

MOVE BEYOND SYMBOLISM

Today's developments inside the J&K Legislative Assembly and outside were in a nature of symbolism. While the National Conference government was forced to hurriedly bring the resolution seeking restoration of Article 370 by the PDP's flashy behavior on the opening day of the session, the opposition BJP also made its opposition to it, and how the resolution was brought loud and clear. The resolution will meet the same fate as the one sent by the J&K State Legislative Assembly on the restoration of greater autonomy. The resolution passed without consultations and bypassing procedures, is not binding on the Parliament of India or the government. Also, it's a mere expression of an aspiration otherwise a UT legislature has no jurisdiction over matters that are the domain of the Parliament. Besides, the J&K government must keep in mind that the August 5, 2019, decisions have been okayed by the Judiciary after the prolonged scrutiny. The BJP, a formidable opposition in the House, also registered its due protest first inside the House and later outside.

In the end, all sides made their points and played to the galleries. However, given the fragile peace, the sacrifices made for bringing it, and also the continuing fight against terrorists in J&K, all political parties must use restraint. A flicker is enough to set things on fire. Speaker of the House, a veteran leader must hold consultations with all parties to settle the matter at this point and not allow the developments inside the House to vitiate the environment or highlight tensions between the two regions. After all, one side expressed itself through the resolution and the other side also did its bit to denounce it. Points are made and both sides need to move on to conduct the matters for people who have elected the legislators.

Food subsidy reforms: Can Govt tackle mounting costs

Uttam Gupta

The Ministry of Finance (MoF) has released Rs 97,000 crore towards food subsidy expenses in the first half of the current financial year (FY) to the Food Corporation of India (FCI). This is over two-thirds of the required fund support of Rs 147,000 crore to FCI during the current FY. The MoF is expected to release the balance amount by December 31, 2024. Under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY), the Centre asks the FCI and other state agencies to procure food from the farmers at MSP (minimum support price) and distribute it to around 820 million people for free. Under the Scheme, each beneficiary gets 5 kg of food per month. The entire cost i.e. MSP paid to farmers plus handling and distribution cost (HDC) is reimbursed to the FCI/other state agencies as a subsidy. The money comes from the Union Budget's allocation for 'food subsidy'.

The FCI conducts the bulk of the food procurement, handling and distribution operations on behalf of the Centre. At Rs 147,000 crore, it gets around 72 per cent of the total food subsidy Rs 205,250 crore being the budget estimate (BE) for 2024-25. The government is duty-bound to make timely payments to FCI to enable the latter to conduct its operations 'smoothly' and 'effectively'.

What is so special about the current FY?

In the past, thanks to inadequate budgetary allocations (often prompted by the compulsion to keep the fiscal deficit - excess of total expenditure over total receipts - under check), the government's payments to FCI had fallen short, forcing the latter to take recourse to working capital from banks to sustain operations. To bridge cash-flow mismatch, the extant arrangements provided for the FCI to avail a short-term loan with a tenure of 90 days up to Rs 75,000 crore at any given point in time.

This led to an increase in subsidy as interest cost on loans taken from designated banks (the interest rate ranges



between 6.98 per cent to 7.36 per cent per annum) had to be reimbursed to the FCI. The gap between budget allocation and actual requirements used to be so huge that cash credit limits sanctioned by the banks proved to be inadequate. This prompted the FCI to even borrow funds from the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF). The NSSF is a public account (established on April 1, 1999) where all deposits received under National Saving Schemes are credited. All withdrawals by depositors are made out of the accumulations in this Fund. Normally, the government is not expected to use the NSSF to meet its revenue expenditure and expenses on food subsidy fall in this category. Yet, it encouraged the FCI to encroach on the Fund to plug the shortfall in its receipts. When the FCI started taking loans from NSSF in FY 2016-17, the Centre had committed to release the subsidy arrears to enable FCI to pay back the loans in subsequent years. But, that was not to be as subsidy arrears kept mounting, and FCI continued borrowing increasingly from NSSF. At the end of 2018-19, FCI's cumulative borrowing from NSSF was Rs 200,000 crore. This continued into 2019-20 on a much larger scale. In that year's budget, Fi-

nance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had kept the BE for food subsidy at Rs 184,000 crore and drastically reduced it to Rs 109,000 crore in the revised estimate (RE) just because she wanted to keep the FD close to the target. Against this, the requirement being Rs 219,000 crore, the

shortfall of Rs 110,000 crore was made up by FCI borrowing from NSSF. In the budget for 2020-21, she kept BE at Rs 116,000 crore against the requirement of Rs 137,000 crore.

