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ARMED FORCE

A call to arms

Karan Thapar

All my life I've been an admirer and champion of our defence services. In fact, of the army in particular. As an officer's son I guess this is inevitable. Indeed, you can't have failed to notice the number of times I've written in support of our army, its officers and the causes they have espoused.

So today, with a heavy heart and a somewhat reluctant pen, I'm struggling to express criticism. The Adarsh Cooperative Housing Society scam has revealed a rot in the armed services that isn't just depressing and distressing but also disillusioning. Honestly, I did not think this was possible. In fact, I'm still hoping it can be explained away. But, I guess, that's a vain and forlorn hope.

First, the dismal facts. Judging by newspaper reports the rot runs deep. Twenty-three retired army officers are part of Adarsh including two former chiefs, a former vice chief, three more retired lieutenant generals, three retired major generals and five retired brigadiers. The tally for the navy is 11, including a former chief and a former vice chief.

These aren't small fry.

A second worrying issue is how much the services knew of what was happening and did they deliberately fail to prevent land in de facto defence possession from being expropriated? A report by the Director of Audit, Defence Services, Southern Command dated October 8, 2010, suggests that the no-objection certificate issued by

the army (MG&G Area) was manipulated. Worse, the press now suspect that some officers connived at this clearance in the hope of

obtaining benefits.

What will pain the army is the claim that this property was meant for Kargil widows and martyrs but ended up in the hands of former chiefs, generals and brigadiers. We knew this sort of thing happened on civvy street. But if the infection has spread to our defence services the moral superiority of their uniform will have been sullied — if not diminished.

Former army chief, general VP Malik, accepts this is a grievous blow to the army's image. He adds it can and must be overcome. The question is how? I'd like to suggest a few urgent steps that could help.

First, the army chief must order a full and detailed inquiry that will go into how this happened, who was involved, what, if anything, they gained and personally question all concerned including those who served at the very top. And this report must be made public. Transparency is critical.

Second, although I'm wholly prepared to believe that generals Vij and Kapoor and admiral Madhvendra Singh weren't aware Adarsh was intended for war widows and martyrs and only acquired flats in ignorance of this fact, they need to give a full and public account of their involvement in this society. More than in their own interest, the honour of the service they once headed requires this.

Third, the 'guilty', once identified, must be prosecuted. If the law permits, let the army do so itself. A military court martial — if it can be extended to cover the retired — would carry far greater

credibility than a prolonged civil court trial.

Last week, in a courageous and forthright interview, general Singh, told me that this sorry story had damaged the army's reputation and would cause pain to his soldiers. I believe he's determined to clean the Augean stables. I hope the government will let him. Faced with a crisis, his instincts are far superior to theirs.

The views expressed by the author are personal

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Structural change and inequality

One important indicator of the effectiveness of economic policy is the manner in which it alters the basic socioeconomic structure of a country. Some 20 years after many of the economies of the world changed track — moving away from an active economic role for states towards liberalisation and globalisation — there is evidence that economic growth, on its own, does not reduce poverty or inequalities. This is clear from a report by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). A basic attribute of economic growth is the movement of labour force, typically, from the primary sector to the secondary, and then to the tertiary sector. But the trend now is to work for faster growth through the tertiary sector, bypassing the all-important manufacturing sector. For a country that embarks upon economic reforms, it is also imperative to put in place adequate institutional support, by way of social policy, so that the transitory process triggered by a smaller role for the state as employment provider does not affect the well-being of its workforce.

The report, “Combating Poverty and Inequality: Structural Change, Social Policy and Politics,” makes it clear that many countries are not doing enough to create productive employment during the structural adjustment process. The message is that the current approaches to eliminating poverty are unlikely to deliver results as they emphasise macro-stabilisation. For instance, the insistence on fiscal discipline relegates social concerns to the level of by-products of policymaking. Specifically, in pursuit of fiscal prudence, governments in many developing countries place less emphasis on universalising social protection, and go for targeted measures, which suffer from a serious shortfall — it relates to the state's capacity to

ensure full coverage of the target group. Moreover, macro-stabilisation policies mean a shrinking public sector and increasing reliance on market forces. The situation warrants a transitory process that emphasises employment-growth, accompanied by active state-backed social policies. For instance, the manner in which the East Asian economies managed their structural change — with an emphasis on the manufacturing sector, backed by social structures — proved effective in achieving higher growth while narrowing inequalities. The over-arching message from the report, which is important at a time when the global targets for poverty reduction appear elusive, is this: poverty and inequality are too serious issues to be left to the markets.

