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AGRICULTURE

Let's make climate change talks inclusive

M. S. Swaminathan

Kanayo F. Nwanze

The Hindu Climate-resilient sustainable agriculture requires knowledge. Successful projects such as these can provide a model for others to follow. Knowledge transfer that brings the benefits of research from the laboratory to the farm is essential.

Price volatility and the persistence of widespread and hidden hunger underline the need for enhancing the productivity and profitability of smallholder agriculture in an environmentally sustainable manner.

When world leaders sit down again to discuss climate change, we hope that the people who live and work on the world's 500 million small farms will be with them, at least in spirit. Their voice — and the issue of agriculture as a whole — has, for too long, been missing from the conversation. But without increased support to smallholder farmers now, the number of hungry people will grow, and future food security will be placed in jeopardy.

The upcoming 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012 — marking the twentieth anniversary of the landmark Earth Summit that produced Agenda 21, “a roadmap” for sustainable development — will both need to ensure that agriculture and the world's smallholder farmers are high on the agenda if we are to overcome the many challenges we face in achieving the Millennium Development Goal 1.

The front line

In the last 20 years the global population has risen from about 5.3 billion to seven billion; the reality of climate change has been accepted beyond doubt; and the number of hungry people in the world has remained stubbornly around the one billion mark. Meanwhile, aid to agriculture has only just recently begun to pick up after decades of stagnation. More needs to be done — a lot more — and supporting smallholder farmers must be at the heart of any agenda.

The rural poor across the world, including India, have contributed little to human-induced climate change, yet they are on the front line in coping with its effects. Farmers can no longer rely on historical averages for rainfall and temperature, and the more frequent and extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods, can spell disaster. And there are new threats, such as sea level rise and the impact of melting glaciers on water supply.

How significant are small farms? As many as two billion people worldwide depend on them for their food and livelihood. Smallholder farmers in India produce 41 per cent of the country's food grains, and other food items that contribute to local and national food security. Small farmers cannot be ignored, and special attention must be given to the most vulnerable groups — particularly women, who make up a large percentage of farmers in the developing world.

Small farms also add up to big business: In the world's 50 least developed countries, agriculture is the backbone of the economy, accounting for 30 to 60 per cent of Gross Domestic Product and employing as much as 70 per cent or more of the workforce. Addressing the plight of smallholders isn't just a matter of equity, it's a necessity if we are going to be able to feed ourselves in the future. Smallholders farm 80 per cent of the total farmland in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia. If we don't help them to adapt to climate change, their achievements — feeding a large portion of humanity — will be endangered.

With appropriate support, smallholders can play a key role in protecting our environment, for example through actions that contribute to carbon sequestration and limit carbon emissions (planting and maintaining forests, engaging in agro-forestry activities, managing rangelands and rice lands, and watershed protection that limits deforestation and soil erosion).

To continue farming in a sustainable way in the face of climate change, rural women and men need to be given the resources to cope with the challenges. Smallholder farmers need support such as resilience-building technologies (including drought- and salt-tolerant seed varieties and new methods of rainwater harvesting), and training in sustainable practices of conservation agriculture, such as minimum-till farming to reduce erosion and moisture loss. Investing in adaptation measures now will be far less costly than in the future.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the M.S. Swaminathan Foundation, together with the government of India and other partners, have undertaken a range of projects to do just that.

For example, in Tamil Nadu, we have been supporting rural communities to produce and market nutri-cereals like millet, which can easily grow in dry and arid environments. We worked with smallholder farmers to use simple techniques to increase their yields, while also helping rural women create and market modern recipes — for example, a millet malt drink now being sold in major health food stores in India. The result has been not only increased food for the community, but also increased income and non-farm employment opportunities.

To help farmers adapt to increasingly dry conditions, a programme in Chhattisgarh has expanded cultivation of traditionally produced Niger seed oil, which grows well in areas that receive little rain. Land and forest regeneration were promoted to improve soil structure and moisture levels, and solar energy technology and biogas digesters have been introduced, which reduce greenhouse gas emissions as well as the

need for fuelwood. Another project in the northeast has helped restore degraded *jhumland* and has benefited almost 40,000 households in 860 villages.

Climate-resilient sustainable agriculture requires knowledge. Successful projects such as these can provide a model for others to follow. Knowledge transfer that brings the benefits of research from the laboratory to the farm is essential.

Programmes targeted at vulnerable groups such as women and tribal communities are particularly important. IFAD-supported programmes and projects in India promote tribal development by building and strengthening grassroots institutions that enable vulnerable people to plan and manage their own development, negotiate improved entitlements, and broaden their livelihood opportunities. Conferences and talks among world leaders can do many things but they don't feed people. We hope that leaders will keep in mind those who do: the smallholder farmers. Price volatility and the persistence of widespread, endemic and hidden hunger underline the need for urgent attention to enhancing the productivity and profitability of smallholder agriculture in an environmentally sustainable manner. This is the pathway to increasing agriculture's contribution to climate change mitigation as well as to sustainable food security.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Book of Jobs

Nishant Shah

The man who made the computer personal, who changed the face of the digital media industry, who was inspired by Zen philosophy to create an eight-billion-dollar empire, Steve Jobs, died last month. Just a few weeks before his death, in the midst of his painful illness, he told Walter Isaacson, the man chosen to write his authorised biography, “I really want to believe that something survives”. And Isaacson wrote him a fairy tale which will make sure that Jobs will be remembered beyond the gizmos and gimmicks.

