Private property, right!

THE KILLING FIELDS OF BENGAL
THE NEW MANHATTAN PROJECT
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MISSING THE DOCTORS?
THE AKHOND OF SWAT
SHASHI THAROOR’S NEW BOOK
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PROPERTY RIGHTS

Ironies on the road

“The unlikely new heroes in the saga of the return of the right to property”

RAJ CHERUBAL

“TRIBAL ACTIVISTS in Tamil Nadu petition government not to lease out their land”, blared an Internet news headline. To a property rights champion and sarcastic analogy seeker this sounded like, “I own the house yet government decides to lease out my toilet, forcing me to petition it to stop”. Either the property is mine or not, give or take a few genuine public goods, which is it?

Later, as an outsider eager to impress, I mentioned this to a group of young tribal activists from Tamil Nadu gathered in New Delhi. One of the activists sheepishly admitted that it was they who had put up the petition. To my amused “Why?” he shrugged, smiled with obvious embarrassment and said, “What else can we do?”. That about sums up the state of property rights in India.

Our constitutional contempt for property rights has turned into bird of prey, feeding mainly on the poor and the defenceless. Today it pecks and tears at everyone from street hawkers to farmers and tribals. It has distorted and corrupted land markets and turned governments, who really ought to be night watchmen into greedy land brokers. How else do you explain Nandigram? Destruction of property rights, aimed at zamindars and maharajas, has come to prey upon the very poor it was meant to help.

Indian citizens once had a fundamental right to property. But the chipping away at this right began as early as 1951, even as the ink on the Constitution was drying. Various socialist leaders continued the hammering as it was fashionable to do so. The final blow came from the Janata govern-
It is the poor who need property rights protected by rule of law, and not the rich. The rich and the powerful can secure them with might. The time is fast approaching when pro-poor activists have to reconsider their socialist leanings.

Maoists who are battling on behalf of private property owners against abuse of eminent domain by fellow Communists. Orwell must be grinning in his grave!

One can sense the Liberal’s dilemma and glee coexisting within the same skull. While it is fun to watch Communists squirm, it is difficult to criticise a business friendly, reformist Communist chief minister. Here’s the rub: chief ministers come and go, parties come and go and being pro-capitalist is not necessarily being pro-capitalism. Liberals would do well to stick to their principles.

The time is fast approaching when pro-poor activists have to reconsider their socialist leanings. Take abolition of private property rights. This is usually done in the name of the poor and as a way of redistributing “ill-gotten” wealth of the privileged class. But bizarre as it may sound, it is the poor who need property rights protected by rule of law, and not the rich. De facto, all over the world, the rich and the powerful already enjoy these privileges and defend them with might.

Try this experiment in Cuba or North Korea, countries based on Communist ideology and hence, theoretically, sans private property rights: try evicting Fidel Castro and Kim Jong-il from their residences, the “peoples’ palaces”. In a land with no private property rights, it would only be fair for anyone and everyone to occupy any and every property, wouldn’t it? Let the average Jose or Kim have his fair turn. Possible? I don’t think so. Interestingly, Kim Jong-il in North Korea even enjoys hereditary property rights as he inherited his palace from his father.

No doubt property rights, included in rule of law, will protect the factories and palaces of the rich. But it will also protect the lands of small farmers, minerals and mines of tribals, knick-knacks of street hawkers, decrepit vehicles of the rickshaw-wallahs and host of other petty property of the vast majority of Indians. Protection that only a complex and evolving property rights system can provide. It is time all pro-poor activists accept this.

Three unlikely groups may end up as catalysts, intentionally or not. Tribal activists have finally forced the passage of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. Though yet to be notified and facing opposition from conservationists, it has forced us to accept that tribal lands belong to tribals and not to everyone (read governments). Kudos to Communist leaders like Brinda Karat for lending a public face to the campaign.

Dalits have been struggling for decades to regain their “depressed class” lands. Moved by their pitiable condition, the British passed an ordinance in 1892 to assign some forest and wasteland—panchami land—to Dalits. Though framed within stringent conditions on its tradability, these lands, running into lakhs of acres, were usurped by powerful non-Dalits exploiting poverty and gullibility and employing outright deceit. Rise in Dalit political power, if sustained, is bound to bring this property rights issue to a boiling point.

Lastly, Janadesh March, a mammoth rally organised by Ekta Parishad, a grassroots Gandhian organisation, received much attention from across the political spectrum. From the list of demands on their website it is obvious that a lot of thought has gone into them. Some of the demands might, by empowering the wrong people in governments, boomerang on small and medium landowners.

But others, like devolution of authority, setting up of fast track courts for speedy settlement of property disputes, “legally enforceable national
rehabilitation policy that supersedes the Land Acquisition Act, 1894” for empowering the displaced, modernisation and computerisation of land records management for greater transparency of land records, among others, may very well lay the foundation of an effective and transparent property rights system.

The god of property rights lies in the details of such a system. As more and more of the poor demand and receive property, hard questions—about registration, titles, transparency, tradability, standardisation, inheritability and much more—will have to answered, thereby strengthening property rights. For without this, transfer of public land to the poor many, will only be an indirect gift to the politically connected few.

Sweet irony will be when actions, today of mostly socialists’, in the aid of the poor, end up in ushering a transparent capitalist system that benefits all.

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NANDIGRAM

The killing fields of Bengal

Behind the story and behind the intellectual outrage

ARNAB RAY

“AMAR NAAM, tomar naam—Vietnam”

“My name, your name, Vietnam”. Resonating across the streets of Calcutta and the villages of Bengal, this slogan of the late 60s and early 70s was as much a cry of solidarity for the Vietcong fighting the Americans as it was emblematic of the growing popularity of the philosophy of Communism among an entire generation, a political ideology that defined itself primarily by its support for the “little guy”, the downtrodden and the oppressed, as they fought the depredations of the West, evil corporations, landlords and the oppressive rule of the Congress. Tapping into this groundswell of Bengali idealistic passion, came to power a man who had positioned himself perfectly to ride the wave, branding himself as the "Sarbohazar Neta" (the leader of those who have nothing).

A man by the name of Jyoti Basu, the leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M).

Bengal was never the same again.

After nearly thirty years of Communist dominion in West Bengal, in what can only be called poetic irony, a word that rhymes with Vietnam has come to symbolise the political ideology of a new generation that defines itself primarily by its support for the “little guy” as they fight the same set of enemies as before but with the oppressive rule of the Congress Party being now replaced by the oppressive rule of the CPI(M).

That word is Nandigram—a human tragedy, an indictment of the extra-constitutional authority of the democracy-crushing CPI(M), and a political dagger in the hands of both the religious right and the “actual” Left to draw blood from their common enemy, Chief Minster Buddhadeb Bhattacharya.

Will Bengal ever be the same again?

Before we try to understand the significance of Nandigram, let us first try to get out of the way a common misconception. Nandigram is hardly about resistance to the acquisition of land for Special Economic Zones (SEZs)—the original notice by Haldia Development Authority was quickly withdrawn.

