

## The End of Scientific Vikasvaad Milind Sohoni

One more budget has come and gone and yet the question remains - What is the change that will improve the lives of our ordinary people? Going by the pronouncements of our leaders, it is *adhyatma* and *parampara* that will rejuvenate our rivers, enhance democracy and improve the status of women. In fact, through *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, the G20 nations too will learn about our recipe for holistic growth. Forgotten, however is the *vikasvaad* of 2015 where a people's mobilization and an overarching reform of the bureaucracy was to transform India.

Coming to the G20, the fact is that we are close to the bottom of the pile. Let us set aside unfavourable development indicators and look at some others. At USD 1900 our per capita GDP is the lowest. The next lowest is Indonesia at USD 3900. At 69 years, our life expectancy is the second lowest. More than 30% of our jobs need just primary education and 70% are vulnerable, i.e., have no contract, both a G20 record. As much as 23% of our youth are unemployed. There are only 35 working women for every 100 men. Of the G20, only Saudi Arabia does worse. Barely 35% of our male population and 18% of our female population attain secondary education - another G20 record. And yes, we have some of the most polluted rivers and cities.

We have seen, in an earlier article, how pollution connects with our inability to produce locally, to understand the science and policy behind packaging, and the poor capacity of our cities. Coming to employment and gender, an important reason that more girls do not go to college is that they must fetch water and firewood. Besides this, as is happening in Maharashtra, the public bus system, the mainstay of the girl students, is unravelling. Most cities remain unsafe for the working woman. These are problems to be handled by better science and effective administration. There is little that *parampara* or *adhyatma* can do to help.

This leads us to two questions - Whatever happened to *vikasvaad*? Why has it been discarded? And what is the role of *parampara* in today's developmental discourse?

Let us take up the first question. The *vikasvaad* of 2015 was aimed at a reform of the top bureaucracy of the country, and a revamp of the central scientific agencies, i.e., the top professors and scientists. Ultimately, for any society, it is this cadre, their competence and integrity, which determines the quality of governance and politics and how its people live.

In India, through the IAS, the IITs, IIMs and a network of central agencies, this power is concentrated in a few hundred top functionaries - the Secretaries, the Directors of the central institutions and senior scientists. They are responsible for the conduct of most state functions such as managing irrigation systems, making railway engines, running universities or regulating hospitals. The scientists and professors are responsible for measurement, analysis and upgradation of most practices - from estimating groundwater to tackling pollution. The elite institutions, through their graduates, are to create new professionals, companies and agencies who would bring modern services to the citizens of this country.

Faith in this elite central bureaucracy is constructed through an enormous machinery of competitive exams.

By the 1990s, the folly of this exceptional concentration of knowledge and power were clear. India is a vast and diverse country, with each state, the size of a European country. A highly centralized scientific system merely ensured that the scientists were more accountable to their own internal bureaucracy of promotions and awards, than to the problems which people in the regions faced. Even today, most IITs remain disconnected from the states they belong to, and most professors have little understanding of regional problems - of floods and droughts, pollution and its causes, small industries or failing public transport. The IIT graduate is a global brand with little training or interest in nation-building or the temperament for working on hard scientific problems. The JEE system, and sister exams such as NEET or CUET, remain the single biggest disasters to befall Indian Science. Year after year, the creative energy and the minds of lakhs and lakhs of our youth are dissipated just to preserve the primacy of a centralized and defunct Science.

The sheer complexity of managing a typical department of a state such as Maharashtra, let alone India, is immense. To pick transport as an example, managing it requires a cadre of committed and studious officers at all levels. The current transport mix, the social value accounting of the public bus system, its logistics, current practices - all need careful documentation and analysis and need to change with the times. The IAS cadre, their training and work culture puts paid to such a systematic approach. Moreover, the overlordship of the IAS over the state cadre and the absence of collaboration with higher education institutions does not permit any delegation and consultation within the senior management. The results are for all to see - most departments in many states including Maharashtra now fail to deliver even the most rudimentary services in a timely manner. This has created a rentier system of local politicians and contractors - from the informal wiremen and land surveyors to private buses and tanker lobbies - who now provide the missing service.

So it was this system of incompetence, lethargy and rents and a top-down elite intellectualism which supported it, that was to be dismantled through the *vikasvaad* of 2015. And indeed, the Directors of the IITs were hauled up before the President of India and told a few things about the utility of Science. The IAS officers were told to go back to the place of their first posting and see for themselves what had changed and what had not. Lateral entry was mooted. But the process stopped as abruptly as it had begun, and here we are now, firmly in the throes of *parampara* and *adhyatma*. Why has this happened?

The first reason of course, is that dismantling the elite knowledge and power structure would cause a rebalance that would diminish the power of Delhi. It would lead to a decentralization of the agenda of development and the re-emergence of India as a union of states - something which was indeed the original intent of our constitution makers. And this would strengthen a diverse civil society, enhance awareness and free thinking on issues of education, health and culture. That is anathema to some national parties.

But more importantly, such a rebalancing would also lead to a multi-polar common market, as in Europe. The regional economy of the southern states, their knowledge cities, expanding cultural influence, intellectual ties across the world, and a significantly better system of citizenship and governance already offer an alternative developmental ecosystem.

That would pose a serious challenge to the primacy of a single metropolitan “national” economy and its class structure and a “national” discourse operated from the North and dominated by familiar business houses with close ties to the ruling elite.

So what we are now witnessing may well be a repeat of the historical expansion of the rule of Delhi, financed by merchants of the North, for economic control of the Deccan and the lands south of the Narmada. The appeal to the *parampara* of an old *rashtra* and the unity of *Kashi-Rameswaram* is the window dressing of a bitter campaign to enforce a single market and create a highly centralized, unequal and unjust, but unipolar India.

One more budget has come and gone. Yet the question remains: What is the change that will improve the lives of our ordinary people? Going by the pronouncements of our leaders, *adhyatma* and *parampara* will rejuvenate our rivers, enhance democracy and improve the status of women. Through *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the G20 nations too will learn about our recipe for holistic growth. Forgotten, however, is the ethos of *vikasvaad* of 2015.

Within the G20, we are close to the bottom of the pile. At \$1,900 our per capita GDP is the lowest. The next lowest is Indonesia at \$3,900. At 69 years, our life expectancy is the second lowest. More than 30 per cent of our jobs need just primary education and 70 per cent of those in the workforce have no contract -- both a G20 record. Barely 35 per cent of our male population and 18 per cent of our female population attain secondary education -- another G20 record. And, we have some of the most polluted rivers and cities.

An important reason that more girls do not go to college is that they must fetch water and firewood. Besides this, as is happening in Maharashtra, the public bus system, the mainstay of the girl student, is unravelling. Most cities remain unsafe for working women. These problems have to be handled by better science and effective administration. There is little that *parampara* or *adhyatma* can do to help.

This leads us to ask: Whatever happened to *vikasvaad*? The *vikasvaad* of 2015 was aimed at a reform of the top bureaucracy of the country, and a revamp of the central scientific agencies. Ultimately, for any society, it is this cadre that determines the quality of people's lives. In India, through the IAS, IITs, IIMs and a network of central agencies, this power is concentrated in a few hundred top functionaries -- the secretaries, directors of central institutions and senior scientists. They are responsible for the conduct of most state functions such as managing irrigation systems, making railway engines, running universities or regulating hospitals. The scientists and professors are responsible for the measurement, analysis and upgradation of most practices -- from estimating groundwater to tackling pollution. The elite institutions, through their graduates, are to create new professionals, companies and agencies that would bring modern services to the citizens of this country.

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