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FROM THE BLURB

Human Rights and Law — Bonded Labour in India: Ramesh Kumar Tiwari; Cambridge University Press India Pvt. Ltd., under the imprint of Foundation Books, Cambridge House, 4381/4, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi-110002. Rs. 495.

Focussing primarily on the efforts made in India to tackle the problem of 'bonded labour' since the time of East India Company, the book brings out the helplessness of the victims as also the failings of the institutions of democracy to render justice to them.

Apart from providing a comparative perspective on two statutes — the Indian Slavery Act 1976 and the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1976 with emphasis on public policy-making — it discusses the motivations for legislation, the intricacies of policy formulation, the problems involved in implementation of the law, and also the factors responsible for the poor enforcement.

By way of conclusion, Tiwari has this to say: “Things have not changed for the poor in terms of the attitude of the people, political authorities and the bureaucracy... The forces which were opposing it [the statute] continued to do the same. Democracy in India has not been able to do something substantial for the poor in terms of their social well-being.”

A “devastating commentary” indeed — to quote Upendra Baxi who has written the foreword — on how the ruling classes have managed “to put the values, and provisions, of the Indian Constitution to sleep.”

Surviving against Odds — The Marginalised in a Globalising World: Edited by Debal K. Singha Roy; Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 4753/23, Anzari Road, Daryaganj, New

Delhi-110002. Rs. 995.

The expansion of democratic and liberal forces has no doubt resulted in the weakening of several processes that were leading to marginalisation of some segments in society. However, in the wake of the globalisation wave sweeping across the world, there are strong trends of marginalisation acquiring new dimensions. Many of the old elements of marginalisation — caste, race, and gender inequality — are getting reinforced to provide legitimacy to pre-existing social and economic segregation, notes Debal Singha Roy, editor of this volume. Even within a developing country, social segregation, political disempowerment and economic exclusive remain a function of the emerging social and political order of society. This collection of 17 essays by scholars drawn from the United States, and the Czech Republic, besides India, critically examines the emerging phenomenon under four heads: changing dimensions and perspectives; land, labour and marginalisation; marginalisation of the dalits, tribes, minorities and children; and marginalisation issues of service users and the consumers.

INDIAN EXPRESS

Black money in politics

Tavleen Singh Posted online: Sun Mar 13 2011, 02:28 hrs

In recent months, there has been a lot of talk about black money. So much talk, that it is hard to turn on your television without some new 'scam' being supposedly unearthed. Hard to open a newspaper, without reading about the CBI conducting new tax raids on some powerful politician or businessman. The Supreme Court has shown unusual interest in the subject and virtually forced the government to arrest Hasan Ali Khan, who is allegedly rolling in black money as the man charged with being the biggest tax evader in Indian history. By the way, I am not sure if the charges against him are true because it is hard to believe that he took so many thousands of crore rupees out of the country without anyone noticing.

So much drama surrounds each new 'scam' that you could be misled into believing that real change is afoot and India is on the verge of some kind of new Satya Yug. Let us not delude ourselves. What is happening is no more than a new game of smoke and mirrors, whereby our wily politicians hope to distract the average Indian from remembering where most of India's black money really lies hidden. It lies hidden in the political system and at election time, can be seen on open display for those who care to look. If you have friends in politics, just ask them whether the money they spend on their campaigns is black or white.

So crucial is black money at election time, that I am prepared to bet that even our most honest politicians are forced to use it. The Election Commission appears to be vigilant in these matters and its sleuths wander about the countryside, counting how many posters a candidate has put up and how many vehicles he uses but there is no way of checking these things accurately. Just as it is not really possible to check how much money our political parties get from which businessmen. Suffice it to say, that the ruling party in any state gets the most money and that the bigger the politician, the more money he gets. There are chief ministers who have rate cards, that everyone knows about in business circles and these clearly state how much percentage of a government contract needs to be delivered upfront before a project can go ahead.

The political system is, to put it mildly, rotten to the core and the only way to change it, is by reducing the huge discretionary powers, that our politicians have appropriated for themselves. So, when you see a political leader making some effort in this direction, as Nitish Kumar recently did by abolishing MLA constituency funds in Bihar, then you know that he is making a serious effort. He did the same with his cycles for schoolgirls scheme by ordering his officials to hand cash over directly to the girls' families instead of buying them as a bulk government purchase. He has never hesitated to admit that he did this to avoid corruption. Big government purchases mean big commissions and many leakages.

