

The Narmada Valley Project Marches On

Build canals and command area channels apace

Inauguration of the Sardar Sarovar Dam by the Prime Minister on his birthday marks a vital step in harnessing the waters of the Narmada, India's largest west-flowing river. It is one of the 30 major, 135 medium and nearly 3,000 dams planned for full utilisation of the river's waters, benefiting Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Large dams are no longer hailed as modern-day temples. They are in bad odour across the world. China's Three Gorges Dam invited worldwide criticism. The mood was different when the Amazon was tamed, the Aswan was built across the Nile and Bhakra Nangal came up. The environmental costs of dams were less appreciated and the human cost seen as well worth bearing, for the larger common good.

The height of the Sardar Sarovar dam causes heartburn in Madhya Pradesh, where much of the incremental submergence takes place. Submergence displaces people, mostly poor, sinks cropped land and kills off wild fauna and flora. Yet, India must build large dams, to harness the monsoons' bounty that drains away. The sum total of benefits across space and time from such dams would far outweigh the costs. But the costs are borne by a relatively small number of people, over a short period of time. The intensity of their suffering makes anti-dam protests far more vocal than the support from beneficiaries, many of them yet to be born. A striking feature of the Narmada project has been that those whom it displaced received compensation, not everyone nor in full measure. Yet, thanks to the valiant efforts of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a norm was established that project oustees must be rehabilitated and compensated. That is as vital a benefit as the additional irrigation and power to be produced from the Narmada Valley Project.

India fails to get the full value of its investment in dams because of failure to build, alongside, the canals and command area channels that are needed to quench the thirst of the lands meant to be irrigated by the dams. This must change.



Activist Shareholders on Boards Welcome

Should the managements of listed companies unduly worry about financial investors who seek to join the board? Certainly not, except in the case of rogues who seek to misuse inside information. The board presence of financial investors would deepen shareholder democracy. They can hold the company to account and demand better performance. The Companies Act provides the right to any person other than retiring directors to stand for director. Active shareholder democracy would bring in greater transparency and checks and balances in the system, boosting corporate governance. Shareholder activism is needed in the Indian context.

Banks are now saddled with bad loans, which have surged as many promoters paid off the political system, got loans sanctioned for inflated costs and harvested the excess amounts for themselves. Expert panels on corporate governance — the Kumar Mangalam Birla Committee and the Narayana Murthy Committee, 2003 — had recommended empowering shareholders. Rightly, the Companies Act mandates shareholder approval in major transactions that include managerial remuneration, inter-corporate investments, guarantees, securities and related party transactions. It also provides for class-action suits against companies that do harm, and the threat of stiff penalties in case wrongdoing, would deter harm. A shareholder can exercise her voting right to influence decision-making in the company, true, but her access to information is limited.

Mature investors must be encouraged to join the board, and must be willing to rock the boat. What counts really is not only domain expertise but also whether a person can think independently and, if need be, challenge the management on its strategies and performance of the company.

Ear, ear to the annual awards that make us laugh as well as think

Bringing Real Peace is an Ig Nobel Goal

The way some Nobel laureates are underperforming after being given their award could kindle interest in their alter ego prize series, the Ig Nobels. After all, the latter are supposed to first make people laugh — and then think; that is more than what some Nobel awardees are doing. Take the case of the Ig Nobel Peace Prize, whose "real" counterpart has been under particular scrutiny of late. The efforts of this year's winners could actually make the world a more peaceful place for countless beleaguered people. After all, Milo Puhani and his team have shown that regularly playing the didgeridoo (the ancient indigenous Australian wind instrument) can deal with obstructive sleep apnoea and its peace-threatening consequence, snoring. No less important is the discovery by James Heathcote (which has won him the Ig Nobel for Anatomy) that not only do old men have big ears — and women too, to a lesser extent — they also grow 2mm every decade after people turn 30. Whoever figures out why ears expand when the rest of the body contracts with age will surely be in the running for a future Nobel if not an Ig Nobel.

Feline fluidity (given their ability to fit any container), cheesophobia and the link between gambling and handling crocodiles are all thought-provoking 2017 Ig Nobel subjects. The list of 2017 Nobel laureates better be good.

