

Some material questions

Centralisation of power, crony capital have created gap between citizens and development. Viksit Bharat should respond to people's needs better



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OUR PRIME MINISTER has given us a dream — a Viksit Bharat by 2047. Let us assume that this is not only about the GDP but also about the provision of basic amenities and decent jobs for people. The GDP part has seen a lot of attention, the people part not so much.

So, how do we prepare on that front?

One way is to construct a coherent model, perhaps even a caricature, of the political reality and through it, funnel some basic material questions (BMQs) faced by common people. This will tell us how well we currently fare and what difficulties lie ahead.

Let us begin with some BMQs. A citizen may ask: Why is my bus late? Or a farmer may ask: Where is my groundwater? The small businessman's lament would be: Where are my customers? These are questions faced by a majority of India's people. There are, of course, basic social or cultural questions too: Why is my road unsafe? But the BMQs will suffice to illustrate the point.

Our political structure formally, even constitutionally, is layered with a national superstructure and largely subservient state structures. There is a concentration of political power at the Centre in Delhi, and within that, the PM's office. This power is operated by the IAS and supported by a constellation of elite institutions such as the IITs and scientific agencies such as the IMD. These regulate most scientific standards and processes — from food safety to forest fires. States have limited autonomy to generate useful knowledge and typically, an even smaller capacity to utilise it.

The legitimacy of executive power flows from the high esteem generally accorded to this bureaucracy. Nationwide competitive exams on "national curricula" are a part of this legitimisation. And yet, there is little formal accountability of the executive to the legislature. If any, it is to the Supreme Court or the media. This is evident from the great shortage of facts — from railway accidents to Covid-19 mortality rates.

The above structure is replicated at the state level, where it is the Chief Minister's office which is the power centre. However, it must project power through the centrally operated IAS above, and the Governor. Hence, the importance of the double-engine. Here again, other than the high court, people must mobilise on the streets or operate the local media for attention. The scientific and political culture, freedom of expression and the presence of independent media change from state to state. This explains, to a large extent, the divergence in development outcomes.

Coming to the economy, there is a national economy and various subsidiary regional economies. There is immense concentration of wealth in the hands of about 100 pan-national business families. These business

houses have flourished, generally, at the cost of regional businesses and industries. At the household level, the top 20 per cent have 80 per cent of the wealth. The rest constitutes the informal sector and much of it serves the top 20 per cent in low-paying jobs.

But what about the people? Any democracy requires them to ask material questions as citizens and then make choices. And yet, come election time, what the media offers us is an echo chamber of emotive issues and personality politics. Our people too seem happy to receive dole than demand better public services. The youth fare worse. High school students cannot measure time or length and graduates cannot write a first-person account or operate a spreadsheet. The intellectual aspirations of our youth are culminating in sitting for competitive exams. Thus, what we are seeing is a veritable collapse of the intellectual capacities of the people.

Let us now trace the BMQs through the above structure. Buses are late because roads are bad, and bus maintenance is poor. Road testing standards are promulgated by the Centre and are complex and expensive. They are rarely carried out. At the bus depot, there is little capacity to analyse traffic and delay data or funds to hire a local consultant.

What about groundwater? Again, it is the Central Ground Water Board which must formulate rules for groundwater use. Neither it, nor the state agencies, have the scientific heft or the empirical data to do this. As a result, rich farmers draw much more water than their fields recharge, to irrigate cash crops. Poor farmers depend on PM Kisan Yojana to make both ends meet.

What about small businesses? A walk through any district market will show that pan-national brands have replaced them in the marketplace. Moreover, customers remain oblivious to how their consumption patterns are changing jobs and wealth distribution (and causing more pollution and demanding more infrastructure).

Indeed, the last two decades have shown us that excessive centralisation and old social arrangements are at the root of many problems. India is just too complex and diverse to be ruled from Delhi. The central bureaucracy and our scientists and professors are not equal to the task. Crony capital has provided neither jobs nor dignity nor has it brought efficiency and global competitiveness. In fact, it is now exacerbating regional disparities.

What is to be done? If we really want a Viksit Bharat by 2047, much of the political structure needs an overhaul. Above all, we must connect our problems with useful knowledge creation and eventually, new jobs and professions. We must bring the youth to the forefront of this process and create opportunities for them to engage with society. Our scientists and professors must develop a theory of change and a science of comprehension and participation. Finally, our bureaucracy must become more local, more responsive and accountable. In other words, we need an *adhunik* (modern) Bharat sooner than 2047.

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Views are personal