One activist, on being asked why the struggle continues even after plans for the chemical hub have been officially abandoned said "Why won't they take the land? They still might. So we will continue with our agitation”. It’s all about the struggle, the original cause be damned.

So then what is Nandigram?
It is a violent dog-fight for power being waged by the CPI(M)'s old guard on one side and the new Trinamool hired toughs backed by the Maoists on the other, a conflict that had been simmering for quite a long time and only needed a spark to set alight.

Those who believe that the Bhoomi Ucched Protirodh Committee (BUPC) is an organisation of unarmed, peaceful Robin Hood-like peasants who have been resisting the "evil government" from encroaching on their land might form an altogether different impression if they see images of policemen with their heads bashed in being taken away, unarmed protestors hurling stones at the police from a neat pile of bricks that seem to have spontaneously materialised out of nowhere, panchayat offices vandalised, a rotting body of a policeman being recovered from the river, and the most harrowing of them all—the wife of Shankar Samanta, a CPI(M) leader, detailing how her husband was dragged out of his house, hacked into pieces and set afire.

all goes to show that the BUPCs people are not Snow Whites just as CPI(M) activists are no Ci...
the rural population, a fear that has been adroitly fanned by Trinamool and Maoist elements to get farmers to take up arms.

A violent breakout had become inevitable. And when mayhem, initially targeted at CPI(M) took place in Nandigram, it became imperative for the Party to assert its power over life and death if only to set an example, if only to show that their iron control over the red dominion is as unforgiving as it always has been, if only to prevent a domino effect all over the state.

What the CPI(M) did not bargain for was the massive public upheaval in Bengal and the tidal wave of opinion directed at Chief Minister Bhat-tacharya that found expression through SMSs, online petitions, mass emails, discussions on social networking sites and a silent walk through the heart of Kolkata attended by thousands of people. While the only silver lining from this whole episode may have been this show of conscience from the people of West Bengal, what has been amusing to observe is the outpouring of vitriol against Mr Bhattacharya and the CPI(M) from the Left-leaning cultural leaders of the state—the Left Front's traditional redoubt.

This has wrongly been interpreted by many as an expression of disillusionment by the Bengali intelligentsia with Communists after the heinous events of Nandigram.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Bengali intellectuals are livid not at the CPI(M) in particular or the philosophy of Communism in general, despite the fact that it is an idea that has been confined to the dust-bins of history elsewhere in the world. They are just infuriated with Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and his politics. Because he is not Left enough.

For many of the same intellectuals had been perfectly silent during the dark days of the 80s and the 90s when Ananda Margis, members of a religious sect, were being shot down by CPI(M) goons while the law looked the other way, when CPI(M) goondas rode on bikes brandishing pipe-guns preventing entire localities from voting, and when Mr Jyoti Basu brushed atrocities on women away by saying "such things keep happening".

As long as Kolkata was brought to a standstill by massive rallies against the imperial Americans and their instruments of evil like the General Agreement on Trades and Tariffs (GATT), as long the militant trade unions of CITU sent another multinational packing from the city, as long as Mr Basu handed out plots in Salt Lake at throw-away prices from the chief minister's quota to the city's "cultural elite" (read Leftist intellectuals), everything was just ah-ok. Mr Basu once famously asked why people ever complain about CPI(M) rule after all the plots of land he has given to the press, the artists and even the Opposition.

Nothing that happened in those happy days of Jyotism was worth protesting about or writing citizen's reports on—not the reign of terror of the CPI(M), not the total suppression of contrarian opinion in all the institutions and not the marginalisation of intellectuals whose views did not tally with the Left.

Things however started changing once Mr Basu, the darling of the intellectuals, stepped down and Mr Bhattacharya took over. No one knew how different he actually was from his predecessor before he became the chief minister—as a minister he was as dogmatic as the rest, preferring to spend his time translating revolutionary works into Bengali and analysing obscure "Leftist" movies.

But then something changed.
He first put the cat among the pigeons by saying that unregulated madrasas were being used to spread messages of jihad. Immediately there was an outcry from many Left intellectuals as even hinting that there exists a concerted movement of radical Islam is blasphemy for "radical humanists". Then started his active wooing of foreign investment, even the Salim Group of Indonesia, once the bête noire of the Bengal Communists for having buttressed the anti-Communist General Suharto. Mr Bhattacharya's aggressive industrialisation drive was in sharp contrast to Mr Basu's summertime sojourns in European capitals, the official reason for which was attracting "foreign investments".

However unlike his predecessor, Mr Bhattacharya was actually getting evil capitalists into the state. He was undermining the authority of the mighty trade unions, trying to get rid of the prevalent bandh culture (or as the intellectuals would say 'putting curbs on democratic expression of dissent') and dreaming of rapidly industrialising Bengal's countryside, an endeavour that would provide opportunities for the many Bengalis who had to leave the state due to the closure of industries in the 70s and 80s because of militant trade unionism and lack of electric power, to come back again.

So what's wrong in all this?

For a state whose intellectuals have a tendency to glorify poverty and consider the act of condemning capitalists and "imperialists" preferable to the flight of capital and loss of jobs, Mr Bhattacharya represents all that is not Bengali Communism. For hardcore Leftists finding it increasingly difficult to explain why the CPI(M) central leadership opposed the same policies at the Centre that were followed in West Bengal, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya is a gigantic embarrassment to the "cause".

Surely such a person had to go!

In the midst of this disillusionment with the non-Marxist rule of Buddha mixed with a nostalgia-tinged desire to return to the old days of militant trade-unionism and the comfortable status of Jyoti Basu's "pure Marxist" rule comes Nandigram, an unifying rallying point for the "real Left" to land some hefty chin punches to Buddha.

The divided loyalties of the Bengali intellectuals, torn between their Marxist ideals and loyalty to the hand that gives, has been perhaps best captured by Mrinal Sen, a noted film-maker, walking in two marches on successive days: one taken out by "Citizens against Buddhadeb" and one taken out by the CPI(M) in support of the Chief Minister.

Lastly, Nandigram has been a gift from above for an increasingly irrelevant Mamta Banerjee and for the religious Right, who after years of being pilloried by the Left for atrocities on innocents in their states, are enjoying kicking the Reds where it hurts. They have even accused the Left of communal violence against minorities, forgetting of course to mention that many of the victims and many of the accused are Muslims.

Once the smokescreen has cleared, political blood drawn and the sense of outrage has dissipated, what's left in Nandigram is a human tragedy of epic proportions whose the victims have cut across all political lines.

What's even more horrifying however is what lies in the future.

With the continued perpetuation of the traditional Marxist power idiom of violent cadre-ism and the accompanying reactionary "itching-for-violence" Maoist-Trinamool presence in rural Bengal, Nandigram-like incidents will remain just one rumour, just one notice, just one bullet away from happening.

