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# **INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

## **Information gathering and sharing tool**

J. MURALI

This edition of NetSpeak introduces a few more means for discovering and sharing content.

A significant factor that distinguishes a researcher of this age from the researcher of yesteryears is the access to multiple collaboration platforms. The widespread growth of Net-based collaboration tools has made sharing of ideas/resources a breeze. As you are aware, for information gathering and sharing we have several tools at our disposal.

The wide spectrum of content discovery and sharing tools includes the traditional search services (search engines, search directories, subject gateways and so on), social messaging and networking services (such as twitter, Facebook and Google Plus).

Though these services can be used for sharing specialised and scholarly content too, they are more tailored to the needs of general public. This scenario is giving rise to the emergence of more focussed networks and services. The introduction of Circles in Google Plus could be considered as recognition of this evolving requirement.

The popular question answer service, [Quora](#) ([discussed in the past - Q & A service: evolving landscape](#)), and the professional social network [Linkedin](#) are a few instances of this emerging trend. [DeviantArt](#), a social networking site for artists and art enthusiasts is yet another specialised social media service worth a look. Another collaborative application, fast gaining popularity among the academic crowd, is ResearchGate, the social network service catering to serious researchers.

[ResearchGate](#), the free collaboration and resource-sharing tool, dedicated to scientists and scholars, is an amazing content source for a

knowledge seeker. A significant aspect of the service is the 'Topics' feature that allows one to subscribe to topics of choice. The service offers a wide array of topics that range from 'Agriculture Science' to 'Computer Science'. Once subscribed to the relevant topics, the service automatically starts sending you alert messages as and when new discussion threads on these topics surface.

Whatever be the topic of choice, you will find numerous discussions that delve deep into the subject. For instance, if you select the topic, say, History of Science, you will find involved discussions and a plethora of links pertaining to it. A researcher might find such discussions helpful in comprehending the current concerns. Besides sharing content/ideas, the service can be used to find people with similar interests. For instance, if you invoke a search on a topic, ResearchGate immediately lists out researchers who are active in the topic.

### **Related sites**

While reading an article or a blog commentary on a product/service, the information gathering process can be made more efficient if the browser automatically populates articles/blog posts related to the one being read. Of course, the technology identifying similar web pages is not new.

We have already featured several tools of this kind in the past (like [Similarsites](#)).

The Chrome extension [Google Related](#) is yet another tool of this type worth a try. Once installed, the extension reads/analyses the text of the page being viewed and automatically presents related content in a bar at the bottom of the browser.

### **Open textbooks**

As discussed in the past, a textbook that can be used/edited/modified/re-published by anyone is called an open text.

Several projects meant for creating open textbooks are live across the Net. [The Connexions](#) project, mentioned earlier in this column, is one of them. Besides books pertaining to core subjects, books that help users learn certain application packages are available on this site.

Recently this author stumbled on a couple of such books on this site. 'Calculating basic statistical procedures in [SPSS](#)' is one such book found on the site. '[Word Processing Essentials](#)' is yet another book of this type available here. Those of you who wish to improve your MS-Word skills may find this book useful.

### **Zotero: new version**

The bibliography creation and citation management tool, Zotero, is one of the tools used by researchers of all hues worldwide. One shortcoming of this tool is that you need Firefox to run it. This dependence on Firefox drives some users away from it. You don't need to worry about this anymore.

The latest version of [Zotero pack](#) contains a browser-independent standalone version too. This means you can use it like any other desktop tool. Besides, Zotero offers plug-ins or 'connectors' that help you access it from other browsers (like Google chrome) as well.

### **Text to speech tool**

We have seen umpteen tools that help us convert text into audio content ([Emerging text-to-speech utilities](#)).

The free software eSpeak is the latest one to join in the bandwagon of text-to-speech tools. The advantage of this open-source free speech synthesizer is its ability to read out text in different languages. Apart from English, the software supports a variety of other languages (Hindi, Tamil and Malayalam). Besides reading out the text from a file, it can also be used to record the content into an audio file. An interesting

offshoot of this project is its 'Javascript' version, which can be used in web sites to speech-enable web pages. As shown in the 'speak.js' [demo page](#), one can easily integrate text to speech function into a web page with a few lines of HTML code.

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# **INTERNATIONAL ECONOMY**

## HINDU 2.10.11 INTERNATIONAL ECONOMY

### **Global economy 'in a dangerous new phase'**

C. R. L. NARASIMHAN

In its recent biannual publication, World Economic Outlook, the International Monetary Fund warned that the world economy was “in a dangerous new phase.” That warning was issued just days before the annual IMF-World Bank meeting of finance ministers and central bank governors in Washington.

