



THE TIMES OF INDIA

Date: 24-01-19

Make India Climate Smart

We have big infrastructure plans but forget to review them through a climate change lens

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India will invest billions of dollars in public infrastructure over the next few years. Government policies also aim to massively increase private investments across sectors – manufacturing, services and agriculture. Each of these policies and investments will have time horizons spanning five to 50 years. Examples of planned infrastructure include – 100 new airports with an investment of \$60 billion, interlinking of rivers at a budget of Rs 5.5 lakh crore, a linked network of ports through Sagarmala at an outlay of Rs 4 lakh crore. At a different scale, just one project – the 29.2 km coastal road planned in one city, Mumbai – will cost Rs 10,000 crore.

All these initiatives will impact the lives and livelihoods of millions, and will compete for finite and scarce public resources. But are any of them being screened against the biggest existential threat humanity has ever faced – climate change? Unfortunately, the answer is NO. There is currently no formal process by which projects of a certain scale would have to go through a risk assessment and a cost-benefit analysis of the potential impact of climate change related effects. This question does not seem to be raised either in Parliament debates, nor does it find mention in the 15-20 substantive laws that are enacted each year at the central level and in states, nor does it preoccupy any of the standing committees.

Climate change is already upon us, and its effects are being felt with increasing intensity. It is no longer about the distant future; decisions made today will impact us in our lifetimes. A recent analysis published in Science reported that the oceans are warming at a 40% faster rate than was estimated just five years ago. And 2018 was the fourth hottest year on record, according to the World Meteorological Organization. Almost one-third of India's coastline was lost to soil erosion between 1990 and 2016, according to the National Centre for Coastal Research. One could go on. Ordinary citizens too are directly experiencing climate uncertainty in their lives, especially from extreme events. Just in these past months we have had the Kerala, Assam and Odisha floods, and the cyclone in the Andamans. No one has an exact count of the loss of assets, the slip-back into poverty and the burden of disease unleashed by these calamities.

Yet massive tourism infrastructure is envisaged right at the shrinking coastline, including in highly vulnerable areas such as the Andamans. The river interlinking project continues though Himalayan glacier melts will seriously affect river flows. On climate mitigation, India has made commitments through the Paris agreement to reduce its carbon emission intensity by 35% by 2030. With an ambitious renewable energy programme, we may well be on track to deliver against the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) of the accord. Under the National Action Plan for Climate Change (NAPCC), there are eight missions under relevant ministries that are doing solid work.

But there is no evidence of the output from NAPCC being integrated with mainstream decision making. And when it comes to climate adaptation, India's track record remains weak. What may happen if we do not put a climate change lens on policy design and investments? At the very least, we may be left with massive stranded assets, with the attendant waste of scarce financial resources. At the worst, we could create a negative impact on hundreds of millions of people, especially when it comes to water resources, fisheries, food, agriculture and rural livelihoods, and coastal and urban habitats.

This writer was in Uttarakhand three months before the floods of 2013. It was a disaster waiting to happen. Dams were built back-to-back without any holistic plan; a haphazard tourism policy allowed infrastructure right on the banks of the mighty rivers. Some places I stayed in were completely wiped out. Who is accountable for decisions there that went wrong? Why were the voices of scientists and researchers unheeded? We must incorporate climate modelling in future plans and investments. Whether it is policies on crop procurement, skilling and job creation, urbanisation or even beach tourism, climate adaptation pathways will have to be imagined.

Other countries do put a climate change lens on policy formulation. Many coastal cities are aggressively de-risking from sea level rise and extreme events. 'Climate Ready Boston' is a good example of an adaptation initiative with extensive community participation. Such efforts globally have yielded many useful, publicly available resources for planners anywhere to use. India can use these resources or create context-relevant toolkits of its own to build widespread capacity to understand, assess and plan for climate related risks. We have to formalise processes to deliberate the pros and cons of policy formulation, using currently available data on climate change.

Operationalising this can become more effective with innovative approaches. These include using new technologies for participatory planning, creating digital public goods for modelling, analysis and decision support, and knowledge exchange platforms between the scientific community and decision makers at all levels of government. Putting a climate change lens on policy making offers a huge opportunity to make smart decisions about India's future. But this cannot wait. Climate change has the potential to swallow up all other issues of development. Given the credibility of this threat, it is both a moral and a strategic imperative to bring climate change to the centre of the planning paradigm.