The biography is an anecdote-filled tale, well told, even though familiar for having been told quite often. It gives you a glimpse of Jobs, who began his life as an adopted child who had discovered early in life that “he was smarter” than his parents. For those who think of Jobs as an icon of our times, the book is filled with delicious tidbits of a life that has been kept fiercely private: his relationships (the story of a 23-year-old woman who he got pregnant and abandoned), his friendships (including how he parted ways with his first business partner Steve Woznaik), his inspirations (how did the name Apple come about, and what exactly is a MacIntosh?), his confrontations (especially the rivalry with Bill Gates), and his roller-coaster ride with Apple (founder-president-poster-boy, who was sent into exile and welcomed back as reigning monarch). Some of the stories are a part of popular lore, some of them will surprise you, some will enthrall you, and yet others, harsh and unflinching, will give you a dekko into what being Steve Jobs meant. Especially to Steve Jobs.

“Abandoned. Chosen. Special”. For Isaacson, these three concepts shape and define the life of Steve Jobs, and it might be a good idea to break this review under these three heads, only in the reverse order.

Special: Isaacson, in his introduction, talks about how, following his biographies on Albert Einstein and Benjamin Franklin, he did not immediately see Jobs too as a figure at the intersection of technology and creativity, someone who changed the world. As he admits, it was only when Jobs revealed his fatal illness that Isaacson decided to join the throngs of people who have admired and accepted Jobs as “special”. But while many believe that Jobs changed the world by making the world of the digital seductive, accessible and friendly, Isaacson himself remains unconvinced. It is this lack of conviction that perhaps produces a jarring note in what would otherwise have been a fitting eulogy to a man who remained a bundle of paradoxes, who saw the world in neat binaries of “gods and shitheads”.

Isaacson does a fantastic job of charting the histories that produced Jobs – the confluence of technology, creativity, hippie lifestyles, fruitarian diets and Zen philosophy that marked his formative decades. He captures the different temporalities, geographies, people and places marked with Jobs’ presence. And yet, when it comes to Jobs himself, there is a wariness, a reluctance to be sucked into his famous “reality distortion field”. Just when an interesting anecdote grabs your attention, Isaacson holds you down and states how special Jobs was. So even when he recounts the famous Xerox PARC raid that Jobs conducted, stealing the GUI (Graphical User Interface) technologies, Isaacson has to come to his rescue and point out that Jobs was a visionary. It tells us as much about history writing — the fact that it is written by winners — as much about Isaacson’s own discomfort with his subject.

Chosen: Steve Jobs believed throughout his life, even as he transformed from an LSD-consuming, acid-dropping hacker into one of the most notorious businessmen and advertisers in the world, that he was chosen to do something special. He saw himself as a rebel pitched against the big establishment (largely IBM) and till the end of his days, continued to believe in the idea that he was here to change the world — and hey, if messianic activities were accompanied with a multi-billion dollar industry, that’s just god working in mysterious ways, right?

Isaacson suffers from Jobs’ “chosen” complex differently. He was singled out by Jobs to write this story. He saw himself as “suitably positioned” to tell the tale. And yet, because he brings to the table the keen reflexivity of a historian, he is uncomfortable with this chosen position. As a result, what you get is an extraordinarily rich set of resources which variously endorse, question, challenge and provide alternative viewpoints to the one expressed by Jobs. With more than 100 sources of interview, an incredibly rich survey of the literature about Apple and Jobs, and long hours spent in conversation with Jobs, Isaacson builds for us a book that might be loved or hated but can never be ignored. He goes into the controversies, digs out the dirt, ferrets out little-known encounters, fights and accusations that have hounded Jobs’ personal and professional life, and never hesitates to call a spade a spade, even if he sometimes finds the need to put a little glitter on it.

Abandoned: Isaacson begins the book in a linear narrative, which, when describing Jobs’ early days, is easy because it takes the form of a pastiche, where different beginnings of people like Steve Woznaik, Bill Atkinson, Nolan Bushnell, Deborah Coleman, Mike Markkula, etc. intersect with Jobs’ life. However, in the second half of the book, especially when we see Jobs’ return to Apple and take over the reins, the book starts feeling abandoned. Isaacson seems overwhelmed by the material, where he has to take care not only of his multi-star ensemble but all the different less visible people — employees, shareholders,

partners, enemies — and their reactions to and interactions with Steve Jobs. It was as if, with Next and Pixar on the verge of collapse and Jobs nearly bankrupt, Isaacson abandons his subject. He tries to gather the fairy dust that surrounds Jobs' ascendance, but the narrative remains lacklustre. The rich anecdotes — Jobs stealing the idea of a tablet from a Microsoft employee — and wrenching interviews with Jobs' final battles with illness remain, but somewhere the narrative momentum seems to have floundered, and unlike Jobs' fortunes, never pick up.

