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The perfect state

Searching for Ramarajya - the Indian ideal of good governance

Only more than a month has elapsed since you took the sceptre in your hand, O Raghava! And mortals have become strangers to disease, death does not overtake even men worn out with age, women undergo no labour-pains during parturition and human beings are well-built indeed. An abundance of joy has fallen to the lot of every citizen dwelling in the town, O king! Pouring down nectarean water clouds rain at the proper time. Even the very winds which blow here are capable of giving a delightful touch, and are pleasing and healthful. People living both in the cities and in the country, arriving in the capital, declare, ‘May such a sovereign be our ruler for long’, O king!” (Srimad Valmiki Ramayana, Uttara Kandam XLI: 15-21)

Every civilisation has its utopian visions and there can be little doubt that "Ramarajya" is that vision for Indians. Until the rise of Hindutvavadi organizations in the 1990s, the term was available to and evoked by leaders and thinkers across the spectrum because it could safely be assumed that people understood it to mean exceptionally good, even perfect governance.

What is “Ramarajya”? The quotation with which this article begins appears in the Uttara Kandam, added to the main text of the kavya, which begins with Rama’s coronation and goes on until the end of his avatara. The description it offers uses indicators to tell Rama that things could not be better than in his kingdom.

Health is, interestingly, the first described. People do not fall ill and they live long. They are well-built and resilient. Women do not even experience labour pains because Rama’s state is so well-governed. It is not just longevity and physical strength but good maternal health that matters. Striking, in an age where maternal mortality is unacceptably high in spite of medical advances.

Befitting a society sustained by rain-fed agriculture, the quotation mentions generous, timely monsoons. The water is “nectarean,” that is, unpolluted and pristine. Timely monsoons as any student of Indian economics knows are the key to cascades of prosperity—bountiful produce, well-nourished people, thriving markets and patronage of arts. People live well enough, to travel between cities and countryside, and are able to see that they are well-governed. “May such a sovereign be our ruler for long,” they aspire, suggesting that their consent to a regime is contingent upon good governance.

A most curious omission in the Uttara Kandam quotation is the “other”—whether the “other” within or the foreigner. It raises many questions. Was defence not a component of Ramarajya,
or did the righteous rule of Rama in Ayodhya intrinsically efface all opposition? Was Rama’s sway taken to extend across the universe such that these conditions obtained everywhere? Were Ayodhya’s stature and defence preparedness such that the outside world was rendered irrelevant? And on the internal dimension, can we assume that all within were as one? We might, except for the story of Shambuka, who crossed caste barriers to practise austerities and paid for it with his life.

Moreover, unlike Indian school history texts, we are not assured that Rama’s rajya was safe for everyone. That is a given. People also presumably live long because they are not summarily killed by thieves, arsonists, rapists and murderers. Rama’s righteousness is protection from the unrighteous behaviour of others.

For hundreds of generations, the didactic value of Rama’s story has lain both in the absolute pronouncement of these ideals in the course of a narration as well as in debating the times where his interpretation or action raises other moral questions. And perhaps these discussions about Rama’s decisions and conduct in different circumstances also point to another element of Ramarajya: the right to question, the right to challenge and the right to debate. We would call these freedom of expression and freedom of conscience. The tradition of the Ramayana makes a gift of these to our political thought.

What would a “Ramarajya” administration deliver? A good quality of life, where people live in good health, enjoy a good livelihood and dignity, appears to be the first element of good governance by Ramarajya standards. Good governance would appear to assure habits of production and consumption that do not interfere with nature and its cycles. In a well-governed state, citizens travel, observe, discuss and then endorse or reject their government; at any rate, informed citizenship is an element of good governance, Ramarajya style. The administration is accountable and responsive. Peace, we infer, prevails within and without. But most important, good governance is predicated on the personal integrity and conscience of the ruler; Ramarajya depends on “maryada purushottama”, the model human being. For the rest of us, this mythical political ideal offers a mirror and a yardstick to our times.
The dominant view among the members of India’s strategic community is that India lacks a strategic culture. Given the cacophony, rancour and partisanship in public debate, with policy discussions taking place within the high walls of the government apparatus, with political leaders seldom articulating the rationale behind foreign and defence policy decisions and with few grand ideas coming out of the academia, it may well appear that a strategic culture is absent.

Looking for culture

Before we challenge this conclusion, let us first ask whether or not there is an Indian culture? At first glance, one is confronted with not one monolithic, homogenous Indian culture but riot of many, heterogenous cultures. From music to visual art, from worship to cuisine, from costume to language, the reality is one of many Indian cultures. Yet, despite all these differences, it is possible to discern a common ethos among them all, making them parts of the whole.

What are the aspects of this common ethos? The most important, in my opinion, are Spirituality, Plurality and Balance. You might have a different list, but very few will dispute the contention that there is an Indian culture that comprises of many Indian cultures.

So why should Indian strategic culture be any different? There is strategic culture in the strategic community; in Jawaharlal Nehru University and other universities; in think tanks like the IDSA; in the media; in the scientific establishment; in the army, navy and air force; in the leadership of our political parties; in the business elite and among foreign scholars dealing with India. Moreover, over the last two decades, a strategic culture has emerged among connected citizens centring around websites like Bharat Rakshak, the Takshashila Institution’s Indian National Interest blogs and magazines such as this one.

Securing unity

Those who lamented the lack of a strategic culture were perhaps looking for something that would be similar to what they thought was the strategic culture obtaining in other countries. Our reality is different. How can it not? India’s strategic culture exists in its diverse strands, but they have in common visions of a united India, maintenance of order within, and ideas on how pluralism is to be managed. This strategic culture has suggested and pursued a grand strategy that can simply be described as “keep the country united”.

Here, it is important not to conflate the government’s decision-making processes with strategic culture. The latter only provides the context for various political & bureaucratic forces to interact and arrive at policy decisions. It is important not to overstate the importance of strategic culture in day-to-day policymaking. Its influence is at the level of grand strategy.
Indeed, uniting and keeping the country united has been the grand strategy of India’s rulers from the Mauryas to the Mughals, from the British Raj to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, from Jawaharlal Nehru to Manmohan Singh. The pursuit of the same grand strategy by different types of governments over two millennia suggests that the roots of India’s strategic culture are far deeper than we realise. India’s strategic culture is not Alexandrian or expansionist, and concerns itself with maintaining national unity. That, however, is no argument to deny or understate its existence.

**Beyond the subcontinental mindset**

Unfortunately, this preoccupation with unity blindsided India to the need to be aware of developments beyond the subcontinent. As the historian and diplomat K M Panikkar observed, “[So] far as areas outside the physical boundaries of India were concerned, we were content to live with the attitude of complacent ignorance... This has been the weakness of India in the past, this sense of isolation and refusal to see itself in relation to the states outside the geographical limits of the subcontinent.” Obliviousness to the state of affairs across the Hindu Kush and the Himalayas, across the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, led the inability to anticipate invasions, and indeed, to prevent colonisation. Fortunately, though, the ability to manage plurality allowed India to survive, albeit at great cost to Indian society and civilisation.

We can no longer afford to be oblivious “about the balance of power across its national frontiers”. Not only is it necessary to understand global politics and how it affects us, it is necessary to shape the global balance of power in a manner consistent with our national interests. The age-old grand strategy of keeping the country together must therefore shed its subcontinental preoccupation and also concern itself with maximising and projecting national power.

**Why India must project power**

In the twenty-first century, nations, above all, are defined by success. In a globalised world, the easy movement of people, capital and ideas means that successful nations preserve their unity, while failing ones fall apart. Success requires prosperity. Prosperity requires power. Kautilya’s Arthashastra teaches us this. If India does not enter a virtuous cycle of achieving success, prosperity and and unity it risks falling into the vicious cycle of failure, penury and ultimately, disintegration.

The emergence of China, a civilisational power with a clashing geopolitical worldview and a competing political model will use its power to change international norms in its favour, and attempt to make others, including India, play by its rules. To the extent that international norms are shaped by power, it is obvious that India can’t afford to sit out of the competition.

**In the twenty-first century, India must project power abroad to stay united at home.**

The upshot is that India must project power abroad to stay united at home.

**How?**

First, act as swing power. The United States will remain the pre-eminent global power in the next two decades. China, in second place, will continue to close the gap with the leader. If the United States were not involved in propping up the Pakistani military-jihadi complex, it might have made sense for India to align more strongly with the United States. Since Washington is unlikely to change course, India should dynamically swing between the United States and China. Swinging, unlike non-alignment, is neither passive nor rhetorical. It is an active approach, using diplomatic, economic and military leverage, to promote India’s interests by exploiting the competitive dynamic between the two bigger powers.

To be a swing power, India must have better relations with the United States and China than they have with each other. It must also develop the credible capacity to give pleasure or inflict Continued on Page 11
We have multiple crises affecting international politics and the global economy. There is an ongoing political turmoil in North Africa and West Asia, a region we refer to as WANA. At the other end of the world, Japan has suffered an unprecedented and devastating earthquake, compounded by a gigantic tsunami. And as if that was not enough, we have a full-blown crisis at the Fukushima nuclear power plant. These two crises are geographically distant but intersect compellingly in a densely interconnected global economy, in particular, its energy component. Both oil, as the fuel of global growth today and nuclear, the energy source for the future, have been impacted.

