

CONTENTS

CIVIL SERVICE

Babus at the crossroads 3-5

CORRUPTION

Ten reasons why criminals in khaki get away 7-10

Corruption has reached higher levels of government: CVC 11-12

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economy will recover 14-17

ENVIRONMENT

Copenhagen, tsunami and hunger 19-23

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

People who made news 25-27

PUBLIC POLICY

Aam admi finds *dal-roti* out of reach in UPA's second innings 29-31

RELIGION

Zero tolerance 33-35

CIVIL SERVICE

Babus at the crossroads

Dilip Cherian

The wheels of Indian bureaucracy are turning and in directions that are sometimes new and occasionally, tried and tested. Yet, there can be little doubt that the past decade has been one of tumultuous change for those in the babu business, though many babu-watchers feel that the pace of "real" change has been rather too slow for the circumstances we are in. The portals of power are now resounding with loud cries for cranking up the old, creaking bureaucracy to meet the challenges of an economically empowered India in the age of globalisation and transparency. At one of his recent addresses to babus, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh enunciated the government's resolve to shift from traditional administrative concerns to a "citizen-centric" approach to governance. Today's citizen is a different genotype from what existed a decade ago.

Such words from Dr Singh should be music to the ears of anyone who has despaired of the venal corruption, inefficiency and red tape that have defined and honed our perception over the years, of the typical babu and indeed, of the entire political system. The babus' indifferent attitude, large scale corruption, abuse of authority, and lack of accountability, are well-documented. Their increasing politicisation is evidenced by the fact that babus are now seen to be in cahoots with netas as equal partners, rather than being either in terror of them, or having to kowtow to them for crumbs. All this has estranged them even further from the aam citizenry.

This then is the new-age babu we see emerging — far removed from the "agent of change" as envisioned by the sweet Prime Minister or even as a strong component of the "steel frame" as envisioned by the British when they originally established the Indian Civil Service.

Yet, the times are changing for the Indian babu, even if old habits die hard. Administrative reform, as articulated in recent years, are on course to being implemented in the next decade. The economic growth story along with the profound changes this has wrought, has inevitably impacted the prevailing administrative culture. If India's initially reluctant launch of liberal economic policies was the result of unavoidable fiscal circumstances, now those very forces of liberalisation and globalisation have made it imperative to reform the government. Good governance demands more and more transparency, public accountability and innovative solutions to the nation's evolving but myriad problems. The visible success of India's private sector has led to the fruition of a line of thought in some government corridors that what has worked so wonderfully for the private sector must be made to work in sarkari matters as well. Clearly however, no sustained change is possible in a system as entrenched as the Indian bureaucracy is, without political will at not just the Centre but at the state-level as well. Most especially the state-level, for it is here that bureaucracy has apparently become the most subverted. After years of being used by regional satraps to further their own political agendas, the local babus have evolved into a grotesque parody of their original personas. The most pernicious change in the last decade is this growing politicisation of the state bureaucracy. Between this and increasing caste loyalties among babus to their political masters (again, more visibly and usually at state-level), the independent nature of the civil service as enshrined in the Constitution, is in grave danger today — everywhere.

I believe 2010 will be a watershed year for India; it will determine whether the next decade will allow the nation to realise in large measure the potential that has become evident in the last decade, or whether we

will falter, unable to reach our objectives due to internal and external pressures. Much will depend on the kind of leadership the country gets — and the sort of governance it receives. Since the babu is an intrinsic part of this governance, whether India realises her dreams will depend in large part on our bureaucracy.

Do they understand their enormous responsibility? Do they even care? They probably will if M. Veerappa Moily's recommendations in his 263 page report titled Ethics in Governance are systematically implemented; particularly the repealing of Articles 310 and 311 of the Indian Constitution which have been routinely misused by civil servants to protect themselves from prosecution, even after the amending of Article 311. The current government has the best chance in the last 15 years to actually make the amendments and changes required to bring greater accountability into the bureaucracy — and to make them stick.

Much has also been said about devolution and down-sizing of government as a way to reform the bureaucracy. I believe the entire issue of decentralisation and devolution requires going back to the drawing board and a new paradigm drawn up that meets India's needs more specifically. I think the focus of reforms during the next decade should be on a more responsive government. But I also believe that one of the problems with Indian bureaucracy is that there are too many babus. While we require more qualified professionals at the top "A" and "B" decision-making levels of the bureaucracy (which currently account for just five percent of government jobs,) providing competent, responsive, more transparent, more accountable government, the lower "C" and "D" levels of government should be pruned. Ultimately, what we need are fewer, but more competent, well-paid babus.

