

Some Imperatives of Government

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The present government at the Centre has just completed four and a half months in office. This is too short time to judge the performance of any government and, therefore, an effort will be made to ensure that this paper is in no way judgemental. However, before proceeding any further in the matter one could start by considering one or two basic issues. One view is that the triumph of the ruling party, BJP and the Prime Minister is the evidence of disgust of the people with the Congress Party and greater acceptability of BJP. A more objective view is probably that for over thirty years in our Westminster type of democracy which mandates the rule of the party which enjoyed a majority in the House of the People and, therefore, its confidence, we have not had any party winning a majority of the seats in Parliament. Therefore, we have had coalition rule in which either BJP or the Congress has been the lead party but in which a number of regional parties have exercised a say disproportionate to the strength of the party concerned in Parliament. This has virtually led to the adoption of a news phrase in our parliamentary lexicon, “compulsions of coalition”. This has become a stock phrase for finding excuses for the ruling coalition to provide weak government, indecisive government or even downright bad government in which coalition members have been given a free hand to do virtually almost anything they like, including indulge in the worst kind of corrupt practices. This was a situation which was no longer acceptable to the people of India and, therefore, in the 2014 general elections the people decided to give a party an absolute majority in Parliament so that it would no longer offer compulsions of coalition as an excuse for bad government. The party in this case happens to be the BJP.

The country entered the 2014 elections under strange political conditions. The Left, after its crushing defeat in West Bengal and Kerala, was in disarray, a process that had begun even at the time of the 2009 election. In two major States in the Hindi speaking belt, U.P. and Bihar, the Congress had totally marginalised itself and the space occupied by it in what is called in popular political parlance as “secularism”, had been occupied by such regional political outfits as BSP, Samajwadi Party, JDU and RJD. The last three named parties claimed socialist origins of the Lohia model, but every government of these parties proved to be highly parochial, caste based and corrupt. In the South, especially in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, local regional parties dominated the political scene and in West Bengal the Trinamool Congress, whose origins might have been rooted in the Congress, set itself apart from both the Left Front and the Congress. All this considerably weakened the Congress which, under normal circumstances, should have been the only national level party that should have had all India ramifications. Organisationally the Congress had moved very far from its grassroots based district, State and national structure and had become excessively centred in the persona of Indira Gandhi at first, with Sanjay Gandhi as the driving force, then Indira Gandhi supported by Rajiv Gandhi, followed by Rajiv Gandhi and on his assassination, by Sonia Gandhi and now her children, Rahul and Priyanka. A political party totally dependent on a single person or family loses its base in the field, has a weakened cadre of party workers, the State leadership becomes excessively dependent on central guidance and the Congress Working Committee, as a result of this, soon became a coterie of sycophants rather than a collective decision making body which took policy decisions and determined programmes on the basis of ideology, principles or a clear understanding of the ground situation. To that extent the Congress went into the hustings in an enfeebled state further aggravated by the fact that for ten years the United Progressive Alliance government over which the Congress presided was led by a Prime Minister who was personally shy and reticent, inadequately aggressive to control disparate coalition partners and, therefore, with a public image of indecisiveness in governance.

The BJP which joined fray with the Congress was a fighting outfit. Because of its RSS background BJP has always had a reasonably strong field cadre and in this it is somewhat similar to the Left Front. The spiritual guide of BJP is undoubtedly RSS which in the matter of politics enjoys the advantage of standing outside the political party and, therefore, not involved in its day-to-day management whilst, simultaneously, being in a position to give the party directives which would be difficult to reject. It is said that RSS advised BJP to retire its old leadership which suffered from the twin disadvantages of advanced age and a track record of an

orthodoxy which failed to deliver electoral results. Despite resistance from the old guard, including LK Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi, the party did sideline the old senior leadership and instead brought forward into the limelight a younger and more vigorous group. It also decided to project Narendra Modi as the potential candidate for appointment as Prime Minister and it highlighted him as a person who, because of his track record of government in Gujarat, could give purposive government to India if given a chance. Despite the horror of the neoliberals, self-proclaimed secularists and progressives, Luddite activist groups and the socialist fringe, Narendra Modi was able to project the party and himself as a definite alternative to UPA in general and Congress in particular. Throughout the election campaign he was focused, energetic and articulate and the Congress, by contrast, gave a fine imitation of Don Quixote on his spavined horse, Rosinante and with his clown of a squire, Sancho Panza. The contrast was so stark that the electorate gave an absolute majority to BJP and a thumping majority to the National Democratic Alliance. After thirty years India once again had a single party having an absolute majority in Parliament and great expectations have been aroused that we shall now have a government which will actually govern.