With the World Bank and other international agencies more or less endorsing the IMF's view, it was hoped that the high-level meeting (on September 24 and 25) would come out with a more tangible statement of intent if not a credible action plan to tackle the euro debt crisis and other pressing concerns than what it eventually managed.

The most pressing issue has been the sovereign debt crisis in Europe. Despite considerable pressure from other countries, leading European economic powers failed to reach an agreement on a specific bailout plan that would stave off a default by one or more eurozone countries. A press release at the end of the IMF-World Bank meeting merely asserted that the eurozone along with other member nations was committed to fixing the problem.

Such inaction can be costly. More than anything else it shows a lack of political will without which no solution to the euro crisis is possible. On their part, the richer countries in the eurozone, notably Germany, have argued that strong political opposition at home has made their task of funding a rescue plan extremely difficult. Already the idea of “throwing

hard earned money for the benefit of profligate neighbours" has cost the ruling German coalition dear in some recent elections.

In the last fortnight, financial markets around the world, which had witnessed a sell-off, were bracing for a major meltdown. If that happens, the prospects for a recession will increase. Granted that the eurozone's sovereign debt crisis has assumed menacing proportions, is the panic reaction of the stock markets justified?

### **Tail wagging the dog?**

Or is it because the markets are aware that there are other significant risks? Such as those emerging from the U.S. where apparently investors have lost faith in the Federal Reserve's ability to stave off a recession?

Even in more normal times the financial markets are not a good barometer of economic health. Certainly in the present situation, the biggest danger is of the tail wagging the dog, with the markets tipping the economies into recession. Even companies with strong balance sheets hesitate to invest amidst all the market turmoil. Consumers are loathe to spend for the same reason.

Around the world, stock markets are showing signs of distress. German and French stock markets have shed a third of their value since their peaks this year while U.K. and U.S. shares have lost a fifth. Normally such steep declines are associated with recessions.

Is there a way out of this gloom? The euro debt crisis has major ramifications and downside risks.

A worst case scenario will unfurl as under:

Investors will start worrying as countries, besides Greece, are pushed to the edge. Already Italy and even France have come under stress. The maximum adverse impact will be on the banking system.

If investors start taking their money out, the banks will react by deleveraging and reducing their exposures as quickly as they can by selling sovereign bonds. They will also be less eager to lend to the private sector. Such acts can lead to tensions in the U.S., a potential recession in Europe and possibly a global recession.

The worst case scenario may not come to pass however. A much more hopeful scenario is possible even if Greece defaults. The Greek government pulls out of the eurozone and devalues its currency to regain competitiveness. Eurozone banks holding Greek debt suffer, but the EU and strong countries such as Germany help in recapitalising banks. The financial system gets back some stability. Funds not spent on Greece are used to bolster other countries, including Spain and Italy. Germany leads the eurozone's drive towards greater fiscal unity. Markets stabilise and the world economy is saved from a double dip recession.

Europe is finally taking steps to calm its financial markets and prevent its economy and that of the world from tipping over. The European Financial Stability Facility, the main weapon in the armoury, is sought to be expanded on a massive scale. Its corpus is \$440 billion and at the moment efforts are on to use it to derive the maximum benefit. Leading European countries are trying to overcome domestic opposition to their efforts to support bailouts. Greece and other countries, which have come under stress, are trying to push through unpalatable austerity measures.

Even as the world is glued to the sovereign debt crisis, other problem areas in the global economy cannot be ignored.

Needless to add, these compound the gravity of the sovereign debt crisis. Perhaps the biggest cause for worry outside Europe is American politics.

There is plenty of rancor still in the political debates in the U.S., which unlike in the past is in no position to provide leadership to a crisis-ridden global economy. Only a rational and determined U.S. policy can steady the nerves in the global economy. Recent happenings on Capitol Hill

and a looming presidential election that promises to be bitter do not offer much hope of that.

# **INTERNATIONAL RELATION**

## **Be very afraid**

Shekhar Gupta

Pakistan has been back in the headlines lately, and we have nothing to do with it at all. You haven't seen it make headlines of any kind on its relations with us, India, for a very long time now. Is that good news, or bad news? So tortuously complicated is our neighbour's worldview, that our situation defies the age-old logic of no news is good news.

