

The Resurgent India

A Monthly National Review

April 2024



“Let us all work for the Greatness of India.”
– The Mother

Year 15

Issue 1

The Resurgent India English monthly published and printed by Smt. Suman Sharma on behalf of The Resurgent India Trust Published at C/o J. N. Socketed Cement Pipes Pvt. Ltd., Village Bhamraula Post Bagwara, Kichha Road, Rudrapur (U.S Nagar) **email:** sadlecjrn@gmail.com, info@resurgentindia.org, URL : www.resurgentindia.org

Printed at : Priyanka Printing Press, Hotel Krish Building, Janta Inter College Road, Udham Nagar, Rudrapur, Uttarakhand

Editor : Ms. Garima Sharma, B-45, Batra Colony, Village Bharatpur, P.O. Kaushal Ganj, Bilaspur Distt. Rampur (U.P)

THE RESURGENT INDIA

A Monthly National Review

April 2024



SUCCESSFUL FUTURE

(Full of Promise and Joyful Surprises)

Botanical name: Gaillardia Pulchella

Common name: Indian blanket, Blanket flower, Fire-wheels

Year 15

Issue 1

CONTENTS

Debasing the Political Culture: The Instructive Trajectory of Aam Aadmi Party	6
Inception and Expansion of the AAP	6
Key Scandals Besetting AAP:	
Misgovernance and More	10
Misgovernance and Corruption:	11
Administrative Deadlock:.....	13
Post-COVID19 Change: Skeletons Fall Out.....	15
Delhi Jal Board scam:	15
Residence Development scam:.....	17
Excise Policy scam:	18
Lack of Public Sympathy	21
The Malady of Development	24
The Web of Corruption: Sacrificing National Character for Development	26
HIGHLIGHTS	33
Developments in Russia and Ukraine	33
Developments in Science and Technology.....	35
Israel-Hamas War	37
Continuing Politics Over Sandeshkhali Debacle	38
Uttarakhand Forest Fires.....	39

A Declaration

We do not fight against any creed, any religion.

We do not fight against any form of government.

We do not fight against any social class.

We do not fight against any nation or civilisation.

We are fighting division, unconsciousness, ignorance, inertia and falsehood.

We are endeavouring to establish upon earth union, knowledge, consciousness, Truth, and we fight whatever opposes the advent of this new creation of Light, Peace, Truth and Love.

– The Mother

(Collected works of the Mother, Vol. 13, pp. 124-25)

DEBASING THE POLITICAL CULTURE: THE INSTRUCTIVE TRAJECTORY OF AAM AADMI PARTY

“Power does not corrupt men; fools, however, if they get into a position of power, corrupt power.” These lines by George Bernard Shaw hold, perhaps, a great relevance to the trajectory followed by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and its chief, Mr. Arvind Kejriwal, who is tenaciously clinging to power despite being put behind bars. With the misdemeanors of Mr. Kejriwal, the centrality of corruption as an issue which evokes public resentment in Indian politics is back to the fore. Ironically, it is the self-proclaimed flagbearers of anti-corruption crusades who are now implicated adversely in some of the most massive corruption scandals that the country has seen in the last few years. The rapid rise and fall of AAP and Mr. Kejriwal are not only undergirded by the numerous corruption scandals allegedly committed by them, but also by the devious ideological war waged by them to mislead the public, bankrolled by dubious foreign support. The saga of AAP exemplifies concretely the travails of modern democratic politics, its utilitarian and corrupt foundations under the garb of development, and the urgent need to reform the political culture in the country.

INCEPTION AND EXPANSION OF THE AAP

The AAP was born in 2012 out of a popular, urban middle-class based anti-corruption movement, namely India Against Corruption (IAC), which was spearheaded by Anna Hazare and in which Mr. Kejriwal had then played a key role. The IAC movement played an important role in capitalizing on the prevailing

anti-incumbency against the then Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) at the centre, which was in the eye of public storm after the Nirbhaya rape case, and several massive corruption scandals. A key demand of the IAC movement at that time was the implementation of the Jan Lokpal Bill to combat corruption in public governance. The AAP emerged out the IAC movement as a splinter group with the objective of transforming from a social movement into a political party. It was initially headed by Arvind Kejriwal, Yogendra Yadav, Anand Jha, Prashant Bhushan and Shanti Bhushan. Its creation was opposed by Anna Hazare on ideological grounds.