The paper started with a statement that it will not be judgemental because it too early to judge. Therefore, in case an element of judgement or criticism does creep in one apologises in advance. The idea is to make suggestions which could help government in providing what the people expect of it and certainly the objective is not to decry what government is doing. However, five years from now the electorate will certainly sit in judgement. Government will clearly have to come forward with an agenda of governance in practical chunks which address well ordered priorities because not everything can be delivered within five years. The programme has to be more long term than that. Looking at the failure of the previous government it would be safe to conclude that the failure is on three fronts. The first is the complete lack of a policy framework of governance within which government is expected to act and perform. UPA had no such framework and, therefore, as situations arose its reactions were spasmodic rather than designed and soon this degenerated into almost totally populism. The worst enemy of good government is populism. The second failure was in implementation in that no clear-cut policies were ever framed, laying down priorities and procedures whereby implementation of programmes was effective, properly monitored and, therefore, had an impact on the polity and ecology. The third failure was in the delivery systems, which had been weakened, politicised and browbeaten to a stage where civil servants had stopped taking decisions, dragged their feet in implementation and stopped giving advice or taking a stand where necessary. One small example of this is that if the Secretary and senior officers of the Department of Communications had told the minister categorically that his orders would be implemented only after clearance by the Cabinet or an empowered group of ministers, there would have been no 2 G Spectrum scam. The policy relating to spectrum allocation was not in itself faulty but in changing norms of implementation the minister was in error, this led to subsequent audit objections and the government did not have satisfactory answers. The failure of the Secretary of the Ministry to insist on adherence to the Rules of Business of the executive government was as responsible for the scam as the alleged cupidity of the minister and the interested parties. A delivery system is only as good as the persons who man it and if the personnel are not correctly selected, are not motivated to work according to set rules and procedures, even though the orders are illegal or improper and are not protected for doing their work bona fide, civil service morale breaks and the delivery system becomes ineffective. Once again this is not a judgement on the UPA government but rather a caution for the present government about how it should function.

Government must be very clear about its priorities, especially because in a democracy any change would be evolutionary and not revolutionary. The old government also took decisions in a democratic environment and whereas these decisions can be changed over time, they cannot be suddenly abandoned. One example of this is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which is administered under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. NREGS is a purely populist scheme because it replaced the old programmes of either community asset creation or individual oriented development programmes by a scheme which aimed at muster roll based employment which would give every eligible villager a guarantee of one hundred days employment per year. Every muster based scheme is open to corruption and NREGS has not

been an exception. Unlike the integrated watershed development and management programme which took up mili and micro watersheds for development, brought barren areas under pasture and afforestation, treated all hill slopes for soil conservation and subjected all rivulets and nallahs to treatment which led to water conservation and harvesting, thus substantially raising the level of ground water and providing adequate fuel and fodder to villagers, NREGS only emphasised employment, regardless of how wasteful the expenditure be. However, through this programme government is pumping about rupees seventy thousand crores into the rural economy every year and if government were to suddenly abandon it this would lead to extreme rural unrest. Therefore, whereas government must bring the programme back to its original form of creating permanent village assets, this would have to be done by restructuring the programme rather than abandoning it. This example is specifically given both to highlight the problem of changing the old government's policies overnight and at the same time showing how even the old programmes offer enormous opportunities for positive change.

