



THE TIMES OF INDIA

Date: 01-01-19

How to fix our inverted public health pyramid

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Ever wondered why our government hospitals look like homeless shelters? Why are there so many people sleeping in their corridors? Do we have too few hospitals? Or too few doctors? The reasons are aplenty; one of the main ones is the poor realisation of a theoretically sound policy. India's current public health set-up is often traced to the Bhore committee of 1946. The committee's continued relevance signifies its foresight, and our inability to achieve its recommendations. For instance, it recommended setting up 75-bedded hospitals for a population of 10,000 to 20,000. The bed to population ratio, 70 years later, is 9 per 10,000.

The three-tiered government health centre model that forms the core of the National Health Mission (NHM), has evolved from the committee's recommendations. There is a base of sub-centres (SC; covering 3,000 to 5,000 people) and primary health centres (PHC; covering 20,000 to 30,000 people) which are the first points of contact for the patient with the government health system. These centres are capable of a basic set of services, which includes conducting normal (vaginal) deliveries.

If the patient's needs are beyond the services available, she is referred to a higher centre which houses specialists. These community health centres (CHC) cover 80,000 to 1,20,000 people, and have a physician, a gynaecologist, a surgeon, and a paediatrician. For even more complicated procedures and diseases, the patient is further referred to district hospitals (DH; also called tertiary centres). This system of graded care with referral linkages helps to bring health and medical care close to a patient's home and ensures timely treatment.

The network of this infrastructure comprises 1.5 lakh SC, 25,000 PHC, 5,600 CHC and 760 DH. This still falls short of the population norms mentioned above, by 19-30%. While the brick-and-mortar gap should be plugged, it is worthwhile to take stock of whether these 2 lakh institutions are working efficiently. If they were, our public health pyramid would not currently be balancing on its tip.

Studies show that more than 50% of patients at tertiary centres are only in need of primary care. One can also use this inverted pyramid to partially explain why so many patients choose to visit quacks, euphemistically referred to as rural medical practitioners (abbreviated as RMP, which is also the abbreviation for legitimate medical doctors: registered medical practitioners). The latest round of National Family Health Survey 2015-16 which had a sample of 5.7 lakh households, shows that the most common reasons for non-availing of services at government health centres are poor quality of services, no nearby health facility, and long waiting lines.

To address these issues, firstly, the public healthcare system in India needs to build a reputation for credibility. SCs are being transformed to health and wellness centres (HWCs) under the Ayushman Bharat programme. This transformation will entail a reorientation of SC from beyond the historic focus on reproductive and child health (deliveries, immunisation, childhood diarrhoea and pneumonia) to

include non-communicable diseases, oral health, emergency medical care, etc. Measures to improve service delivery and not merely expanding its ambit are critical. A strong foundation of first-point-of-contact centres will lessen the burden on specialist hospitals where much time and money are wasted.

Secondly, a humble acknowledgement of the limitations of the public healthcare sector needs to be made and an assessment of the complementarities of the private sector should be done. While Niti Aayog has been encouraging states to take up a PPP model for setting up hospitals, the regulatory environment must also incentivise more single doctor clinics to plug the rural-urban inequality.

Thirdly, technology has been tested to improve access and its quality. Tata Trusts and the Karnataka government put forth the 'Digital Nerve Centre' which merges the last two suggestions. It uses tele-medicine, video-conferencing and e-appointments systems to improve patients' experience. While there may be limitations in its scalability, such innovative interventions need to be tried out across the country. With government spending on health stagnating at 1% of GDP, capacity building of the existing institutional framework will be a challenge. Much hinges on creating an ecosystem of partnership and innovation which brings to the fore a renewed vigour for improving India's healthcare system.

Date: 01-01-19

Eight Things India Must Do In 2019

The economic challenges we face and the reforms we need to carry out now

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Last October thirteen of us, all economists, got together in the hope that as the country gears up for elections, we could start a conversation by identifying a set of policy ideas that might help inform party manifestoes and policy visions. While our views stretch across the spectrum from right to left, we found surprising agreement on the challenges India faces and reforms it needs now. Two of us sifted through the set of ideas, picking what we felt were the top challenges and proposals to address them.

