Destigmatising mental health

Most patients and their families prefer being in the denial mode

HUMAN FACTOR

SHYAMAL MAJUMDAR

Earlier this week, Siddhartha Mukherjee, a Pulitzer Prize winning author and a world-renowned doctor, raised an important point on mental health issues. The doctor drew parallels between the stigma that cancer faced in the 1950s and that mental health faces today. Cancer patients, he said, "were then stuffed in the back of hospitals" till increasing awareness removed the stigma attached with the illness. His talk at a public event centred around three forces, which he felt needed to be addressed. The first force is political — for mental health to be recognised as a public health crisis, stakeholders in the political domain must come together and work towards setting up national institutes for mental health.

The second force is social — advocacy on destigmatising mental health. In the case of cancer, women like Rose Kushner, Betty Ford, and 'Happy' Rockefeller played an important role, helping the focus to shift to "empathy, a desire to relieve suffering, and a want to cure and to treat". Mukherjee, who is also an assistant professor of medicine at the Columbia University Medical Center, said mental health requires such advocates. And the third force is biological — genetic or pharmaceutical. This entails making efforts and carrying out research to understand the molecular mechanism so that people having mental health issues would not be victimised.

He should know from personal experience, as he has two uncles who have schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. One of his cousins was also diagnosed with schizophrenia and institutionalised. Mukherjee had initially blocked out anything to do with mental illness and didn't want to understand it partly because he was "too fearful of understanding" till the time he picked up courage to write a book, *The Gene: An Intimate History*.

The doctor is bang on. In India, as in many parts of the world, the first reaction of mental health patients and their families is denial. Most are bent on convincing the doctor that the diagnosis is a colossal error, or that the so-called broken psyche would mend itself. That's because of a lack of awareness that all mental health patients are not lunatics and the disease is entirely curable if detected on time.

One of the main reasons for this is the acute shortage of mental health consultants in India. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there were 0.301 psychiatrists and 0.047 psychologists for every 100,000 patients suffering from a mental health disorder in India. The lack of mental health care workers, however, is hardly a new issue. In 1982, the government began implementing the National Mental Health Programme with the broader aim of integrating mental health care with general care. But rollout has been slow. As of 2015, more than three decades after the programme launched, it has been prevalent only in 27 per cent of districts.

The recently conducted National Mental Health Survey says the treatment gap of any mental disorder in India is as high as 83 per cent, and around 150 million people in India need care for their mental health condition. Corporate India also needs to take this seriously. It is alarming that 42.5 per cent of the employees in the private sector suffer from depression or some form of anxiety disorder. The WHO estimates that India will suffer economic losses amounting to $1.03 trillion from mental health conditions between 2012 and 2030.

Poor communities also tend to ignore mental illnesses as they are not obviously disabling. People very rarely die because of them, and families that struggle to make ends meet do not consider that mental health is something that money should be spent on.

In 2018, the Live Love Laugh Foundation, a charity that aims to create awareness on mental illness, commissioned a study, "How India Perceives Mental Health", across eight cities in India. The study showed that while 87 per cent of the respondents had some awareness of mental illness, 71 per cent also used terms associated with stigma. More than a quarter admitted that they would always be indifferent towards people with mental illness.

That needs to be addressed urgently. If individuals continue to view mental illness with apprehension and resistance, it will remain difficult for people with mental health concerns to seek the support they require. That is where institutions supported by the government have a huge role to play.

CHINESE WHISPERS

Principal surname

Guess which surname has the largest share in the list of 13 principal secretaries who have served the prime ministers of India in the last half a century. If you ignore the difference in how they spell their surnames, Mishra has so far won this race by a wide margin. As many as four Mishras have till now headed the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). That is almost a third of all principal secretaries at the PMO so far. Of course, one of them, Nripendra, would spell his surname Misra. But the three others spelt their surnames Mishra and they were: S K Mishra, who served Chandra Shekhar, Brajesh Mishra, who served Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and P K Mishra, who is now serving Narendra Modi. One of the Mishras is ahead of the rest in another area — holding the office for the shortest time. S K Mishra held it for six months and 13 days!

