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WRITE FOR TOI BLOGS

The end of secession: Why the elite withdrawal from public services is coming to an end

November 13, 2017, 2:00 AM IST

Rohini Nilekani in TOI Edit Page | Edit Page, India | TOI

With the approaching winter the air quality in many Indian cities, especially in Delhi, becomes a public health hazard. Something so fundamental as breathing easy can no longer be taken for granted. It's a wake-up call worthy of a civic revolution.

For decades now those who could afford it (very much including this writer), have seceded from public services. The Indian elite send their children to expensive private schools, bypassing the public school system. They have their own infrastructure for water, with sumps to store it, pumps to lift it, and fancy filters to de-risk from erratic, polluted government water. Most access private healthcare to bridge the health services deficit.

Many have their own energy infrastructure, with diesel generators, solar plants, UPS and stabilisers, to safeguard against unpredictable energy supply. We have private cars and more rarely, private planes to bridge the public transport deficit.

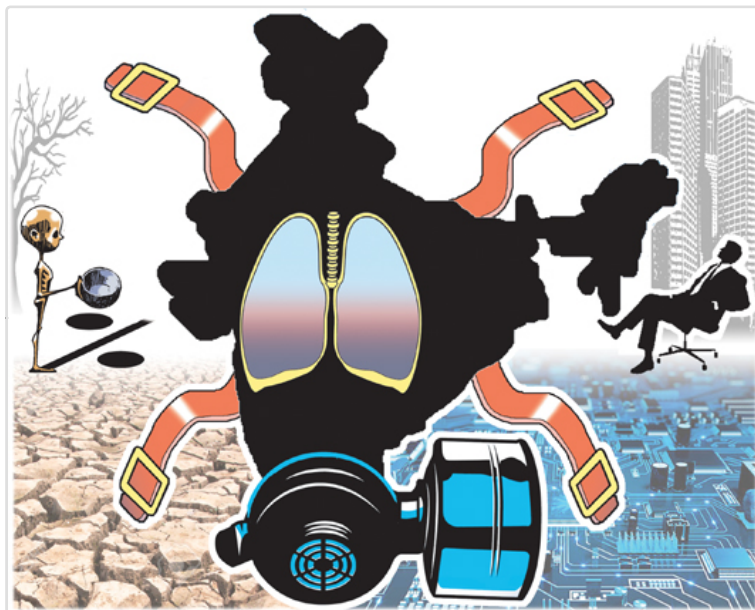


Illustration: Ajit Ninan

The wealthy can vacation abroad and avoid poor domestic tourist facilities. Some have private security services to augment routine police protection. Some even have access to high-end private capital, or alternate currencies, hidden away from the public gaze, bypassing public sector financial systems or open stock markets. Finally, the elite have their walled and gated communities, islands of efficiency in a sea of broken promises.

The middle classes, equally frustrated with the poor quality of government services, have also drifted into this private world, withdrawing children from government schools, and mustering their own solutions for water, health, energy, transport and finance.

But what has this meant for hundreds of millions of people who cannot or will not bypass goods and services that the modern nation state is supposed to provide, or at least enable for its citizens? It has meant that the quality of public services has remained stagnant or even deteriorated, as all citizens with voice and power have fled from them. This has made even more people flee, as soon as they can afford it, finally leaving public services to those who have little choice.

In Scandinavian countries, which practised social democracy and have created common taxpayer funded health and education systems, everyone experiences a fairly high quality of public service delivery. There is tremendous pressure on the state to keep elevated standards, since everyone has skin in the game. In India, those who could apply that pressure have simply exited from the service, and therefore have little stake in its improvement.

Government after government has spoken of deeper investments in public infrastructure but the demand and supply mismatch is so great that every new power plant, every new road, every new water pipeline is soon overwhelmed. Plus, in representative democracies, political parties tend to favour short-term goodies, neglecting long-term needs. Government investments are also very vulnerable to capture by various lobbies that try to squeeze benefits for their own constituencies.

Arguably though, the time for the richer Indian to secede has come to an end. The foul air in Delhi is a perfect example. It is a great leveller. Rich and poor alike must breathe in its health hazards. Facemasks and air purifiers can take the edge off, but quality of life declines regardless.

