



**A thought for today**

*To get away from poverty, you need several things at the same time: school, health, and infrastructure – those are the public investments*

HANS ROSLING, Swedish physician

# Sell Air India

*To boost economy, Modi government must invest resources where they are really needed*

Finance minister Arun Jaitley has made a lucid and compelling case for why the government should divest stake in Air India. His argument should now be taken to its logical conclusion with a strategic sale of the loss-making airline. As Jaitley says, Air India's market share is now only 14%. Private airlines are already fulfilling 86% of market demand and there is no doubt they can fulfil all of it. Government resources are scarce. It makes no sense for government to be running businesses like airlines or hotels where the private sector does an excellent job. Where the private sector can deliver, government spending represents misallocation and haemorrhaging of taxpayer's money.

The NDA government must, therefore, privatise Air India. This will free up resources which can be deployed in areas where the private sector cannot meet all needs, and which happen to be poorly served in India, such as healthcare and education. As minister in the earlier NDA government, Jaitley had pushed for disinvestment in Air India. Unfortunately, it did not fructify and the airline became a financial drain on the exchequer.

Air India's financial performance over the last decade has been appalling. It has a registered net loss every year since 2007-08. In April 2012, govern-

ment put in place a turnaround plan which envisaged financial support of Rs 30,231 crore over the next nine years. Till now, almost Rs 25,000 crore has been spent with little to show; instead Air India's market share has shrunk to 14%. Apart from compelling economic reasons to disinvest Air India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has declared war on VIP culture. Government ownership of Air India encourages ministers, parliamentarians and bureaucrats to make unreasonable demands at its expense – as Shiv Sena MP Ravindra Gaekwad's boorish behaviour recently demonstrated. Selling Air India would also be a significant blow to India's VIP culture.

The previous NDA government's reform record was better than what this NDA government has demonstrated so far, which is why investment, credit and job growth are flagging currently. However, the PM's stock is running high and he has the boldness, political credibility and communication skills to launch big-bang reform. Cutting unproductive subsidies on a large scale would be such a reform. A strategic disinvestment of Air India will send an important signal in this regard, unleashing animal spirits in the economy.



# Modi In Europe

*India must capitalise on the ongoing shifts in the global order*

Embarking on his latest foreign tour, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is visiting Germany, Spain, Russia and France over the next few days. The tour comes at a time when the global order is undergoing fundamental shifts. Populist sentiment is surging in Western countries, triggering dramatic political change. This includes Europe, currently dealing with the aftermath of Brexit and a new US administration that wants EU member nations to shoulder greater responsibilities for their defence. In fact, German Chancellor Angela Merkel recently said that Europe could no longer completely depend on others – a reference to the US and UK – and needed to fight for its own destiny.

Such a reordering of Europe and the world presents opportunities as well as threats for India. For example, Brexit opens up the possibility of a mutually beneficial India-UK free trade deal that wouldn't have happened under the aegis of the old EU. Similarly, Brexit indirectly puts pressure on EU to get its own long-delayed trade agreement with India up and running.

Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin have a good chance of working out a US-Russia modus vivendi. This would be beneficial for India and Modi must attempt to nudge both powers in this direction. That said, it would also be welcome if the US continues to provide leadership in areas such as climate change. Trump refused to commit to the 2015 Paris climate accord at the recent G7 summit and may decide to pull America out. American leadership receding here would only see China fill the vacuum – not a very appealing proposition given that climate change must be taken seriously and China mostly works against India at international fora. In short, Indian diplomacy needs to be extremely agile in a world that is being unmade and remade again.



# Family recipe

*Getting the great, elusive cough and cold cure ... plus smelling like a plate of biryani*

Bikram Vohra



Every family in India has a cure for a cough and chest congestion and everyone's formula is guaranteed to make you hop, hop, hop like a bunny full of beans. This family recipe is evidently handed down from generation to generation and is hugely competitive in that one fam's cure is infinitely better than the others.

It can become a bit of a war with you, hacking away and making gurgling sounds as the target of affection. You also end up smelling like a plate of biryani. Between those who espouse adrak and honey (heated as opposed to cold) and those who go for garlic and cinnamon in ghee the fight is stark and without quarter.