EDUCATION

HINDU 8.11.10 EDUCATION

Delhi University: in a hurry to 'semesterise'?

Shahid Amin & Shobhit Mahajan

What really is at stake in academic and governance terms in the battle over the semester system? What implications does it carry for academic reforms in the country more generally?

The managers of higher education appear to be in a crisis. This may appear a bit rich coming from two teachers of a university that has been in the news for the trade union-like attitude of its academics. Earlier, the Vice-Chancellor knocked on the doors of courts to restrain the Teachers' Association, and now a public interest litigation plea filed by an ex-serviceman has resulted in its withdrawing the agitation. The High Court threatened to pass orders on what is at core an academic and governance issue: the content and modality of the dozen-odd science courses which were recently 'semesterised.'

The bitter confrontation between the administration and the teachers of Delhi University has been seen as a clash between progress and mule-headedness. The immediate issue — 'semesterisation of undergraduate education' — seems simple enough, with which no reasonable person should have any quarrel. The basic idea is that students will learn and get evaluated after 13-15 weeks, and move on to the next set of courses. This would make college education student friendly. It would take away the pressure of having to sit for 8-10 papers at the end of the year. It will also create greater mobility, the transfer of credits and resource utilisation across Indian universities. A short-term student exchange between Indian and

foreign universities would become possible. Besides, this is the practice in the best universities on the East Coast of America. That Berkeley and Chicago have quarters, not semesters, and Oxford and Cambridge end-of-year examinations appear to be matters of detail.

Over the last year, a rapid introduction of the semester system has been advocated by the University Grants Commission and the Human Resource Department as being productive of assured results. But as policy decisions turn into hurriedly-assembled common sense, any plea for reconsideration — even caveats — gets perceived as oppositional. If the Indian Institutes of Technology and even Jawaharlal Nehru University can have semester systems, why not Delhi University, one of the premier universities in the country? The question, it seems, has to be posed only for the answer to be in the negative. Unless, one pauses to ponder over the aphorism: 'The devil is in the details.'

So what really is at stake in academic and governance terms, in the unsavoury battle over the semester system? What implications does it carry for academic reforms in the country more generally? The problem, indeed tragedy, of Delhi University's recent history — symptomatic of educational reforms in the country as a whole — has been the failure of honest and effective academic exchange between the teachers and the administration. One could well decry the politicisation of the Delhi University teachers' association, and allude to the little known fact that an organisation which had Amartya Sen as a founding member has been reduced to arguing for the fundamental right to strike in a court of law.

It is undoubtedly true that such associations very often work as trade unions. However, the failure of the university to adhere to strict academic norms is very largely a failing of its Professoriate, that is, professors, heads, deans, etc, who, as ex-officio members of decision-making bodies, have been charged with overseeing

academic standards but who seldom assert their intellectual independence. With the over two-score undergraduate colleges having a smaller voice in decision-making, the clutch of elected teachers' representatives get all the more vociferous at being marginalised by the ex-officio majority.

This asymmetry between the policy-effectiveness of its constituents produces an oscillation between accommodation and steamrolling within the university system. “Weak” or “ordinary” Vice-Chancellors operating in normal times tend to be accommodative, even soft, towards the vociferous elected teacher minority. Additionally, they end up being solicitous even of deadwood configurations within the departments. This results in zero academic change.

If an incumbent Vice-Chancellor perceives a messianic role for herself — as not just a messenger but an enforcer of centralised change, emanating largely from the UGC and the HRD — then everyone not paying untrammelled obeisance will have to go unheard. Contrarian academic opinion, almost by definition, becomes invalid; expecting to be sidelined in decision-making, teacher representatives filibuster or, worse, stall proceedings. All normal procedures of academic decisions get subverted: committees that are to approve newer courses don't get to see, much less discuss, what they approve; pliant heads of departments start functioning as backroom boys; major decisions about the organisation and the quality of education that we impart to students are “technically” approved sans deliberation, and without feasibility studies on their deliverable worth.

