

CONTENTS

CORRUPTION

The economy, not Anna 3-5

The poll's in our court 6-7

EDUCATION

State of higher education 9-11

INTERNATIONAL RELATION

Myanmar is becoming Burma 13-16

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

Golden ghos 18-20

POVERTY

The poverty line fiasco 22-24

Nature of poverty 25-28

WOMEN

Bold intervention 30-34

CORRUPTION

INDIAN EXPRESS 9.10.11 CORRUPTION

The economy, not Anna

Tavleen Singh

We deserve Anna Hazare. As an implacable opponent of his movement and his methods, it is with sadness that I admit that my relentless opposition has been wasted. Did you notice the frenzy that gripped my colleagues in the electronic media when he reappeared last week? Did you see how they raced off to Ralegan Siddhi for another round of identical 'exclusive' interviews? Anna looked quite recovered from his hunger strike and ready for more action. He was off to Hissar, he said proudly, to tell voters not to vote for Congress. Then he would extend his 'mission' to Uttar Pradesh by fasting for three days before the assembly elections. He intended to go on hunger strike whether his Jan Lokpal Bill was passed in the winter session of Parliament or not. He did not explain what the purpose of this new hunger strike was but it seems like no more than a move to remind his supporters that he must not be forgotten.

It should be clear to the average, thinking Indian that Anna's ability to solve India's huge political, social and economic problems is seriously limited. But, this seems not to have happened yet. The TV reporters who hotfooted it to Ralegan Siddhi asked tougher questions this time but the importance they gave Anna indicated that they have not yet seen the light. If they had, they would have noticed that Anna has distracted attention from our biggest and most serious problem. The economy. Nobody talks about it any more and it is about time we did.

Having grown up in socialist times, I get nervous when I see the smallest sign that the incredible economic growth of the past two decades is about to end. It is and the signs are no longer small. Since August, investors have sold \$2.6 billion worth of Indian shares. The rupee has fallen against the dollar by 10 per cent since April. Indian industry has slowed down ominously and the forecast is bleak. There is talk of things getting a lot worse before they begin to get better so by next year we could see a huge increase in unemployment.

Government spokesmen have already started blaming the international financial crisis for all India's ills but do not believe them. India's problems are of our own making. Since April, when Anna went on his first hunger strike, senior ministers in the Government of India have been too caught up with political firefighting to deal with our real problems. And the Prime Minister has been too preoccupied with political infighting to notice that some ministers in key economic ministries have used their powers to reintroduce the licence raj by using government clearances as a weapon. Huge projects, in which thousands of crore rupees have already been invested, have come to a grinding halt. Nothing has been done yet to end this new license raj.

Anna and his team cannot see beyond their Jan Lokpal Bill so they have not noticed that if we return to the licence raj, there will be such a dramatic increase in corruption that a thousand Lokpals will find it hard to control. The corrupt officials that they would like to see sacked and jailed are mostly those who cut their teeth when licences, quotas and permits were the norm. Sadly, since most of Anna's young supporters have no memory of those times, it is hard to explain to them that the real reason for corruption in India is because officials and ministers have too many discretionary powers. If Anna and his team had a broader vision, their movement would have demanded reforms that would reduce these powers.

The good news is that it seems as if Dr Manmohan Singh is not in danger of losing his job for the moment. Those who were fighting to get it have succeeded in disqualifying themselves. So the Prime Minister can concentrate, in this season when most Indians worship Lakshmi, to find his own ways to placate the Goddess of Wealth. If we go back to those bad old times when India's economic policies created poverty instead of wealth we can be sure that by Diwali next year there will be nothing to celebrate.

It should be easy to understand that for a country to win the fight against poverty, it must first create wealth. In India this simple truth has only begun to be understood in the past twenty years when better economic policies gave us a hint of India's enormous potential. Anna and his followers would have us believe that India's economic growth was a sham and that all it did was create a corrupt 'mafia' of politicians and businessmen who colluded to loot the country. This is complete nonsense. But, neither the Prime Minister nor anyone in his government appears to have the courage to challenge Anna.

Follow Tavleen Singh on Twitter at [tavleen_singh](#)

The poll's in our court

We the people demand the right to redress against false poll-eve pledges. Hasn't a [Team Anna](#) member placed us - along with Annaji - above Parliament? Why, even the PM signals in a letter to Anna that he'll consider our right to reject election candidates. Imagine the ballot actually offering that "none of the above" option - the ultimate citizen's cane. Bye-bye, voter apathy. Hello, booth bangla.