A Union minister's thoughtless remark reveals the mindset: our rulers needn't care what we think

Double, Double Oil & Trouble



Sukanta Chaudhuri

Opposites meet in politics, sometimes piquantly across decades. Union minister Alphons Kannanthanam's remarks on fuel prices took me back to the early days of Bengal's Left Front government. The leftists were unfazed by the state's power crisis. (To do them justice, they soon changed their stand.) Chief minister Jyoti Basu made his memorable remark, "Can we eat electricity?" Their take was that power shortage only hurt the rich, who had to sweeter without fans and air conditioners. There was no perception that factories and irrigation needed power, to generate employment and, yes, feed the people.

Unwittingly, taking a leaf out of the Marxists' book, Kannanthanam (from Kerala, after all) would persuade us that only the well-heeled are affected by oil prices: let them pay more to flaunt their cars and bikes. The Union government will make them sweat to benefit the poor. It is heartening to find this Robin Hood stance in a BJP minister.

But someone should tell him that goods of all kinds, including those catering to the poorest, are transported in vehicles run on fuel. A 2013 Nielsen report for the petroleum ministry found 58.45% of India's retail demand for diesel was for public transport and commercial (chiefly goods) vehicles, 14.11% for agriculture and 8.22% for industry and mobile towers.

It seems bizarre to say that any price is justified if the customer can pay it, regardless of costing and input. I would protest if I was charged ₹100 for a matchbox

The proportions cannot have changed radically in four years.

To say that only the affluent are affected by fuel price rises, because they alone buy directly for private use, is like saying that only the affluent pay taxes because they alone pay direct taxes. It was considered a commonplace that a hike in diesel prices pushes up all costs, obviously with most hardship to those with least cushioned wallets. If a new economic wisdom suggests otherwise, we may be told why.

Oil's Not Well

We might seek a little more enlightenment. If the State wants fuel prices to respond to the global market, it must tell us why retail rates remain virtually unchanged when world crude prices drop by half. The explanation should cover the broad picture over three years, not short-term blips like Hurricane Irma. If, contrarily, the government wants to top up low crude prices with taxes to a preset level, let it announce that intent. Let it also explain how such a policy differs from state-administered prices of the hoary discredited type. Either way, let it be frank with the citizen if it cares for the latter's trust.

It also seems bizarre for a responsible member of government to argue that any price is justified if the customer can pay it, regardless of costing and input. I would protest if a shop charged me ₹100 for a box of matches, although paying it would not drive me bankrupt. The minister has created a template for any trader to demand any price he can prise out of the customer.

Ah, says Kannanthanam, but the purpose of the exercise is to help the poor. The self-absorbed middle class has ignored this aspect of his utterance. Yet, this is the feature that reflects most on the government's priorities.



Let him eat cake

Let me return to the petroleum ministry for my last example. Remember the Prime Minister's call to give up LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) subsidy to 'light the flame in a poor man's home'? Yet, by a UPA order not rescinded to this day, LPG for midday meals in schools and anganwadis receives no subsidy. If the government has indeed changed its heart, let it reverse this order as a token of good intent.

But this is to give too much importance to one man's thoughtless outburst. What is really biting us is the underlying mindset, which seems endemic to our rulers. They need not care what we think, hence do not weigh their words on matters of public import. Kannanthanam has fobbed us off with some casual remarks off the top of his head. Our feelings are hurt.

The health budget for 2014-15 was slashed by 20% from the initial allocation, and has risen only sluggishly thereafter, especially after allowing for inflation. Admittedly, the states now get a higher share of central revenue, and garner their own taxes from petroleum products: if they re-

duced the last or agreed to the goods and services tax (GST), prices would fall. But their increased responsibility for the social sector makes them reluctant to do so.

I Think, Therefore You Are

Let me return to the petroleum ministry for my last example. Remember the Prime Minister's call to give up LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) subsidy to 'light the flame in a poor man's home'? Yet, by a UPA order not rescinded to this day, LPG for midday meals in schools and anganwadis receives no subsidy. If the government has indeed changed its heart, let it reverse this order as a token of good intent.

But this is to give too much importance to one man's thoughtless outburst. What is really biting us is the underlying mindset, which seems endemic to our rulers.

They need not care what we think, hence do not weigh their words on matters of public import. Kannanthanam has fobbed us off with some casual remarks off the top of his head. Our feelings are hurt.