Love them, hate them but-you-can't-leave-them tales of babu watchers are welcome. Share your most recent and interesting experiences in detail with dilipcherian@gmail.com. Dilip has his lips sealed, so write freely.

CORRUPTION

HINDU 26.12.09 CORRUPTION

Ten reasons why criminals in khaki get away

Siddharth Varadarajan

Behind every man like S.P.S. Rathore who abuses his authority stand the generals and footsoldiers who help and support him. We need to take them all down.

S.P.S. Rathore, the criminal former top cop of Haryana, may appear alone today but we must never forget that he was able to get away with the sexual molestation of a young child and the illegal harassment of her family for 19 years because he had hundreds of men who supported him in his effort to evade justice.

The fact that these men – fellow police officers, bureaucrats, politicians, lawyers, judges, school administrators – were willing to bend the system to accommodate a man accused of molesting a minor speaks volumes for the moral impoverishment of our establishment and country. Decent societies shun those involved in sexual offences against children. Even criminals jailed for ‘ordinary’ crimes like murder treat those serving time for molesting children as beyond the pale. But in India, men like Rathore have their uses for their masters, so the system circles its wagons and protects them.

The CBI’s appeal may lead to the enhancement of Rathore’s sentence and perhaps even the slapping of abetment to suicide charges, since his young victim killed herself to put an end to the criminal intimidation her family was being subjected to by Rathore and his men. But the systemic rot which the case has exposed will not be remedied unless sustained public pressure is put on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram, two men who have it in their power to

push for simple remedies in the way the Indian law enforcement and justice delivery system works.

First, abolish the need for official, i.e. political sanction to prosecute bureaucrats, policemen and security forces personnel when they are accused of committing crimes. The original intent behind this built-in stay-out-of-jail card was to protect state functionaries from acts done in the course of discharging their duties in good faith. Somewhere along the line, this has come to mean protecting our custodians of law and order when they murder innocent civilians (eg. the infamous Panchalthan case in Kashmir where the trial of army men indicted by the CBI for murdering five villagers in 2000 still cannot take place because the Central government will not grant permission), or assault or molest women and children. No civilised, democratic society grants such impunity. It is disgusting to see former officials and bureaucrats from Haryana saying how they had wanted Rathore prosecuted but were prevented from doing so because of pressure. Such officials should either be made formally to testify in a criminal case against the politicians who so pressured them or they should themselves be hauled up for perverting the course of justice.

Second, stop talking about how making the police and army answerable to the law will somehow demoralise their morale. Does anybody care about the morale of ordinary citizens any more? Or the morale of upright police and army officers, who do not think it is right for their colleagues to be able to get away with criminal acts?

Third, bring an end to the cosy relationship between the police and politicians. Rathore was protected by four chief ministers of Haryana. He served them and they served him by ensuring his unfettered rise. It is absurd that the Indian Police is still governed by a colonial-era Act dating back to 1861. A number of commissions have made recommendations for reforming the police over the years; but no

government or political party wants to give up its ability to use and misuse the police for their own benefit.

Fourth, ensure that police officers who abuse their authority and engage in mala fide prosecutions are dismissed from service and sentenced to jail for a long period of time. Mr. Chidambaram should use the considerable resources at his command to find out who were the policemen involved in filing 11 bogus cases against the teenaged brother of the young girl Rathore molested. He should then make sure criminal proceedings are initiated against all of them. The message must go out to every policeman in the country: If you abuse the law at the behest of a superior, you will suffer legal consequences.

Fifth, ensure that criminal charges against law enforcement personnel are fast-tracked as a matter of routine so that a powerful defendant is not able to use his position to delay proceedings the way Rathore did for years on end. The destruction or disappearance of material evidence in such cases must be treated as a grave offence with strict criminal liability imposed on the individual responsible for breaking the chain of custody.

Sixth, empower the National Human Rights Commission with teeth so that police departments and state governments cannot brush aside their orders as happened in the Rathore case. This would also require appointing to the NHRC women and men who have a proven record of defending human rights in their professional life, something that is done today only in the breach. The attitude of the Manmohan Singh government to this commission and others like the National Commission for Women (NCW) and National Commission for Minorities is shocking. Vacancies are not filled for months on end.

Seventh, ensure the early enactment of pending legislation broadening the ambit of sexual crimes, including sexual crimes against children. Between rape, defined as forced penetrative sex, and the vague, Victorian-era crime of 'outraging the modesty of a woman', the Indian

Penal Code recognises no other form of sexual violence. As a result, all forms of sexual molestation and assault short of rape attract fairly lenient punishment, of the kind Rathore got. In his case, the judge did not even hand down the maximum sentence, citing concerns for the criminal's age. Sadly, he did not take into account the age of the victim and neither does the IPC, which fails to distinguish between 'outraging the modesty' of an adult woman and a young child.

