Towards Private Universities
A Social Trend in India

Amrik Singh writes from New Delhi

ONE of the dominant social trends in India now is that more and more Indians want to be like the Americans. To what extent that is a desirable model and to what extent we can take to it are important questions no doubt but they need not be asked here.

One minor aspect of the American example is that, unlike UK, Germany, France and indeed a large number of other countries, USA has private universities. How they came to be established and how they have risen to great heights is a story by itself and makes fascinating reading. There is no doubt that some of the best universities in that country are privately owned. Apart from Harvard, Columbia, Princeton, Yale, Chicago, Stanford, and several others, there is another 100 or so which over the years have distinguished themselves in terms of high attainments.

Can India follow this example? In theory, yes. In practice, it is going to be difficult. There is nothing wrong with making the attempt, however. Only the attempt should be made in a properly regulated manner. The justification of such an attempt would be that their standards are higher than that of others and, in course of time, they become what is called 'trend setters'.

In order to facilitate the process of setting up private universities, the Central government came out with a Bill a few months ago. Likely enough, this would be moved at the next session of Parliament and would shortly get adopted — maybe with some changes.

Why was it necessary to move a Bill? After all, private school and colleges have been established for a long time. There was no problem about their establishment. The law permits it and there was never a legal wrangle.

Universities, however, are a different proposition. In 1956, the Central government passed the UGC Act. According to one of its clauses, only a university can confer a degree. Certificates and diploma can be conferred by other institutions but a degree can be conferred only by a university. This therefore made it incumbent upon the Central government to prepare such a Bill. As and when it is adopted, it would be possible for a society or a trust or even a registered company to set up a private university according to the terms and conditions laid down.

The most important of these conditions are such that most other universities do not have to follow them. While proposing to set up a private university, the sponsor would have to prepare a 10-year perspective plan. While fees etc. would be fixed by the university, 30 per cent of seats would have to be made available to deserving but poor students. To start with, every university would have to have a corpus of 10 crore rupees. It would be open to the Centre to increase the quantum of this corpus at any stage and the university would have to comply with this requirement.

The most important provision, however, is that in order to ensure high standards of performance, every such university would have to have arrangements for academic audit. Towards this end, within three years of its establishment, every such university would have to get accreditation from the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) with its headquarters currently in Bangalore. This professional body would have to certify that what is being done in that university is in accordance with the plans made and everything is at the appropriate level of performance. Not only that, this process of accreditation would have to be repeated every five years.

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In other words, if a private university can maintain high standards, there would be no problem. But if it falls below the required standard of performance, accreditation would be refused to it and the university would cease to have the right to confer degrees.

Would this work? On the face of it, there seems to be no reason why it should not work. NAAC was established in early 1995. It has yet to get into stride, however. In all likelihood, in 1996, it would begin to send out the right kind of signals. In case of state-run universities (and each one of them is run either by the Centre or one of the states), accreditation would be a desirable thing. In the case of private universities this would be mandatory.

No restrictions are being placed on the fees to be charged. In other words, universities would be free to levy high fees, indeed as high as the market could bear. In order to make sure that this does not lead to ugly commercialisation, one of the requirements is that the fee structure would have to be based on the unit cost of each student who is enrolled and the cost of freeships and scholarships. In other words, a university would have all the powers to charge whatever it wishes to charge.

Equally important, fees for non-resident students and foreign students would also be fixed in such a way as not to lead to the growth of vested interests. Clearly, these are important safeguards and one hopes that these would be acted upon or implemented in the spirit in which they are intended.

There is a good deal more to be said about it. One thing, however, should be made clear. The whole thing would depend upon what is called the play of the market. If these institutions can maintain high standards and charge high fees, those people who can afford to pay and avail of good education would join in large numbers and the system would grow. Since 30 per cent of freeships would be made available to deserving (but poor) students, the need to ensure equity would also be taken care of. However, everything would depend upon the market demand.

This experiment can succeed. In a way, something like this is already working in respect of capitation fee colleges. The only problem in their regard is that, over the years, all kinds of vested interests grew up and corruption became rampant. The Supreme Court therefore had to intervene in 1993 to set matters right. While some of the problems have been set right, some new problems have also arisen. This is not the place to discuss those issues, however.

Private universities, as and when established, should not be allowed to get into that rut. How exactly this is to be done is a matter that would have to be gone into at the time rules and regulations are framed. Altogether what the Centre has done is to propose a framework. On the face of it, it looks reasonable. How it is put into practice remains to be seen. The next few years would give us a clear picture. — *Mandira*

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Socio-environmental Problems of Megacities

by AKM Jamal Uddin

A city is now the radiating centre of mankind with a large, dense and heterogeneous population which is a veritable subject matter for social research particularly in the field of urban and environmental sociology. City is a place for multiplying happy chances and making the most of unplanned opportunities. If life is the art of encounter, then the city is the setting for encounter.