Ever since its creation, the primary focus of the AAP was on projecting itself as a people-centric party which provides an alternative to the existing political establishment (consisting mainly of the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and the Congress). It sought to project the existing political establishment as corrupt, steeped in dynastic politics and far removed from the realities and reach of the common person. In contrast, the AAP tried to market itself by claiming that it is ushering in a new era of democratic politics which would be based on principles of transparency, accountability, and participation of the public. During its electoral campaigns, the party attempted to come up with catchy ideas to focus public attention, such as holding *mohalla sabhas*. Its campaigning and pitch in the initial years enabled it to enlist the support of middle class, the poor, the business class as well as the Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), all of whom saw an appeal in the promises made by the AAP.

These principles received further encouragement when the AAP made its first foray into electoral politics in 2013 in Delhi Assembly elections. In these elections, the AAP announced its

arrival, with Kejriwal defeating the then Chief Minister of Delhi, Ms. Sheila Dixit, from her seat. It is widely believed that this was possible due to the support given to the AAP by Congress members who were opposed to Ms. Dixit. In these elections, the party won 28 seats – a little behind the 32 seats won by the BJP – and the Congress won just 8 seats. With these elections, the Congress was decisively wiped out of Delhi politics, never to recover again till date. This first minority government of the AAP – formed with Congress support after the 2013 elections – lasted merely 49 days. This was because, in sync with his style of confrontational politics of victimhood, Kejriwal and his ministers ostentatiously resigned to protest the lack of progress in the passage of the Jan Lokpal Bill at the national level. Thereafter, Delhi came under the rule of the Lieutenant Governor. AAP continued its politics of confrontation and victimhood in relation to the Lt. Governor, enabling it to play the politics of blame shifting and shirk all responsibility and accountability.

From the very beginning, the party's appetite for expansion was also evident. It contested the 2014 Lok Sabha election. While it lost all seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi to the BJP, it, surprisingly, managed to win four seats in Punjab. That the Delhi electorate continued to be held in thrall to the street-style politics of Kejriwal was visible in the subsequent electoral successes of the AAP in Delhi, which contributed to relegating the Congress into near-oblivion and even marginalizing the BJP, although the latter continued to broadly retain its vote-share and give tough competition to AAP in national-level and Municipal-level elections. The 2015 Delhi Assembly elections exemplified this trend well. In these elections, the AAP won a brute majority of 67 out of 70 seats, taking both the BJP and the Congress by surprise.

Soon after its 2015 victory, the party became beset with internal feuds, with Kejriwal consolidating complete control over the party leadership and expelling founding members such as Yogendra Yadav and Prashant and Shanti Bhushan. *The AAP significantly outstripped all other Indian political parties when it adopted the personality cult, centered around Kejriwal. From the beginning, the amount of taxpayers' money that it spent on advancing its personal ambitions was quite visible. Even as the party kept the electorate hoodwinked and appeased through piecemeal projects in education and healthcare (such as the much-publicized mohalla clinics), it squandered huge amounts of money on advertising – especially personalistic advertising centered around Kejriwal.* Kejriwal's pictures pervaded the entire territory of Delhi, right from relatively big projects to something as minor as sewage drain cleaning and fixing potholes (Rai, 2017). A recent response through Right to Information (RTI) showed that the *Delhi government had spent more than 1500 crore in advertising along since 2015, with the advertisement expenditure growing nearly 408 percent in the last five years under the AAP government in Delhi* (OpIndia , 2024).

Throughout its journey since 2015, the AAP has been plagued by incessant controversies. These include sexual harassment explosives, getting funding from Khalistani elements right from the beginning, instances of vigilante justice, allegations of domestic abuse, several early publicity stunts to sustain the confrontational mode of politics, making illegal bureaucratic and other appointments, assaulting bureaucrats and numerous allegations and cases of corruption that started out from relatively low-key allegations to full-fledged massive scandals. Apart from that, the AAP has also played an infamous role during the 2020 Delhi communal riots, and subsequently, in the handling of the COVID-

19 pandemic. Its rule in Delhi has also been consistently marked by a track record of confrontation with the Lt. Governor, right from the time of the Congress-appointed Lt. Governor, Najeeb Jung. Beneath all the accusations leveled by AAP against the office of the Lt. Governor is the bare struggle and greed for power which comes to the fore as the central element in the politics of AAP. *Ever since ascendance to power, AAP has always been in the eye of scandals and infamy.*

Since Delhi is a Union Territory with a special status and the national capital, the contribution of AAP to actual governance (except for piecemeal programmes shrouded in mystery) is very hard to discern in a VIP territory where everything is available from the central government. Spearheaded by Kejriwal, what most stood out about AAP was the numerous promises of freebies that were made to the people from time-to-time, especially around the election season. Above all, the effective use of propaganda machinery and media ensured that even the most minor and non-existent elements favouring AAP were amplified out of proportion.

