

After Demonetisation we need Depollutisation

Two years ago, when the world was staring at USA for its choice between pest and cholera, India was shocked with no choice but focusing on the unthinkable. An economy that is based on 80 percent of the working population being part of the unorganized sector, was taken its blood! When cash is king, declaring 85 percent of the money in circulation invalid from the very next day onwards and giving a pretty much unprepared banking system just a few weeks to exchange the white and black money of 1.2 billion people, is like a full blood transfusion and kidney transplant, for diabetes king India. The fact that patient India did not turn violent and there were no riots, but only long queues with people patiently waiting to exchange their hard earned money, is a phenomenon probably possible only in a country that mainly believes in destiny.

Now, patient India again faces a life-threatening disease that needs an immediate operation. This time, it would be akin to a lung, heart and liver transplant, in one go. With the air in Delhi being the worst polluted among all the world capitals and 8 out of the 10 most polluted cities on our planet being in India, the country is a champion that nobody can be proud of. Unfortunately and strangely enough, nobody seems to care, when every day the free Indian press is writing about how 1 in every 8 people dies because of pollution. Kids suffer from asthma because the air they breathe is as bad as it would be if they were constantly smoking cigarettes, an addiction strictly forbidden for anyone under the age of 18.

So when the Indian people have accepted suffering for an attempt to turn a black economy into a white one, they will also accept drastic measures to convert black air and poisonous water into clean ones.

Looking at the reasons for this hell on earth, it is obvious who the culprits are. We the people and our way of living. It is all man-made. The traffic with cars, trucks and motorcycles, of which a vast majority have no or minimal modern exhaust cleaning systems. Power plants that produce perceived clean electricity, with the poorest of coal and certainly not the latest cleaning technology available. Factories that don't or inadequately comply with any environmental standards. Construction sites and roadsides uncovered and unplanned, diesel generators without air filters, slums and roadside dwellers with open fires, farmers burning their crops, we see it all and know it all. But still, rarely does anybody wear face masks and even if they do, they are not the most modern ones. So what to do?

The role models are there. Beijing was Delhi's predecessor as the world's most polluted capital. And the Chinese got their act together. Factories were relocated. Coal power plants were converted to gas power plants. Only electric motorcycles and buses were permitted and the number of cars was drastically restricted. Open coal fires were completely banned, the air quality was constantly monitored and no compromise was accepted. Other cities like Mexico City took similar routes.

In India, the shock therapy that is needed, seems to come only after the patient is dead. Looks like everybody waits for the other to decide and act. Only the Supreme Court acting from time to time does not help anymore, especially when in spite of its corrective judgements, their implementation is lacking.

What is needed, is another demonetisation-like revolution. And the destiny-believing, patiently obeying Indian will go for it!

Just close Delhi for a month, so that it can somehow recover and get back to life. Like in the old days, when the government shifted to Shimla and stopped working in the sauna of Delhi, one could shift most of the Delhiites to their relatives in the rest of or outside the country, just like it's normally done for any big fat wedding or religious festival. Companies could let their staff work out of their non-Delhi offices and the kids could just take a well-deserved holiday and learn about the beauty of the rest of India. Parliament can just 'not function' anywhere else in India and politicians could visit their constituencies and listen to the grievances

of their electorate. Even the question of who should pay for all of this can be answered easily. The recent global climate summit – COP24 in Katowice, has made it more than obvious that the developed countries cannot shy away from their responsibility anymore. They have to pay, so that the developing countries do not make the same mistakes that the developed countries made to become developed in the first place.

USD 100 billion every year, from 2020 onwards, were committed in Copenhagen in 2009 and reaffirmed in Paris. Now it is getting serious and Germany has reassured to fulfill its share of USD 10 billion. Germany has also promised to double its contribution to the so-called Green Climate Fund, from USD 0.75 billion to USD 1.5 billion. And maybe, one could find a modus operandi by which the contribution is made directly from Germany to India. Germany could send its experts that have converted the former East German Laender (states), from some of the worst polluted places in Europe if not the world, into the cleanest. Most of the experts are retired, but still fit and going strong and would only be too happy to share their experience and expertise.

This would take longer than a month, of course. But like demonetisation, India has to start with a big bang and then follow the Chinese Blue Sky model. This is a readymade blueprint, in the best sense. The average PM_{2.5} emissions in 2017 were down to 58µg/m³ on average in Beijing, a level the Delhiites can only dream of. For Prime Minister Modi it could be another pre-election coup, like demonetisation was in case of Uttar Pradesh. Indians appreciate a leader who takes the bull by the horns.

And the Indian forgets even the worst of disruptions very fast. The unprecedented floods in Tamil Nadu and in Kerala, out of sight out of mind. The tsunami in 2004 and the horrible earthquake in Gujarat in 2001, forgotten. And how different is the deadly air or the poisonous water, from a flood, a tsunami or an earthquake? The mess has to be cleaned up immediately and everybody has to help.

Not only the Indians; the world is watching! If India does not get its act together and continues as the world's third largest and with 6.3 percent, also its highest growing CO₂ emitter, the subcontinent is finished. Even the comparatively low per capita emission does not help, as over 2 million premature deaths occur in India due to pollution, a record 25 percent of all the global deaths due to air pollution. Besides it being morally unacceptable to ignore such a disaster, financially also it does not make any business sense. As per the World Health Organization (WHO), India could get health benefits to the tune of USD 3-8 trillion, by meeting the Paris climate targets. According to the Indian government representative in Katowice, India will have no problem in achieving its climate goals even before schedule. And in the latest Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) 2019 by Germanwatch, India has even made it up to place 11 out of 60, ahead of Norway, Finland, Denmark and even Germany that crashed down to place 27! But in contrast to the reaction towards moving up to place 77 in the Ease of Doing Business ranking, nobody in India is raving about this perceived excellent position. And rightfully so.

Seeing is believing and seeing what happens in the Indian sky is a shocking reality that even the best of theory or statistics cannot manipulate. The truth and nothing but the truth will prevail. Since 2003, the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA) has been regulating smoking. No smoking in public spaces. No access for children. On every package there are warnings that smoking kills and drastic pictures of smoke-related diseases. So where are the warnings and posters at Delhi airport, train stations, roads or on television, when the air is like smoking for all? And what about the fines? The tragic star at COP24, was the 15-year-old Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thunberg, who confronted the delegates as follows: "You say you love your children above all else and yet, you're stealing their future in front of their very eyes". No country in the world has more children than India. Out of the 1.21 billion Indians, 39 percent or 472 million, are children. Wake up India, save their future!