

# Eat Railway food at your peril

## India's lifeline must improve its services or privatise

A question often asked when the issue of the introduction of bullet trains comes up is whether they will be safe in Indian conditions. Now with the latest Comptroller and Auditor General's report on catering services in the Indian Railways, we must ask a more basic question – is it safe to eat and drink the fare on offer? Clearly not. The CAG report says that the food articles being provided on the railways are unfit for human consumption. Some of it is contaminated or past its shelf life. The fault is in the compromises made on hygiene.

The Indian Railways Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) manages catering services, but does not cook or supply food that is served to passengers. This is done by private firms which are awarded the contracts after an open tender. The problem is that the same set of contractors has managed to get contracts for several decades. The railways minister has tried to strike at the contractor nexus by encouraging the e-catering business. But this initiative has not fully taken off yet.

Apart from the unsuitable food, the CAG report found that the water was not purified, waste bins not covered and food stuff left to the depredations of flies, dust, rats and cockroaches. The railways are notorious for their poor levels of hygiene when it comes to food. Coaches are rarely cleaned given the volume of traffic and the indifference of the officials. This means that the coaches themselves are unhygienic and dirty especially on long distance trains. At all times, the private contractors should be held accountable. Old habits die hard and the railways, much like the national air carrier, is treated as nothing more than a source of revenue. The tracks are aging, the coaches are often damaged and technology which can play a big part in rail safety has not been used as much as it should. From time to time, we hear of the need for an overhaul but there the matter ends. The railways are usually seen in terms of how much freight it can carry and how much revenue it generates. The least consideration is the passenger who keeps the organisation afloat. Parliament needs to take serious note of the CAG report and its alarming findings.

# Let's keep the nuclear energy door open

## The India-Japan agreement works well in New Delhi's larger policy interests

A major milestone in India-Japan relations and the future of the nuclear power in the country was passed by the coming into force of the bilateral civil nuclear agreement. Nuclear may seem expensive in a time of low oil prices and collapsing solar rates, but it remains the world's most viable source of carbon-free baseload power. International sanctions and India's own ill-considered nuclear liability law have artificially confined the nuclear option in India. India's domestic reactors are small and Russian ones are not much larger. Learning how to build reactors in the 2000 MW range was a goal of negotiating the India-US deal in the first place.

Japan is the world's leader in civil nuclear technology – almost every advanced nuclear reactor in the world is dependent on Japanese components. One of the key reasons that a rush of reactors did not follow the Indo-US nuclear deal was that without a parallel agreement with Japan, no country other than Russia could sell reactors to India. Japan's initial insistence that India sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty was one among many barriers that had to be crossed.

The show is hardly over. The major Japanese reactor firm Toshiba-Westinghouse recently went bankrupt. This is why the new agreement also includes clauses that allow Japan to finance reactor projects in India. India's poorly drafted liability law continues to be a problem for some other firms. The Fukushima accident, liability concerns, depressed global energy prices and other issues have clouded the future of nuclear power in India and the world. Nonetheless, the atom's contribution to India's energy mix remains among the smallest of any major economy. China continues to build reactors as fast as it can put them up. Nuclear energy is not a promise, but it is an option. At a time when energy is both of rising importance and riddled with uncertainty, India must work to keep the nuclear door open.

### straightforward

SHASHI SHEKHAR



# Why Mayawati needs good captains

## By resigning from the Rajya Sabha, the Dalit leader has played a clever political stroke

That astonishing moment suddenly took shape in the Rajya Sabha last Tuesday. Deputy chairman PJ Kurien had allowed Mayawati three minutes to speak on the issue of atrocities on Dalits. She needed more time but the deputy chairman did not agree. This made her furious and she walked out after saying: "How can I not be allowed to speak on issues about the section of society where I come from? If I cannot place the issue of Dalit atrocities before the Parliament, then I don't have a moral right to continue in Parliament."

Still, the deputy chairman clarified the next day and asked her to withdraw her resignation. Mayawati did not agree and finally it was accepted. Did she do this on impulse or in a moment of anger? It may be the case, but she is supposed to be a seasoned politician. So, it will be seen as a well-thought-out strategy where Mayawati has very smartly used the monsoon session of Parliament to her own benefit.

If you glance at Mayawati's career graph, you'll discover that after the initial setbacks she has rapidly risen up the ladder of success. She became the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh four times. This is a record that she shares with giants such as Chandra Bhanu

Gupta and Narayan Dutt Tiwari. During this period she very cleverly and successfully pushed both the BJP and the Congress to the margins. Till May 2012, Uttar Pradesh was traversing its political journey in the Tamil Nadu mode. The way the ball was either with Jayalalitha or M Karunanidhi, in a similar manner, the fight for power was always between the SP and the BSP. In the last Lok Sabha polls, by fighting elections from Uttar Pradesh, Narendra Modi dismantled this combination that had flourished since 1989. As a result, the BSP tally contracted to just 19 seats. So few MLAs cannot help Mayawati reach the Rajya Sabha once again. Who is responsible for this fall from grace?