A draft law changing these provisions and bringing India into line with the rest of the modern world has been pending with the NCW and Law Ministry for years. Perhaps the government may now be shamed into pushing it through Parliament at the earliest.

Eighth, take steps to introduce a system of protection of witnesses and complainants. The fate that the family of Rathore's young victim had to endure is testament to the fact that people who seek justice in India do so at their own peril.

Ninth, ensure that robust interrogation techniques like narco-analysis, which are routinely used against other alleged criminals, are also employed against police officers accused of crimes.

Tenth, the media and the higher judiciary must also turn the light inward and ask themselves whether they were also derelict in their duty. The Rathore case did not attract the kind of constant media attention it deserved, nor do other cases involving serving police officers accused of crimes against women, workers, peasants and minorities. As for the upper courts, their record is too patchy to inspire confidence. It was, after all, the high court which chose to disregard the CBI's request for including abetment to suicide charges.

TIMES OF INDIA 30.12.09 CORRUPTION

Corruption has reached higher levels of government: CVC

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NEW DELHI: Central Vigilance Commissioner (CVC) Pratyush Sinha has admitted that corruption has now reached the "higher levels" of government and in high-profile cases there are delays in responding to various queries of the commission.

"If a senior official is involved, there is definitely a hesitation on the part of various government agencies to move quickly. So there are delays, we have to make extra effort to get all information which is required for a thorough enquiry," said the country's top anti-corruption watchdog.

Sinha also said the nature of corruption has changed and reached the top in government.

"Earlier, we used to see decentralized corruption, which means corruption at lower levels. Today, corruption is known more in cases of major public procurements and dispensation of various services at a higher level," Sinha told a TV channel in an interview.

"Powerful ministries like petroleum, civil aviation, power are now dealing directly with big corporate houses. This is a new trend in India," said the official.

Citing the Ruchika Girhotra case in which a former Haryana director

general of police is a main accused, Sinha said "any abuse of personal authority must be prevented at any cost."

"This (Ruchika case) is a very bad example of what somebody can do with the system and get away. Unfortunately, we have the rules and regulations, but they are not strictly enforced. Even today, there are rules in place and if government is sincere in enforcing, then such events would not take place," said the official.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economy will recover

Arjun Sengupta

The Indian economy should recover from the recession caused by the global meltdown. India's exposure to the world economy is quite limited. It is mainly through the exports market and partly through foreign investment flows either as equity or debt capital that financed private investment. The extent of the dependence, however, is quite low. The recession in the exports market affects only few sectors, such as textile and labour-intensive manufactures and some industrial raw materials and engineering goods with limited feedback on other intermediate products. The effect of recession on final demand, mostly from domestic market, remains limited when there is a downturn, although expansion in demand often is significant in pushing up domestic production.

The fluctuations in capital flows may, however, have much larger impact, especially when an increasing amount of private investment has been financed by foreign borrowing. Now that the international capital market is reviving and the rate of return in the Indian industries remains reasonably high, the revival of the international capital market will act as an impetus for Indian investment. The existence of a large domestic market provided a basic cushion for the Indian economy to the negative effect of global recession. But as the world demands start picking up the market response would go beyond the domestic interdependence to further increase the growth impulses in the Indian economy.

I, therefore, feel that the Indian economy will get back its high growth trajectory in 2010 unless some unforeseen development takes place. Several reforms may improve the matters, but they are not that important

to keep the growth momentum. The investors should not lose their confidence in the continuation of the growth outcomes, which would result if there is no reversal of policies.

But does the revival of the economic growth answer all the major concerns of Indian development? By now, almost two decades of high economic growth after the economic reforms of 1991 have taught us a lesson that high rate of growth may be necessary, but is insufficient to produce the inclusive development that has been the principal goal of the Indian policy. Inclusive development does not mean that all sections of the economy should experience some development. Sustained high growth for some years will, in due course, impact most sectors through increasing demand and supply and general increase in productivity. Inclusive development implies increasing equity, improving the livelihood conditions of the poor and more than the average growth of the economy. Nobody in our country today would ask for growth for the sake of growth. It should improve the welfare of the people reducing the disparity in income and opportunity, poverty and destitution, lack of health and education. The least advantaged must improve their welfare more than the national average.

A number of studies have shown that high performance of economic growth in India has not made much impact on the income and welfare disparities. India is now divided — the poor and the vulnerable and the rich luxury consumer.