Issues of water are not far behind. The pollution of so many of India's rivers and aquifers affects everybody, no matter how many purifiers are installed. Urban floods and rural droughts have cascading effects on the whole population. Think of Chennai floods, or Punjab droughts.

Let's take transport. The most fancy Lamborghini can hardly race past potholed roads, traffic snarls and hazardous highways without personal risk. The lack of good healthcare and education for millions destroys lives but also comes back to encircle the elite by destroying the country's demographic dividend.

The list goes on. The wealthy cannot even escape the country easily anymore, what with tightening global movement across borders. There is, literally, nowhere left to hide.

This is a wonderful opportunity. The time is ripe for a full realisation of the interconnectedness of a billion lives and destinies. The better off Indian can engage more deeply with political process to demand effectiveness from the institutions of the state. We can raise our voices for better education and healthcare, for better public infrastructure, for cleaner air. Not just for us, but for all citizens. For good governance is not something citizens can just consume; we have to participate in its creation.

A quarter century of liberalisation has given crores of people a chance at a new kind of prosperity. It has also left crores behind, thirsting for more but anticipating less. They cannot wait any more.

Public goods and services are at the heart of the transformation India needs to unleash. People with influence, power and a moral vision for this country must speak up loud and clear. It needs that and more to build strong public pressure on the political class and the executive. We can commit to a society where every resident experiences the same basic quality of life that we have been so far privileged with.

As we draw bad fumes into our nostrils, let our suffering lungs issue a call to serious action. Let's fight for all, not just some Indians to breathe and live free.

DISCLAIMER : Views expressed above are the author's own.

AUTHOR



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Speaking Tree in TOI Edit Page | Edit Page, Spirituality | TOI

Talk: J Krishnamurti

All human problems are interrelated. Human problems are common to all mankind whether one is born in India, Russia, America or England. We tend to consider one problem isolated from other problems instead of understanding the totality of all problems. And this can only be done if we are capable, earnest enough to investigate, to go deeply into one problem; then we shall see that all the other problems are related to it. And this is rather important to understand; there is no problem by itself, every problem is related to all the other problems and we have, as human beings, innumerable problems. Apparently whatever we touch becomes a problem.

Throughout society there is a tremendous amount of violence, uncertainty and fear, a form of organised, flourishing anarchy. Society has become a structure in which there are wars, separate religions and different nationalities, each in conflict with the other. And all over the world man has lost faith; he no longer trusts anybody, neither priests nor politicians, nobody, not even his own parents because the older generation has created such a monstrous society, a world in which there is constant war, insecurity and therefore fear.

Religion has no meaning any more. And although priests in all organised religions talk everlastingly about being kind, loving, in the name of God, in the name of Christ, in the name of all manner of deities, the fact remains that there is a great deal of envy, hatred, greed, brutality, antagonism and violence. So man is beginning to realise that there is no one he can turn to, no one to help him out of this chaos and misery.



Through propaganda, through clever intellectual groups throughout the world – in the past as well as in the present – human beings are being conditioned by words, by various formulas, by ideologies which divide societies. The world is not only divided religiously but nationally as Italy, France, America, Russia and so on. Ideologies are always absurd, idiotic; they have no meaning whatsoever. The thing that has meaning and is of great significance is what *is* – not what should be or what might have been in the past. You know, when one is terribly confused as we all are, one resorts to the past, to the culture in which one was brought up, hoping thereby to shape one's thoughts differently.

So ideologies have failed, education has failed. Education can give marvellous technological knowledge which will help man get to the moon, show him how to run a computer, or kill thousands of people from a great distance, but we haven't solved human problems, that is how to live together as human beings, how to cooperate with one another and find unity in relationship between man and man. And that's the only thing that matters – nothing else! Not belief in God, rituals, dogmas and priests, but how to live together peacefully as human beings, with love, with generosity and without violence.

So every human being is concerned with this primary issue, which is to live in this world, earning a livelihood, having great technological skill, and yet not to destroy one another. To live at peace because peace is necessary – peace in our daily life in which there is no competition, no destructive ambition. Is this possible?

(Courtesy: KFI)

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