Moreover, Team Anna wants us to wield the right-to-reject lathi even before it's granted. Didn't Anna say we had the right - and solemn duty - to reject Congress-wallahs contesting the Hisar Lok Sabha bypoll, which saw a 70% voter turnout? Fighting corruption, we're told, means favouring parties that back Team Anna's [Jan Lokpal Bill](#), not just in Hisar but all upcoming electoral matches. If some of these pro-Bill outfits have supped with tainted Yeddys and Reddys, so what? The public, it's said, has a short memory. It'll exercise its right to forget.

But what about the right to recall? Some say if politicians claim the right to subject people to their non-performance, voters must have the right to do more than reject them. They need the right to eject them - midway in their terms. Our CEC isn't so sure. Right to recall, after all, may boil down to having polls everywhere, 365 days of the year, for all kinds of (non) reasons. Whoa! Even the world's most excitable demo-crazy can't digest that kind of high-octane excitement. Not to mention EC-wallahs who'll collapse like overused EVMs.

Happily, right to recall for many means plain and simple wallowing in nostalgia. Take Advaniji's right to project his prime ministerial

candidacy. He's recalling those heady days in the 1990s when his Ayodhya-bound rath asserted its right to race till Lalu deflated the tyres. On yet another yatra today, BJP's Loh Purush rides a more calamity-prone chariot. Not because Lalu's exercised his right to object against a roadshow "insulting the land where [Jayaprakash Narayan](#) was born". But because Advani's modified bus has got stuck under a colonial-era bridge, hit an unsuspecting tree and belched carbon monoxide into the faces of [BJP](#) leaders! Rumour has it other 'Me-for-PM' BJP-wallahs - like Modi and now Yashwant Sinha - are asserting their right to recoil. Advaniji, ab bus.

Meantime, the Congress's [Digvijay Singh](#) insists on his right to interject: writing to Anna, he has berated saffron politics. And what about the criminal cases pending against the Congress's rivals in Hisar? Unfazed, the Gandhian has described [Congress](#) and BJP as two peas in a pod. Plus, he's told voters: Reject just about everybody who's corrupt! If we follow Anna's advice, "none of the above" might come to mean none climbs above - into those high legislative seats.

Psst Rahul baba says, to combat corruption, you need those very much-maligned folks who get elected into Parliament. But another issue is definitely more urgent. Do we the people really want a [House](#) emptied of netas and their high-decibel antics? What about our right to entertainment?

EDUCATION

State of higher education: Mani Shanker Aiyar and Narayana Murthy statements

MANOJ PANT

Two seemingly unrelated developments motivated this article. One, Mr Mani Shanker Aiyar's rather irresponsible statements on the English capabilities of Mr Maken. Second, Mr Narayana Murthy's statements about the declining standards of [IIT](#) graduates as a consequence of the 'teaching shops' in the country. Apart from the implied humour in Mr Aiyar's statements, there was an inference about the relative merits of two colleges of Delhi University.

In the same vein, Mr Murthy's statement reflected more a failure of the higher education sector in India rather than that of the private 'teaching shops'. While one can cavil about the political correctness of either Mr Aiyar or Mr Murthy's statements, it is difficult to disagree that something ails our higher education sector.

Consider the comparison that Mr Aiyar (implicitly) made. Despite the politically-motivated outcry, issues of various magazines devoted to surveys of the higher education sector have periodically brought out that all higher education institutes (universities and professional colleges) do not bring out the same quality of students.

Yet, while [Delhi University](#) as a whole is still the premier institution in the country, it's also true that in many subjects (Economics for one!), [St Stephen's College](#) is no longer the premier institution even in the Capital.

What is, however, more disconcerting is that the relative ranking of

various institutions have more or less remained the same and there seems no 'levelling out'. Even more important, standards in most state universities are declining drastically and there seems no end in sight. Why this situation?

Let us get back to St Stephen's, admittedly the premier institution in India (and not only because Mr Aiyar studied there!). The question is whether the students excel because of the institution or the other way round. With all due apologies to St Stephen's College, the second explanation is closer to the truth. If the best enter St Stephen's, it is not surprising that they outperform others at the university level.

