

Development over-riding divides in Indian Democracy: Ideas India 2009

Continuing with the typical interactive format, the afternoon session of Day 1 of Ideas India 2009, organized by Aspen Institute India from 17-19 December in New Delhi, covered a range of diverse topics including elections, healthcare, education, and naxalism.

The plenary session 'Do Elections in India Reinforce Narrow Divides?' touched upon whether India's democratic processes perpetuated identity politics. It was moderated by Mr Pramit Pal Chaudhuri, Senior Editor, Hindustan Times and the panelists included Mr Manish Tewari, MP and spokesperson for Congress party, Dr NK Singh, Rajya Sabha MP, Prof Sumantra Bose, Professor of International and Comparative Politics, London School of Economics, and Dr Pratap Bhanu Mehta, President, Center for Policy Research.

Fifteen general elections have been held since 1952, pointed out Mr Tewari, and resulted in national mandates upto 1984. After a period of identity politics, national mandates are again trending in the last two elections. Voters primarily want efficacious delivery of public goods, he added. Dr Singh felt that states which have moved towards larger market economies have fewer divides. Prof Bose stated that the electoral process in India is in the early stages of transition from identity to performance-based voting. Democracy is a synthesizing force and not a fragmenting force as Indian democracy now is stronger and better than in early years, said Dr Mehta.

However, it is necessary that democracy give political expression to communities, and democracy by its very nature is contentious. The menu of choices to the voter must expand in terms of ideological options. Identity-based parties proliferate due to lack of intra-party processes and high entry barriers. Questions from the audience covered issues relating to greater representation of youth, too many political parties, and women's participation, among others.

The session 'The Right to Education: is Volunteerism the way forward?' addressed the potential of volunteers as teachers since the Right to Education Act is constrained by acute shortage of teachers in government schools. Experts in the education field Mrs Manju Bharat Ram, Founder and Chairperson of Managing Committee, The Sri Ram Schools, Dr YS Rajan, Principal Advisor, Confederation of Indian Industry, and Mr Anand Shah, Co-founder Indicorps, addressed the session.

The main concern with volunteerism is whether unqualified teachers can do the job or if formal training is necessary. The panel agreed that more than any formal training, a passion for teaching is important. It was also agreed that some remuneration to meet basic requirements may be necessary to attract volunteers.

The main hindrance to volunteerism is psychological. Therefore, it is important to give the volunteer a sense of prestige. It was pointed out that in the past many educational schemes had been started in India with voluntary action. However, of late, the significance of community action has declined. Government can play an important role by providing short term training to the teachers and to the volunteers. Also, the rigidities in teacher recruitments and several entry barriers in teaching profession need to be eased.

Speaking at the session on "How Can Health Care Service Delivery Become More Efficient?", moderated by Dr Sudha Iyer, Chairperson and Managing Director of Haritas Health Services, the panelists - Dr AK Mukherjee, Director General, Indian Spinal Injuries Centre; Mr Alkesh

Wadhvani; Deputy Director, Avahan India (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation); Bhavdeep Singh, CEO, Fortis Healthcare Limited; and Ramnik Ahuja, Indian Business Trust for HIV/AIDS - presented a multitude of ideas that could improve the healthcare situation in India.

Given that government as well as private sector spending on healthcare is much below the World Healthcare Organisation (WHO) recommended standards, there is a pressing need for greater investments in healthcare services, education and infrastructure. Further, an insurance model for rural areas needs to be created for affordability, and a management structure needs to be put in place for oversight. Efficiency can be improved by considering the requirements and measuring results relatively, rather than in absolute numbers. NGOs also play a key role in the healthcare service delivery model in rural areas.

While there do exist multiple problems pertaining to healthcare, there also exist simple solutions. The challenge India faces is to scale up those solutions. The industry, in an effort to expand on tried and tested solutions, has been participating in healthcare delivery services, not only as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs but as a partner in national public-private partnership programs. A healthcare revolution would include addressing the shortage of doctors and nurses through education and training and focusing on accreditation as well as standardization with a long term view.

The session "Naxalism and Adivasi Disquiet: Two Sides of the Same Coin?" brought together different perspectives in the challenging problem of Naxalism in India. Moderator Anil Padmanabhan, Deputy Managing Director, Mint while setting the context for discussions said that the challenge of Naxalism is currently the single biggest threat for India and added that an increased divide between the haves and the have-nots is the root cause of the problem

Mr. B J Panda, Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha, said Naxalism has evolved in India because of Government failure and added that in recent years Naxalites have become a parallel form of government in the entire red corridor. He said the challenge of Naxalism can only be tackled by using a dual approach of development and swift military action. Mr. Manoj Kumar, CEO, Naandi Foundation said that the hot-beds of Naxalism are among the most undeveloped parts of India and lack any form of basic services. Even Adivasis who are indifferent to Naxalites are harassed by State Police forces. Ms. Somini Sengupta, New York Times, pointed out that most of the Naxal affected areas also happen to be the most mineral-rich parts of India. Apart from lack of governance and poverty, Indian demographics and deprivation of opportunities are also to blame for the rise of naxalism, she added. Mr. Sugata Srinivasaraju, Associate Editor (South), Outlook Magazine said unrest among the Adivasis is a strategic entry point for Naxalites and added that Naxalites do not always have any altruistic agenda for people they claim to represent; rather, they want more power.

The evening session of the first day of the Ideas India 2009 conference includes the sessions 'The Legacy of Forgotten Leaders', 'Why is Economic Growth not Translating to Economic Prosperity for All?' and 'Time for a Second Green Revolution.'

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