All in all, Walter Isaacson's *Steve Jobs* remains faithful to everything that one can expect of a biography of the true computing rock-star who shaped the collective futures of people. It is rigorous, honest, poignant and romantic. There will be many debates about how much Jobs' reality distortion field affected Isaacson's own rendering of his life. But those debates are futile. Because, despite the names, dates, figures, the agonising over-accurate perspectives and the attempt to write a history, the book, like Steve Jobs himself, is best read as a fairy tale — a mixture of the real, the imagined, the plausible, the probable and the possible.

CORRUPTION

**Political party reform required
Team Anna's double standards**

B.G. Verghese

ANNA HAZARE has switched from tweeting to talking to threaten yet another fast if a “strong” “Jan” Lokpal Bill of his liking is not legislated by the end of the forthcoming winter session of Parliament. Why this “threat” when the Standing Committee of Parliament is seized of the matter which will thereafter go to the Lok Sabha with Cabinet approval? The constant reference to official and parliamentary “assurances” given to Anna that must be fulfilled (or else) is a gross misreading of the facts. The only promise made and accepted in black and white was that Anna’s proposals and last three “demands” would be placed before the Standing Committee for consideration. No more. No five or fifty or fifty thousand persons can presume to dictate to Parliament what it must do.

To equate a “strong” Lokpal Bill with the “Jan Lokpal Bill” is another misjoinder. Corruption has to be fought in multiple ways and on multiple fronts. There is no single magic formula and a monolithic authority with all power over every domain is dangerous as it would be authoritarian and could impede good governance.

Habitual resort to emotional blackmail — for that is precisely what constant threats of fast until death or near death, inevitably followed by mob violence, amount to — is a bluff that must be called if put to the test. The Anna Team has been anything but Gandhian, and has practised double stands of morality. Those who demand a “strong” Lokpal must themselves display “strong” ethical standards and not plead petty technical and procedural excuses that they scornfully deny others.

Anna has properly turned to electoral reforms as a priority issue, as electoral funding is a major font of corruption and black money. But he has focussed on somewhat peripheral issues such as the need for “rejection” and “recall”. The Election Commission, which his team met has, explained the practical difficulties in implementing such suggestions, offering instead the possibility of introducing a “none of the above” button in the voting machines. The right to recall has been rejected by the BJP. This is a questionable proposition in a country with huge constituencies and diverse populations.

Some argue that “representation” would be improved if candidates are not elected on a minority vote but are required to garner 50 plus 1 per cent of the total votes cast, something that could be achieved by a run-off. Here too the CEC pleads that this could lead to a five-day delay between voting, counting and re-polling and frustrate the electoral timetable and security arrangements in remote and troubled areas, which many already complain is far too stretched. A higher voter turnout, through voters’ education and some form of incentives and disincentives, and fewer candidates could give serious candidates a higher proportion of the votes cast. The EC is already working on these ideas.

State funding has been mooted to curtail expenses, but there is reason to suppose that this will be an additionality unless given in kind. The EC now has an expenditure division that monitors expenses and the first scalp has been taken for paid news for which the concerned media houses must also be held accountable. The other approach would be to cut down election expenditure by further reducing the election period and mandating common platforms for all (leading) candidates through the electronic media, social media and in town halls, market squares and maidans. The Church in Mizoram has, with public consent, virtually abolished individual party campaigns by organising joint public meetings. Corporate funding should be permitted subject to a ceiling and approval by shareholders

Anyone with a criminal record should be barred from contesting. All candidates must declare their family (wife, children and dependants') wealth and tax returns over the past three years and must file annual declarations thereafter, including gift income from adoring citizens who seem prone to pour money into the coffers of those elected. The sources of such gifts and the tax returns of the "philanthropists" must also be examined and condign punishments for default awarded.

However, electoral reform by itself will be insufficient without political party reform. The two have seldom been interlinked in public debate. The Constitution makes no reference to political parties except in Schedule 12 relating to defections. The Representation of the Peoples Act too is silent on political parties except with reference to their recognition. This constitutes a major lacuna. The Constitution should be amended to provide that representation in legislatures shall normally be through political parties that shall be registered. Such a formulation would not exclude independents.

Given such a constitutional amendment, a Registration of Political Parties Bill can be introduced to flesh out provisions relating to the party's constitution, roll of members by the state and constituency, subscriptions, election of office-bearers, public audit of accounts, and so forth. Supervision of such an Act could also be brought under the jurisdiction of the Election Commission so that all electoral levers are in one hand. Absence of any political party regulation gives licence to parties to collect and conceal funds, cook their accounts, enrol and jettison members at will, set up dummy candidates who can be adopted if they win, indulge in aberrant behaviour and allow cabals to gain control over the party machine.

Most parties will balk at this idea as they talk democracy but are themselves somewhat undemocratic entities. Public audit of funds for them is taboo. Nevertheless, it is desirable that such a one-line constitutional amendment be framed in the first instance and let any

party that opposes the very principle of party registration and accountability explain why.