The impact of high oil prices resulting from prolonged political and economic disruption in the Gulf, may lead to inflationary pressures in the US economy and cause a setback to its still fragile recovery. Each major spike in oil prices in the past has been followed by a prolonged recession in Western economies. If this happens now then, thanks to the 2008 crisis, neither the US nor most of the Western economies have any weapons left in their monetary or fiscal armory to deal with a fresh crisis. The fears of a double dip recession could come frighteningly true.

The Eurozone remains unstable with sovereign defaults still lurking round the corner for Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain. There is growing political opposition to a fully effective bailout mechanism among creditor countries, in particular Germany. While differences have been papered over, the underlying structural weakness of the European Monetary System remains. There is a common currency and a European Central Bank, but no coordinated fiscal policy. This is unlikely to change and, therefore, the Euro will continue to remain under threat.

Germany has emerged as the strongest economy in Europe and is undoubtedly the continent’s prime engine of growth. It is no longer willing to play second fiddle to the other European
powers like France and the UK and is displaying a greater degree of independence from the United States. It has developed an unusually close energy partnership with Russia and its fastest growing export markets are outside the European Union, most prominently in China. This is leading to a perceptible change in the balance of power and influence with the European Union and a loosening of the erstwhile strong political, economic and security links across the Atlantic.

What about China? There is no doubt that at the beginning of 2011, China was looking the indisputable winner, emerging relatively unscathed from the global financial and economic crisis. While there have been concerns about over-heating and inflationary pressures, China appears to have managed its economy with skill and finesse. With this increase in economic capabilities has come political influence and the resources to expand and upgrade its military, in particular naval assets.

In sustaining a high rate of GDP growth, the Chinese economy has accumulated significant imbalances that could result in an asset-bubble and a painful collapse thereafter. The growth drivers continue to be high investment and high exports, both of which are very susceptible to changes in the external economic environment. China is heavily dependent upon oil from the Gulf region and this dependence has been growing year by year.

China has also been affected by the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Its ambitious nuclear expansion plans have been put hold pending a comprehensive review. Considering the fact that China has been planning to use nuclear energy to enhance its energy security and reduce its dependence on imported energy, the decision to review proposed nuclear power plants is unusual, but may reflect a greater sensitivity to domestic and international public opinion than one had realised.

What is the outlook for Japan? At the beginning of the year, Japan appeared headed for a modest economic recovery, but was still unable to engage in any significant reform as a result of continued political instability and frequent changes in political leadership. Japan’s long-term prospects appeared to be bleak, given its aging and declining population and its unwillingness to consider any significant immigration. The latest crises could impact Japan in two contrary directions. They may reinforce the passivity and lack of dynamism that has characterised the “prolonged slumber” that Japan appeared to have fallen into after the real estate bubble burst in 1990. Or the crises may shake Japan into forging a new political consensus, willingness to accept thoroughgoing reforms and put the Japanese economy on a higher growth trajectory, driven by innovation and efficiency. Having served in Japan, my sense is that the people of this remarkable country have the reserves of innate strength, resilience and commitment to excellence which are necessary ingredients for its much anticipated renewal. There will be many cheerleaders for Japan’s strong revival.

Engage with all powers, but align with none

Despite the complexity we confront in WANA, it would be worthwhile to interpret, however tentatively, the swift and often dramatic chain of events unfolding in the region. In my view, the bigger story in the region is not Libya, but the Saudi armed intervention in Bahrain, which has the potential to trigger a region-wide Shia-Sunni divide. It is unlikely that Shia Iran will stand aside while this unfolds and a Shia dominated Iraq may well be drawn in as well. In Libya, popular protests are overlaid with inter-tribal loyalties and conflict. Western armed intervention is unlikely to resolve these domestic fissures even if Gaddafi departs from the scene. It was United States’ military pre-eminence in the region and its network of authoritarian allies which held the pieces together, while the current wave of unrest is fragmenting the alliance network. WANA is becoming what geopolitical scientists refer to as a “shatterbelt”, radiating tensions in all directions.

Bringing these different strands together, what is the big picture which emerges?

First, at the beginning of 2011, the world was witnessing a multi-speed economic recovery. In the industrialised world, the United States
registered a relatively stronger recovery than Europe but it was the emerging economies of Asia, in particular, China and India, which regained accelerated rates of growth thereby becoming the engines of global recovery. There is a sense that the latest crises will further accentuate that trend. However, it is likely that if the multiple crises cross a certain threshold, the entire global economy could go into a cumulative contraction, and all bets will be off.

Second, the other aspect of the energy crisis is what is happening to the nuclear industry worldwide. The immediate impact is on countries which have a high proportion of their electricity generation dependent upon nuclear power. This will add to the price pressure on both oil and natural gas. Nuclear energy will remain a significant source of clean energy going into the future because there are simply no other credible alternatives for the foreseeable future. However, there will be a slow-down.

**India has space to consolidate the geopolitical gains it has already made and expand its strategic space.**

Third, given the emergence of energy as a pivot around which geopolitical changes will tend to play themselves out, it is energy producers who will stand to gain the most from the current crises. The oil producing countries of the Gulf stand to gain but only if they are not overwhelmed by the spreading political turmoil. Russia is likely to be a net gainer. Other energy producers will also gain both political and economic leverage and this includes Brazil and Indonesia. We will probably witness an even more frenzied scramble for energy resources in Africa. One analyst has warned that we may be on the threshold of a “geopolitical Cold War centred around energy security”.

Fourth, the redistribution of economic and political power has not yet fallen into a neat and predictable pattern. The diffusion of power is ongoing and its nature is fragmented and lumpy. This is already having the effect of loosening existing alliances and more informal groupings. A certain fluidity is in evidence all round. The United States is reluctant to act in WANA and prefers to let France and United Kingdom take the lead. Germany, an important NATO ally, demurs. In Asia, on the other hand, we are witnessing the gradual crystallisation of a loose, countervailing coalition that seeks to hedge against a more powerful and assertive China. The emerging powers, India, Brazil and South Africa, are now coordinating their political postures on key issues and this was in evidence during the early phase of the Libyan crisis.

Fifth, this somewhat confused geopolitical backdrop is likely to deal a setback to efforts to evolve equitable and effective global regimes to deal with global and cross-cutting challenges such as piracy, international terrorism, non-proliferation, climate change, global pandemics and issues related to food, water and energy security. There may be more limited solutions, region-wise or among countries with convergent interests, such as India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA). The role of the G-20 may increase and its agenda may expand beyond the management of the global economic order. The pressure for reform of the UN Security Council may increase as its dysfunctionality becomes even more exposed in a world beset with simultaneous and multiple crises.

**In a broad sense, what could India’s strategy be to deal with this environment of heightened uncertainty and rapid and unexpected change?**

One, “Engage with all major powers, but align with none”. We need to become adept at forming and working through coalitions that are issue based and sometimes event-specific. Dealing with uncertainty demands flexibility of response. It also demands contingency planning, the working out of alternative scenarios and Indian responses that are appropriate to each.

Two, India still remains a relatively stable political entity in an arc of instability stretching from the edge of Europe to the Western edge of the Pacific. In an atmosphere of pervasive uncertainty, this attribute of stability is a strong asset that can
be leveraged to India’s advantage. It can serve to attract investment, it can keep projecting India as a reliable and predictable partner. An international situation which is in flux creates the space for an emerging power like India to consolidate the geopolitical gains it has already made and expand its strategic space vis-à-vis other powers. This requires a degree of strategic boldness which is not always characteristic of the Indian temperament.

Three, for India, the geopolitical focus will be Asia and, in particular, the Asia-Pacific region. The emerging strategic order in the region is in the words of one analyst, “profoundly maritime” and “geopolitically speaking the maritime balance would appear to be the key to further stability in Asia”. With its significant and steadily growing naval capabilities and its geographical location, straddling the Western and Eastern reaches of the Indian Ocean, India is very well placed to be a decisive element in this maritime balance. A reordering of our security priorities in favour of our naval capabilities is essential if we are to consolidate and expand our role in region. This will also enable us to help create the kind of countervailing presence that is necessary in order to ensure that Asia remains as multi-polar as the world that is emerging.

Four, there is a need for a long-term and effective neighbourhood policy. The Indian sub-continent is a single, interconnected and cohesive geopolitical and geo-economic unit, though it is divided politically. It constitutes India’s strategic realm. The challenge for Indian diplomacy will be to gradually transcend the region’s political divisions and enable a shared security and strategic perspective to emerge. Regional economic integration and promotion of cross-border physical and digital connectivity must become an urgent priority, because it may help foster the shared security perspective that I have referred to. Without progress in this direction, India’s larger role regionally and globally will encounter a constant constraint nearer home.

Projecting power to protect unity: Continued from Page 7

pain on geopolitical and geo-economic issues. From the military perspective, the former calls for the Indian armed forces to improve military-to-military ties with both countries, while the latter enjoins us to acquire the capability to influence the military balance of power beyond the Hindu Kush, in and around the Indian Ocean and East of the Straits of Malacca.

Second, break through the paradox of proximity. The instability immediately across the borders makes it important for India to intervene but there are structural constraints on the ability to do so, despite possessing adequate military capabilities. The situation further afield is reversed: there are fewer constraints on the ability to project power, but there is lack of appropriate military capabilities. Indian power can not only make a positive difference but is actually sought in regions like the Somali littoral, the Gulf of Aden and the waters East of Singapore that Indian.

Third, reform, reform, reform. It is impossible to project power unless the Indian economy is fully unshackled, and the once-promised and long-delayed second-generation economic reforms are implemented. It will be impossible to generate the resources, and indeed the consensus to allocate the required resources for defence, unless there is sustained, equitable economic growth.

