



Amazing development contrasts in India

BY KP SHASHIDHARAN

Amazing are the development contrasts in India. Despite its macroeconomic vulnerabilities, including the substantial fiscal deficit, the current account deficit, hyper inflationary trends, and the subdued GDP growth of the economy; it is proud to know that India remains as the world's fourth largest economy. The agricultural revolution has transformed the country from its chronic dependence on food imports to a net exporter of food grains. Life expectancy has more than doubled in India; its literacy rates have quadrupled and its health conditions have improved. Also a sizeable middle class has emerged in the country. Many of its industrial sectors like pharmaceuticals, steel, information and space technologies have grown to international standards.

Development contrasts are equally disturbing. Out of India's 1.2 billion people, 270 million people are afflicted by chronic poverty, though the country is blessed with the largest, youngest workforce in the world. Forbes report 2014 shows that though India is the home of 70 billionaires in the world, its financial capital, Mumbai, is predominantly a city of slums interspersed with skyscrapers. Families living on the street, begging street women and street children compete in the struggle for livelihood. The nutrition level of children is 40 percent constituting 217 million of the world's malnourished children in India.

Indian cultural and development discourse, possibly sanitation, still remains a low priority. After experimenting with decades of focused sanitation projects, a recent joint report of the WHO and the UNICEF finds that India has the largest number of people—597 million—defecating in the open in the world. India is out of only 10 such countries. UN reports find that countries having the open defecation practice have the highest number of deaths of children under the age of five,

due to infection, disease, malnutrition, abysmal poverty and large disparities between the rich and the poor.

Gender equity, gender development and gender empowerment are far away in the development scenario of India. A strong gender bias results in subjugating women with patriarchal social norms.

The lack of safe, private toilets becomes problematic for women, girls and children to live in dignity making them vulnerable to the increasing incidence of sex, crime and violence. Newspapers report daily that women and children are brutally manhandled, raped and murdered. The poorly constructed and maintained sanitation infrastructure is only beneficial to corrupt contractors and their allies and is seldom used by villagers. Drinking water and electricity are not there in many villages. The increasing gap between the rich and the poor and inequity in all its dimensions, including region, caste and gender, need to be addressed. Enormous investments are required to generate adequate employment opportunities, and health, housing, education, and other infrastructure facilities. One-third of the world's poor live in poverty.

Recently World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim met Prime Minister Modi and the Union Finance Minister and assured them that the Bank is committed to provide \$15-18 billion over the next three years to bring India back to the sustained high economic growth trajectory by investment in infrastructure and job-oriented skills development.

Full potential of the people is to be developed and reoriented by adopting suitable good governance models. E-governance solutions for rapid urbanization, inclusive sustainable economic growth, economic integration and rural-urban transformation can lead India ahead to become a modern 21st century nation. ■

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