At such crucial times, the Professoriate either looks the other way or lowers its academic guard: a coup de grace can now be administered. The Vice-Chancellors wheel in the heavy artillery of emergency powers. The normal tendency of the eminent outside

nominees on the executive bodies of a university is not to queer the pitch: for, there surely must have been an emergency for such powers to have been invoked. With the abdication of the watchdog function by the apex body, we enter an Orwellian world where the very use of emergency powers becomes the supreme justification.

So why can't Delhi University with its illustrious list of alumni and the Prime Minister among its past professors implement the semester system? To even pose the question this way is to buy into the argument that no thinking academics are left in the capital's oldest university at present, that college teachers are an ungrateful lot unwilling to innovate and work harder even after the recent pay hike, and the CEO knows best while exercising her emergency powers. These are all questionable assumptions.

What is clear is that very little thought seems to have gone into balancing the requirements of access, equity and quality. Universities are now committed to increasing student intake from 'backward' social groups at all levels. To adjust and develop the capacity to imbibe what is necessarily a more rigorous academic programme requires time and mentoring.

To examine and grade differently-abled students in the first two months when a large number are still struggling to find their feet is in effect to deny them the opportunity they had come seeking in the first place. It will be unwise to just keep failing students in large numbers. What we need are imaginative schemes that enable knowledge acquisition by all — in the classroom and in smaller tutorial groups.

The real danger of hurriedly cobbled semester courses, as has happened with the undergraduate programmes in science subjects in Delhi University, is that the deliverables, in terms of the structure, course content, its logic and student uptake, the vaunted inter-

disciplinarity and enhanced modularity have been sacrificed. It saddens us when in a mid-semester evaluation in a new-fangled M.Sc. programme, only five out of 300 students make the grade. At times, it is salutary to be reminded of the expression: 'devilish hurry.' This is not to argue that a semester system is principally evil: it is what one does with the principle that creates the possibility of a wholesome interest in the newer investment in higher education. This seems to be the lesson for all universities poised at the launch pad of educational reforms.

(The authors are Professor of History and Physics at Delhi University.)

Ethics of activism and teaching

Shelley Walia

WE see that a time comes when suddenly our intellectual activities are shaken; traditional rationales which underpin our daily practises stand discredited. In this context, the role of the teacher becomes an act of responsibility and intervention, especially when we all know that education is never neutral. Its emancipatory project makes it inherently political.

As Samantha Powers writes: “At the moment our world seems to be afraid and fear is dangerous. It can justify excesses and can lead to escapism. The gravest temptation is an overwhelmed, apolitical retreat into private life. But it is not enough to lament the burden of our time; we critics must shape the response. It is only in the public sphere, through voting, voicing, and mobilising (and through dissent) that our fates become our own. While fear is dangerous, fear can also concentrate the mind and lead citizens to take political action. The coming years are years of danger and promise, and we can only hope that the tug towards apathy will be overcome by the lure of human improvement and self-preservation.”

Powers fears a progressive withdrawal in the universities from public concern. Until this is realised, it would be futile to talk about ethics and teaching. I am not engaging in any sermon that puts across lessons in moral responsibility, truth and sincerity in the teaching profession. Surely, we all know the ethics of our profession; every teacher must maintain integrity and devotion to teaching and do nothing that is unbecoming of the profession.

For me, ethics, more than anything else, stands for outrage and a sense of duty that refuses to retreat into a squirrel-like specialisation perpetuating a system of professionalised transmission of knowledge. In such a discussion on ethics, the need is to move out of the closet and one's own narrow specialisations, always resisting the overwhelming effect of received notions. A deep-seated fluidity marks all disciplines of investigation and we cannot push the students and ourselves into the quagmire of fossilised principles that are regurgitated day in and day out. I have in mind the case of the yellowing notes that teachers often resort to.

We cannot possibly cordon off literature or pure science from social science or social theory. The focus on ethics redirects all reading and learning towards active politics, towards an emphasis on social justice and freedom. Stepping beyond the narrow confines of one's area of pursuit, it becomes imperative for a teacher to relate to extraneous social concerns of his research and teaching. With a ferocious work ethics combined with a restless curiosity and sharp literary judgement, the teacher has to rise against any kind of oppression. These are the ethics of an emancipatory value that are then passed on to students.

