

A THOUGHT FOR TODAY

It is health that is real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver.

MAHATMA GANDHI

Ill Considered

Our political and electoral discourse must begin to prioritise health

A nation's true well-being is measured by the state of its public health system. If we are to shift from a patronage-based system to one that empowers people, education and health would be crucial elements of a 'soft' infrastructure that facilitates such empowerment. One can't actualise human potential if children succumb early to a killer disease such as encephalitis – as they're doing in large numbers in UP. But health continues to be low on the agenda of successive central and state governments, regardless of their political affiliations. In this bleak scenario, the UPA government's decision to set up a GoM on encephalitis is welcome. But the government needs to deliver much more, if it is to turn around the health sector.

To begin with, across the board, authorities will have to get proactive to cleanse the system's entrenched rot. It's a matter of national shame that our public health infrastructure is languishing for want of effective government management. Not to mention rampant leakages and widespread corruption, that are further debilitating an already tottering structure. The recent spate of deaths in UP and West Bengal has hammered home the situation's gravity. Under Mayawati's watch more than 400 children have died of encephalitis. While in West Bengal at least 40 infants have died in government hospitals, due to lack of proper medical facilities and absence of doctors. To make matters worse, the UPA's health budgetary allocation continues to be a mere 0.9% of GDP.

But it is not just a question of funds. Two chief medical officers in UP's family welfare department have been shot dead, while their deputy died under mysterious circumstances in jail. There is a general lack of political will to put the derailed system back on track. Political parties have shown little interest in incorporating health into the national political discourse. Primary and secondary education have gained from the government's focussed interventions and their greater visibility in public discussion. In contrast, the health sector is still starved of attention.

True, the UPA government had inaugurated the ambitious National Rural Health Mission in 2005. The project aimed to increase public expenditure in health, reduce regional infrastructural imbalance and optimise health manpower by decentralising health delivery services. But the objectives have remained mostly on paper. The need of the hour is to recognise health as an administrative priority. Our political class can take a cue from political parties in most democracies, which lend due weight to health and education issues including in their election campaigns.



Medium As Massage

When your phone speaks to you

It may be Artificial – but it's certainly Intelligent. Technological advances have led to mobile phones featuring a 'personal assistant' application that understands ordinary speech and offers advice on a rainbow of queries. The phones' commentary is not confined to simple reminders but extends to considerably more emotional needs – like wondering why the phone's owner might be feeling depressed and advising when they should go see a therapist. It's small wonder then that consumers are not only growing increasingly dependent on their phones but also developing warm, loving feelings for them – some even going to the extent of trying to find the 'person' locked inside the application that so faithfully listens and speaks to them!

Today, as technology spreads democratically around the world, you no longer have to be a millionaire to afford a gizmo as solicitous as a newly-developed wristband that tells you what to – and not to – eat and when to exercise and sleep in order to keep fit. Such luxuries of intelligent companionship may be easily available to regular consumers, but there's a flip side too. What if our mechanical mates eventually grow as clingy or cranky as our human pals? Wives and girlfriends step aside; a man's phone must talk to him – even during a tense moment in the newest cricket match. And hey, parents-in-law, shelve those concerns about your new relative's weight. Their wristband will do all the annoying nagging needed to keep them off those laddus, even demanding they photograph and log everything they eat! One mode of communication may thus stymie another. But here's the funny thing – the message remains the same.

First-class foul-up

Sometimes, the wrong people get the right ticket

JS Raghavan

The Madras-Howrah mail was on its usual platform, standing as if bemoaning the human load it would have to carry. The lights in the first-class bogie i boarded were dim, the smell assuring me that the Railways had not committed the crime of cleaning the toilets. With mixed feelings, I learnt I had been allotted a coupe that would offer privacy and entered it.

He was in the corner of the lower berth as if he were a bedbug metamorphosed into human form and recoiled from me as bugs do. He soon buried his head in a fat file that perhaps held some secret code, which if broken would lead to a treasure buried in a temple vault.