TV Somanathan, the then expenditure secretary, saw nothing wrong in the above practice arguing that borrowings by FCI were against the assets it held in the form of food stocks. The argument was flawed since loans were taken against subsidy receivable from the Centre. In the case of wheat, for instance, on every kilo sold under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), the subsidy was Rs 23 (MSP plus HDC of Rs 25 minus Rs 2 being the price paid by the beneficiary).

The loan was given against this amount promised by the Centre. This liability couldn't be adjusted against the food stock, which, on giving to the NFSA beneficiary would fetch only Rs 2. The Secretary further argued that keeping these borrowings off the Centre's balance sheet would prevent crowding out, and help the private sector borrow from the market at a lower interest cost. This needed to be weighed against erosion in the credibility of fiscal consolidation, which is inevitable when a strict liability of the Centre is kept off

its balance sheet. A wrong can't be justified simply because the honest course of reflecting the liability in the Union budget would lead to problems for private firms.

The government recognised the flaw in the above approach even as Sitharaman made a course correction while presenting the budget for FY 2021-22. In the RE for FY 2020-21, she provided for a massive allocation of Rs 529,000 crore. That amount included Rs 462,000 crore towards payment of subsidy to the FCI against a claim of Rs 216,000 crore by the latter. The excess amount was used by the FCI to extinguish all its accumulated liabilities to the NSSF. During 2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24, the government stayed on course with allocation for food subsidy at Rs 372,000 crore, Rs 287,000 crore, and Rs 211,394 crore respectively adequate to fully cover the requirement. As for payments to the FCI, during 2021-22, the subsidy received was Rs 208,000 crore against the claim of Rs 207,000 crore. During 2022-23, the amount received was Rs 200,000 crore against the claim of Rs 204,000 crore. During 2023-24, the FCI received Rs 139,000 crore against the claim of Rs 133,000 crore.

During the current FY, having already received 2/3rd of its likely annual requirement, Rs 147,000 crore, during the first half, the FCI is expected to receive the balance 1/3rd by December 31, 2024. It receives the money almost round the clock, meaning it doesn't have to resort to short-term credit even from banks (forget NSSF), as its operational expenses are fully met from timely reimbursement of subsidy dues by the Centre. From the Centre's perspective, all its liabilities regarding food subsidies are 'fully' reflected in the budget for any given FY. The government no longer indulges in window dressing, no carryover of subsidy dues, and the process is fully 'transparent'. Moreover, there is no interest cost boost to subsidy payments as the FCI need not borrow. But the unsustainable increase in food subsidies continues to haunt us.

LIFE BEYOND THE GRAVE

Rajyogi Brahma Kumar Nikunj Ji

Every time we see death or attend a funeral, we experience something like cemetery-induced reclusion which makes our mind & body numb. This makes us question the very purpose of our life. We start thinking that if death is the be-all and end-all of it-all, and it can kill anyone, anytime, then why should we bother about doing good deeds and fear punishment for our sins? There are mainly two kinds of people who have two different beliefs in this regard.

The first kind of people believe in the rebirth of human beings and strongly feel that the account of our good and bad deeds will be settled on the day of judgment when the dead rise from their graves, and then there are the second kinds of people who not only believe that human souls are reborn, but they also feel that humans transmigrate into 8.4 million species before getting a human birth again. However, there is very little knowledge about the third kind of people who believe that human souls take rebirth and are always in the human body.

Let us suppose that humans are not reborn. In that case what reason would there be to perform good deeds and desist



from bad ones? Also, if there were no rebirth there would be no fear of punishment for one's bad deeds either, and little to stop people from doing as they pleased as long as they could evade the law. We should understand that if there is no future after death, people would also not amass wealth right up to their death, or build houses in their old age.

These efforts would be futile, in the absence of rebirth. Thus, our hopes of eternal prosperity and happiness, desire to earn merit by performing good deeds, fear of punishment in future births and

feelings of eternal love and patriotism, would not arise at all if rebirth were not a reality. According to Hindu Mythology, a soul never dies, it is the body that dies & immediately after death, the soul changes body as we change clothes. With modern techniques like Past Life Regression, there are lots of cases around us where we see a child claiming to be experiencing visions of his/her previous births. Many of these cases have been verified by experts and psychologists who have recorded the testimonies of people recalling their previous birth and then cross-checked the facts with official records and the people mentioned by them.

