

## They're our PSUs

If you're looking for yet another reason why the government cannot be trusted to own and properly manage companies and banks, the UPA's decision to nominate Congress politicians as "independent directors" of banks (more or apparently in the pipeline) is a good one. Coming as it does so soon after the attempt to foist unqualified party nominees on the boards of the oil sector PSUs (and these are not penny companies but giant corporations), it is obvious that the Congress party has no qualms about going back to the old days when the boards of PSUs and public sector banks (PSBs) were routinely packed with political appointees. As a logical corollary, dealerships of PSUs also used to be handed out to the party faithful, or at least to those cleared by the party high command. To some extent, this practice was at least frowned upon during the NDA's tenure, if you leave aside the blatant scandal in the allotment of petrol pumps to friends and relatives of BJP/NDA members and the well-known nomination of a young lady to the board of a telecom PSU. Indeed, there were also instances of relatives of senior BJP leaders/ministers being nominated to the boards of PSBs. But the practice was not as blatant or as rampant as is now becoming the case.

It is interesting that the two guilty ministries (finance and petroleum) today are headed by people who would in the ordinary course be expected to stay clear of such shenanigans. That encourages the conclusion that it is not the ministers who are initiating these changes, it is the party high command—and no minister can apparently refuse to oblige. Coming as this does when the UPA and the committee that it has set up under Ar-

jun Sengupta are busy swearing by public sector autonomy, some obvious questions need to be answered: autonomy from whom, for what purpose, and in what manner?

Autonomy has usually meant managerial autonomy, so that government and/or political pressure do not bring extraneous considerations to bear on a public sector company's performance. And since the traditional perception of a PSU's role goes beyond maximising profits and encompasses a variety of other financial and social considerations, it has usually been considered necessary to have some public personalities nominated to the board of directors—not only as a check on the management but also in pursuit of the larger objectives that a PSU is expected to serve. However, this cannot possibly be interpreted to mean that party faithful should be given sinecures, with obliging managements holding board meetings in exotic locations with all facilities laid on. Independent directors have an unambiguous and serious role to play, and to believe that semi-educated politicians can play that role with no prior experience of the corporate world, is to take credulity to the extreme. The more likely reason, though, is that the politicians simply do not understand the role that an independent director is supposed to play, and don't see anything particularly wrong in appointing novices to the corporate world.

Since the UPA has already put an end to the policy of privatisation of PSUs, under pressure from the Left parties, it was hoped that it would at least move forward on the issue of granting them more managerial and other autonomy. And if that is not to be, why keep these companies in the public sector?

## Farming without technology

India has one of the world's largest agricultural research networks, churning out a good deal of new technology. But the majority of farmers still practise traditional farming, for want of adequate transfer of the new technology to the fields. A recent National Sample Survey report on farmers revealed that over 60 per cent of them lack access to new technology. In reality, a sizable chunk of others, too, do not get to know all that is new and useful for them. Person-to-person flow of information remains the most common mode of dissemination of farm know-how. As a result, the extension machinery has come to be viewed as a speed breaker in agricultural development. This is reflected in the recent mid-term appraisal of the 10th five-year plan, which has presented agriculture as a virtual drag on the economy.

Though the reasons for this are several, the most significant among them are the widening schism between technology developers and state extension workers, and the inherent disabilities of the state extension machinery. Most of those occupying high positions in the extension services are themselves not fully aware of the latest technologies, having passed out of agricultural colleges and universities many years earlier. Field-level workers usually complain of lack of transport and other facilities to visit scattered villages. The number of villages to be covered by each worker is normally too large to manage. That apart, most of the new technology is being generated by the institutions that are under the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), a central government body, while technology transfer is a state subject. The mandate of the ICAR does not go beyond displaying the effectiveness of the new technology through a few field-level demonstrations. The state agricultural

universities, which are supposed to integrate agricultural research, education and extension, have proved incapable of doing so. In any case, most of these universities are in poor financial health for want of adequate funding support from the equally resource-starved state governments.