This is what Mr Murthy was saying. The IITs attract the best students but add little value so that graduates remain unemployable. However, here, Mr Murthy must realise that the 'teaching shops' are probably adding some value in enabling weaker students to compete in exams. The 'teaching shops' also exist only because of so much competition for just a few institutions of excellence.

One radical solution is to 'randomise' the entry of students to higher institutions: let admission be related to non-merit parameters like location of students, income of parents, etc. This would lead to a political outcry from the reservation lobbies (caste and religion) in particular: how can state education be non-discriminatory?

The problem is the vicious circle: good students attract good faculty who then attract the best students, and so on. How to break this circle? Another solution is to start with the faculty. Today, NAAC - the UGC's rating system for higher education institutes - is a reality. So, suppose faculty in institutions lower down the ladder are offered a higher salary. To one extent, this is being done today.

Central universities in backward and hilly areas get an additional DA of 12.5% (NEHU in Shillong actually gets an additional 25%, but that is another story). What if this system were to be extended to other institutions based on a NAAC assessment? Rating changes every 5-10 years would then allow the system to be tweaked. This is likely to work better than merely setting up central universities in every state and then find most suffering due to non-availability of faculty.

Both these solutions sound radical. Yet, something on these lines is necessary as the market solution is worse (but unstoppable). While state universities are mired in procedural issues in appointing faculty, the private sector is snapping them up. Politicisation of the student body makes most decision-making nearly impossible. Worse, CAG has noted that some universities have misutilised money for faculty travel. Yet, around the world, faculty is penalised for not utilising funds set aside for attending conferences.

India has about 320 universities of which only 40 are central universities where some control on quality - and politicisation - still exists. They can only absorb less than 15% of the growing student population. The US has about 4,000 accredited institutions and caters to students across the globe! Indian public sector education must survive given the low cost and the need for state-funded R&D.

But while Parliament is obsessed with Anna or the '2G scam', two Bills for regulating and creating autonomy for higher education lie in cold storage. Benign neglect or malign intent: the decline and irrelevance of state-supported education seems inevitable.

The author is faculty at [JNU](#)

INTERNATIONAL RELATION

**Myanmar is becoming Burma
A good opportunity for India**

B.G. Verghese

MYANMAR seems to be returning to Burma. The good news has trickled in after talks between Aung San SuuKyi and the new civilian President, Thein Sein established a framework for national reconciliation and graduated democratic reform. A political amnesty is on the anvil and moves are afoot to liberalise trade and investment regimes. The new government has invited Burmese refugees who fled the country after the military takeover to return and assist the process of national reconstruction.

Perhaps even more significantly, work on the \$ 3.6 bn 3600 MW Myitsone dam on the upper Irrawaddy, under construction with Chinese assistance, has been suspended as being “against the will of the (Kachin people)”. The decision was announced in Parliament and suggests that the Burmese leadership is not going to kowtow to its giant neighbour which has established a major presence in the country during the past 30 years of isolation and sanctions. This does not bring Chinese collaboration to an end by any means as numerous other large hydroelectric, hydrocarbon, port and other infrastructure projects are moving forward.

It does, however, suggest that the new regime is mindful of ethnic minority and ecological sensitivities. After years of ceasefire based on a policy of live and let live, the regime sought to integrate ethnic nationality armies into the Myanmarese armed forces on the eve of the last elections by declaring them national border guards under the command of the Tatmadaw. Most refused, and four insurgencies have

resumed in consequence. Aung San Suu Kyi has appealed for restraint, a further ceasefire and peace talks, to which the regime has not been entirely unresponsive.

This too marks a potentially significant development as its resolution will determine whether Burma is to be a truly federal state, with ethnic nationalities enjoying considerable autonomy, or remain a largely centralised polity at war with itself. Suu Kyi's father General Aung San, the Father of the Nation and first Prime Minister, had negotiated the Panglong agreement with the minorities in 1948. The one issue on which it broke was on the interpretation of whether the option to review federal ties after a decade implied a choice of independence or only a re-jigging of the federal arrangement. It was on the identical issue in regard to the nine-point Hydari agreement that the Naga leader, Phizo, broke with the Indian state.