The new government has started well by the Prime Minister sending a direct message to civil servants that they must function effectively and that they will be fully supported by the government. This is not enough. Government is organised into ministries and departments in which the civil service head is the Secretary. There are too many of them and as a part of administrative restructuring there should be a drastic reduction in the number of secretaries. The ideal would be if we could reduce the number of secretaries to about twenty, but let us at least aim for the present at reducing them from the one hundred plus to about fifty. Each ministry should have a Secretary, if there are departments under it they can have an additional Secretary with wide ranging powers and there should be similar pruning at the level of Joint Secretary and below. Within a ministry or department there has to be maximum delegation of powers and the lowest competent functionary should be encouraged to take decisions at his level instead of passing every file upwards. The Secretary must be made directly responsible for the performance of all these officers and the ministry as a whole, whilst being told specifically that under the Rules of Business it is his responsibility to ensure that there is adherence to rules and that if there is an impropriety he must bring it to the notice of the minister and, if necessary, to that of the Cabinet Secretary who may then decide to brief the Prime Minister. Officers must be protected against political whimsicality. Each Secretary should be told that he is Secretary to Government and not merely to a Ministry and that for the purpose of his ministry he will be deemed to be the Civil Service Advisor of both the Minister and the Prime Minister. The head of the Civil Service is the Cabinet Secretary and he is responsible for coordinating the functioning of various ministries. This coordination function must be emphasised and strengthened and the office of the Cabinet Secretary must be cloaked with necessary authority to ensure that departments function effectively. He is the key functionary and, as is reported, the weakening of his authority by centralising the powers in the Prime Minister's Office is reducing his effectiveness as a coordinator.

Narendra Modi is said to favour a very strong Prime Minister's Office. The PMO is not a department of government, nor a coordinator of government, certainly not according to Rules of Business of the Executive Government. PMO is designed to provide secretarial assistance to the Prime Minister so that he can effectively discharge his duty as the head of government. The PMO cannot perform either a coordinating role or act as a super secretariat giving direct orders to departmental secretaries. Every Prime Minister starting from Indira Gandhi downwards, with the exception of Morarji Desai, has tried to create a larger than life PMO and the present Prime Minister is doing exactly that. One can but caution him that to the extent that this cuts across normal governmental practices and procedures it renders both the Cabinet Secretary and the Departmental Secretary ineffective and this is antithetical to good government. What we need is interlocking accountability, with every senior officer being accountable for the actions of his juniors and every Secretary being personally accountable for the performance of his Ministry. The ultimate accountability has to vest in the Cabinet Secretary and in order that interlocking accountability may actually function the officer in whom accountability vests must be armed with the authority to ensure compliance with his orders and directions. That is the direction in which the Prime Minister must move if he is to have a delivery mechanism which can actually deliver. Civil Service morale must be restored, civil servants rewarded for initiative and good work, lacks of performance or under performance must be penalised, but officers should be given the confidence that

government will support them to the hilt for every bona fide action, including bona fide mistakes. In other words, accountability will be within the administrative hierarchy and not to a policeman, unless there is an act of criminality. It is only then that the Civil Service will begin to function as it once did.

The Prime Minister has very rightly stated that employment generation by strengthening the secondary, or manufacturing sector is absolutely essential if India is to progress. Very early after the revolution of 1949 China decided to take the secondary sector route to development and that has paid China rich dividends in terms of GDP growth, the development of a manpower which has industrial skills and discipline, transfer of technology and a huge range of industries which now manufacture almost everything consumed or used throughout the world. Our socialist inhibitions and deep suspicion of foreign investment has held us back and even today there is no shortage of protests against any form of modernisation, induction of foreign capital or location of foreign manufacturing units in India. The latest is the call by the trade unions of railway employees to protest against any foreign direct investment in the railways. Narendra Modi has stated that India welcomes the setting up of industry in the country through even hundred percent foreign investments and he has publicly welcomed manufacturing in India and then selling the product to the world. He must spell out in detail how he will tackle political opposition to this move whilst at the same time addressing certain questions which any foreign investor is bound to ask. Amongst these would be one relating to how a foreign company wanting to set up an industry in India will access land. The State will have to be both a facilitator and a provider in this behalf because no person who is not an Indian citizen, not even an OCI card holder, may purchase agricultural land, whereas the requirements of industry can only be met by large scale purchase or allotment of land. Then there would be the question of infrastructure, including guaranteed power supply, a transparent tariff system, support infrastructure such as water supply, sewerage, drainage, telecommunications, road and rail connectivity, as also social infrastructure such as health care, education, etc. A foreign investor would like to know what sort of a labour regime he would face and whether a trained labour force would be available which would be amenable, within legitimate trade union practices, to discipline. In China the availability of a disciplined labour force was a major factor in the location of industry by foreigners in that country. A foreign investor would also expect continuity in government policy and he would also like to be assured of a taxation policy which is rational and not liable to sudden change. One expects that government is already mulling over these issues, but if we are to expect fairly early decisions by potential investors government must come out with specific policy statements in this behalf, simultaneously setting up the organisational structures which would enable the policy to be translated into action. Great care will also have to be taken in our federal polity to ensure that the State Governments and Central Government are on the same grid so that a recalcitrant State Government does not, through State legislation or executive action, negate whatever the Centre is trying to do to encourage the “make in India” policy.

