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### **Information, Not Just Emotions**

The India of today would perhaps be among the most emotion-driven societies in the world. There would have been nothing wrong per se in this if emotions determined how an individual were to live his or her life, and influenced personal decisions. The big danger is when emotions become the Rosetta Stone to interpret the current and emerging needs of the nation, putting aside facts, objectivity, scientific temperament, and even ideology.

The most recent “debates” and indeed, even the political and civil society’s articulated position on economic, political, and social reforms seems to be founded on emotions and beliefs rather than on hard data, rigorous analysis, and scientific interpretations. Perhaps the most disconcerting of all the recent ones is the one relating to FDI in retail. In the din, facts have been substituted by fiction both by the proponents and the antagonists, and in the process, the bigger picture issue to the need for India to have an efficient, quick-responsive producer to consumer distribution system is completely lost. Likewise, the debate on reforms in the education sector seems to be hijacked by the superfluous issue relating to “profit” orientation and relating to entry of foreign universities rather than the bigger issue about aligning the entire educational infrastructure (public and privately owned) to the current and future needs of the country (both vocational and higher education), and then creating the appropriate framework to bridge both the quality and the quantity gaps wherever they exist. Likewise, there are many other equally critical challenges that India is facing today and all of them are on the trajectory to become much more acute if immediate visionary and bold action is not taken.

India needs enlightened leadership, appropriate policies and laws, and strong governance much more now than perhaps at any other time in the last 2500 years or even more. The diversity of ethnicity, beliefs, needs, socio-economic stratification, and aspirations of its 1.2+ billion inhabitants reinforces the need to have a vibrant, functional democracy and also the challenges involved in arriving at some acceptable degree of consensus on different issues and that too within a reasonable time frame. This is where India has failed to create world class, politically and financially independent think-tanks which can provide facts & intellect based framework to the politicians, planners, and other policy decision makers on various India (and then South Asia) economic and social issues.

The ideal “think-tank” for India would have to be conceptualized specifically keeping India’s (and its neighbouring countries’) ground realities, the most critical of which is the near absence of institutions and mechanisms to collect, collate, and disseminate data covering a large part, if not the entire, spectrum of human activity. What goes around for data in India is largely a combination of outdated figures, a lot of guesswork, and intellectually flawed interpretation and extrapolation. For instance, none of the major ministries such as agriculture, human resource development, healthcare, housing and urban development, and energy can provide accurate and current data on what is the true occupational distribution of the population, the availability and demand-supply gaps between the needed and projected skills set, the needed and projected demand supply gaps relating to food, energy, clean water, sanitation, waste management, intra-city and intra-country transportation, housing, office, education, hospitals, retail and other such physical spaces from the point of view of the individual citizen. The Planning Commission and various other government departments are ill equipped to collect and collate high quality, real time data, and not equipped at all to connect India’s ground realities and challenges with appropriate inputs for policy making.

It is, therefore, no surprise that it is becoming nearly impossible to arrive at any kind of consensus on what India needs to do (and does not need to do). It is, also, no surprise that emotional outbursts and political one-upmanship and expediency now passes for debate and discussion within (and outside) the Parliament and the State Legislatures.

This ideal think-tank has to be set-up through a generous philanthropic support from within India itself with no absolutely strings attached. There are several illustrious examples and role models to learn from e.g. Brookings Institution and Rand Corporation. However, unlike most other such institutions, the Indian one should have the know-how to conduct cutting edge primary research and advanced analytics (beyond usage of classical statistical tools) which should be the bedrock for ideation on India’s current and future needs across various economic and social issues, and to enable it to provide a very sound fact and information based framework to policy makers. An initial corpus of no more than Rs 1000 Crores, some institutional land from the Government, a visionary director, and a top-calibre non-political governing board is all that is needed to make a start. Hopefully, India would soon see some progress on this front.

**Arvind Singhal**

[Arvind.singhal@technopak.com](mailto:Arvind.singhal@technopak.com)