Let me explain. For decades, and particularly so since the end of the Cold War and nuclearisation of the subcontinent, Pakistan has had only one real, permanent leverage with the rest of the world: its strained equation with

India, its ability, with just one provocation, to bring the two countries close to war (as after the December 13, 2001 Parliament attack, the tenth anniversary of which will fall later this year) or help its establishment drum up a fictitious war-like atmosphere, as they did after 26/11. That immediately gets the world to wake up. In short, it solves (albeit temporarily) Pakistan's biggest problem: lack of attention from the rest of the world, particularly America. India is Pakistan's permanent hostage and it is worth good ransom value whenever the Western powers seem to be losing interest in their old, favourite and often naughty child in the subcontinent.

Developments over the past few months may just be leading the Pakistani establishment into that state of mind. We have Admiral Mullen, and now Obama himself, accusing them of betrayal. It has, in fact, been a long time since you heard even the usual, patronising words

of praise the Americans gratuitously throw at the Pakistanis. This, when the Americans are heading for their own elections, and when their plans for a phased withdrawal from Afghanistan are nearly final.

This is how the Pakistanis will read this: these guys are going away and won't need us any more. Of course, if they are attacked from this region, they will respond with Tomahawks or drones as they do, hold your breath, in Yemen. Hold your breath, because, can you imagine the almighty, nuclear-armed Pakistan, with the fifth largest army and more civilians carrying Kalashnikovs than the rest of the world put together, being reduced to the utter irrelevance of a Yemen? Do the Americans really think they can leave us alone to deal with these Indians, or as a satellite of China with no leverage any more, globally, or in the neighbourhood?

If you go by the record of the Pakistani establishment, it is precisely moments like this that should get India worried. There is nothing the Pakistani establishment detests — and fears — more than falling in importance, and utility, for America. They can curse and abuse America, praise China as their only loyal ally, but they desperately crave Washington's attention. This contemptuous American dismissal of Pakistan as a failed, and treacherous (client) state must hurt. In times like these the Pakistani establishment knows only one trick works — in fact, it always works. It is a provocation, and an escalation of tensions with India.

In spite of the three phases in its history when it acquired strategic relevance for the West for other reasons (as part of the anti-Communist alliance in the fifties, to fight the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the seventies and then post-9/11), Pakistan sees its leverage with the rest of the world through India. At one point, it was seen as India's more energetic, virile, more capitalist and faster-growing rival. Now it is as a spoiler.

It is no surprise therefore that, of late, intelligence and diplomatic sources are picking up a feverish build-up in the stockpile of fissile material and tactical battlefield nuclear weapons by Pakistan.

Increasingly, Pakistani officials have not merely shed all inhibition in admitting this, they are now flaunting it. Some of the best informed international sources would tell you that Pakistan is now building its fissile material and tactical nuclear arsenal at a pace greater than any other country in the world. You won't think it will be needed to deal with their own radical gangs after the Americans leave.

To justify this, the Pakistanis cite the alleged, new Indian doctrine of cold start. It's not even been debated or seriously war-gamed in India. But Pakistan is latching on just one statement by an outgoing Indian army chief to build an entire mythology: that India plans to carry out limited, punitive strikes into their territory, using its conventional superiority, without waiting for a full mobilisation (as in Op Parakram, 2001-02) which takes more than a month. Battlefield nuclear weapons are needed to discourage, or halt, just any such Indian misadventure.

The most worrying thing about the Pakistani strategic discourse is how lightly, simplistically and even enthusiastically it treats nuclear weapons. So, on the one hand, they say there is already nuclear deterrence in the subcontinent, and that if India had the courage to go to war with them, it would have done so. On the other, they are building tactical nukes just in case India launches a conventional attack. If they refuse to see the contradiction between the two, they also do not learn from recent history, even when it was of their own making. The same, so-called nuclear deterrence did not stop them from walking into Kargil in 1999, a full year after Pokharan and Chagai. It may even have encouraged them: now that we have nuclear deterrence, we can grab some territory and dare the Indian cowards to escalate. Therefore it is the Pakistanis who checked out the cold start doctrine (in Kargil) with disastrous results. But the Pakistani establishment has never learnt from its mistakes. And

the current set of circumstances are adding up to the kind of situation where the powers that be in Islamabad are tempted to repeat some old mistakes.

So, am I predicting a major provocation? A big terror attack, an escalation on the LoC, a flare-up of some sort in the Valley? Can you predict such things? Can anybody predict an earthquake?