KEY SCANDALS BESETTING AAP: MISGOVERNANCE AND MORE

Over the course of the last eight years, the AAP has been embroiled continuously in several scandals. These not only include corruption and mismanagement, but also peddling a communal agenda, grey areas over sources of funding and displaying blatant anti-nationalism. While the AAP has been cautious to not explicitly expose itself in all these issues, yet over the years, the patterns have become clear.

Key examples include the arrest of AAP workers and leaders in *Delhi Communal Riots of 2020* and the role played by them in

instigating violence against the Hindus; the alleged funding and initially explicit support given to *Khalistani elements* which was visible with renewed vigour during the 2020 Farmers Protests and its politics in Punjab; and, the manner in which the AAP government in Delhi deliberately *mishandled the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic* creating not only extreme panic in public psychology but also doing so with a devious motive to show the country as backward and ill-equipped by resorting to the use of blatant misinformation. More recently, Khalistani terrorist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun – who is at the centre of diplomatic controversy between India and US – *claimed that AAP has received USD 16 million from Khalistani terrorist groups and their supporters between 2014 to 2022*, and that Kejriwal had proposed to release Delhi Bomb Blast case accused Devinder Pal Singh Bhullar in exchange for money (Rastogi, 2024).

Thus, even as the AAP consolidated its hold on power after 2015, the devious patterns of its politics became more and more visible with the passing years, despite all attempts to hoodwink the public through unrealistic promises and flashy schemes.

Misgovernance and Corruption:

Over the years, AAP has been plagued by corruption and misgovernance. However, thanks to its successful media propaganda, there has been little by way of serious systematic exposure of such maladies of the party. *A key case of misgovernance and corruption by AAP is its vote-begetting programme, Aam Aadmi Mohalla Clinics (AAMC) scheme*, started in 2015 and being implemented in Delhi and Punjab. It is a highly publicized scheme claiming to provide subsidized low-cost healthcare services to the public, through community health

centers established in every mohalla/neighbourhood and has been sought to be replicated and studied as a model. Such has been the level of publicity that these mohalla clinics have been liberally lauded by the United Nations and its former Secretary Generals, by other world leaders and well-known academic journals.

For such a programme to be at the centre of controversy is, therefore, more significant. In more recent times, the scheme has been at the centre of allegations of corruption, mismanagement and irregularities, becoming a target of investigation by Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), although this is nothing compared to the bigger corruption scandals that the party has recently committed.

The murky working of mohalla clinics came to light in 2023 when the Department of Health and Family Welfare took cognizance of the fact that ***doctors at these clinics, across Delhi, resorted to unethical practices, and manipulated attendance records with pre-recorded video footages.*** When patients visited these clinics, it was the unauthorized staff who provided prescriptions and medicines. This development led the Department of Health and Family Welfare to launch a further probe into suspicions of further corruption at these clinics. The findings revealed a ***nexus between these mohalla clinics and private testing labs to whom testing was often outsourced by the Delhi government. The irregularities unearthed in the probe were recorded in a mere three months' time, during which over 6 lakh tests were conducted at two private testing labs, indicating a widespread 'scam' which was suspected to run into hundreds of crores of money pilfered to provide monetary benefits to the private labs.*** Apart from this major scam, these clinics have also been under scanner for ***ghost patients who do not exist except of***

paper and use of spurious drugs that failed quality tests done after complaints received from several patients (Srivastava, 2024).

The scam-ridden record of these clinics has begun to cast shadow even in Punjab, whose Assembly elections AAP won with a majority in 2022. To export the mohalla clinic model in that state, the AAP-led government in Punjab is launching mohalla clinics in already existing primary health centers (Sewa Kendras) and converting even basic dispensaries into mohalla clinics, drawing protests from the locals. The AAP-led government even went onto convert centrally funded Ayushman Bharat health centers in mohalla clinics, leading the central government to threaten to slash funding (Srivastava, 2024).

Administrative Deadlock:

The *constant confrontation between Mr. Kejriwal and the LG* has been a marked feature of the Delhi governance scenario ever since AAP took reins of the government. The confrontation has been marked by unfounded allegations by the AAP government that the LG does not let the government function by withholding approvals, through interferences and other administrative blockades. The confrontation has been a mask to hide the ambition for power on the part of the AAP. The key *contention was over who would exercise control over bureaucrats involved in the Delhi administration. The nexus between politicians and bureaucrats is an old and well-known one and the cause of pervasive corruption* and misuse of power.