Agriculture is a very important part of our economy because it provides employment directly and indirectly to about seventy percent of our population. Because India is a largely ryotwari State in which the tiller of the soil has always been the owner of the land, bhoomiswami farming at a small scale has always been the backbone of our economy. It makes sense to try and build the village economy in a manner such that the basic equilibrium of settlements in India remains undisturbed and massive migration from rural India to urban India is prevented. A strong agricultural economy based on the small, individual farmer is as important to India as is the rapid development of the secondary sector. The primary sector needs investment in terms of power supply, irrigation, capital investment in land improvement, good seed and the technology which would substantially increase the per hectare yield of crops across the board. All weather village connectivity through good roads with mandi and service towns, the growth of a transportation system to move agricultural produce, a strong marketing infrastructure, storage facilities which would enable the farmer to get a good price for his crop because he is not compelled to sell when the harvest is in and the steady all round release of agricultural produce, including fruit and vegetables, into the market, thus bringing about price stabilisation, plus downstream processing for value addition, a well developed credit system, market intelligence, accurate weather forecasting and a very strong research and development base for agriculture are some of the means by which we can have a thriving agricultural sector. These are all matters which can be achieved because in many

States, such as the Punjab, much of what has been said can actually be seen on ground. This is one area in which government can very quickly come out with a policy frame which is fairly easy of implementation, can have an immediate impact on the rural economy and can boost agricultural incomes to a level where rural poverty is eradicated.

An educated and skilled population is a sine qua non of development and not only does the Prime Minister appreciate this but has acknowledged it on several occasions. The present approach to human resource development as adopted by the HRD Ministry (one fails to understand why we have renamed the Education Ministry as HRD), with its antiquated thinking, its regulation oriented approach, its inability to take a holistic view of education from preschool to university, its rules and regulations whereby the autonomy of educational institutions is throttled, cannot possibly deliver on any promise that the Prime Minister might make about education and skill development. This ministry needs a leadership in which the minister does completely unorthodox thinking and he is supported by a Secretary and other personnel who are open to ideas and are prepared to make a complete break from the past. It is for the Prime Minister to judge whether the present HRD Minister is capable of doing this, but certainly that Ministry needs substantial review because immediately with the change of government the Minister, Secretary (Higher Education), Additional Secretary (Technical Education) and five Joint Secretaries either retired or were changed. In a way this is an opportunity to break away from the past and bring in people who have the capacity to do such unorthodox thinking that they can actually transform the entire educational scenario. With this, of course, will have to go a radical change in our mental approach to vocational education which we now view as being several degrees lower than normal education, almost as if skills have to be left to the lower strata of society. Actually craftsmanship is essential to the translation of ideas into a product and a master craftsman is a jewel to be preserved and honoured. Let us really honour the 'ustaad' because it is he who will transform our dreams to reality and an ITI certificate holder should not be considered less than a polytechnic diploma holder or an university graduate. Each has his own field of operation and skills and within that field each one is as valuable as the others. The Prime Minister must take a lead in this behalf.

