The need to look within: A vision for India

-Amit Ranjan

There is a tide in the affairs of men.  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.  
On such a full sea are we now afloat,  
And we must take the current when it serves,  
Or lose our ventures.

_Julius Caesar Act 4, scene 3, 218–224_

The situation in which we are poised right now is that of Hanuman before he takes a leap over the seas to reach Lanka. Hanuman had immense powers, and he had forgotten them. He needed to be reminded that he could fly over rills and hills. We need to remind ourselves that we have a history of thousands of years, of civilizations, of innovations, of enterprise, of courage. We need to fight a war, a war within our own minds to let confidence triumph over self-doubt.

Let us begin with the most current. The Commonwealth Games are barely two months away, but if one sees the roads of Delhi, it seems that there are still two years to go. The red earth is turned inside out, the stadia are not ready, and work is on twenty-four hours a day to desperately make the show happen. The organizers have been accused of high corruption. Let us juxtapose this image with that of the new swanky airport at Delhi, or the Metro rail project which has spread its wings all across the city in less than a decade. How is it that one project is marred by corruption, while others have a smooth ride? The answer to this probably is ‘political will’. The Metro project, right from the outset, was a determined project, that it shall be a world-class affair, that it shall set an example. And so it was, and one doesn’t find paan-stains which is a pan-Indian affair, in the Metro. The people were given a modern, clean system and they built a public culture around it. There was a will on the part of both the government and the people.

Whereas, in the case of the Commonwealth games, there is a general disinterest towards the idea of sports. The Asian Games were held successfully in 1982, but that was also after similar glitches, and Rajiv Gandhi had to be roped in by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, to set things right. There is a lack of political will that India should excel in sports, and so the games have been taken lightly, and the corrupt bureaucracy allowed to have a field day. With a population of over one billion, and so many traditional and modern forms of sports, one always wonders why India’s name doesn’t feature in any list apart from cricket. There was a time when Indian domination in the field of hockey was complete. Beginning 1928, India won at six Olympic games consecutively. In a game against USA in 1932 Olympics, India beat the US 24-1, and that one goal was scored.
because the goalkeeper Richard Allen was signing autographs, since the ball wouldn’t come to him at all! The Australians were beaten by India regularly till the 1960s, and they started learning tricks from them. A lot of Anglo-Indians migrated to Australia after Indian independence, and some of them joined the Aussie hockey team. After the 1980s, the Indian team has had a dry run. The question to ask is how was ignominy followed by glory?

One is harping on the issue of sports since one is using it as a metaphor of self-expression, of commitment towards a cause. Also because one is writing this article in Australia where sports is almost a cultural value. To elaborate upon the idea of self-expression, it is not uncommon in Australia to see old people, over sixty and even seventy, jogging down the streets or swimming in the open seas even in winter. There is a will, a vitality, and a jouissance about the whole affair. We perhaps need this will to live, to connect with the nature, to aim for a healthy life of our citizens.

One may counter-argue that the family ties in India are very strong, and in the West the older people are more lonely and isolated. However, one’s strength does not mean a negation of one’s weaknesses. The old in our society are excluded to retired roles, to caring for grandchildren, and to preparing for ‘journey beyond’. I am talking about civil life; the case of politics is quite different. We need an inclusive strategy where people of all ages have a role to play in the enterprise of building a society. The older people can be consultants to the new generation; they can be writers writing about their wealth of experience etc. The possibilities are immense and waiting to be tapped. There is a need for social security for the old, impaired and the unemployed. We want Western models implemented in our society, but without first building an infrastructure that sustains such models.

One may also argue that a nation that is preoccupied with issues of employment and survival cannot afford to invest in sports and leisure. When Indians win a cricket match, doesn’t the nation rise up in an extra-terrestrial show of celebration? It is not just a matter of pride, but economics as well. If there is such a big market associated with the viewership of cricket, can’t a similar viewership be harnessed for other sports? If our media gives attention to sports instead of Saas-Bahu soaps, there will be a dramatic change.

The media had two models in front of it in the globalised era – the American model of reality shows, and the BBC model where there was a mix of everything, with an emphasis on educational programs. Sadly, the Indian media has gone on the former way, a point that doesn’t need elaboration. Twenty-four hour news channels having made entertainment out of news have sensationalized everything; everything is a breaking news; and every serial is about domestic intrigues in a business family. The media has played a proactive role in fighting for the rights of civil society as well, but it has been limited to a certain class that patronizes the media. Marshall McLuhan coined the famous phrase “Medium is the message” in 1964; implying that the structures of media in themselves carry a message. There are structural changes introduced into the society over long periods of time through media strategies, and this is something that’s ignored. A
later work of McLuhan is titled *The Medium is the Massage*iii, implying that that the media “massages” our senses, that it prejudices our senses in several ways. Given this, it is important that we build a vision for the media. There has been a certain kind of homogenization in the media where certain forms are preferred over certain other forms. So while Bollywood is being celebrated across the world, there has been a near death of parallel cinema, which saw stimulating movies like *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* and *Garam Hawa* produced in the 1980s. With the rise of sensationalism, there is a dearth of documentaries, and serious fiction.

