

The Quiet Revolution

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address to the nation from the Red Fort on 15th August, 2014 has already invited a whole raft of comments, almost all of them positive and one need not launch into a detailed account of what was said. However, as one commentator wrote in the Economic Times, Narendra Modi is in many ways unpredictable and when people expected grandiose announcements during the maiden speech to the nation, the man spoke of toilets. The fact is that there were three things which Modi said which, when one thinks deeply about them, are the harbingers of revolution and it is on them that this paper will concentrate.

India has gone through a number of models of rural development, including the Integrated Rural Development Programme which was individual oriented, a number of programmes like the Indira Avas Yojna which were both individual and project oriented and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme which was aimed at providing one hundred days employment to every eligible person in rural India. Before them all we have had the Community Development Programme which started the whole process of rural development after Independence and which was aimed at creating permanent assets at village level. We also, for a short while, had the Integrated Watershed Development and Management Programme which had directly benefitted the villagers, was highly successful and had the least corruption. In this programme a micro watershed of about five hundred hectares covering a village was taken up as part of a slightly larger milli watershed programme covering about five thousand hectares and about ten villages. Under this programme all hills features were treated from ridge line to foot hill in terms of protection of existing root stock, contour trenching, gap filling plantation, etc., so that the hillside became covered with grass, shrubbery and trees. This immediately moderated the water regime by preventing soil erosion, slowing down the velocity of flow of the rain water run-off and facilitating recharge of ground water. All slopes were treated with boulder checks, contour trenches, etc., and all nallas and waterways were treated by check dams, anicuts, gabion structures etc., so that with some storage there was also ground water percolation and recharge. The vegetation on the hills gave fodder and fuel, ground water recharge made the wells come alive, soil conservation measures improved soil moisture and there was a visible improvement in agricultural yields. Greater fodder availability also meant that cattle were better fed and milk yields increased. The National Centre for Human Settlements and Environment, Bhopal, for example, took up a major watershed development and management programme in chronically drought stricken districts such as Jhabua and Dhar, with dramatic results. In the Bhil villages from which seasonal migration in search of employment was endemic, wherever a watershed management programme was taken up such migration ended. Because the entire village benefitted the villagers who found employment in the development phase virtually adopted the programme as their own and, therefore, there was almost no corruption. Permanent village assets were created. This programme is mentioned because in terms of rural development this was a most praiseworthy model. Under pressure from the half baked members of Sonia Gandhi's National Advisory Council the programme was subsumed by NREGS, the objective of which was to provide employment, not to create assets. The muster based employment programme brought in corruption with a bang and all the good work done under the watershed management programme was undone overnight.

What has this to do with the 15th August speech of Narendra Modi? Modi announced that it is disgraceful that most of our schools are without toilets and, therefore, he has decided that for one year the local area development funds of the Members of Parliament would be used for building separate toilets for boys and girls in all schools in India. By itself the statement means almost nothing. When one delves deeply into it one

finds that it is one of the most profound statements ever made by a Prime Minister in India. India has 5.5 lakhs villages. Assuming that there are 6.0 lakhs schools, village and urban, in which there is no toilet and it is decided to build two toilets per school, that would mean 12.0 lakhs toilets. Taking the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha together we have 793 Members of Parliament and the total local area development fund comes to almost Rs. 4,000 crores per year. If this amount is divided by the number of toilets mentioned above there would be approximately Rs. 33,000 available per toilet, which is more than enough money to construct a toilet. But the matter goes much further. Obviously in rural India there would be no centralised sewerage system and, therefore, the toilets would require stand-alone treatment systems. Ishwarbhai Patel, who was the first Vice Chancellor of the Gujarat Agriculture University, was the Gandhian who designed the pour flush latrine in which the toilet seat pan was steeply angled and a single lota of water was enough to flush the toilet. We need further refinement of this design so that we can put in a double U-bend which acts as a water seal and prevents odours from flowing back from the treatment tank into the toilet. Bindeshwari Pathak, who founded Sulabh, designed the two-pit latrine. We need to revisit this design and see if it can be improved. This means that the construction of school toilets will also require a research and design input. If the treatment system can be improved so that the possibility of ground water pollution is eliminated the project would be truly successful.

Toilets need water for flushing and washing. Many of our villagers do not have enough water. Therefore, a programme for toilets also has to have a concomitant programme of increasing water availability. This brings us to the direct connection between the earlier discussion on watershed management and the speech of the Prime Minister on 15th August 2014. It would be necessary to take up a universal coverage of all micro watersheds in India so that water availability improves throughout rural India, right from Cherapunji in Meghalaya to desert villages in Barmer District of Rajasthan. This has to be done under the rural development programme, thus completely redesigning the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Now the objective of the scheme would be to create permanent village assets with an emphasis on water recharge and would no longer be a highly corrupt, muster based employment programme. From toilets to a concept of redesigning of rural development is a jump almost equivalent to that of Hanuman across the Palk Straits in search of Sita.

With greater water availability improvement in agriculture becomes possible because without seasonal migration and with an adequacy of water agriculture would become more intensive, with better milk yields because of fodder availability. There would now be the question of marketing of the village surplus. From this would flow road connectivity with mandi towns, improvement of dry and cold storage for grains and perishables, improvement of marketing services and the backward flow of services such as agriculture technology, agriculture credit, etc., and this would create a backward and forward linkage between the village, the market town and the intermediate level town where agro processing industry could be located. The jump from a toilet to a settlement pattern in equilibrium in which from village to intermediate town there is a continuum would be a rural revolution of unprecedented dimensions. That is the real purport of that one statement of Modi calling for construction of toilets. Of course there would be another beneficial fallout which is that with better sanitation there would be an improvement in health which, in turn, would contribute to having a healthy population in the country.