If Nitish Kumar can be praised for sincerely trying to reduce discretionary spending in Bihar, the Government of India needs to be censured for doing the opposite. The Finance Minister told the Lok Sabha last week, that he was bowing to popular demand and doubling the constituency allowance MPs get from Rs 2 crores to Rs 5 crores. The announcement was made to loud cheers from MPs of all hue because they know well how much money can be made from this scheme. They distribute the money at their discretion and where MPs from smaller parties are concerned, the misuse is so blatant that no sooner is the fund in their hands, than MPs hand over a chunk of it to their party leaders. There are even politicians who are forced to use these funds to buy their election tickets. The MPLADS (Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme) is no more than an innovative way of turning taxpayers' white money into black.

If the Finance Minister was serious about bringing black money into the open, he would have abolished the scheme instead of more than doubling it. And, he would have spent the nearly Rs 3,000 crores that the scheme will now cost taxpayers, on something more worthwhile like public health services. These are so disgraceful that the World Bank estimates that 80 per cent of Indians use private healthcare services and 24 million Indians are pushed into poverty every year because of healthcare expenses. How can it be otherwise, when we spend barely 1 per cent of GDP on healthcare? How nauseating that we spend more on a scheme, that does little more than legally convert white money into black and have so little to spare for things that really matter.

Ballot boothim parkalam!

March 18, 2011 12:36:25 PM

Chandan Mitra

The impact of the coming round of Assembly elections hinges on just one State — Tamil Nadu, which holds the key to Congress's fortunes in the foreseeable future.

An anti-Congress mood was palpable in the run-up to the general election in 1967 of which I retain fleeting memories as a schoolboy. The State that worried the Congress leadership most was Tamil Nadu (then Madras), where CN Annadurai's Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, riding the crest of an anti-Hindi, anti-Brahmin movement was threatening the monopoly of power hitherto enjoyed by the Congress. But then, the ruling party was not to be written off either. Firmly controlled by K Kamaraj, the Syndicate strongman who was instrumental in propelling Mrs Indira Gandhi to power mistakenly believing her to be a "*goongi gudiya*", the Congress in Madras arrogantly shrugged off suggestions that the Dravidian party might dislodge it from office in Fort St George.

Kamaraj, when asked if the DMK posed a serious challenge replied: "*Parkalam, ballot boothim parkalam*" (We will show them in the polling booth). Beleaguered Congress leaders in other States loved this cockiness. In West Bengal Kamaraj's Syndicate colleague, Atulya Ghosh, grabbed the word "*parkalam*" (Bengali newspapers translating it as "*dekhey nebo*" — a rather menacing version of "we shall show them") to threaten the motley group of non-Congress parties that eventually flummoxed all to trounce the Congress. In West Bengal, the party at least came back to power a couple of times between 1967 and 1977. In Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, the last State Assembly election it won was in 1962.

It is the DMK's turn this time to cry "*parkalam*", even as the odds mount against its ageing patriarch, the Kalaingar, who was Anna's young assistant in 1967 although dwarfed in stature by the party's charismatic No 2, silver screen superstar MG Ramachandran. It is also a measure of the twists and turns Indian politics has taken that today the Congress hangs on to the DMK's black-and-red striped veshti. Even after superficially winning the standoff over seat-sharing, the Congress in Tamil Nadu cannot cry "*parkalam*" in a challenging voice; it can barely utter the word gingerly. This is the State that will make or mar Ms Sonia Gandhi's fortunes on May 13, usually a lucky day for her party as far as election results go.

For a change, the outcome of the April-May round of elections in four States and one Union Territory is largely predictable. The CPI(M)-led Left Front faces rout in West Bengal and convincing defeat in Kerala with the Trinamool Congress in alliance with its parent party poised to sweep into Writers' Building while in the usual five-yearly swing, the Congress should easily romp home in Thiruvananthapuram. Some deft manoeuvres by Mr Tarun Gogoi, assisted by a splintered Opposition, could enable the Congress to perform a hat-trick in Dispur. Puducherry is too small to matter, but the Congress may

well retain power there too.