The job could be entrusted to the Law Department, the Law Commission or the Election Commission or done through an inter-party meeting of recognised parties. Suitable legislation could be introduced in the Budget session after a national debate. Simultaneously, a draft Political Parties Bill could also be prepared for wider national consultation and enacted before the end of 2012.

Meanwhile, the government is going ahead with enacting a wider citizens' charter that will enable the public to enforce stipulated rights and compel officials to perform their duties in a timely manner. Steps are also being taken to get back black money secreted abroad. Things are moving.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Shelter from the storm

Sitaram Yechury

It gives little satisfaction to feel vindicated by this column's prognosis that capitalism's prescription to overcome the economic crisis set in motion by the 2008 financial meltdown would lay the seeds of a deeper crisis leading to a double dip recession. Millions of people the world over have become victims of this strategy to convert corporate debt into sovereign debt. The staggering amounts of bailout packages to those very financial corporations who, in the first place, generated the crisis resulted in huge governmental debts.

While corporate balancesheets today look handsome and their executives are receiving hefty bonuses, the governments are implementing severe austerity measures to meet the debt burdens. This has severely crippled the livelihood status of billions the world over. Little wonder that the anti-Wall Street protests continue to swell.

A snowballing political fallout has begun. Greek prime minister George Papandreou resigned last week after having threatened to go for a referendum on whether Greece should continue with the European Union and, hence, break from the Euro. This would have set in motion a crisis for the EU itself, consuming other European economies including Germany and France and hurtling the global economy into a vicious recessionary spin. A hasty transitional government of 'national unity' has been cobbled up hoping to restore political stability and calm the nerves of a turbulent global financial market. This, however, appears unlikely with the Greek people up in arms against growing unemployment, severe cuts in social sector spending combined with increasing working hours, lower wages and pensions. Greece has already been rocked by an unprecedented number of nationwide strikes.

Italy's prime minister Silvio Berlusconi has resigned after dominating the country's politics for 17 years. Italy has accumulated a debt of 120% of its GDP. Interest rate on government bonds touched 7%. This was the rate at which first Ireland and then Greece and Portugal were forced to seek bailout packages. The new government that follows is forced to implement a severe austerity package for saving, to begin with, 60 billion euros. This includes a freeze in salaries, increase in the retirement age and an increase in value added tax (VAT). All measures that will mount further miseries on the people.

Spain appears to follow suit. It has reported an unbelievable zero growth rate this year. Its unemployment rate has reached 22% and has accumulated an unbearable debt burden. The US itself continues to remain embattled. Like the earlier effort to overcome the crisis by converting corporate insolvencies into sovereign insolvencies laid the seeds of the current crisis, the current prescription of seeking to emerge from this crisis by meeting the costs of sovereign debt by imposing greater burdens on the people is laying the seeds of another deeper crisis. This is bound to push the world into a depression whose dimensions could well be worse than the catastrophe of 1929.

These severe austerity measures will further sharply reduce the purchasing power in the hands of the vast majority of the world's population compounded by mounting unemployment. This, in turn, would further depress manufacturing output and the consequent fall in the levels of aggregate demand would also adversely affect trade and commerce that will have a ripple effect on the global economy.

The hope that India will remain unaffected by these shocks is, alas, proving to be a mirage. The confidence exuded by our prime minister at the recent G 20 summit in Cannes notwithstanding, all indicators show that the Indian economy is not only slowing down, but it also appears already to be in its grip. Manufacturing output has fallen to its lowest levels in two years. The index of industrial production (IIP) declined for

the third consecutive month in September to 1.9%, down from 6.1%. In the first half of this year, industrial growth dipped to 5% as against 8.2% a year ago. This would lead to still fewer job opportunities and salary freezes impacting upon the growth of domestic demand negatively.

This comes on top of a sharp decline in the growth of exports that has been plummeting continuously since July when it hit 81.79%. It has now come down to 10.8%. Even with imports remaining volatile, the trade deficit has burgeoned to \$92 billion and is expected to breach \$150 billion this fiscal. The slowdown in global trade has already impacted our textiles and apparel sectors creating a serious unemployment situation as, after agriculture, this sector is India's largest employer.

While these developments create a bleak future for the vast masses in India, the existing livelihood status itself is being severely assaulted by the relentless rise in the prices of all essential commodities. Despite all claims of controlling inflation, food inflation is now around 12%. Vegetables are costlier by 26%, pulses by 14%, fruits by 12%, eggs, fish and meat by 13% and milk by 12%.

Under these circumstances, the cries by India Inc. for further financial liberalisation to facilitate the flow of international finance capital will only spell further ruin for the people of India. Instead, for the sake of the aam admi, UPA 2 must be forced to stop giving further tax concessions to corporate houses and the rich (a whopping R5.2 lakh crore, in the last two budgets). This has not led to larger investments and consequent growth as envisaged. Unless people's purchasing power rises, no investment can be sustainable. Such concessions, instead, should be collected and invested for building our much needed socio-economic infrastructure generating jobs and enlarging domestic demand.

