

Opportunity for more transparency

Nobody has so far made any allegation against former Chief Justice of India and chairman, National Human Rights Commission, K G Balakrishnan. His name is mentioned only in the context of the sudden prosperity of his two sons-in-law. It could very well be nothing more than mere coincidence that their financial stature improved dramatically during the period their father-in-law held the highest judicial office. The income tax department has, reportedly, found out that the assets one of them — P V Sreenijan who contested the last Assembly elections in Kerala on the Congress ticket — has acquired is wholly disproportionate to his known sources of income. Investigations underway will, hopefully, reveal the truth. Once the relatives are able to account for all the wealth they have acquired, Balakrishnan's name would no longer be dragged into the controversy. There would, of course be no cause for closer scrutiny if Justice Balakrishnan had not strained himself to prevent disclosure of judges' assets. Ironically, it may be recalled, most judges favoured disclosure. In that instance, Justice Balakrishnan did not give the impression that he was for suitable transparency.

Though he has declared his assets, in this instance, Justice Balakrishnan has asked the income tax department not to disclose details of his income tax returns for the last five years as demanded under the Right to Information Act. He has taken shelter in a clause in the RTI Act which bars officials from disclosing personal information which has "no relationship to any public activity or interest". However, the clause also mentions that such information can be disclosed if it serves the "larger public interest".

At least in this particular case, the disclosure will be in public interest as it will remove some of the apprehensions of the people and restore their faith in Balakrishnan's integrity. As per law personal income tax details can't be made public. The government refused to disclose the names of those who held foreign accounts. In the present instance even ministers cannot be made to divulge their income tax returns. But this instance provides a starting point. Balakrishnan's is a fit case for the government to change the law under which those who hold public offices should be obliged to disclose their income tax returns — if a genuine demand is made in public interest. It should be equally applicable to ministers, civil servants and the judiciary.

Advice fraught with danger

The government's seemingly dysfunctional condition has apparently persuaded the Supreme Court to offer gratuitous advice on a wide range of subjects, a propensity which recently drew faint objections from the mild-mannered prime minister. It would be worthwhile, therefore, to wait for the government's response to the court's directive on an unusual subject — an alternative source of income for commercial sex workers. Commenting on the murder of a sex worker in Kolkata in 1999, the court has pointed out that women take to sex work "not for pleasure but because of abject poverty". In doing so, it turned to Guru Dutt's *Pyasa*, and to the works of fiction of Dostoevsky and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay for sympathetic portrayals of those living in 'red light' districts.

Though well-meaning, it is doubtful whether the government will be able to provide to the court the details of the steps it intends to take about organising vocational training for the targeted women. The government may be hard put to finding either the funds or the inclination for a venture of this magnitude and meet the May 4 deadline set by the court. Besides, it is a matter of debate whether turning to the government to address every problem, especially one mixing morality with employment opportunities, is advisable. The best course is for the government to turn to NGOs to arrange for rehabilitating those who have had to forsake their earlier means of earning a living.

However, an aspect of the world's oldest profession to which the Supreme Court does not seem to have given adequate attention is that compulsion — either to leave or join a profession, however disreputable — cannot be the government's business. The reason is that any attempt to put human nature in a straitjacket is not feasible. In this particular case, a way out is to arrange for vocational training for the "fallen" women, but leave it to them to accept or reject the choice. The emphasis has to be on the availability of options, not on a coercive act, driven by pity or morality, if only because a refusal by any individual or group, even out of cussedness, can invite more coercion by the authorities.

Just as prohibition leads to the manufacture of illicit liquor, attempts to regulate commercial sex work have to be undertaken with caution, keeping in mind the frailties of mankind.

UPA's Confidence Deficit Raj

The real deficit that is afflicting the government is of direction. It is a government on drift. The '1991 reformers' — Manmohan Singh, Montek Ahluwalia, Pranabda — are tired but not retired

POWER & POLITICS | PRABHU CHAWLA



THE GOVERNMENT IS MISSING THE PLOT ON ITS BIG-TICKET PROJECTS, LIKE THE ONE TO UNIVERSALISE PRIMARY EDUCATION. SURVEYS SHOW THAT OVER 60 PER CENT OF STUDENTS ARE INCAPABLE OF SIMPLE DIVISIONS AND OVER A HALF OF THE 10-YEAR-OLDS COULD NOT READ TO THE ABILITY EXPECTED OF SIX-YEAR-OLDS

already earned the sobriquet "minister for Air India," do any better? If Murlidhar Deora hobnobbed with the Big Oil as petroleum minister, will he not walk through another corporate door as corporate affairs minister? Besides, Jaipal Reddy, who is known to love nothing more than the microphone, may not be the ideal leader of the petroleum ministry, which calls for tightrope walking between consumer interest and that of producers.