The Thein Sein government is seeking foreign investment and collaboration in every field. It is a country with enormous land and natural resources (minerals, bio-diversity, hydropower and hydrocarbons) but currently lacking in human capital — administrative, entrepreneurial, institutional, scientific — after 30 years of military rule. It is because of this that it has farmed out major development projects, including plantations, to China, its ASEAN neighbours, Japan, India and others. Only a small fraction of its 39,000 MW hydro-potential has been harnessed though almost 14,000 MW worth of projects have been signed up (especially with China on the Salween). With little domestic demand as yet, most of this power will be exported to China, Thailand and the ASEAN grid, and to adjacent Nagaland if the 1200 MW Tamanthi project, part of the Chindwin cascade, comes to fruition with Indian assistance.

India's major project so far has been the Kalewa/Kalemayo-Tamu (Moreh) highway (along which the projected Indo-Burma-ASEAN trade has been stymied for lack of trade facilitation measures on the Indian

side). An even larger project under implementation is the multi-modal Southern Mizoram-Kaladan River-Sitwe Port corridor which will provide India's Northeast an ocean outlet. The Kaladan Corridor may, alas, go the way of the Kalewa-Tamu Road unless concurrent steps are taken here and now by both governments and all concerned actors — transporters, entrepreneurs, bankers, freight forwarders, hoteliers and others — to concert action and get their act together.

Around 1998, Myanmar had offered extensive wastelands to India to grow rice, pulses and palm oil on renewable 30-year leases. Thailand and Malaysia signed up. India was unresponsive. Whether such leases will again be on offer and will be acceptable to the ethnic minorities is uncertain. However, it is something that could be explored on the basis of cooperative partnerships with local ethnic groups, the Burma government and the Indian state or private entrepreneurs as a means of coupling ethnic settlements in Burma with income and employment generation and the development of much-needed infrastructure.

Hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation, onshore and offshore, is another area that holds out considerable promise.

Burma has had a long and close association with India and has applied for SAARC membership, which Delhi supports. The country is also a member of ASEAN of which it hopes to become rotational Chair in 2014. It is in transition and holds a geostrategic position of high importance as a bridge between SAARC, ASEAN and China.

Rather than be a passive spectator or late actor, India should move energetically to engage the new Thein Sein administration to assist and encourage its transition to full democracy, ethnic reconciliation and economic and social reconstruction at all levels, governmental and non-official. Aung San Suu Kyi studied in Delhi and is greatly revered here and has high regard for this country. India's relations with the military regime have also been maintained at an even keel and the military

leadership too trusts India as a non-intrusive neighbour and long-term friend.

Why does the government and credible civil society institutions not invite delegations of Burmese parliamentarians, trade representatives, ethnic nationality groups and security analysts to visit India and talk to their counterparts and potential collaborators here? Scholarships and seats in training institutions should be readily on offer as this is perhaps Burma's greatest need. Charter flights should be organised both ways to promote tourism and understanding. And high-level Indian political and trade and investment delegations should visit Burma as early as possible.

The Indo-Afghan strategic partnership agreement signed on the occasion of President Karzai's visit to Delhi need not be a model but could point a direction. Afghanistan is in flux. America's Af-Pak policy has failed and it is now locked in a huge muddle and spat with a defiant but bewildered Pakistan that knows it needs to redefine itself. This again presents India with an opening and an opportunity to further its engagement with Islamabad as much as with Kabul and jointly with both. Pakistan's concerns about winning strategic depth in Afghanistan against India are unreal in concept and substance. India is no threat to Pakistan, which is its own worst enemy.

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

Golden ghos

Jug Suraiya

In the eyes of the law, giving or taking a bribe is a crime. However, bribery is not a crime when the bribe given is by the government to the people, or to certain electorally important — read vote bank — sections of the people.

Caste-based quotas of various forms, from reservations in jobs to admission into educational institutions, have been an accepted part of vote-bank politics since Independence. The policy of reservations — affirmative action on the part of the government to help the social and economic uplift of communities which have suffered cruel oppression over millennia — was initially supposed to last 10 years, after which it would be reviewed.

Sixty-four years after Independence, quotas and reservations have proliferated and become inextricably entrenched in the system. Originally meant only for dalits and tribals, the quota system has, thanks to the pressures of competitive populism, been inevitably extended post-Mandal to cover various categories of OBCs. Demands have also been raised for separate quotas for the weaker sections among religious minorities. If quotas are seen as reserved slices cut from a pie, it seems that soon there will be more reserved slices than there is pie.