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The views expressed by the author are personal

EDUCATION

The education wars

Pratap Bhanu Mehta

In country after country, the consensus over the importance of education is matched by angst over how to reform it. These debates have two dimensions. There is the increasingly murky relationship between education and employment. Unemployment is being attributed not merely to a business cycle downturn, but a mismatch between education and employment. In advanced countries, college graduates are less likely to be unemployed than their less educated counterparts. The technology revolution and globalisation produced a pitiless combination. On the one hand, you must have higher skills to have a shot at a job. On the other hand, there is global competition for those jobs. The answer to both these challenges, so the story goes, is education reform: education that allows you to participate in the economy, and education that allows you to compete. Both propositions seem intuitively obvious. But whether education will continue to be enough to give access to jobs, if the competition becomes genuinely global, is an open question. Education will be central to the arsenal of competition between nations. War metaphors are not alien to education. After all, the famous American Report, “A Nation at Risk”, had as far back as 1983 warned that the nation “has been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament”.

In countries like India, there is another version of the education-economy mismatch. There is a disjuncture between the demands of the economy and what education produces. Part of this may be simply a matching problem: there is a supply out there, but individuals cannot be matched with the right kind of jobs. Part of it is a genuine shortage, exacerbated by the fact that schooling is not the same thing as education,

just as having a degree is not the same thing as having actual skills. Low (albeit growing) rates of educated female participation in the labour force means some of India's significant human capital is simply not coming on the job market. India is also going to increase its retention rate in secondary schools and higher education. In the short run, this helps mitigate the employment challenge: it may be that the upward pressure on wages is due in part to the fact that the supply of labour is shrinking because more people are staying longer in school. States with higher education achievement like Kerala tend to have higher unemployment. So while education is intrinsically important, the relationship between education and employment in the long run is no less uncertain. The framework for calibrating education to the job market remains a leap of faith.

But if the top end of education is marred by uncertainty, so is the lower base. With the Right to Education Bill, the milestone of near total enrolment and access to adequate infrastructure will have been achieved. The demand for schooling has exploded. But the key issues in school reform — quality and accountability — are still open questions. It is, in retrospect, amazing that so much ideological energy has been expended on the issues of public versus private schooling. Part of this was understandable: there was a deep consternation at the failures of the public system; and now there are questions about the RTE's possible effect on low-cost private schools that have been as much part of the education revolution as any. The comparative evidence on what systems work is mixed at best: there are successful and unsuccessful models of all systems, public, private or public-private partnerships. But the focus of debate largely remains the somewhat unresolvable and abstract issue of systems.

The real tricky questions come in the realm of teaching, testing and curriculum, no matter what the system. But these three issues are harder to resolve because they involve difficult choices. They are also not the

sort of issues that lend themselves to neat legislative or bureaucratic solutions. There is a consensus in most studies that exposure to good teachers is the surest guarantee of improved learning achievement; equally there is a consensus that good teachers are not easy to identify before the fact. The quality variance of teachers, even in India's so-called top schools, gives one a reason to pause. Some have proposed that teachers be appointed only after long internships and evaluations. But there is no framework in which to think of our recruitment practices.

At one level, testing is a no brainer: an essential ingredient of accountability is being able to measure. Organisations like Pratham revolutionised our discourse on education by simply measuring what children know. It is a mark of some progress that there is now at least beginning to be a debate over what we should measure: at higher levels, what is the trade-off between “aptitude”—based testing, and content-driven exams? At the lower level, there is a need to at least track basic achievement in mathematics and literacy. But while some measure of testing is essential for any accountability, preventing an education system from being distorted by the superficial certainties of testing is a different challenge. An equally deeper challenge will be responding to results of such tests. At one level, these can be a tool for teachers to identify where to begin their teaching: teaching must talk to a child, not talk at them. On the other hand, what we do know from comparative evidence is this: given flexibility and a culture that makes students the centre of education, not abstract objectives, teachers can improve outcomes. Yet, it takes enormous resources and the best teachers to compensate for the complex background inequalities that result in unequal educational performance. Testing allows for a perverse kind of sorting: where society stops investing in weaker children. These are not insurmountable challenges. But they will get exacerbated in times to come.

Our curriculum debates have oscillated between ossified, bureaucratic imaginations, taking perverse pride in an endless amount of material formally covered, and the romantic fantasy of an oxymoron called free, unstructured education. This is now being replaced by equally false dichotomies between skill-based and general education, and near total neglect of the basics like writing, logical reasoning and mathematical skills. That we need the educational arsenal is clear. But post-RTE, the oldest questions need to take centrestage. What should we be teaching? How should we be teaching? Why should we be teaching? And how do we know that we have in fact managed to teach? Or else, to use the other war metaphor, will our education be arming without aiming?

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The right to fix your education

Yamini Aiyar

On Friday, the Prime Minister launched the Shiksha Ka Haq Abhiyan — a yearlong nationwide campaign for promoting the Right to Education (RTE). As these efforts gain ground, the country faces one important choice: should elementary education be delivered through the current model, which focuses on the expansion of schooling through a top-down, centralised delivery system? Or should we use the RTE as an opportunity to fundamentally alter the current system, to create a bottom-up delivery model which builds on an understanding of children's learning needs, and which privileges innovation and accountability for learning, rather than schooling?