The second statement consisted of three parts, the first being skill development so that we have a labour force which is trained. A trained and skilled labour force would always find a market because it would fulfil a felt need of industry and reduce the training cost to be incurred by industry in imparting skills to unskilled workers. To this statement and as a continuation thereof Modi added that this country needs invention and

innovation and he appealed to entrepreneurs and to budding entrepreneurs that they should each invent or innovate at least one thing which could substitute for an import. To this he added that the quality of the product should be such that it should never be rejected anywhere and in producing it there should be zero negative effect on the environment. Skill development, invention and innovation, an emphasis on quality and equal emphasis on environmental protection are profound statements to be contained in a few simple words. The strength of Modi obviously is that he can go to the core of an issue and address it instead of losing himself in the obfuscation of complicated dialogue or monologue. This is a rare quality and one did not suspect Modi of having it, but his 15th August 2014 speech did indicate that he has a quick grasp of issues, can separate grain from chaff and hit the nail on the head every time.

The third statement which is of equal or greater importance is Modi's call to the world to come and invest in manufacture in India, make products in India and with that brand name sell them throughout the world. When Mao-Tse-Tung, after the Chinese Revolution, gave a call to the Chinese to set up a small furnace in every backyard and to manufacture pig iron the idea appeared to be lunatic. Millions of inefficient furnaces emitted smoke from incompletely combusted fuel creating pollution, the product was worthless and so much time and resources were wasted. However, there was a much deeper meaning to what Mao-Tse-Tung demanded of the Chinese people. China was a feudally organised country in which the vast majority of the population was agrarian, but with the most iniquitous land distribution system in which landlords owned the land and the farmers were tenants at convenience. The Chinese peasant, therefore, did not have an ownership interest in the land but he followed an occupation which was seasonal, he had no industrial skills and for a major part of the year he was idle. Through communes Mao eliminated the landlords, but through his backyard furnace he introduced an industrial culture in which some rudimentary skills were picked up by individual householders. Now the time was set for moving from marginal agriculture into the secondary sector of industrial manufacture in which the discipline of regular hours of work throughout the year was introduced. Thereafter Deng Tsiao Ping opened the economy to foreign investment, but with emphasis on locating factories in China, manufacturing western branded goods but with a made-in-China label. The relatively low labour cost and the industriousness and discipline of the Chinese workers brought in huge amounts of foreign investment, with the largest companies locating their manufacturing facilities in China. The world's markets are now flooded with made-in-China goods, right from complex computers to the effigy of Ganesha to be found in every Hindu household. Today China is a manufacturing giant having access to the best technology in the world.

India preferred to follow the easier route of the tertiary sector, where money did flow but we acquired no manufacturing skills. One reason was that we have always been highly suspicious of foreign investment and multinational companies and with the hidden fear that the new commercial organisations like the old East India Company will return us to colonial rule. Talk of lack of self esteem and trust in oneself! China had self confidence and had no such fear, we had no self confidence and for too long we have allowed ourselves to be haunted by the possibility of the devil of foreign takeover through the multinational companies. In one blow Modi has swept away the cobwebs. He is not interested in FDI in retail. He wants to build the manufacturing sector, to use our manpower to produce goods and to acquire the manufacturing capability which would make us an advanced industrial nation. That is why he gave the call to make in India and to sell in the world. In other words, he has said that we have the resources and the manpower. We have the scientific establishment which can engage in research and development. Let the world establish its manufacturing units in India, give our people gainful employment, give a thrust to technology and then export to the world so that the world buys Indian rather than Chinese. This is not only a revolution in thinking and attitude, it is a revolution in action

because if Modi is successful in attracting manufacturing units to locate in India ten years down the line we shall outstrip China. The move is bold, innovative and worthy of praise.

Some words of caution. The entire toilets programme and the downstream programme would have to be implemented by the States who will have to be brought on board wholeheartedly. We shall have to develop new model of administrative integration so that at the stage of implementation, operation and maintenance there is continuity. The Central Government would have to suggest, monitor and, perhaps, in extreme cases even intervene, but it is the empowerment of the States and build up of their own delivery mechanisms that will lead to the success of the schemes. Similarly, we shall have to build new models of administering economic development programmes in the secondary sector, to monitor how the programmes run, keep a close watch on environmental impact and ensure quality control. This is a huge task and calls for a major overhaul of our administrative structures, ethos, work ethics and capability. When the Community Development Programme was launched just four to five years after Independence we set up a new development administration structure, the C.D. Block and created a dedicated cadre of development administration at Block and village level. The separation of the regulatory and the development administration was done very smoothly and coordination was achieved through the Collector. That office still exists and is still relevant, but we also have decentralisation through the District Panchayat. The challenge now is to build into the IAS a completely new culture of positive action, with poodle fakers who like to nestle in the comforts of the Secretariat being turfed out to perform in the field. We need a result oriented system of performance evaluation, we need interlocking accountability so that the administration become self monitoring, supervision at all levels is strict, the superior is made accountable for the deeds of his subordinates and authority is delegated but with total accountability. In other words, the instruments of governance are fine honed and made effective. Is toilet the real key word for triggering meaningful administrative reforms? That would be a revolution to match the French Revolution!