Arnab Ray blogs at greatbong.net
ENERGY SECURITY

The new Manhattan project

Energy security calls for government investment in renewable energy

ATANU DEY

The story of human civilisation is principally that of an increasing ability to find and exploit energy sources. Until relatively recently in human history, animals and humans were the principle sources of energy. Slavery was an unfortunate consequence of that need for energy. Coal later powered the industrial revolution. The discovery of petroleum oil about 150 years ago literally fuelled such phenomenal growth that it increased human population six-fold to its present over 6 billion.

But oil is an exhaustible resource and the supplies are diminishing even as the demand for energy is increasing. This leads to not just a steadily rising price but also an increase in global conflict induced by the fierce competition for the increasingly scarce resource. The advanced industrialised countries advanced and industrialised precisely because they developed the science and technology required to transform potential sources of energy into usable energy. Unfortunately, their legacy investment in what is now called conventional energy sources forces them into continued dependence primarily on oil and to some extent on nuclear fission power. They are prisoners of their own ingenuity in being the first to exploit non-renewable fossil fuels.

The greatest constraint that developing countries face is that of energy availability. Energy is the primary resource in the sense that all other resources, such as land and water, can be substituted to a considerable degree by energy. Yet billions of people cannot hope to satisfy their energy needs by emulating the developed countries simply because they are late in the game. Their only hope lies in exploiting energy sources that are secure and renewable. One such source is clear as broad daylight—solar. The annual solar energy incident on every square mile is approximately equivalent to 4 million barrels of oil. To capture that efficiently enough to make it commercially viable requires technologies that do not exist today.

India imports about 70 percent of its current oil needs. It can barely afford that, to say nothing of what it will be like when oil prices continue to hit higher peaks and its needs increase in pace with its growing economy. It lacks nuclear fuels, and has to debase itself begging to be given access to them.

India cannot continue to ignore reality: its continued economic growth and development is predicated on it developing the technology to exploit solar energy, and base its industrial, transportation, commercial, and household energy needs to be met through the derived electrical energy. Every bit of modern technology India uses has been developed elsewhere. It would be a welcome change if it developed the technology that would be its lifeblood. Developing technology is a matter of will, vision, and sometimes dire necessity. The Manhattan project and manned missions to the moon are examples of what can be achieved within a short time if the will exists.

India cannot afford not to develop solar energy technology for a number of reasons. First, eventually someone will, and then once again India will have to perhaps grovel for access to it. Second, and conversely, if India develops the technology, not only will it have it for its own use, it would be able to sell that technology to other nations. Third, India does not have a very large legacy infrastructure system built on oil. It therefore has the opportunity to build its infrastructure that is electricity oriented. For instance, India’s transportation needs
can be met more rationally primarily by extending the rail network backbone instead of roads, cars, airports, and aircraft.

Developing solar technology is not going to be cheap. But the alternative is going to be immeasurably more expensive. Here’s the scenario using ball-park figures. India somehow acquires the vision and the will to invest US$100 billion and within the next five years develops efficient solar energy technology. That investment reduces its dependence on foreign energy imports on average by US$100 billion every year for the foreseeable future. The returns on investment will be immense. Furthermore, if India were to be the leader of solar energy technology, it could earn from licensing that technology to other economies.

The question naturally arises: why aren’t others doing it if it is such a great idea. First, the private sector cannot match the funding ability of a large government. Second, other large governments do not face the immediate necessity that India faces and besides they are invested in their legacy systems. Another question relates to why the market cannot be depended upon to create the solution. It is well known that markets fail when there are very high fixed costs. Only a government has the ability to fund the high fixed costs and thus correct for the market failure. Later the fixed costs can be recovered through taxing the inevitable increase in the national income.

With the will to invest US$100 billion, India can acquire the best brains in the world to work on the problem. That spending will have important forward and backward linkages that will have multiplier effects throughout the economy. Research and development capacity will be built in the private sector and in educational institutions. Millions of productive jobs will be created by the need to develop the infrastructure required for the new industries that result from such a massive project.

India today is a large economy with a GDP of around US$1 trillion. The majority of its billion plus population is stuck at a subsistence level and faces an energy constraint. India’s economy cannot grow to US$ 10 trillion—what it minimally has to be if it is to become a developed economy—without having a secure, renewable, non-polluting, affordable source of energy. Investing US$100 billion may appear large but in the context of the Indian economy of the near future, it is small change. That investment works out to around US$100 per capita, an amount that is well worth the thousands of dollars of returns it can generate every year.

The biggest challenge India faces is not a lack of ability to create the energy technology which will ensure a prosperous future. It is rather the lack of vision to foresee the future and then muster up the will to being the leader. India has to ask itself: isn’t it time for it to create, innovate, transform and lead instead of being a large country of followers in the field of science and technology?

Atanu Dey is chief economist at Netcore Solutions in Mumbai and author of the Rural Infrastructure & Services Commons (RISC) model. His blog is at deeshaa.org
Securing Pakistan’s crown jewels
“THERE IS always the worry about Pakistan’s nuclear weapons going loose,” says strategic analyst K. Subrahmanyam, “if that happens we will be second in the line of attack. The first target will be the US, but if the jihadists cannot get to Washington, India will certainly be next.”

But Subrahmanyam adds, “So long as the Pakistan army stays a cohesive force, the nuclear assets will remain secure. It is not a question of whether General Musharraf is in control or not. The issue here is so long as the Pakistan army remains a professional army, it will remain in effective control.” Subrahmanyam believes that even if Musharraf goes, his successor will make sure the nuclear setup is well guarded.

- Seema Guha, Can Pakistan’s nukes get loose, Daily News & Analysis, 21 Nov 2007

Still with Musharraf
Musharraf is not even like the shah of Iran. He is not the living embodiment of a regime, as the shah was. He is not irreplaceable. He is not the lone savior of a whole way of governance. He is but a general, and not an especially effective one at that.

There are other generals. With all the billions of dollars in aid the United States provides to Pakistan, it ought to be possible to discuss with the Pakistani military alternatives to the man who so poorly serves their interests. Musharraf may be willing to lose American aid in order to remain in power, but that is unlikely to seem attractive to the men who work for him. It ought to be possible to find a general who is willing to let Pakistan return to a democratic path and meanwhile do a better job of fighting Pakistan’s real enemies.

Much is riding on the Bush administration’s ability to steer its way through this transition in Pakistan. President Bush’s claim that Musharraf can be trusted to lead Pakistan toward democracy is not credible. In its better moments, the United States has known when to tell such leaders that their time was up.


Arming Pashtuns...again!
THE TRIBAL proposal, a strategy paper prepared by staff members of the United States Special Operations Command, has been circulated to counterterrorism experts but has not yet been formally approved by the command’s headquarters in Tampa, Fla. Some other elements of the campaign have been approved in principle by the Americans and Pakistanis and awaited financing, like $350 million over several years to help train and equip the Frontier Corps, a paramilitary force that has about 85,000 members and is recruited from border tribes.