I think the challenge to the Indian economy next year and in the years to follow would be — how to change the dismal dichotomy between two Indias? This division not only makes mockery of tom-tomming our high growth rate as the index of prosperity, it is also fraught with the danger of widespread violence and anarchy forcing the policymakers to reverse the reform process with investors eventually losing their confidence in our economic prospects. If that happens, it will take very little time for the high growth performance of the country to collapse. It is high time

that we change the emphasis of our economic policy and plan for an inclusive development that removes the prevailing disparities.

The United Progressive Alliance government has worked out major programmes, which can tilt the balance in favour of the poor, if faithfully implemented. Five programmes — National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, Bharat Nirman, rural infrastructure including roads, irrigation, sanitation, and electricity, Savarashiksha Abhyan and Rural Health Mission — would take us a long way towards changing the nature of our economic development. If the government added to this the employment creating programmes in our informal economy, providing the 92 per cent of our unorganised workers access to enterprise, credit, technology, and marketing, it would place us firmly on the path of development bringing equity and social justice to the high level of economic growth.

We have, however, learnt a major lesson from our attempt to implement these programmes — they are not dependent only on provision of finance or public expenditure. With economic growth, the volume of revenue realisation has increased over the last five years, which has allowed us to increase public expenditure on these projects. But we have failed to work out effective delivery of these programmes, without leakage and inefficiency and with accountability and transparency. We no doubt need financial provision, but more importantly we need organised public action, making the stakeholders responsible for delivering the programmes and being accountable through a proper process of evaluation and scrutiny and mid-course correction when necessary. In other words, we need a different approach to governance where accountability should be established, whether by the panchayati raj institutions or local level organisations. We need a new model of governance.

Planning for development in India, from now on, should be done from the point of view of equilibrating demand and supply and generating

investment and capacity expansion of specific sectors where there are bottlenecks. The methods of carrying out those exercises will have to be much more decentralised going to the grassroots level. A simple top-down approach will not work because the top does not have and cannot have all the information necessary for implementing the programmes.

Apart from decentralisation, this new model of governance involves a new model of accountability and transparency holding the different agents responsible for carrying out specific functions. Where agents fail in discharging the responsibilities, there should be a mechanism of correction as well as reprimanding and punishing. The government machinery at the district, state, and Central levels must fully engage in identifying their responsibilities. They would derive their legitimacy from carrying out that exercise of governance and there should be a method of changing them if they fail. I very much hope that year 2010 would mark the beginning of a process of reforming our system of governance, so that we can achieve our cherished goal of economic growth with equity.

Dr Arjun Sengupta is a member of Parliament and former economic adviser to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi

ENVIRONMENT

Copenhagen, tsunami and hunger

M.S. Swaminathan

India's food and water security systems will be the worst victims of a rise in mean temperature. Building our defences against potential climate change activated calamities through mainstreaming climate resilience in all developmental programmes should be the priority task in the New Year.

The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities is the core of the many climate agreements arrived at so far, including the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Bali Plan of Action (2007). The differentiated responsibilities aim to meet the special needs of developing countries for accelerated and equitable economic development. Both at L'Aquila and Copenhagen, the industrialised countries proposed limiting the rise in mean temperature to 2 degrees C above normal. Even this seems to be unattainable in the context of the present rate of emission of greenhouse gases (GHG). Hence, *the principle of common but differentiated impact of 2 degrees change in mean temperature is essential for prioritising climate victims.* For example, small islands like Tuvalu in the Pacific Ocean, the Maldives, Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar, as well as Sunderbans in West Bengal, Kuttanad in Kerala and many locations along the coast will face the prospect of submergence. Floods will become more serious and frequent in the Indo-Gangetic plains. Drought induced food and water scarcity will become more acute. South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and the small islands will be the worst victims. In contrast, countries in the northern latitudes will benefit due to longer growing seasons and higher yields.

Addressing the World Climate Conference in Geneva in 1989 on the

theme, “Climate Change and Agriculture,” I pointed out the serious implications of a rise of 1 to 2 degree C in mean temperature on crop productivity in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. An Expert Team constituted by FAO, in its report submitted in September 2009, also concluded that for each 1 degree C rise in mean temperature, wheat yield losses in India are likely to be around 6 million tonnes per year, or around \$1.5 billion at current prices. There will be similar losses in other crops and our impoverished farmers could lose the equivalent of over \$20 billion in income each year. Rural women will suffer more since they look after animals, fodder, feed and water.