Lets' first understand the current system. For decades, India's education goal has been to create a universal elementary education system by expanding schooling through inputs: building schools, hiring teachers, and enrolling children in these schools. Substantial finances have been provided to create these inputs: in 2008-09 the country spent Rs 6,314 per child (this is a low estimate, as available data is yet to take into account post-RTE budget hikes). Most of this money has gone toward creating a large education bureaucracy controlled and managed by the state and central government.

When PAISA (an annual survey of elementary education plans and finances) analysed the budgets of 7 states between 2009-10 and 2010-11, it found that, on average, 76 per cent of the education budget is allocated to teacher salaries and management costs. All critical teacher- and administration-related decisions, whether salary payment or hiring, are taken by the state (and in some cases the district) bureaucracy. School infrastructure receives about 4 per cent of this money. Funds for

building are often channeled directly to school accounts; but all decisions, whether about the nature of infrastructure (buildings or toilets or on procurement are taken by the district bureaucracy. Investments directly in children account for just 6 per cent of the total budget.

Interwoven in this top-down system is an intention to involve parents in decision-making through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA), which mandates parent committees to make plans and monitor school activities. But SSA has done little to empower these committees. For one, teachers, as pointed out already, are not accountable to them. Second, committees have spending powers over just about 5 per cent of SSA funds. And these expenditures are expected to be undertaken based on norms set by the Government of India.

So, if a school wants to spend more than the norm on, say, purchasing teacher material by dipping in to its maintenance fund — well, it can't. In essence, SSA has had a bottom-up rhetoric with no bottom-up control or decision making power. It's no surprise then that studies have pointed out that these committees under SSA were defunct. After all, why participate if you have no control?

To the extent that expansion of schooling has been the goal, this top-down model has been effective. Schools have been built, teachers hired and the country has reached near universal enrollment levels. But there is no evidence that improved infrastructure has resulted in children acquiring basic abilities in reading and arithmetic.

Between 2004-05 and 2009-10, India's elementary education budget has nearly doubled. Yet learning levels have remained stagnant. According to the Annual Status of Education Report, only half the country's Standard 5 children can read a Standard 2 textbook, far fewer can do basic arithmetic. The current top-down system can create inputs but the assumption that this model can deliver on the next generation challenges

of elementary education does not hold. A fundamental rethink is imperative.

The good news is that the framework for an alternative model is already in place. Like SSA, the RTE mandates parental involvement through school committees that are tasked with making annual school development plans. Crucially, RTE entitles all children to “age-appropriate mainstreaming.” It also lays down entitlements for schools, through norms related to inputs. It thus requires the system to focus on the needs of individual schools and children, where the emphasis is on understanding children’s learning levels and building skills appropriate to their age and grade. This necessitates a decentralised, bottom-up system.

To ensure that the RTE avoids the SSA trap of bottom-up responsibility with no bottom-up control, the current financial model needs to be fundamentally altered. Rather than dropping funds to schools through tightly controlled line-item budgets, the current model could be altered to provide a basket of monies to the school and allow the school plan to determine whether it wants to build a boundary wall in a given year, or purchase new materials, or provide extra training for children and teachers.

Above all, SMCs should be empowered to hold the education bureaucracy accountable. This could be achieved by giving them some role in decision-making over teachers assigned to their schools. In a 2006 study, Pritchett and Pande lay out an innovative framework for building a district cadre of teachers and empowering Gram Panchayats and school committees to draw on this cadre, and assign teachers to their schools. Teachers will be assigned on a contractual basis, renewable on performance and paid through the panchayat or committee.

Will this lead to more learning for schoolchildren? At the very least, such a system will serve to strengthen parent engagement and ownership with the school and encourage accountability to parents. This is a critical first step.

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JUDICIARY

A Good Judgment

Given the impunity generally enjoyed by perpetrators of [communal violence](#), the imposition of life sentence on 31 rioters for burning alive 33 Muslim victims in Sardarpura in the 2002 [Gujarat](#) riots is a milestone in India's history. If the signal goes out that those responsible for heinous communal massacres do not enjoy immunity from prosecution, that in itself will have a salutary effect in curbing their incidence. It's safe to say that with a few verdicts like this the country will have made a dent in controlling communal riots, and therefore dramatically improved its record of upholding human rights.

Thanks to the Supreme Court's tenacity, the country has come a long way from the shame in the Best Bakery case when in 2003 all the 21 accused were acquitted after eyewitnesses turned hostile. If the prejudicial environment created by chief minister Narendra Modi's rule could not much affect the outcome of the Sardarpura case, it is mainly due to the activism displayed by the apex court in monitoring the investigation and trial of this and eight other high-profile cases. The special protection given to witnesses by a central paramilitary force played a crucial role in securing convictions in the [Sardarpura case](#) against heavy odds.