Undaunted by this paradox, the government — its image battered by corruption charges and uncheckable inflation — is reportedly proposing to extend the quota system beyond government jobs to include the field of entrepreneurship. Sarkari policymakers are said to be working out a scheme, first proposed during the tenure of UPA-I, that 4% of all

government purchases will be made from companies owned by dalits and tribals. Back-of-the-envelope calculations suggest that the quantum of business which would be directed to SC/ST-run firms could amount to anything between 25,000 crore and 94,000 crore a year.

The scheme seems to have been motivated with an eye to the 2012 UP assembly polls. Having failed in its attempt to extend job reservations for SC/STs to the private sector, the government is hoping that its proposed 4% solution will seduce the dalit vote away from Mayawati and help to reconsolidate the tarnished image of the Congress as a champion of the aam admi.

While the avowed objective of the scheme is social and economic justice for the oppressed, shorn of its window dressing it is a clear case of government-sanctioned bribery based on vote-catching calculations. It is undeniable that dalits and tribals continue to suffer brutal discrimination and deprivation. But it is also undeniable that the strategy of redressal through diverse kinds of reservations and quotas — pursued not only by the Congress but by almost all political parties — has more often than not intensified inter-caste antagonisms and has deepened the schisms in Indian society. In the present case, the question to be raised is: To ensure national progress for all, should government tenders go to the most competitive bidders, or should a percentage be reserved to create caste-based constituencies?

Quotas and reservations have been an unqualified success in only one thing, and that is in the creation of captive vote banks for political parties. In other words, they have proved to be a successful form of openly practised political bribery.

Bribery and corruption, and the long overdue need for electoral reform, have come to the centrestage of public discourse, partly thanks to Anna Hazare and his followers. Even those who disagree with Anna`s extra-parliamentary methods agree that corruption and electoral malpractice are the twin evils which have to be exorcised from our polity.

Are reservations a politically correct euphemism for bribery? Is it time to cleanse the electoral system of vote-bank manipulation? Inconvenient questions which need inconvenient people to ask them. Hands up those prepared to be inconvenient today.

POVERTY

The poverty line fiasco

Seen, obscene and unseen

M J Akbar

Wealth is far easier to recognise than poverty. Wealth is either seen or obscene; poverty remains largely unseen.

Poverty of the worst kind is hidden in those parts of India — or indeed the world — where it is outside the provenance of government, and beyond the interest of individuals and institutions who fuel the engines of modern life, like business concerns or bureaucracy or media.

Those of a liberal persuasion do feel the occasional moral twinge at the passing sight of near-starvation, but poverty does not appear on any balance sheet, liberal or conservative. The cure for liberal guilt is aversion. We take our eyes off the hungry. We leave the responsibility to government.

Government is a curious mixture of personal interest and impersonal decision-making. We know from experience that the best service that government provides is lip service. Do not sneer at lip service. It has been developed into a science. Statistics are the data of this science. They seem to have the legitimacy of fact, as if facts were synonymous with truth.

But it is a good alibi, a perfect vehicle for the psychological postponement of a decision, since no one is really desperate for a solution. Data keeps whirring away in some dark corner of government, giving the illusion that someone is actually doing something about anything. In our case, data is the preserve of a cavernous Planning Commission, headed at the moment by an impervious “foreign-returned”

bureaucrat who confuses self-importance for governance. It would be a good idea to introduce Montek Singh Ahluwalia to India. Both he and India would benefit from greater familiarity, since Ahluwalia will remain the effective head of the Planning Commission as long as Manmohan Singh is prime minister.

The interesting part of the story is that Ahluwalia, now even more famous as the father of the Rs 32 a day poverty line, does not apply the criterion for measurement of poverty that nations like America and Britain observe. We take the bottom-up approach: the minimalist cost of a handful of essentials required for basic survival, in effect a computation of calories sufficient to keep you alive. The richer nations calculate poverty as a percentage of average wealth; if anyone slips a certain percentage point below that average then he or she is deemed poor, and therefore in need of help. This is why the poor in those nations never fall into a starvation net, or are forced into a subsistence existence.