SIMI’s networks
PROSCRIPTION, THOUGH, has done little to disrupt SIMI’s networks. Several key leaders succeeded in escaping ill-planned police sweeps against the organisation, and continued to work out of camps in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Some States flatly refused to cooperate with police action against SIMI, pointing to the Union Government’s failure to act against Hindu fundamentalist groups involved in violence, like the Bajrang Dal.

As early as 2002, SIMI operatives Sayeedah Shah Raza and Amil Pervez were arrested in Kolkata with large supplies of explosives. In 2003, Intelligence Online reported that as many as 350 Indians working in West Asia had been recruited by SIMI sympathisers to fight the United States. SIMI’s name again featured in investigations of the 2006 serial bombings in Mumbai, when key suspects, notably Rahil Ahmad Sheikh, turned out to have had past links with the organisation. In Uttar Pradesh, too, SIMI linkages were thrown up in investigations of the 2005 serial bombings — just as they have been in the course of the most recent attacks.

Fighting SIMI, it is clear, will take more than arrest warrants and intelligence work: a coherent strategy to clean up the toxic political landscape from which it arose is desperately needed.

- Praveen Swami, SIMI and the cult of the Kalashnikov, The Hindu, 28 Nov 2007

Wither India-Russia relations?
THE POLITICS are no longer right. New Delhi’s dance with Washington is timed in sync with Moscow’s adoption of a hard line towards the west. The trilateral Russia-China-India talk shop is an ineffectual band-aid over a deep sword cut, because Moscow has few expectations from either India or China.

Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs complains that both Asian giants pay lip service to multi-polarity, and the primacy of the UN, while actually aligning their foreign policies to the US in order to gain short-term objectives like the lifting of sanctions, preferential trade relations, and an easier visa regime.

- Ajai Shukla, From Russia...with a bill, Broadsword, 21 Nov 2007

INDIA APPEARS to have failed in persuading its principal military ally, Russia, to stop China from supplying Russian-made RD-93 aircraft engines to Pakistan, according to a report in Jane’s Defence Weekly.

Pakistan and China are partners in the Joint Fighter-17 (JF-17) Thunder programme.

Pakistan Air Force (PAF) Air Chief Marshal Tanvir Mahmood Ahmed told the British journal that the PAF expected to receive the first eight JF-17s powered by RD-93 engines in the next few months.

- China to export Russian jet engines to Pakistan: PAF, Daily Times, 21 Nov 2007

China’s nuclear deal with Kazakhstan
KAZAKHSTAN HAS agreed to share its uranium resources with China in exchange for equity in Chinese nuclear power facilities in a strategic deal that brings together the world’s fastest growing uranium and nuclear electricity producers.

The president of Kazatomprom, Kazakhstan’s state-owned nuclear power company, said: “We will swap shares in uranium production for shares in Chinese atomic facilities … This is the first time China has allowed any foreign company to become a shareholder in its atomic power industry enterprises.”

Two of China’s leading nuclear power companies, would team up to take a 49 per cent stake in a uranium mining venture in Kazakhstan with Kazatomprom retaining a 51 per cent stake, Mr Dzhakhishev said. In exchange, Kazatomprom would take equity in Chinese nuclear fuel processing or electricity generation plants.

- Isabel Gorst, Kazakhstan in nuclear deal with Beijing, Financial Times, 18 Nov 2007

Do you have something for FILTER?
If you have a journal article or paper that you think your fellow readers might be interested in, please email it to us at pragati@nationalinterest.in
Overview

The Winter Session of Parliament is underway. Announcing an early and shortened session, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha are to be in session for 17 sittings over a period of 23 days, between November 15th and December 7th, 2007.

Among the 16 bills listed for consideration and passing this session, those that have drawn a fair amount of interest include:

The Banking Regulation (Amendment) Bill, 2005 proposes to amend the provisions related to acquisition of banks, voting rights and transactions with related companies.

Anyone who wants to acquire more than 5% shareholding of a bank must seek prior approval from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The cap of 10% on voting rights of shareholders is being removed; voting rights would be in proportion to shares held. The bill allows banks to take permission from RBI to lend to companies in which any of its director is engaged as a director or employee; these transactions were earlier prohibited.

RBI has been given the power to inspect associate enterprises of banks. All co-operative societies would require a licence from RBI to do banking business. The bill has been stalled for over a year on opposition from the left parties, primarily on the provisions related to acquisitions and voting rights.

The Payment and Settlement Systems Bill, 2006 designates RBI as the regulator to oversee the various payment and settlement systems in the country.

The bill lays down the requirements of a settlement system. Importantly, it recognises net settlements, and authorises RBI to permit both gross and net settlement procedures.

The Factories (Amendment) Bill, 2005, is an amendment to the Factories Act, 1948. There was a section in the original Act that prevented women from working in factories in the night shift. Following writ petitions by women’s organisations that these provisions were discriminatory, some High Courts had struck down this clause as unconstitutional. The proposed Bill allows the state government and other authorities to permit women workers in factories at night, provided they have consulted with the concerned employer or representative workers organisation. The real issue related to this bill is the tricky task of striking a balance between the risk of exploitation of women workers and their right to earn a living.

Under various labour laws, enterprises employing more than 19 persons have to maintain 53 registers and file 11 returns. The Labour Laws Amendment Bill, 2005 exempts enterprises employing up to 500 persons from this requirement. They have to maintain two registers and file one return in the prescribed form.

The Communal Violence (Prevention, Control and Rehabilitation of Victims) Bill, 2005, is part of the UPA government’s Common Minimum Programme to introduce a comprehensive law to deal with communal violence. The bill authorises the state government to declare an area as communally disturbed under certain specific conditions and allows the district magistrate or appropriate authority to take all measures necessary to control the violence. It doubles the punishment under various laws (such as the Indian Penal code and the Arms Act) for crimes denoted as communal violence and establishes Special Courts to try these offences. It discusses provisions to protect the identity of witnesses. The Bill proposes a system of compensation including payment of immediate compensation at 20% of the total compensation. Major issues with regard to the Bill relate to implementation. The main problem in the current system is the low rate of conviction in cases related to communal violence. In the absence of measures to ensure physical protection of witnesses and improving conviction rates, increasing the punishments may be of no effect.

The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Bill, 2007, makes it a legal obligation for children above the age of 18 and heirs to provide financial maintenance to parents and senior citizens who are unable to take care of themselves. The Bill allows state governments to set up ‘maintenance tribunals’ in every sub-division to which senior citizens may file a case and if granted, obtain a mandatory maintenance fee of up to Rs 10,000 per month from their child or legal heir. One of the major issues related to the Bill is that the onus of well-being of senior citizens is being placed on their children, and not being taken up by the State (as mandated by the Directive Principles of the Constitution).