I have before me the example of the Grand Strategy Programme at Yale run by Professor Charles Hill who involves his students in relating big ideas to big events; the application of Gibbon's thought to international politics, for instance, is one way of breaking walls between disciplines and learning to correlate disparate subjects which inherently have a deeper connection often overlooked by traditional forms of teaching. It is through his commanding presence that Professor Hill draws students towards his rather revolutionary pedagogy through activism and an aura of great purpose that underpins his approach. Indeed it is imperative to "de-academise" critical and literary theory, refusing its disciplining into courses, methodologies, and conferences which are utterly cut off from the political reality that they purport to address.

My point of reference is the ethics that we confront in the life and works of writers like Vaclav Havel, Jean Paul Sartre or Raymond Aron, all of whom are role models of immense consequence. If Havel stood against the onslaught of the Soviet invasion, Sartre and Aron stood against the French dominance in Algeria. I rate these three as profound intellectuals, though surprisingly, none of them seem to have been given enough importance in academic disciplines. I feel we academics try to achieve a timeless perspective on a well-defined patch of reality, whereas these intellectuals were prompted by current events to develop a distinctive point of view on all reality, which they repeatedly revisited and revised as the times changed. They realised that their “conscience was the most reliable instrument of inquiry at their disposal”. We remember them more for the attitude they brought to what they wrote or said.

Such is the new intellectual base for teaching which becomes an instrument of change, a practise that changes the very conditions of reading any text for that matter. We have to move on into the practise of thinking hard and scrutinising the possibility of the hitherto unthought-of, so that teaching changes the very outlook of students and of society.

The responsibility, therefore, of a teacher is to expose lies and lay bare the hidden agenda of discourse, so that his intervention can help to mitigate misery and terminate violence. Telling people that, which they least want to hear, becomes the moral responsibility and the consequences of our actions or writings. The ethical value of intervention is judged according to its human consequences. The responsibility conferred on the teacher by his freedom must lead him to protest, to resistance, to articulate goals, to persuade, and to organise.

Thus, in the Gramscian sense, the teacher has to avoid a role whereby he executes nothing more than the legitimation of the acts of the ruling class. It is well known that the role of the intellectual has been to ensure that beliefs are properly inculcated, beliefs that serve the interests of those who wield social control. As Chomsky writes, “Ideas that circulate

in the faculty club and executive suite can be transmuted into ideological instruments to confuse and demoralise.” Intelligentsia, therefore, chooses to serve power rather than truth, while ideology becomes a mask for self-interest. The intellectual tradition around the world is one of servility to power and, therefore, opposed to the philosophy of anarchism where no privilege is granted to the public servant and no intellectual is drawn to power; he just uses knowledge for application to various problems. Thus, those who desire freedom must beware the mechanisms and practices of indoctrination.

Within this context, I see an ethical concern that gives an impetus to socialist thinking that can reach out to millions who have sacrificed, gone hungry and lost dear ones; only that culture may take birth and survive. It is imperative to keep this fact of our social and economic history in the forefront in order to come to grips with the need to offer resistance in a growing exploitative world.

GOOD GOVERNANCE

Bottom-up decentralisation

Sameer Sharma

Decentralisation rooted in ward committees can lead to effective microgovernance, develop partnerships among people, and enhance their capacity to build consensus on local issues.

In India, responsibility for development has oscillated between two extreme models — as a central/state government function (development from above) during the 1950s and 1960s and as a local agenda (development from below) from the 1980s.

However, the decentralised form was also a variant of the top-down approach. First, functions which the higher levels were unable to perform or had little interest in were offloaded to the city level. Second, local authorities were given inadequate support and resources and often left to fend for themselves.

Finally, little attention was paid to local area governance in which decision-making starts from the ward level upward. Even though the 74th Amendment to the Constitution has mandated establishment of ward committees (WCs) as the microgovernance unit, little real progress has been made to establish WCs with adequate delegation of funds, functionaries and functions (3Fs).

The recent setting up of WCs in the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) and entrustment of 3Fs based on Walter Stohr's notion of 'subsidiarity' is one noteworthy attempt to fulfil a gap in decentralised governance. Subsidiarity is a multilevel process that mandates that processes and decisions that can be best performed at

local levels should be executed there.

Only those that cannot be satisfactorily done at local levels are ‘delegated’ to higher levels of government, the private sector, or the third sector; accordingly, subsidiarity is a process of bottom-up decentralisation.