It should be amply clear that without structural reforms, the defence services will be unable to project power abroad, especially in theatres thousands of kilometres from the Indian frontier. The recommendations of the Kargil Committee report should be the starting point of reform of the defence services. The delay in their implementation is inexcusable and has set India back by a decade, even as the Chinese People’s Liberation Army has leapfrogged into a next generation force.

How will we get there? India’s political climate is unlikely to throw up a statesman with the knowledge and commitment to push through the required reforms. Nor does the civilian bureaucracy have an incentive to promote them. Civil society lacks the depth of expertise to demand them. The armed forces must, to use Mahatma Gandhi’s phrase “be the change you would like to see in this world”. The rest will follow.
GLOBALIZATION-ENABLED CORRUPTION

ARVIND SUBRAMANIAN of the Peterson Institute and DEVESH KAPUR of the University of Pennsylvania state that the skyrocketing corruption in India and the consequent money-laundering indicated the usage of discreet foreign jurisdictions as destinations for black money and India’s financial integration had facilitated these transfers.

In an article for Business Standard op-ed, “India: Fighting Imported Corruption”, they also state that macroeconomic analysis showed that the laundered money came back to India as the much sought-after ‘foreign’ investment with additional implicit subsidies such as secrecy and avoided taxes, with the monies round-tripping back through the banking channel from countries such as Mauritius and Cyprus with lower financial transparency and low tax rates.

They call upon New Delhi to take the lead internationally in pressing for data-sharing between governments and global financial institutions on overseas assets of citizens, trade flows and remittances, and recommend an abolition of double-taxation avoidance agreements with states such as Mauritius who were not members of the Financial Agenda Tax Force.

RENEWING ASIA’S COLLECTIVE DESTINY

SOURABH GUPTA argues that despite past missteps and future hurdles, India’s and Indonesia’s parallel histories, similar policy preferences and opportune international circumstances were drawing both countries closer to revitalize bilateral relations and potentially reconfigure Asian geopolitics.

In his Asia-Pacific bulletin for the East-West Center, “India and Indonesia: Renewing Asia’s Collective Destiny”, he states that both countries could leverage opportunities to revitalize the bilateral relationship; New Delhi and Jakarta could start by championing each other’s entry into the BRICS and MALSINDO collectives and this could help both countries set the tone on how leadership could be collaboratively exercised in the Indian Ocean region.

He concludes that a bilateral road map interspersed in equal parts with ambition and pragmatism, and cognizant of their differences in security perspective, held the potential to unlock the immense promise of this natural partnership.

CHINA’S SPENT NUCLEAR FUEL MANAGEMENT

YUN ZHOU of the Belfer Center’s Project on Managing the Atom and International Security Program reviews China’s current nuclear fuel cycle program, spent fuel management methods and its reprocessing policy to forecast the spent fuel and associated storage requirements until 2035 when the first commercialized Chinese fast neutron reactor is expected to be operational.

In a working paper for the Centre for International and Security Studies, “China’s Spent Nuclear Fuel Management”, she explores China’s long-term options for managing the back-end of its nuclear fuel cycle by examining China’s spent fuel storage capability, uranium resources, fast reactor R&D capability, and the cost and proliferation risks of each option.

The study concludes that China can and should maintain a reprocessing operation to meet its R&D activities before its fast reactor program is further developed.

DHAKA’S WORLDVIEW

IFTEKHAR AHMED CHOUDHURY, the former Finance Minister of Bangladesh states that Dhaka’s two major foreign policy aspirations of preservation of sovereignty and quest for resources combined with the fact that was surrounded on three sides by India informed its external behavior of being a player in world politics with a web of extra-regional linkages.

In his article for the Institute of
South Asian Studies, “Foundations of Bangladesh’s Foreign Policy Interactions”, he states that Dhaka’s international interactions were based on twelve pillars comprised of the states such as Western aid donors, South Asian states, Middle Eastern Muslim states, China, multilateral institutions such as the UN, Commonwealth, OIC, SAARC, and trade and financial institutions such as the WTO, Bretton Woods organizations, ADB and the Islamic Development Bank.

He concludes that there was a greater commitment to multilateralism and Dhaka generally kept a lower profile on high-risk issues and higher profile on low-risk issues.

**INTEGRATED COSMOPOLITANISM**

**ROBERT BITZ, OMANI ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN AFFAIRS**

He states that Oman’s foreign policy was very well integrated with the West since it was a part of the Empire, but its foreign policy orientation started deviating from the US and Europe once it joined the OIC and its foreign policy was in a transition phase.

**INDIAN OCEAN: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE**

**TIM SWEIJS and JEROEN DE JONGE** of the Hague Center for Strategic Studies state that the Indian Ocean and its rim with instability in its north-west corner, failing governance structures and resource competition could well become a sample stage for systemic challenges to global security even as it emerged as a key transportation hub and trade destination on the back of strong growth in its littorals.

They analyze three key themes related to Indian Ocean’s maritime future in their article in Marineblad magazine, “The Maritime Future of the Indian Ocean”

1. strategic importance of the sea lines of communication (SLOC) where energy security could drive confrontation between major players,
2. vulnerability of SLOCs to the threat of non-state actors such as pirates, terrorists, and international crime syndicates and
3. maritime balance of power including naval assets, strategic maritime infrastructure and co-operation

**INDIAN OCEAN: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE**

**PROBAL GHOSH of the Observer Research Foundation** states that the Indian Ocean region with its extensive trade, energy flows, piracy, terrorism and transnational crime has seen increasing struggle for maritime influence from players such as India, China, Australia, Indonesia and South Africa seeking primacy along with the US with new strategic questions being raised due to the number of naval forces acting independently in the region.

In a commentary for the East Asian Forum, “Indian Ocean dynamics: An Indian perspective”, he states that while China was making increasing forays into South Asia as part of its string of pearls strategy, India was seeking to neutralise Beijing’s influence by courting states in its periphery such as Japan, Korea and Vietnam, enhancing politico-military relations with the states of South East Asia, East Africa and the islands of the Indian Ocean.

**CHINA’S DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION**

**WANG FENG, director at Brookings-Tsinghua center** examines China’s demographic transition, role of the Chinese state as an accelerator of transition and highlights a few key unique features of China’s demographic future based on a few scenarios.

In an article in the Population and Development Review, “The Future of a Demographic Overachiever: Long-Term Implications of the Demographic Transition in China”, he puts in perspective China’s demographic transition starting from a state of high-mortality and high-fertility to a state of low-mortality coupled with low-fertility in a span of 50 years which is unprecedented in history.
exist in both countries, who intend to derail the people’s pursuit of peace. It suggests, therefore, that it is important for the peace process to be sustainable and not succumb to the acts of extremists. It further urges both nations to be wary of other countries that have built their defence industries by selling sophisticated military weapons to India and Pakistan. On the peace process, the editorial suggests while both India and Pakistan can pursue dialogue on “lesser” issues to build confidence, priority must also be given to bigger issues, including Kashmir and Siachen. It ends by suggesting that a bilateral cricket series between India and Pakistan would be ideal in paving the way for warm ties between the two nations.

SYRIAN UNREST

Munir al-Wadi writes in the state-run Syrian newspaper, Sana, about the recent uprising in Syria. Mr. al-Wadi argues that safety and security were inherent characteristics of Syria for decades after its foundation. These provided conditions for growth and development of infrastructure and industry in both rural and urban areas. Syria’s growth, the writer argues, was as a result of a collective effort by the people of Syria, and now Syrians must unite against those that seek to destroy what the Syrians have built.

Mr. al-Wadi states that citizens have a right to redress their grievances, but not through threats and intimidation of other citizens. The writer says that the “Syria we knew” provided security to to entrepreneurs and businessmen to pursue their trade, and to its citizens such that men, women and children could move freely about their cities, even until late hours of the night. Mr. al-Wadi states that all Syrian citizens have the right to feel secure, and that it is the duty of the State to provide for such security. He applauds recent statements by the Ministry of Interior suggesting that violent protests will be dealt with force. He urges all Syrians to rally around their government and their country.

THE US-PAK TANGO

Jang’s editorial of April 13 focuses on the state of relations between the United States and Pakistan. The editorial recaps a recent lecture by Ambassador Cameron Munter at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad. Mr. Munter had argued that the United States wanted not only better political ties with Pakistan, but also better people-to-people ties. The ambassador had...
also indicated to participants that he would convey Pakistanis' concerns about drone attacks to Washington, D.C.

The editorial is critical of Mr. Munter's lecture, saying that the realities are far different from his diplomatic statements. The editorial accuses the United States of hostility towards Pakistan and the Islamic world. It points to Secretary Clinton’s statements that India and Pakistan cannot be equated with each other; it further takes umbrage to recommendations made by some members of the United States Congress, favoring stronger ties with India at Pakistan's expense.

The editorial contrasts the cases of Raymond Davis and Aafia Siddiqui, arguing that while an American citizen escaped punishment after killing two Pakistanis, a Pakistani citizen in the United States was languishing in prison on unproven charges. It opines that the United States sends its spies to Pakistan on diplomatic visas to steal Pakistan's nuclear secrets.

It is further critical of American aid to Pakistan. The editorial suggests that American aid to Pakistan was via the World Bank and IMF, which have hurt, rather than helped Pakistan. It points to the absence of tangible results—in terms of new power projects, industrial ventures or employment—as evidence of the United States not fulfilling its obligations towards Pakistan. The editorial ends by predicting that ties will not improve unless the United States alters its approach to Pakistan and treats that country with dignity and respect.

