

# How to clean up the mess

To improve civic amenities and solid waste management, a more aware and cohesive citizenry can do its bit and demand more from its government



## OUT OF THE BLUE

ANJALI BHARGAVA

A few weeks ago, I had written a piece on garbage and how the country seems to be filling up with dumpsites and unsorted trash. We can all see the magnitude of the problem if we stop to look around us and we can also see how little is being done to deal with it. Almost every few days, there are news

stories in the dailies of courts asking municipal officials to grab a broom and get working — orders that seem to be falling on deaf ears so far.

But of late, as the magnitude of the problem grows, I have met a few people working in the area and some private individuals who have plunged in themselves and have realised that even at an individual level, there are things we can each do to make a small difference. These are my learnings from them that I think are worth sharing.

Although the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) is well intentioned, it is not able to fully tackle the problem of solid waste management — which remains a matter under state jurisdiction. The focus at the central level remains making India open defecation-free while door-to-door collection of garbage, segregating and sorting remains under municipi-

pal control. The municipalities in most states continue to work in a lackadaisical and indifferent manner, if at all. None of the urgency of the SBA has seeped into their running.

One of the biggest problems in solid waste management remains lack of awareness and the dangers of not doing what is required. The city-wide bubonic plague in Surat in 1994 was primarily caused by improper solid waste management. Clogged sewers and drains accentuated the problem — if not caused it — during the Mumbai floods of 2006. The story repeated itself when Chennai was hit by floods in 2015. Time and again, the failure to manage solid waste has compounded — and occasionally led to — the damage wreaked by natural disasters.

Why some states fare better is because their citizens demand more and force the government's hand. Kerala is an

example. A more aware and cohesive citizenry with common interests demand its rights and coerces the government and municipal authorities to do their duties. Inequality of income in large metros like Delhi and Mumbai leads to a divide and allows the authorities to get away with laxity. The rich pay to keep the areas around them clean; the poor are too wretched and lack both unity and awareness to demand anything, more often than not they are unaware of their rights. It results in cities with pockets of spotlessly clean areas intermingled with areas strewn with garbage.

People who work in the area also say that citizens can on their own do more. Even tiny initiatives help and all steps add up. Earlier, even in richer areas and upmarket colonies in large cities it was not uncommon to find people asking their help to throw their garbage in empty plots nearby. But I do think this is changing in cities like Delhi and Mumbai. Of course it has helped that there are no empty plots anymore, but also there is a greater awareness. In Gurgaon for instance, several resident communities have come together to manage their waste better. They sort and segregate,

pay for private services to collect the waste and in many cases are composting in their apartments. A number of women are actively encouraging others to follow suit. They are both more aware and willing to take the trouble to not only do it themselves but also spread the message. It's heartening to see as they are leading by example. Similarly, in Bengaluru many apartment complexes and bulk waste generators — partly forced by law — manage their own waste. Let me add here that law is not the problem in India. Laws are aplenty (take a look at the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016). It's the implementation that remains an issue.

Last but by no means the least, I am delighted to report that a state that wants to do it can. I am just back from a trip to Madhya Pradesh's commercial hub, Indore, and I am yet to come to terms with what a government can achieve if it so desires. In 18 months, the city of Indore has done what many cities would not be able to achieve in years. Since this is a separate — and marvellous — story for me I won't elaborate too much here except to say that if there is a will, there is definitely a way. Indore is a shining example of this.

## CHINESE WHISPERS

### Keeping friends guessing



Top leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Congress suffered pangs of nervousness on the eve of elections to three Rajya Sabha seats from Gujarat. The BJP has laid much in store to ensure that Congress leader Ahmed Patel is defeated. The Congress has tried all it can to frustrate the BJP machinations. On poll eve, former Congress veteran Shankersinh Vaghela (pictured), who recently quit as its leader in the Gujarat assembly, was unwilling to announce his choice in Tuesday's contest. "Each and every voter is the owner of his vote. The vote is the personal property of an MLA (for the Rajya Sabha election). Therefore, I do not want to reveal whom I will vote for," Vaghela said. He, however, said Patel and he have been friends since 1977. "We have been friends since then and we remain friends till now. Even today, we talked over phone. Our relationship is not limited to politics," Vaghela said. BJP chief Amit Shah has appointed party general secretary Bhupender Yadav to be in Ahmedabad to oversee the party's preparations.