India's approach to science and technology is very strange. We take great pride in our scientists going abroad and as citizens of a foreign country earning kudos for scientific research. Why is that research not possible within India? Is it our pay structure, our failure to give autonomy to scientific establishments, our bureaucratic hierarchical system which is responsible for this? Or is it our audit and vigilance system which is the guilty party? Research actually moves forward through failure, which means that more often than not the money that has been spent on research and experimentation is likely to be lost because the experiment fails. Audit would object to this and the vigilance machinery would look for criminality in the failure. Let us liberate our scientific establishment from the twin horrors of bookish audit and tyrannical vigilance because neither an auditor nor a policeman understands anything about science. Give the scientific establishment generous funding, total autonomy in working and an accountability only to itself, which means that if the head of the establishment certifies that money spent on a failed experiment has been properly spent, no further questions should be asked. It is the lessons learnt from failure and the desire to achieve success which are the twin spurs which drive scientific research and in this behalf the Prime Minister, Government, Parliament and the people must give complete autonomy to scientists. In combination with this we have also to ensure that our major institutes of technology such as the Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Information Technology, Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research are given full freedom about what and how they will teach, are given the laboratory space and equipment that they need, are encouraged to do the research, both fundamental and applied, which pushes forward the frontiers of science and technology and to motivate the students to work in India, teach in India, do research in India and manufacture in India. This is a major challenge for the Prime Minister, the Department of Science and Technology and the HRD Ministry.

A tropical country where, because of heat, humidity and a general environment in which every form of life is enabled to grow, including harmful pathogens, micro organisms, etc., will always tend to have potential health problems and it is the job of science and technology to use this as an opportunity for creating systems

which negate what is harmful and promote that which is beneficial. That is how penicillin was invented and has proved such a potent fighter of disease. In India we can dramatically improve health care if we take care of drinking water so that water borne diseases are virtually eliminated, effectively ensure vector control so that insect borne diseases such as malaria, dengue, encephalitis, etc., are eradicated, have an universal immunisation programme which eliminates those diseases which become endemic because the body immune system cannot handle them. We need to improve nutrition standards so that the diseases which attend upon malnutrition are controlled, we need proper sanitation, effective treatment of sewage and garbage collection and disposal which eliminates dirt from the streets. These measures alone will constitute an effective primary health care system. On top of this would be superimposed the formal system of preventive medicine, curative medicine and specialised health care. Where is the blueprint for achieving these objectives which would make India one of the healthiest countries in the world? Government must come out with specific programmes on how, within the foreseeable future, we can achieve a health care target by which there is massive disease control, infant and child mortality is drastically reduced and, therefore, life expectancy sharply rises. India can aim at achieving a life expectancy of at least eighty years and that, too, through the basic fundamental systems of preventive and curative health care. The Prime Minister's Swachh Bharat Campaign is a move in the right direction, universalisation of toilets is welcome but now detailed programmes relating to cleanliness, sanitation, safe water supply, etc., must be placed before the people.

Defence is one area which has been neglected. In 1962 we were hammered by the Chinese despite the fact that the Chinese Army itself lacked the equipment and logistical support of a truly modern army. Our army was ill equipped, badly led and its morale had been bled white by political interference. If the Chinese had not given us a solid beating we might have continued in our old ways. 1962 led to a change of leadership in the army and greater professionalisation, together with re-equipment of the armed forces. However, after Rajiv Gandhi was embroiled in the controversy over purchase of the Bofors 155 mm howitzer which, incidentally, is a very fine piece of artillery, our armed forces have virtually not been modernised because every attempt at arms purchase runs into a wall of accusation about possible corruption. The Air Force desperately needs modern weapons platforms to replace its ageing fleet. The army needs modern infantry weapons, artillery and armour, the Strategic Forces need modern missiles and the Navy needs a totally new submarine fleet and a large number of surface craft. Nothing moves. The Prime Minister must announce a new procurement policy in which the Service concerned must make out a convincing case for a particular weapon system. The proposal has to be examined threadbare at the service level, inter-service level, Defence Ministry, Finance Ministry, etc. Once a decision is taken, then the entire budget must be placed at the disposal of the Service Chief concerned. Government should lay down the ground rules for acquisition, but within those rules the acquisition authority or committee, on which there may be representatives of the Defence and Finance Ministry also, should have complete powers to take every decision necessary for speedy acquisition of the system. If there are allegations of corruption, which are bound to be there because the amounts involved are huge and a party which does not achieve success in receiving an order will try and stymie it by making allegations, they should be inquired into separately, if there are guilty parties they must be punished but the process of acquisition should not be stopped because if the system meets the approval of the armed forces then it must be acquired. If we can trust our Service Chiefs to fight our wars and commit their officers and men to a venture which can cost them their lives, can we not trust them enough to buy a rifle, a gun, an aircraft or a ship? If they are that untrustworthy they should never have been made the Chiefs of the respective Services. Any reforms brought about by the Prime Minister to ensure that within given resources our armed forces are equipped to fight tomorrow's wars would be most welcome.