Multifaceted Mamata

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee (*pictured*) was in New Delhi for the last three days. Apart from meeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday, and Home Minister Amit Shah, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, senior Congress leader Ahmed Patel, and also West Bengal cadre bureaucrats on Thursday, she also hosted journalists for lunch at New Delhi's Banga Bhavan. Banerjee, however, did not partake of the Bengali spread. She said she took only a bowl of curd for lunch, and stuck to a non-carbohydrate diet for dinner, not eating either rice or bread for the past 20 years. Apart from running her party and the state, Banerjee keeps herself busy sketching and painting and also writing poetry. She plans to release seven songs — she has written the lyrics and scored the music herself — during the Durga Puja festivities. She said she had taught herself to sketch whatever she saw from her car when she was on the road rather than fiddle with her phone.

The next MP Congress chief?

Who will be the next Madhya Pradesh Congress president? There are many contenders and each one is confident about his prospects. But bitter infighting has made the choice difficult for party's President Sonia Gandhi. After former state unit chief Arun Yadav tweeted his unhappiness recently — "I fought for 15 years with the help of faithful party workers. If I had any clue about what was going to happen in the next eight months, I might not have put my life in danger fighting with a poisonous and corrupt ideology. I am really hurt" — Gandhi called him to Delhi and had a 20-minute one-to-one meeting, fuelling speculation that he was the top contender for the post. Yadav held the post for four years and was succeeded by Kamal Nath just six months before the Assembly polls last year.

Google is prince of mobile payments

Cash may be king in India but millions of Indian consumers are using Google Pay to spend and transfer money

NEWLEY PURNELL

The leading player in the battle for mobile payments in India isn't either of China's pioneers, Alibaba Group Holding Ltd. orTencent Holdings Ltd. It isn't Apple Inc, Visa Inc or even PayPal Holdings Inc. It's Google.

The Alphabet Inc unit has for years tried to diversify its revenues beyond advertising by pushing into new fields like cloud computing and hardware. While its profits remain healthy, it needs new ways to make money as the specter of regulation looms at home and around the globe. Its booming new business in the world's largest untapped digital market could be the engine of expansion that it has been looking for.

In India today, the company has one of its fastest-growing hits ever with Google Pay, a two-year-old app that millions of consumers are using to spend and transfer tens of billions of dollars.

Resembling a chat app and available in local languages, Google Pay was the most downloaded financial technology app world-wide last year, according to SensorTower, a research and marketing firm for the app industry.

Indian consumers use it to buy train tickets, pay bills and even to purchase lunchtime meals from street vendors. Tiny mom-and-pop shops around the country now display a logo with a large "G" and Google's blue, red, yellow and green colors, signaling that merchants accept payments via the app, which is free for all to use.

"There's good reason for Google being bullish," said Satish Meena, a New Delhi-based analyst with research firm Forrester. "They're getting good traction. The opportunity in India is massive."

The app has been downloaded more than 180 million times since it launched in September 2017 and in the first half of this year, it clocked more downloads world-wide than PayPal or its Venmo app. It also outpaced Alipay, from Alibaba affiliate Ant Financial Services Group, data from SensorTower showed.

WSJ SPECIAL

"India is setting the global standard on how to digitise payments," Caesar Sengupta, Google's vice president for its Next Billion Users initiative and payments, said Thursday at an event in New Delhi. In the past year, the service has processed transactions worth more than $110 billion on an annualised basis via the government's popular real-time payments platform, he said.

Analysts estimate Google Pay is now used as much as or more than any other service, including apps backed by Tencent and Paytm, which counts among its investors Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway Inc, SoftBank Group Corp and Alibaba.

Google offers other payment systems branded Google Pay around the world, but Google Pay in India is the only service of its kind offering real-time payments without the use of credit or debit cards between individuals and businesses.

Shop owners can display a printed QR code for shoppers to scan, or two individuals can open the app, hold their phones together and use audio pairing to connect and make payments.

DIGITAL INDIA **The value of mobile payments in India is well behind China's, but is ahead of the US. But it could nearly double to hit $450 billion a year by 2023, according to a 2018 report from Morgan Stanley**

Hundreds of millions of Indians are entering the digital economy for the first time thanks to inexpensive mobile data and smartphones. Cash still rules, but most Indians have bank accounts and for simple payments they are skipping plastic and going straight to mobile.

The catalyst for mobile-payment growth came in 2016, when India's government nullified the largest-denomination cash notes in circulation to curb corruption. That triggered a crunch and consumers had to stand in long lines for ATMs. Many downloaded mobile wallets like Paytm's, learned more about digital payments and became comfortable making them.

Google, sensing an opportunity to get a digital payments foothold in the country of 1.3 billion, has used its massive war chest to capture users with an advertising blitz and cash awards.