As we see it, rethinking government is key. Government capacity is limited. We need to target it better while trying to enhance it. Stability in government policy is important so that our farmers and firms can plan better, and markets can play a more effective role. Cooperative federalism, Centre and states working together and learning from each other, is essential.

1. The massive aggregate fiscal deficit of the states and Centre combined leaves fewer, costlier, resources for private investment. We should aim to hit the FRBM-suggested 5% by 2023, but not by creative accounting or off-balance sheet transactions. Instead, we must increase revenues, both through better compliance and more progressive taxation, and target spending better. State deficits have grown, partly because markets assume that the Centre will bail out over-extended states and therefore do not charge them higher interest rates. To incentivise better behaviour, any state's borrowing above agreed limits should be funded through

special bonds that are explicitly free of any federal guarantee. A Centre-state council modelled on the successful GST council could supervise fiscal federalism.

2. Three sectors that are distressed today are agriculture, power, and banking, despite massive past government intervention, and often because of it. For example, periodic export bans and large-scale imports to keep food inflation down have radically moved the terms of trade against agriculture, while reducing the farmer's ability to plan. Cheap or free power to farmers have depleted the water table to the point of disaster. Farmers do need assistance. However, the instruments used – loan waivers, inflated MSPs without adequate procurement, and input price subsidies – often exacerbate the problem. In addition to enhancing investment in new technologies and irrigation, a government move towards lump sum payments to farmers for holding below a certain limit, in the spirit of Telangana's Rythu Bandhu scheme, will be an improvement. Similarly, distressed state-owned power distribution companies stand between power producers who want to sell more and consumers who want more reliable power. The solutions are well-known – better metering, less distorted pricing of both power as well as energy inputs, and the use of new, cleaner technologies for distributed production and decentralising distribution. All these require rethinking the government's role, as will any sustainable solution to banking sector distress.
3. We need a better business environment – whether to create the jobs for those leaving agriculture, urban schools, or our universities, or to ramp up our woefully inadequate exports. We need to learn from state experiences about what works in areas like land acquisition, industrial regulation, provision of power and logistics, and environmental clearances. A Centre-State Productivity Council can be useful for this; such a Council could revive the idea of Special Economic Zones where coordinated land, environmental clearances and transportation infrastructure are available on a "plug-in" basis. Such zones, not necessarily targeted at exports, may also be used to experiment with reforms such as changes in labour laws before an all-India roll-out, to provide the evidence needed to build consensus for them.
4. Sustainable growth requires more effective but less burdensome regulation. Our cities are choking and climate change is upon us. Municipalities need the powers and funding to deal with these challenges, which means more decentralisation. In other areas, we need more centralisation: for instance, a new and technically beefed up environmental regulator, combining powers that are currently with multiple bodies, setting fees based on careful analysis of tradeoffs, and enforcing them.
5. Government has to provide for benefits, but is not always best suited to deliver them. To reduce the implementation burden and free up its ability to take on new challenges, government should move towards cash transfers. As a first step, beneficiaries of all specific government subsidy programmes should have the choice between cash transfers and benefits in kind. Many of our challenges also have to do with enhancing the capabilities of our people.
6. We need more skilled personnel in government – at higher levels in technical areas like digitisation, trade negotiation, and environmental regulation but also at lower levels outside the larger cities. More lateral entrants, merging into the permanent civil service, are desirable near the top. At lower levels, too many youth waste years taking competitive exams for government jobs that most will never get. One alternative that will give them skills and work experience is a multi-year paid government internship at salaries comparable to entry level market wages (much less than what the government pays) for those under 26 to work as support staff in government offices/ public sector enterprises where needed. Performance on these could help entry into permanent government jobs, though political pressure to make these internships permanent should be resisted.
7. The Right to Education Act focusses on input requirements for schools that have little bearing on learning outcomes, which have deteriorated alarmingly. Learning must be our central focus, with all schools, public and private, responsible for delivering a minimum level of basic skills to every child. Bringing those falling behind up to par through remedial teaching will be critical.
8. We must address the coming explosion of Non-Communicable Diseases, which will require engagement with the frontline providers. The vast majority of these have no formal qualifications, but the evidence suggests they can be trained and pushed towards practising better medicine. Since they have the patients' ears, the health system should use them better rather than ignoring them.