Included in the Hyderabad WCs are two types of members — 10 ward committee members representing citizens and interest groups such as the resident welfare associations, slum-level federations , NGOs and chambers of commerce; and five to nine area sabha representatives , representing a geography containing nearly 5,000 people. Both types of WC members are elected through voice votes by the municipal council.

Therefore, the WCs are predominantly composed of interest groups and mirror the emerging political economy in which public interest is constructed from the diverse and often competing goals of people and groups of people. Below are given some of the distinct ways in which subsidiarity principle was made operational in Hyderabad through the WCs.

Understanding that actual needs at the ward level are related to the daily operation & maintenance (O&M) of facilities and services and the WCs are best positioned to deal with them, 20% of the annual maintenance budget was given to the WCs to be spent on O&M of roads, water supply, street lighting, sanitation, drainage and other public works.

Importantly, all proposals are to be generated and prioritised in the area sabhas and later confirmed by the WCs, the purpose being to promote local-level discourse and conversation which, according to the communicative ideal, is a form of action.

Ward committees, in fact, are expected to promote dialogue and communication by creating a public realm that encourages individuals,

groups and interest groups to engage in free and open communication in which all are equally empowered, the power of best argument prevails, and all assumptions and claims are tested.

However, as noted by Susan Fainstein, discourse alone may be insufficient to address local inequalities in power, opportunity and resources. A novel provision in the business rules of the WCs that resolutions will fail if opposed by more than 20% of the members , ensures that the ‘voice’ of the less endowed is also valued during decisionmaking and implementation.

Innovative accountability tools and processes were developed to make ward-level functionaries more responsive and responsible for their actions. For example, an action-oriented monitoring tool with a focus on results and utility, called the pinpoint program (3P), was designed and implemented.

The 3P tool is a daily morning visit programme of all ward-level officers to a particular neighbourhood at a specific time to address both financial and non-financial local needs. The cyclical nature of the 3P compels ward-level functionaries to act on the felt needs of citizens within a timeline.

Additionally, the 3Ps of all ward-level functionaries are known to the WCs and citizens beforehand; so, the WCs are enabled to participate in the process and engage in active review of municipal functions and functionaries to understand how ward-level civic operations are proceeding and what aspects need correcting. Reporting is an integral part of the pinpoint programmes and standardised SMS messages are sent to WCs and citizens by the frontline overseers daily.

Furthermore, the Hyderabad WCs are mandated to prepare development plans. Local strategy design is best done by actors or agencies at the ward level that are “better placed to develop strategies tailored to the

specific problems of the individual regions (ward)”.

However, the mainstream ward functionaries lacked the flexibility or the innovativeness to deal with modern urban development challenges of micro urban units; therefore, ‘local development agents’ , such as Administrative Staff College of India were positioned to help the WCs. The ASCI was tasked to identify the areas to mobilise the endogenous development potential of the wards and to provide the external innovative impulse in a language which was understood by the WC members.

Simultaneously, the capacity of the WC members was enhanced through training programmes designed and implemented by the Centre of Good Governance (CGG), Hyderabad. The synergy provided by the two institutes helped expose the WCs to global trends and address larger issues of poverty, illiteracy and health, requiring access to greater information than available at the local level.

All in all, the Hyderabad experiment has shown that decentralisation rooted in subsidiarity has the potential to lead to effective microgovernance, develop partnerships among people and groups of people, and enhance their capacity to build consensus on local issues.

Additionally , the Hyderabad WCs have generated several power centres in addition to the traditional, thereby facilitating participation of new actors and promoting inclusive growth because conflict lines and excessive use of power are recognised and accounted for explicitly during goal-setting and implementation. Finally, unworkable uniform solutions and standard recipes are not imposed on local areas and decentralisation is based on local history, culture, issues, and resources.

(The author is an IAS officer. Views are personal.)

INTERNATIONAL RELATION

No moral compass

Karan Thapar

I wonder how many of you winced when Barack Obama admonished India for failing to stand up for democracy in Burma? Our MPs, who had resoundingly applauded his commitment to support India's candidature as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, sat in silence, their smiles giving way to sullen looks. In TV studios, where I was anchoring, a sudden hush descended as panelists shrank back in their seats after hearing the US president.

Well, au contraire, I was pleased. I applauded Obama. I enjoyed his forceful, passionate ticking-off. He said what I have myself repeatedly written and suggested, albeit in vain.