Both, however, gang up against the haldi in milk brigade since they are seen as traditionalists and no longer of the essence. Then an aunt or neighbour kicks in with her village 'cure' which is a poultice of some blackened herbs reeking of dalcheeni and other stinky stuff and this is unceremoniously slapped onto your back and chest and on the soles of your feet over which you place your socks.

Since you, the patient, have no opinion and are not asked how you feel about all this you wake up next morning with black crumbs all over the bed, yucky looking globs on your chest and squishy socks and a chest congestion that has valiantly fought off the invaders and dried them out.

At which point along comes a friend and he tells you to take lemon, ginger and honey in warm water and sip it. Nooo, says another expert on the subject (expertise here is in full flow), salt in hot water, drink it all, that's like magic, takes all the phlegm away.

Since the phlegm doesn't know that, it survives and your neighbour's mother who by virtue of her age is certain to know about colds and things says that try tea with binaksha, elaichi, saunf, gur not sugar (that's the big secret ingredient) twice a day and then see, you will be fine. All this time they are making you come up redolent with multiple spices like some East India Ship of yore.

By now you couldn't care less and are enjoying your misery and flinging those black crumbs that are everywhere and your wife's boss walks in with the surefire 'rasam'. So you call your doctor and he says, have you finished with the herbs and syrups and chais and you say, yes, all done and he says, okay get on to antibiotics now.

# How To Make Schools Compete

*Abandon marks manipulation, publish school rankings based on board exam results*

Geeta Gandhi Kingdon



In April, the HRD ministry took the brave step to stop undue 'moderation' of marks in all secondary school board examinations in the country. This willingness to face the truth, howsoever ugly it may prove, is rare in education policy making circles, but is a crucial first step in the reform of school education.

Although the upset of the current-year board examinees is understandable, yet it is right to do away with the status quo of systematically covering up the true quality of education by large-scale artificial inflation of marks by the exam boards, which maintains a pretence of high achievement.

For example, last year CBSE inexplicably gave exactly 95 marks in math to any student who actually got 79 to 95 marks, and arbitrarily inflated the English mark of all its Delhi examinees by 12 marks. In Uttar Pradesh there are instances of 100% moderation, eg. pupils with 28% marks in chemistry being given 56% marks in their report card.

In view of the Delhi high court's order, the CBSE and other boards' decision to continue moderation (a standard practice to equalise marks across years and across easy/hard papers) but to eschew manipulation and inflation of marks, if carried out honestly, will foster trust in the exam system.

The declaration of board results is an excellent juncture to consider how the information contained in the (now more believable) results can be used to improve the quality of education in the country, by holding schools and teachers accountable.

The CBSE exam board declared on May 17 that it will grade all its (about 18,000) affiliated schools on the basis of quality, so as to help parents and students. The board can be applauded for grasping the critical idea that sharing information will empower parents to hold schools accountable. Providing parents information on school quality is a key plank of education policy in most educationally advanced countries. However, for the CBSE (or any board) to itself grade schools is a cumbersome



schools dropped dramatically, even though the top 25% of schools continued to perform very well. Several studies indicate that lack of pressure on poorly performing schools makes them unaccountable for poor learning outcomes.

Similarly, in the US, publication of performance data by schools is an essential requirement of the No Child Left Behind Act, 2001. Research studies indicate that comparison of test data across schools has made schools more accountable.

The main resistance to the publication of school league tables comes from teacher unions, who argue that the socio-economic backgrounds of students influence school rankings, enabling wealthy schools to top league tables. However, countries still publish school rankings, recognising that the benefits far outweigh any concerns. Some countries publish 'value-added' rankings as well, based on each school's 'gain in achievement' rather than on 'level of achievement', which would largely remove the bias in favour of wealthy schools.

Academic rankings do not preclude publication of perceptions-based rankings for non-academic parameters, just as the world university rankings assess institutions on parameters such as student satisfaction levels, infrastructure, faculty salary levels, degree of internationalisation, etc.