The value of mobile payments in India is well behind China's, but is ahead of the US. The value of mobile payments could nearly double to hit $450 billion a year by 2023, according to a 2018 report from Morgan Stanley, with Google wringing as much as $4.5 billion annually out of the business should it introduce advertising or other new services.

Google has an early lead but isn't without challenges. The biggest one on the horizon is Facebook 's WhatsApp. The platform has 400 million users in India, more than any other country, and it rolled out a trial payments service to a million users in February 2018.

Two months later, the Reserve Bank of India said payment-related data needed to be stored in the country and a complete rollout of the service has stalled. WhatsApp says it adheres to those rules and hopes to be able to fully launch the service to all users in India in the coming months.

Analysts say that Google, having fully launched Google Pay before the guidelines were issued, hasn't been affected. A Google spokesman didn't immediately respond to a request for comment on Google Pay's adherence to data localisation guidelines.

"One year ago no one knew about this app," said Surender Singh, a sales clerk in a New Delhi smartphone shop.

While customers still use rival apps, Google Pay's usage is surging more than others, with nine or 10 people a day using it at his shop to buy items like chargers and headsets, spending as much as $40 per transfer, he said.

"If people don't have credit cards or cash, they use Google Pay," said Singh.

Source: The Wall Street Journal

INSIGHT

Should the govt borrow to fund capex?

JYOTI MUKUL

A crucial indicator of a company or an organisation's prospects is its strategy towards creating productive assets. For the Union government, that used to be defined by its planned expenditure. But the distinction of planned and non-planned expenditure was removed in 2017. Now, the Centre's spending is categorised as capital and revenue expenditure.

Capital expenditure, when undertaken by companies, shows the level of private investment in the economy. Any debt taken on this account is considered healthy so long as the companies are not overleveraged and are paying back on time. Companies not going in for debt and relying only on equity financing is bad for a vibrant financial market. Even for shareholders, it could mean the company is risking its capital and is being too aggressive by solely relying on equity financing. So why is it that when governments take loan to fund capital expenditure, it raises question?

The National Highways Authority of India and the Indian Railways are two government organisations that take care of a major part of transport infrastructure of the country. While the railway accounts for around 20-25 per cent of the Centre's total capital expenditure, the ministry of road transport and highways constitutes another 7-8 per cent. Both earn some revenue but are also dependent on the Union government for meeting their expenses. These sectors require huge investment and constant maintenance. The Railways have to additionally bear some manpower cost quite like public sector undertakings and unlike other government departments.

Over the years, however, both the NHAI and the Railways have become heavily dependent on borrowings. In the current year, for instance, NHAI's borrowing target has been hiked by 21 per cent. It has an approval to raise ₹75,000 crore during the year while government support is just ₹36,691 crore. NHAI's cumulative borrowings stood at ₹184,500 crore at the end of March 2019. If one looks at the Railways, long-term borrowings of its arm, Indian Railway Finance Corporation, stood at ₹114,854 crore while short-term was ₹4,96,679 crore on March 2018, according to the latest available data from its annual report.

From lenders or purely fund raising point of view, money could more safely be deployed with the government entities like the NHAI and the IRFC than with private companies

There are two reasons for such heavy borrowings by these organisations — less-than-required government fund infusion in these sectors over the years, made worse by tepid private investment.

In the case of NHAI, the share of government funding in its total expenditure was a little over 75 per cent in FY08 but has fallen to around 25 per cent. For the Railways, however, funds from the government that flow in as gross budgetary support constitute a higher chunk of 41 per cent of its capital expenditure. The Railways also has the advantage of a much larger resource generation capacity since it is essentially a commercial organisation. The NHAI, by contrast, does not run any commercial operation. Even the toll income that comes to it from highways built with government funding or the engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) model are used for maintenance work.

Though the public-private partnership route has in the past been more successfully exploited by the NHAI than by the Railways, the lack of investment appetite forced the government to keep funding road construction. The natural fallout was an increase in borrowings which is now forcing the NHAI to revisit the build-operate-transfer (BOT) route. A multi-pronged approach to road construction — where the platter of offerings would include BOT, toll-operate-transfer, infrastructure investment trust and hybrid annuity — has been envisaged. This is expected to ease the need to borrow.