Of course, a few attempts have been made in the past to address these issues through programmes designed specifically for technology transfer. But their outcome was far from satisfactory. The failed experiments included operational research projects, the country-wide lab-to-land programme and the institute-village linkage programme undertaken as part of the World Bank-aided National Agricultural Technology Project (NATP). Moreover, state extension agencies have experimented with different knowledge-spreading approaches like field demonstrations, farmers' fairs and the TV (training-and-visit) method of extension. These too have failed to achieve the desired results. The time now seems ripe therefore to experiment again and involve the private sector in this task by offering suitable incentives. The concept of facilitating the setting up of agricultural clinics by farm graduates, for disseminating technological knowledge among farmers, seems a well-conceived step in this direction. So also the programme for setting up kisan call centres with toll-free telephone numbers. Besides, all agro-based industries should be encouraged to take up technology dissemination projects, or to combine technology transfer with their raw material procurement operations through contract farming. The bottom line for all this is regular interaction between agricultural scientists and extension workers, on the one hand, and the extension workers and the farmers, on the other.

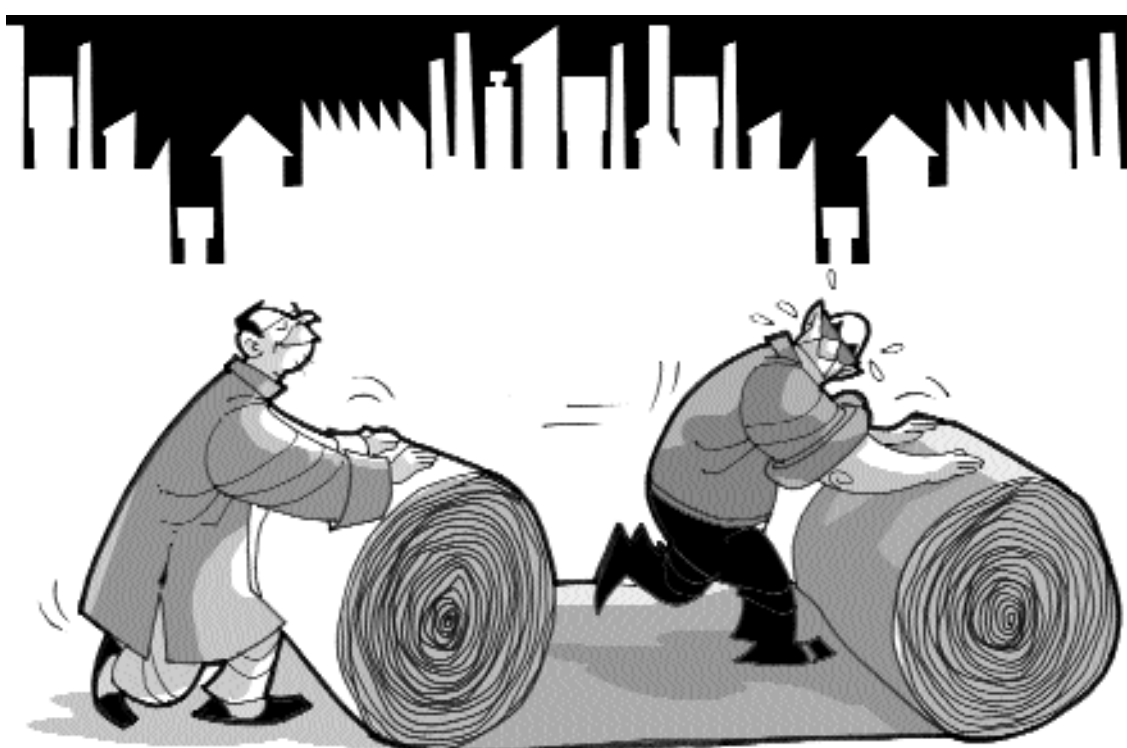


Illustration: BINAY SINHA

## The reformers' dilemma

The UPA under Sonia Gandhi would do well to consider an alliance with the NDA at the central level, says DEEPAK LAL

