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Promise is not delivery

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A roadside vegetable seller speaks on a cellphone.

India's rapid economic growth has not entirely left the poor behind. The fraction of people who live under the poverty line has gone down from 46 per cent in 1983 to 28 per cent in 2004-05. Poor people can now afford cell phones, TVs, and some other of life's little treats. The SC/ST population has not been left out of this trend. Indeed it has caught up: In 1983, the average worker who was not from the SC/ST category used to earn 42 per cent more than one who was an sc/st. In 2004-2005, this gap was just 22 per cent. Yet, as the upset defeat of the NDA in the 2004 polls made clear, creating the conditions for robust economic growth, and counting on the tide to lift all boats was not sufficient to enlist the political support of the poor. Clearly, despite some progress in living standards, too many still felt left behind by "Shining India".

The new Congress-led UPA administration was smart enough to realise that it needed to pay attention to the quality of life of the poor: the poor deserve (and want) better services now, from electricity to education, and they are not going to sit patiently when what is needed to satisfy their needs seems to be within reach.



A child protests against the delay in rollout of the right to education.

The IPA's vision of how this was to be done has evolved in the years that it has been in power. The National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) came first, and it involved mostly throwing more money into the existing system: upgrade facilities, hire additional nurses, and introduce a new health worker (the Accredited Social Health Activist or asha), one who lives and works in the village.

It was with NREGA (now renamed MNREGA), perhaps the largest social redistribution programme in the world (at least in terms of numbers of potential beneficiaries), that the distinct flavour of the UPA's approach to anti-poverty policy was set: The basic approach is rights-based, which means that people were given a legal right to demand coverage under the programme. Since then there has been a Right to Education, and the Right to Food Bill will soon be enacted. Presumably, other rights will follow.

It is certainly important for a nation to define its core values, and articulate the aspiration to deliver those to every one of its citizens. India is rich enough that none of its citizens should ever starve or go without a decent education. However, handing people rights is only a part of the battle-and mostly just the easy and politically convenient part-unless something is done to make sure that they actually get what they have been

promised. Does it make sense to talk of a right to education if, as we learnt from ASER (Assessment Survey Evaluation Research), 59 per cent of Class IV students and 44 per cent of those in Class V possessed reading skills below the Class II level? Or a right to food, when as we learnt from a recent survey that we did in Bihar, that few of the poor reported ever using the Public Distribution System: the shop was closed, or they did not have the right card, or the shop was always out of stock of what they needed. Even MNREGA, where a substantial proportion of the population does report getting benefits, things are not exactly what they are supposed to be: A survey of 1,400 households who were supposed to have participated in NREGA in 2007-2008 found that households claimed to have worked a third, or less, of the workdays that were reported on their behalf, and only 60 per cent say that they did any work.



Villagers build a road as part of mnrega in Rajasthan.

The idea that such a system can be made to work much better, simply by the sleight of hand of making everything justiciable, seems unjustifiably optimistic. The experience with MNREGA suggests that states like Bihar and West Bengal, that decided not to put much effort into the programme, could quite easily get away with it, and not because of a lack of potential demand—these states have some of the higher concentrations of poverty in the country. The fact that everyone has a right to employment or compensation in lieu of employment, should have meant that these states would be inundated with law suits and contempt orders, but that seems to have not happened. Supporters of this approach will argue, correctly, that in part this is a matter of time. The Right to

Information law, which was also dismissed by many when introduced, is indeed proving to be a powerful instrument in the hands of civil society activists. However, these newer rights are somewhat different. For example, there could be different reasons why someone does not get the employment she wants under MNREGA. The village administration may not have proposed and received approval for enough projects, the funds for the funded projects might have disappeared along the way, or the mechanism for her to register her demand for work may be broken. Does the average villager always know what the problem is? Will the local judiciary, famously inefficient in so many other ways, be able to identify the particular failure in every instance? Can we afford to have the courts even more clogged up by interminable arguments about the apportionment of blame? And this is the simplest case—where what is being guaranteed is money, which, thankfully, comes in only one quality. Think of education, and the many ways in which the system can fail to deliver a quality experience. Even the framers of the law seem to tacitly agree—this is why the Right to Education law contains next to nothing about how to guarantee that the kids are learning anything, and pages about the exact kind of building that schools must have. But this means that the law, if enforced, may shut down cut-price schools and tiny NGO-run operations that are the only alternative for the poor in comparison to the often dysfunctional government schools. These schools will probably not be economically viable if the provisions of the law get enforced. The Right to Education Bill, as it stands, might be more of a problem than a solution.

None of this says that a rights based approach should not be a vital part of the overall strategy to get good governance. But we should not lose focus on the need to improve the standard bureaucratic mechanisms of delivery. The UPA seems to believe that this is a mainly a matter of mobilising communities to be more effective in monitoring what they are getting, through social audits and other similar interventions. This is certainly a worthy goal but it is anything but easy. Four years after the Village Education Committees (VEC) had been introduced in every village to improve school governance, a survey we did in Jaunpur district in

Uttar Pradesh found that only eight per cent of villagers knew about the VEC, and a quarter of VEC members did not know that they were members. And despite Pratham's extensive efforts to mobilise parents around VEC participation in 130 randomly selected villages, neither parental involvement nor test scores improved, relative to other villages.

It, therefore, remains key to improve the basic bureaucratic machinery (what Nandan Nilekani calls the "plumbing" of government). The Unique Identification Number may help, but we need many more creative solutions for getting government officials to do their jobs better: better monitoring-where new technologies can contribute-but also more rewards, more encouragement and more realistic job descriptions (nurses in rural Rajasthan are expected to visit five different villages a week, often five kilometres apart, with no roads connecting them, while also maintaining a presence at the health centre).

And most importantly, it is a matter of recognising that the government's capacity is limited and it is not possible to solve all problems at the same time. Promising rights that turn out to be empty is worse than promising nothing, because it contributes to the growing cynicism about the nation and the state ("sab sala chor hai" is a common refrain these days), which in turn plays directly into the hands of the forces that can make India fail.

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