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A RIVER WITHOUT TRIBUTARIES LIBERATING THE MIND THROUGH HARNESSING GRASSROOTS CREATIVITY

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The authors, in an apparent bid to emphasise the critical need for assimilation of the logic and spirit behind the drive of liberalisation by the common man in the street in the midst of realities that mark our present social ethos, raise questions on validity of claims of benefit accruing therefrom, highlight—through the metaphor of river and its strength-providing tributaries—the importance of fuller play of mass creativity in attaining the visualised goals of liberalisation.

OUR CENTRAL concerns in this article are: (*a*) the current phase in which our society finds itself, *i.e,* liberalisation of the economy and 'opening' up of the polity to influences from outside, which can have meaning only when what may be called the collective 'mind-set' of the country is oriented towards a sense of self-confidence; (*b*) the wellspring of such a revitalised consciousness may be found in the tradition of grassroots invention and innovation, nurtured and developed by hitherto marginalised sections of society. The former position necessarily implies existence of a consciousness which may militate against independent and confident participation in the global order. It is possible that such a generalisation may be misunderstood or may appear to be unwarranted and sweeping. What is being implied is that such a consciousness happens to be dominant, both among the elite sections of society and also among what popular discourse labels the 'average citizen'. It also has to be borne in mind that the second position outlined above does imply existence of alternative modes of consciousness among individuals and groups, who are usually outside the arena of public discourse, and who have either sought to remain on the margins or have been marginalised. These margins may function as crucial resources in the process of bringing about the change in 'mind-set', to which we now turn.

PRESENT SOCIAL ETHOS

It is the contention of this article that within the context of the social impact of the recent attempts at opening up the Indian polity, socially and economically, purely material liberalisation, without an accompanying or prior liberation of the 'mind-set' or ethos, would be detrimental to the developmental interests of our society. This ethos, as it has developed up to this day, is largely characterised by a

manipulative, rather than a transparent, rights-based, approach to life (originally generated by the need for survival in adverse circumstances). Developments in social theory have recognised manipulativeness as a resistance strategy of the disempowered[1] rather than condemning it out of hand as moral evil. This is, in fact, a healthy corrective to the usual 'blaming-the-victim' approach. However, in the Indian context, manipulativeness (for instance, an indirectness in dealings, the tendency to take short-cuts to one's goals, the related tendency to prioritise immediate short-term benefits over distant and long-term gains) has become a routine way of life, virtually an unconscious reflex reaction to any situation. This has been, of late, especially noticeable among the socio-economic elites of the country, who, by any yardstick, would not qualify to be placed in a position of disempowerment. It is not necessary to reproduce here the long list of well-publicised scams ranging from cannons to fodder which implicate the business, political and other kinds of elites.

Rent-Seeking Behaviour and Manipulative Consciousness

It is a small step from such blatant rent-seeking behaviour to a general undermining of the social self-confidence and what may be loosely called the ethical fabric of society, a process which is akin to the phenomenon of "learned helplessness". Hence, also a peculiar blend of complete cynicism about human potential and a sanguine faith in God's upholding his end of a bargain in the marketplace of the supernatural. This blend is also closely related to the massive proportions and reach of the phenomenon of corruption in this country.

To return to the manipulative consciousness: although it has become a way of life, it is rooted in, and continues to reinforce, a perceived powerlessness (in terms of human capability) which has been profoundly internalised and which continues to be self-perpetuating. For instance, one wonders whether the attempts by local companies, ostensibly committed to free trade and competition, to seek protection from an otherwise maligned State against foreign entities, is a manifestation of a manipulative consciousness perpetuating a perception of powerlessness. Such a syndrome generates a culture of compliance, conformity and cop-out. At another level, what has been said about the mind-set above, resembles the patterns associated with what is usually written off as typically 'feminine' behaviour. This comment distantly echoes what Nandy[2] has described as the colonizer's use of sex homology to undermine the self-perception of individuals. Perhaps, this 'colonized-mind' syndrome continues to linger on with us. Unless this perceived powerlessness changes (and along with it all accompanying behavioural patterns) a liberalisation of the economy and greater cultural exposure to outside influences will merely aggravate the entire gamut of social, economic and political problems.

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[1]A. Nandy, *Intimate Enemy*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1983; M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, *An Introduction* (translated by R. Hurley), New York, Pantheon, 1980; G.G. Raheja, and A.G. Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Word: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1996; and K. Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1996.

