**Recasting Welfare**

Despite our ‘deepening’ democracy and record economic growth since 1990s, human indices in India have remained dismal on most counts. While about a sixth of our population remains close to the starvation line (of $ 1.25 per capita, daily consumption), as much as a third of our children appear stunted and about half of Indian women were found anemic, in the National Family Health Survey, in 2005. No doubt, life expectancy has doubled in the country since independence. Yet, morbidity is rising as pollution and contaminated food and water are unleashing diseases like asthma and diabetes on an unprecedented scale. Contradictory trends are evident in Indian education too; while, on paper, 60% of our enrolled children are now completing primary education, only half of these can read sentences in their mother tongue and less than a third can do two digit multiplication, according to a survey conducted by the Human Resource Development Ministry last year. In the sphere of governance too, the picture is bleak in most provinces of India. In 2014, for example, 14% of our legislators had heinous criminal cases pending against them even as bail, parole and case-closures are available to dangerous criminals while pendency in courts has crossed the three crore mark and crimes against women are growing in brutality as well as frequency.

In such a scenario, the mass of our population is forced to live in harrowing insecurity compounded by their low wages, harsh working conditions and little insurance against illness, old age or accidents. It is this nine-tenth of population living in villages and slums that faces the brunt of health risks (including the presence of fake medicines and doctors), economic failings (including immense underemployment and poor infrastructure), and communal tensions (including riots over music, stalking and cricket) too.

**Underlying Causes**

This brings us to the riddle as to why a country that has been a functioning democracy for 60 years and is seen as the fastest growing large economy, a country that has an active civil society (including two million NGOs) besides a long history of welfare and social reform movements, remains such an underachiever on development and governance indices ? More strikingly, why has our HDI rank, among 190 odd nations remained stuck at 130 when even late developers like Malaysia and Thailand were ranked at 64 and 83 respectively by the UN in 2015.

Scholars have cited a number of factors to explain India’s baffling underachievement on the development ladder. These include: steep social hierarchies and continuing caste barriers; the semi-feudal character of our ruling class and its iron grip on the state; the stranglehold of rigid customs and cultural prejudices specially on our middle class and finally, the deep influence of dynastic loyalties and caste and communal identities on our electoral politics. Some of these constraints like sharp inequalities seem clearly overstressed, in accounts of underdevelopment, in light of the communist collapse (even after abolishing private property) on the one hand and evolution of welfare magnets, in highly inegalitarian countries like Canada and UK, on the other.

While generations of left analysts diverted public attention to pointless discourses on mode of production, internal contradictions of capitalism, imperialist hegemony etc, real constraints hampering our development like falling standards of governance, over-regulation of private enterprise, paralyzing laws (epitomized in our harsh and counterproductive rent, labour and dowry statutes) and chimeras spawned by pseudo-socialists and anti-developmentalists (regarding self-sustained growth, cottage industry, taxation etc) remained under-attended for long among dominant segments of legislators and intellectuals too. Fortunately, stifling controls on trade and industry were dismantled partially after the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1990s. Yet, new controls reappeared as reckless ‘green tape’ spun by the UPA regime (specially through rigid new provisions in land, forest and environment clearances even for essential infrastructure and defense outlays) in the preceding decade.

The recurrence of such administrative and policy fiascos in India indeed point towards some deeper factors which generate quasi-immunity even for poorly performing parties and criminal politicians in country’s electoral arena. Among these constraints, the dominance of money and muscle power, identity politics and of the nexus between populist leaders and utopians and pseudo-socialist ideologues are specially noteworthy. It is also ponderable that the success of Asian ‘tigers’ like Japan and South Korea could have a lot to do with the marginalization of leftist hegemony in their public spaces. In India, on the other hand, policy discourses were long dominated by imported visions of ‘proletarian dictatorship’, centralized planning and class struggles on the one hand and utopian expectations from *gram-swaraj, garibi-hatao* and the handloom etc on the other

**Correctives**

In this scenario, shackles of staggered development in *Bharat* would not be broken without combining rapid economic growth with improved governance and comprehensive social security for all. In all these realms, the state, civil society, local communities as well as the private sector need to act jointly and in a coordinated fashion. Indeed, by becoming less obstructionist against the private sector, the Indian state would be able to focus better on its core functions too. This is not to say that the state should confine itself to the night watchman’s role. Not only welfare services but infrastructure growth and saving private enterprise itself (from its profiteering impulse) would remain critical for any developmental state. But the liberalisation of the economy needs to be carried forward in areas like labour and administrative reforms also.