The Armed Forces Tribunal Bill, 2005 and the Sashastra Seema Bal Bill, 2006. The Armed Forces Tribunal Bill creates an Armed Forces Tribunal to adjudicate on disputes relating to service matters and appeals arising out of verdicts of courts martial of members of the Army, Navy and Air Force. The Sashastra Seema Bal Bill provides for the constitution and regulation of an armed force of the Union for ensuring the security of the borders of India. The Bill establishes a self-contained statute by which this force (previously referred to as the Special Service Bureau, which guards the Indo-Nepal and the Indo-Bhutan borders) may be regulated.

Two Bills have been introduced to regularise Ordinances. The National Capital Territory of Delhi Laws Bill, 2007 seeks to maintain status quo on unauthorised developments and encroachments. This law would stop the current process of sealing and demolition of unauthorised structures by the municipal corporation following directions from the Supreme Court.

The Payment of Bonus Bill, 2007 raises the eligibility limit for bonus to employees from Rs 3500 per month to Rs 10,000 per month.

Compiled by Priya Parker, an analyst with PRS Legislative Research, www.prsindia.org
Improving fiscal responsibility

Institutional reform is a must for medium-term fiscal management

MUKUL G ASHER

AS PREPARATIONS are underway for the Central government’s 2008-09 Budget, it is an appropriate time to discuss sustainability of the overall fiscal targets set under the FRBM (Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management) Act of 2003.

This Act set the medium-term target of elimination of Revenue Deficit (current receipts less current expenditure) to zero by 2008-09 and to generate surpluses thereafter. It also sets the Fiscal Deficit (total expenditure less total receipts net of borrowing) target of no more than 3 percent of GDP by 2008-09. The Act also recognises the fiscal risk of liabilities arising from government guarantees and the like (called contingent liabilities), and sets limit on them.

The officially projected Revenue Deficit of the Central government for 2007-08 is 1.5 percent of GDP (4.4 percent in 2002-03), while the Gross Fiscal Deficit is projected at 3.3 percent (5.9 percent in 2002-03). Many States have also passed their own FRBM Acts. Their passage suggest that there is a consensus that a sustainable medium term framework is an essential element for sustaining high-growth, and for generating 140 million jobs needed between 2005 and 2020.

In spite of this consensus, it appears that the FRBM Act’s target of eliminating the Revenue Deficit is unlikely to be met. The attainment of Fiscal Deficit target of 3 percent of GDP can only be met if the 2008-09 Budget exhibits an unlikely restraint on populist expenditure schemes in anticipation of the impending General Election in 2009. Ongoing deliberations of the Sixth Pay Commission for civil servants add to further uncertainty.

The annual issuance by the UPA government of oil, fertiliser and other bonds which are off-budget, are already estimated to be between 1.5 and 2.0 percent of GDP. With oil prices near USD 100 per barrel and rising input costs for fertiliser production, this may rise even further. The refusal by the government to reconsider this practice, or even to revise subsidy levels according to world prices, not only compromises FRBM targets, but also puts high sustained growth at risk. Such behaviour by the UPA (or any other governments in the states) must be punished in the electoral arena.

The quality of fiscal consolidation achieved so far also requires improvement. Much of the progress has been due to robust nominal GDP growth of around 12 percent; and due to increases in effective tax rates, combined with limited efforts towards broadening of the tax base.

Progress in expenditure management and in obtaining better outcomes from the outlays has however been painfully slow. Without it, the FRBM targets are vulnerable to growth slowdown, a prospect that cannot be ruled out in the current uncertain external environment.

The FRBM Act, like the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) set by the European Union (EU) for its members, relies heavily on quantitative limits to budgetary deficit as a share of GDP. The EU deficit (it also has a 3 percent target) is however based on an accrual budgeting which besides being complex, can only be calculated ex-post. This prevents fiscal correction during the ongoing fiscal year.

India uses cash budget which is simpler, and can be calculated monthly. For this reason, even as India widens the use of accrual and outcome budgeting, cash budget should continue to form the basis for quantitative fiscal targets. Regardless of the budget used, formal and informal norms,
and institutional checks and balances should severely limit any recourse to financial jugglery, such as one-off policy measures.

Reliance on quantitative targets however has a major limitation of de-emphasising the quality of public finance policies in general, and of the process of achieving the fiscal targets in particular. Repeated concerns expressed by successive prime ministers that outlays are not being effectively transformed into outcomes (while contradicting themselves by launching more and more expensive and complex schemes such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) strongly suggests that promotion of appropriate institutional and organisational changes (involving whole gamut from laws, regulations, organisational and governance structures, budgeting procedures, civil service recruitment and promotion criteria) should receive high priority.

The 2008-09 Budget should incorporate specific steps towards modernisation of tax administration, making it consistent with India’s US$1.1 trillion dollar economy with external sector approaching 45 percent of GDP. The Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) should be given substantial autonomy to achieve the revenue and other goals, with insistence on high degree of accountability and transparency. Human resource and technological aspects of the tax administration require urgent reforms.

It is high time to reconsider the role of the revenue secretary. Any potential inter-service issues should be ironed out in the larger public interest in rationalising the responsibilities of the revenue secretary and of the CBDT.

There is also a need for more sophisticated revenue forecasting based on prudent economic assumptions. The establishment of an autonomous centre devoted to policy-relevant research on tax administration and for developing data-mining and revenue forecasting capacities merits serious consideration. The February 2008 budget speech would be an appropriate juncture to signal the UPA’s commitment to this initiative.

A framework should be laid to achieve greater co-ordination between the CBDT and the customs and excise tax administration as this would be crucial in smoothly implementing the proposed Goods and Services Tax (GST). About half of the GST revenue is usually obtained at the importing stage, and in many countries such lack of co-ordination has been resulted in the poor performance of the GST. The process of creating consensus on administrative modalities, design and revenue sharing between the centre and the states must be pursued with greater urgency.

The central issue of quality of public finance policies and management is also equally crucial at the state and local levels. They should not feel complacent as their fiscal positions are even more vulnerable to slower growth and other exogenous factors. In particular, modern financial management practices, and focus on results need to be emphasised by them.

Many states have passed their own FRBM Acts. A better co-ordination between expenditure plans of the states negotiated with the Planning Commission and the FRBM targets of the States is required.

For the municipalities and other urban bodies, such reforms will be essential to access financial and capital markets (e.g. through securitisation of property tax revenues) to finance capital expenditure. By 2030, about 45 percent of India’s population, numbering about 625 million people will be living in urban areas and their periphery. Given the general neglect of the urban bodies, institutional and organisational fiscal reform is considerably overdue and urgent. Isolated attempts at budget reforms, such as in Ahmedabad and Bangalore are encouraging, but insufficient. The aim must be to develop an active municipal bond market by about 2015.

To ensure a sustainable medium-term fiscal framework, the finance minister should explicitly recognise the need for better fiscal institutions and organisational arrangements, and propose specific measures in his February 2008 Budget speech. This would help ease a major constraint in securing India’s economic future. The linkage between municipal fiscal management by the centre, the states and the electoral outcomes needs to be made stronger. There is no substitute for competence in governance and in government.