The Prime Minister has emphasised Centre and State relations and the need for India to work harmoniously so that the Centre and the States pull together for the development of the country. One test of this could be how government handles the Ganga Purification Programme. Let it be remembered that the Ganga has a basin of over one million square kilometres in which forty percent of India's population lives. By contrast the Thames River has a basin of about 12,500 square kilometres. It took the British more than sixty years to cleanse the Thames. We cannot afford to wait for sixty years to clean the Ganga but we must remember the

enormity of the task before us. The matter has been written about separately and one need not elaborate here, but the fact is that largest part of the Ganga flows through U.P., Bihar and West Bengal. The States which contribute water to the Ganga include Madhya Pradesh which through Son, Chambal Betwa, etc., contributes a great deal of water either directly or through the Yamuna. The health of the Ganga in Uttarakhand is also very important because that is where the source of the river lies. Therefore, the Chief Ministers of the contributing States have to be partners with the Prime Minister, even though the Chief Ministers of U.P, Bihar and West Bengal are from parties others than that of the Prime Minister. Cleaning the Ganga cannot be left to the Centre alone and, therefore, the Prime Minister must immediately set up an apex, omnibus, omnipotent group which takes policy decisions relating to the Ganga. On board should be the Chief Ministers of all the States in the Ganga basin and, in particular, the Chief Ministers of U.P, Bihar and West Bengal, not on a proforma basis but as genuine partners who see a common good in the purification of the Ganga. The Prime Minister very rightly said that the Ganga does not have only a religious or emotional connotation. Because forty percent of India's population lives in the Ganga basin a pure Ganga would have a major impact on the health of this huge population, improve agriculture and transform the economy because of new economic activities which a pure Ganga would encourage.

For actual planning, development, monitoring of work, superintendence, setting up micro structures for sector wise development and subsequent management and maintenance we need an overarching Ganga Development Authority headed by a renowned administrator or a technologist, with representatives of the participating States and with a competent technical and administrative team. It must also have a strong sociological unit which reaches out to people and develops a partnership in which the people are the main force in implementing the programmes for purification, participating long term in keeping the Ganga pure and educating people at large on the very simple steps needed to ensure cleanliness of the river. This has to be a matter of high priority for government because it will lead to time bound purification of the Ganga, improve the economy of the Ganga basin States and be an exercise in Central-State partnership which could be role model for all inter-state issues. It would also bring mutually hostile parties on to the same platform for achieving of common goals and that is the true essence of federalism.

One question remains. India is a huge country, its resources are limited and its problems are myriad. Does the Prime Minister take huge chunks which may be difficult to chew or should he nibble so that at least every bite can be swallowed? This is a difficult question to answer because the balance has to be found between how much to handle at one go so that results can be seen, or little things at a time and this will always be a dilemma. That is why specific priorities have to be laid down, goals and objectives prescribed together with a time limit for achieving them and then, according to these priorities, action being swiftly initiated and implemented so that within the time frame the work is finished. There has to be the mental discipline to stick to the priorities and the timetable and not to be tempted to wander into the desert sands of populism because ultimately populism sinks everything and leads to no results. This calls for extreme focus, a willingness to accept temporary setbacks because it is permanent improvement which is aimed for and the mind is not diverted because of some public outcry. Narendra Modi has shown himself to be a person who sets goals and achieves them. Can he do so in the next five years in the universe that is India? If he can he will be a Prime Minister to be remembered for long. If he cannot then his picture will be put in a gallery together with the photographs of Manmohan Singh, Dev Gowda and Inder Gujral. Sardar Patel would have opted for the first option,