Analysts may have forced the Prime Minister's Office to ask the highway ministry to look at asset monetisation rather than road construction, but this is nothing new for Union road minister Nitin Gadkari since he himself had been talking about it for almost two years now. But should this mean that the government should move away from government funded route of EPC? The industry itself wants the government to continue with EPC. The reason being that the liquidity provided by government funds to these companies is crucial in these times.

From lenders or purely fund raising point of view, money could more safely be deployed with the government entities like the NHAI and the IRFC than with private companies. Nonetheless, these organisations should go slow on borrowings and not venture into high cost projects. However, considering the slowdown, any spending cut on their part will hit the sector hard.

LETTERS

Too many cooks...

This refers to "Misuse of agricultural credit" (September 19). It has been rightly pointed out that there is disproportional disbursement of rural credit far in excess with their actual output. The basic flaw in agricultural and allied credit is the multiplicity of institutions playing various roles without any coordination. Banks disburse credit purely from the financial angle to meet priority sector norms -- that is, target-oriented financial lending. Their approach to rural finance is safety-oriented and directed towards credit recovery to prevent NPAs (non-performing assets) and ultimate accountability of the disbursing official. The seasonal requirements under agriculture including the period for cultivation and harvesting apart from the technicalities involved in the process are known to them more in theory than in practice. Untimely credit defeats the purpose.

Then there is pressure on land due to successive inheritances reducing the feasibility of cultivation. The purpose of subsidy is to partially finance agricultural and allied activity; it should not be given as a dole. However, the latter is the practice than the exception. Lastly, the technical institutions also maintain safety in their approach thus benefiting large farmers at the cost of small and marginal ones. The financially backward farmers follow traditional styles of cultivation as they are neither financially strong nor are aware of improved modes of cultivation. For the small and marginal farmer, the only way to raise funds is diversification of portfolio and borrowing from moneylenders at exorbitant rates of interest. A solution to this problem is to do away with the multiplicity of institutions and set up a single body, coordinating technical, infrastructural and financial assistance functions apart from furnishing information on market pricing for a specific geographical area.

The same applies to allied activities also like fishery, forestry and animal husbandry. This will ensure timely financial disbursement, product quality, functional control and return on investment. This will also be in line with the single window approach for credit being emphasised by the government. Capital investment for such an enterprise should be made by the government, banks and technical institutions. Cooperative farming should be made mandatory depending on land area to ensure efficiency of cultivation. Subsidy should be the capital for the institution and not personal funding. Personal subsidy should be replaced by institutional expertise. The capital investment and management skills should be jointly vested with banks, technical institutions and government in consultation with the gram panchayats to ensure credit is directed in a timely manner. Finally, a uniform budgetary target for such institutions is a must to ensure coordinated functioning. Ultimately, it is social confidence that will prevent misdirected credit, the dependence on moneylenders and the removal of rural indebtedness. This may appear idealistic but will ultimately save costs.

C Gopinath Nair Kochi

A welcome move

This refers to "New proposal in the works to give Dipam more teeth" (September 18). The proposal to arm the Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (Dipam) to carry out strategic sales of public sector units (PSUs) is a welcome step. There are approximately 250 odd PSUs under the central government and most of them are in urgent need of capital to augment their capacity and be competitive. The internal accruals of most of the PSUs are not great and the government is in no position to infuse capital as it itself battles lower revenue figures. The most desired option under the circumstances is to go for strategic sales of these companies that will bring both much needed capital and technology to these PSUs.

It is often said that the government has no business to be in business. In our context, this has largely remained a mere statement, without resulting in anything substantial. Hopefully the current move to empower Dipam will have a discernible impact on the disinvestment process.

Sanjeev Kumar Singh Jabalpur

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HAMBONE

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Global economic turmoil

There are limits to what central banks can achieve

The new forecast of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development shows that global growth in the current year will slip to its slowest since the financial crisis, largely because of the ongoing trade war. On Wednesday, the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) of the US Federal Reserve reduced policy interest rates by 25 basis points to support the US economy. This was after the European Central Bank pushed interest rate on its deposit facility further into negative territory and announced a plan to restart asset purchase without an end date. However, aside from the decision to reduce policy rates, the other commonality in both the central banks was the division among officials. In a way, this reflects the state of the global economy and difficulties in policymaking.