EGYPT’S ECONOMY

Egypt’s al-Ahram poses challenging questions on the state of Egypt’s economy, in light of Cairo’s request for $10 billion from the West to address its fiscal deficit. The editorial, critical of this approach, asks how long Egypt will continue to depend on foreign assistance to sustain its economy. It asks what measures Egypt’s interim government plans to institute to make a significant economic impact to the average citizen.

The editorial sees three main economic challenges in Egypt. First, the editorial says that the policies pursued by the Mubarak regime on production levels, wage levels, employment, investment and export regimes were a total failure. It asks whether the interim government has the wherewithal to reform Egypt’s economy. Second, the editorial says that many sectors of Egypt’s economy are riddled with corruption, so much so that Arab and foreign investors are deterred from investing in and assisting Egypt. Third, the editorial says that the revolution instilled a sense of dignity, justice and freedom among Egyptians, but questions whether this is sufficient to invigorate Egypt’s ailing economy.

It ends by asking whether Egyptians will be able to direct their new-found energy into transforming their country or will nothing of substance materialise from the Revolution.
Infographic

Disparate Freedoms

The Economic Freedom of States Report 2011 scores the 20 largest Indian states on three parameters (Government Size, Legal Structure and Labour & Business Regulation, which are then combined into an overall Score.

The 2011 report offers a comparison between the 2005 and 2009.
The Economic Freedom of States of India 2011 Report, released by the Cato Institute, with Friedrich Naumann Stiftung and Indicus Analytics, takes a look at the performance of the largest Indian states on three parameters.
The debate on how to eradicate corruption, kick-started by Anna Hazare’s indefinite fast, has now moved into its second phase. This involves the drafting of a bill that will provide a foolproof mechanism to bring the corrupt to book. Here is an examination of the structural flaws inherent in the Jan Lok Pal Bill.

The bill, also known as The Anti Corruption, Grievance Redressal and Whistleblower Protection Act, 2010 (which will be referred to as the Jan Lok Pal Bill) is about the most overwhelming piece of legislation since Independence.

Why the big fuss, you may ask. Don’t we have any laws against corruption in India? Well, of course, we do. Taking of illegal gratification by public servants was made a criminal offence way back in 1860 by the repository of all that’s evil—the Indian Penal Code, in Sections 161-165A.

The Prevention of Corruption Act was first enacted in 1947. In fact, when the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act, 1946 (the parent statute of the Central Bureau of Investigation) was enacted, it was primarily to investigate allegations of corruption against central government employees.

Jan Lok Pal is both unconstitutional and unnecessary

The battle against corruption must be fought by strengthening existing instruments.
A “new and improved” Prevention of Corruption Act (PoCA) was enacted in 1987, complete with special courts and tougher punishments, and with it, the relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code stood repealed.

The new Prevention of Corruption Act is not without controversy, and the Supreme Court usually has to consider who a “public servant” is every other month. However, the main issue with the PoCA is that while it targets employees of nationalised banks, lower level policemen and similar other members of the government food chain, the higher-ups just never manage to face the heat, and even if they do, it takes years for cases to see the light of day.

And all we really want is to see the corrupt thieves in jail, or at least, not in any position of power. Why is it so difficult to just throw out corrupt unmentionables? For that, we need to go back to the hallowed Constitution of India. Article 311 is the party pooper, which requires that a civil servant can only be dismissed by an authority equal or superior to that which appointed it. That at least is at the stage of dismissal. Even for prosecution, the PoCA requires previous sanction, according to Section 19.

Section 197 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, follows suit for offences committed “in the discharge of official duty”. Obviously, the public perception is that government officials will always refuse to accord sanction to protect their minions, perhaps rightly so.

Keeping this in mind, the government proposed the Lok Pal Bill, 2010, as a mechanism for inquiry into allegations of corruption against public functionaries. As a response, several public-spirited citizens countered with their own draft Jan Lok Pal Bill. The latter is so much broader in scope compared to the government’s draft that it is not even fair to compare the two. The activist’s Jan Lokpal Bill, version 2.1 doesn’t just stop at inquiry. It goes the whole hog.

It says that the Lok Pal shall consist of one chairperson along with 10 members. These persons should not, at the time of appointment, be holding any “office of profit” or be a member of parliament or the legislature of any state. It also bars persons who have even been charged (not convicted!) under the IPC or PoCA or penalised under the Central Civil Services Conduct rules.

Out of these 10 members, four must have some “legal background”, bringing in former judges and lawyers. A maximum of two of these members can come from a civil services background. Looks like a healthy mix. So far, so good.

Then there is this requirement: “The members and Chairperson should have unimpeachable integrity and should have demonstrated their resolve to fight corruption in the past.”

This is jarring for two reasons: one, it looks like the bill is leaving a lot of scope for canvassing for these posts, and two, isn’t impartiality a much more important consideration? The objective of the Lok Pal ought to be to conduct an honest and fair inquiry. Anyone who has demonstrated their resolve to fight corruption in the past might end up being a trigger-happy vigilante in judicial robes (and police uniform—but we’ll get to that later), especially when empowered in such a manner.

The cream of the crop, including the chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission (oh, the irony!) are involved in the selection process. In fact, a previous version (1.9, apparently) proposed former Magsaysay award winners and Nobel laureates “of Indian origin” to be members of this selection committee. The good news is that they have been shoved aside to accommodate “retired army personnel who are five star generals”. It is unclear if they asked the 92-year-old Marshal of the Air Force, Arjan Singh, before adding this post to the list, considering he’s the only living five star general we have.

Any person can propose the name of a deserving candidate to be appointed to the Lok Pal, and after initial sifting by the selection committee, the person recommending a candidate has to provide material to support his nomination. Thereafter, the names will be put up on the Internet to solicit public feedback, and the committee can also use “any means” to collect more information about the background and past achievements of the shortlisted candidates. Lok Pal members are appointed by the President of India.
So despite all of this, if a member is found being less-than-unimpeachable, the Supreme Court of India—yes, the highly overburdened final court of appeal and protector of the constitution—in a bench of five judges, no less (normally known as a “constitutional bench”), will have to conduct the inquiry.

However absurd an allegation, the Act specifically bars the Supreme Court from dismissing the petition at the threshold stage. The Supreme Court can order a report of “investigation” by a Special Investigation Team and can bench the allegedly errant member while such inquiry is being conducted. If someone makes a false complaint, they can be punished with fine and imprisonment.

The demands for Jan Lok Pal demonstrate utter disregard for the separation of power and the right to appeal.

There is, however, no appeal for a member who may have been wrongly dismissed. Neither is there is any discretion left with either the Prime Minister or the President of India to withhold the person’s removal. So, the President can refuse to sign bills passed by both houses of Parliament, refuse to sign orders of impeachment of Supreme Court judges, commute a sentence of death which could have been upheld by four different courts (including two benches of the Supreme Court in appeal and review), but she must remove a member of the Lok Pal on the recommendation of the Supreme Court.

Moving on. What does this wonderfully constituted Committee get to do, anyway?

According to the Bill, the Lok Pal shall be responsible for receiving complaints for offences under the PoCA, or for “misconduct” which includes “vigilance angle” which in turn includes the very carefully worded “Gross or wilful negligence; recklessness in decision making; blatant violations of systems and procedures; exercise of discretion in excess where no ostensible/public interest is evident; failure to keep the controlling authority/superiors informed in time”.

Presently, complaints for offences under the PoCA go to the anti-corruption wings of either the CBI or the local police. The police investigate, and present their findings to a government authority for sanction. The government authority is supposed to independently apply their mind and accord sanction if a case has been made out. The case is then tried before a special court. The procedure for complaints under the PoCA now is that the Lok Pal will order an inquiry or investigation, and only when the Lok Pal is satisfied that a case is made out, will it direct that prosecution be launched. The procedure for obtaining sanction prior to prosecution is eliminated, once the Lok Pal orders investigation it is deemed that sanction is accorded.

The branch of the CBI that deals with investigation and prosecution of offences alleged to have been committed under the PoCA, will now be the “Lok Pal Investigation Wing” and be under the direction and control of the Lok Pal.

To start with, it crosses the line when it comes to the separation of powers. Each wing of Government—the Legislature, Executive and Judiciary—keeps checks and balances on the other, and so they must remain separate, because that’s the only way to ensure that there is no abuse of power. Here, the Lok Pal, which is a judicial body, for all practical purposes, will have control of the part of the Executive that conducts investigations on its behalf. To add to more confusion, the chairperson, members of Lok Pal and the officers in investigation wing of Lok Pal are to be deemed to be “police officers” as defined under the Code of Criminal Procedure, for the purpose of carrying out investigation.

When a complaint comes before the Lok Pal Committee, they can either initiate investigation straight away, or conduct a preliminary inquiry. Interestingly, the Lok Pal can also direct any other person to make this preliminary inquiry as it deems fit for ascertaining whether there exists a reasonable ground for conducting the investigation. An aside here—the whole wording of this bill
can get kind of confusing, because, for example, in criminal law, “Inquiry” is usually meant for a stage prior to the filing of an FIR, and Investigation denotes that an FIR has been filed. In this Bill, the Lok Pal can, after investigation, order that Prosecution be launched, which means an FIR, after which investigation has to be carried out. Again.

While the complainant is mandated to be kept in the loop regarding the inquiry into his complaint at all times, the same is not true for the public servant. In fact, it isn’t very clear when the public servant is allowed to make his representation, which is slightly disturbing considering the possibilities at the end of this inquiry/investigation, which we’ll get to in a bit.