The argument offered for changing the parameters seems plausible. A rich nation, ipso facto, has the ability to raise the poverty line because of its economic surpluses. How about a different perspective? Rich nations are rich precisely because they have changed their definition of poverty. What makes a nation rich? The creation and appropriation of wealth by a thin community at the ozone layer of society, which then uses its power to prevent dissemination of this wealth downwards to the extent it can? Or the creation of what might be called a more generous, and therefore general, wealth that ensures a better life to the hundreds of millions at the lowest economic levels?

There is a harsher Indian response, a violent theory barely disguised in smug accusation, that the poor deserve what they get, that they are responsible for their own fate. When logic confirms that this is absurd, that the poor are victims, that poverty cannot be dismissed as a self-perpetuating punishment, we resort to silly fallacies like destiny, the ultimate argument for complacency. We have got away with this in the

past because the hopeless were also helpless, bereft of the ability to challenge the injustice that was killing them, in slow, tortured stages. It is one of the great achievements of democracy that such devastating inequity is not sustainable. Political rights are a means to economic empowerment, or they are nothing.

Feudalism and colonialism could get away with long periods of brutality, of which famine was an extreme symptom. But the best of emperors and viceroys knew that empire ebbs when the poor are driven to death by economic apartheid. An American museum edition of Jahangirnama in my library is liberally illustrated with wonderful reproductions of Mughal miniatures. Among the heroic scenes there is one very unflattering portrait of Jahangir, given pride of place on a full page. The emperor has drawn his bow, not while on a hunt, or in battle, but in order to kill an ugly hag. This is hardly an image that the lord of India would want to preserve for the future. It puzzled me until I read the caption inscribed around the picture. The hag represented poverty, and the emperor was killing poverty.

Diwali is around the corner. Maybe we should raise a collection and send this edition of Jahangirnama to each member of the Planning Commission as a Diwali gift.

Nature of poverty

Samar Halarnkar

In the village of Marenahalli Bunde — a settlement of quarry workers supplying Bangalore with stone for its seemingly unceasing building boom — I recently listened to 30-year-old Kayaveli (she uses one name), a third standard dropout, who narrated how she toiled from daybreak to dusk.

“It takes a week to bash a truckload of stone,” she told me on the windswept bluff of the quarry, a giant, ugly gash about six storeys deep.

Kayaveli, an energetic woman with jasmine in her hair and a smile on her round face, was not unhappy with life. Though her husband died of a heart attack three years ago, her 10-year-old daughter, Kirtishri, was a fourth standard student at a school for poor, young achievers. The Rs 6,000 that Kayaveli earned every month was enough to buy food from local farmers for herself and her younger daughter and install a satellite-television dish on one of the sticks supporting her two-room shack. Kayaveli does not have a ration card and is not officially recognised as poor. “It’s a hard life, but it is better than before,” she said, “And I know my children will escape this.”

No optimism was evident when, a few months earlier, I met 25-year-old Rajkumar, a tired-looking, clean-shaven odd-jobs man — in other words, unemployed — as he watched over his tuberculosis-afflicted wife, Rekha (both use one name), in a spare hospital in a shabby backstreet of old Gurgaon, a 20-minute drive from the chrome-and-steel towers of its flashy, globalised avatar. Their only satisfaction was that

Rekha was getting free medical care, thanks to the National Health Insurance Scheme, which charges Rs 30 and covers medical expenses up to R30,000 for families with ration cards. “This system works for people like us, but I do not know what will happen now,” said Rajkumar, an 8th class pass. “I need a steady job more than anything else, but I have no qualifications.”

As UPA chief Sonia Gandhi prepares to give her verdict next week on the uproar over India’s official poverty line — declared as the ability to spend Rs 32 every day in urban areas and Rs 26 in rural — the stories of Rajkumar and Kayaveli indicate that India’s anti-poverty measures require rewiring and alignment with a word that increasingly defines 21st-century India: aspiration.

Those on the left of the debate, including Sonia Gandhi, believe India underestimates the numbers of the poor. The official figure is about 400 million; the highest estimate is 800 million. They argue welfare spending must rise in what is one of the world’s most unequal nations. One way to do it is, some say, to withdraw tax exemptions to India Inc, now worth Rs 4 lakh crore.