For instance, the Fed saw three dissent votes in the FOMC meeting. Also, there was a clear spilt among officials in projecting the course of the policy. Similarly, several member countries in the European Union were not in favour of restarting quantitative easing. Asset purchase by the ECB, among other things, could lead to dislocation in financial markets and escalate trade tensions. It will increase the supply of euros in the system and put downward pressure on the exchange rate, which would help exporters in the region. The market condition would encourage global money managers to shift from Europe to other countries, particularly the US, which will strengthen the dollar. US President Donald Trump accused the ECB of manipulating the euro in the past. Clearly, its latest move will not please Mr Trump, who firmly believes that the US is being treated unfairly by its trading partners. Also, this would encourage other countries, both in the developed and emerging markets, to manage their currencies more aggressively, potentially leading to further escalation in trade tensions. The US-China trade war is anyway affecting the global economy significantly. A recent note by the Fed, for instance, showed that trade policy uncertainty in the first half of 2018 accounts for a decline in global gross domestic product by about 0.8 per cent by the first half of the current year.

Trade uncertainty is likely to remain a drag on global growth in the foreseeable future. While the central banks are doing their bit to contain the damage, there are limits to what they can achieve in an unsupportive policy environment. Fed Chairman Jerome Powell in his remarks at the recent Jackson Hole conference, for example, noted: "...while monetary policy is a powerful tool that works to support consumer spending, business investment, and public confidence, it cannot provide a settled rulebook for international trade." Besides slower economic growth and trade and currency issues, the global economy also has to deal with higher oil prices and geopolitical tension in West Asia. An escalation would affect the global growth.

The ongoing uncertainty in the global economy will only add to India's problems and could prolong the slowdown. While emerging market countries like India tend to benefit from monetary accommodation in the advanced economies because of higher capital flows, an increase in risk aversion in the global financial system could reverse flows. In the given global economic situation, policymakers in India should redouble efforts to build investor confidence through reforms that would increase the ease of doing business and by protecting macroeconomic stability.

Closure for Ayodhya

Justice Gogoi's deadline is a big step forward

With Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi setting the date of October 18 to conclude the hearing on the nine-year-old Babri Masjid-Ram Janambhoomi case, an end to a controversy that has been at the root of India's debilitating polarisation is finally in sight. With the prospect of a judgment by the three-judge bench in mid-November, before Justice Gogoi retires, Indians could earn respite from the unending uncertainty over an issue that is out of sync with the aspirations of a modern nation-state. The case, involving a 70-year-old land title dispute, has proved so contentious after the 1992 demolition of the mosque by Hindu devotees, that it has covered the terms of no less than four chief justices (Justice Gogoi being the fourth). It came to the apex court in 2010 as appeals by the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha (ABHM) and the Sunni Waqf Board against an Allahabad High Court judgment. The ABHM and the Waqf Board are two of the three entities that were awarded one-third each of the disputed territory (the Nirmohi Akhara, as ascetic sector, was the third awardee) by the high court, which appeared to have based its judgment on unprovable myth. Much water has flowed down Ayodhya's Saryu River since, with the building of a temple over the site of the demolished mosque becoming the basis of the Bharatiya Janata Party's election manifesto. Meanwhile, the case acquired a life of its own with multiple interveners (including maverick politician Subramanian Swamy), threats against lawyers, and a (failed) high-profile mediation effort that included the lifestyle guru Shri Shri Ravishankar.

Justice Deepak Misra, the previous chief justice, partially cleared the way for his successor by declining to refer to a larger Bench a point of law over whether a mosque is integral to Islam or not — a 1994 Supreme Court judgment had declared it was not. Given the febrile atmosphere ahead of the 2019 parliamentary elections, further hearings were suspended till after the polls. Under Justice Gogoi, it is fair to say the Supreme Court's three-judge Bench hearing the case has proceeded with business-like speed. After declaring on August 3 that the mediation efforts had failed, the Supreme Court began daily hearings on August 6. The Supreme Court is uniquely placed to make a strictly legal judgment on this festering issue based on the principle of equality of religions as enshrined in Article 14 of the Constitution.

The critical point in all this, of course, will be the response of the executive. There can be no doubt that starting with the decision by a Congress government to not appeal a fateful district court judgment to open the disputed site (locked by the government since 1949) to inadequate security arrangements when *kar sevaks* gathered in Ayodhya to demolish the mosque to serial communal riots, successive political executives have failed to ensure law and order. It is imperative that irrespective of its agenda, the current regime should now listen to what the Supreme Court says. In a statement on Wednesday to a local language newspaper, Home Minister Amit Shah has said that everyone would have to accept the court's verdict. That, for the moment, should be considered a sign of hope.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

The ever-changing meaning of violence

Depending on the community involved, violence is classified differently in India and given different names

A riot is defined as a violent disturbance of the peace by a crowd. The word is understood elsewhere to mean the fury of society against the state. For example, the Paris riot in 1968, which began with student protests against imperialism and capitalism. Or the Los Angeles riot of 1992, following the acquittal of the police officers who assaulted Rodney King.