The Indian school rankings published by some magazines are compiled on the basis of perception scores awarded by a sample of principals, teachers and parents on several parameters including 'academic reputation', but an analysis of ICSE schools by Bhattacharji and Kingdon in 2016 shows a poor correlation coefficient of only 0.58 between the perception-based 'academic reputation' scores and the actual academic performance of students in the class XII board exams.

Therefore education policy makers and the exam boards need to seriously consider publishing data on the actual performance of schools in board examinations, to assist parents with school choice, to drive up inter-school competition, increase school accountability, and thus to improve schooling quality.

The writer is Professor of Education Economics, University College London

and inefficient way of providing information. Other countries simply publish annual rankings of schools based on the actual board exam marks of students.

In the absence of such institutional information about student performance across schools, parents are left to judge the quality of schools on the basis of hearsay and schools' visible physical facilities, which are inadequate and sometimes misleading indicators of school quality. Information with parents about the actual academic results of the different schools in their city/district introduces an element of competition between schools to attract parents, leading to greater effort by schools. Unless it is public knowledge how every school is performing relative to its peers in the district, their managements have little incentive to improve teaching-learning standards.

The secondary examination data contains much valuable information for policy makers too, and it can be used to identify high- and low-performing schools, geographical regions and socio-economic groups, for remedial action for specific schools or regions or socio-economic groups.

**CBSE declared it will grade all its affiliated schools on the basis of quality. Providing parents information on school quality is a key plank of education policy in most educationally advanced countries**

Many countries have been publishing school performance data. The history of the liberalisation of factual data about the academic performance of every school in the UK shows that initially only the media published school rankings in the form of school league tables. However from the mid-1990s onward, the UK government's department for education publishes its own league tables.

This official initiative was not universally welcomed and, in 2001, school league tables were abolished in Wales. But a couple of years after publication of league tables was stopped, the performance of students in the formerly lower-ranked

# Coalgate convictions: It is not enough for senior bureaucrats to be 'honest', they must also uphold public interest

TSR Subramanian



In a significant judgment, the New Delhi district court's special judge has recently convicted ex-coal secretary HC Gupta and two serving joint secretaries to two years' imprisonment, under Section 13(1)(d)(iii) of the Prevention of Corruption Act (causing loss to public property) and Section 420 of the IPC (criminal conspiracy). The three are now out on bail, pending appeals.

Gupta enjoys an excellent personal reputation, and nearly anyone who knows him well cannot believe that any charge of corruption or dishonesty could ever be levelled against him. It is an axiom of Indian jurisprudence that mens rea (intention) is an essential component of a criminal offence – probably the only exception is under the Prevention of Corruption Act 13(1)(d)(iii), which relates to causing loss to public property through negligence or collusion, without the need to prove personal benefit.

There is bound to be much sympathy for Gupta. Much hue and cry is likely to be raised that if the judgment is upheld in appeal, this will adversely affect civil services morale and lead to slowdown in decision making. Indeed, the Government of India is said to be in the final stages of examination whether Section 13(1)(d)(iii) should be repealed, ostensibly to speed up decision making.

It will be recalled that the 'coal scam' and '2G scam' were landmark events of the second Manmohan Singh government, in which lakhs of crores were siphoned off by unscrupulous political and business interests, causing enormous loss to public property. Indeed PC Parakh, Gupta's predecessor as coal secretary, had strongly written to then PM Manmohan Singh over the head of the then coal minister, attacking the committee system of allocation of coal blocks which led to much corruption and recommending an auction system.

Ironically the then PM agreed but did not implement Parakh's suggestion, due to the large political interest in maintaining the existing corrupt crony capitalist system of 'pick and choose' allocation – merit or suitability be damned. Surely Gupta was aware of this background, and ought to have taken sufficient care in processing applications to the screening committee which he chaired.

Indeed the court judgment refers to huge deficiencies in the application by the sponsor – the chairman ought to have established procedural checks to routinely verify the completeness of each application; the application accepted for recommendation for final approval ought to have been vetted well. Clearly there was serious negligence to put it mildly – with political direction almost certainly being the mainspring and motivation of the lack of alacrity by the committee.