The truth is there's a small body of Indians who feel dismayed, even betrayed, by the way our governments have turned their back on Aung San Suu Kyi and the struggle for democracy in Burma. Inder Gujral and George Fernandes are its stalwarts. Amartya Sen is a recent and very welcome addition to the list. But, sadly, our pleas have fallen on deaf ears. The Congress and the BJP have remained impervious to our exhortations. Nothing has changed.

So, clearly, the time had come for someone like Obama to remind us that by forgetting Burma, democracy and Suu Kyi we're actually damaging our principles and diminishing ourselves. The question is will it have any effect?

Before I answer that, consider the plight of Burma which we, a democracy, a neighbour and a friend, are contriving to ignore. For six decades military generals have quashed the country's democracy. The

results of elections held in 1990, which Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won overwhelmingly, were ignored. Of the last 21 years she has spent over 15 in jail. Meanwhile, the country languishes in poverty, malnutrition and despair whilst the junta attempts to usher in sham civilian rule.

If we really believe in democracy, the values inherent in our Constitution, and the principles we claim to cherish, do we not have a moral duty to stand up and defend them when they are under attack? Can we really claim that the Burmese military junta's support in the fight against Bodo, National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) or Mizo rebel groups constitutes a higher national interest than upholding our beliefs?

Don't take my answer, listen first to Amartya Sen: "It breaks my heart to see the prime minister of my democratic country ... welcoming the butchers from Myanmar and ... be photographed in a state of cordial proximity."

Now, this is what Obama said: "When peaceful democratic movements are suppressed ... the democracies of the world cannot remain silent. For it is unacceptable to gun down peaceful protestors and incarcerate political prisoners decade after decade ... it is the responsibility of the international community, especially leaders like the United States and India, to condemn it."

How true. But did we really need to be told something so obvious and elementary? Sadly, yes. Because Obama added, "If I can be frank, in international fora, India has often shied away from some of these issues."

Once upon a time India's moral voice was heard clearly, forcefully and, often, effectively. But not today. Obama was, in fact, reminding us of the passion we've lost.

Yesterday Suu Kyi was released but hereafter will India behave differently? I hope so. If we want to be recognised as a leading nation we need the courage and conviction to speak out. On the other hand, small men prefer silence. Cowards shrink from challenges. Opportunists choose expedience over principle.

The key question is, are our politicians moral pygmies?

The views expressed by the author are personal.

From crisis management to global governance

Kim Joong-keun

Two developed countries are out; India and Brazil are in. The BRIC countries, namely Brazil, India and China, move up to the top 10; three OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries slide below the line. I am referring to the recent change in the membership and country ranking of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) 24-member board. This is what was agreed at the G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors Meeting in the run-up to the G20 Seoul Summit, to be held on November 11-12. The transformation is emblematic of a tectonic shift in economic power among countries and heralds a new era in global financial governance. At the centre of this remarkable evolution is the G20 as a prime mover.

The Seoul summit will be the fifth since the G20 leaders got together in the immediate aftermath of the global economic crisis in 2008. Thanks to the G20-led concerted efforts, the world has been able to avoid another Great Depression. The successfully-performed feat has earned the G20 an honourable title: 'a premier forum for international economic cooperation'. To be fair, the G20 that accounts for 85% of the global domestic product and two-thirds of the world population deserves due respect on its own merit. The emergence of the G20, with both developed and emerging markets as members, is definitely a welcome step forward from the standpoint of global governance, when compared with the G7 as an exclusive club of high-income countries.

There is, however, still doubt and scepticism hanging over the future of the G20. Some point out its lack of legitimacy as a group of non-elected countries. Others are worried that the waning of the global financial

crisis could undermine collective action as countries become more embroiled in their own economic circumstances. Still others regard the G20 as a crisis committee responding to the recent financial meltdown as opposed to being a more permanent steering committee for the global economy. Under such circumstances, if the world's pressing concerns are not properly and effectively addressed by the upcoming G20 Summit, recent progress made over the years risks being undone.

The Republic of Korea is taking these challenges by the horns. The Seoul agenda is clear. First, the Seoul summit will ensure that the commitments made by previous summits should be honoured in good faith and within a given timeframe. These commitments relate to a framework for strong, sustainable and balanced growth, reform of international financial institutions, rejection of protectionism and fostering an open and free global trade regime. The IMF and the World Bank should be reformed to better reflect the contemporary global power configuration. Necessary measures must be taken to mitigate global imbalance in order to forestall trade or currency wars. Similarly, an early conclusion of the Doha Development Agenda (DDA) negotiations is imperative to ensure sustainable growth, job creation and balanced development of the world economy.