In 2011, after the fatal police shooting of a man named Mark Duggan, there were riots in cities across England in which five were killed and 3,000 arrested.

AAKAR PATEL

This word does not capture the meaning of a riot as it is understood in India, that of organised violence against citizens by other citizens. During an episode of such violence, the state steps aside and allows, till it naturally cools down, the passion of the majority to reveal itself as arson, rape, loot and murder. Elements of the state often actively participate in the violence, feeling the same strong emotions as the mob it is meant to subdue.

Even the best governed states do not appear to have the capacity to control the damage and our most competent chief ministers have failed on this count. It is also true that the violence is justified in the minds of many, including those who lead the state.

In an interview with *The Indian Express* published on September 16, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh was asked: "The Muzaffarnagar riots took place under the last government but of the 44 cases decided, there has been acquittal in 43 cases. Why isn't your government filing appeals?"

The chief minister replied: "The charge sheets in the Muzaffarnagar cases were filed by the previous government. The (riots) were the result of biased policies and failure of that government under which the whole society was differentiated on the basis of caste, belief and religion. There is nothing like that in our government. On the question of appeal, we will do that if needed. If there is no need, why should we unnecessarily intervene in the matter of the court?"

The root of such violence is an underlying sentiment existing perennially in a large part of our society, and kept stoked through politics. An external trigger then sets it afire: An assassination in 1984, an act of vandalism in 1992 or an incident on a train in 2002.

The other difference between the riot abroad and the riot here is that of spontaneity. The riots referred to in the instances above were not anticipated. In India, we are aware that the deliberate raising of the temperature will have consequences.

The Supreme Court has decided to wrap up the case and hand down judgment on the Ayodhya matter before the Chief Justice retires on November 17. It has instructed the parties to finish arguments by October 18. It appears likely we will receive a decision on the case in the next few weeks.

This decision will come in a period of our history in which the state has actively demonised a minority and punished it. The legislation on meat, the absurd and Kafka-esque (as described by *The Economist*) events in Assam, the criminalisation of divorce, what we are doing in Srinagar and so on.

A collection of columns written in Indian newspapers in recent years will read like the diary of Victor Klemperer. He was an academic, a scholar of languages, who kept a record of what was done to him and others in Germany in the 1930s. There is something happening daily.

And the decision will provide an answer to a question that has not been discussed in politics as a property dispute. It has been projected as vengeance and retribution against a building made five centuries ago — Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi in 1526 and died in Agra five years later aged 47 — on the site of another building apparently made earlier. How much earlier?

Bharatiya Janata Party Member of Parliament Satyapal Singh, when he was still an Indian Police Service officer, wrote an article ("Proving the historicity of Ram", *Rediff.com*, April 14, 2008) in which he said Ram lived 8,69,108 years ago.

Meaning 500,000 years before the appearance of Homo Sapiens. That is, of course, if one believes in the theory of evolution, which Mr Singh, who headed education in India through his human resources development portfolio in the first Modi government, says he doesn't.

It will be interesting to see how the world views us as we go about resolving this pressing matter judicially and how we will anticipate and control what will come after the judgment.

If some fear that this will precipitate the sort of disturbances we have seen before then their fear is not unfounded. It is hoped that the state is mindful of potential consequences and doing what it can to mitigate them as the day of judgment approaches.

Lastly, to go back to where we started, a riot in India is what happens when the majority inflicts organised violence on a minority community. When the minority responds, this violence is classified differently in India and given another name.

Industrial growth could flounder on water

We continue to disregard the fact that water is India's most important and completely unreformed infrastructure sector. Lack of water could become a key constraint to sustained industrial growth in India. Over the last decade, industrial shutdowns due to water shortages have become increasingly common. Thermal power plants take up the highest proportion of industrial water used in India. According to the World Resources Institute, India lost about 14 terawatt-hours of thermal power due to water shortages in 2016, cancelling out more than 20 per cent of growth in total electricity generation since 2015. During 2013-16, water scarcity forced at least one shutdown for 14 of India's 20 largest thermal power plants, which lost more than $1.4 billion in potential revenue. Grasim Industries started reducing production of staple fibre at its plant in Nagda, Madhya Pradesh, in 2012. In 2016, the Rashtriya Ispat Nigam, had to operate on reduced capacity due to a severe water crisis.