The point is that we are nearly always there, but not quite there. While Indian writers of English fiction are thriving in a global scene, none of the major writer lives in India. They all have to immigrate to some Western country – be it Amitav Ghosh, or Salman Rushdie or Vikram Seth. Besides that, literature in Hindi and vernacular languages has barely got a presence within India itself. Expressions through media and literature are self-expressions of a nation, and emphasis needs to be laid on building these to build a better future. With the rise of technology, and the middle class largely taking up software and managerial jobs, there is a dearth of people involved in serious research in social sciences. That there is intolerance in our society despite it becoming a global presence insinuates that there is a lack in social education. We need to understand our long history which is gradually getting lost due to a step-brotherly treatment to the study of humanities.

The rise of technology also needs serious thought, in terms of its harnessing. While India has become a global giant in software, at the other end of the spectrum, there are farmers committing suicides in Maharashtra. The condition of the farmers was appalling and the media had paid no heed to it till P. Sainath took an activist stance vis-à-vis journalism. The question is how to integrate these two ends of the spectrum. Agriculture has been the strength of the nation. If a billion people are fed through a self-reliant agricultural system, the farmers need to be given respectability in society. Technology needs to aid further agricultural growth. Chandrababu Naidu was the poster boy of the West in 2004; Bill Clinton and Tony Blair had paid him visits in Hyderabad. He was seen as an icon of modernity. Yet, he was routed in the elections. One needs to think over people’s verdict and what went wrong. He wanted Hyderabad to become an IT giant, but he did not try and harness IT for improving agriculture – to use it for better forecasts, for developing new technology for farming, for equitable distribution etc. In fact, he outsourced the development program to McKinsey, which prepared a document called Vision 2020iv. On the surface, it looks rosy with educational and health programs at the helm. However, when one delves into it, one realizes that these systems would be built on “user charges” and that small businesses should be done away with to make way for large corporations. It is alright to have corporations, but only after the interests of our own people are secured.

Globalisation is supposed to unite the global village, but unfortunately it has been a one-way process where we are consuming burgers but our dosas are not being consumed at the same rate. In such an situation, occurrences like that in Nandigram and Singur are bound to happen. If the people do not trust their government that they will get fair prices
for their land, or employment once their occupation is taken away, it demonstrates the lack of faith that the populace has in its authorities. These agitations never occurred in the first phase of infrastructure building when the big steel plants of Steel Authority India Limited were built, for example. That faith needs to be restored, and the government needs to show its poorest that it is interested in the alleviation of its poverty. There is a need for implementing the ides of “globalization” if I may put it that way – where there is a globalization of the local, where local news reaches the mainstream media and vice versa. For example, there are FM radios being built in remote areas where what the people tell the radio is broadcast on a website. This is just a basic example to show how interfaces can be built.

Naxalism has become a huge challenge for the government. The situation is very like the underground fire in Jharia coalfields in Jharkhand, where coal has been burning under the surface for decades, and the entire place might collapse some day. There has been simmering discontent that the poorest of our lot have not been given a share in development. The government wants to negotiate. It is rather late in the day, but the first step is always battle half-won. There are several internal disturbances like this, and addressing them should be our top priority. One needs to take a look into the history of all these problems. The government needs to speak with the all parties concerned and employ its intellectuals to look into all these in the earnest.

The biggest challenge facing us is that the one billion strong population is seen as a liability and not as an asset. Once we learn how to treat everyone as equal, and take pride in the fact that we are all Indians, half the battle, again, will be won.

We have had a tradition of assimilation, of tolerance, of finding ways of building unity amidst diversity. At a time when India is recognized as a global economic and technological power, we must seize the advantage instead of collapsing due to our internal bickering. The Indian railways is an apt metaphor for our unity, which carries on its parallel lines, a huge chunk of the country’s business. We need to respect everyone’s worldviews and run the train of our unity on these parallel lines.

Oil, fish and coal
And a billion whole,
Traverse a million miles,
And owe it to the parallel lines.

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i “Los Angeles 1932” on the website http://www.bharatiyahockey.org/olympics/golden/1932.htm, as viewed on August 10, 2010