Regarding welfare, it cannot be disputed that entitlements to quality education, health and economic security for all helps in promoting productivity too. Despite an overwhelming consensus in this regard, multiple ills plague public welfare in our country related to funding as well as design and delivery. Despite some hike in recent years, welfare expenditure of the Indian state, for example, is low at about 7% of the GDP in contrast to advanced nations like Sweden where upto a third of the gross domestic product is reserved for social security and free education and healthcare. Clearly, the central as well as provincial governments in India need to raise their welfare commitments specially in sectors like health and pension support for the needy.

**Policy Reforms**

Any raise in welfare spending would, however, end up in a leaky bucket unless design and delivery problems are also addressed. Unfortunately, public services in India suffer not only from rampant corruption but also misplaced priorities and needless policy conflicts. While billions have been spent by central and state government on departments of slum rehabilitation, urban housing etc and schemes like Rajeev Awas Yojna and MGNREGA, delivery of essentials like roads, regular power supply, sanitation as well as reliable healthcare and security against sickness, old age etc have not been assured still. Acknowledging that the larger aim of welfare ought to be enhancement of capabilities rather than citizens’ dependence on the state, greater weight ought to be given to quality education (including skills for making a living and for daily life too) and security cover for all instead of free laptops, mobiles etc. Digitised safety nets also need to be created for migrant workers, the homeless and those in the informal sector (including home based workers and semi-legal earners like beggars) who often lack residence proof and other documents and thus remain outside the safety nets designed specially for them. Illness hits the poor as a pincer that inflicts sudden expense along with loss of earnings. In this light, the neglect of reliable healthcare as well as sickness support (say, ten days’ wages in lieu of illness to all workers) seems most unfortunate in our entitlements architecture till today.

As far as the delivery apparatus is concerned, one measure that cries out for attention is a better carrot and stick policy for improving work culture in government departments. Denial of salary increments to those who shirk work and bonuses for extraordinary performers need to be tried within the public sector too in place of assured increments and routine promotions. To tackle corruption and pilferage, the institution of the Lokpal and Lokayuktas (independent of the executive) are welcome moves. However, better protection of whistleblowers and calls for anonymous and confidential complaints against manifest corruption, from the general public, on publicized addresses along with wider use of IT to improve transparency in decision making can go a long way in addressing grave lapses for which the Indian state has become an epitome in the world. Apart from corruption and poor work culture, public institutions in India also suffer from critical ailments in the selection and appointment processes. Power to recruit to these sought after jobs has been grossly misused by ruling politicians not only to mint money but also as instrument of sectarian largesse and for cultivating vote banks often. This has, in turn, lead to a major slide in efficiency as well as reliability in policing, municipal functions and aid distribution etc. To check such malpractices, video recording of public exams and evaluation work (including interviews and selection panel proceedings need to be made mandatory.

While tracking corruption, however, we need to be alert that excessive fear of prosecution may also slow down decision making if witch-hunts are not preempted. Resultant policy and administrative paralysis would harm the poor too. To counter this, prosecution shield needs to be firmed up to check nefarious complaints against public officials and interfaces between people and the bureaucracy need to be improved through clear display of information (including officers’ mobile numbers) in vernacular language bill boards as well as websites. Simultaneously, use of CCTVs also needs to be pushed in office spaces to monitor employees’ punctuality and behavior towards the visiting clients and the public. However, motivating employees for dedicated service is always preferable to coaxing. Cash and non-cash incentives for better output including extra increments and generous use of public honours and praise can be of critical value here. A major roadblock in this approach is the difficulty of assessing performance without bias and investment of excessive power in the bosses’ hands. To address this, a mix of peer reviews, public feedback and self reporting need to be promoted over and above confidential reports from superiors to evaluate performance of government employees.

In the private sector too, workers’ exploitation needs to be taken seriously and decent wages and healthy working conditions as well as gender justice and democratic functioning need to be promoted through setting up of response mechanisms to follow up on anonymous complaints from work places and cognizance of workers’ harassment as a human rights issue. Once these safeguards are in place, greater involvement of the private sector in welfare delivery can be given a try along with trimming of government staff so that resultant savings with the government can be used to fund vouchers for needy families and for local bodies which can then be free to avail concerned services from schools, doctors etc of their choice instead of depending on government staff alone. Such public-private-local partnerships (or a *PPLP* model) could then bring greater momentum in a staid administrative machinery which has been wasting upto three fourth of precious funds meant for the poor at times.

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