Another simple fact that points to the reality of rebirth is that a soul cannot function without a body. If there were no rebirth, where does the soul go after a

person has died? As human beings, nearly all our interactions are with fellow humans. Thus, we create karmic accounts with humans, to which we have to take birth in human form again. The analogy of the seed also illustrates this point. Just as a mango seed brings forth a mango tree, which then produces mangoes, which again provide mango seeds, the human soul possesses human qualities, feelings and experiences, and is the seed of human life. Hence it cannot function in any other living creature's body.

Scepticism about the existence of souls and facts like rebirth is widespread because of the lack of an experience of soul consciousness. Such an experience requires spiritual effort for which one has to focus the mind and the intellect inward and then contemplate on it in silence. Slowly one begins to sense the existence of a sentient entity within, which is the soul. Such an experience, repeated over time, brings soul-consciousness, or the belief that one is a soul. It is this experience of reality that removes the shroud of ignorance from all other facts of the subtle world of souls, which we usually dismiss in disbelief for lack of material proof. So let us practice remaining in soul consciousness and enjoy being an enlightened soul without any botheration.

How mobile video conferencing is bridging the digital divide in Bihar

Varinder Singh Jawanda

In a time when digital communication is essential for efficient government, resolving infrastructural and geographic obstacles is vital to making decisions in real time. This need is especially acute in large states like Bihar, where there are major connectivity challenges due to the expansive rural environment.

To narrow this gap, a major project was started by Bihar State Electronics Development Corporation (BELTRON) along with Millenium Automation as a system integrator, to establish a mobile outdoor video conferencing system that would improve communication challenges and enhance the state's governance. Because of this initiative, the administration can now function smoothly throughout Bihar by introducing an inventive, stronger video conferencing system.

Improving Governance With the use of the new outdoor video conferencing technology, authorities in Bihar can now hold virtual meetings and communicate with other offi-

cially directly from almost anywhere in the state.

This technology allows government officials to communicate in real-time, independent of their actual location, providing a much-needed degree of flexibility. This solution's robust, continuous connectivity and high-quality video streaming facilitate quicker decision-making, effective governance, and a more open line of contact with rural residents.

Recognising the Challenge

In places remote from urban networks, ensuring reliable, fast communication was crucial but challenging. To prevent interruptions, a smooth interface between the new mobile video conferencing system and the Bihar State Wide Area Network (BSWAN) was required. Sustaining steady uptime was essential since government communications are so vital. To maintain system functionality and quickly address any technological problems, comprehensive maintenance assistance was also necessary, guaranteeing dependability and continuity through-



out the state.

A Comprehensive Solution

With portable video conferencing devices that have high-quality audio and video components in cases that are easy to move, a specially designed solution was developed to meet these demands.

Even in remote locations, the sys-

tem's smooth integration with the current Bihar State Wide Area Network (BSWAN) guaranteed reliable service quality.

Advanced networking equipment allowed for seamless data transfer, particularly in areas with limited bandwidth. Disruptions during crucial meetings were minimised by op-

timising bandwidth in locations far away. Prompt technical assistance, and on-site maintenance guaranteed continuous strong system operation across the state.

Key Outcomes of the Project This initiative empowered Bihar's government to conduct mobile, outdoor video conferences statewide, enabling officials to make real-time decisions from any location, thus streamlining operations and improving emergency response.

As a technological advancement, it highlights how mobile technology can bridge the digital divide, aligning with the "Digital India" vision by enhancing transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement.

With scalability for future needs, the system can expand into public services and disaster management, offering a sustainable, resilient model for evolving governance demands, and setting an inspiring precedent for other states. Future Prospects and Potential for Growth. This outdoor video conferencing solution has the potential to revolutionise governance in Bihar and

other similar states.

As Bihar continues to advance, the system can be further expanded to incorporate additional features and applications, including new e-governance initiatives. Emerging technologies like IoT, advanced bandwidth optimisation, and real-time analytics are being explored to enhance communication efficiency even further.

The success of this project opens doors for expansion into other government sectors, allowing more departments to benefit from mobile video conferencing. In conclusion, this outdoor video conferencing initiative has enabled the Bihar government to communicate and make decisions effectively, regardless of officials' physical locations.

It has solved an immediate challenge while laying the foundation for future technological advancements in government communication.

By bridging the digital divide, this solution is enhancing governance in Bihar, helping to build a more inclusive, connected, and prosperous state.