If the party's success came because of Mayawati, she also has to take the responsibility for its failure. In 2007, after becoming chief minister for the fourth time, her advisors told Mayawati her life was in danger. Her security ring was tightened so much that if you went to meet her, you had to pass through a security apparatus more elaborate than even the Prime Minister. It could be true that there is a real danger to her life, but all this began alienating the Bahujan Samaj.

It wasn't as if she wanted to ignore them. That is why Mayawati had formed a cadre-based party. It was the responsibility of party workers to help the common man's voice



A file picture of Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati in New Delhi HT PHOTO

reach middle-rung leaders and they in turn were answerable for helping these problems reach the top leadership. But this chain was broken. The reason? Most of the party's tickets began to be reserved for the well-heeled Dalits, minorities and backwards could not relate to these candidates despite being from the same caste. This gave the party's critics an opportunity to say tickets were being sold in the BSP. This happened despite those lev-

elling the allegations never furnishing the evidence to back this claim. Earlier Mayawati used to condemn dynastic politics. To achieve her mission, she did not even start a family of her own but over a period of time her brother's interference in the party and governance began increasing. Now Mayawati's nephew is spotted with her on political platforms. During this time grassroots leaders such as Nasimuddin Siddiqui, Babu Singh Kushwaha and Swami Prasad Maurya deserted her. Some of them levelled such allegations that tarnished the party's image.

To retain her clout, Mayawati had to take shake off the image she has these days. The incidents in Saharanpur gave her this opportunity. After her resignation from the Rajya Sabha, Mayawati is in the epicentre of Dalit politics. The BJP's efforts to woo Dalits to its camp have received a setback. Meanwhile, with a proposal to send her to the Rajya Sabha, Lalu Yadav has indicated the emergence of a new polarisation. Will the next few days see an anti-Modi alliance take shape? If it happens, you'll see Mayawati in a central role there.

An old saying in the army goes: There are two type of officers — loyal lieutenants and good captains. You need loyal lieutenants for a dictatorship and good captains to win a war. At one time Mayawati was Kanshi Ram's good captain. But she groomed loyal lieutenants. Now Mayawati needs good captains. Will she be able to groom them?

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### HOLYMESS



Kanwaris trigger a traffic jam on the National Highway 24 in Delhi, July 21. All faiths today tend to be aggressive and oblivious of public sensibilities RAVI CHOUDHARY/HT PHOTO

# Faith can't encroach upon the right to movement

## The absence of designated times or places for rallies and processions – religious or otherwise – is frustrating



LALITA PANICKER

Your right to your faith cannot literally encroach on my right to movement. But this is precisely what happens on large swathes of public roads when the kanwaris make their way to pilgrimage sites across north India. Now that it is over, we can breathe a sigh of relief and once again exercise our right of smooth passage when we are not being held up by other such processions and rallies. Given the fact that theirs is a religious mission, even the authorities seem to quail at telling them that the public thoroughfares cannot be taken over in the name of devotion.

What was once a quiet pilgrimage of penance and faith has today become a mega-decibel sponsored event, with film songs blaring out of six-foot high speakers, throwing ordinary commuters into disarray and confusion. The faithful are housed in makeshift tents, the state governments makes available a host of amenities from ambulances to water and the kanwaris go their merry way leaving mountains of garbage and clogged roads in their wake. But one cannot single out the kanwaris. All faiths today, barring perhaps the Parsis, tend to be aggressive, loud and completely oblivious of public sensibilities.

The deities have become muscular and overbearing. The gentle Ganesh at the chaturthi is warrior-like, his angry tusks and visage nothing like the playful god he is meant to be. In Kerala, every other day, there are Christian processions to places of worship accompanied by vans fitted with loudspeakers taking over the narrow roads. Across India, come festivals, jagrans or devotional songs – sometimes Hindi film songs – are belted out at such high decibels are to render one temporarily deaf.

Taking over public roads could mean the difference between life and death if an ambulance is passing. There are no designated times or places for rallies and processions, religious or otherwise. Wedding parties take over roads with gas lights, horses and wild dancing leading to monster traffic jams. No question of permits or payment, just take over public property and deface it with no penalty at all. Clearly, the concept that public places cannot be usurped by private parties, whether kanwaris or wedding guests, seems alien to us as a society.

The kanwaris situation is not likely to ease up next year. Already, local politicians have formed welcome parties for them, the kanwaris wear T-shirts bearing the name of one or other chief minister and they have become a law unto themselves. What about the public who has to endure days of suffering? Or have to wait patiently missing hours of work or an examination as rallies and procession pass through busy roads? They can complain all they like, but no one is listening.