Calling for the say of the public servant at the stage of inquiry is entirely at the discretion of the Lok Pal. At the stage of investigation, thankfully, the Lok Pal “shall afford to such public servant and the complainant an opportunity to offer comments and be heard”. What is the scope of offering comments, though? Does the public servant have the right to legal counsel? It is also very disturbing that there is no provision which prevents the bench of the Lok Pal that conducts the preliminary inquiry from being the one that conducts the investigation, which is a necessary safeguard from a “judge, jury, executioner” situation.

After completion of due investigation, the Lok Pal has several options, including (besides dismissing the complaint) initiating prosecution against public servants as well as abetting private parties, imposing of penalties under the conduct rules, order cancellation or modification of a licence or lease or permission or contract or agreement, or even blacklisting the concerned firm or company or contractor or any other entity involved in that act of corruption.

Pretty harsh punishments, probably what these people who are guilty of corruption-related offences deserve—but wait—this is all prior to having been found guilty by a court of law. Since the inquiry/investigation/what-have-you is in the nature of a civil Inquiry, the standard of proof is very different than of a prosecution under criminal law. Take the example of people who are found guilty in departmental inquiries who often get acquitted by courts in PoCA offences. In criminal law, the standard of proof is beyond reasonable doubt. If this standard of proof is not adhered to, and at this stage which is prior to any independent investigation authority even looking into the matter (the Lok Pal Investigation Wing not really fitting in with the concept of “independent”) the ability to blacklist corporations is absolutely absurd. Another point to ponder—if the Lok Pal decides to “initiate prosecution”, who is the investigating authority then? Is it the Lok Pal Investigation Wing again? God forbid!

That’s not all—even at the stage of inquiry (that is before even concluding their inquiry and referring this case for initiation of prosecution) the Lok Pal can move for interim measures to restrain him or his orders from causing further harm. However, even at the stage of investigation, the Lok Pal can ask for a tabulation and freezing of immovable and movable assets of the public servant. It is not even necessary to show that these assets are disproportionate or reasonably suspected to have been derived from funds which are the subject of inquiry.

The Lok Pal Bill moves further into uncharted territory with the possible prosecution of the “bribe giver”. For years, the position of law as to whether a person could be prosecuted for giving a bribe was unclear. Under PoCA, a statement made by a person in any proceeding against a public servant that he offered or agreed to offer any illegal gratification would not make him liable to face prosecution as an abettor. The purpose behind this was simple—to encourage reporting of offences and ensure convictions. It looks like a person who had to give a bribe may not get this cushion of protection before the Lok Pal.

More absurdity—the act also takes the liberty of amending the Prevention of Corruption Act. Sections 7 – 15 of the Act which have minimum punishments of six months to a year and maximum punishments of 5-7 years are now amended to two years minimum imprisonment and a maximum punishment of life imprisonment. If the accused is an officer of the rank of joint secretary or above or a minister, a member or chairperson of the Lok Pal, the
minimum imprisonment is ten years. A fine of five times the “loss caused to the public” will be recovered in case the beneficiary is a “business entity”, and if the assets of the company be not enough to recover the amount, it will have to be recovered from the personal assets of the directors.

Regardless of what it fancies itself to be, by the lack of provision for appeal, it is unconstitutional. Granted, the Lok Pal itself doesn’t convict anyone, but that doesn’t mean that there should be no right to appeal. The right to at least one appeal against an order, which affects someone adversely, is inherent in the Constitution. There is no specific clause regarding appeals in the Jan Lok Pal Bill, and that is unconstitutional, to say the least.

The only mention of an Appeal is in Section 28A regarding disposal of “Properties deemed to have been obtained through corrupt means” where appeals against the orders of the Lok Pal shall lie in High Court of appropriate jurisdiction, which shall decide the matter within two months of filing of the appeal.”

Gautam Patel, a lawyer, points out, that according to Section 27 (2), there appears to be a further ousting of the power of the judiciary by barring any proceedings or decision of the Lok Pal from being challenged, reviewed, quashed or called in question in any court of ordinary civil jurisdiction. While in my opinion that doesn’t preclude the interference of the High Court in its extraordinary writ jurisdiction, thus allowing for judicial review, the section is extremely high handed.

The bill is also contradictory and confusing when it comes to inquiries and investigations against various public officials. The big ticket is of course the judiciary. Special provisions exist only as regards judges of a High Court or Supreme Court. All complaints concerning these persons will be subject to a preliminary screening for prima facie evidence—interestingly, judges will only be considered for offences under the PoCA and not for “other” offences and misconduct.

Registration of a case will only be done with the approval of a full bench of the Lok Pal, a majority of the members being from a legal background. Even after registration, such cases shall be investigated by a special team headed by an officer not below the rank of a superintendent of police. This is all well and good, because this...
makes absolutely no difference to the judge who is protected by the rigorous impeachment method.

The proposed Jan Lok Pal Bill is a knee-jerk reaction to the present scenario. No doubt, corruption is draining our exchequer as well as our sense of morality and faith in the system. Like most knee-jerk reactions, it is not well thought out, and by taking over the independence of courts and the investigating authorities, leaving no scheme of appeal, and the ambiguous treatment of the right to be heard, the bill is absolutely unconstitutional and should not be implemented at any cost—fast-unto-death or not. The possible implications of its enactment far outweigh the obviously good intentions that it was drafted with.

It is always easy to criticise and walk away without any suggestions. So let me throw in my ideas. Say you remove the unconstitutional and absurd bits from the Jan Lok Pal Bill, what do you have? A legislation that prides itself on transparency in its constitution and functioning and easy accessibility by the public, all of which can and should be strengthened in existing mechanisms. The provisions regarding protection to whistleblowers should extend to all endangered witnesses in general, and should find place in a separate legislation or appropriate amendment to the Criminal Procedure Code.

The purpose of the Lok Pal Bill should be a transparent means of pre-trial evaluation of material against public servants, and providing a more public alternative to the closed door sanctioning process under the PoCA and the Code of Criminal Procedure. Like it or not, the process of sanction is a necessary evil especially when dealing with publicly elected officials. It cannot be the tool of a witch-hunt, and it must respect the boundaries of due process and constitutionality.

When you already have courts and police personnel devoted exclusively to unearthing offences under the PoCA, an act which actually places the burden of proof on the accused, why not expend resources in trying to strengthen these?

By bringing in the spirit of the Jan Lok Pal Bill and improving citizen access to complaint mechanisms, ensuring witness protection, along with a transparent and public process of according sanction for prosecution, there will be a great improvement in the effectiveness of the PoCA, which itself would be a huge deterrent.

A relook at the PoCA and its scope, particularly the inclusion of the private sector, would also not be out of place. Enacting the Jan Lok Pal Bill in its present form, the appointment of the officials and the sure-shot constitutional challenges it will face will be a waste of time, energies and effort. Let’s get to work with what we have.
The Anna Hazare-led movement against corruption has divided Indian society—at least the urban middle class and intelligentsia—right down the middle.

At one end of the spectrum stand the frustrated supporters of the activists. Their argument is simple. Fed up with the political class’ abuse of power, they see the movement and the proposed Jan Lok Pal bill as an opportunity to check the growing impudence of the ruling elite. On the other hand, the opponents of the bill have not only raised concerns about the method of protest but also condemned it, and the proposed bill, as an anathema to our electoral and constitutional structures.

Lost amidst the boisterous calls for a revolution, the media jamboree, condemnation of a lethargic electorate, accusations against ignorant voters and the tit-for-tat shrillness of the discourse, however, is the fundamental question that demands our immediate attention.

What is the relationship of the Indian people with their state and what sort of a relationship do we seek?

Those who argue that now is the time for action and not for a philosophical undertaking of this nature, perhaps need to take a breath and think again. Values are the key to responsible action, and never the other way round.

The first step in answering the question is an understanding of the nature of the Indian voter. What motivates us to vote? And what motivates us to abstain? With that aim I traveled across ten states over 45 days during the run-up to the 2009 Lok Sabha election.

On the ground, you do encounter the ugly realities of our electoral process in the form of cynicism, booze, money, muscle and dynasty. Yet suggesting that these are our primary motivations is rather simplistic and offensive. They reduce the entire process of manufacturing apathy to merely the end product.
For the poorest and the most disempowered sections of Indian society, there is often little choice. I can’t recollect encountering a single farm worker or urban labourer who beamed at the thought of being part of the largest democracy in the world. For them, the basics—clean water, a decent income, housing and education—still remained the unmet priorities. The struggle for survival is what consumed them. In such a scenario, however much they might want to, it is difficult for them to appreciate the true value of their vote in building long-term state institutions.

Their vote is thus treated as a bargaining chip that is used for short-term gains. The genuinely ignorant use it to trade for escapism in the form of drunken cynicism. These deserve our scorn—it’s probably the best way to get them to rethink their choices.

Then there are those that prioritise parochialism and identity politics over republicanism as means for economic ends. It is often in such cases that feudal lords emerge and maintain their stranglehold. Such behaviour is also prevalent among the middle classes.

The others, and this is the largest grouping, often tend to fall prey to immediate circumstance. Cash and sops are fair game here then.

In contrast, urban middle-class voters tend to suffer from a different disease that yields the same terminal result—a wasted vote. For them, it is not about a lack of concern. It is not about the unrelenting sun, the unremittingly poor quality of candidate, the fragmented numeric fatalism of elections, or a fading belief in our ability to change things. These aren’t causes; these are effects.