But explosive population growth and a torrent of migration from the countryside are creating cities that dwarf the great capitals of the past. By the turn of the century, there will be 21 "megacities" with population of 10 million or more. Of these, 18 will be in the developing countries including some of the poorest nations of the world.

Socio-environmental problems of megacities have been manifested in relationship between over-population and socio-environmental factors i.e. poverty, housing, sanitation, transport, land, law and order, health, urban services (power, water, gas, unauthorised market, sewerage, wastes disposal, etc.) and therefore, deserve attention to identify the magnitude and dimension of their operation.

The socio-environmental problems of an urban community can be viewed as an eco-system. The concept of eco-system identifies four major classes of variables and specify their relationships to one another which are: population, environment, technology and social organisation. This concept is useful for illustrating not only how each of these four classes of variables interact and contains implication for the others but also helps us to understand the inter-relations of urban life in a far more general way and maladjustment of these variables causes socio-environmental problems in a city.

The development of cities fostered competition among humans and alienation from nature. Often the price of a city's greatness is an uneasy balance between vitality and chaos, health and disease, enterprise and corruption, art and inequality.

The extent of impact of people on the environment depends on their number and on their level of consumption (including the use of renewable and non-renewable resources). Both expand independently and both lead to increasing pressure on the environment as a supplier of resources and as a repository of wastes. Increasing number of people are at the same time moving to urban areas where the infrastructure is rarely able to keep up with the influx of new entrants while in cities and rural areas alike the amount of domestic waste to be disposed of also rises with the number of people. In the developing countries the resource consumption per capita is lower.

Population influx in the city: Crowding for livelihood above, increasing traffic jam (below).

But the rapidly growing population and the pressure to develop their economies are leading to substantial and increasing damage to the local environment.

Population impacts — including population growth, distribution, migration and dynamics — will exacerbate the problems to varying degrees in some areas including hazardous emission from vehicles and industrial pollution, deteriorating quality of water due to inadequate urban sewerage and industrial waste-water treatment and land degradation from uncollected and unprocessed municipal and industrial solid waste, erosion and flooding. These have resulted from the city's uncontrolled urbanisation with its lack of policy and infrastructure, and from the inability to match growing demands with expanding service.

The current pace of urbanisation in the developing countries is a consequence of rapidly growing population and rural poverty. The rapid and unplanned growth of cities is a matter of grave concern for national planners and policy makers. Most city administrators find it difficult to cope with huge and continually increasing population in many cities, therefore, the urban facilities are on the verge of collapse. The problems plaguing large urban agglomerations include chronic housing shortage, omnipresent squatter settlements and slums, inadequate infrastructure and public services, widespread poverty, relatively high unemployment rate, environmental degradation and increasing delinquency and crimes.

The era of the megacity could bring the triumphant return of microbes that have toppled empires throughout history. Large cities are breeding grounds for novel, antibiotic-resistant strains of old germs and for entirely new kinds of microbes. Since the bubonic plague the world has not encountered anything like AIDS virus which has infected at least 10 million people. No one knows exactly where AIDS originated from, but it has become almost an epidemic in many cities of Africa, Europe, Asia, Latin America and the USA.

The threat of the disease is heightened by urban pollution. Brinkman notes that in the industrial countries, as much as 50 per cent of the population will suffer from a rash or other skin diseases during the course of a year, compared with may be two per cent in the 1950s. Besides, indiscriminate dumping of toxic wastes are so poisonous that the newborns have birth defects, from missing limbs to brain damage. Inadequate sanitation often provides new pathways for infectious diseases. Large cities are the main carriers and containers of all these health hazards.

In the large cities, garbage problem has become a great socio-environmental issue, for example Tokyo has been building artificial islands in the Tokyo Bay to hold garbage, but cannot continue to do so without threatening both the fishing and shipping industries. Some critics argue that in its obsession with technology, the Japanese government has chosen the wrong tack. Notes Keisuke Amagusa, editor of the Journal "Technology and people": "The government is focusing on garbage collected and not doing anything to reduce the garbage created."

The pell-mell expansion of cities creates risks not just for their residents but for every human being. As cities grow so does the demand for standardised, easily transportable fooditems. Farmers in the countryside respond to this demand by planting a narrower range of crops, which in turn increases the likelihood of major disruptions of food supply by pests and droughts. Particularly in the developing-world, cities seemingly act destructive parasites on the surrounding of countryside. Urban thirst for fuelwood and building materials leads to deforestation, which can destroy an area's watershed and thus cause flooding and soil erosion.

Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, is going to be megacity (10 million people) by the year 2000. According to the latest statistics presented in the Parliament, the population of Dhaka city is 8.6 million. The land area upon which these 8.6 million live is only 345 sq. km. The annual population growth rate in Dhaka during 1974-81 was 10.78 per cent and the population was found to be increasing by 300,000 per year. In some parts of the old-city area, the density is extremely high. Some of the areas like Sutrapur or Kotawali accommodates a density of 200,000 to 340,000 per sq. km. This information could enter into Guiness Book of Records. The slum population is about 900,000 according to a study done in 1988. This is supposed to have increased by 1.5 million at least.