The calling off of the privatisation of 13 profit-making public enterprises through strategic sale of equity, and the UPA's decision to halt even the 10 per cent disinvestment in BHEL, together with the veto on any reform of the colonial labour laws, makes it clear that it is the Left which is now calling the economic shots. The faded dream team of economic reformers has clearly been checkedmate. Whilst it is impossible for an outsider to know the inner workings of the relationship between the Prime Minister and the Congress president, who is responsible for managing the UPA's allies, the obvious question which arises is: what can the reformers do to overcome the Left's veto on the necessary reforms, which alone can allow India to compete with the looming Chinese dragon? This is the issue I will attempt to discuss in this column.

As Surjit Bhalla has been loudly proclaiming in these pages, where the Communists are in power—as in West Bengal—the imperatives of government have led them to embrace the very reforms which their ideologues supporting the UPA from outside oppose. As exercising

power without responsibility is the worse form of abuse of power, one possible way out might be for the reformers to insist that the Left parties be brought formally into the government, with, say, Buddhadev Bhattacharya, or Ashim Dasgupta being inducted into the Cabinet as a minister for economic reform! If the Left parties demur, it would be sensible to call their bluff and say that the process of economic reform would continue despite their objections. If they refused to support the government, it would be willing to call fresh elections. If the NDA won, which it well might given the negative incumbency factor in recent elections, the Left would be even worse off than if they joined the government and allowed reforms to proceed.

This option would of course depend upon the Congress president's agreement. How likely is that? This depends upon what her long-term aims are. Clearly she would like the Congress to remain in power. But, at any cost? Does she really believe in the necessary economic reforms which her dream team of reformers wishes to implement? Or does

she in fact sympathise with the ideologues of the Left? After all her mother-in-law, though not necessarily her husband, did. Is she, like her mother-in-law, primarily concerned with making India great, whilst of course preserving dynastic power? Or is she keen at all cost to see one of her children maintain the dynastic hold over the Congress, and wants to stay in power by any means as long as is necessary for them to have served their suitable apprenticeship? We do not know the answers to these questions. I suspect neither do the reformers. This leaves the reformers in a dilemma about advocating the option just considered, as it could lead to the UPA losing power.

This leads to another option—which may be termed the German option: a grand coalition between the UPA and the NDA with the Left parties left out in the cold. As has now transpired with the virtually hung parliament the latest German elections delivered, both the major parties—the SPD and CDU—were agreed that, despite their ideological differences, they would keep the Left party (of the old style Communists and

the leftist defectors from the SPD) out of power. As the SPD in its "Agenda 2010" had advocated some economic reforms, there was enough of a common agenda—though not enough to remove all the impediments to labour market flexibility—for a grand coalition to be formed, with the CDU, the party with a slim majority, getting the chancellorship. Even though the BJP seems currently to be in the throes of a nervous breakdown, it might be willing, like the SPD, to join the UPA in a grand coalition whose agenda would embrace the economic reforms it itself had espoused, but which put a lid on its Hindutva agenda, with which quite rightly the UPA would not concur. Also as it initiated the moves leading to the strategic alliance with the US, which the Left bitterly opposes, as well as the rapprochement with Pakistan, there is common ground on foreign policy. Such a grand coalition has the advantage that the Congress would still be in power. So whatever its president's personal agenda, it would not be derailed. Furthermore, given the coming state elections in West Bengal and Kerala, where the Congress is to do battle with the Communist parties, this alternative would also let it off the possibly disabling hook of having and continuing to bow to the wishes of its Left allies at the Centre.