THE ECONOMIC TIMES

Date: 01-01-19

Bravo Sheikh Hasina! Welcome Continuity

ET Editorials

The landslide victory of Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League in Sunday's national elections in Bangladesh is good news for the region. As Bangladesh's prime minister for the third continuous term, Sheikh Hasina needs to continue with the policies that have ensured stability and economic growth, although the strong-arm measures that give the discredited Opposition the chance to cry foul were eminently avoidable. The results of the Bangladesh elections are significant for India as well. New Delhi must continue to partner with Bangladesh, deepening the ties to ensure regional development, security and cooperation.

The Awami League government in Dhaka has flushed out Islamic insurgents. The shrinking political presence of the Bangladesh National Party, which backs Islamists, will ensure that the country becomes far less hospitable to Islamists either in transit or seeking refuge. Hasina's political success, while essaying a closer relationship with India, was underpinned by continued economic growth.

Bangladesh has overtaken Pakistan in per-capita income and pressed its total fertility rate below the replacement level of 2.1, a performance superior to that of most north Indian states. Sheikh Hasina's electoral victory is important for New Delhi in the context of countering China's influence in the region. India must continue to partner Bangladesh in its economic growth: encouraging Indian companies to invest, and working together in climate change, terrorism, migration and energy. One area that the two countries need to address is cross-border migration — there is a need for a legal framework that will allow people to live and work in the two countries. This will address the concern over illegal migration to India that should not mar the strengthening Indo-Bangla ties.

बिज़नेस स्टैंडर्ड

Date: 01-01-19

संस्थान ही सर्वोच्च

संपादकीय

भारत नए साल में प्रवेश कर रहा है लिहाजा वर्ष 2019 में देश के लिए दांव पर लगाने वाले सभी पक्षों पर गौर करना लाजिमी है। इसमें संदेह नहीं है कि यह भारतीय इतिहास के सबसे परिणामपरक साल में से एक होगा। अगले आम चुनाव का नतीजा न केवल अगले पांच वर्षों तक बल्कि उसके बाद के दशकों में भी भारत को आकार देता रहेगा। कई तरह से वक्त बीतता जा रहा है। भारत के लिए जनसंख्या से जुड़े लाभ लेने का मौका बीत रहा है। अगर भारत के कस्बों एवं गांवों में बड़े हो रहे युवा शिक्षित नहीं हो रहे या कौशल नहीं विकसित करते हैं तो ऐसा दिख पाना मुश्किल है कि

भारत कभी भी एक अच्छा मध्यवर्गीय समाज बन पाएगा। अगर देश की आर्थिक रीढ़ उद्यमशीलता को सक्षम बनाने, निवेश के संरक्षण और बड़े उद्यमों को बढ़ावा देने की पहल नहीं होती है तो भारत व्यापक स्तर पर रोजगार मुहैया करा पाने का आखिरी मौका भी गंवा देगा।