But unlike with earthquakes, where shifts and drifts take place for years at depths not accessible to any sensors, the tensions and faultlines in the subcontinent lie in the open. Sometimes you can read these shifts in your headlines, and sometimes in the absence of headlines. This is one such period, and a time to get very worried. Particularly when we are so distracted with so many self-inflicted calamities and a government in freeze.

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# **POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT**

**Playing fast with facts  
Cost of 'development' in Gujarat**

Rajindar Sachar

THE fast by Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi got excessive media coverage, which defies logic. Modi's critics rightly called it a self-image building exercise to project himself as a prime ministerial candidate and, under the cover of the slogan of sadbhavna, as an attempt to wash off his sinful conduct in post-Godhra period.

I am clear in my mind that in the matter of government's complicity in gory happenings like 1984 genocide in Delhi and 2002 Godhra genocide in Gujarat, there can never be a question of forgiveness. There are certain crimes and human rights violations which can never be forgiven or forgotten, though, no doubt, we must learn from them and so modulate our political and social programming that such like events never shame us again. But that process can only happen if the perpetrator of crime is seen as genuinely contrite, which alone can create confidence in those who suffered untold miseries. That has not yet happened.

One is sad and amused at the carnival-like response of the Congress in purporting to observe a fast at the same time. I wish the Congress, instead, had brought out the unspeakable condition in Gujarat camps where a large number of Muslims are still living in misery. Also the Congress leader Shankarsinh Vaghela would have done well if he and his colleagues had chalked out a definite programme to create an atmosphere so that hundreds of Muslim families which are afraid to go back to their villages could go back with dignity and assured safety.

The media, though somewhat critical of Modi's sadbhavana/secular pretensions, has unfortunately swallowed the propaganda of development-oriented programmes in Gujarat, ignoring its perversions which have in fact led to greater pauperisation of masses, possibly because those policies coincide with the neo-liberal and anti-farmer policies of the corporate sector. All this information, which is uncomplimentary towards Modi, was placed in a public hearing when Anna Hazare visited Gujarat in May 2011 (in a report prepared, among others, by PUCL (Gujarat), Socialist Party and other concerned citizens of Gujarat).

Thus, 30,000 farmers walked nearly 350 km to protest against the cement plant being set up at Mahuva, which will lead to a total loss of 25,000 bigha land on which 1,25,000 people survive. The cement factory would provide direct employment to only 498 persons.

One of the biggest scandals and violation of human rights is taking place in the much-touted Narmada Dam. Even at present, hundreds of families are still displaced though even the award postulated the complete rehabilitation of the oustees. Modi's claim that Narmada was to supply water to the farmers is belied by the established fact that only 29 per cent of the canal work has been done. As recently as 2009, there was the Rs 260 crore scam pertaining to National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

As for Right to Education, a fundamental right, the Gujarat government is ironically closing 3,000 primary schools on the unacceptable plea of lack of attendance. In fact, the plan is to lease them to private bodies.

One of the biggest scandals highlighted was the allotment of land at throwaway rate to private industrialists in capital Gandhi Nagar, without holding a public auction. The beneficiaries are big builders, construction companies and other corporate houses with not-so-good public acceptability. This has resulted in a loss to Gujarat state, as per market rate allotment, of Rs 51,97,16,22,317 (rupees five thousand one hundred

ninety-seven crores and sixteen lakhs and twenty-two thousand three hundred and seventeen.)

Labour disputes have increased by 600 per cent in last five years, but instead of 100 per cent increase in the staff dealing with them, the government has reduced the staff by 40-60 per cent.

Regarding expenditure for social sector by 18 large states of India, Gujarat embarrassingly stands at 17th, according to the Monthly Bulletin of Reserve Bank of India, February, 2007.

Gujarat stands 14th in infant mortality rate (IMR) for 0-1 year and 13th for 0-5 years. There is 47 per cent malnourishment among 0-5 year-old children. About 67 per cent women are anaemic and of them, 80.1 per cent of girls aged between 6 to 35 months are anaemic.

India is 66th on the global index on hunger. Gujarat ranks 69th, which is actually as low as Haiti in Africa, according to the International Food Policy Research Institute's report (2008).

I unreservedly accept some positive features of Gujarat, like it has 90 per cent paved roads to villages, 98 per cent electrified villages with 80 per cent electrified homes and 18 hours of electricity every day, 86 per cent piped water supply compared to other states. Unfortunately, we cannot overlook that amidst all this, poverty, hunger, lack of sense of security among minority thrives.