In Delhi, however, due to the unique legal administrative status of the Union Territory (under Article 239AA of the Indian Constitution), the attempts of the government to control bureaucrats and cover up smoothly the corrupt practices of the

ruling party members has proven to be much more challenging. As a result, the territory has witnessed constant deadlock as the question of administrative control had been under litigation for a prolonged period, settled only in 2023 by the Supreme Court.

The final judgement of the Court on this matter was delivered in May 2023, wherein it upheld the powers of the Delhi government to exercise administrative control independent of the Centre despite its status as a Union Territory. However, soon, the Centre passed an Ordinance to nullify the effect of the judgement. The Ordinance barred the Delhi government from making laws on services regardless of what ‘any court’ says and created a 3-member body, called the National Capital Civil Service Authority (NCCSA), to regulate the civil servants in Delhi.

The incriminating politics behind this power tussle between the Centre and the AAP government was revealed soon after the Court passed its judgement last year. As soon as the Court gave its verdict, the Delhi government was quick to dismiss a bureaucrat who oversaw the entire investigation into liquor scam, renovation scam and numerous other corruption scandals of the AAP government. The Delhi government had his office sealed, perhaps with the intent of seizing incriminating evidence. But with the passage of the Ordinance, the bureaucrat was re-installed immediately within a day by the central government.

This *recent saga showed the desperation of the AAP government, indicating that the reason for desiring administrative control could be to commit corrupt acts* more freely, instead of actual governance. Even prior to these exposes, the *misdeemeanors of the AAP government had come to light as early as 2016 through the revelations of the Shunglu panel report*, which was released after scrutinizing more than 400 files pertaining to the

Delhi government. This was in the aftermath of the scandal involving 21 AAP MLAs appointed as parliamentary secretaries by the Chief Minister who were named in an office-of-profit controversy, inviting judicial intervention. Several MLAs were named in high-level cases too.

Besides that, the assault on a civil servant in the presence of the Chief Minister was another indication of the nature of AAP politics. The *Shunglu report exposed several questionable appointments made by the AAP government*. These included Satyendra Jain's daughter Soumya Jain to the mohalla clinic programme, appointment of Kejriwal's relative, illegal accommodations and other favors bestowed, questionable contractual appointments made without following the due procedure etc. The report also exposed how these questionable appointments were followed by salary hikes, foreign travel undertaken by ministers and other staff without prior approval of the LG etc. (Mishra, Tyagi, & Kunal, 2017).

POST-COVID19 CHANGE: SKELETONS FALL OUT

After the COVID19 lockdown, several major scams have been exposed, compromising the reputation of AAP and Mr. Kejriwal to an irretrievable extent.

Delhi Jal Board scam:

While corruption allegations against the AAP had already mired it in trouble, in March 2024, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) filed its first chargesheet in, yet another scam linked to the party – the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) scam. The ED had contended that *bribe money generated from corruption in a contract issued by*

the DJB was “passed on” as election funds to the AAP in Delhi.

ED had also summoned Arvind Kejriwal and one of his ministers, Ms. Atishi, for questioning in the case, but they did not appear before it. Four individuals and a company have been named as the accused in the chargesheet – former DJB chief engineer Jagdish Kumar Arora, contractor Anil Kumar Agarwal, former NBCC general manager D K Mittal, one Tejinder Singh and a company called NKG Infrastructure Limited.

The ED case is based on an FIR registered by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in 2022, which alleged that DJB’s Jagdish Kumar Arora, awarded a 38-crore contract to NKG Infrastructure Limited in 2017. In January this year, the ED arrested Arora and a contractor, Anil Kumar Aggarwal. The case alleged that NKG Infrastructure won the bidding based on forged documents and Arora knew the company did not meet the technical eligibility. Arora received a bribe in cash and bank accounts after the contract went to NKG Infrastructure. The amount was allegedly passed on to persons connected with the AAP in the form of election funds to the party (Mukherjee, 2024).