सबसे बड़ी बात, अगर यह अपने संस्थानों को संरक्षित नहीं करता है और हाल में अपनी विश्वसनीयता गंवा चुके संस्थानों में नई जान नहीं फूंक पाता है तो उदार उम्मीदों के ध्वजवाहक के तौर पर इसका दशकों पुराना दर्जा खत्म हो जाएगा। अभी खत्म हुआ साल भारतीय लोकतंत्र के आधार-स्तंभ माने जाने वाले संस्थानों के लिहाज से अच्छा नहीं रहा है। साल की शुरुआत उच्चतम न्यायालय के चार वरिष्ठतम न्यायाधीशों के अभूतपूर्व संवाददाता सम्मेलन से हुई थी जिसमें तत्कालीन मुख्य न्यायाधीश के कुछ कदमों के खिलाफ असहमति सार्वजनिक रूप से जाहिर की गई। समय बीतने के साथ अन्य संस्थानों ने भी खुद को मलीन होते हुए देखा। केंद्रीय जांच ब्यूरो के शीर्ष नेतृत्व की आपसी खींचतान सार्वजनिक होने के बाद समूचा नेतृत्व निलंबित कर दिया गया। भारतीय रिजर्व बैंक को भी गैर-निष्पादित परिसंपत्तियों के निपटान और अपने आरक्षित कोष के मुद्दे पर केंद्र के अधिकारियों और नेताओं के दखल का सामना करना पड़ा। वृहद स्तर के साथ ही सूक्ष्म स्तर पर भी संस्थानों का पराभव देखा गया। उत्तर प्रदेश में एक पुलिस अधिकारी की भीड़ के हाथों हुई हत्या ने यह खुलासा कर दिया कि मुख्य भूभाग में भी संस्थानों का रसूख किस कदर कम हुआ है।

भारतीय राज्य के जमीनी स्तर पर सक्रिय अंगों- पुलिस से लेकर निचली न्यायपालिका तक, की प्रभावहीनता और जवाबदेही की कमी ने संस्थानों का रसूख कम किया है। पुलिस एवं न्यायिक सुधारों की दिशा में लंबे समय से काम नहीं हुआ है। कोई भी देश सशक्त, प्रभावी एवं अखंड संस्थानों के बगैर महानता की आकांक्षा नहीं रख सकता है। कोई भी देश स्वतंत्र, पारदर्शी और उत्तरदायी संस्थानों के बगैर एक उदार लोकतंत्र नहीं बना रह सकता है। लिहाजा भारत के लिए वर्ष 2019 में चुनौतियां गंभीर होंगी। इस दौरान अहम संस्थान भारतीय चुनाव आयोग को भी कमर कसनी होगी। चुनाव आयोग पर पिछले दशकों के सबसे कटु एवं बेहद कड़े मुकाबले वाले चुनाव की निगरानी का जिम्मा होगा। आयोग को यह काम ऐसे समय में करना होगा जब भारत समेत दुनिया भर में चुनावी प्रक्रिया की शुद्धता पर सवाल खड़े हुए हैं। यह काम उस आयोग के लिए भी असाधारण रूप से मुश्किल है जो भारत जैसे जटिल देश में स्वतंत्र, निष्पक्ष एवं पारदर्शी चुनाव कराने का काम दशकों से करता आ रहा है। भारत के नेताओं के साथ यहां के मतदाताओं को भी कुछ कड़े फैसले लेने होंगे।

उदार लोकतंत्र के संस्थान प्रायः अवरोधक या विरोधाभासी रूप से अलोकतांत्रिक नजर आ सकते हैं। लेकिन ऐसे हालात एक ऐसी व्यवस्था के उप-उत्पाद हैं जिसके विकास ने हरेक नागरिक को एक आवाज दी है और जो सामाजिक अनुबंध के विघटन को भी रोकती है। अगर भारत मजबूत एवं स्वतंत्र संस्थाओं के बगैर रहने का फैसला करता है तो उसे एक दोयम दर्जे के भविष्य के लिए भी तैयार रहने का निर्णय लेना होगा। यह एक ऐसा चयन है जिसे 2019 में करना ही होगा।

प्रियदर्शन, टेलीविजन पत्रकार

क्या इतिहास है कि साल के आखिरी हफ्ते पूर्व प्रधानमंत्री मनमोहन सिंह के कार्यकाल के बारे में संजय बारू की किताब द एक्सिडेंटल प्राइम मिनिस्टर पर बनी फिल्म को लेकर कांग्रेस के कुछ नेता सवाल उठा रहे हैं, तो साल के बिल्कुल शुरू में पद्मावत को लेकर बीजेपी के नेताओं ने हंगामा किया था। यह शायद कांग्रेस की बदली हुई संस्कृति का असर है कि द एक्सिडेंटल प्राइम मिनिस्टर के विवाद को एक हद से ज्यादा हवा नहीं दी गई। मध्य प्रदेश में इस पर पाबंदी की बात अफवाह साबित हुई। हालांकि पिछले साल मधुर भंडारकर की फिल्म द इंदु सरकार पर कांग्रेस के ऐतराज तीखे थे।