Date: 24-01-19

Let us unite the Great Indian Family

Allow overseas Indians to have citizenship and political rights

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For a nation that proudly and tirelessly espouses to the world the idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam – the world is one family – India is perhaps unconsciously tone-deaf in how it discriminates against more than 10 million members of its own family. I refer to the treatment of Persons of Indian Origin who carry passports issued by other countries. By doing this, they lose the opportunity to hold Indian passports.

Think how unfair this is. I may look Indian and have been born in India, as immersed in Bollywood as kids in Mumbai, rooting for the Indian cricket team as much as anybody else. But if i happen to hold the citizenship of another country, i cannot carry an Indian passport. Instead, the best i can have is an Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card which allows me to travel to India, and live and work there, but denies me: 1) the right to vote; 2) the right to hold elective public office; 3) the right to compete for government jobs; and 4) the right to buy agricultural property.

I know what you are thinking – “Be grateful we have given you even this much. After all, you left us!” To which my response is, “What about Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”? If there is any philosophical or moral merit to this idea, then surely no Indian who ever left the shores of India ceases to be a member of the Indian family. Then why treat us differently? To which you might say – every other country does the same thing. But you would be wrong – at least 50 countries, including major ones like the US, UK, Canada and Australia, allow dual or even multiple citizenships.

But how would you know that we would be loyal to India? This is an unfair knee-jerk question. A little reflection will show that resident Indians are not required to prove their loyalty, so why should overseas Indians be held to a different standard? Consider the millions of resident Indians who show active “disloyalty” to India on a daily basis – through their corruption, tax evasion, fraud, subversion of institutions, incitement to communal violence, terrorism, etc. You do not take away their citizenship for any of these reasons.

Moreover, overseas Indians have proved their loyalty time and time again – most spectacularly in 1999 during the Kargil War when NRIs were critical in influencing and shaping public opinion in the US all the way to the US Congress and President Bill Clinton, who just a year earlier had castigated and sanctioned India for its nuclear tests. But he shifted gears dramatically and forced Pakistan to withdraw in humiliation. US-based NRIs also made a valuable contribution in guiding the US towards accepting India in the nuclear club.

Permitting dual citizenship will get India incremental, high quality civic engagement in local, state and national issues. The grant of full political rights will see more Indians abroad choosing to get involved in the political processes of India, instead of being mere bystanders. OCIs will bring, based on their observations and experiences, new, creative and innovative approaches and skills to think about and solve problems.

Having experienced and helped build successful public institutions, these overseas Indians understand good citizenship, and demand and expect quality in all aspects of public life. They will bring new and better ideas for governance to improve delivery of public services and reduce corruption. And they will bring all the passion and energy that has allowed them to be successful overseas. How can all this be bad for India?

And then there is money. Overseas Indians remit an average of \$70 billion annually to India, approximately 3% of India's GDP. Given India's large twin deficits in the fiscal and current accounts, these remittances continue to be a vital bridge to economic stability. It is likely that this number would go up, perhaps quite substantially, if overseas Indians were allowed to connect and involve themselves more deeply with India. To sum up, uniting the Great Indian Family costs India nothing and could deliver some very significant benefits. It is a free option.

THE ECONOMIC TIMES

Date: 24-01-19

Do Poor Choices Win Votes ?

The truth is, India isn't rich enough to be a welfare state

Chaitanya Kalbag , [He was Editor, Asia with Reuters News Agency, Editor-in-Chief of Hindustan Times, and Editor at Business Today.]

William Safire must be turning in his grave. The language maven and Nixon speechwriter came up with the 'nattering nabobs of negativism' phrase that Vice-President Spiro Agnew used in a 1970 speech. Finance Minister Arun Jaitley first used "nawabs of negativity" in a video Q&A on January 19 and then quoted the correct phrase again in a Facebook post two days later. (Note: Agnew had to resign in disgrace in 1973 over allegations of corruption and tax evasion. The Agnew/Safire phrase referred to mainstream U.S. media). The finance minister, who is in New York for a medical check-up, has unleashed an alliterative attack on the opposition on social media. He was in fine fettle a couple of days after landing in the Big Apple with a post on Compulsive Contrarians. Part of that blog post was about the 10% reservation for 'economically weaker' upper castes. I suggest he calls critics of this move Quota Querulists.