"Good evening," I greeted him, dumping my bag. "Are you going up to Howrah?"

"Who told you?" he growled like a grizzly bear snapping at a man trying to tease it, and concealed his face again – which in any case deserved to remain eclipsed by the file. In the meantime the train started moving.

I sat on the long seat away from him and tried to read a Jeeves omnibus. After a few pages, I felt it was time to have dinner and so removed the packet of idlis from my bag.

Since Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar had ordained that even it be nectar, one should not partake of it without sharing with guests, I asked him, "Sir, I am going to have dinner. How about you?" I had enough idlis to feed a platoon and so was ready to give him a few in case he had come dinner-less.

"You eat if you are hungry. Why are you bothering me?" he growled. After this onslaught, I dismissed him from my thoughts and climbed to the upper berth after a frugal dinner.

A superfast that roared past woke me up. It was midnight. I peered down. Mr Grizzly Bear was having his lavish dinner holding a stainless steel vessel close to his chest lest some miscreant should snatch it away. I rolled back and picked up my sleep.

When I woke up in the morning, the train was chugging over Krishna river bridge with a rhythmic, staccato clacking. Mr Grizzly Bear had gone, the door was ajar and the seat and floor were ornamented with a yellow lemon-rice-papad rangoli. Muttering under my breath, I requested the coach attendant to clean up the place and sat by the window, mercifully alone.

At Tadepalligudem, the train stopped. As I scanned the platform she came into my view; a woman of middle age sitting near the water tap, a white dog giving her and her hunger company, the sunlit tableau fit for capture by a lensman of Raghu Rai's calibre.

"Ikkada rama," I called her in passable Telugu and gave her the packet that held some idlis in stock. She came unhurriedly and took it as if receiving a south Indian thali in a five-star eatery. She thanked me with a flicker of a smile and went back to her place.

As I watched curiously, she washed her hands meticulously at the railway tap. After drying her hands, she took two idlis and fed her dog, patiently watching it eating. When it had had its fill, she brought water in a coconut shell and bade her companion to slurp.

Looking at me once more by way of thanksgiving, she ate the remaining two idlis without the hurry that hunger drives people to, pausing and enjoying every morsel. She then wiped the ground around her thoroughly with paper.

As the train began to pull out, the dog scrambled up, wagging its tail and barking in my direction. She stood up politely and soon vanished from my sight. Now, which one of them should be travelling first class in the journey of life?

An Autumn Of Happy Tidings

Amidst all the doom and gloom, it's all too easy to miss the positive signs for our economy

Chandrajit Banerjee

After a long period of perceived lack of movement on critical policy issues, last week saw some very positive movement, with the cabinet clearing the National Manufacturing Policy. This is a welcome move; India has been falling behind its peers in the competitiveness of its manufacturing sector. Without the sector's growth, it will not be possible to provide employment to the large additions to its labour force. Availability of land for industrial development together with a facilitative environment and adequate provisions for good quality infrastructure will encourage investments from the private sector.

Therefore, the cabinet clearance has given us much cause to cheer. As a close observer of this policy's progress, there is additional satisfaction in seeing that the various ministries have come together for a cause which is clearly in the overall interest of the country – particularly from the point of view of employment generation.

The week had some good news coming our way when the RBI decided to announce its intent to pause on rate hikes. The view across industry has been that the continuous hike in interest rates has only served to discourage growth and investment, without having much

impact on inflation. India is at a stage of development where transmission of monetary policy is weak, particularly if the intent is to contain inflation in food items and the like.

Instead, if certain policy reforms were to take place to encourage investment in key sectors such as food and agriculture, this would ease supply-side constraints and lead to some moderation in inflation. With the RBI expressing its concern on growth for the first time, there seems to be light at the end of the tunnel.