To give an instance: to overcome the Muslim deficit at different levels of education, the Central government has launched a nationwide scholarship scheme since April 1, 2008. All states have responded favourably, with the only exception being Gujarat, which has not implemented even the pre-matric scholarship scheme for minorities. There are 55,000 scholarships allocated to Gujarat of which 53,000 are to be given to deserving Muslim candidates, but Gujarat has not even cared to implement this program.

Modi proudly proclaimed at his sadbavana jamboree that he did not recognise doing anything especially for the minorities but that they are to be treated only as Gujaratis. Modi apparently has not been properly coached about Indian Constitution. Of course all six crores residents living in Gujarat are Gujaratis. That is their one identity. But the minority has also other identities — they are Indians and Muslims just like majority — they are Gujaratis, Hindus and Indians.

As emphasised by Noble laureate Amartaya Sen, each one of us has multiple identities and each of it deserves equal recognition and protection. Somebody must tell Modi that our Constitution, as interpreted by the Supreme Court, has loudly proclaimed that: “The purpose of law in plural societies is not the progressive assimilation of the minorities in the majoritarian milieu. This would not solve the problem; but would vainly seek to dissolve it.”

It is axiomatic that in any country the faith and the confidence of the minorities in the impartial and even functioning of the state is the acid test of being a civilised state — this is accepted wisdom, and was expressed succinctly by Lord Acton thus: “A state which is incompetent to satisfy minorities condemns itself; a state which labours to neutralise, to absorb or to expel them is destitute of the chief basis of self-government”. Can one hope that Modi will modulate in his future policies in the light of these constitutional and wise pronouncements.

*The writer is a former Chief Justice of the High Court of Delhi.*

# **POVERTY**

## HINDU 8.10.11 POVERTY

### **Barefoot: Rainbows in the dust**

Harsh Mander

Street children have often gone through and survived a brutalised life. Adult interventions, therefore, need patience and understanding...

Children on the streets are brave but profoundly vulnerable survivors. They have often run away from drunken and intensely violent fathers, cruel step-parents, incest, starvation, parents who cannot or fail to support or take care of them, and even horrendous massacres. Some are lost or abandoned, or their parents have died or are in jail.

They brave, usually with groups of other street children, the harsh adult twilight world of the streets. Like little adults, they negotiate with spirit and audacity the brutalised life of pavements, public parks, railway and bus stations, and waste dumps. They learn to live by their wits on the street, find food, work or beg to get money, fight for whatever they need, and fend off older bullies and the police. At an early age, they often learn to beg at places of worship or traffic lights or forage in rubbish heaps not only for food but also for various materials that can be sold for recycling. As they grow older, girls are often drawn into domestic or sometimes even casual street-based sex work, whereas boys may diversify from rag picking to working in garages and catering establishments.

Children and youth of the street have no adult protection, usually because they have chosen to snap their ties with their families and run

away, or because their guardians have died, or in jail, or are lost. They are the most vulnerable, because a child needs the care of adults as she grows. Children and youth on the street do retain contact with their families in the city, who may also live on the street or in slums. However, because of extreme poverty, substance abuse or irresponsible parentage, the children are left largely to their own devices. At an early age they learn to find food and earn money for themselves, and often for their families; they may beg, forage in rubbish heaps for food and recyclable materials.

Street children live in the present moment and get what joy they can, when they can. Their backgrounds and experiences are colourful and the name 'rainbow children' (given to them by a pioneer in work with street children Sister Cyril Mooney) suits them well. You can also never hold a rainbow in the palm of your hand. Children from the street are free spirits. They rebel against being locked inside a gate, being supervised closely, and being corrected constantly. Therefore, they need intelligent and understanding guidance from adults that comes only with love. They prove to be able to learn and accept discipline when this is not accompanied by condemnation or rejection.

### **Protective walls**

They are extremely resilient and some of them bounce back even after severe maltreatment. But all the time, they carry a well of emptiness in themselves because the significant adults in their lives have failed them. They seem to have created a space around themselves, which served the purpose of self protection when they were living on the street. They do not easily allow others to come into this shell. The children often carry scars of earlier negative experiences of which they do not speak until they trust people around them. They sometimes show a strange combination of the maturity of adults coupled with the joy, vulnerability and innocence of a child.

Street children typically suffer from many denials and vulnerabilities: these include deprivation of responsible adult protection; coercion to work to eat each day; work in unhealthy occupations on streets like rag-picking, begging and sex work; abysmally poor sanitary conditions; inadequate nutrition from begging, foraging and food stalls; a range of psycho-social stresses; physical abuse and sexual exploitation; and exposure to hard drug abuse.