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TO PREVENT BRAIN DRAIN, PRESENT OPPORTUNITIES TO THE YOUNG

### Garima Behl

The term brain drain refers to emigration of educated and skilled people from developing countries that are unable to provide facilities and opportunities to youngsters. India is one of the countries facing this problem.

The young generation of our nation doesn't consider India as a good opportunity provider and therefore many of them move towards greener pastures. The prime minister's Make in India initiative, which could provide them a good chance, hasn't been

### pulp-it

R SUKUMAR



# If things are so good, why do we feel so bad?

## India's macroeconomic numbers are offset by a near-term slowdown that may be hard to reverse

There are two competing economic narratives on India at the moment. They sit uneasily with each other. But both are correct. So begins an op-ed by JP Morgan's Sajjid Z Chinoy published by Mint on 19 July. The piece is titled Indian Economy: A tale of two narratives.

For those who haven't read Chinoy's op-ed, here's a quick summary: India's macroeconomic numbers are the best they have been in years, so much so that "India is considered a safe haven among emerging markets." And the government has done its bit with what Chinoy calls "four transformational pushes": "Aadhaar, the bankruptcy law, the goods and services tax, and the codification of the new monetary policy framework." (I would have included the push-in-the-making, the new fiscal policy framework and made it five). But this is offset by a "... second, more sobering narrative: of a near-term slowdown that may be hard to reverse using traditional fiscal and monetary policy." He goes on to list some of the reasons for slowing growth: a fall in exports; the stabilisation of oil prices; the debt on the books of companies (and the corresponding poor assets on the books of banks); the stress in agriculture; and the incomplete recovery after demonetisation.

Chinoy's article – there's more good stuff in the piece; do read it – is a great answer to a question many have been asking: If the macro is good, why isn't the micro reflecting it? Or the question I posed in the headline of this column: If things are so good, why do we feel so bad?

There's more to it, though. There are reasons beyond structural ones, or short-term disruptions (such as demonetisation, the new real estate act, even the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax) for slowing growth in India. A significant one is the fundamental shift in the dynamics of some industries that has resulted in the narrative

**IS THERE SOME MAGIC WAND ANYONE CAN WAVE AND MAKE EVERYONE FEEL BETTER? SAJJID CHINOY SAYS THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD "HANG IN" TILL THE BENEFITS OF SUCH THINGS AS THE GST KICK IN**

turning negative – at least as far as the incumbents in that industry are concerned. For instance, energy companies that invested huge amounts in coal-based thermal power plants a few years ago are suddenly realising that solar energy, which was oh-so-expensive a few years ago, now costs less than coal power. Indian IT services companies are under pressure because they haven't adopted Artificial Intelligence and automation as quickly or as well as they should have. And incumbent telcos have had their businesses wrecked by an aggressive new entrant.

And some industries have been laid low by extraneous factors. India's once-booming generic pharma business has been hard hit by actions taken by the US drug regulator. To be fair, none of these actions are motivated by protectionist tendencies, but that doesn't change the fact that a once-thriving business is now not-so-thriving. The IT services industry has been affected by a similar extraneous factor, namely the new US visa regime. For both IT services and pharmaceutical companies in India, the US is the biggest market.

Finally, the predominantly negative sentiment among Indian business leaders can't be ignored. Some of this is understandable. For instance, demonetisation killed demand for several products and services. But some of it is also prompted by the inability to adjust to the rules-based regime the current government is trying to move towards. When the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power in 2014, most businessmen expected it to be business-friendly. For at least some of them, though, the definition of this term was restricted to whether or not the government was willing to make an exception (or maybe more than one exception) for them. Whatever else you can say about it, the NDA has been loath to oblige on this front.

So, what now? Is there some magic wand anyone, including the government, can wave and make everyone feel better? Chinoy says the government should "hang in" till the benefits of such things as GST kick in. He argues that neither fiscal nor monetary interventions will help.

At another level, over time, Indian companies will get used to the new dynamics of their businesses, the extraneous factors currently worrying them, and, perhaps, the new rules of doing business in the country.

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explored much by the youth.

Indians keep migrating to other countries because they hate the corrupt system that prevails here. Most of them oppose the reservation policies prevailing here.

Many have the mindset that their future is ruined in India and they want to discover better opportunities on their own in other countries.

It is high time to think from the perspective of a migrating professional and take steps to stop this brain drain.

Facilities for working professionals

should be taken care of. From healthcare to travelling allowances, from housing needs to other provisions for a better life should be provided.

The government should analyse the lack of opportunities in our country and subsequently present opportunities before them so that they don't think of migrating to other countries.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers.)

The views expressed are personal  
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