So, on the face of it, the leader of the UPA should be hoping for exhilarating news on May 13. But Tamil Nadu will decide if there will be joyous delirium at 24 Akbar Road or morbid depression. The victory in West Bengal will never be credited to the Congress, while in Kerala quinquennial change of Government is the norm rather than exception. A win in Assam, if Mr Gogoi indeed pulls it off, will be creditable but not a spectacular achievement. But defeat in Tamil Nadu will send some signals so loud that the Congress is certain to be disoriented if not destabilised nationally.

On the other hand, victory of the DMK-led alliance, which includes the chameleon-like PMK, a few splinter parties and Congress, will suggest that cynics who always say that corruption is not a determinant of voting intentions are probably right. If even the magnitude of the 2G spectrum scam and the naked loot of national resources by DMK Ministers and the party patriarch's family cannot shake people's faith in that party, nothing will. Some analysts have grudgingly acknowledged that notwithstanding Mr M Karunanidhi's frightfully venal record in office, it is undeniable that populist schemes like rice at Rs 2 a kg and colour television sets for BPL families throughout the State will ensure the electorate orders an encore. This is despite apprehensions that the *Mahabharata*-like family intrigues are set to continue and even the succession issue is far from over. The patriarch's obvious preference for Stalin over his less presentable elder sibling has not clinched the matter; as and when the octogenarian Kalaignar departs from the scene, fierce blood-letting is bound to ensue.

More than outrage over the shameless stripping of public resources through manipulated allotment of scarce spectrum, Tamil Nadu's electoral results may be shaped by the outcome of the conflict between caste groups arrayed against each other. Film actor 'Captain' Vijaykanth's DMDK, controversial MDMK leader Vaiko and similar outfits can swing the polls Ms Jayalalithaa's way with the BJP's tacit support. Nobody has yet estimated the impact of the corruption factor in people's voting intentions because conventional wisdom has it that it doesn't really matter except with the non-voting urban elite. But that may be too smug an assumption in the age of 24x7 TV bombarding information and opinion into drawing rooms of India's burgeoning urban middle class.

What happens if the Congress loses Tamil Nadu? For the present: Nothing. The Government will remain in office at the Centre because no MP would want an early election especially now that Mr Pranab Mukherjee has bribed them with the promise of increasing MPLADS funds to Rs 5 crore per annum from the existing Rs 2 crore. But a defeat in Tamil Nadu will mean that the doomsday clock would have started ticking faster for the Congress. Ms Sonia Gandhi would have to quickly rethink her strategy of persisting with Mr Manmohan Singh till he turns 81 in 2014. As it is, media hype over 'youth icon' Rahul Gandhi is dissipating by the day in the aftermath of the Bihar election results. None of the States going to the polls in the forthcoming round cares much for the Gandhi scion. The Congress's defeat in Tamil Nadu will undoubtedly affect his plans for Uttar Pradesh, which will test him big next year. Mr Rahul Gandhi can galvanise the party, especially its youth wing only if he demonstrates a winning streak. But at present the stars seem ranged both against him and his party.

Unless the DMK-led alliance scrapes through in Tamil Nadu, Mr Rahul Gandhi's future

prospects will be severely dented because Ms Sonia Gandhi will be forced to retreat into a defensive strategy that will enhance the role of veteran party managers. Adventurism of the RahulGandhi-Digvijay Singh variety will have to be discouraged. With Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's image badly dented in the aftermath of the 2G and CVC scandals, the Congress has few options left. The outcome of Tamil Nadu will decide whether we will be compelled to live under a *de facto* lame duck Government for the remaining three years of its term or if the Congress will regain the initiative once again. My guess is that we are headed for three more years of a Government marking time for its exit. The people seem to have made up their minds to "*parkalam*" the same way as they did in Tamil Nadu 44 years ago.

A mysterious reluctance

A Surya Prakash

It remains a mystery as to why Manmohan Singh took so long to accept the demand for a JPC inquiry into the 2G Spectrum scam.

Much like the reluctant bridegroom who is kidnapped and dragged into the *mandap* kicking and screaming and married to the daughter of a mafia don in the badlands of Bihar, the Prime Minister, Mr Manmohan Singh, has, much against his will and with the utmost aversion, given in to the Opposition's demand for the constitution of a Joint Parliamentary Committee to inquire into the 2G Spectrum scam.