Street children have seen violence, adult betrayal and death, and have survived. If they did not have confidence in themselves, they could not have done what they have done — survive and overcome — and in planning interventions with street children, the new adults in their lives must not undermine that self-confidence, but rather nurture it into maturity and emotional stability.

More and more children are taking to streets for a variety of reasons and an alarmingly miniscule proportion have been reached out to by state and non-state actors. It is estimated that out of these less than two per cent of street youth and children are reached by the custodial juvenile homes and less than five per cent by all NGO interventions. In Delhi, the national capital, for instance, there are, for instance, an estimated 50,000 street children. In a recent case in the High Court, it emerged that around 1,200 are reached by custodial juvenile homes of the state government, and 1,500 by all NGOs (but very few provide mainstream education and comprehensive residential care). There are also serious limitations to the conventional state approaches such as custodialising such children in unfree homes. NGO models are of uneven quality, and diverse approaches; those that have merit are often too cost intensive to be replicable on the scale which is a dire requirement.

The Government of India, through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and other initiatives, has been able to work with state governments and citizen groups to expand significantly the availability of primary schooling at the doorstep of most children in the country. But there remains a

stubborn core of children that an even more expanded network of schools would not be able to bring into school, even if the school is at the neighbourhood of where the children live. These are children who survive in the most difficult circumstances, and face formidable barriers to be able to access schooling. These include disabled children, children of migrant workers, rural working children and urban street children.

## **New strategies**

If the country is committed to bring these 'last' children through the doors of our schools, and to retain them there, this would require the development of strategies that recognise and address those barriers that block a child from walking into schools, and staying there. This is even more imperative in the light of the obligations created by the fundamental right to education. In my next column, I will describe different approaches to working with street children.

In our own work with these children over the last five years, my colleagues in Aman Biradari and I have learnt that they have many strengths which children in families often do not display, such as courage, spirit, initiative, self-reliance and also caring and sharing. We have seen that these children are also very wounded; battered physically, emotionally and sexually by the adult world. These include often those closest to them, such as abusive, violent, alcoholic or irresponsible parents. Under their cocky exteriors, we find that sometimes they carry a well of emptiness — and on occasion suppressed violence — within themselves, because the significant adults in their lives have so profoundly and comprehensively failed them.

But we have found that many of these wounds can, with love, faith and persistence, heal and be overcome. We find that these children need intelligent and understanding guidance from adults that comes only with love. They prove to be able to learn — sometimes spectacularly — and accept discipline, when this is not accompanied by condemnation or rejection. We find in our care of our children who are formerly from the

streets, that children are far more emotionally resilient than adults. And that love truly heals.

ECONOMIC TIMES 2.10.11 POVERTY

## **Middle class hypocrisy on the poverty line**

**Swaminathan S A Aiyar**

The latest controversy over India's [poverty line](#) proves two things. First, statistical illusions can be spun by presenting numbers in different ways. Second, India suffers from middle-class double standards and denial on poverty.

A media storm has arisen after the Planning Commission's affidavit to the Supreme Court stated what all experts know-India's poverty line is defined as consumption of [Rs 32/day](#) per person in urban areas and Rs 26 in rural areas. Outraged TV anchors and [middle class](#) viewers asked how on earth people could survive on so little. Reports cited pavement hawkers spending Rs 32/day just on bus tickets.

The Planning Commission was driven on the defensive. One member said poverty was a relative concept and he personally might view Rs 15,000 per month as being in poverty. The Commission clarified that Rs 32 per day would not be the cut-off for benefits like subsidized food-that would be decided by other criteria covering far more people.

Fact: the current poverty line (based on the Tendulkar Committee recommendations ) has actually been re-drawn well above the historical line. Far from fiddling the numbers downward, the new poverty line increased them from 27.5% to 37.2% in 2004-05' translating into an additional 100 million poor.

A poverty line of Rs 32/day may outrage some, but the equivalent old

poverty line was barely Rs 24/day. You saw relatively little middle class anger in past decades about that: many were in denial on the width and breadth of poverty.

If consumption of Rs 24/day (at today's prices) was the poverty norm for decades, why does Rs 32/day sound so low today? Mainly because we don't usually think in terms of consumption per day. The average family size in India is five members. Poor people have more children, so an average poor household will have around six members. If six members consume Rs 32/day, it adds up to almost Rs 6,000 per month.