The real cause for the lack of urban participation is that most city-dwellers just don’t relate to the state anymore. It is here that civil society organisations, not just NGOs but also units like Resident Welfare Associations and community organisations, must play an active, constructive role. While we need greater economic freedom, electoral reforms and more inner-party democracy, what we also need is far more participation from citizens at local levels. That in itself can be a catalyst for the other, larger reforms mentioned above.

It is imperative for activists, ordinary people and state officials to rebuild institutions through public participation at the rural and urban grassroots. We need institutionalised consultations between local authorities and the people they serve. That is where accountability must begin. That is where we can begin setting a concrete agenda at the most local level, and increase public stake and ownership in the state. Disowning a ‘corrupt parliament’ or ‘corrupt legislature’ is no way forward.

It’s only then, that a vote will matter the way it should, the way it can.
Nearly three-fourths of the electorate turned out to vote in the recently concluded state assembly elections in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The panchayat polls in Jammu and Kashmir have seen similarly high polling percentages. This has been universally hailed as being representative of the strength of Indian democracy.

In democracies, the ultimate holders of power are voters. The right to vote is a form of political power. The voters determine how political offices will be staffed. An individual’s vote is usually not expected to change the outcome of any election, especially in India where constituencies have large electorates. However, by virtue of having the right to vote, each individual still has a status. The public is thus authorised—in conjunction with others—to make fundamental political decisions.

Higher voting means greater engagement of the public with the state. It signifies a political empowerment of a larger number of stakeholders—the citizens of a democratic state. This is welcome because all citizens subject to political power of the state ought to have a say in how that power is wielded. It is for this reason that most public policy commentators campaign for greater voting by the electorate. When voters complain of no suitable candidate being present in the fray for them to vote for, the realist solution is to vote for the least unsuitable candidate.

From the high visibility Jaago Re to humble campaigns run by politically conscious individuals in the social media, the slogan of greater voting has now been accepted as a gospel truth. This is because most of us have been made to believe that greater electoral participation strengthens a
democracy, provides a fairer outcome and creates a just system.

However, when we run campaigns and celebrate greater voting—presenting it as a moral, if not constitutional duty of every citizen—thereby coercing everyone to go out and vote, we overlook a major dilemma caused by these exhortations.

While it is instinctively blamed on low literacy standards, there is significant evidence that many voters, often literate and educated, are equally incompetent, ignorant, irrational and morally unreasonable about politics, public policy and governance. By creating a moral obligation to vote, we are increasing the number of incompetent and ignorant citizens who will be casting their vote. They will be subject to rent-seeking, manipulation, corruption and demagoguery that characterise democratic voting procedures in India. This low quality electorate can make worse choices at the polls: it can be worse at selecting good leaders, and can tend to choose worse policies. Having a low quality electorate also tends to reduce the quality of the candidates who stand for elections. In fact, a low quality electorate brings the quality of an election’s results downward even before the election takes place.

When voters choose badly, the consequences can be dire. Bad voting can be and has been disastrous. After all, the National Socialists were also brought to power in Germany in 1933 by a popular vote.

Many good studies exist on the pathologies of democratic decision-making under universal suffrage. Bryan Caplan, a professor at George Mason University, argues that voters are systematically biased and systematically in error about which economic policies will promote their ends. Scott Althaus, of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign uses a different data set from Mr Caplan, but arrives at similar conclusions. Mr Althaus concludes that well-informed citizens have systematically different political preferences from uninformed citizens. Loyola Marymount University’s Andrew Healy has a series of papers showing that voters in the United States and elsewhere punish incumbent candidates for bad weather. Drew Westen, professor of psychology at Emory University, has documented cases of serious motivated reasoning and irrationality even among politically active citizens.

Those who object to this suggestion hold that the electorate, as a collective body, tends to make excellent choices even if many or most of the voters are incompetent. There are certain mathematical models in which democracies can be expected to nearly always make good decisions, even though the majority of voters are incompetent. For example, the Miracle of Aggregation theory holds that a very large electorate composed almost entirely of ignorant voters but which has a small minority of informed voters will make equivalent decisions to an electorate composed solely of the informed voters.

People can vote competently only if they put in the effort to educate themselves on matters of public policy.

However, empirical work on voter behaviour suggests that voters tend to be altruistic but badly informed when their votes do not count for much, yet they tend to become more selfish and better-informed in rare cases when their votes do count for much. The inconsequentiality of individual votes in India’s large constituencies means that voters, regardless of whether they have selfish or altruistic motives, have little incentive to be well-informed about politics, or even to form their political beliefs in a rational way. The costs of gathering relevant information and processing this information outweigh the expected benefits of voting well.

However, this does not mean that we draw a bright red line that segregates all citizens into voters and non-voters, based on those citizens’ individual abilities. That would disenfranchise a section of the populace and goes against the basic tenet of universal suffrage underpinning the Indian democracy.

Most people could vote competently if only they put in the effort to educate themselves on
matters of public policy. But all the citizens can never have the time or the capacity to become expert political scientists, sociologists and economists on their own. The onus is thus upon think-tanks, NGOs and the media to make an endeavour to highlight relevant issues, break them down into easily understandable forms and present it to the electorate for taking an informed decision. All campaigns for greater voting must therefore be accompanied by equally strong information campaigns, lest these exhortations for greater electoral participation end up being counterproductive to the democratic cause.

Democracy has held India in good stead since it became a republic. This doesn’t mean that Indian democracy is perfectly just, or that it could not do even better. The way to further strengthen Indian democracy is to simultaneously educate the electorate while exhorting them to come out and vote in larger numbers.
We Indians seem to love government. And we seem to love a lot of government. Whenever there is an issue to be tackled, we say “the government should do something about it”. When we don’t like something we recommend that the government ban it. Till recently, we all wanted to be employed by the government, in some form or the other. In short, we are a society highly fond of government.

History bears this out. In some sixty odd years of independence, there has been exactly one attempt to decrease the size of the government—by the P V Narasimha Rao government in the early 1990s. It can be argued that the efforts of the United Front and National Democratic Alliance governments in this direction were just a hangover of the efforts of the Rao government.

Even that was by no means painless—the Congress party which headed the government was thrown out by the electorate and sank to new depths in every subsequent election until it made a comeback a decade later with the promise of more government. Rao was virtually ostracised by most of the political class after his term as prime minister. His right-hand man in those efforts, Dr Manmohan Singh, did make a spirited comeback, but is quite a changed man now.

Recent events have shown that us Indians loathe corruption—at least we want to make a show that we are against corruption by government officials. In certain states, every time a government falls, the new government spends its first few months undoing everything the previous government did—alleging rampant corruption.
What is hard to understand, however, is that the large majority of the country fails to make the simple link between the size of government and corruption. Government officials at various levels have several discretionary monopoly powers—in the sense that if they refuse to do something there is no one else who can do it. A large portion of corruption stems from government officials utilising these discretionary monopoly powers to extract “rents”.

This is not to say that there are no checks and balances in the government—there exist several in order to prevent officials from extracting rents, but the problem is in latency—the time it takes to prosecute, prove charges and take action against someone deemed to be extracting rents is huge, not to speak of the rather low conviction rate. This implies that for the rational and selfish government official, the odds are stacked up in favour of extracting rents.

In order to minimise rent-seeking, there are two possible approaches. The one that has been tried so far, without too much success, is in improving legal processes to make it possible to punish the corrupt quicker and with a higher success rate. The intention is to deter a government official from extracting rent. For example, most states have a Lok Ayukta whose job it is to speed up the process of punishing the corrupt. It is debatable as to how successful this institution has been. The efforts to put in place a Jan Lok Pal (a proposal that has been pending for some 40 years) is again in a similar direction.

The alternate approach is to decrease monopoly powers, so as to reduce the number of people with discretionary powers, which could decrease rent-seeking. What this indirectly implies is that we decrease the size of the government. The question remains as to how we can achieve it.

There are significant hurdles. First, there is our people’s affinity to the government that was mentioned earlier. Second, there is the issue of incentives—which rational self-interested government in its right mind would want to let go of some of the discretionary powers that it possesses? Finally, there is the performance of the then pro-reform Congress in 1996 and the NDA in 2004 elections.

It is crucial, therefore, to educate the public about the link between size of government and corruption. Given the recent protests, corruption is something that is at the top of the public mind, and there is an opportunity to drive home this point. This is the hard, but certain route to good, clean governance. Until the connection permeates the national public consciousness, though, governments and their employees will continue to extract rents, irrespective of the number of government watchdogs who are supposedly trying to control that.
In his recent column in DNA, Nitin Pai argues that the way to wean away young, urban, Kashmiri Muslim from their anti-Govt agitations is by raising the cost of protesting, as well as the benefits of not protesting. While the former can be tackled by revving up the security machinery, the latter has to be enabled by creating alternative occupations through a “guerilla development plan”, he argues.

Any development plan must presuppose the existence of basic infrastructure. The Chinese believed in the philosophy that infrastructure must precede development and went about laying roads, building airports, installing power plants and transmission lines, even in sparsely populated and under-developed areas. This acted as the magnet for attracting more investments and generating more employment.

In India, where providing infrastructure is often an afterthought, almost all states suffer from a shortage of good roads and reliable power supply, but in Kashmir’s case the problem assumes an alarming dimension, one that seriously impacts our national security.

Let’s just look at one of the components of infrastructure—electricity. There is enough empirical evidence from around the world to show that electricity and development have a two-way relationship (or two-way Granger causality). Introduction of reliable electricity in an area speeds up development and increases the GDP. Development, in turn, creates a demand for more electricity—with more people, more devices and higher aspiration acting as multipliers. In the early stages of development, the energy intensity is high. Typically, a 1 percent growth in GDP will need to be fuelled by a 1 percent increase in energy supply.