बहरहाल, पद्मावत व द एक्सिडेंटल प्राइम मिनिस्टर के बीच ऐसी कई फिल्में रहीं, जिनको तरह-तरह की असहमतियों का सामना करना पड़ा। दिसंबर में ही रिलीज हुई फिल्म केदारनाथ को उत्तराखंड के सिनेमाघरों में दिखाने नहीं दिया गया। यह संदेह अन्यथा नहीं है कि फिल्म का विरोध बस इसलिए किया गया कि वह उत्तराखंड में विकास के नाम पर चल रही पर्यावरण की विनाशलीला की ओर ध्यान खींचती है, वरना फिल्म में ऐसा कुछ नहीं है, जिससे उत्तराखंड में किसी सामाजिक-धार्मिक मर्यादा को चोट पहुंचती हो।

दरअसल, 2018 में बेसब्री और असहिष्णुता का वह प्याला कुछ और छलकता नजर आया, जिसके कुछ छींटे पिछले वर्षों में उड़ते दिखे। सिनेमा, साहित्य और संस्कृति पर इसकी छाया तरह-तरह से पड़ती रहीं। साल के अंत में ही नसीरुद्दीन शाह के वक्तव्य को लेकर जो तीखी प्रतिक्रिया दिखी और जिस तरह अजमेर साहित्य समारोह में उनके कार्यक्रम का विरोध हुआ, वह इसी असहिष्णुता की पुष्टि करता रहा। उनका वक्तव्य सुने बिना उन्हें विदेश जाने की नसीहत दी जाने लगी। यह अलग बात है कि अजमेर में एक अलग जगह पर उनके कार्यक्रम का आयोजन हुआ और उसी समारोह में लोगों ने हंगामा करने वालों की जमकर खबर भी ली।

साहित्य और संस्कृति की दुनिया में यह हड़बड़ाई हुई प्रतिगामी किस्म की हिंसक प्रतिक्रिया मौजूदा समय के राजनीतिक-सामाजिक टकरावों की कोख से निकली है। जिस धार्मिक-सामाजिक मूल्यबोध पर पहले समाज और संस्कृति में बहस होती, उस पर अपने वोटों के हिसाब से राजनीति फैसले कर रही है। इसमें दबंग और आक्रामक बहुसंख्यकवाद हावी दिख रहा है। गोरक्षा से लेकर लव जेहाद और तीन तलाक तक के मामले मूलतः सामाजिक-सांस्कृतिक हैं, लेकिन वे अपने राजनीतिक प्रतिफलन से इस तरह जोड़ दिए गए हैं कि उन्हें अलग से देखना, उन पर बहस करना संभव नहीं रहा।

लोहिया कहा करते थे कि राजनीति अल्पकालिक धर्म है, जबकि धर्म दीर्घकालीन राजनीति। हमारे वक्त की रफ्तार इतनी तेज है कि लोहिया के समय की दीर्घकालिकता त्वरित प्रतिक्रियावाद में बदली हुई है और धर्म सीधे राजनीति का उपकरण है। साहित्य और संस्कृति की प्रक्रियाएं उससे स्वायत्त होते हुए भी कई बार उसकी अनुगामिनी दिखाई पड़ती हैं।