If most people are surprised that Rs 32 per person per day (which looks so low) translates into Rs 6,000 per household per month. They lose their initial sense of outrage' and think Rs 6,000 per month is a reasonable poverty definition.

However, there's more to this than statistical illusion. Foreigners find Rs 6,000 per month scandalously low. Why not our middle class? Answer: they often pay hired help just Rs 4,000-5'000 per month, and complain if servants demand more. Middle class folk don't want to calculate the per capita daily spending of their servant's family. They resent servants constantly wanting more pay, even if this falls short of the very level they find outrageous when specified by the Planning Commission.

This double standard is not restricted to paying servants. When middle class folk go to Dilli Haat to buy a sari, they will beat down the weavers to the lowest price possible. If told that the weaver earns only Rs 4,000 per month, will they change their attitude or agree that they have helped keep the weaver poor? No chance.

Don't be too harsh on the middle class: double standards exist in almost every group of humans. The middle class is correct in blaming poverty mainly on the government. Enormous amounts are allocated to poverty alleviation by politicians shedding crocodile tears for the poor, but the

sums are largely wasted or stolen.

The middle class strongly supports poverty alleviation. But it also wants massive subsidies itself, cheap cooking gas and kerosene being obvious examples.

Does this mean India's progress in the last two decades has been illusory? Not at all. The poverty ratio did not change between independence and 1977-78' although the population doubled. So, the total number of poor people doubled in the heyday of Indian socialism (many young socialists are in denial about this). Fortunately economic liberalization, starting in the 1980s and accelerating in the 1990s, stoked faster GDP growth and started reducing poverty.

India will probably exceed the UN Millennium Development Goal of halving poverty between 1990 and 2015. Even so, India will be a poor country for a long time. Forget statistics -just see the horrific workers' hovels at construction sites. Workers nevertheless come because rural conditions are even worse.

The middle class has done a yeoman job crusading against corruption, which hits all classes. However, its main anger is about big political corruption. The poor are hit more by low-level corruption and pathetic government services. The middle class has stopped using government schools and other services. So, these topics attract less middle class anger-and TV ratings- than Big Corruption. We need more anger against lousy, corrupt government services.

ECONOMIC TIMES 8.10.11 POVERTY

### **The best antidote to poverty is growth, not endless entitlements**

As the furore over the government's affidavit to the [Supreme Court](#) (that anyone with a monthly expenditure of more than Rs 965 in urban areas and Rs 781 in rural areas would be above the [poverty](#) line) refuses to die, [Planning Commission](#) Deputy Chairman [Montek Singh Ahluwalia](#) and [rural development minister Jairam Ramesh](#) have clarified that official entitlements would not be limited to those determined as poor under these criteria.

The assurance is bound to go down well with well-meaning, if sometimes ill-informed, [civil society activists](#). But let us be very clear. The present ruckus is not about the precise definition of 'poverty'. It is about access to entitlements.

And here the harsh reality is that the government cannot allow its heart to rule its head. Given the limited resources at its disposal and the competing demands on its funds, it has to prioritise between those who are desperately poor and hence eligible for handouts and those who are not.

Yes, there's not much you can buy with Rs 32 a day in urban areas or Rs 25 a day in rural areas. But there is no bottomless pot of gold the government can dip into. So to pretend there is no link between poverty, however defined, and entitlements is to buy peace by being economical with truth.

Yes, there is a lot of wasteful expenditure the government can excise, starting with subsidies on cooking gas and diesel. Yes, there is a lot of additional revenue that could be raised, if only people paid their taxes.

It is important also not to confuse the Planning Commission's poverty line as a measure of what constitutes the minimum desirable level of expenditure.

Not only has that been an on-going debate, with estimates of poverty ranging from 30% to over 70%, the yardstick will vary from region to region depending on the quality of social infrastructure (primary health, education, potable water, etc).

A person in Kerala or Tamil Nadu, for instance, will need to spend much less on private healthcare compared to his counterpart in, say, Bihar.

At the end of the day, the idea should be to minimise, if not eliminate, the need for entitlements rather than to redefine eligibility. For that, faster, more equitable growth is the answer.

## **Errors of commission**

Pratap Bhanu Mehta

The Planning Commission is not an institution. It is a syndrome. It, often unconsciously, operates on assumptions that no longer have much plausibility. It has lost much of its credibility as an interlocutor in India's debates. During the recent controversy over the poverty line, the commission was often accused of being "out of touch". Much of the discussion focused on the poverty line, and the uses to which it should or should not be put. But it is also clear that the Planning Commission has ended up in a cul-de-sac because its institutional mission is incompatible with the governance requirements of the 21st century.