WATER: REFORM OR PERISH

MIHIR SHAH

At the same time, conflicts with farmers are intensifying in several locations. Following protests in 2014, Coca Cola scrapped a planned expansion of its plant near Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. In 2015, a petition was filed with the National Green Tribunal against Bajaj Energy's power plant at Burogaon, Uttar Pradesh, for unlawfully using water from an irrigation dam. Earlier this year, the US Supreme Court overturned a lower court's ruling and revived a 2015 lawsuit by fishermen and farmers negatively impacted by the Tata Power's Mundra plant in Gujarat. Since 40 per cent of our 399 thermal power plants are located in water-stressed areas, they have repeatedly got into conflicts with farmers, especially in Maharashtra and Rajasthan.

It is undeniable that Indian industry has among the highest water footprints in the world, both because it is excessively dependent on fresh water and because it tends to dump its untreated waste into rivers and groundwater. The good news is that the water footprint can be dramatically reduced through technologies and investments, which have a short payback period. The best example is thermal power. The overwhelming water-use in these plants is in their cooling towers and nearly 90 per cent of India's thermal power generation uses fresh water for this purpose. It has been estimated that by converting all thermal power plants in India from once-through open-loop to closed-cycle cooling systems using recycled water, about 65,000 million litres per day of fresh water can be saved. A large quantity of water is also consumed in the ash-handling process. Ash residue is converted to slurry using fresh water and transported to nearby dykes for disposal, leading to massive wastewater discharge. Recapturing and recycling this water has a significant potential for water savings. The payback period for investments in these wastewater treatment and recycling systems is usually not more than three years. A growing market for treated wastewater is an additional incentive.

Thus, alternatives exist and are easily available and affordable. Why are they still not being widely used? Once again it is a matter of what has been incentivised by policy. Since there is no regular water audit of the industrial sector and water is easily — and almost freely — available, its misuse is rampant. A recent study finds that India's thermal power plants are consuming excessive amounts of water, in many cases beyond permissible limits, set by the Union Ministry of Environment. Government needs to make comprehensive water audits a recurring feature of industrial activity so that we know current water use, monitor changes and work out the most cost-effective basket of water-efficient technologies and processes to reduce water demand and increase industrial value added per unit of water consumed. In their annual reports, companies must provide a statement of their water footprint for the year. This should include activity-wise volume of fresh water used and the volume of water that was reused or recycled in each line of production. This must include beyond-the-fence upstream and downstream water-use in their total supply chain.

There must also be a commitment with a clear road map and timeline that a company will reduce its water footprint by a definite amount within a specified period. Simultaneously, we must develop benchmarks for water-use in each activity to enable transparent target-setting. The starting point could be large units in water-intensive industries such as thermal power, paper and pulp, textiles, food, leather (tanning), metal (surface treatment), chemical, pharmaceutical, oil, gas and mining. A few of our best companies, in both the public and private sector, are already showing the way forward in this regard.

Such water audits would also help identify training requirements and the most effective way of achieving behavioural change. Water saving is best delivered when both behavioural and technological changes are simultaneously adopted. In order to more credibly move industry along this path, central and state governments need to set an example by undertaking water audits in their own premises and setting targets for reducing water use.

Government must also facilitate setting up of knowledge institutions that would provide information on industry-specific good practices in wise water use; undertake to develop expertise in water audits and water-use advisory services; provide details of exemplar case studies that are relevant to the different industrial sectors operating in India; and provide a gateway for accessing information about water-saving and water efficient technologies in rain-water harvesting, recycling and reuse, water conserving devices and support to help behaviour change.

Once such systems are in place, there is enough experience from across the world to show that significant economies can be effected in water use. Reported water savings range from 15-90 per cent of current water use, depending on the industrial subsector considered, the individual process investigated or the combination of water-saving measures analysed, with the most common figures being within the 30-70 per cent range.

Given the emerging scenario of industrial shutdowns and water conflicts, compliance with these reforms should be voluntary, based on the enlightened self-interest of each company. Government just needs to actively facilitate and enable such change.