What if this alternative also is not acceptable to the Congress president? A last hope the reformers might entertain is that, as in 1991, a crisis would force the necessary reforms. One of the great ironies is that, largely because of the reforms they then initiated and which were not reversed and in some ways furthered by the succeeding coalition governments, the dangers of a crisis today are remote. But, the failure to implement the next series of reform of the labour market and the privatisation of the public sector means that India will be growing well below its potential, with all the attendant consequences for the future of its poorest labouring millions. This makes it a moral imperative to call the Left ideologues' bluff. As the reformers do not have their own independent constituencies, they cannot threaten to organise an alternative political coalition if the Left's veto on further reforms is not rescinded. No doubt there are many others within their party just waiting to take over the reins of power. But if their party does not work to remove the Left's veto on reforms, instead of limping along neutered in power for the next 3-4 years, they might consider that in the interests of preserving their deserved reforming reputation, the most honourable course could be to resign from the government. After all none of them is any longer young, and as Chinese emperors and mandarins have always realised, the only verdict which matters for posterity is that of the historian.

## Educating girls

"Educate a girl, educate the nation". "Educate a girl and attain happiness." Slogans such as these appear on every public vehicle in Maharashtra. There is no gainsaying the message. Undoubtedly, educating a girl will contribute to the national good, insofar as a girl lays claim to being part of a nation. But why has a state that introduced free education for girls over 20 years ago moved to this new phase of rather inane sloganeering? These years of free education for girls should by now have yielded to a more refined campaign directed either at those specially stubborn pockets of resistance to women's education or to encouraging girls' further education even without state subsidy.

The policy to introduce state subsidy for girls was based on several studies on why girls are not sent to school. The commonest reason for this is that in economically strained circumstances the education of boys takes precedence over that of girls. In sum, if girls' education was free, there would be more takers. However, as an SIDA report on girls' education points out, there are several issues associated with the cost of education that need to be addressed: the cost of schooling including fees, books and transport, and the mother's income loss if the daughter is not available for domestic chores in the mother's absence. But there are



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other associated factors that have received only patchy attention: availability of adequate women teachers; safety issues; and, of course, appropriate syllabi.

While girls' education in Maharashtra, for instance, has made progress, it is nothing to write home about. Sadly though, there are hardly any reliable, well-designed studies that have tracked the outcome of this policy of free education. Just how much of the improvement in girls' school enrolment has been because of the fee subsidy? Which sections have been able to benefit from this? For example, in Mumbai, the relatively wealthy suburb of Bandra boasts of any number of good state-aided schools that provide free education for girls, but 10 km up north, where the real estate prices begin to drop, there are only newer private schools that are not state-aided and so need not (or cannot) offer such subsidised education for girls. What are the other effects of the subsidy? There is anecdotal evidence that boys' education

is being delayed deliberately. A vegetable trader/transporter/vendor may choose to let his daughter be in school up to the 12th standard, and have his son work in the business until after the girl is free to help out, allowing perhaps the mother to be employed. There may be any number of changes that have occurred that we need to know to reckon if the policy has indeed yielded the expected results. Does education create expectations that the economy cannot fulfil? Does it create new domestic/familial demands on women? Clearly, it is not enough to simply look at numbers.

There are larger issues, too: How the career/employment or social trajectory of girls, now educated, is different from that of their mothers? Slogans of the recent past such as "educate a girl and you educate a family" or the more blatant "educated girls make better mothers" show a preoccupation with wife-mother-family roles of girls. Education as a standalone asset is not being promoted. And that perhaps is the difference in secondary education attainments between the subcontinent and, say, the East Asian countries. Undoubtedly, education has meant a change. What is the nature of this change? What should now be done to fine tune the policy to ensure that girls will be educated even after the 12th standard, when they

have to pay for schooling? How can the social dynamics further influence so that even those pockets where subsidisation has not had a positive impact may be persuaded to allow daughters to go to school? These now are the important issues in some states such as Maharashtra. In other states—most have introduced free school education for girls—the policy issues may be very different.

Against this background, the central government's grandiose decision to make girls' education free for girls from single-child families needs to be put under a scanner, not so much for what it proposes as for its avowed purpose. The decision is meant to discourage families from devaluing girls and will stall the deteriorating trend in sex ratios in some pockets (one of which incidentally is in Maharashtra). At best the policy is ill-conceived and at worst, it seems to be pushing families to limit family size to a single child. If free education, offered in so many states today, has not had that desired impact, why will this scheme be any different?