Second, Korea will position itself as an honest broker to bridge the divide between developed and developing countries. As an OECD country that has achieved industrialisation and democracy in a short span of time, Korea has much to offer. The host country's principled position is that emerging, developing and low-income countries must be an important part of the solution and considered equal partners in achieving a more resilient and balanced global economy.

It is in this context that President Lee Myung-Bak, as Chair of the G20, proposed the inclusion of two agenda items closely related with the interests of developing countries: the formation of a global safety net, and development issues. The global safety net aims at countering capital

flow volatility and providing emergency support for developing economies hit by external financial crises. The latter is to narrow the development gap with differentiated strategy focused on growth and capacity building.

Third, Korea is trying its best to ensure the full participation of all stakeholders in the world economy to firm up the G20 process. Since the Pittsburgh Summit in 2009, Korea has been engaged in extensive outreach activities geared towards non-member countries and various regional and international organisations. In order to mobilise the resources of the private sector, a G20 Business Summit is being planned where top global business leaders will discuss current issues of global economy related to trade and investment, finance, green growth and corporate social responsibility.

India is one of the biggest beneficiaries of the G20 process. The improvement of its rank to the eighth position from the current 11th in the IMF quota shares is just one example. As newcomers and representatives of emerging markets, Korea and India have a common interest in putting the G20 on a more solid foundation by enhancing its legitimacy and sustainability. In particular, promoting the development agenda is important to accelerate global growth and reverse the three-decade trend of worsening equity between the developed and developing world. Failing this, the G20 will be perceived as an expansion of the rich nations club or another avatar of G7 or G8. On this front, Korea is looking forward to a continued and proactive role of India as a leader of thought.

All eyes are now set on the upcoming Seoul Summit. The outcome of the Summit will have profound implications for the future trajectory of the G20 and world economy. Korea is fully committed to make it a great success. Only the success of the Seoul Summit would put paid to the scepticism and doubt in some quarters, and accelerate the transformation

of the G-20 from a crisis-management grouping into the global governance architecture in the true sense of the word.

Kim Joong-keun is Ambassador of the Republic of Korea to India. The views expressed by the author are personal

Don't let the bibimbap distract you from the crisis, Dr Singh

Gautam Chikermane

As the Group of 20 (G20) summit begins at Seoul today, a warning for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh: don't let the bibimbap —a delicious South Korean dish I discovered in Seoul last month and found to be the most appetising meal I've ever had — distract your attention towards what the country's President, Lee Myung-bak, has been lately pushing for. Instead, concentrate on the economic crisis that has not yet ended.

Like the bibimbap, which is made of many ingredients, largely meats and herbs that carry their unique taste within the rice-based concoction that's delightfully spicy, the G20 comprises 19 nations and EU, with each country having its own agenda. So, while Europe and the US are combating unemployment, India and China are facing capital inflows that threaten to create asset bubbles and high inflation.

Also known as the board of directors of the global economy, the G20 leaders have their agenda clear — to fix the global economy together. But within the G20, there are varying and often contradictory interests. India wants trade and financial protectionism to end, China wants no interference in its currency, the US wants a trade balance that's more stable, France and Germany want stronger financial regulation.

Behind all this, is South Korea, the first non-G8 country to host a G20 summit. Among other things, Lee has been attempting to broaden the scope of G20's mandate to include development, while pressures are on this informal gathering to look at other distractions like climate change.

The challenge at the Seoul Summit would be to ensure that all individual, nation-specific agendas get bound together with the glue of

stronger financial regulation, reforms to make IMF more meaningful and thereby more credible, and most important, prevent the world from falling under the protectionist weight of trade and finance restrictions, and ongoing currency wars. If they are able to manage an agreement on just these three issues, the summit will go a long way.

Unfortunately, I don't see that happening. Soaking in their own misery, what I observe is that there is a strong centripetal force that's getting nations to look within the boundaries of their narrow interests clashing with a centrifugal force that attempts to bind them.

The official G20 agenda will focus on four ideas — ensuring ongoing global recovery (notice the positive tone: recovery, not crisis); framework for strong, sustainable, and balance growth; strengthening the international financial regulatory system; and modernising international financial institutions. But if tweets of the Seoul Summit are any signal, Lee wants to use the summit to not only put a seal of Korean success on it, but is thoroughly distracted into weaker issues.