Those on the right, including the prime minister, believe that India cannot afford to spend R4.5 lakh crore a year on the social sector. The benefits are uncertain (about 60% of food subsidies never reach the poor, for instance), at a time of slowing growth and a fiscal deficit tipped to hit 5% this year, instead of the budget target of 4.6%. Better, they say, to invest instead in India’s collapsing infrastructure and push the most effective anti-poverty measure — growth.

The truth appears to be somewhere in between; it requires a step back from established positions to create a blend of subsidies, investments and re-imagined public services.

First, with growing uncertainties, economic and otherwise, safety nets are vital. As a new study from the advocacy group Action Aid warns,

India is ranked seventh, ahead of Pakistan, Nigeria and 21 other countries, for its vulnerability in growing food and feeding its poor. So tenuous is the existence of those just above the poverty line, about 250 million people, that it takes just one health crisis to slip below, says a 2010 report by the Independent Commission on Development and Health in India. Yet, as Rajkumar explained, without a job, subsidised food and basic health care were, at best, band aids. In his village, 16 km from Gurgaon, farming is receding and there is little on offer for a semi-educated man.

Second, welfare spending cannot be India's long-term fix. That can only come from investments in infrastructure and agriculture. As data from the world's largest jobs-for-work programme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, indicates, the rural poor are better off than before, but digging ditches and ponds does not create strong assets, skews the labour market and could slow growth needed to generate real jobs.

Third, as Kayaveli's story shows, India's poor are willing and eager to haul themselves up the ladder. In Marenahalli Bunde, the grim, backbreaking job of smashing stones had delivered mobile phones and satellite dishes to most of the village, even those in shacks.

Fourth, those moving up the ladder need access to basic public services. As part of Hindustan Times' and Mint's 'Tracking Hunger' series, my colleague Primit Bhattacharya recently chronicled the life of 'Pipeline', a precarious Mumbai slum — it literally sits atop a water pipeline — home to maids, drivers and others just below the lower middle-class. Most people here earn twice as much as the R32-cutoff, get no doles and can afford food. But they have no health care and sanitation. So, most children in 'Pipeline' are malnourished, as are nearly 80,000 in India's richest city.

This is not to suggest that the malnourished, in general, are rich enough to buy food, especially at a time of record inflation. Poorer slums and

India's most deprived tribal areas resemble a failed State with millions consigned to real, grinding poverty. The common thread is the failure to invest in public services.

With only 1% of its GDP spent on healthcare, India will continue to house the greatest share of the earth's malnourished people. So, too, without more and better teachers, schools and universities, it will continue to produce semi-educated young people — and the statistic that only 15% of Indian graduates are employable. India must urgently decide how it can better returns on its investments.

WOMEN

Bold intervention

Nobel Peace Prize for three women this year is well within the best traditions of the prize and an affirmation of the role of women in the political process

Philip Hensher

IN August 1976, British troops had been deployed in Northern Ireland for exactly seven years. There seemed no prospect of any resolution to what had taken place. British forces shot at an IRA



Tawakkul Karman (32) Leymah Gbowee (39) Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (72)

fugitive called Danny Lennon in his car, and killed him. The car drove off the road, and killed three children. Their mother, Anne Maguire, survived. The horrifying accident was witnessed by Betty Williams, driving in her car. She went to help, but could do nothing.

Immediately, Betty Williams started a petition with the Maguire children's aunt, Mairead Corrigan; shortly afterwards they founded an organisation called Women for Peace, later becoming the Community for Peace People. Marches of tens of thousands of people took place, denounced by the IRA. Who was the petition addressed to? What were the demands of the organisation? Well, to some active participants, their involvement seemed naive. But it came from a belief without which nothing would ever get better; this situation can't go on. We must do something. We must have peace.

And in 1977, Corrigan and Williams were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It was an extraordinary thing for the Nobel committee to do. The women were not politicians; they hardly had a programme. They had merely stood up in an entrenched situation and said, Neither this way, nor the other way, but things must change. Only a year after that brave gesture, the Nobel committee members came to the conclusion that that was good enough for them, and that they should bring it to the world's attention.

This year, the Nobel prize went to two Liberian women and a Yemeni woman activist: the elected Liberian president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberian activist Leymah Gbowee, and the Yemeni Tawakul Karman, who at 32 is the youngest winner of the prize since Mairead Corrigan. The theme of this year is prize is the non-violent contribution of women to democracy and politics. It is well within the best traditions of the prize.

