

UNCOMMON GROUND
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BRINGING THE STATE BACK IN

Whenever the family travelled together, while most of us would admire the greenery, my father-in-law would sigh ecstatically over the beauty of the giant pylons striding across the fields. To him, they represented the engineering talent and achievements of the public sector, munificently straddling the commanding heights of the economy. He was also genuinely sorry to see an empty BTS bus pass by, and actually climbed on one once even though it took him in the wrong direction! "Why go by a small bumpy car, when such a big beautiful bus is waiting for you?" he would often ask, and lived by his credo almost till the end of his life.

Papa was not alone in his faith and belief in the public sector. For at least two decades after independence, the state in all its forms genuinely represented the aspirations of the people. Citizen expectations of the state were by and large managed with honesty and compassion, and resulted in much of the public infrastructure my generation has taken for granted.

Sadly, all that changed dramatically some time ago. We now have very good reason to be as cynical as we are about government. Along with our dwindling faith, the public sector role in the economy seems to have shrunk somewhat since liberalization began.

There are just too many millions below the scope of 'efficient' markets and beyond the reach of most NGOs

Still, events have cycled back to a point where some of the faithless are echoing my father-in-law, seeing again the potential beauty in the guiding hand of a benevolent state.

But too much has changed on the ground in the past four decades and it will not be easy to restore the state's effectiveness.

Just in the past two weeks of travel, from the dusty villages of Bagepalli in Kolar district, to the grimy streets of municipal Kolkata, I have seen, all over again, just how callous and neglectful the state has become in the provisioning of public services, and how devastating is the impact of that on the most vulnerable.

Kolar, one of the most backward districts of Karnataka, also has the misfortune of having high fluoride content in its groundwater, which remains the primary source of drinking water for people.

All state measures to improve the situation appear to have failed. In one panchayat, a de-fluoridation plant lies abandoned, having worked for only two months. Nobody knows what to do with it. In a government primary school, a rainwater harvesting system is similarly broken.

In one particularly bizarre instance, the government has handed out rather neat looking fluoride filters, but with no instruction on how to replace the activated alumina that filters the fluoride. With the result that the water, which we tested, now has even more fluoride concentration than before.

On the streets of Kolkata, in a scorching sidewalk school run for homeless children, the situation is even more heart-rending, with a left-wing government long in power. There seems little hope of change anytime soon for the spunky kids who generously shared their morning meal of dry bread and *channa* (gram). The nearby feeder school is already overflowing and no new schools are coming up in the area.

As citizens, we need to deepen our inspection on this as much as our governments do. But there are two sectors that specially need to sharpen their analyses—the business sector and the voluntary sector.

Both sectors have rapidly filled the vacuum created by the faltering state. They have become incredibly powerful in the name of the citizen. And for just a while there, somewhere in the late 1990s

perhaps, it seemed that a new balance of *sarkaar*, *samaj* and *bazaar* would actually create desirable change. I personally believe the promise still holds good to avoid excessive concentration of power, so long as we do not give up the responsibility of citizenship.

But recent events have reaffirmed that there is no substitute for the state in key areas of the economy, and for the universalization of essential public goods and services. There are just too many millions who lie below the scope of even the most "efficient" of markets, and beyond the reach of even the most "well-meaning" non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

As one political regime gives way to another, enlightened business and NGO leaders need to come together to enable the state as never before, instead of to merely supplement or replace it.

This is never going to be easy, given deeply polarized positions on the role of the state.

Yet, we can try hammering out some new Indian-style consensus, and get back to the original task of creating a functional state apparatus that can actually serve those citizens whom no one else can.

Hopefully then, like Papa, we will soon be able to pause on our journeys to admire shiny new solar roofs on our public schools.

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