The writer is Professor Emeritus, Jadaipur University, Kolkata



Why Fasting is Beneficial

RAVITREHAN

At the superficial level, vrat means observing fast. But its deeper meaning is 'a firm resolve'. In order to achieve anything, it is important to resolve firmly and have a burning desire. Undertaking a fast is a way to cleanse the body, bring about stability of mind and enhance the power of concentration. The ill-effects of tamoguna and rajoguna wear off and the fragrance of satoguna is established.

'Vrat' does not mean to remain hungry or to starve. The mind easily gets attracted to sense objects and we generally have a tendency to keep eating something or other, even if we are not hungry. Fasting really means to exercise restraint and not to allow the mind to get distracted. Instead, one has to concentrate on performing satoguni karmas and try to be in tune with the Divine.

Vrat not only means exercising restraint on eating habits but also on speech, and how we relate with fellow beings. This way, one develops a sense of sacrifice to some of the urges that come from the sensuous objects and desires from time to time. This promotes a healthy lifestyle and creates an atmosphere of peace, love and compassion.

Observing 'nirjala upvaas' throughout the day has a scientific and medical validity also. In addition to giving rest to organs of the digestive system, it generates tremendous amount of heat in the body that is capable of eradicating many ailments and ensures maintenance of good health. Upvaas really means to practice relinquishing attachment to the material world and have a firm resolve to attain Self-realisation.

Chat Room

Equity, Growth for Everyone

Apropos the Edit, 'Growth Implies Some Rise in Inequality' (Sep 18), development at the cost of society has always been a debatable issue for a country like India. Decades of planning has pushed the nation towards higher economic growth. However, 21.9% of the population is still grappling with extreme poverty, literacy rates are uneven among the states and social dogmas are still deep-rooted. The way to growth and prosperity lies in vastly investing in social and physical infrastructure to create more jobs and bridge the divide.

GEETANJALI SHARMA
Bangalore

Bring Women Back to Work

This refers to the Edit, 'Mystery of Shrinking Female Workforce' (Sep 18). For all the hue and cry over increasing maternity leaves and making workplaces more conducive for women, the fact that the female workforce is actually shrinking comes as a shocker. To top that, we are ahead of only Pakistan and the Arab nations. A deeper analysis is needed to figure out the root causes. The mindset of our society, women's safety and the lack of well-paying and proper job opportunities have contributed largely to this sorry state of affairs. Only a dedicated effort to setting the right will solve the problem.

GAURAV GUPTA
Hyderabad

Is Kamal Haasan Right on Cue?

Kamal Haasan's speculated entry into politics is no surprise as film stars entering politics in Tamil Nadu is nothing new: movie actors have steered the state many a time. The need of the hour, however, is a righteous, non-nonsense person as chief minister. Now that Kamal Haasan claims to have started his political journey, one wonders whether he can easily essay the character of a politician without being coerced to compromise in what is often deemed as "dirty politics".

TS KARTHIK
Chennai

Letters to the editor may be addressed to editet@timesgroup.com

GEOPOLITICS

Deep Fried in the Deep State



Pinaki Bhattacharya

The term 'Deep State' is much in vogue these days. The term originates in Turkey from the time of its inception as a modern State about 90 years ago. Turkey's Deep State comprised intelligence agency seniors, military officials, major bureaucrats and their representatives in politics. This was supposedly in alignment with its agenda of nationalism, corporatism and a securocratic State.

Even though US President Donald Trump does not really require a 'Deep State' to create problems for him (he does the best job himself), his problems with three investigations being conducted by the US House of Representatives, the Senate and independent counsel Robert Mueller about his connection with Russia, are indeed a 'Deep State' function.

The media that found each of Tru-

mp's actions 'unpresidential' and each of his tweets 'obnoxious', only exaggerated the impact of all that he did. Add to that his overt anti-Washington rhetoric, his drumbeats about the entrenched political elite of the country, and his White supremacist mien all combine to create a picture of a president of the US who is really an interloper in the White House.

On the other hand, he has virtually created a junta of military personnel — a national security adviser, a chief of staff and a secretary of defence — around him, the others of his close circle being members of the billionaires' club. That apart, more than six months after Trump took over the reins of the world's largest economy in terms of GDP and with the highest military expenditure and globe-girdling armed force, no one knows what the Trump administration's foreign policy priority is. Or what it wishes to do with its financial budget. Or how much of credit does it wish to raise from the world.