Jammu & Kashmir has a staggering power deficit, despite a very high hydro potential. The peak shortage for the year 2009-10 was 33.8 percent (760 MW), and the energy shortage (in millions of units) was 24.8 percent, even without factoring in the huge latent demand that is kept suppressed by the absence of power lines and sub-stations. The transmission and distribution losses (T&D) in Kashmir are believed to be over 45 percent. The difficult terrain makes transporting coal or gas a formidable task, which explains why very few thermal plants have come up. Security concerns, both external and internal, and reluctance of the Union government to provide counter-guarantees have kept away prospective private investors.

The state has been pointing out that it has suffered heavily as a result of discriminatory provisions in the Indus Water Treaty, that deny it the right to impound the waters of Indus, Chenab and Jhelum for optimum usage, to take care of the seasonal variations in power demand. This is a valid grievance. The resulting, low annual plant load factor (PLF) makes the state vulnerable to acute seasonal shortages, especially in winter when power demand is at its highest. Though connected to the Northern grid, other states have not been able to come to the rescue; each state has its own litany of power woes.

Not surprisingly, therefore, power cuts stretching over 10-12 hours a day are quite common in Kashmir. This adds to the growing sense of unrest and frustration—and helps
breed a ‘protesting’ and ‘anti-national’ mindset. Most blue prints for the power sector recommend more investments in hydel plants, quicker implementation of such projects and allotting a higher share of the power from such plants to the state. Then there are the usual proponents of renewable energy, especially solar and geothermal, claiming that these are non-polluting and non-threatening to the pristine environment.

The problem with this idealistic approach is that it will take years for meaningful development to kick in. The track record of implementation of hydro projects even in ‘peaceful’ states leaves much to be desired and it would be delusional to presume that it will be any different in Jammu & Kashmir. If and when they do come up, the problem of seasonality will still remain.

Solar energy has its merits but will not be the right answer either in this context. It will not offer the possibility of scaling up in megawatt terms or the comfort of 24 x 7 x 365 supplies, given its weaknesses of intermittency and very low PLF. These projects must be pursued for eventual absorption into the grid, but cannot be expected to provide immediate relief, let alone catalyse development.

So, a “guerrilla development plan’ must look at quick-relief, scalable options with an optimal mix of efficiency, flexibility and environment-friendliness. The paramount consideration must be to provide reliable power round-the-clock and all-year-round.

A technical solution worth exploring is the concept of multiple, decentralised, liquid-fuel based power plants of capacity 100 MW each, close to different load-centres. These rely on heavy-oil that can be sourced from the refineries in Northern India and transported in regular tankers. The plants can come up in quick time (14-18 months). They can be ramped up or down efficiently to suit the seasonal or diurnal load. The deration in output on account of altitude will be low. And, the make-up water requirement for such plants will be almost negligible.

Concurrently, the transmission lines from the Northern grid need to be strengthened and the state grid widened as part of the Accelerated Power Development and Reforms Programme (APRDP). As the generation capacity in the North increases with more Ultra-mega power projects getting commissioned, a disproportionate share must go to Jammu & Kashmir.

Multiple, decentralised, liquid fuel-based powerplants of 100 MW capacity can be installed in 18 months.

Power based on local, liquid fuel plants or from remote thermal plants through long-distance lines will not be cheap. The landed cost of electricity may be around Rs 9-10/kWh, but when gradually blended with more hydel power, the weighted-average will come down. What is urgently needed is reliable power at the best cost that can be achieved, not unreliable power (or no power) at a desired low cost. The ‘opportunity lost’ cost in the absence of electricity, or the back-up generation costs (such as diesel generators) are far higher.

Reliable electricity may well provide the spark that Jammu & Kashmir needs. It will help create a virtuous cycle that will foster development and promote lifestyle changes that could eventually render ‘protests’, in any form, a thing of the past.
cases of corruption in Nigeria. One particular case of a student forced to drop out of school as she was unable to purchase notes of the teacher outside the classroom, is a common tale.

India is embroiled into several corruption cases. It is amazing how corruption was ignored till high-profile scams came to light last year. Political campaign finance in India has been happening for long in highly innovative ways. In fact, both politicians and Wall Street executives can learn some lessons from Indian polity in this regard.

IMF PROGRAMS USUALLY RELIEVE AUSTERITY RATHER THAN MAKE IT WORSE

IMF is severely criticized for imposing fiscal austerity in crisis-hit economies as witnessed during the South East Asian crisis and the recent European debt crisis.

KEN ROGOFF (Austerity and the IMF, 2010) turns the debate on its head. He says that IMF lending programs are wrongly accused of harshness and IMF actually imposes lesser stringent conditions than other lenders. Rogoff asserts that countries come to IMF only when all the other options have been exhausted. Given the situation, IMF lends on more favorable conditions than any other private sector lender.
He highlights that IMF lends to these economies at rates just above those at which Germany and US can borrow money.

IMF has many issues upfront before lending – size of the loan, determining the right amount of deficit as official figures are questionable, and political capacity to absorb austerity. This leads to bad press coverage and none of it really is IMF’s fault.

He says the problem is not whether IMF is too stiff on debtors. But whether it is too kind to creditors leading to moral hazard: The idea should be to curb this favorable conditions to creditors. He says the creditors should be pushed into becoming equity investors rather than take debt of economies. This would alleviate the crisis situation.

HOW INDIA’S FINANCIAL MARKETS HAVE EVOLVED AND DEVELOPED OVER THE YEARS?


India does not rank very high in its overall score of financial development but is relatively well placed in terms of development of non-banking financial services and financial markets. Within financial markets, India fairs well in foreign exchange and derivatives markets. However, the country’s institutional environment is weak with low degree of contract enforcement. The other insight is the contradictory developments in equity and debt markets with the former very well developed and the latter making very limited progress. Author says that this pace of reforms is because of government’s role. Wherever government is dominant, pace of reforms is the slowest! The debt market and banking sector have had a strong public sector presence, and here the pace of the reforms has been the slowest.

He says regulatory structures need to be streamlined to avoid regulatory inconsistencies, gaps, overlap, and arbitrage. Along with streamlining the regulatory framework, there is a need to review the actual financial regulations and move toward more principles-based regulation to promote financial innovation. Based on this, he says lessons from the crisis are not to restrict finance but let it move ahead and innovate.
The agitation led by Anna Hazare against corruption touched a chord with large sections of the population. On April 8, 2011, the government finally acceded to the demand of Shri Hazare to form a joint committee to draft a Lok Pal Bill. The committee includes five nominees from the government and five nominees of Shri Anna Hazare and is scheduled to draft the Bill by June 30, 2011.

The basic idea of the institution of Lok Pal was borrowed from the concept of Ombudsman in countries such as Finland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, U.K. and New Zealand. In India, the idea was first mooted in 1963 during a debate on Demands for Grants for the Law Ministry. In 1966, the First Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) recommended that Ministers be included within the jurisdiction of the Lok Pal (along with government servants). The National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (known as the Venkatachaliah Commission) of 2002 suggested that Members of Parliament should be prosecuted for the offence of giving or receiving bribes. The Second ARC of 2007 stated that Ministers, Chief Ministers and Members of Parliament should be within the Lok Pal’s purview. However, the committees did not favour inclusion of the office of the Prime Minister. The 1996, 1998 and 2001 Bill covered Prime Minister and MPs. The Standing Committee that examined the 1998 Bill stated that allowing the Lok Pal to have disciplinary authority over Members of Parliament may affect the supremacy of Parliament. However, the Standing Committee examining the 2001 Bill accepted that the Prime Minister and MPs should be included in the Bill. It further recommended that a separate legislation be enacted to ensure accountability of the judiciary.

**Composition and appointment of Lok Pal**

Another major issue is the composition of the Lok Pal and the mode of its appointment. The First ARC did not specify any qualification of a Lok Pal except to state that it should be a body which shall have the same stature as the Chief Justice of India and can be removed only by impeachment. On the mode of appointment, it suggested that the Lok Pal should be appointed by the President on the advice of the Prime Minister who shall consult the Chief Justice of India and the Leader of the Opposition. Both the Venkatachaliah Commission and the Second ARC recommended that the Lok Pal should be a constitutional authority. The

**Jurisdiction**

One major issue is to decide who should fall within the ambit of the Lok Pal. In particular, whether the Prime Minister, Ministers, and Members of Parliament should be within its purview as they are already accountable to Parliament. Moreover, whether the judiciary should be excluded from the Lokpal’s ambit to protect its independence and autonomy.
Venkatachaliah Commission did not have any objection to all members of the Lok Pal being from the judiciary as proposed in the 2001 Lok Pal Bill. However, the Second ARC stated that the office of the Lok Pal should be a three member body consisting of a serving or retired Judge of the Supreme Court as the Chairperson, an eminent jurist as Member and the Central Vigilance Commissioner as the ex-officio Member. They should be selected by a Committee consisting of the Vice President, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and the Chief Justice of India.

**Powers of the Lok Pal**

There are three major issues to consider. First, whether the Lok Pal should be a recommendatory body or should have the power to prosecute. The Second ARC recommends that the Lok Pal should be empowered to supervise the prosecution of corruption related cases. Second, whether there should be the need to obtain prior sanction before a public official can be prosecuted. This provision was designed to protect honest officials from harassment but it has been misused to delay responses to requests for sanction. The Second ARC has recommended that prior sanction need not be required in case where a public servant has been “trapped red handed or in cases of possessing assets disproportionate to their known sources of income.”