[2]A. Nandy, *op.cit.*

Absence of Mass-based Creativity, Innovation and Ethicality

It is to the sources of change that we now turn. Given the dominance of the culture of cynicism, compliance and conformity, one has to examine an alternative understanding of the 'great Indian' river of consciousness which can serve as the wellspring of the forces of revitalisation. At the moment, checkdams of mediocrity prevent the tributaries of local and non-dominant streams of creativity, innovation and ethical behaviour from enriching the great river.

Let us apply the metaphor of the river to one aspect of our society's underpinnings, science. One bank corresponds to the formal institutional scientific structure. On the opposite bank we have what may be termed informal science. However, bridges connecting the banks are few. The lack of attention to building bridges has resulted in an alienation of formal science from the roots of innovation and creativity which are very much alive at the grassroots. Efforts and achievements of Amrutbhai Agrawat—an artisan of Pikhor village in Junagadh, Gujarat, who has designed a bullock cart with a trolly which can be tilted, in order to solve the problem of distributing manure on the fields—and Jabbarbhai, who has designed a four-gear system for pedal *rickshaws,* to solve the mechanical efficiency problem faced by more than three million rickshaw pullers—are now better known. These are only two examples. There are many more instances of grassroots people who seek solutions to their day-to-day problems and issues in spite of the formidable constraints posed by structures and institutions. The point is that if such problems affect people at the grassroots, there are bound to be solutions also. Underpinning this solution-seeking attitude to life is a sense of optimism, an outlook which encourages confidence in one's own self about the future and one's own ability to solve problems.

Erosion of Faith in Indigenous Capabilities and Institutions

Formal science misses out on the very necessary processes of cross-fertilisation by devaluing problems and solutions which get written off as 'simple'. This 'simplicity' is only one barrier to building bridges. There are many others, both professional and institutional. Perhaps an improved design of the centuries-old pulley, used by millions of women daily to draw water (for instance, a ratchet to counter the downward force of the bucket of water),can still give formal science a socially-relevant breakthrough.

It is possible for formal science to harness the sense of optimism and self-confidence noted above into a large-scale effort. One good example is the movement to control schistosomiasis in the China of the 1950s. The key turning point was the realisation that "ordinary people possess great strength and wisdom and that when their initiative is given full play, they can accomplish miracles...".[3] Perhaps K.M. Munshi's calls for the "gospel of the dirty hand"[4] and the land army were missed opportunities.

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[3]J.S. Horn, *Away With All Pests,* New York, Modern Reader, 1971.

[4]K.M. Munshi, *The Gospel of the Dirty Hand and Other Speeches in the Policy and Programme of Land Transformation,* New Delhi, Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1952.

Unfortunately, formal science finds itself in a position where one is unable to answer the question, "where are the Ramans, Boses and Sahas of post-independence India?"[5] It is easy to explain this state of affairs, and the wag's comment that "India is a nation of losers", by pointing a finger at the decline of leadership in all spheres of life. Doubtlessly, leadership is an important aspect of any institution-building process. But are we ready to accept leadership which is based on competence, commitment and concern for ethical values? It is not that this country doesn't have leaders of this kind. The point is that they have not become points of reference in society. Recognising such leadership is a crucial task which is essential if we are to arrest the erosion of our institutions. The mind-set we referred to earlier believes in strengthening the process of erosion of faith in our institutions. Especially when such institutions seek to excel. It does this by relying on leadership through positions. Countering the erosion will need a faith in leadership through ideas. This implies a leadership which is willing to question the principle of patronage, whether of the State or of other 'patrons'; for instance, equating of welfare with subsidies. It also implies the importance of peer groups in setting, and monitoring, standards of performance and ethical behaviour.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we are at a stage in which a particular cast of mind is dominating. This mind-set has drawn shutters around itself, seeks to develop "learned helplessness" and is engaged in developing 'antibodies' to discourage any expression of self-confidence. Countering this trend is possible by drawing upon the insights and traditions of creativity and innovation in the margins which have hitherto remained outside the pale of formal discourse.

[5] J.V. Narlikar, "No More Ramans, Boses and Sahas: Unless Science Gets Young Blood", *Time of India*, Ahmedabad, October 7, 1996.