Going by his statements, the Prime Minister's discomfort is obvious. He suddenly finds that much of the goodwill that he had earned as a 'clean' politician has evaporated over the last six months and, for reasons best known to him, he fears that a full-fledged JPC inquiry will further undermine his position. In his view, his conduct is above reproach while all others — the media, the Opposition, some of his Ministers and his coalition partners — are blame-worthy on one count or the other. Therefore, like the reluctant bridegroom who goes through the rituals while someone holds a gun to his head, Mr Singh behaved as if he was doing something under duress as Parliament went through the formality of constituting the JPC.

Mr Singh gave vent to his annoyance over the JPC issue a few days before the opening of Parliament and reiterated some of these arguments when the matter came up in the Lok Sabha. According to him, the media is to blame for all the muck-raking that it has been doing since last September. He told editors of television news channels that as a result of the media's focus on these scandals "an impression has gone round that we are a scam-driven country" and that such coverage is willy-nilly "weakening the self-confidence of the people".

Therefore, he wanted the foot soldiers of the media to return to their barracks (in the national interest) because it is not good to "focus excessively on the negative features" as this will only result in the people losing their self-confidence. Mr Singh's media advisory was much like that of Mrs Indira Gandhi. This was her view of the media, too, in the 1970s around the time her position as Prime Minister became untenable.

The Prime Minister's next target has been the Bharatiya Janata Party. This party, he says, has been raking up the 2G Spectrum scandal because his Government proceeded against a Minister in the Gujarat Government headed by Mr Narendra Modi. No one who has an understanding of politics will ever take Mr Singh's theory seriously.

First, no political party will make such a disproportionate trade-off and let go of the biggest scandal the country has seen merely to secure some legal relief for a Minister in a State Government. Second, even if the BJP was willing, the others in the Opposition and the media — both of whom are sensing a kill — would ever let go. Further, is not the Prime Minister aware that the Supreme Court is monitoring the case involving the

2G Spectrum scam? Will the court back off if the BJP 'loses interest'?

Meanwhile, Mr Singh has been repeatedly asserting that neither he nor his Government has done any wrong. He wrote letters to the Telecom Minister, listed a number of issues and mentioned a number of concerns. A Raja, the then Telecom Minister, said auction of spectrum was not suggested by either the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India or the Telecom Commission, arguing, "It (auction) will not give level playing field for new players."

Further, Mr Singh found nothing wrong in the licence-holders making a killing soon after getting the allotment. "The basic policy was as per prevailing practice — I don't know the motivations of those who got licences (and sold their equity for higher prices). If they have to roll out, they need money, they can do so by selling equity or by borrowing money," he has said. Even more preposterous has been his comparison of spectrum subsidy with subsidy on food and fertilisers.

Finally, the Prime Minister has shifted the blame onto his coalition partners. "There is a coalition *dharma* in coalition politics — some compromises have to be made in managing coalition Governments," he told the news television editors. In Parliament, Mr Singh has repeated this theme and said the Government agreed to a JPC "as the country can ill-afford disruption of the crucial Budget session".

The Prime Minister's protestations and stiff resistance to a JPC inquiry go against established traditions in democracies and in our Parliament as well. Not only have we had three JPCs until now, we have seen the enlargement of Parliament's powers and responsibilities through two of them.

The JPC that was set up in August 1992 to inquire into irregularities in securities and banking transactions set new benchmarks for parliamentary scrutiny. Since Direction 99 of the Directions of the Speaker says a Minister shall not be called to a committee of this nature, the chairman of the JPC made a special request to waive this rule. The Speaker granted the request "in view of the uncommon nature of the case and the views expressed by leaders of all political parties".

Armed with this power, the JPC called for information in writing from as many as 10 Ministers and former Ministers (Mr Manmohan Singh, B Shankaranand, VP Singh, Mr Yashwant Sinha, SP Malaviya, Madhu Dandavate, Chinta Mohan, Madhavarao Scindia, Mr ND Tiwari and Mr P Chidambaram). It also recorded the evidence of three of them including that of Mr Manmohan Singh, the then Finance Minister.

Yet another JPC which adopted this approach was the one constituted in April 2001 to look into "the stock market scam and matters relating thereto". This JPC too sought waiver of Direction 99 of the Speaker. It said it wanted to call for information from some Ministers. With the Speaker's permission, it called for written statements from two Ministers and two former Ministers and later recorded their evidence. Mr Singh and Mr Chidambaram appeared before this JPC as well.