We are now in the midst of a steep rise in the prices of essential food items like pulses. 2009 has been characterised by both extensive drought and severe floods. The gap between demand and supply is high in pulses, oilseeds, sugar and several vegetable crops including onion and potato. The absence of a farmer-centric market system aggravates both food inflation and rural poverty. FAO estimates that a primary cause for the increase in the number of hungry persons, now exceeding over a billion, is the high cost of basic staples. *India unfortunately has the unenviable reputation of being the home to the largest number of undernourished children, women and men in the world.* The task of ensuring food security will be quite formidable in an era of increasing climate risks and diminishing farm productivity.

China, which was reluctant in Copenhagen to join other developing countries in efforts to restrict the rise in mean temperature to 1 to 1.5 degrees C, has already built strong defences against the adverse impact of climate change. During this year, China produced over 500 million tonnes of foodgrains in a cultivated area similar to that of India. Chinese farmland is, however, mostly irrigated unlike in India where 60 per cent of the area still remains rain-fed. Food and drinking water are the first among our hierarchical needs. Hence while assessing the common and differentiated impact of a 2 degree rise in temperature, priority should go to agriculture and rural livelihoods. What are the steps we should

take in the fields of both mitigation and adaptation?

The largest opportunity in mitigation lies in increasing soil carbon sequestration and for building up soil carbon banks. Increase in the soil carbon pool in the root zone by 1 ton C/ha/yr will help to increase food production substantially, since one of the major deficiencies in soil health is low soil organic matter content. There should be a movement for planting a billion “fertilizer trees” which can simultaneously sequester carbon and enhance soil nutrient status. We can also contribute to the reduction in methane emission in the atmosphere from animal husbandry by spreading biogas plants. A biogas plant and a pond on every farm will make a substantial contribution to both reducing GHG emission and ensuring energy and water security. Similarly neem-coated urea will help to reduce ammonia volatilisation and thereby the release of nitrous oxide into the atmosphere.

2010 is the International Year of Biodiversity. We can classify our crops into those which are climate resilient and those which are climate sensitive. For example, wheat is a climate sensitive crop, while rice shows a wide range of adaptation in terms of growing conditions. We will have problems with reference to crops like potato since a higher temperature will render raising disease-free seed potatoes in the plains of northwest India difficult. We will have to shift to cultivating potato from true sexual seed. The relative importance of different diseases and pests will get altered. The wheat crop may suffer more from stem rust which normally remains important only in Peninsular India. A search for new genes conferring climate resilience is therefore urgent.

Anticipatory analysis and action hold the key to climate risk management. The major components of an Action Plan for achieving a Climate Resilient National Food Security System will be the following:

— Establish in each of the 127 agro-climatic sub-zones, identified by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research based on cropping systems

and weather patterns of the country, a *Climate Risk Management Research and Extension Centre*.

— Organise a Content Consortium for each centre consisting of experts in different fields to provide guidance on alternative cropping patterns, contingency plans and compensatory production programmes, when the area witnesses natural calamities like drought, flood, higher temperature and in case of coastal areas, a rise in sea level.

— Establish with the help of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) a Village Resource Centre (VRC) with satellite connection at each of the 127 locations.

— Establish with the help of the Ministry of Earth Sciences and the India Meteorological Department an Agro-Meteorological Station at each Research and Extension Centre to initiate a “Weather Information for All” programme.

— Organise Seed and Grain Banks based on Computer Simulation Models of different weather probabilities and their impact on the normal crops and crop seasons of the area.

— Develop Drought and Flood Codes indicating the anticipatory steps necessary to adapt to the impact of global warming.

— Strengthen coastal defences against a rise in the sea level as well as the more frequent occurrence of storms and tsunamis through the establishment of bio-shields of mangroves and non-mangrove species. Also, develop seawater farming and below sea-level farming techniques. Establish major research centres for sea-water farming and below sea-level farming. Kuttanad will be a suitable place for the Below Sea-Level Farming Research and Extension Centre. A major centre should also be established in the Sunderbans area.

— Train one woman and one man of every panchayat to become

Climate Risk Managers. They should become well-versed in the art and science of Climate Risk Management and help to blend traditional wisdom with modern science. The Climate Risk Managers should be supported with an Internet-connected Village Knowledge Centre.

Today (December 26, 2009) marks the fifth anniversary of tsunami. The tsunami of 2004 was a wake-up call alerting us to the consequences of a sudden rise in the sea level. The “Copenhagen Inaction” will lead to more severe coastal storms, tsunamis and sea level rises. A Climate Literacy Movement as well as anticipatory action to safeguard the lives and livelihoods of all those living in coastal areas and islands will have to be initiated. Integrated coastal zone management procedures involving concurrent attention to both the landward and seaward site of the ocean and to coastal forestry and agro-forestry as well as capture and culture fisheries are urgently needed.

