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### **Losing Faith in Governance?**

The Prime Minister, in his meeting with five editors, reportedly exuded confidence, contending that there was nothing basically wanting in his leadership itself or government in general. Unfortunately, a prime example of the sloppiness of our governance was the direct and, extremely embarrassing, fallout of the meeting: the way his off-the-record comments about Bangladesh were initially included in the published transcript, before being hastily removed, unfortunately after the damage had been done.

Two questions arise:

- ⇒ If even on such sensitive matters, there is such loose governance even in the highest levels of government, can the rest of society trust it to deliver public services with at least a modicum of efficiency and honesty?
- ⇒ Would anybody ever be punished for the extremely embarrassing *faux pas*?

While poor governance has been there for a long time, one gets an impression that the situation is worsening in recent years – or is it the cumulative impact of many incidents over the years? As for the former, just recall the way the Commonwealth Games Organization Committee was allowed to function despite a series of warnings about the issue from three sports ministers (The Economic Times, July 4); the mess in the communications (under two different ministers) and petroleum ministries; the appointment of the of the CVC; etc.. Even the Supreme Court seems to be losing faith in the ability of the government to conduct investigations honestly and reasonably efficiently. No wonder the judiciary is taking over an increasing number of cases under its direct control; the latest example is the investigation is of unaccounted money stashed abroad, by a special investigative team under two former judges. Perhaps the Supreme Court's distrust in different institutions of the government is enhanced by the allegations against several of its own previous chief justices, as also others in the highest level of judiciary.

No wonder the man on the street is getting increasingly intolerant and disrupting public services in frustration, on the smallest of grievances, without any thought for his/her co-citizens. To quote a few instances, fairly representative of countless others, reported on just one day (last Tuesday) from Mumbai alone:

- ⇒ The BJP Yuva Morcha protested against hike in entry fees to the Borivli National Park by doing a *dharna* in front of the park;
- ⇒ Western and central railway suburban services were affected during rush hours with commuters blocking tracks in protest against the delay in construction of over-bridges at suburban stations;
- ⇒ A long distance train was delayed by 90 minutes at Panvel station because some passengers, dissatisfied with the quality of food served by the railway catering service, insisted that the station master immediately punish the contractor, and held up services.

These could be discounted as minor, local incidents. But the same anger is having major impact in implementation of needed infrastructure or industrial projects – highways, power stations, dams, land for industry, etc. The common man just does not trust that he would get a fair compensation or that rehabilitation will be implemented efficiently.

Adding to the frustration is the issue of increasing corruption and lack of accountability in every institution of the government. One problem is that no prosecution of public servants is permitted without clearance from the government – and their own colleagues sit (almost literally!) in judgment on the issue. To quote the latest instance, the prosecution of Ajay and Abhay Chautala for owning assets disproportionate to their known sources of income, required an order from the Supreme Court! How long the case itself will take is of course anybody's guess. No wonder Anna Hazare got such massive support when he fasted on the issue of the Lokpal Bill. Not that it would do much to improve matters: it might only add one more bureaucracy to the already cumbersome system. We do not lack laws, but too many of them are not implemented efficiently or honestly; and the often confusing and contradictory legal/regulatory/

contractual provisions and multiplicity of agencies implementing them, hinder prospects of effective governance.

We should not forget that such non-economic factors are important for growth, balance of payments and poverty reduction, points I would come back to.

Tailpiece: The strength of Indian family ties was once again in evidence in two other reports in the same day's newspapers (Tuesday July 5). K. Srikanth, Chairman of India's cricket team selection committee, proposed the name of his son for the India 'A' Team. Murli Deora resigned from the cabinet, and has reportedly recommended his son Milind to be named in the Cabinet reshuffle as a minister of state. But why single out Deora and Srikanth when the ruling party itself has been headed by one dynasty ever since independence? Congressmen were not at all comfortable with other leaders like Narasimha Rao and prefer to forget them, as evidenced by the fact, reported by our editor in his article last Monday, that the only senior Congressman to attend his birth anniversary regularly is Dr. Manmohan Singh – such apathy despite the great service he performed as the Prime Minister during the balance of payments crisis of the early 1990s, his erudition, and many other qualities. Perhaps he was neither fair nor handsome enough.

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