A Cabinet superimposed on the government cannot but be muddleheaded. It is unable to explain the current inflation, which food economist Ashok Gulati has described as the "worst form of taxation on the poorest of the poor." But Chidambaram is unfazed. "Any serious student of economics would say that, for the most part, this (high inflation) is demand driven", he has said in the interview. He was echoing what the prime minister recently told the state chief secretaries, that food prices are soaring because Indians are eating more.

The argument is specious because the government itself released data in 2009 showing 37 per cent of the people below poverty line. The calculation was obviously a joke, as the Planning Commission had calculated the poverty rate only two years earlier at 27.4 per cent.

But the 2009 figure was justified on the ground that its basis was different, or, in other words, the poverty line had been redrawn. A bit of dithering on the poverty number may be explained as a smokescreen to justify a bunch of hopelessly inefficient wel-

fare programmes, including the unaudited MGNREGA. It was of the more-leftist UPA-1 vintage. But now the UPA leaders are no longer on the same page. The welfare programmes, they are saying, have already made Indians rich. In UPA's India, things really happen fast. In the process, however, about 10 per cent of the population — some 120 million people representing the gap between the 2007 and 2009 poverty counts — are missing.

The government is missing the plot even on its big-ticket welfare projects. Take for example the one to universalise primary education, begun by Atal Bihari Vajpayee as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, on which the UPA government has applied a new coat of paint and enacted a new law giving Right to Education (RTE) to all children between 6 and 14 years of age. It has no doubt raised enrolment, but that's where the story ends. NGO surveys show that over 60 per cent of the students are incapable of simple divisions and over a half of the 10-year-olds could not read to the ability expected of six-year-olds. Primary dropout rate at 40 per cent is higher than Bangladesh, a country poorer than India. The pity is, of those students who enrol themselves in secondary schools, as many as 48 per cent drop out during the journey from the ninth standard to twelfth. It shows how unattainable is the promised "right" to education.

That brings us to UPA's another shining project, the Right to Food Bill. The new buzz is to do away with the corruption-ridden Public Distribution System and issue food stamps, much like it was done in Europe

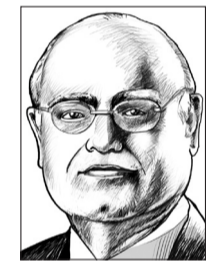
ravaged by the Second World War. That enables the coupon holder to buy his quota of food from the market at subsidised price, with the trader free to cash out the coupon later. It will no doubt let the food security system reach every deserving citizen, which is not the case with the ration shops now. But is Indian agriculture equipped to meet the consequent spike in demand? Not quite. On an index of 100 in 1993-94, agricultural production in India has gone up to only 119.2 in 2009-10. If population was identically indexed, it would probably have reached 135. That's a rough measure of rising starvation. Instead of planning a second Green Revolution, the government is writing a new law. Agriculture minister Sharad Pawar has remained too busy with management of cricket all the while to give it a thought.

And so every minister has some preoccupation other than the drab job of governance. Railway minister Mamata Banerjee has the task ordained probably by the goddess next to her house in Kolkata's Kalighat to rout the CPI(M) in the next Assembly poll. What does it matter to her if the railways budget suddenly goes in the red? And why should Union finance minister Pranab Mukherjee, who enjoys being adored in his Congress party for his Confucian wisdom, be hassled by the rising prices? He has on his hand the more important task of giving his son a Congress ticket for the West Bengal Assembly poll.

The real deficit that is afflicting the government is of direction. It is a government on drift. The '1991 reformers' — Manmohan Singh, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Pranabda — are tired but not retired. It may have so far escaped the notice of voters, but the stock market is unforgiving. It is struggling to claw upward from where it was on the last day of 2009, after losing a fifth of its value in the past five weeks.

Isn't it confidence deficit, Mr Chidambaram? ■

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Supreme Court:

Noting that commercial sex workers also have the right to live in dignity

"A woman is compelled to indulge in prostitution not for pleasure but because of abject poverty. If such a woman is granted opportunity to avail technical or vocational training, she would be able to earn her livelihood by such vocational training and skill instead of by selling her body..."

Rajnath Singh:

BJP leader

"Manmohan Singh has no 'moral right' to stay in power and must step down in the interest of the country."

M S Dhoni:

Indian cricket captain, On India's below par performance in the warm-up match

"If you play 35 odd ODIs in a year, 10 Test matches and 45 days of IPL and Champions League, then all of a sudden there's a warmup game, it's very difficult to mentally prepare yourself for it."