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HIGHER EDUCATION

A crisis profound

Indian universities needs reform, not fatalism

HARSH V PANT

IT TURNS out that not a single Indian university made it to a list of top 200 higher educational institutions in the world. As many as ten Chinese universities made it. Meanwhile the Vice Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) wrote a letter to the parents of his students threatening to convert the academic session into a “Zero Year” if there was a repeat of violence that occurred on the campus in September.

Amid all the claims about the rise of India as a major player in the international system, it is often ignored that India continues to face some fundamental obstacles in its drive to achieve its full potential. One of the most significant of which is the crisis in India’s higher education system, something that goes unnoticed amid the glare of the engineers, doctors and managers that seems to be emerging from India’s premier professional institutions such as the IITs and the IIMs.

While a recent national conference of university vice chancellors, Arjun Singh, the Union human resources development minister, described higher education in India as a sick child and asked that it should be given a new direction so as to be able to better serve the cause of the nation’s youth. Seeking a road map on higher education from the delegates, he asked them to define “the content, extent, methodology and basic ingredients of higher education.”

While Mr Singh’s comments certainly need to be welcomed it is surprising that it took him more than three years to address what should have been his top priority when he assumed office. It is also interesting to note that some of the minister’s own actions in the past three years have not exactly served the goals of improving the quality of higher education in the country.

Knowledge is the key variable that will define the global distribution of power in the 21st century and India has also embarked on a path of economic success relying on its high-tech industries. But given the fragile state of India’s higher education system, it is not clear if India will be able to sustain its present growth trajectory. While India’s nearest competitor, China is re-orienting and investing in its higher education sector to meet the challenges of the future, India continues to ignore the problem as if the absence of world-class research in Indian universities is something that will rectify itself on its own.

While India may be producing well-trained engineers and managers from its flagship IITs and IIMs, it is not doing so in sufficient numbers. There is also a growing concern that while private engineering and management institutions are flouris-

Indian universities, which should have been hubs of intellectual activity, are more in the news for political machinations than for research excellence.
The context in which its engineers, its doctors and its managers are emerging is not shaped by the liberal ethic of higher education, something that should be its very essence. Social science and humanities are being devalued today vis-à-vis science and technology which can have some serious consequences.

Democratic requires a questioning citizenry brought up on liberal education that gives its citizens the ability to interrogate and investigate the claims of authority. The real value of liberal education comes from a distinctive quality of mind and character that encourages the ability to explore moral and political questions from a variety of perspectives. India’s higher education has long ceased to ask big questions, the most important of which should be: What kind of citizens is the Indian education system producing?

Some scholars have pointed out that a process of privatisation of higher education is underway in India, a result not of some comprehensive programme of education reform but as a consequence of the collapse of the public sector and the withdrawal of the middle classes. This is indeed a worrying trend. The government must realise that just by pumping more money into the system or by building more universities it will not be able to remedy the underlying rot.

With the National Knowledge Commission calling for a fundamental change in higher education and the HRD Minister finally realising that something drastic needs to be done, the stage is hopefully set for a radical overhaul of the higher education sector. It would be a grave travesty if a government led by an educationist himself fails to do anything to stem the rot in India’s higher education.

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EMISSION

Doctors across borders

Some conclusions about emigrating doctors are hasty

ROHIT PRADHAN

THE EMIGRATION of health professionals from the developing world to member countries of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) remains a highly contentious issue. In America itself, according to the American Medical Association (AMA), International Medical Graduates (IMGs) constitute approximately 25% of the physician population. Indians are by far the largest group—nearly 20% of American physicians were trained in India. According to some calculations, of the nearly 24,000 medical graduates India produces every year, 1200 eventually emigrate.

A recent study by Manas Kaushik, Abhishek Jaiswal, Naseem Shah & Ajay Mahal in the Bulletin of the World Health Organisation has approached the emigration of physicians from a slightly different angle. The researchers have looked at physicians trained at India’s premier medical school, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), and have concluded that nearly 54% of its graduates (1989-2004) currently reside abroad. Focusing on quality of physicians emigrating, they have shown that general category students (those who did not benefit from reservations) are more likely to leave India for greener pastures abroad.

The findings are easy enough to explain. Medical profession in the West remains highly competitive, and AIIMS graduates—with their superior training—are at a distinct advantage. Quite clearly, this emphasis on quality also means that students with the highest academic achievement would contribute disproportionately to the ranks of emigrating physicians. Indeed, it is surprising that the researchers have declared the lower proportion of emigrating physicians among the reserved category students as an “unintended benefit of affirmative action programs”. It is premature to reach such a finding without comparing the rates of emigration among affirmative action beneficiaries in AIIMS with students of other medical schools. It is reasonable to hypothesise that emigration rates would be higher among AIIMS graduates across all categories.

Such issues apart, the main question remains: Are the researchers justified in arguing that “intervention should focus on highly trained individuals in the top institutions that contribute disproportionately to the loss of human resources for health?” There are two ways to answer this question.

First is to ask whether the health profession—and highly skilled physicians—can be viewed separately from the larger pattern of migration. According to the United Nations, in 2000, 175 million people were living outside their country of origin. Around 65% of the migrants have been classified as highly skilled. According to some estimates, 20% of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) graduates have moved abroad. Therefore, focusing merely on physician immigration without appreciating the context of a rapidly globalising world is patently misleading. In fact, physicians move abroad for similar rewards as other high skilled professionals: higher salaries, better technology and better standards of living.

Instead of subsidising higher education and then attempting to curb emigration, the emphasis must be where state intervention is directly required: rural areas and primary health care.
An approach which focuses on emigration of specific groups rather than the economic, political, and social contexts which make emigration desirable is staring through the wrong end of the telescope.

Second, is the Indian health system really affected adversely by the emigration of physicians and other health professionals? Currently, around 600,000 doctors are registered with the Medical Council of India. The physician-population ratio of 56 per 100,000 is inadequate and below the levels recommend by the World Health Organisation. However, the distribution is heavily skewed and the physician-population ratio in urban areas has been estimated to approach 200 per 100,000 which approximates the physician concentration in developed countries. In other words, India faces a severe shortage of physicians in rural areas, a problem which is not amenable merely to increased number of physicians. How many of these AIIMS graduates would have practised in remote rural areas? In fact, it is questionable if AIIMS and other centres of medical excellence have justified the public expenditure on them. The budget of AIIMS—500 Crores—may be smaller than the research budget of an average American university but still it consumes a large proportion of the health budget. While so much attention is focused on tertiary care centres, the latest round of National Family Health Survey (NHFS-3) has clearly demonstrated the abysmal state of Indian public health system. Infant mortality still remains high (57 per 1000) while less than 50% of India children are fully immunised. None of this requires the intervention of highly skilled health personnel—rather the opposite—a renewed focus on general health practitioners and other health personnel.