The Planning Commission has gifted individuals. There is no reason to doubt their commitment to India's growth prospects and the well-being of the poor. But we need to ask: why has it lost authority? Part of the answer may require excavating a whole range of illusions it has fallen prey to. The Planning Commission has long been a victim of its own name. It has this illusion that it can neatly order India's economy. It does so, but often as a kind of conjuring trick, where real credible objectives disappear under a set of entrenched assumptions.

First, the commission exhibits great confusion over ends and means. The Planning Commission's goal should have been to end poverty. It needed to work backwards from that end to ask the question: what instruments are necessary? Instead it picked on a bizarre intellectual construction, the

poverty caps, and defended those with the zeal of a politburo. So you got a strategy where a commission told you how many poor you could have, independently of the means of identifying them. Instead of focusing on the objective, it made holding a line its *raison d'être*. The illusion of targeting became more important than the achievement of objectives.

The Planning Commission arrogated to itself the role of a quasi-ombudsman, whose job became “just say no”. It is difficult to find any major innovative social sector scheme — whether it is food, health, employment or education — whose intellectual origins were in the Planning Commission. Instead of taking the lead on how socially desirable objectives could be met, its entire approach was to act as a kind of fiscal police. As a result, it completely ceded the initiative in the social sector space to other actors and now does not have a leg to stand on.

The commission does not plan. It creates the illusion of planning. Planning ought to be future-oriented. The Planning Commission ought to be a space to think at least a decade or so ahead. But in almost every field the commission has touched, it ends up bringing a strangely pinched-up imagination to planning. Ever wonder why our infrastructure always looks like it was based on yesterday's realities, rather than future needs? Somewhere, in the explanation, the Planning Commission's penny-wise, pound-foolish conception of its role will figure prominently. But the other issue with planning is this: we often confuse plans with a statement of objectives. A plan not only requires a destination, but all the series of steps that will get you there. These steps have to be embedded in a range of ground realities from finance to administrative capability. The commission's abilities to internalise these ground realities in the steps it proposes have become even shakier.

The commission's penchant for standardisation extends to its own proposals. Take, for example, its current obsession with public-private

partnerships. These are worthy instruments. But there are huge questions about sectors in which these should be applied, and the terms that define a good PPP. But the Planning Commission now has an unenviable track record of indiscriminately advocating them in areas where there is less compelling justification for them, and on insisting on standard models for these. Again, rather than work backwards from an objective to an instrument, the commission seizes on an instrument as a fad.

The commission, as the late economist Amaresh Bagchi used to remind us, is a big detriment to the development of states. It narrows the space of state governments to set priorities on expenditure. It is pre-empting more resources. It has an in-built bias towards standardisation and homogenisation. India is now a diverse and fast-moving economic space. Planning that does not have flexibility or responsiveness to local conditions is designed to fail. But it is bizarre to think that we can have supple planning without giving more autonomy to states, cities and local governments. Yet, the Planning Commission, in the end, peddles the illusion that without its omniscient choices and conditionalities, anarchy would ensue in the states. Nothing is farther from the truth.

The commission mistakenly believes that inclusive consultation can be a substitute for inclusive governance. It is has to be said, the commission's consultative reach has become truly impressive. But institutionally this consultation produces odd outcomes. For, on the one hand, it allows the commission to check every box. Most approach papers have all the bases covered. You can never accuse the commission of not discharging its responsibilities. It can point to the right phrase as evidence. But on the other hand, this inclusive approach makes the central goal of planning obscure. Planning is not simply about stating all the good things you want. It is about explaining the hard choices that need to be made. These are often implicit in the financial allocations the commission makes. But these financial allocations often bear little relationship to the overall strategic direction.

Admittedly, the commission has a difficult task. It is now located amidst a thicket of actors. The prime minister has very little authority to throw his strategic weight behind the commission. The task of aggregating diverse views into a plan is not easy. To the commission's credit, it is engaging in a lot of self-examination and trying to be more experimental. Plans are required. But the commission is still not reconciled to the fact that the very scale at which it plans militates against innovation. And by not giving ministries, state government, local governments enough space or ownership, it dooms proposals to failure.

The commission has taken a dazzling array of talent and sucked them into this illusory world of its own making. Thought leaders who should have been at the cutting edge of thinking about growth, or a new welfare architecture, or new data, have now become the object of easy scorn. They may not be personally out of touch. But the institution they serve is ill-fitted for the times we live in.

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