With the help of Tata Trusts, the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation is dedicating today to fisher and coastal communities a “Fish for All Research and Training Centre” at Kaverpoomipattinam (Poompuhar) for imparting training from fish capture to consumption. A college for coastal communities is also being established with the help of the Indira Gandhi National Open University. Artesanal fishermen going to the sea in small boats are being provided with cellphones which can give them information on wave heights and the location of shoals. This helps not only to save time but also allay fears concerning a sudden rise in the sea level. In 2010, India will complete 60 years of planned development. *Hereafter, climate resilience must be mainstreamed in all development programmes.* Let not the Copenhagen Inaction add to the number affected by deprivation and malnutrition.

(The writer is Chairman, M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation and Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha))

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

People who made news

Mrinal Pande

"I imagined myself sitting on the end of a beam of light and imagined what I'd see," wrote Albert Einstein. What would Sonia Gandhi, who turned 63 earlier this month, see if she chooses to sit on a beam of light and looks at her own journey through the year 2009? Most of this journey's achievements, including the general elections, have been uniquely hers. Is it possible, one wonders, if she'd now be experiencing an edge-of-the-world sensation in her career — entering entirely new territories of activism and politics, with the wind whistling past her ears. Who would have imagined that she, once among the least externalised of the Gandhis, would in 2009 be India's biggest newsmaker as she and the party she leads move ahead towards a glory that most had thought would never again be theirs.

It is good to see that somewhere along the way Sonia Gandhi has trashed what Germaine Greer called the "chrysalis of conditioning" — the psychological shroud which wraps up most women over 60 with all sorts of anxieties about disease and dependency. To women of all ages and all political leanings in India, she represents an energised, effective and politically-savvy elder stateswoman who enjoys immense power without worries of losing her dignity.

For Lal Krishna Advani, the year 2009 has undoubtedly been an *Annus Horribilis*. Till the other day he was the Iron Man, the lauh purush of the Bharatiya Janata Party, slated to lead the party to certain victory in 2009 elections and take over as the undisputed leader of the National Democratic Alliance. Party astrologers were already predicting a great innings for him and somewhere a Man Friday may also have worked out

the first draft of his first speech as the Prime Minister of India. Alas, it was not to be. Like the courtesan, wrote a Sanskrit poet, politics has many unseen faces. The face Advani's party and its mentor the Sangh have revealed to him after the party's poll debacle has been anything but benign. Endless squabbling within the second-rung leaders and the trashing of his trusted Hanuman, Rajnath Singh, by Mohan Bhagwat had already signalled an end to Advani's political career. His latest indictment, by the Liberhan Commission, for the rath yatra and the demolition of the Babri Masjid it triggered, is the last sordid blow to an image already in tatters.

Manmohan Singh's horoscope must feature a most unusual combination of stars. Nothing else would explain how despite qualities that spell political unemployment in India — modesty, honesty and a noticeable lack of oratory skills — he has notched one success after another. In the international arena, despite the fact that world markets are still to recover, friend Dubya retired and his party failed to capture power in the US, he is the blue-turbaned boy of the Western leaders — from Obama to Sarkozy. As second-time Prime Minister, Dr Singh continues to come across as a sombre man who is always concentrating, absorbed by difficult and important ideas. That is why he rarely smiles and almost never laughs even at the moment of a major victory. After being "re-anointed" as the Prime Minister, visiting a troubled area, returning from a spectacularly fruitful trip abroad, or delivering a public speech, he displayed none of a leader's stagecraft — stroking children on their head or raising his hands in the air or dropping his voice to an intimate whisper when delivering a public speech. Yet the world media treats him with respect and presents him as a potent symbol of the bond between capitalism and socialism. It's all in the stars, or at least most of it!