The entire issue of migration needs to be examined in a broader economic context. Migration, like globalisation, need not be a zero-sum game. To view it merely as “loss” and “gain” is to miss the immense economic opportunities it affords. The movement of high-tech personnel between India and the developed world has benefited both the parties. India is among the leading recipients of foreign remittances. This apart, many highly skilled individuals have moved back to India and helped fuel the Indian IT and services boom. A similar trend is being witnessed in the medical field with non-resident Indian doctors investing in greenfield hospital projects.

Over the next few decades, with the demographic shift, the developed world will face an increasing shortage of trained health personnel. In nursing alone, according to the American Nursing Association, a shortfall of 200,000 is expected by 2013. India is uniquely placed to take advantage of this emerging opportunity. After all, almost every factor which allowed India to emerge as the world’s most competitive destination for IT and outsourcing is present in the case of medical education. If medical education is liberalised, India can emerge as the health sciences outsourcing destination of the world. It will not only improve the standards of medical education in India, but can also help fund a much-needed expansion of India’s public health system.

The emigration of health professionals to the developed world should be addressed from a different paradigm. Instead of subsidising higher education and then attempting to curb emigration, the emphasis and the resources must be directed where state intervention is directly required: rural areas and primary health care. Similarly, by creating conditions conducive for operation of free markets in medical education, the India can hope to exploit the immense arbitrage opportunities of migration and globalisation.
PAKISTAN

The Akhond of Swat

A closer look at the separatist religious movement

MANAN AHMED

WHO OR WHY, or which, or what, is Maulana Fazlullah of Swat? Recent headlines from Pakistan have been grim—pitched battles with many reports of casualties and mass migration of civilians from the conflict region. Yet, the foreign media hasn’t really focused on Maulana Fazlullah—perhaps thinking that the story of “Talibanisation” covers this particular mullah just as well as it does any other. At a cursory glance, it all does blend in. The overall deterioration in the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in recent years—specifically in Waziristan, the Malakand Agency regions, Dir, Bajaur, Swat and areas around Peshawar—is often called “Talibanisation” and is often pegged to the aftermath of the Afghanistan war of 2001. There is, though, a longer history that offers some additional venues of thought. At the very least, it tells us to pay attention to the local even as we highlight the trans-national aspects of movements like the Taliban.

Shah Ismail (1789-1831) and Sayyid Ahmed Barelvi (1786-1831), specifically, are pivotal figures in the memory and history of Swat. In the late 1820s, they waged a religious war against Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s forces for the control of Peshawar. They succeeded briefly, declared themselves an emirate where the creed of the Prophet Mohammed held sway, and were swept away in 1831—killed in battle. Shah Ismail and Sayyid Ahmed, though defeated, emerged as an integral part of the narrative of anti-imperialism. Not simply for their militant struggle for the establishment of an Islamic polity, they came to represent a profound connection to the revivalist thought of nineteenth century Muslims in India. Shah Ismail was the grandson of Shah Waliullah—the progenitor of the Deobandis who have continued to enjoy a wide following in NWFP. It is more fashionable nowadays to connect Shah Waliullah to Abdul Wahhab and build an argument about some unitary “fundamentalist” strain of Islamic thought—but that is a wrong notion. There are crucial differences, not only in history but in the theological arguments underlining Deobandi and Wahabbi ideologies of revivalist Islam. The Deobandi, in particular, combined the idea of a polity based on Islamic Sharia and free from foreign influences with a more quixotic attempts to “migrate” or “settle” a Caliphate in Afghanistan. (The migration of thousands of Muslims to Afghanistan in 1920 needs historical attention.)

The mountainous regions between Kabul and Peshawar and across Baluchistan and Gilgit remained an odd absence in the centralising ideology of Pakistan. Partly it was due to the linguistic and ethnic communities that stretched beyond the nation-state. Partly it was a function of the lack of political legitimacy for any federal government in the region. The Pakistani State, created with unequal halves of East and West Pakistan, proved unequal to the task of imagining itself. In 1971, Bangladesh emerged out of the political chaos and opportunism and military destruction wrought by West Pakistani armies. In 1972, Pakistan embarked on a new path to re-affirm itself.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the father of Benazir Bhutto, was the chief architect of a program of Islamisation to glue together the rest of Pakistan. He looked towards the pan-Islamic movement to position Pakistan as an international entity that wasn’t simply a footnote in the red hot Cold War. Bhutto’s Islamisation efforts continued under General Zia ul Haq, who overthrew Bhutto in 1977. Except that under Zia ul Haq, they became the Sunnification efforts to counter his (and Saudi) fears of a Shia revolution sweeping out of Iran and across the Muslim world. The frontier, as always, of these efforts was the NWFP. It is around this moment that the Soviet-Afghan war overshadows all local
narratives but it will be interesting to study the movement of Pashtun men out of NWFP territories and into the urban centers of Karachi and Lahore—and further to Riyadh and Doha—for economic reasons. We are sorely lacking scholarship that can trace these movements back to the origins where petro-dollars (from doing labour in the Gulf states) transformed these small communities. It is one sad casualty of our current myopia that we are interested only in the monolithic account of Soviet-Afghan war and the “Talibanisation” and continue to stress “top-down” factors in our analysis.

It may be shocking to remember that Benazir Bhutto who is now proclaiming herself as the sole secular leader was none too shy about cutting deals with TNSM where it suited her.

In November 1994, the year old government of Benazir Bhutto faced a crisis in NWFP. Some of the Pashtun tribal chiefs, led by a Maulana Sufi Muhammad proclaimed that Sharia needed to be enforced in NWFP. His movement, the Tehrik Nifaz-i Shariat Muhammad (Movement for the Establishment of the Path of Muhammad), enjoyed widespread support. He was shutting down airports and businesses and making life hard for the Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party. So, she cut a deal. It may be shocking to remember that this same Benazir Bhutto who is now proclaiming herself as the sole secular leader was none too shy about cutting such deals where it suited her. The Musharraf regime also turned to TNSM and Maulana Sufi Muhammad to try and operate in the Swat region. In late 2001, after the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom against Mullah Omar’s Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Sufi Mohammed gathered a force of several thousand tribesmen to fight against American troops. But this force did not survive the encounter with the Northern Alliance. Sufi Mohammed himself survived the campaign but was arrested by Pakistani authorities upon his return. The American air strike on Bajaur in November 2006 and the Lal Masjid crisis this year put an end to the partnership between the TNSM and the Musharraf regime.

The reason is Maulana Fazlullah and his declaration of open hostility against the Pakistan military. Fazlullah is the son-in-law of Maulana Sufi Muhammad and has organised his own army called Shaheen Commandos. He is young—30 or 32—and comes from Imam Dheri in Swat. Around a year or so ago, as the Imam of the seminary in Imam Dheri, he established an FM radio channel in the area to deliver sermons and became a local celebrity. After the Lal Masjid crisis, he declared jihad on the state of Pakistan. His Shaheen Commandos now control Matta. In early October, in an act reminiscent of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Fazlullah’s forces blasted off the head of a 23-feet tall statue of the Buddha at Jehanabad. And the fight is slowly reaching the capital.