The offer of free education is an important policy initiative and has implications for the state exchequer and for the beneficiaries of the subsidy. But promoted as a measure to persuade people to value a girl child, it smacks of being only a populist initiative.

The audience had been queuing for an hour in order to hear Harold Pinter speak at Edinburgh. This was 2002; the Iraq invasion was in progress and phrases like "freedom-loving people" and "axis of evil" were the common currency of the day.

Pinter had just recovered from major surgery for cancer of the oesophagus, and written a poem—Cancer Cells—to celebrate, his first published poem in decades. We expected him to speak about his fight with cancer, which he did, eloquently and movingly. And then he moved on to the matter of the US war in Iraq, and made his strong opposition perfectly clear. Pinter likened Tony Blair's plans to bomb Iraq to an act of "premeditated murder". He spoke of the war as an exercise in power, he spoke of the silence and acceptance that greeted the ritualised killing of people

outside the "Western world" and he said: "I could be a bit of a pain in the a\*\*\*. Since I've come out of my cancer, I must say I intend to be even more of a pain in the a\*\*\*."

In the three years since his Edinburgh comeback, Pinter has kept that promise. He has heckled Bush and Blair, campaigned against the war, and written cheerfully obscene poetry slamming the US army's tactics in Iraq.

This record has helped many see the 2005 Nobel, awarded to Pinter shortly after his 75th birthday, as one of the most politically charged decisions in the history of the literature Prize. The Nobel announcement was delayed by a week; there was speculation that the Academy was considering Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish writer who's in trouble for speaking out against the Armenian genocide. (Turkey officially refuses to accept



### SPEAKING VOLUMES

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that the mass killings of Armenians occurred on the scale on which Pamuk and other observers point to, and refuses to call those murders genocide.) There is now much speculation, as one commentator put it, that this year's Prize is a rebuke to America, an anti-US Nobel.

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## Pinter's birthday party

politically correct decision would be to overlook Pinter's work. That would be naïve: I cannot see how you could possibly look at this century in theatre—and film—and ignore Harold Pinter's contribution. (He would probably be amused to know that in Calcutta theatre troupes, a standard stage direction was: "Aaro Pinteresque deen, dada!", meaning that more Pinteresque pauses were necessary.)

His first two plays, *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*, were ahead

of their time. Their themes would eventually become familiar, much-imitated clichés of the stage—the damage that families inflict on each other, the struggle for power in everyday domestic life, the power of obsession, violence and the erotic, all of this presented by a man who had a gift for listening to the silences that lie between the lines. *The Birthday Party* ran for just a week, initially, before being taken off, and Pinter tells of how he met an usher on his way to one of the last performances. She asked who he was; he said he was the author. "Oh, are you?" she said. "Oh, you poor darling."

The late Samuel Beckett, who greeted his Nobel Prize with dismay

rather than Pinter's expletive-laden exclamation of delight, had rather less trouble than those early audiences in recognising his younger colleague's talent. He and Pinter met often; I would have liked to have been a fly on the wall when Edward Albee, Beckett and Pinter spent a long evening in a pub

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discussing the Marquis de Sade—the three great chroniclers of the absurdities of modern times on the life of the sensualist who took the pursuit of pleasure to lengths beyond the absurd. Pinter sent Beckett his plays, in typescript, and Beckett reserved a special place in

his library for Pinter's dedication copies.

Pinter's plays, from *The Room* to *Ashes to Ashes* and *Remembrances of Things Past*, are still performed today. If you've seen the film versions of *The Comfort of Strangers*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *The Trial* or *The Last Tycoon*, to name just a few of his adaptations, you know that he is also one of the greatest screenplay writers of our time.

What I'm looking at is not the work, or the man, but at his signature: Harold Pinter, scrawled in a bold, unwavering hand right across the page, the letters large and uncompromising. That signature, the mark of the author, the political protestor, the man who refuses to back down, is scrawled all across the 20th century.

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