Another example of forward movement on policy issues is the progress made on the Companies Bill, which is

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awaiting final clearance in the cabinet after a few remaining differences are resolved. With a view to creating a flexible and less regulated framework, India is all set to replace the 55-year-old Companies Act, 1956 with the Bill. It is based on the need for structural change and modernisation of corporate



The engine that can propel India out of troubled waters

regulation commensurate with global standards.

Even on GST, which is considered to be most difficult to implement as it requires consensus across state and central governments, there is reason to be optimistic. From the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII)'s interaction with state governments, it seems what they are looking for is an assurance from the Centre that it will compensate them in case they suffer revenue losses and a water-tight formula for such compensation. This should not be so difficult; even the more fundamental intransigence that was on display earlier seems to be eroding. Of course, this is a subject on which one always runs the risk of being told later,

"You spoke too soon." But where's the harm in being a little optimistic in life?

However, much remains to be done; as the saying goes, one swallow does not a summer make. For instance, the problem being faced in the power sector poses an immediate threat to the country's economic outlook. On the one hand, the shortfall in coal production is leading to a lack of fuel availability for thermal power generation. On the other, escalating losses at state electricity boards are making it difficult for them to pay cost-reflective tariffs. CII is in active discussion with the relevant ministries to develop a conducive framework for competitive bidding of coal blocks and for the implementation of

distribution reforms.

Another area where the economy is facing a challenge is the persistently high level of inflation in food items. Here, as highlighted by the RBI, the problem persists despite record food production in the last two years. This is because the rise in prices is concentrated in items such as fruits and vegetables and eggs, meat and fish, which have experienced an increase in demand following changes in dietary patterns. An adequate supply response has been missing due to various bottlenecks in the distribution of these products. Policy action is required to reform agricultural marketing so that the retail food sector is consolidated, middlemen are eliminated and margins are slashed.

Clearly, the glass can be seen as half-full or half-empty depending on whether one is an optimist or a pessimist. It is time to break the negative feedback loop that tends to develop when all views converge towards pessimism. India still has strengths that will enable it to survive the global turmoil better than many other countries. Our policymakers are alive to the challenges of ruling a large and thriving democracy. As has been the experience in many critical situations earlier, I am confident that economic reforms will continue to take the country forward.

The writer is director general of Confederation of Indian Industry.

American fashion label launches designer rickshaws

Art not limited by canvas

The limited range of designer cycle rickshaws – each priced at Rs 1.07 lakh – by US-based fashion label Anthropologie needs to be seen for what it actually is: an interesting collection of applied art. That an American design label was inspired to produce its own version of decorative rickshaws bears testimony to the increasing cultural influence that India exerts on the western creative imagination. However, there has been criticism that the rickshaws represent a grotesque celebration of poverty. This couldn't be further from the truth. True, the cycle rickshaw is plied by thousands in the developing world to eke out a living. But art is governed by aesthetic qualities. In this case, it is the application of design elements to an object of everyday use.

The evolution of art over the 20th century was defined by the search for new artistic standards. Artistic styles such as Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism and Dadaism pushed the envelope in terms of form and media. Marcel Duchamp's iconic Fountain – a urinal signed R Mutt – showed how artistic values can be read

into everyday objects way back in 1917. In that sense, designer rickshaws are hardly outrageous. In fact, such rickshaws by Indian designers like Samant Chauhan, Rohit Bal and Manav Gangwani are known to have graced various fashion week venues. Nor is the concept revolutionary – ordinary rickshaws are

often decorated in a unique style, which has long been a subject of study.

Besides, so what if designer rickshaws are politically incorrect? Art has long thrived on political incorrectness. The rickshaw as a symbol of poverty is something that critics are reading into the three-wheeler. But just like horse-drawn carriages in the West, they could easily become a stylish mode of travel. Creating such alternative perceptions is the very aim of art.