### Rakhi spoiler

Tracking the attendance records of government employees has been a cat and mouse game between them and their superiors. While the biometric attendance system had stymied the trend in its early days, over time employees found they could check in and out at any of the network of connected machines — so the one nearest to their homes became the obvious choice for many who came in late or left early. Authorities have now moved to stop this trend by inserting a place identifier in the machines. It acted as a major spoiler this *rakhi* day — employees had to travel to their offices to record their presence instead of using machines closest to their homes.

### Why and why not

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is a divided lot on the issue of a woman stalked by the son of the party's Punjab state unit chief and his friends. While some in the party have questioned why the woman should have been out at midnight, some others have disagreed at the attempt to shame the woman. BJP Lok Sabha member Anurag Thakur tweeted on Monday his strong condemnation of the incident. "Instead of questioning the girl why she was out at 12.30 am, we must question those individuals and their mindset that leads to such harassment," he said. Earlier, BJP's Lok Sabha member from Chandigarh Kirron Kher tweeted: "In 2017, every girl and boy has equal rights to be out at night. We need to respect that right. I condemn statements questioning this."

# MGNREGA payout delays underestimated

Despite several progressive measures, payment holdups are rampant because the method of delay compensation is flawed

RAJENDRAN NARAYANAN, SAKINA DHORAJIWALA & RAJESH GOLANI

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) provides a minimum of 100 days of work in a year for every rural household at a minimum wage. Because of MGNREGA, for the first time in the country, a transaction-based Management Information System (MIS) has been made available in the public domain; a great feather in the cap of transparency. An essential safeguard in MGNREGA is the delay compensation which is paid, as penalty, when workers don't receive wages within 15 days of completion of work. Despite several progressive measures, payment delays are rampant and the method of delay compensation is flawed leading to massive under-calculation of the true payable compensation.

In order to assess the extent of the true delays in wage payments and the associated under-calculation of delay compensation, we present some intermediate findings from an ongoing study. We have analysed over 90 lakh records for the financial year 2016-17 from a random sample of 3,446 panchayats across 10 states. In our (fairly large) sample, only 21 per cent wage payments for work done are completed within the stipulated 15-day period. In 47 per cent of the records analysed, only partial delay compensation is being captured and the remaining 32 per cent of the records are

not even being considered as delays in the NREGA MIS. These are due to the flawed method of calculating delay compensation. On aggregate, in our sample, while the true total compensation payable is about ₹36 crore, only about ₹15.6 crore is being calculated in the MIS. In other words, about 57 per cent of the true payable compensation is not being calculated at all. This is in gross violation of the spirit of the law.

The term "delay" has been manipulated to underplay the actual delays by the government. Once the work is completed, an electronic voucher called the Funds Transfer Order (FTO) is generated at the block/panchayat. After two digital signatures, the FTO is electronically sent to the Public Finance Management System (PFMS) at the Centre. The Centre on its part, after a sequence of more technical steps, transfers the wages to the beneficiaries' accounts. The date when the wages are deposited to the beneficiaries' accounts is known as the credited date on the MIS. Instead of counting "delays" from the time of muster closure till the credited date, the MIS calculates delay in days only till the payment date. Payment date is actually the date on which the second signature on the FTO is done at the block and not the credited date. Thus, the delays accrued from the FTO signed date till the credited date is not treated as "delay" in the MIS.

This leads to two broad cases. **Case 1:** When the FTO second signature is done after 15 days of

## NOT ADDING UP

FTO signature within 15 days but crediting into accounts exceeds 15 days

States	Number of records for which FTO is generated within 15 days	# Records for which FTO is generated within 15 days but crediting to workers' accounts exceeds 15 days	Percentage of records for which delays are not calculated	Average days taken to credit into accounts when FTO is generated within 15 days	Delay compensation not calculated (in ₹)
JHARKHAND	511,786	157,182	31	9	722,961
BIHAR	142,034	65,831	46	41	2,328,290
CHHATTISGARH	77,016	35,521	46	13	200,303
KARNATAKA	260,870	88,704	34	19	1,394,841
UP	29,551	15,938	54	40	360,833
RAJASTHAN	649,863	388,120	60	12	3,092,843
MP	194,483	39,214	20	6	114,469
ODISHA	176,252	93,142	53	34	1,644,133
WB	376,953	198,415	53	26	3,822,197
KERALA	2,374,254	1,803,628	76	89	82,209,019
OVERALL	4,793,062	2,885,695	60	63	95,889,889



completion of work. Suppose the wage for a week of work is ₹1,002 and the muster was closed on July 5, 2016. Suppose the FTO second signature happened on September 10, 2016, and the credited

date is October 20, 2016. For this situation, the prevailing flawed method considers a delay of only 52 days (between July 5 and September 10) and not the true delay of 92 days (between July 5 and

October 20). The prevailing method yields a compensation amount of ₹26 whereas the true compensation should ideally be ₹46.