Third, the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988 does not explicitly mention who shall be the sanctioning authority in case of political functionaries (MPs, Ministers and the Prime Minister). The Second ARC suggests that the presiding officer of the respective House should be the sanctioning authority in case of MPs. Other issues that have been flagged by experts include the power of the Lok Pal to inquire into a complaint on its own or only on the basis of a written complaint and the time limit for investigation.

**Next Steps and Conclusions**

Public anger and street power have forced the government to form a drafting committee. It is now important that citizens engage constructively in the process of formulating the Lok Pal Bill by giving suggestions and feedback to the Committee. After the Bill is introduced in Parliament, the standing committee and each House must deliberate on the various policy choices in order to create a robust and accountable institution that tackles corruption. It would also be timely to examine the various anti-corruption laws and make suitable amendments (such as mandating a time limit for giving sanctions for prosecution).

The Lok Pal Bill and related suggestions are steps to prosecute persons after an act of corruption. It is equally important to understand the larger context that breeds corruption, and take appropriate steps to reduce the opportunity for bribe taking. To use a cliché, monopoly combined with discretionary power lead to corrupt behaviour. Increasing competition lowers corruption; Indians who lived through the 1970s and the 1980s would remember the ‘premium’ for telephone connections and two-wheelers. And, wherever the government has the monopoly power—such as granting licences to use natural resources—transparent non-discretionary rules can reduce the scope for misuse of this power. Given another cliché—prevention is better than cure—policymakers and parliament, as well as the general citizenry must ask for reforms that reduce the opportunities for corrupt behaviour.
The man who could have saved 3 million Indians

...but didn’t. Reviewing Winston Churchill’s place in history.

Three days after Germany invaded France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, Winston Churchill inspired Britain with the words, “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.” These words—Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat—is the title of a book by John Lukacs which analyses Churchill’s motivational speeches during World War II as American and Russian forces battled the Axis in Europe and the Pacific. The titles of other books—The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill, Visions of Glory, Churchill: A Study in Greatness—reveal the exalted position Britain’s war-time prime pinister occupies in world history, specifically Western history.

While reading Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat it was unclear what was more funny—Mr Lukacs’ repetition of the title words every few pages or his admiration of Churchill’s speeches extolling the virtues of freedom ignoring the enslaved people of the colonies. For such historians Churchill proved his mettle by leading the country through the war and coming out victorious. Like how many American historians do not see the irony in Thomas Jefferson asserting all men are equal while owning slaves, members of Churchill fan club do not see anything wrong in pronouncing him as the upholder of freedom and democracy despite his unapologetic imperialist stance and inhuman behavior towards the colonies.

In Madhusree Mukherjee’s book, Churchill is neither a lion nor a man of great moral rectitude. He was a man who could have prevented three million Indians from starving to death, but did not. Clouded by racist views of Indians, he even stopped other countries from helping the starving population, antagonised the US president with his stand on India and argued that the Atlantic Charter did not apply to British India. Despite all these, when the first words of Paul Johnson’s biography states that Churchill was most valuable man to the whole of humanity in the 20th century, one has to wonder about the lack of perspective behind that testimonial.

The famine

Between 1941 and 1942, three events occurred which turned out to be disastrous for the people of Bengal.
First, fearing the Japanese invasion of India, the War Cabinet ordered a scorched earth policy in areas which would have to be surrendered. Rice was removed or destroyed. Money was advanced to businessmen to buy and hoard. Along with this, boats, much needed by farmers, fishermen and potters for their livelihood were destroyed.

Second, there was a massive cyclone which killed around 30,000 people. Besides the death and damage, the cyclone also caused the price of existing rice to go up. Finally, the Japanese arrived in Burma and cut off the millions of tons that Bengal used to import from Burma and Thailand. Thus the stage was set for famine.

Britain’s focus during this period was to make sure that the war production was not affected: Indian industries were involved producing ammunition, uniforms, parachutes, vehicles and machine parts. The government machinery ensured that people in Calcutta—soldiers, war workers, government employees—became the priority class and sufficient rice was stocked up to feed them. The choice was between war efforts and large scale deaths in rural areas.

These rural deaths could have been avoided if the government imported grains, but Churchill was unwilling to provide shipping. We can understand why the government denied permission to Subhas Chandra Bose who wanted to send rice to Bengal, but how do you explain Churchill turning Canada away citing wheat shipment to India as an ‘uneconomic prospect’? The argument that providing ships for India would mean less ships for war effort falls flat because ships became available for Churchill’s pet project of stocking grains for the newly liberated European countries. For this, ships carrying wheat went from Australia to various countries around the world, navigating around a starving Bengal.

Ms Mukherjee argues that India was intentionally punished due to three reasons. First, Churchill’s primary goal was to ensure that British citizens did not have to follow an abstemious lifestyle. Statisticians estimated the food required and Churchill ensured that shipping was available for this. The prime minister had other calculations as well. He knew that Britain would be bankrupt after the war and wanted to stock up. He also knew that in the post-war period, there would be great demand for food in Europe which could be an excellent business opportunity.

Second, Churchill knew that India was slipping from his hands and did not care much. British rule was symbolised by Robert Clive’s memorable trip down the Ganga carrying barges filled with money. The economic balance of power was shifted by a 1940 arrangement by which war expenditure incurred by India had to be paid by Britain and the bills were accumulating. India had become a major creditor or in Churchill’s words—the biggest war profiteer. This was a serious issue and Churchill thought of various ways to not pay India back which included changing the exchange rate or presenting a counter bill to India for defense expenses.

Finally, Churchill hated Indians and more specifically, Hindus. “They are a beastly people with a beastly religion” were his exact words. But he did not wanted to let go of the cash cow and wanted to keep it for a few generations mostly on his terms. Roosevelt tried to get Churchill to negotiate with the nationalists without much luck. Churchill did not want to leave India for the nationalists; his spin was that there would be no future for Untouchables, Muslims and other minorities under Congress which he saw as a ‘Caste Hindu’ enterprise. While he used every opportunity to widen the communal chasm, he argued that the British had to stay in India for the benefit of the minorities.

Churchill saw the famine as a failure of the Indian government in redistributing the excellent harvest; importing grain would not have made any difference according to him. Ms Mukherjee says that this is a fallacious argument for there was no efficient way of redistributing grain to rural areas. Also, the government did not want to
procure grain from Punjab—whose soldiers were battling in Middle East for Britain—and upset the farmers. When finally the grain from Punjab did reach Bengal, it never went beyond Calcutta. If Churchill had abandoned his overweening ego and imported grain as the famine set, Ms Mukherjee argues that it would have caused the hoarders—who included government supported businessmen—to release the grain and reduce prices. The War Cabinet acknowledged this, but by then it was too late.

Churchill’s priority simply was Britain and the execution of the war and he would do nothing to jeopardise it. Much later when Punjab had a bad crop and there was fear of desertion by Punjabis in the Indian Army, Churchill was ready to budge. When it became obvious that the Allies would not be able to take on Japan without India’s help, with sufficient persuasion by army officials, tons of food made its way to India.

Clouded by racist views of Indians, Churchill even stopped other countries from helping the starving population.

The familiar pattern of historiography

When it comes to the historiography of the famine of 1943, it follows the same pattern as in the historiography of the war of 1857 or river Sarasvati: many inconvenient truths are suppressed. Churchill’s tome of the war does not mention the famine. The famine commission ignored the scorched earth policy and the fact that aid was refused. According to the Communists the blame lay purely with everyone else—speculators, Japanese—but the British. They stayed out of jail. The British blamed the Indians, United Nations and even God. Another member of the War Cabinet blamed crop failure and high birthrate. In short, the British negligence and Churchill’s role in the shipping crisis etc were simply washed away. Arthur Herman’s Gandhi and Churchill blames Churchill briefly, but Ms Mukherjee’s book fills the vacuum and refutes the popular narrative by quoting chapter and verse from the national archives, War Transport ministry’s logs and the recently released transcripts of the War Cabinet meetings.

The book provides sufficient context for the events of 1943. After giving a brief history of British rule in India and the changes they made which went against Indian polity, Ms Mukherjee diligently follows the strategies of the Allied and Axis powers, Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose, Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Franklin D Roosevelt as well as the uphill battle of British administrators against Churchill’s advisers like Lord Cherwell, who believed in the Malthusian population theory. Even when it comes to documenting the efforts by British administrators in intentionally fanning the Hindu-Muslim communal divide, Ms Mukherjee does not walk on egg shells.

The most heartrending portion of the book is when Mukherjee writes about people who survived the famine. Through interviews with them she reconstructs the holocaust of 1943 and those vignettes are hard to read. In the midst of famine, people had to find ways to survive. Some women survived as domestic help or by providing child care. Others had to resort to prostitution. Unable to feed their children, some parents sold them or simply threw them into the river. Dead bodies piled along the roads as people tried to make their way to the cities. But in the midst of this famine and even when the nationalist leaders were in jail, local leaders dragooned themselves into fighting for freedom. A parallel government, which provided basic administration and civil courts, functioned in Tamluk.

Thus the British rule started with the famine of 1770 with an estimated 10 million deaths and ended with another one. Yet there are some who believe that the British left too soon and should have stayed longer to educate us on civic sense, how to run our cities and manage traffic. There are others who believe that we should be thankful to them for railways and English language. After reading Ms Mukherjee’s book, you will be relieved that the imperialists finally left.
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