Jaitley wrote: "[The Contrarians] picked holes in the proposal to give 10% reservation in education and public jobs to the poor, compelling me to comment in the Lok Sabha that this was the first illustration in history where the Communists were obstructing a step taken to support the poor." But who exactly are the poor? Therein lies the nub. Any household in the 'general' category will now be considered poor and qualify for a 10% quota in government jobs and public college admissions if it earns less than Rs 8 lakhs annually. You pay income-tax if you earn over Rs 2.5 lakhs a year. How do these facts fit together? More importantly where will the extra jobs and seats come from? We have already seen 25 million applicants for 90,000 railway jobs, now we hear that government colleges will have to create a million new seats – which will need funding – to take in the newly entitled.

That was about the largely-urban upper-caste poor. The rural poor are also dear to the government in this general election. Jaitley has dropped heavy hints about splurging on welfare spending, fiscal deficit be damned. Most of the profligacy will be disguised as the interim budget next week, which will not pretend to be a vote on account and unabashedly churn out the blank cheques before the Code of Conduct kicks in around mid-February.

A Statement or a Sentence ?

As rural distress soars, fuelled by a sclerotic agricultural economy, the government has moved far away from February 27, 2015, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered a withering speech in Parliament. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), he said, was “a living monument to [Congress’s] failures. Sixty years after independence, you had to send people to dig ditches”. Two years of severe drought followed by an output glut and plunging crop prices have forced the Modi government to not just embrace but also expand MNREGA. Last week it announced extra funding of Rs 6,084 crore, taking the outlay in 2018-19 to a record Rs 61,084 crore.

Forget ditches: a long Ministry of Rural Development paean to MNREGA said the programme had resulted in a huge number of community assets in the countryside. From April 2014 to January 2019, more than 1.73 million farm ponds had been dug, and 512,398 cattle sheds, 112,341 goat sheds, and 37,936 Anganwadi centres had been built. Over the past three years, MNREGA had generated employment averaging 2.35 billion person-days annually. At least 50 million households sought work under the scheme every year. What does this say about the pledge to double farmers’ income by 2022, never mind the IMF’s roseate forecast of average GDP growth of 7.5% in the short term?

In fact, inspired by the Telangana Rashtra Samithi’s landslide election victory last month, the Modi government is reportedly poised to imitate its version of a Universal Basic Income. The TRS’s Rythu Bandhu scheme offered Rs 4,000 per acre per crop season to farmers as a direct cash transfer, which meant up to Rs 8,000 a year (the party has vowed to raise this to Rs 10,000 an acre). Critics note that the cash dole has not worked very well. It goes only to farmers with land titles and so benefits absentee landlords, not marginal farmers or share-croppers. But since the Modi government does not want to be seen joining the race of the lemmings in farm-loan waivers, it appears to favour UBI.

Whether it is the (quota) poor or the electorally sensitive rural poor, Jaitley is confident Modi’s chemistry will any day trump vote-bank arithmetic. But what about the vision of a more prosperous New India?

Fearing the Future

Last month, 13 Indian economists, both resident and expatriate and including IMF Chief Economist Gita Gopinath and former RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan, laid out an economic strategy for the next five years. The absence of an inclusive and sustainable growth agenda, the economists said, has triggered demands for loan waivers and more reservations. “This reflects Indians’ growing anxiety about their future and that of their children in an increasingly winner-take-all society, where they often end up on the losing side. Our welfare schemes like the MGNREGA and Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awas Yojana are mostly directed towards the very poor...so they do not serve the purpose of protecting those outside that group.” Poor choices, all round.