Rahul Gandhi continued to be a newsmaker through 2009, but he broke out of the confining walls of public/media expectations. He politely refused to oblige both the party sycophants who wished to see a fifth-generation Gandhi assume the family gaddi, and the Opposition leaders

who awaited the chance to go to town about his pashchatya (westernised) ways and the dynastic politics of the Congress. Rahul is gradually becoming more open, receptive and relaxed as he tours rural India. But he needs to guard against insufficient discrimination between the angst of the genuinely needy and those using fake anger against the system to get tickets (remember Kalavati?). He has so far been a student of no ideological school and says he has agreed to lead the party, particularly the youth wing, because he wishes it to recapture the lost glory and acquire a mass base. Economic stagnation, internal disappointments and bureaucratic lethargy usually push politicians in Asia in one of the two directions: either they become dictators or escalate their activities abroad in the field of foreign policy. Youth and lack of a clear ministerial berth have helped this newsmaker stay clear of both through 2009. Watch this space. Mayawati is different. She is undoubtedly brave, decisive and dynamic but also an autocratic leader of her party who, when faced with charges of corruption and bullying her pack, continues to be intolerant of dissensions and sharp of tongue. The year 2009 saw her paint herself in a corner over the issue of her stone parks and monuments. She held centre stage in Uttar Pradesh, but held it alone. Even her pet bureaucrats seem to be fast losing touch with her. The secretary in charge of her theme parks allegedly shot himself, the dissatisfied sugar farmers are threatening to go on a dharana, crime graph is rising all over, even the Dalits are complaining about lawlessness to rival Rahul. Yet she managed to defeat arch enemy Mulayam Singh Yadav's party in by-elections. Mayawati's complex, many-layered personality continues to make news as she improvises and changes tack continuously, election after election. No clear long-term vision guides her strategies and tactics. The kind of news she generated in 2009 showed that she is a fascinating juggler with no clear plans. A pity, given the hopes her supporters have riding on her.

Mrinal Pande is an author and journalist and former editor of Hindi language daily Hindustan

PUBLIC POLICY

HINDU 29.12.09 PUBLIC POLICY

Aam admi finds *dal-roti* out of reach in UPA's second innings

Gargi Parsai

More than the return of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government to power, the *aam admi* will remember the year 2009 for the back-breaking *mehngai* and the inability of the government to make *dal-roti*, *sabzi* and *chini* affordable for the masses.

The unprecedented rise in the price of essential commodities, particularly pulses, sugar, milk and vegetables turned the year bitter for the *aam admi*. What was irksome for the people was that instead of tackling the situation, the government justified price rise and tried to prepare, as it were, the *aam admi* for what is to come. By the end of the year when inflation soared to 18.65 per cent (for week ending December 12) there were doom's day prediction of it becoming worse in the coming year.

The year began with enhanced prices of essentials that was explained away as part of the global scenario. However, as the year progressed, there was no easing the situation in food items and the blame was laid at the door of deficient monsoon that hit 299 districts in 13 states. The fact, however, remains that the effects of deficient kharif monsoon — an estimated 18.8 million tonnes decline in the combined production of rice, coarse cereals and oilseeds — would be felt later or even next year, if rabi does not make good the losses. Although monsoon deficiency averaged at 22 per cent, it is hoped that delayed monsoon activity will help the rabi (wheat) crop.

Through the deficient south-west monsoon, the government assured the nation that foodgrain stocks totalling 233.88 million tonnes were enough to tide over the situation. In fact, towards the last quarter, the government decided to offload wheat and rice in the open market to enhance availability and hold prices. So it is not as if the country was short in cereals.

The sugar story took a trajectory of its own. Much into the year the government woke up to the fact that sugar production would be 146.8 lakh tonnes in 2008-09. In the previous year it was 263 lakh tonnes. At the height of robust sugar stocks, the government refrained from allowing sugar exports. But even as reports were coming in about the decline in domestic sugarcane acreage in 2008-09, the government allowed industry to export. And then in 2009-10 kharif sowing, when there was no great improvement in sugarcane sowing figures, and with predictions of sugar output remaining around 160 lakh tonnes this year, the government had to go in for imports of raw and refined sugar. By then, of course, international sugar prices soared. The price of the sweetener in the domestic retail market soared from Rs. 16 two years ago to Rs. 40 a kg currently. Around the same time, koya prices also escalated, impacting Diwali and Id celebrations.

As things stand, the Central government has not been able to get on top of the price rise situation but has almost succeeded in tossing the blame on state governments saying that they must take action against hoarding, speculation and diversion from the PDS. Chief Ministers Nitish Kumar and Mayawati opposed this, but by and large there is an inexplicable quiet in the polity on this. The Samajwadi Party had announced an agitation against price rise but dropped it. Now the Left parties plan to take to the streets on the issue in the budget session which is two months away and by when the situation might alter.

As per official data, *atta* prices that were Rs. 14 a kg one year ago in Delhi's retail market stood at Rs. 20/kg on December 24, 2009; sugar

soared from Rs. 21/kg to Rs. 40/kg; tur dal from Rs. 50/kg to Rs. 90/kg; moong dal from Rs. 45/kg to Rs. 81/kg; urad dal from Rs. 45/kg to Rs. 76/kg; milk from Rs. 21 to Rs. 22-26/kg; wheat from Rs. 13/kg to Rs. 15/kg; rice from Rs. 22/kg to Rs. 23/kg; loose tea from Rs. 144/kg to Rs. 156/kg; salt from Rs. 11/kg to Rs. 12/kg. Ghee prices have also soared.