According to Professor Nazrul Islam, Director of the Centre for Urban Studies, Dhaka University, 80 per cent of the urban population are to be considered as poor. As a result of growing urban population, the major socio-environmental problems faced by Dhaka are inadequate transportation and traffic jam, lack of proper sanitation, shortage of safe drinking water, inadequate electricity, poor housing, growing squatters and slums, industrial hazards and garbage, toxic wastes and pesticides. These socio-environmental problems have been changing Dhaka city into a model of over-urbanised megacity of the developing countries.

Watchdog Tests its New Teeth

Derek Ingram writes from Auckland

A historic summit in New Zealand ended with the Commonwealth bestowing upon itself rules of behaviour. If countries do not comply they will be disciplined. Nigeria has been suspended and is threatened with expulsion. Two other military regimes are under pressure to reform quickly or go down the same path. Gemini News Service examines the implications of the new rules.

The Commonwealth has given itself the teeth that critics for so long said it lacked. A watchdog committee of eight foreign ministers will decide when a member country strays too far out of line from the principles set down in the 1991 Harare Declaration.

The Declaration deals with democracy, good government and human rights. If a country is seen to be flagrantly contravening the principles — as in the case of Nigeria — the watchdog committee will advise what action shall be taken against the offender.

This turns the Commonwealth into a rule-based organisation and the question arises as to how far this will affect the flexibility and pragmatism with which it has so long been associated.

Nigeria's main complaint about the action taken at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) just ended in Auckland was that the Commonwealth was interfering in its internal affairs.

The summit was shocked into suspending Nigeria from Commonwealth membership by the sudden execution of writer and minority rights campaigner Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others. In an extraordinary press conference before leaving New Zealand its Foreign Minister, Tomi Ikini, conveniently forgot that for decades Nigeria, along with the rest of the Commonwealth, had intervened in the internal affairs of white-ruled South Africa — quite justifiably and with good result.

Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka came to Auckland to lobby for Nigerian democrats. Most pertinently he pointed out that when Africans were in the wrong the Commonwealth should speak out just as strongly as it once did against whites.

Sub-Saharan Africa, a region of some 40 countries, has long been touchy about sovereignty and external intervention — and with reason. For centuries it suffered from imperial and then superpower involvement. This produced a kind of ethnic solidarity in international organisations.

But not only Africa is sensitive. Countries everywhere still begin to curl up at the idea of outsiders coming in to tell them what to do. India and Pakistan have always pulled back from any idea of international help to solve Kashmir and the British would never have brooked the notion of a Commonwealth team looking at Ulster.

And yet the world is rapidly moving towards a situation where nations are increasingly giving up bits of sovereignty. It happens every time a nation joins an international organisation, regional or otherwise. Surrender of sovereignty is at the heart of the problems among the membership of the European Union, particularly Britain.

The lesson so far learned is that governments cannot move faster in this sensitive area than their people, and that lesson is being learned the hard way by the European Union. The Commonwealth has often come under fire in the past for not acting strongly even when there have been gross abuses of human rights within member countries. Now that it is taking tougher action, the critics can hardly complain.

But it is a tricky area, and, until now, the Commonwealth's strength, as well as its weakness, has been to operate with the minimum of written rules, rather in the way that Britain has operated without a written constitution. No-one has totally clean hands, and at his press conference the Nigerian Foreign Minister rather cunningly indicated that Nigeria would expect the eight foreign ministers of the watchdog committee to come only from countries that have no political prisoners and a free press. The eight countries chosen — Britain, Canada, Ghana, Jamaica, Malaysia, New Zealand, South Africa and Zimbabwe — do in fact have a fairly good record. None has transgressed in anything like the way that Nigeria is now doing, but in terms of the Harare Declaration not all are completely clean. The Commonwealth will have to avoid charges about those who live in glass houses."

None the less, the Commonwealth way is likely to be relatively cautious, and, if it plays the new rules right, it could set a model for the rest of the world.

The very existence of these rules could help to keep member countries from drifting into undemocratic situations. There is no reason to believe that the informal approach, which has been the hallmark of the Commonwealth, will not continue.

However, it is most unlikely that the measures now being taken against Nigeria will make any difference to the regime in Abuja. Its leader, General Sani Abacha, has shown himself to be impervious to most international criticism.

Abacha's programme to restore civilian rule in three years' time lacks all credibility. The evidence is that he is a man hanging on to power at all costs. A dictator in such a position becomes fearful of how he is to escape with his life and is driven to more extreme measures.

Meanwhile the country is in economic decline as those in power line their pockets.

People like Soyinka argue that sanctions must he imposed if change is to come. The Commonwealth has given Nigeria two years to make "demonstrable progress" towards civilian rule and democracy.

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Commonwealth tightens the rules