Inspired by an India trip of their staff, the American fashion label Anthropologie has launched designer rickshaws. Offered at a price of Rs 1.07 lakh, these rickshaws come complete with batik designs and Hindi lettering. Given that western artists thrive on the business of presenting symbols of Indian poverty in a ster-



Don't glorify poverty

not only shown cultural insensitivity and made fun of the plight of rickshaw pullers, they have failed to appreciate the efforts of civil society organisations who fight for their dignified existence.

Further, to defend these rickshaws on environmental grounds is to deflect the central issue of exploitation at hand. There exists a plethora of other modes of transport which can take care of the problem. It only shows our inability to handle a sensitive subject like poverty with caution. We cannot expect the West and foreigners to be sensitive about depicting India and its problems, but at least we should not support agendas that make a mockery of our poverty.

COUNTERVIEW

ecotypical and narrow-minded manner, this so-called fashion makeover of cycle rickshaws comes as yet another crude attempt to render poverty exotic and peddle poverty porn.

For starters cycle rickshaws, even though widely used as a means of transport and conveyance, are a vicious mani-

festation of rampant poverty in this part of the world. The life of a regular rickshaw puller is unspeakably hard. The most extreme example of this is Kolkata's hand rickshaws pulled by human beings. Not only are most rickshaw pullers victims of high daily rental fees, many of them fail to own a rickshaw in their lifetimes. By launching an exorbitantly priced rickshaw, the designers at Anthropologie have

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SNAP JUDGMENT



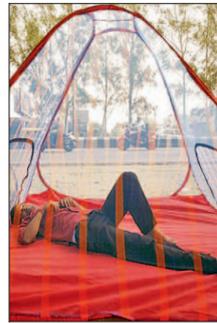
The Northeast's Voice

Bhupen Hazarika's success highlighted, in a paradoxical way, just how great the cultural void he filled was. By bringing the music of the northeast to the mainstream, he bridged – in one way, at least – the gulf that has been at the heart of so many of the region's problems. Hazarika's voice may be stilled now, but hopefully that synthesis can continue after his death.



Birthdays Aren't Evil

Darul Uloom Deoband has made a number of positive moves over the past few years, such as issuing fatwas against terrorism. That is why its directing Muslims now not to celebrate birthdays because it would be against Sharia is disappointing. Its logic that such celebrations are a western imposition is retrograde. In the modern world cultural identity is strengthened, not weakened, by interacting with other cultures.



Another Great Wall

For those fearing dengue and malaria, here's good news – Columbia University scientists have developed a mosquito-repelling 'laser wall', a cone of light surrounding sleeping people, fending off mosquitoes flying around the luminous barrier. Hopefully, this great wall should prove more impene-trable than a plain mosquito net. But could keeping the lights on lead to another hazard, uncomfortable too in the bargain – sleep deprivation?

SACRED SPACE

Heal Yourself

Healing ourselves on the spiritual level involves developing a strong connection with our soul. We heal ourselves on the mental level as we become aware of our core beliefs, release those that limit us, and open to more supportive ideas and greater understanding. Emotional healing takes place as we learn to accept and experience the full range of our feelings. And we heal ourselves on the physical level when we learn to honour and care for our bodies, and for the physical world around us.

Shakti Gwain

It's far more important to know what person the disease has than what disease the person has.

Hippocrates

In ancient Greece, dreams were used to provide cures for ailments through divine power. The Greeks called this practice egkoiimesis, and the Romans incubatio.

Necati Alkan

Zero, Mathematics And Consciousness

Shri Ashutosh Maharaj

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, sage Yagyavalkya was asked by his pupils to explain the nature of Brahmn, Universal Consciousness. The sage replied: "Neti Neti – neither This nor That – such is Brahmn."

This definition sounds enigmatic. But within this mysterious concept lies the profound philosophy of existence, which can be understood in terms of mathematics. If we look for a mathematical numeral equivalent to the Upanishadic 'Neti Neti', it is zero, because zero is neither This nor That; it is neither positive nor negative. Therefore, the Vedas proclaim: "Aum Kham Brahmn", meaning Brahmn is shunya or zero! Hence Brahmn = 0.