Given the fact that 14 Ministers and former Ministers have been summoned by JPCs in the past and Mr Singh has appeared before two of them, the Government's obstinacy vis-à-vis a JPC inquiry into the 2G Spectrum scam is certainly inexplicable. And after

agreeing to set up a JPC, there was no logic to the Government's initial move to limit the size of the committee to 21 when the earlier committees had 30 members each.

Hopefully, since Mr Singh refuses to come clean, the JPC inquiry and the investigations monitored by the Supreme Court will one day throw light on his reluctance to have the 2G Spectrum scam investigated.

[Back Literary Review](#)

BOOK TALK

Destroyers of books

First it was insects; now it's rats and scorpions. K.K.S. MURTHY battles to save his old books.

How does one keep old books safe?

Subsequent to the article 'When bookworms attack' (Literary Review December 5, 2010), I find I have more to say on the same topic. During the summer vacation in high school and college, I would invariably travel to my grandmother's village with my mother, sisters and

brothers. However, this was not enough companionship.

I would also carry with me several tomes in a small trunk. When I think back about the type of books I carried, I still feel puzzled. For instance, Havelock Ellis' *My Confession*, William Saroyan's *Human Comedy* and *Correspondence between H. Ellis & Olive Schreiner ...* were some that found their way into my trunk. Though these books gave me immense pleasure, often I could make no sense of some of the chapters. But I continued to read and assimilate them as far as possible. However my joy was short-lived. Before I reached satiation point with my books, I was waging a battle against two determined species trying to destroy my tomes: the rat and the scorpion. My grandmother's village abounded in many varieties of scorpions.

In one American journal, S. A. Barnett quoted English zoologists G. E. H Barrett Hinton and M.A.C Hinton on the subject of rats. The quotes reflect a widespread and partly justified horror of wild rats: "There are many tales, usually mythological, of large-scale movements by the Norvegicus". "In temperate regions, including most of Europe, *Rattus* is now found almost wholly in ports; in hot countries such as India/ the same is true of *Norvegicus*."

A Collins encyclopaedia defines scorpion as a "Carnivorous, nocturnal arachnid of order Scorpionidae of warm and tropical regions. Long narrow segmented tail with venomous sting rarely fatal to man."

Brittle booklet

When I decided to come back to Bangalore to continue my studies, I noticed a brittle-paged booklet "English Theatre" had been totally destroyed by a brown rat. I felt sad at not having taken better care of it.

Rats, and dead ones at that, have been causing me painful moments while I work in my garage. The room has books stocked all over the walls; many of them with very delicate and brittle pages. If not handled delicately they fall to the floor like powder. So, I take every care to protect them by wrapping them either in butter-paper covers or soft plastic covers while several cardboard boxes serve to preserve loose maps, paper cuttings and postcards.

Such brittle and delicate pages have to be carried in cardboard boxes when we want to display them to our specialist buyers. For instance, we stock a number of German, French Latin and Greek books, which are carried to several book exhibitions.

However the boxes are invariably transported by trucks and face plenty of hurdles on the road.

Moreover, the handlers are mostly illiterate and handle them as they would any other luggage.

Sometimes, if not often, I do get a pleasant surprise. Last year, I made a unique find in my old collection. Hidden among several untouched books was a book titled P.S. Ramulu Chetty Gaudharvakayavalli: Being a Self instructor in Music on South Indian Music, in Telugu published in Madras in 1911 and dedicated to Dewan Bahadar S.Subramanya Iyer. It also had a frontispiece photograph of the author, a harmonium player, and a three-page English introduction. Will we discover such a title in the real or virtual (Internet) Worlds?

The writer is the proprietor of Select Book Shop, Bengaluru.

Bumbling along **Electoral politics as font of corruption** by B.G. Verghese

RECENT events, with action often being propelled only by media exposure and court directives, reveal the parlous state of governance in India. This is truly alarming and scandalous as much of what passes for lofty decision-making constitutes just bumbling along. The Supreme Court has removed P.J. Thomas as Chief Vigilance Commissioner (CVC) consequent to bureaucratic mishandling of his papers as put up before the high-power selection committee.

The court has laid down future guidelines, stressing the overriding importance of institutional over individual integrity, though the latter is not unimportant. It has also questioned limiting high-level posts to government servants. This pernicious practice stems from a misplaced spoils system premised on wisdom and competence residing exclusively within the government.