Thus, while the state government's delay is being accounted, there is no accounting of the delay in the funds transfer from the Centre. Such partial accounting for delay is observed in 47 per cent of the records in our sample.

**Case 2:** This is the case in which the FTO is signed within 15 days of the muster closure but crediting to workers' accounts exceeds 15 days. Findings for this case are in the table. About 32 per cent of the records in our sample fall in this category.

This case corresponds to the scenario when state governments are doing their job reasonably on

time and yet crediting to workers' accounts doesn't happen on time. The Centre doesn't acknowledge delays beyond FTO second signature date, so no compensation is being calculated for these cases.

As can be seen in the table, when the states are sending the FTO to the Centre within 15 days, the workers are experiencing an overall average unaccounted delay of 63 days in our sample. Further, there appears to be much variation in the time taken by the Centre to release funds to different states. In the two extremes for this situation are Kerala and Madhya Pradesh. When both these states seem to be doing their part of the job well, it appears that it is taking 14 times longer for Kerala to get funds in comparison with Madhya Pradesh. The causes for this intriguing observed pattern of variation are, as yet, unclear.

The provision of the compensation clause in the NREG Act should ideally reduce payment delays. As things stand, the large delays are dissuading workers from taking up NREGA work. Currently, it is unclear as to who assumes responsibility for the delays accrued once the FTO is generated at the state level.

The flaw in the method can be easily rectified in the MIS, provided there is political and administrative will.

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## CONSUMER LIFE

### Young, unemployed and not looking for jobs

MAHESH VYAS

We have spoken about job losses in this column earlier. But, the labour markets' problem is not just in this fall or even its composition, which is no less worrying. Arguably, a greater problem is the sharp fall we see in the number of people seeking jobs.

A fall in the number of people employed along with a fall in the number of people seeking jobs implies a fall in the labour force. Prima facie, this is worrisome. Why should the fastest growing large economy with a young population see a fall in the labour force?

The number of people who declared themselves to be unemployed and were willing to work and were also actively looking for jobs was 39 million in January 2016. Between January and September 2016, this estimate varied between 37 million and 44 million, with an average of nearly 40 million unemployed. It peaked in May 2016 to over 44 million. This, we believe was the time of the year when fresh graduates thronged the labour markets looking for jobs.

In October 2016, the number of unemployed dropped sharply to 30 million, from nearly 39 million in the preceding month. But, there was no corresponding increase in the number of people employed. This happened before demonetisation. We cannot tell (because we do not have long time-series data as the CMIE-BSE partnership to estimate unemployment started generating data only in January 2016) if this was a seasonal fall at the end of a busy kharif season.

Under normal circumstances the extraordinary fall of October 2016 should have reversed in a month or two. But, this did not happen. The count of unemployed has continued since October 2016. By July 2017, the number of people unemployed fell to 13.7 million. It is this persistent fall in the unemployed who are seeking jobs to nearly a third of its



Young people faced with fewer jobs or less-paying jobs may just decide to pursue higher education

level a year ago that makes us focus on this problem now.

Why are the unemployed not even seeking jobs? It will require academics to undertake rigorous research targeted for publication in peer-reviewed journals of repute to answer the question thoroughly. Ingredients for such research (the record-level raw data) are available with CMIE.

Here, I make one observation as is evident from the broad aggregated data.

First, the data says that it is the young who are moving out of the labour force. It is the young who are losing jobs and it is the young again, who have stopped looking for jobs although they are unemployed.

We define the young as persons between 15 and 24 years of age.

We compare the January-April 2017 data against the September-December 2016 data. Over this period, the labour force shrunk by 11 million. Of this, 1.5 million were employed and the rest, that is a whopping 9.5 million were unemployed. We had spoken about the loss of 1.5 million jobs earlier (July 11, 2017). Now we try and understand a bigger problem — the 9.5 million people who stopped looking for jobs

with a particular focus on the young.