**PC Parakh, Gupta's predecessor as coal secretary, had strongly written to then PM Manmohan Singh over the head of the then coal minister, attacking the committee system of allocation of coal blocks**

The bureaucrat and the politician are two sides of the administrative coin. In a government ministry, the secretary and the minister are the custodians of public interest. Decades of experience have shown that the minister's main job, particularly in state governments, is to distribute favours, repay political debts, and secure his financial future for the

next five generations.

Under the UPA government, this surely was the norm. Things have drastically improved lately at the Centre, though arguably these affairs are now much worse in the states. This case is not to be seen in isolation, but in the perspective of dozens of other coal blocks screened by the committee. A clear pattern is seen of 'defective' examination in most cases; lack of criteria; often the applicant's firm was even registered just a few days before the committee meeting with little experience; and many applicants selling off their shares soon after the 'lottery'.

All over India, increasingly senior officials crawl when asked to bend, and are willing collaborators, conspirators and even partners with their political 'masters'. Indeed, many officials may not be overtly 'corrupt' in the technical sense, but willingly play ball in the expectation of a foreign posting or extension or other service benefit. It will be naive to argue that they do not know the meaning of 'public interest' or 'loss to the public'.

It will be ill-advised of the government to eliminate Section 13(1)(d)(iii). While it is ironic that one 'honest' officer (Gupta) has been convicted, tens of thousands of corrupt officers thrive all over India, tangling with ministers. It is not sufficient for an officer to be 'honest' – what is of essence is that senior officers are outspoken, upright, and fearlessly uphold public interest.

The writer is a former Cabinet Secretary

## dilbert



# Do Unto Rivers As You Do Unto Yourself

Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev

Years ago when I lived on a farm, I employed a local villager to help me. His name was Chikkegowda. He was hard of hearing and an object of ridicule for the rest of the village. I found him a pleasant companion because I wasn't particularly interested in talking.

One day, at 4am, I saw him preparing the plough. "What are you doing?" I asked. "It will rain today," he said. I looked up. It was an absolutely clear sky. I said, "What nonsense! Where is the rain?" He said, "No, Swami, it will rain." And it did.

I sat up for days and nights after this. Why couldn't I feel what this man could feel? I sat, holding my hand in different positions, trying to feel the moisture, the temperature, trying to read the sky. I read books on meteorology, but to no avail. And then, finally, with careful observation of my own body and my

surroundings, I discovered the fundamental mistake most of us make: we view the ingredients that constitute our body, like earth, water, air, and food, as commodities and not as an organic part of the life process.

The severe water crisis and drought conditions that plague this country today are related to this process of fragmentation and commodification. In allowing traditional wisdoms to be eroded, we have forgotten that the body is part of a larger organism called the planet, which is part of a much larger body called the solar system, which, in turn, is linked to the cosmos. If we view these in isolation, we are hacking at the fundamental unity of existence.

The writing on the wall is clear: if we do not act decisively, perennial rivers will

turn seasonal, and several will vanish altogether (as they already have). The per capita water availability in this country has already plummeted by over 60% in 70 years.

In Tamil Nadu, there is an old proverb: if the palm trees go dry, you are heading for a disaster. In the last 10 years in this region, the level of environmental degradation is unimaginable. A combination of over-cultivation and rampant construction has dried up rivers and made groundwater tables plummet. The monsoons have been erratic, as they will be when vegetation grows increasingly scanty. The situation in many other regions of this country is similarly grave.

There is much that can still be done: rainwater harvesting, afforestation, cultivation of nurseries, urgent

population control. However, none of this can simply be addressed by a government initiative. The environmental cause has to become a people's movement, a mass campaign in which aware and motivated citizens participate in something that is seen to address their personal and collective survival on this planet.

A crash course in civics will not accomplish this. The spiritual process has become vital today because it is the deepest possible reminder to an individual that a human being is not an island. This reminder is not ideological. It is existential. Yoga is a clarion call to a truth we forget time and again: we are not separate from the world we live in. What we do to our rivers and forests we do to ourselves.

To make India water positive, support the cause at: #bewaterpositive  
Facebook: www.facebook.com/bewaterpositive  
Twitter: twitter.com/bewaterpositive  
http://waterpositive.timesofindia.com/