Though the Supreme Court-appointed special investigation team (SIT) claimed credit for the breakthrough, it had actually brought to book only two of the 31 convicts and had failed to convince the court that the burning of the victims, largely women and children, had been the result of a conspiracy rather than a spontaneous act, despite the formidable evidence available to it. The judgment comes at a time when the credibility of the SIT has taken a beating, for the manner in which it has

been dragging its feet on Zakia Jafri's complaint against Modi and 61 other high-ups. The SIT is under pressure because of the report given by amicus curiae Raju Ramachandran, another appointee of the Supreme Court, stating that the allegation of complicity made against Modi by suspended police officer Sanjiv Bhatt required to be placed before the trial court and tested through cross-examination of all the officers present at the fateful meeting of February 27, 2002.

It would have surely been in the spirit of Modi's sadbhavna fasts if he had displayed the sagacity to welcome the Sardarpura convictions as a vindication of the rule of law. His silence explains why, even after a decade, the survivors of Sardarpura are unable to return to their homes. The struggle for reparation and restitution is far from over. Nevertheless, the Sardarpura judgment is a good beginning.

POVERTY

HINDU 12.11.11 POVERTY

Where the poor are fighting a losing battle

Deepti Singh

Our yesteryear movies focussed on poor protagonists and exemplified the struggles of a farmer or a common man. Now there are no poor people in our movies...

We were sitting in a café when a friend casually remarked to me: “I think India doesn't have horrendous poverty anymore.” This naïve statement rendered me speechless. Then I looked around and realised how the poor are kept from the vision of urban India.

Gladiator spectacles were once used to distract the citizens of Rome from the inadequacies of the government. In “modern” India, is it the glamour of Bollywood and cricket that shades the reality? Our yesteryear movies such as *Mother India* (1957) and *Coolie* (1983) focussed on poor protagonists and exemplified the struggles of a farmer or a common man. Now there are no poor people in our movies — not in supporting characters, not even in the background. The hero is almost always a multimillionaire, who switches countries at a blink of an eye and the heroine always wears designer clothes. Blockbusters such as *Kabhie Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001) and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011), precisely establish the fact.

The poor are fighting a losing battle for space in the English dailies; beset with advertisements of super luxury villas and cheap(er) air tickets to Singapore.

How true is this story of rising India? Has poverty eradication been as rapid in reality as in our movies?

While I was thinking about this question, I noticed a cobbler right below a magnificent high-rise at Connaught Place in Delhi. I never gave him much thought except now when I realised that he has been occupying the same spot under a tree beside a busy office complex for many years. He agreed to an interview on condition that he would continue mending shoes as we spoke. He respectfully welcomed me to his stall and I found a place on the ground next to his official chair — a torn red rug.

He looked frail in a loose cream shirt and faded, worn out, trousers. He kept his head down, mending a shoe, raising it only occasionally to either answer greetings from the hawkers around him or to my questions. This profession came as an apparent choice to him since his father too, was a cobbler. “I used to come here to help my father when I was young. We used to sit right here.” So does he have the same dream for his children? “I have put all my three children in a government school at Seelampur. I can't say about their future; they have to decide.”

I had to put aside my hesitation to bring the conversation to his earnings. “I make about Rs. 200 on a good day,” he said, without exhibiting any trace of awkwardness. To my surprise, he did not follow this statement with rhetoric about rising prices. How could he be content with making just Rs.200 a day? How does he buy new clothes and new toys for his kids? “I buy them gifts on Diwali, if I have money.” It was easy to get envious of his contentment; I began to wonder if he is harbouring any anger against the rich who surround him on this busy street. “There is nothing to be angry about. There are people who are richer than these rich people too,” he reverted, uncontrived.

Owning a pucca house at Seelampur takes away his right to claim the Below-Poverty-Line (BPL) card which could give him access to cheap rations. Given the soaring prices, how is he able to save for his children? “I could save earlier but not now. What little I had, I spent it on my

father's treatment. He died two years ago, since then I have been trying to save up again for making shoes. I used to make shoes by hand and sell them right here but I have no money to do that anymore,” he said, pointing to his worn out chappals. But, surprisingly, he doesn't believe in holding big expectations from his children. “All that is a matter of fate. I want to do my duty and leave the rest to god.”

That's when I realised that it was his faith in destiny and his uncomplaining acceptance of poverty that kept him going. I felt I had my answers now.

“*Bhaiya* - Your name?” I enquired as I dusted myself after getting up.

“Suresh,” he responded, continuously chopping the extra leather off a shoe sole.

“Suresh... *aage*? last name?” I asked, tapping my pen to my notebook.

“It's Suresh only. Actually, Suresh Kumar but everybody calls me Suresh.” I left him alone with the uneasiness he tried to hide by burying himself in his work.

David Dhawan doesn't plan to make *Cobbler number 1* anytime soon and hence it's time we took on the onus to notice, not just the Mercedes at the traffic signal, but also the helpless leprosy patient banging the car window or an abandoned granny on the roadside.