Literally, it seems zero is nothingness. However, from an elemental perspective, it is not so. Otherwise 10s and 1,000s, would have never been quantified. The figures would have remained simply '1'! A zero placed before the numeral '1' would not have added value to it.

According to Panini, zero is "Adarshanam Lopah". It indicates an entity that does exist, but it is invisible. Zero, therefore, represents a mysterious element that has an unseen and unfathomable existence.

In the Chandogya Upanishad, sage Udyalak asks his son Shvetketu to cut the seed of a fruit of a banyan tree into two halves. "Could you see anything inside it?" Shvetketu replies, "I can see nothing in it." The sage remarks, "What you call as nothing is actually the source of everything. From this shunya springs a huge banyan Tree." From shunya or absolute zero springs the entire Universe. Zero is unmanifest Brahmn.

Look at the other perspective of zero. We know that the value of a standalone zero remains unmanifest. It gets manifested or

quantified only when it combines itself with other numerals. Similarly, Brahmn alone remains avyakta or unmanifest. It is only in unison with matter that it manifests itself. Only then, nirguna, the unmanifest, becomes saguna, the manifest, quantifiable or qualitative. A couplet says, "Brahmn bole kaya ke ole" – Brahmn reveals its presence in the guise of matter; just as zero reveals its presence in the presence of other integers.

Zero is neutral. It never adds charge to an integer. It simply quantifies the integer combined with it, be it a positive or negative one. If it is combined with -1, it quantifies it to -10; with +1, it makes it +10.

Quite analogous to it is the nature of Brahmn. It is nirguna, neutral. But at the same time, it is the universal energy, the consciousness that drives or quantifies all our actions; the whole existence. If we employ it with negative mental propensity, it leads to wrong actions or destruction; with positive mindset, it leads to goodness or construction.

The barriers running between the two realms – academics and spirituality – could be mitigated to some extent after pondering over the above-mentioned aspects. However, it is also true that the theoretical integration of spirituality with any secular knowledge cannot reap fruits unless spirituality is realised and experienced in person. Who is Brahmn? What is Universal Consciousness? What is the absolute zero or shunya state in terms of spirituality? Neither theory nor language alone can answer these questions. They are the subject of Self-experience through the Third Eye. Krishna says spirituality is sovereign knowledge, the secret of all things, meant to be experienced and practised.

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EDIT PAGE MAILBOX



The foreign hand

The article 'The Swiss Bank Myth' (November 1) by Ashok Malik has rightly pointed out that the obnoxiously overpriced property business has been contributing a major share to the black money kitty for the past two decades. The tax authorities and our politicians cannot feign ignorance of this fact. They are also aware that the municipal organisations, aided by the state bureaucracy, encourage illegalities in building constructions to enjoy a slice of the black money pie running into thousands of crores of rupees. The writer is bang on that ridding the domestic economy of black money should take precedence over how to get back money in Swiss banks, which in any case will be a long haul. It would be simpler to choke the very source of creation of black money.

Shashank Bendre, VIA EMAIL

Fuel for thought

With reference to the Snap Judgment 'Stoking Inflation' (November 5), the hike in petrol prices has come as a bolt from the blue. It needs no further elaboration that the worst affected is the aam admi. Statistically, this is the second upward revision in petrol prices in less than two months and the 13th since petrol prices were deregulated in June 2010. It will have a cascading effect on the economy. It is time we follow a uniform tax structure across the country to relieve the difficulties faced by harried citizens. For starters, fuel-guzzling vehicles should be phased out at least in government offices and vehicle manufacturers focus on inventing fuel-efficient engines. The government should also encourage electric vehicles to mitigate the level of pollution by offering liberal incentives.

HP Murali, BANGALORE

We want your views and comments. Please write to us at speakoutedit@timesgroup.com