The Prime Minister has properly taken responsibility for the Thomas muddle though no mala fides attaches to him. But he must now act and clean the Augean stables. This can only be done by building a national consensus as good governance cannot be a matter for partisan predilections. One question that must be asked in all these cases — and of the judiciary and investigating agencies too — is why the Thomas case and so many other sensitive matters drag on forever.

Liberhan and Nanavaty are outstanding examples of how not to do it. The Qattrocchi “closure” masks the deliberate sabotage of the Bofors inquiry early on, with the then foreign minister used to further a cover-up. Hasan Ali, a named multi-crore tax defaulter, is regularly at the gym and seen at the races but was allowed to roam around scot-free until the court had to bellow about “what the hell “ was going on. The BJP may smile, but its conduct in Karnataka is equally reprehensible.

The breakdown of the criminal justice system is palpable, with even justices and former chief justices being arraigned, one such being the current chairman of the National Human Rights Commission. Another judge has remarked that “no government wants a strong judiciary”. The Supreme Court has shared its agony over low provisioning for justice in the national budget. What comes in the way of greatly expanding the judiciary at all levels, with nyaya panchayats and honorary magistrates at the base? This, of course, will be useless without police reform and independence for bodies like the CVC and the CBI, which should have its own autonomous prosecution agency.

Much of this can surely be done within weeks by ordinance, on the basis of a broad national consensus that starkly exposes stand-out elements that patronise the corrupt and corruption, legislative ratification can follow. Undemocratic, some will exclaim! But is the

persistent and massive looting of the nation's conscience and wealth a democratic virtue? And do we have the luxury of time with a billion mutinies on hand?

And why cannot the full gamut of police reforms, endlessly debated and refined for 30 years, be enforced at least in Delhi, Pondicherry and Chandigarh without further delay? It is a crying shame that even after the Home Minister's plaintive cry in Parliament that mala fide transfers have reduced the police to a "football", absolutely nothing has happened. The charade must end.

The font of corruption is undoubtedly electoral politics and the assiduous cultivation of the corrupt and corruption to amass funds from any and every source. Hence the criminalisation of politics and the politicisation of crime. With elections in five states slated for April-May, the corrupt are readying to gather their harvest. Let us see how many with criminal records are given nominations. The Election Commission is expanding and strengthening its election expenditure monitoring system — including paid news in which sections of the media are involved — and favours inserting a "none of the above" box in the ballot paper and introducing a run-off system so that the winning candidate is elected by a true majority of those voting. All this will call for long-pending electoral reforms that must include registration of political parties with a roster of paid members, annual elections of office-bearers and public audit of accounts. A simplified primary system on the American pattern may also be considered at the next stage.

The series of killings of whistle blowers across the country indicates that honest men and women are in danger of losing life and limb while the crooked flourish. This is an intolerable state of affairs and such criminal activity must be put down with an iron hand.

The sudden Tamil Nadu crisis is likely to blow over as the DMK has few options. The withdrawal of its Union ministers could facilitate a Cabinet reshuffle but should not incapacitate the government from vigorously pursuing governance and economic reform for that is what the country wants and will strongly support.

Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, the ruling regime has unfortunately launched a vendetta against the country's best known son, Mohammad Yunus, the founder of Grameen Bank. The charges are trivial and run counter to the efforts being made to restoring the country's secular, democratic, liberal values that inspired its liberation movement. Friends of Bangladesh must hope that the government will realise its error and not allow its record to be sullied by a sorry witch hunt.

In Pakistan, liberal voices have been further intimidated by the brutal killing of the Minorities Minister, Shahbaz Bhatti, in Islamabad. In Track-II dialogues, such spokespersons say they are fighting back but fall a prey to old mindsets when they talk of threats from across their "eastern borders". Yet they deny they need a permanent enemy in India to cohere. They cite a huge "trust deficit" and want India to put behind 26/11 but cannot plainly assert that Pakistan will live up to its 2002 promise of ending cross-border jihad, pleading that this is past history despite current incendiary pronouncements of the JuD/LeT. They say General Musharraf's peace formula was not based on any consensus, and the will of the J&K people must prevail. They welcome the restoration of dialogue, with the Pakistan Army fully on board, and their bottom line is that India cannot be an island of peace in a continent in turmoil.