The writer is Distinguished Professor, Shiv Nadar University and former Member, Planning Commission, Government of India

The IAS de-constructed

BOOK REVIEW

A K BHATTACHARYA

This book is highly recommended for those who aspire to be civil servants. Coming from an author who served as an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer with distinction but quit perhaps realising the limitations of this premier all-India service, the book provides an authoritative account of what an IAS aspirant needs to focus on and the notions she should disabuse herself of.

The easy style, often fun-filled and peppered with self-deprecating humour, makes the book eminently readable. The author provides a theoretical basis to why the IAS has failed to deliver on its promise of providing better governance and why it is caught in its own trap of red-tapism. You may not always agree with him. But it is a perspective that comes from his vast experience and solid research. More importantly, he achieves all this without sounding bitter, didactic, dreary or pessimistic.

Equally notable is the author's ability to laugh at the IAS and its system that is stuck in a time warp. This, however, may not be enough to cushion the hard blow dealt by his trenchant criticism to the spirit of the civil service aspirant. The book picks many holes in India's governance structure, largely managed by the IAS, and yet its criticism has an optimistic touch. That delicate balance has been achieved by the author right through and enhances the book's credibility.

You don't give it up mid-way as a rant from a former IAS officer, who gave up service before finding the holy grail of becoming a secretary in the Union government, after being slotted in a "selection" grade and later being "empanelled" to become a joint secretary at the Centre. Mr Raghunandan also makes a valid observation on how the IAS system does not encourage officers to become specialists, preferring generalists but he hopes this would change soon. There is, thus, plenty of criticism, but each of the nine chapters also provides a road map for improving the system.

From tips on how to deal with files to those on managing postings and transfers, securing promotions and to building leadership skills, the author also offers hope and promise that all is not lost for the IAS. Thus, it presents the tedious prospect of a young IAS officer deciphering the nitty gritty of leafing through files with colourful stickers serving as pointers. It lists out the many tricks an IAS aspirant should learn quickly to beat the examination system that has been put in place to filter out the wheat from the chaff. In the end, the reader will be sad to learn of the deep problems from which the service suffers. But in the process, he will also be wiser about dealing with the challenges.

The depth of the book's analysis of what ails the IAS becomes evident when it discusses two specific issues of governance. The two issues pertain to the manner in which the IAS structure refused to empower the local tier of governance in spite of Constitutional amendments and the IAS' inability to create a more practical and contemporary framework for securing honest and corruption-free behaviour from civil servants.

Both issues have been analysed on the basis of recent research and Mr Raghunandan's experience. He shows how the government's laudable goals of decentralising governance failed to grow roots because of the collective refusal of the IAS network to make itself less powerful and share power with officials in lower rungs of governance.

What is not entirely clear, however, is why the political class did not force that devolution of power or decentralisation in spite of its commitment to that idea and the obvious gains it would have seen for its local leaders. This analysis may appear simplistic, but it does rightly highlight the basic reason the dream of an empowered third tier of governance was shattered.

The second issue Mr Raghunandan raises is the need for a more holistic approach to corruption and ethics among civil servants. His thesis that ethical conduct and corruption are not simplified lessons in morality, but they exist in a broader context of society and governance goals. An upright officer whose rudeness becomes a barrier to smooth and easy communication to the people or beneficiaries may not help the administration become more effective. The author believes that younger civil servants are relatively more conscious of the multi-layered concepts of ethical conduct and honesty. Hopefully, senior civil servants and the political establishment would heed to this advice too and introduce changes in norms that should determine the conduct of an IAS officer.

This review will not be complete if adequate praise is not showered on the Afterword section, written by the author's elder sister, Renuka Vishwanathan, also an IAS officer and who was known for her ability to fight against deep prejudices against women in the civil service. Not surprisingly, she recalls how Gopi Arora, then finance secretary, had wondered if she would be able to work in a division in the finance ministry and oversee the government's policy response on the economy, which then required 24-hour monitoring. She writes that she finally got that job and discharged her responsibilities, hopefully without having Arora to regret his decision.

Mr Raghunandan rues the fact Ms Vishwanathan exceeded her brief of only focusing on the state of women in the civil service. But this book is even more rich because of her crystal-clear analysis of how the IAS is no longer a meritocracy, how the bureaucrat is not a democrat and how the bureaucracy can improve itself manifold with better skilling and more appropriate use of technology.

EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT BUREAUCRACY BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK
T R Raghunandan
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