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TERRORISM

**Threat of bio-terrorism
India must take necessary measures**

P. R. Chari

WHETHER the threat of bio-terrorism is real becomes germane with a plot discovered recently in Georgia within the United States to use ricin as a bioterrorism agent. Ricin can be extracted from castor beans, and is deadly even in trace quantities. There is no known cure. The plot came to light with the arrest by the federal authorities of four men following a sting operation. Apparently, they had wanted to buy explosive materials and arms components in Georgia to attack government facilities and kill local law enforcement officials by dispersing ricin-using explosives.

Another plan was to release the ricin in US metropolitan centres from a car driven on their road. What was their objective? Unreal and fanciful as it might seem, they wished to weaken the state and the federal government to "make the country right again." Such ravings cannot be dismissed as inconsequential, considering the damage and panic that would ensue in the general population if such plots came to fruition. Neither can US actions be termed paranoid since they are being targeted by terrorist organisations across the world.

Several secular state and non-state actors are known to be interested in acquiring biological weapons. So are many religious extremist and millenarian organisations with apocalyptic visions of destroying the world and molding it anew in their vision. Bio-terrorist attacks are considered permissible by these organisations, even moral. Several examples can be recalled. For instance, the Aum Shinrikyo had released sarin gas (a nerve agent) in a subway train in Tokyo, which affected thousands of commuters and left 12 dead in 1995. They had dispersed chemical and biological agents earlier from moving vehicles and atop tall buildings, but fortunately without success. Before that, in 1984,

followers of Acharya Rajneesh had infected salad bars in Oregon with salmonella, resulting in several customers falling ill, but fortunately no deaths.

The anthrax attacks in the US soon after 9/11 are firmly etched in American collective memory and have strengthened their beliefs that terrorist organisations like Al-Qaida have an abiding interest in developing biological agents for mass destruction. Indeed, a recent news story in The New York Times informed that Al-Qaida in Arabian Peninsula is accumulating castor beans to make ricin and cause mass casualties.

Is this picture overdrawn? Is the bio-terrorist threat quite exaggerated? Atypical of the hype surrounding ricin is a media report claiming: “The US government also learned that Awlaki sought to use poisons, including cyanide and ricin, to attack Westerners’ citing a “senior US official”. Anwar Al-Awlaki has been killed; so this assertion cannot be either confirmed or denied.

However, the contrarian argument should also be taken note of. The technical problem with using ricin as a bio-agent is that it is a macromolecular protein, which is sensitive to heat, many solvents and removal from its natural environment. Therefore, reports that it can be packed around explosives and detonated are just plain wrong. Ricin bombs have yet to be made and demonstrated. Besides, ricin, like other proteins, cannot be absorbed through the skin like nerve agents. It can be used in an aerosol directed against individual targets, but only after purification, which is a highly complex process.

Ricin is not easy, in short, to weaponise for extensive use. The same is true of anthrax, which needs to be manufactured to a particular granular size to enter the respiratory tract. To date, only the Fort Detrick defence lab in Maryland is known to have achieved this. The technical problem with bio-terrorism agents, therefore, lies not only in their production, but

also in maintaining their coherence until delivery, which is very difficult for a terrorist organisation.

Is the bio-terrorism threat, therefore, chimerical and greatly over-stated? The dilemma before the national security agencies is that maverick organisations and individuals are a reality, and prudent governments have to defend themselves against existential and potential threats.

How is India positioned to meet bio-terrorist threats? The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) recognises this range of threats, and has issued guidelines for managing bio-terrorist attacks which address the prevention, preparedness, and countering of major epidemics and pandemics. An Integrated Disease Surveillance Project (IDSP) is designed to undertake immunisation programmes, and ensure preparedness by creating bio-safety laboratories across the country.

Agro-terrorism is also addressed, but the precise counter-measures taken to mitigate a bio-terrorist attack are not clear. India's dense population, poor health surveillance and medical organisations, long history of suffering cross-border terrorist attacks, and hostile neighbours makes India highly vulnerable to bio-terrorist attacks. An unusual outbreak of plague, for instance, had occurred in Surat (1995), which was never properly identified and remains a mystery. But it had caused great panic and led to wholesale exodus of migrant labour that brought Gujarat's flourishing diamond industry to its knees.

In truth, the bioterrorist threat to India emanates not only from its hostile neighbouring countries but also from non-state actors supported by these States. Al- Qaida, for instance, is known to have an active interest in biological weapons. A bioterrorist attack on India's agriculture and animal husbandry, which is not being given any priority at present, could have a serious impact on its large agricultural economy. A holistic programme is needed, therefore, to deal with the several dimensions of the bio-terrorism threat, which requires urgent attention of the relevant intelligence agencies and the health authorities. At the operational level,

arrangements have to be made to ensure surveillance, detection and prompt reporting. Since the possibility cannot be excluded of a bio-terrorist attack succeeding, despite all the precautions taken, it is also necessary that arrangements were made for evacuating and treating the victims. These measures have sizeable budgetary implications. Fortunately, they also have public health spin-offs; hence, raising the standards of public health in these areas should not be begrudged by an enlightened state.

Bio-terrorism has been designated as a low probability, but high consequence event. Viewed in this perspective, precautionary steps are necessary, and the American reaction to the ricin plot discovered in Georgia is entirely explicable.