बिज़नेस स्टैंडर्ड

Date: 23-01-19

उपाय सही, अमल कठिन

संपादकीय

नीति (नैशनल इंस्टीट्यूट फॉर ट्रांसफॉर्मिंग इंडिया) आयोग ने किसानों को प्रति वर्ष, प्रति हेक्टेयर 15,000 रुपये की राशि प्रत्यक्ष आय समर्थन के रूप में देने की अनुशंसा की है। यह उपाय कहीं राजकोषीय दुःस्वप्न न साबित हो, इसके लिए आयोग ने सुझाव दिया है कि कृषि क्षेत्र में दी जाने वाली उर्वरक, बिजली, फसल बीमा, सिंचाई, ब्याज में छूट समेत हर तरह की सब्सिडी समाप्त कर दी जाए और इससे होने वाली तकरीबन 2 लाख करोड़ रुपये की बचत सीधे किसानों के खाते में डाल दी जाए। यह प्रस्ताव दो कारणों से उचित प्रतीत होता है। पहला, मौजूदा सब्सिडी का वितरण निहायत गैर किफायती अंदाज में होता है और किसानों के खाते में प्रत्यक्ष हस्तांतरण कहीं अधिक किफायती विकल्प है। दूसरी वजह यह है कि न्यूनतम समर्थन मूल्य के उलट प्रत्यक्ष आय समर्थन से बाजार में विसंगति नहीं पैदा होती है। न ही इससे जुड़ा अन्य कोई नुकसान है। यह तरीका दुनिया भर में कहीं अधिक स्वीकार्य है और यह विश्व व्यापार संगठन की मांग के अनुरूप होने के साथ-साथ कहीं अधिक समावेशी और समतामूलक भी है।

इस बात के प्रमाण भी बढ़ रहे हैं कि ऐसी प्रत्यक्ष नकदी समर्थन योजनाएं राजनीतिक तौर पर भी लाभदायक साबित हो रही हैं। तेलंगाना के मुख्यमंत्री के चंद्रशेखर राव की रैयत बंधु योजना इसका महत्वपूर्ण उदाहरण है। तेलंगाना में कृषि कार्य करने वाले लोगों की तादाद राष्ट्रीय औसत से काफी अधिक है। अन्य राज्यों की तरह यहां भी अब तक ढेर सारी सब्सिडी और कृषि कर्ज माफी की जाती थी। रैयत बंधु योजना सभी खेत मालिकों को प्रति एकड़ 4,000 रुपये प्रदान करती है। अगर जमीन दो फसल वाली है तो यह राशि दोगुनी कर दी जाती है। हालिया चुनाव में टीआरएस की भारी जीत में इस योजना का भी प्रभाव माना जा रहा है। इस योजना के दो अहम पहलू हैं। पहला, यह हस्तांतरण मौजूदा सब्सिडी के स्थान पर नहीं किया जाता है। दूसरा, इसका डिजाइन ऐसा है कि जमीन मालिकों को लाभ पहुंचा लेकिन भूमिहीन श्रमिक इससे वंचित रहे। ओडिशा एक अन्य राज्य है जिसने कुछ बदलाव के साथ इसे अपनाने का प्रस्ताव रखा है। ओडिशा की कालिया (कृषक असिस्टेंस फॉर लाइवलीहुड एंड इनकम असिस्टेंस) योजना के तहत सभी छोटे और सीमांत किसानों तथा किराये पर खेती करने वाले और बटाईदारों को प्रति एकड़ प्रति सीजन 5,000 रुपये की राशि देती है।

बहरहाल, हमारे देश में लक्षित आय समर्थन योजनाओं को लागू करने में एक अहम समस्या है। इसका संबंध मौजूदा सब्सिडी को खत्म करने में आने वाली दिक्कत से है। आय समर्थन योजना तभी सही ढंग से काम कर सकती है जबकि हर तरह की सब्सिडी समाप्त कर दी जाए। देश में व्याप्त गरीबी और सब्सिडी को समाप्त करने में राजनेताओं की अनिच्छा को देखते हुए अधिक संभावना इसी बात की है कि आय समर्थन योजना को सब्सिडी के अलावा लागू किया जाएगा। यहां ऐसी योजनाओं की वित्तीय व्यवहार्यता को लेकर प्रश्न उत्पन्न होता है। केंद्र और राज्य दोनों स्तरों पर सरकार तनाव में हैं और काफी संभव है कि सकल घरेलू उत्पाद की तुलना में राजकोषीय घाटे और सार्वजनिक ऋण के लिए तय लक्ष्य प्राप्त न हो पाएं। इस योजना की दूसरी कमी यह है कि भारत में भूमि रिकॉर्ड डिजिटलीकृत नहीं हैं और बिना उनके इस योजना का क्रियान्वयन लगभग असंभव है। यह बहस जारी रहेगी और इस बीच सरकार को विपणन के बुनियादी ढांचे, भंडारण और खाद्य प्रसंस्करण आदि में निवेश बढ़ाने और किसानों को अपनी उपज पंजीकृत बाजार में बेचने के लिए बाध्य करने के बजाय कृषि उपज संस्थानों को सीधे बेचने देने की सुविधा देने पर विचार करना चाहिए।