DEAR EDITOR

Krishna has embarrassed the nation at the UN

The faux pas made by Indian external affairs minister S M Krishna at the United Nations Security Council meet has put our country in an embarrassing situation. It is unfortunate that the maiden speech of India after getting the non-permanent seat in UN Security Council after a gap of two decades has been messed up by the external affairs minister — **Mukundan Mangalamkat, Tiruchy**

It's time to hand over baton to the youth

External affairs minister S M Krishna's faux pas at the United Nations Security Council meet where he read the speech of the Portuguese minister once again reiterates the need for the young brigade with rational thinking at the helm of affairs. It's time for geriatric leaders, some who can hardly sit and think but cling on to power for personal gains, to hand over the baton to the young ones to lead the country on right path devoid of scams.

V Vijayendra Rao, Neyveli

Dynastic succession is still followed in India

Apropos Shiv Visvanathan's "The dance of democracies" (TNIE, February 10), for America, democracy is still a product for export. When dictators fall, the political transition must be orchestrated by 'stable' regimes, depending on the frowns and favours of Washington. Otherwise, the regimes may not bear its stamp of approval. Egypt has lost much of its sheen. Now neither Hosni Mubarak nor Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen can ready their sons for dynastic succession. But, shamefully in India, the world's largest democracy, dynastic succession is still the order of the day and the curse on the people.

Kangayam R Narasimhan, Chennai

Dictatorial democracies should be brought down

Apropos the edit 'Egypt's general dilemmas' (TNIE, February 14), it has been rightly stated that there is no popular face in the overthrow of 30-years President Hosni Mubarak.

After Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution, another dictator is forced to step down. A fact that we should ponder over is: Does Islam and true democracy go together in any part of Arab World? The whole world should take steps towards stopping and replacing dictatorial democracies. We cannot afford to turn a blind eye to such problems as the people will suffer due to our inaction.

V Sundararajan, e-mail

Egypt uprising a warning to autocratic forces

The Egyptian revolution will not remain confined to Egypt. Congratulations to the people of Egypt who changed the course of the mad river not by the power of the gun but by their dedication and will power. This is a warning to those who choose autocratic means and the use of occupational forces. However, the question to be asked is whether what happened in Egypt was a revolution or merely a regime change. A revolution needs decades to occur and it is not a mere regime change. Revolution in Egypt is a welcome step but let not the US or other so-called democratic governments start pushing their ideas to fulfil their nefarious designs in Egypt.

Noor ul Haq, Coimbatore

Can India drive out its corrupt politicians?

Apropos V Sudarshan's "The return of the mummy" (TNIE, February 15), Egypt had a Dictator but the people power drove him out. Ours is a democracy, but can Indians at least drive out corrupt politicians and install a reasonably clean government? We don't have to spend a single day on the street pro-

testing, but will have to exercise our franchise and vote for change. But unfortunately we do not do it and are left with leaders who loot the country.

Neelu, e-mail

Left is losing its last bastion in India

Sumit Mitra's 'Left Vs Democracy' (TNIE, February 12) is a convincing analysis on the Lefts irrelevance in the present political scenario. Marxian communism will no longer be relevant. Collapse of the Soviet Union is the best example. But leftists in India still cling to outdated dogmatic approaches which will result in their ultimate ruin. The support and prospects of the Left in Bengal is proof of this decline. General secretary Prakash Karat's wrong policies have resulted in the party losing its base in its bastions.

B Veerakumaran Thampi, e-mail

The end of the Left in India is near

Sumit Mitra's 'Left Vs Democracy' (TNIE, February 12) manifests the malady that infests Left parties in India. The title is apt in the sense that our comrades experiment twisting democracy to fit their communist ideals. They fail in their mission as the collapse of communism in Russia has its impact all over the world and the double standards of the Left parties are keenly viewed by the people. The Lok Sabha results didn't help them change their path and the future also does not look promising. If the trend continues, the end of Left's presence in Indian political arena is fast approaching.

Srinivasan J, Dindigul

Taliban is shooting itself in the foot

This is with reference to news that a school-bomber became a suicide bomber killing 31 Pakistani army recruits. The Taliban takes pleasure in announcing that it has successfully accomplished its mission of attacking those recruits who provide security to the United States. How the Taliban feel proud of themselves by doing such immoral and unfruitful things? The Taliban should feel ashamed of themselves for such cheap acts. Such acts will only decrease their popularity among the public. They might fear the Taliban but they would be waiting for an opportunity to boot them out.

Saurav Kumar Sahu, Bhimatangi

Basic amenities a must in public buildings

The Tamil Nadu administration swung into action only after getting a thrash from the Chief Justice of the Madras High Court on the appalling conditions prevailing in the chief judicial magistrate court. One wonders what the administration was doing all those days till they got the whip from the judiciary. The enthusiasm and zeal now shown by them could have been initiated long back which would have avoided the criticism. It appears there is no periodical inspection carried out on the old buildings for ensuring the essential services. The observations of the chief justice must be an eye-opener to the government for providing basic essential services in public offices.

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