What is inexplicable is the unprecedented rise in the price of vegetables and fruits, even seasonal ones. Gaps between demand and supply are the routine excuses put out by the administrative ministries. In some cases, as in onion prices “local factors” are responsible. But in the case of potatoes, farmers got paid peanuts while in the cities the tuber is selling at Rs 15/kg. Tomatoes continue to be sold between Rs. 22 to Rs. 30/kg.

Clearly high inflation is the combined and the cascading effect of the last hike in the price of diesel and petrol, the high across-the-board service charges that is levied, and the high percentage (to be raised) of value added tax. Speculation in the futures market is also said to be responsible for the tendency to hoard. The result is that there is no respite for the *aam admi* and housewives are at their wits end on how to manage the family budget. For the poor and lower middle-class, any medical emergency or celebration or children’s education and tuition costs is enough to push them into debt.

In the year to come the *aam admi* will have to bear the consequences of the free market forces and speculative trading that the Manmohan Singh government favours. Of course the parallel economy in the country will give the government a false sense of comfort about recession not hitting India, but the *aam admi* will ring in the new year worried about how to make both ends meet.

RELIGION

Zero tolerance

Jug Suraiya

Voltaire said, "I disagree vehemently with what you say, but i shall defend to my death your right to say it." Today's India might paraphrase that remark to read, "I disagree vehemently with what you say and i shall defend to your death your right not to say it."

If a 198-country survey conducted by the Washington-based Pew Research Centre is to be believed, India ranks only below civil war-torn Iraq in terms of 'social hostility and religious discrimination'. It would seem that when it comes to respecting the social and religious beliefs and practices of others, we are a zero tolerance society. The report identifies the Hindutva movement as the main reason behind this social and religious chauvinism.

So what happened to the image we'd long fostered about India being an eclectic sponge, capable and, indeed, willing to soak in all the diverse cultural currents that have flowed into it over the millennia? What happened to the ancient concept of 'anekantwad', which has been defined as the willingness to accept another person's point of view, and which has been claimed by some commentators as the taproot of the spreading banyan tree of India's much-celebrated pluralism through the ages? Is that long-enduring tree which for long has given shelter and shade to all, irrespective of creed and custom in danger of withering and dying?

We can, of course, dismiss the Pew report as yet another example of biased, anti-India foreigners who want to paint us in the worst possible light, for their own vested interests, on all issues, be it climate change,

corruption or, as in the current case, religious and social intolerance. It is not being paranoid, or xenophobic, to say that often the so-called First World projects a distorted image of India to suit its own ends and to assert an implicit moral, social or political superiority vis-à-vis us.

But such foreign gamesmanship discounted, what is likely to be the reaction to the Pew report? What is your reaction to it? Is it one of the righteous wrath there go these wicked Americans again, spreading nasty lies about us to cover up their own shortcomings on human rights issues or is it one of sober reflection maybe the report is prejudiced, but is there even a germ of truth in it?

On the same day that the Pew Research Centre report appeared in the TOI there was another report which said that in Surat 1,747 tribals had been reconverted from Christianity to Hinduism by the Shree Sampraday organisation. The organisers of the reconversion camp reportedly did not seek official permission to reconvert, as required by the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act, 2003.

But that's a minor technical point. A far more significant lapse on the part of the organisers, and their supporters, was that no one seemed to ask why the tribals had converted to Christianity in the first place, and whether they'd converted from Hinduism or from some form of animism. The cruel, and continuing, physical and social dispossession inflicted on our indigenous peoples is exemplified by the episode in the Mahabharat when Dronacharya requires the tribal, Ekalavya, to cut off his thumb as guru dakshina so that the maimed warrior will not be able to match Arjuna in archery.

Why do tribals convert to Christianity? Is it only because those predatory Christian missionaries bribe them with free rice and other goodies, or is there some other reason? Is it the missionaries' carrot or the majority's stick which drives them into the Christian fold? Similarly, when Dalits convert en masse to Buddhism are they falling prey to

proselytisation, or are they seeking to escape millennia of persecution by the majority?

Are we going to ask these questions, or are they going to be shouted down before they are raised? If they are, it'll show that the Pew report was wrong. We are not an intolerant lot; we are very tolerant. Of our own intolerance of others.