications for the absorption dimension of food security, since lack of safe drinking water and sanitation leads to poor biological utilisation of food and repeated episodes of morbidity.

A recently completed study of urban food insecurity explores these issues through an exercise of constructing an Index of urban food insecurity for the major States (M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai (2010), Report on the State of Food Insecurity in Urban India, being released in Delhi on September 25). Using several outcome indicators such as the incidence of anaemia and chronic energy deficiency among women in the fertile age group, and of anaemia and stunting/underweight among children below three years of age, as well as some input indicators such as the percentage of urban population without access to safe drinking water and that without access to toilets, the study shows that the period of economic reforms and high GDP growth has not seen an unambiguous improvement in urban food security across all States.

A comparison of the Index values for the periods 1998-2000 and 2004-06 suggests a rather modest improvement of the urban food security situation as measured by official data. But there should be a qualifying remark: that the data on access to safe drinking water and to toilets may in many cases overstate the actual access on the ground, in view of the reality of non-functioning or provision, or

inadequate functioning or provision.

The overall marginal improvement in urban food security in India as measured by the composite Index in all its variants is accompanied by a significant improvement in the poorer States. The fact that the picture looks much less rosy when a purely outcomes-based measure is used suggests that there is no room for complacency on the issue of urban food security. If anything, it is disappointing that urban economic growth has made little dent on urban food insecurity.

While the poorer States have done better than before, they account for only a small part of the country's urban population. On the other hand, States such as Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Haryana, which are relatively more urbanised, have done poorly. This suggests that the food security situation may have worsened rather than improved for a sizeable segment of the urban population between 1998-2000 and 2004-06. Considering that urban inequality has worsened in the period since 1991, the implications for the food security status of the urban poor or slum-dwellers are worrying.

What can the government do to address the challenge of urban food security?

#### Points for Action

Expansion of productive and remunerative employment needs to be enabled through special assistance to the numerous small and tiny enterprises in the urban economy from credit to marketing support to infrastructure provision, along the lines suggested by the NCEUS. Based on an Urban Employment Guarantee Act, urban employment schemes can be designed and integrated in a synergistic manner with the need to improve urban amenities, especially in the small and medium towns.

Urgent action is needed to improve access to safe drinking water and

to toilets. Special attention needs to be paid in this regard to small and medium towns which happen to be most poorly provided for in this respect.

Interventions in flagship programmes such as the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) and other urban schemes should focus on the needs of small and medium towns and on the needs of slums in all cities, taking care to address the needs of the poor with regard to shelter, water, sanitation, drainage and nutrition education. Urban infrastructure cannot and must not mean only flyovers and six-lane roads in the metropolitan cities.

The urban Public Distribution System must be made universal. However, it is important to recognise that the PDS is only a part of a comprehensive food security strategy. Policy must address hidden hunger. It must also address the special needs of the vulnerable sections such as street children, orphans, HIV-AIDS patients and so on through such initiatives as community kitchens. Designing and implementing a nutrition literacy movement across all urban centres will also be worthwhile.

Promotion of urban and peri-urban agriculture, especially horticulture, can make a vital contribution to food and nutrition security. It can also be a source of sustainable livelihoods. Issues of governance in urban food and nutrition programmes need to be addressed through, among other things, democratic decentralisation and local body capacity-building.

Finally, urban food security is as much a matter of the fiscal policy framework as it is of programme implementation on the ground, and a precondition to achieve targeted outcomes is adequate outlays. Economic reforms therefore need to be 'reformed' if inclusive urban development that addresses the needs of urban food security for all is to occur.