इस साल एक और प्रवृत्ति पिछले वर्षों से कहीं ज्यादा बड़े विस्तार की तरह सामने आई। कुछ बरस पहले जयपुर में साहित्य समारोह के साथ जो नई परंपरा शुरू हुई, वह अब समारोहों की बारिश या बाढ़ में बदल गई है। जयपुर में इस साल एक ही साथ तीन समारोह चलते दिखे। दिलचस्प यह था कि जेएलएफ के विरोध में या उसके समांतर शुरू हुए इन समारोहों में कुछ लेखक ऐसे थे, जो सभी मंचों पर आते-जाते रहे। इसके अलावा, देश के तमाम छोटे-बड़े शहरों में समारोहों की झड़ी लगी रही। मुंबई और दिल्ली से लेकर पटना, लखनऊ, देहरादून, बरेली, कानपुर से लेकर गुवाहाटी, भुवनेश्वर तक न जाने कितने साहित्य समारोह और पुस्तक मेले सजते रहे और हिंदी लेखक खुशी-खुशी इनमें शिरकत

करते देखे गए। सोशल मीडिया की दुनिया एक तरफ इन समारोहों की तस्वीरों से पटी रही, तो इन पर उठाए जा रहे सवालों से भी भरी रही। इसके अलावा रेख्ता के नाम पर जश्ने-रेख्ता व जश्ने-अदब के नाम से कई कार्यक्रम चलते रहे।

क्या इतने सारे समारोहों ने साहित्य और संस्कृति को कुछ जनप्रिय बनाया? क्या कुछ लेखकों को ऐसी बड़ी पहचान मिली, जिससे वे खुद को जनता का लेखक मान पाएं? इस सवाल का जवाब कुछ उदास करने वाला है। ज्यादातर साहित्य समारोहों में फिल्मी सितारों, खिलाड़ियों, नेताओं, टीवी एंकरों और कुछ जाने-पहचाने चेहरों को सबसे ज्यादा अहमियत दी गई। उन समारोहों का प्रचार उन्हीं चर्चित हस्तियों के इर्द-गिर्द किया जाता रहा, जबकि लेखकों को हाशिए पर छोड़ दिया गया। निस्संदेह, इन समारोहों में लेखकों के हिस्से आए कुछ सत्र रचनात्मक भी रहे होंगे, लेकिन वे बस पूरी समारोह-योजना में चुटकी भर चटनी बराबर थे।

इस सांस्कृतिक समय में पहली बार सोशल मीडिया पर अफवाह की विराट होती संस्कृति को लेकर चिंता भी दिखी और सक्रियता भी। पर यह समझ अभी विकसित होनी बाकी है कि अफवाह की इस संस्कृति का वास्ता राजनीतिक-सांस्कृतिक वर्चस्व को बनाए रखने की एक वैचारिक कोशिश से भी है। तो एक तरफ पाबंदी की बढ़ती संस्कृति, दूसरी तरफ समारोहप्रियता से निकले साहित्यिक आयोजन, और तीसरी तरफ अफवाह की लगातार मजबूत होती संस्कृति- क्या इन बंटे हुए शीशों में हमारे समय के साहित्य का कोई मुकम्मल चेहरा बनता है?

इसमें शक नहीं कि तमाम समारोहों और बंदिशों के बावजूद हिंदी जैसे साबित करती रही कि वह अंततः प्रतिरोध की भाषा है। पत्र-पत्रिकाओं, समांतर आयोजनों में और सोशल मीडिया पर यह प्रतिरोध खूब दिखा। सच तो यह है कि अब पत्र-पत्रिकाएं पीछे छूट गई हैं और सोशल मीडिया जैसे साहित्य की मुख्य धारा बनता और बनाता जा रहा है। पत्र-पत्रिकाओं की रचनाएं भी सोशल मीडिया पर आकर नई बहस में ढलती रही हैं। इस बरस भी कुछ आक्रामक बहसें चलीं, कुछ क्रांतिकारी मुद्राएं अखितयार की गईं, कुछ निजी हिसाब-किताब चुकाए गए, कुछ बदगुमानी से भरे आरोप लगाए गए और कई सदाशयता से भरी बधाइयां दी गईं। इन सबके बीच साहित्य और संस्कृति की अपनी गतिशीलता और प्राणवत्ता बनी रही और यह उम्मीद भी कि अंततः रचनाशीलता सारे आघातों के बावजूद बची रहेगी और अपनी एक समानांतर शक्ति बचाए रखेगी।

What The Women Believe

At Sabarimala, their religious beliefs have come to the fore.