Of the 9.5 million unemployed who stopped looking for jobs, nearly seven million were young. Is it possible that the young decided to continue with studies rather than look for jobs? This is known to happen in developed countries — during economic slowdowns, people seek to re-skill themselves. A similar phenomenon could be under play in India now. Young people faced with fewer jobs or less-paying jobs may just decide to pursue higher education instead of looking for presumably non-existent jobs.

Possibly, the youth are enrolling themselves into the various skilling programmes being promoted by the government. But, if the youngsters are not enrolling themselves in higher education or skilling programmes then, we could have a problem growing in our midst.

The fall in the count of unemployed is concentrated in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha. These are the less developed states and these are also the states with the greatest bulge in young population. Such youngsters, who have no jobs and have even stopped looking for jobs, could easily stray into unlawful activities. The demographic dividend can become a demographic demon.

The need for rigorous research in this area cannot be understated. We do not have to wait for another round of data collection on employment and unemployment. Such an exercise could take anywhere between three to five years to provide any meaningful insight. We need to call in the academics, use the existing machinery in the government and in the private sector to help in understanding the employment/unemployment scene in India and take corrective actions wherever necessary.

The author is managing director and CEO, Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt Ltd

## LETTERS

### Welcome appointment

This refers to the report "Rajiv Kumar named vice-chairman of NITI Aayog" (August 6). The Centre's decision to fill the vacancy caused by the exit of Arvind Panagariya with a professional economist, who has roots in India and who is unlikely to take over the top position in NITI Aayog with a resignation letter in his pocket or an obligation to return after expiry of leave, will be welcomed by all.

Now, one more thing the government can do to make NITI Aayog a professional and functional body that is "superior" to the earlier dispensation (Planning Commission) which it displaced is to allow the present team comprising stalwarts such as Bibek Debroy, V K Saraswat and Vinod Paul some breathing time to settle down and evolve an institutional strategy which will help the organisation stand on its own. To make this possible, the government's support will be needed in making the organisation financially independent and also in terms of legislation, where necessary.

M G Warrior Mumbai

### Upper House check

That Venkaiah Naidu (pictured) would be elected vice-president was a foregone conclusion. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) would want its own man as chairman of the Rajya Sabha, particularly as it does not yet have a majority there. But the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) missed a good tactic in the presidential elections. The NDA had the numbers. But the UPA could have announced that if the NDA chose a non-political nominee who has never been a member of any party or even a legislator as Independent, it would support the candidate so that there is unanimous election of the President. That would have put the NDA on the back foot (like the UPA was in 2002 when APJ Abdul Kalam was fielded) and caused considerable thinking to thwart the suggestion and even convince the people why it refused.

A neutral president would be better for the UPA in 2019. Now the spotlight is



on Rajya Sabha majority. It would be in the interest of the country and its people not to give the NDA a majority in the Rajya Sabha, as then it would then have too free a hand. The government must be given the task of convincing at least a section of the opposition in the Upper House to get legislations through. That would make it less belligerent and make it necessary for house management strategies and lower political temperatures. In the given scenario, while a government must be given a majority in the Lok Sabha so that we don't see umpteen no confidence motions, it must be denied a majority in the Upper House to prevent any runaway policies and agendas.

TR Ramaswami Mumbai

### Constitutional role

The president and vice-president have constitutional obligations. While addressing a meeting of National Democratic Alliance (NDA) MPs just ahead of the election for the office of

vice-president of India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said it is significant that the country would have the president and the vice-president from the same ideology as that of the alliance during 2017-22. It seems Modi has forgotten the important feature of our democratic set-up — that when the president and vice-president are elected, they do not have any ideology.

They are the president and vice-president of the nation and they are to safeguard its interests in accordance with the Constitution of India. The vice-presidential office is constitutional, but the most substantive part of the incumbent's job is his role as chairman of the Rajya Sabha. It is in this context that a vice-president gets tested and judged irrespective of his ideology. It is for the chairman to protect the requisite neutrality and fair-mindedness over and above of his ideology. Now that the Bharatiya Janata Party has more Rajya Sabha MPs (though not in majority) than Congress and when the NDA and its friends are no longer heavily outnumbered by the combined opposition, his role becomes a testing one. We hope the president and the vice-president will stand by the value of multi-party democracy and will be the custodians of the Indian Constitution.

SK Khosla Chandigarh

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