Govt's stables must be cleansed Nation faces crisis of confidence by Kuldip Nayar

GOVERNANCE is not a matter of wishful thinking. Nor is it some political trickery. For this, a clean, transparent administration is something minimum. Providing more funds for different fields, as the budget has done, does not automatically ensure improvement, particularly when the aam admi has been consciously left out. If the past experience is any guide, the bigger the expenditure, the greater is the scope for siphoning off money. A few scams, which have come to light, show how large allocations have given an opportunity to ministers, bureaucrats and their men to fritter away public money.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's admission that there have been "aberrations" does not wash. All that he says is that they will be "more cautious" in the future. The crisis is that of confidence. How do we stand in our mind and spirit? How far do we adhere to the basic principles that give strength to people? The deterioration in public life in the Congress as well as in other parties and groups is matched by growing disruptive tendencies, rooted in province, religion, caste and language.

People intrinsically decent are forgetting major issues and getting excited over minor matters and thereby harming the country's unity, strength and progress. There is need for new thinking, in terms of not slogans and dogmas but a pragmatic idealism related to both modern conditions and human values. It is not necessary for all Indians to think alike. Indeed, it would be unfortunate if they did. But they should try to share some broad objectives and methods, within a framework, to persuade each other if they differ on specific issues.

Punishing one former Telecommunication Minister A. Raja or one Commonwealth Games-in-charge Suresh Kalmadi does not mean that the government has cleansed its stables. And what the two did is by no standard an "aberration". They acted fraudulently and went on doing so over a long period. The Prime Minister may not have known the nitty-gritty of the corrupt deals. But he was aware that there was some hanky-panky. He could hear the noise the media and others were making. The entire system is reeking with the arrogance of power and little fear of punishment. The rot has gone down all the way, making those at positions confident of going scot-free even if a few from among them are caught with their fingers in the jam jar.

I concede that this situation has not come about in one day. Yet I have never seen in my life so much corruption on the scale it is found today. Take any field. It seems that everyone is devising ways to make money and evade the law.

Practically all members of Dr Manmohan Singh's Cabinet, if assessed by an independent body (not the government-controlled CBI), would be found wanting in integrity in one way or the other. And this holds good for the states, ruled either by the Congress or the BJP. In fact, both parties have brought down public life to such a low level that people do not know whether India had ever maintained high standards.

The Prime Minister has advised the people to improve the tone of public life. How do they do? The common man does not count. He is so burdened with ever-increasing food prices that he is all the time busy trying to keep himself afloat. Civil society is itself a participant in the loot. And the top is so mixed up with the ruling party at the Centre and in the states that it has developed a vested interest in what is going on in the name of governance.

When morality goes out of politics and power becomes the end by itself, the parties do not mind what methods they adopt to reap benefits. What the different governments have done is that they have wiped out the line dividing right and wrong, moral and immoral. People do not have any compunction in adulterating medicines, fudging degrees or even leaking question papers. There is nothing called wrong per se.

In the process, violence has come to be accepted a normal way in a country which has forgotten how it won Independence through non-violence. Since most political parties have become mafias themselves, they have in their cadre criminals, black marketeers and sheer killers. But then they are the ones who are able to "manage" elections, now that Assam, Pudhucherry, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal go to polls in April.

Another ill that has crept in is the assertion of identity. All communities want an identity of their own. This is fair as long as the Indian identity is above the rest. The media, a strong pillar of the democratic structure, has itself become part and parcel of the corrupt system. Newspapers and TV channels sell space for consideration. The phrase "Paid News" is not an affront any more. An unpublished report of the Press Council of India has proved beyond doubt that most leading papers, the English Press is not an exception, have accepted money to publish a candidate's propaganda as news and has kept out the opponents from the paper.

When no field remains unpolluted, the blame lies on the shoulders of the intelligentsia. It has ceased to be sensitive. It has no realisation of what is wrong. Yet the nation has to preserve the fundamental values of a democratic society. The ethical considerations inherent in public servants have to be refurbished. They run the system. I agree that cleansing has to begin at the top. The Lokpal Bill has to be enacted soon. The CBI should be put under the charge of the Lokpal. Maybe, the institution should have more than one person, approved by the Prime Minister and the Opposition leader in the Lok Sabha.