However, the American 'Deep State' is now worried about the dip in support among his original constituency of voters. They are worried because these are White, working-class



Spades of statecraft

people who have seen their fortunes shrink from a low-middle-class level. This worries the Washington establishment as much it worries Trump.

Thus, when Hurricanes Harvey and Irma gave the country an opportunity to come together, the 'Deep State' quickly withdrew, for the time being, its vice-like grip that had been tightening around the president. Hence, we see Democratic Party Congressmen like Nancy Pelosi and Senator Charles Schumer traipsing into the White House to have confabulations with Trump.

There is also the 'Deep State' here in our own backyard. Especially the one that has been reared on the larg-

esse of the public sector much before any of its members joined government, but came into its own under the benevolence of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Tired of the Congress party's self-destructing kleptomania, and its perennial inability to strengthen the Indian State by addressing its fundamental problems of being unable to deliver public goods and services through the politico-bureaucratic route, they found in Narendra Modi a certain ability to focus on precisely these issues.

The middle classes thus voted in 2014. It is also this experimentation of the 'Deep State' that has created today's 'hybridised' politics.

GOODS & SERVICES TAX

Disabling the Differently Abled



Koshy Mathew

In July, the goods and services tax (GST) was rolled out to a mixed reception. Its objective is to prevent cascading of taxes and avoid built-in taxes — for example, excise duty at the factory gate, duty on equipment used by telecom companies, etc — thereby lowering retail prices and increasing tax revenue by more voluntary compliance. If it proves effective, there is an anticipated increase in GDP by 2%.

But the implementation of GST has not gone down well with everyone as the initial impact on the market has been an increase in the prices of goods and services. It is also because taxes have become more visible, as compared to earlier when they were hidden and built into the price itself.

What was visible earlier was a value-added tax (VAT) imposed by states at the retail level, or the service tax imposed by the Centre. The new 5%, 12%, 18% and 28% tax based on categories divided into essentials, necessities and luxuries has also left the public confused.

But if anyone has been particularly hurt by GST, the differently-abled are facing a double blow. With 5%

GST being imposed on disability equipment, the message sent out is not one of inclusion. Unfortunately, this notion of economic 'demands and costs' associated with disability is rooted in the misconceived perception that the disabled cannot contribute economically and socially.

To nurture such ideas is in conflict not only with reality but also with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the Right to Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016, and all other steps taken to spread awareness and bring about change in the way society views the differently abled.

To impose GST on wheelchairs and Braille paper is literally taxing the disabled person for trying to overcome his or her disability, in this case,

the inability to walk and read. This is not justifiable and nullifies all the provisions, rules and guidelines envisioned within the RPWD Act 2016 that was cleared by the government in December 2016.

GoI is contradicting itself by passing a progressive legislation and following it up six months later with something that will hinder it. Disability activists have been vociferously protesting against the GST rollout. Following a PIL filed by wheelchair-bound Nipun Malhotra, the Supreme Court has issued a notice to the Centre seeking a response on the matter.

The government, in its statement, responding to the public outcry had said that the GST on disability instruments is to create a win-win situation for the domestic producer of such

instruments and the disabled population. This might be true in concept, but it is totally void in terms of ground reality. The domestic producer pays 18% tax on the raw materials for making disability equipment, which is refundable through the input tax credit (ITC) mechanism.

The 'concessional rate' of 5% would bring in some tax revenue to credit the taxes incurred in the production-distribution chain. If these goods are made tax-free to the final consumer, the input taxes-led cost would ultimately deal a fatal blow to the disability instruments manufacturing industry in India, especially when facing competition from imported disability equipment that is duty-free.

We have optional goods like bindi, kumkum, bangles, sindoor, etc, exempted from GST, and polished diamonds and gold taxed at just 3%. The GST burden on the disabled makes no logical sense.

The fact that disability and poverty form a vicious circle, and that any increase in price in disability instruments would make life harder for the differently abled population, is simply ignored. This either reflects the regressive attitude of the government or its obsession for 'political' optics.

This makes the 'opportunity cost' — Return on the most lucrative option minus Return on the chosen option — for the disabled life-hindering.



Queering the pitch

The writer is research officer, Score Foundation