Maulana Sufi Mohammed has apparently been released after General Musharraf imposed martial law, even as the Pakistani Army has commenced new operations against Fazlullah’s forces in Swat. The use of helicopter gunships and heavy artillery against the insurgents is believed to have led to an exodus of the civilian population from the region. This is certainly a complex and deeply troubling development for the state of Pakistan. The rise of local militias and the oppressive reaction by the military was certainly a contributing factor in the secession of East Pakistan. And a similar pattern is clear in Balochistan. The recent killing of Mir Balach Khan Marri, a Baloch rebel leader, is sure to have wide repercussions for that separatist movement.

So to wrap it up: separatist religious movement in Swat, separatist nationalist movement in Baluchistan and a separate Musharraf from his dictatorship movement in the rest of the country. Things can only get better, no?

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A NEWSPAPER column is, as demonstrated by its best practitioners, a minor but nevertheless demanding art form, the essence of which is to give memorable expression to the topical by linking it to deeper realities.

Those who carry it off most successfully on the Indian scene—Ramachandra Guha, Vir Sanghvi, Girish Shallow, Santosh Desai, Mukul Kesavan, Swaminathan S. Aiyar—delight and provoke us not only with their command over their subject but also their flair for shrewd generalisation and the economy and lucidity of their expression.

Sadly none of these qualities are visible in Shashi Tharoor’s *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cellphone*, a ragbag of columns and op-eds in which ancient platitudes, second-hand insights, and tacky witticisms are aimed at the reader with a quite breathtaking conviction. Tharoor has never been a very good columnist anyway, so his unwise (but in some ways perfectly characteristic) decision to gather up his jottings only serves to expose more clearly his considerable shortcomings in the realm of both thought and expression.

Let us begin with the thought. India, proclaims Tharoor, is an ancient civilisation of great diversity and richness, “a conglomeration of languages, cultures, ethnicities”, “a land of contrasts”. Our pluralist ethos is our greatest strength, yet because we have so many differences we often lapse into anarchy and division. Our economy is booming and our middle-class expanding; the cellphone is the symbol of this economic revolution. But a large chunk of our population still languishes in poverty, and if we don’t attend to this problem then, in Tharoor’s heavy-handed metaphor, the elephant which is turning into a tiger may turn back into an elephant.

Tharoor asks us to mark also that elected leaders are often corrupt and unprincipled, and a blot on the name of democracy. Corruption is so endemic that the size of the black economy is probably as large as that of the white economy. To turn now to cricket: cricket emerged in a foreign land, but its spiritual home now is India. Cinema: movies are the great Indian national pastime, and Bollywood dominates popular discourse in India. Health: Indians are somehow acutely conscious of personal hygiene but unmindful of public sanitation. The mango: the mango is the king of fruits, but it sells at prices that make it the fruit of kings. Although Tharoor is an Indian writer writing about India for Indian readers, his writing is somehow pitched at the level of, say, a Norwegian writing about India for Norwegian readers.

Tharoor’s interpretation of particulars is as dismaying as his stultifying generalities. Nowhere is he more wearisome than when composing elaborations on his favourite theme: the Nehruvian idea of India’s unity in diversity. Take his reflections on the rise of the cricketer Irfan Pathan. That Pathan, a Gujarati Muslim and the son of a muezzin, could play for India and attain the popularity he did in the wake of Gujarat 2002 is for Tharoor “a testament to the indestructible pluralism of our country”. This is dubious in itself, but a further advertisement of pluralism, Tharoor avers, was the Indian team itself, a champion side “including two Muslims and a Sikh, and captained by a Hindu with a wife named Donna”. Tharoor here...
carelessly confers an honorary Christianity upon Sourav Ganguly’s wife Dona—one cannot see any other reason why her name merits a mention—to fill up a blank in his pluralist headcount.

Elsewhere Tharoor recounts an incident, which he knows only through the testimony of “two American scholars”, of a Muslim girl whose father refused to let her play one of Krishna’s dancing gopis in a play, but had no objection to her playing a stationary Krishna holding a flute. Anybody can see that this story is marked by doubt and confusion (and distaste for low activities like dancing) as much as assent, but for Tharoor it is “a lovely story that illustrates the cultural synthesis of Hinduism and Islam in northern India”. Tharoor sees himself as a proud carrier of the Nehruvian torch, but is happily oblivious to how complacent and patronising a Nehruvian he is.

Nor is Tharoor much more edifying when talking about another of his pet subjects, “the new India”. Watching the excitable cricketer S Sreesanth slog a bullying South African fast bowler over his head for six and follow it up with a frenzied war dance, Tharoor is convinced that this incident epitomises “all that is different about the new India” - bold, fearless, confident. As the flag-bearers of the bold new India and the secular and pluralist India respectively, Sreesanth and Irfan Pathan may, to go by Tharoor’s reading, be the most meaningful pair of new-ball bowlers in the history of cricket. Tharoor continues: “Sreesanth’s India is the land that throws out the intruders of Kargil…that wins Booker Prizes and Miss Universe contests.” I felt embarrassed even reading such twaddle.

Of course we have still not approached one of Tharoor’s main subjects, one that looms almost as large in the book as the India he loves so. This topic begins with the same letter as India and stops right there: it is the writerly self, the “I”. Tharoor is not only saying something that all of us keep saying, but also insisting that he said the very thing earlier, as if by a continuous process of self-quotation he can lever the thought into the domain of his personal copyright.

Consider these two examples. Coming across a photograph of a sadhu chatting on a mobile phone at the Kumbh mela, Tharoor remarks that this contrast “says so much about the land of paradoxes that is today’s India—a country that, as I wrote many years ago, manages to live in several centuries at the same time.” In another passage about India as a land of contrasts and extremes, Tharoor closes a paragraph with the lines: “Any truism about India can be immediately contradicted by another truism about India. I once jokingly observed that ‘anything you can say about India, the opposite is also true.’”

What is going on here? In these lines we find not one but two Shashi Tharoors—Shashi Tharoor present and Shashi Tharoor past—supporting each other in confirmation of the most trite characterisations. Tharoor is not only saying something that all of us keep saying, but also insisting that he said the very thing earlier, as if by a continuous process of self-quotation he can lever the thought into the domain of his personal copyright. The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cellphone abounds with such predictable moves out towards India on the one hand and preening gestures in towards the self on the other.

Not all of Tharoor’s book is so tedious. In one chapter he argues persuasively that Hindutva, an ideology without any base in Hinduism even if it shares the same root word, is in effect a separatist movement, one that appeals to a majority rather than a minority. Another section offers some useful profiles of little-known or neglected figures. But most of Tharoor’s writing is just noise. Although we know from Tharoor that “anything you can say about India, the opposite is also true”, there is little chance about the same diversity of opinion about a work so banally, so fatally, in love with India as The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cellphone.

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