But the top-most priority has to be given to the functioning of Parliament. What the Congress has experienced – stalling of the winter session-the party has done the same thing when the BJP was in power. I was then in the House and found some members equally exasperated over the daily disturbance. Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee is quite right when he says that some mechanism should be found to ensure the functioning of Parliament. But this depends on the political parties, especially the Congress and the BJP.

I recall how on the 50th anniversary of Parliament all members swore never to disturb the House. The Congress, then in the opposition, was the first to violate the consensus. Timely action could have been taken to stop the slide. To say that the government will be "cautious" in the future is neither here nor there. People want to see quick results. And they are losing patience.

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Cash transfers are a good idea but hasten slowly

Swaminathan S. Anklesaria

The finance minister's Budget speech proposed a radical change in subsidies: instead of trying (and failing) to provide subsidized goods to the needy, the government would provide cash transfers. This would cut leakages in subsidies, which former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi estimated at 85% of outlays.

By June, a task force headed by Nandan Nilekani is to work out modalities for the scheme using biometric smart cards. This will prepare the ground for launching cash transfers in lieu of subsidized kerosene, LPG (cooking gas) and fertilizers by March 2012.

This deadline looks too hasty. I have long urged cash subsidies to replace subsidized goods and services that do not reach the needy. Yet I must warn that many pitfalls lie ahead. Scoundrels who have found a thousand ways to sabotage existing programmes will try to sabotage cash transfers too. We need to proceed cautiously, constantly devising new ways to combat new attempts at sabotage. Speed will be the enemy of success.

In the last decade, conditional cash transfers have worked well in Brazil, Mexico and Chile. These countries give poor families cash transfers subject to conditions like sending children to school and health clinics. However, these are relatively high-income countries with almost universal literacy and 75-80% urbanization. This makes it relatively easy to identify, target and monitor cash transfers.

Conditions are far less favourable in India, which is still 70% rural, 30% illiterate, largely unbanked, and with zero or unreliable electricity in most rural areas. New biometric technology has shown a way forward. Telecom has penetrated even non-electric villages (cellphones can be charged by truck batteries). This makes mobile banking possible. Every villager can get a mobile bank account (though universal coverage could take years) that he or she can access through biometric technology, using fingerprints and irises.

Biometric smart cards will reduce, but by no means eliminate, leakages. There will still be problems of exclusion, the poor won't get cards because of insufficient awareness, or because they are too intimidated by the formal application process, including upfront bribes. There will also be problems of inclusion, upper-caste sarpanches and their cronies will claim to be the needy. Such problems can be reduced by deploying NGOs as social auditors at the time of the smart card issue, but leakages will remain. As time goes by, some people will get richer or poorer, some will die and others will be born. Until a really good state apparatus is created for updating data constantly, serious gaps will start appearing in the beneficiary list. Rural cellphone towers are proliferating fast and will soon provide almost universal telecom availability, save in the most remote areas.

This will facilitate mobile banking using biometric cards. But the process will need 3G broadband to be really effective, and this will take time.

Corrupt officials will continue demanding bribes, for issuing smart cards, for opening a bank account, even for cash transactions. Thugs have long confiscated ration cards of the poor, and can extort money from smart card holders too. Fake cards and ghost cards of all sorts have been used in the past by crooks. Biometrics will make the use of fake cards more difficult, but not impossible.

So, any attempt to provide subsidies through biometric cash transfers will face challenges galore. The Nilekani committee cannot possibly anticipate and guard against all possible hanky-panky. An attempt to launch cash transfers nationally by 2012 will mean a thousand glitches and scams, giving the scheme a bad name. Instead, the government should launch small pilot projects in 10-20 districts, some urban, some rural and some in remote areas without electricity. Some pilots can focus on a single item (kerosene, LPG or fertilizer), while other cases can cover all three.

Such experimentation will reveal a hundred glitches that need to be fixed before scaling up. Suitably modified pilot schemes should then be extended to more districts, and more glitches will come to light that need fixing. Only after extensive modification in the light of experience should entire states be covered. National scaling up, including remote states in the northeast, will probably take three years or more.

Most districts in the initial phase of experimentation should have good existing infrastructure. These will have the least glitches and shortcomings. It is important to start with a model that demonstrably works and gives the scheme a good name. This model can gradually be modified and extended to less promising areas. Is it worth spending huge sums on a new technology that will still leak? Yes, indeed. Forget perfection, we should be happy to reduce leakages from 85% to 15%.