Promoting “sustainable development for all countries”, for instance. A noble cause that the G20 must consider. But right now, I think they're losing their sense of perspective. The new order is a long-term aspiration, not very different from an ideal society, income equality, gender justice. But the problems the G20 needs to address today are short term — how to destroy the entrenched interests of the few such that the many don't have to suffer.

For this bibimbap of ideas and actions to be effective, the G20 leaders are duty-bound to ensure that the centrifugal force of the collective — with people at its epicentre — is stronger than the centripetal force of individual countries or the few ultra-wealthy, entrenched, uncaring, wealth-destroying managers of global finance.

As the Group of 20 (G20) summit begins at Seoul today, a warning for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh: don't let the bibimbap —a delicious

South Korean dish I discovered in Seoul last month and found to be the most appetising meal I've ever had — distract your attention towards what the country's President, Lee Myung-bak, has been lately pushing for. Instead, concentrate on the economic crisis that has not yet ended.

Like the bibimbap, which is made of many ingredients, largely meats and herbs that carry their unique taste within the rice-based concoction that's delightfully spicy, the G20 comprises 19 nations and EU, with each country having its own agenda. So, while Europe and the US are combating unemployment, India and China are facing capital inflows that threaten to create asset bubbles and high inflation.

Also known as the board of directors of the global economy, the G20 leaders have their agenda clear — to fix the global economy together. But within the G20, there are varying and often contradictory interests. India wants trade and financial protectionism to end, China wants no interference in its currency, the US wants a trade balance that's more stable, France and Germany want stronger financial regulation.

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The challenge at the Seoul Summit would be to ensure that all individual, nation-specific agendas get bound together with the glue of stronger financial regulation, reforms to make IMF more meaningful and thereby more credible, and most important, prevent the world from falling under the protectionist weight of trade and finance restrictions, and ongoing currency wars. If they are able to manage an agreement on just these three issues, the summit will go a long way.

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POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

Right people for the right posts

In the end, kicking and screaming, telecom minister A Raja's been removed from his ministry. If, as he says, his conscience is clear, he would have done well to step down at the first hint of scandal instead of causing such enormous embarrassment to both the prime minister and the DMK chief M Karunanidhi. The government appears to be in no mood to pander to the DMK's sentiments and has given additional charge of telecom to human resource development minister Kapil Sibal. That Mr Raja gave out licences on prices negotiated earlier is in no doubt, but he hopes that he will be able to get off on the technicality that an auction is not a requirement unless so recommended. Given the sum of money involved, it is in everyone's interest that this matter is resolved. In this context, it makes no sense for the Opposition to disrupt Parliament and demand a Joint Parliamentary Committee probe even before the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General is tabled before it. This is a case of jumping the gun. Had Parliament been allowed to proceed, it might have begun the process of unraveling what is alleged to be a mega-scam.

Similarly, the public might have been wiser on the moves to bring the guilty to book in the Commonwealth Games scandal. The catalyst for Mr Raja's exit seems to have been the offer from the AIADMK supremo, Ms Jayalalitha, who offered support should the DMK withdraw from the UPA government. Despite being a notoriously unreliable ally, the message wasn't lost on the DMK that finally acted against the minister. But for a cleaning of the Augean stables, it is not enough for erring ministers or politicians to give up their posts after the deed. The probe — and if need be prosecution — must be seen through to the bitter end. One way of preventing this sort of thing happening so often is to stem the rot from inception. We are in an age of meritocracy.

The PM himself is an exemplar of merit and hard work. We oppose needless reservations for jobs in today's competitive world. Therefore, it stands to reasons that our policy makers too should adhere to the principle of the best man or woman for the post.

At present, it would seem that certain ministries are the stomping grounds of certain parties, extracted as a price for their support to one or other coalition. There are certain ministers who are all-rounders. But there are also many who are clearly either unsuited to or uninterested in their portfolios. Much greater deliberation has to go into who takes charge of crucial ministries and they should be awarded to those who are not only known for their probity but who will also make a difference to that portfolio. The Raja episode should occasion a rethink on portfolio allocation. This would be one way of ensuring that the political establishment is not furthered diminished in the eyes of the people.