

***People Power*****No Room for Cynicism and Despair**

The new year brings little cheer to the long-suffering people. War clouds are hovering over our skies. Much of the economy is stagnant. The share of manufacturing sector as a proportion of GDP is in decline. Tax revenues are well below projections, and expenditure – mostly unproductive - continues to mount. Capital markets are jittery and investor confidence is low. Banks are flush with funds, and yet legitimate credit requirements of the surviving manufacturing enterprises are not met. But spurious companies get large loans for imaginary purposes. Touts promise bank credit for an upfront hefty fee. Kidnappings for ransom and an occasional murder of an industrialist continue. Securities scam will now die a natural death with the demise of Harshad Mehta. The nation does not seem to care at this colossal failure of justice. Every crisis is overtaken by the next one! There is a deep sense of disappointment at lost opportunities and unfulfilled potential.

The saber-rattling that followed the December 13 attack on Parliament has served two vital purposes. It enabled the US and the West to apply pressure on Pakistan to curb militant groups. And it strengthened Musharaf's hands in dealing with the jihadis and extremists. Paradoxically, Musharaf, an avowed liberal whose hero is Kamal Ata Turk, is India's and Pakistan's best bet to rebuild Pakistani society and eliminate the influence of gun-toting jihadis and hate-filled Mullahs. He certainly has no love lost for India, nor do we have reason to trust him. But controlling the maverick elements in ISI and curbing the extremists are beneficial to both countries. Our talk of decimating Pakistan or breaking up the country is both irresponsible and counter-productive. We do not have to add to our woes an unstable and uncontrollable neighbour feeding on religious frenzy and in which all state authority collapsed. Both nations need to move forward with a vision of genuine liberal democracy, enlightened self-interest, and economic prosperity. Hate campaigns will do no good for either country.

The real problems for both countries are internal. Pakistan's problems are its own business. But we need to focus on ours without resorting to alibis all the time. Of the million or so

families which play a pivotal role in our politics, bureaucracy, business or professions, some 90% have become colonists in their own country. These elites have delinked their future from that of the country. They have no confidence in the nation's future. Strangely it is today's elites who benefited most from our society in the past five decades, what with free higher education, government sops, patronage, wages and expense accounts from the public exchequer, and infinite opportunities of corruption at the cost of the hapless majority.

With green cards in hand many youth are leaving the country. There is no point blaming them for wanting to escape. Poor infrastructure, unreliable systems, ubiquitous corruption, the rule of the mafia, sub-standard education and inaccessible health care deter even the most stoic of our citizens. As someone said, brain drain is better than brain in the drain. The sad part of our crisis is the incapacity of the middle classes and ruling elites to envision a humane, liberal, efficient society that provides opportunities for all.

And those who care are often impatient, seeking miracles overnight. Many nations could overcome their problems only by clarity and relentless pursuit of institutional improvement. The world has faced many similar problems and we can easily adopt the best practices in, say policing, judicial reform, urban management, public transport, and a host of other sectors. In our own country Kurien's work in dairy cooperatives and Arole's work in health care provide outstanding examples of replicable models. None of our problems are intractable, and we don't have to reinvent the wheel. But what we do is endless dithering. Even where some movement is seen, as in case of the recent Bill on political funding reform, tokenism and marginal change become the norm. A lot more can be done, but it needs patient, painstaking, systematic and professional effort.

The other trap we find ourselves in is cynicism and despair. We tend to ignore what is possible, and blame all our failures on lack of national character and decline in values. Once we reach that conclusion, we are absolved of all responsibility to change things, and can continue merrily with status quo! But the reality is we have immense potential, and we are accomplishing quite a bit in select areas. All we need is better designed and accountable

systems which reward good behaviour, and punish deviant conduct. There are specific, practical, effective, time-tested remedies to most of our predicaments.

There is no room for cynicism or despair. Realistically India can accomplish a great deal more with a few sensible, practical steps backed by institutional reforms. The people are ready and willing. Does our leadership in all walks of life have the courage to respond?

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