Repeatedly, the Nobel Peace Prize has sought to find a third way between entrenched positions by focusing on the role of women in the political process.

The Nobel Prize for peace is often remembered for its occasionally bizarre decisions which subsequent events have not justified. Tom Lehrer said that he gave up the practice of satire on hearing that Henry Kissinger had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The bien-pensant opinion of the moment led the committee, on occasion, to reward President Obama while he was still deciding whether he wanted to keep or change the carpet in the Oval Office; one wonders, too, whether the justification for rewarding Al Gore for climate change activism will really stand up, or whether, in time, it will look as tattered as 1994's award to Arafat, Peres and Rabin.

Still, the Norwegian committee has shown an admirable tendency to avoid the safe option, and to award prizes while the issues involved are still very much alive. It showed itself at its absolute best last year in

giving the prize to Liu Xiaobo. It gave Chinese dissidence a face and a cause; it confronted a government that the West is too apt to cower before; and, best of all, it made the Chinese government look incredibly stupid in creating a rival Confucius Peace Prize for politicians that the Chinese government approved of.

The committee has shown a robust taste for interfering in national politics when it considers that its values of liberal democracy and freedom could be propagated. Think of the award to Carl von Ossietzky in 1935 for his resistance within Nazi Germany; Andrei Sakharov in 1975; or Lech Walesa in 1983, no more than three years after the founding of Solidarity.

Most consistently, however, it has been inclined to award it to women when they can act, as Corrigan and Williams did, as an alternative to a situation of impasse. Aung San Suu Kyi is a genuine alternative to the Burmese generals and offers a future for her country; after the prize, many more people knew of her. The same is true of Shirin Ebadi and Rigoberta Menchu and perhaps, of Mother Teresa too.

The significance of the award of the prize to the Yemeni Tawakul Karman is that she stands outside the familiar scenario Western governments work with. In this region, the West has a bad tendency to support dubious governments on the basis that they are, at least, bulwarks against al-Qaaida and other unruly groups - the Roosevelt doctrine, based on the apocryphal statement that the Nicaraguan dictator Somoza (or, in other telling, the Dominican Trujillo) may be a son of a bitch, but he is our son of a bitch.

The Yemeni situation is not currently under consideration by the UN Security Council. It can be thought of as one of those zero-sum analyses governments so enjoy: if not our dictator, then it can only slide into the hands of our enemies. The award of a prize to Karman, who stands for freedom of speech and opposition to President Saleh's government, presents a difficulty to the Yemeni government and its Western

supporters. Suddenly, the situation no longer looks like a zero-sum game; there is another player, and its name, for the moment, is Karman's Women Journalists without Chains.

Some commentators would suggest that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's administration doesn't deserve this honour; despite statements of the most honourable intentions, Liberian public life remains mired in corruption. In April this year, she rather remarkably told journalists that she was planning to charge an opposition politician with sedition for organising an anti-corruption rally, quickly saying that she had meant it as an April Fool's joke.

More interesting, perhaps, is the remarkable fact that the Norwegian committee is so confident in its values that it is prepared to give the prize to a person currently in the middle of a general election campaign in their own country - at least they waited until Barack Obama was elected before giving him the seal of approval. Johnson Sirleaf's value, it suggests, is that she is exactly the sort of politician who stands outside the usual choices of warlords.

And these bold interventions are very much the style of the Nobel. They have no hesitation in singling out a person at the very beginning of a long road of public dedication, and of infuriating oppressive and powerful governments. In their backing of the powerless, they have often made their best and most resonant awards to women, who can represent an overlooked third way in the blocked paths of national arguments. For these reasons, the committee should perhaps have preferred the Saudi activist Wajeha al-Huwaider, who this year has started small with a conspicuous campaign to allow women in Saudi Arabia to drive. That might have been a subtler intervention than openly backing a national presidential candidate during the election period.

To give a brave, suffering voice a platform from which to speak is what the Peace Prize does best, and we will listen to Karman the next time she speaks. Sometime in the next 10 years, the prize will, I believe, go to a

gay person in a difficult situation, just as the prize has gone to women who have spoken out. What it celebrates and enables is simply this: someone saying, “This can’t go on. Someone ought to do something, and that someone might as well be me.” —**The Independent**