P S Nirmala , [The writer is a former journalist]

Before getting to the Sabarimala imbroglio that the Marxist-led government faces in god's own country, we need an answer to a sensitive question: Is the "Makaravilakku" phenomenon — the "celestial light" that appears above the skies of Sabarimala on a particular day — man-made or not? Is it true that the Kerala State Electricity Board spends a lot of money and labour to create this "divine" visual which

enthral millions of devotees coming from Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Tamil Nadu? If this is so, is not that, in very simple terms, a betrayal of the people by the government? Why would any Marxist government continue this act of cheating millions?

Decades ago, Sabarimala was a serene temple. In the misty mornings of December and January, devotees wearing black carried the imaginary double-load of their papa-punya as bundles on their head, trekked to the temple all the way through forests. Self-realisation was the motto. Even the revolutionary Malayalam poet, Vayalar Ramavarma, had sung about the pilgrims' quest: "We come to your doorstep, Ayyappa/With the heaviness of our good and bad karmas".

River Pampa had pristine water then. When it was cold (though Kerala can never be as cold as the north), the devotees would dip in the river and continue their journey to the temple. And at the doorstep of the Absolute, they would leave the heaviness of their hearts — the papas and punyas of all their karmas — and would descend with a clean slate. With time, Pampa lost her pristine nature. This was the impact of a kind of Sabarimala tourism. It started attracting a lot of pilgrims from neighbouring states; money started flowing in. The cash-strapped government sat up and took notice. The state, which could never depend on industrial growth, was always looking for other areas of resources. Pilgrimage became tourism.

The yearning for a stone bench, to unload one's heaviness of existence, is an absolute necessity for man. But it underwent some transformation too. The new way is, indulgence as much as possible, and then look for redemption. Everything is in flux in the style of Heraclitus. Life is short, enjoy it in the Epicurean line. Then there is this fear of the unknown in the subconscious mind as a back drop, which makes one look for redemption.

Why did Sabarimala become such a draw, in the south at least? There is an obvious romantic halo about the whole thing. The non-indulgence you vow for 40 days is a challenge — challenges have their own charm. There is no denying that people have become more religious everywhere, thanks to the decline and fall of Marxist ideology. This is so in Kerala as well, the state which never wore religion on its sleeve. There are socio-political and economic reasons for this. Most of those who migrated to the Gulf, the US and elsewhere in the early period were Muslims and Christians. They were economically weak and did not possess a belief system which restricted them from doing so. The Hindus, in the 1960s, were generally reluctant to migrate for jobs. The impact of this was that moderately educated Christians and Muslims working in foreign countries started earning much more, and their remittances caused a disparity in the society. Just see how many new churches with state-of-the-art architecture have come up in the state in the last few decades. Their affluence and the ostentation led to a solidification of the Hindu mind in the state under the veil of secularism. That the Hindus, too, shed their resistance to going abroad and earning is the later part of the story.

There occurred a solidification of religious feelings, beneath the proclaimed secularism of the state and it was strengthened by the fall of Marxism internationally. An average Malayali prefers to live local, but tends to think in international terms. Precisely because of this there is hope. A common man in Kerala is, by and large, secular in his thoughts. But now comes a grave situation involving the hitherto docile, dormant section of the population — the women. Do Kerala women stand behind their religions?

From the indications we have received till now, they are solidly behind their own religions. Call it a conservative state of mind or being regressive, but they would not like a court to intervene in their faith or related customs. They would not want any man to do "ponkala" at the Attukal temple, where it is an all-women affair. This does not mean that they are intolerant to other religions. But they do not want to

desecrate the customs of a men-only-allowed temple. They do not consider this a revolution. The ones who caught the tiger's tail, of course, are the state's Marxists. It is so sweet, this court verdict, that they cannot spit it out; and it is so bitter, this court verdict, they cannot swallow it. And for the BJP, it is the pleasure of an elephant in a garden of sugarcane.