In addition to committing this scam, the AAP government further heightened the woes of an already distressed DJB in a city which is increasingly facing water shortages especially during summer months. ***By promising free water in exchange of votes – the populist campaign promise of AAP – the Delhi government heightened the debt burden of the DJB from Rs. 20,000 crores (at the time when the AAP assumed power in Delhi in 2013) to Rs. 73,000 crores presently*** (Organiser, 2024). When financial disputes related to the DJB reached the Supreme Court due to allegations by the Delhi government that funds are not being disbursed to the DJB, submissions by the Delhi Finance Secretary

showed that while the DJB received more than Rs 28,400 crore since 2015-16 it did not use the funds as per sanction conditions. Further, the Finance Secretary also submitted that the DJB was losing out on a potential revenue of about Rs 1,200 crore per annum due to non-enhancement of tariff against domestic bills alone (PTI, 2024).

Thus, the numerous issues relating to the DJB span not only instances of deep-rooted mismanagement, but also scams committed through illegal tendering processes whose proceeds can directly be traced to the party.

Residence Development scam:

Yet another scam that has evoked public anger recently is the money spent on the development of the official residence of the Chief Minister. This came to light last year with the exposure of documents showing that Rs 45 crore was spent on rebuilding and renovating the official residence of the Chief Minister. The money was spent in six tranches between 2020 and 2022. In this regard, the L-G's office had sent a report to the Centre, pointing out that gross financial irregularities and “extravagant expenditure” took place at the behest of “Hon’ble CM Madam” – a reference to Kejriwal’s wife – during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the initial cost for construction work had been pegged at 15-20 crore, the report said that the expense had been inflated from time to time, eventually amounting to 53 crore. Further, the ownership of the property was not ascertained by the Public Works Department (PWD) before commencing the construction, and several mandatory approvals were not sought.

Thereafter, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) registered a preliminary enquiry to investigate alleged “irregularities and

misconduct” by unidentified Delhi government’s public servants in the construction of the house. Interestingly, the report was being prepared and investigated by Special Secretary (Vigilance) Y.V.V.J. Rajasekhar who had been immediately divested of all duties by the Delhi government following the latest Supreme Court verdict on the services issue in May 2023, and his office was sealed and taken control of by the Delhi government. At the time, there was widespread apprehension that the government may try to interfere with the evidence linked to this scam. It was likely this anticipation which led to the central government immediately reinstating Rajasekhar and creating the NCCSA in a bid to get around the Supreme Court verdict which had disproportionately inflated the power of the Delhi government.

Excise Policy scam:

After a series of scams, it was finally, most recently, in the excise policy scam – also known as the Delhi liquor scam – that Arvind Kejriwal was arrested, after having ignored nine summons to appear before the ED. This was the *first instance of a sitting Chief Minister being jailed, with even the Delhi High Court refusing to grant him protection from arrest.* The Delhi Excise Policy case arose in 2022 based on a report submitted by Delhi Chief Secretary to the Lieutenant Governor (L-G) of Delhi.

The report alleged that there were procedural lapses in the formulation of the Delhi Excise Policy 2021-22, which briefly came into force in November 2021 but was later scrapped in July 2022 due to widespread resistance from the people. Prior to the formulation of the new excise policy by the AAP government in 2021, the liquor business in the city was regulated by the government of Delhi, with around 60% being under government

control and 40% being under private ownership. The new excise policy was formulated with the stated aim of curbing mafia and black marketing in the liquor business in the city.

However, instead of fulfilling this goal, the ***new policy led to a privatization of the liquor business***, giving an overwhelming role to private vendors in the liquor market. Not only this, the ***rules for selling liquor were relaxed greatly for the purpose of commercial greed***, thereby always making liquor easily available to people and at most breweries. Under the policy, the city was divided into 32 zones and each zone would have 27 liquor shops. Facilitating such ***easy availability of liquor was done with complete disregard to the high crime rates, violence against women and road accidents in the city***, which can be exacerbated by the influence of alcohol (Rastogi, 2024). It was also ***resented by the communities for leading to excessively wasteful expenditure on alcohol*** thus made cheaply available, especially to people from low-income families.

With the new policies accelerating the revenues of the Delhi government, the ***motive of commercial greed further led to corruption and pilfering of funds*** to benefit those involved. This was made worse by the ***illegal nature of the policy***, in principle, as it was formulated without the approval of the office of LG. Due to the widespread negativity and illegality surrounding the policy, the office of the LG ordered an investigation by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) into the policy in 2022. The ***CBI found an unholy nexus between license holders, their proxy owners, politicians, and ministers of the Delhi government, thereby registering a case of criminal conspiracy and corruption and getting the ED also involved***. The ED investigation confirmed this unholy nexus and discovered how several cartels had been formed during the implementation of this policy, with the same

people controlling the entire supply chain of liquor sale from manufacturing to retailing, under proxy identities.

The crux of the ED charges was that the AAP and its key functionaries – including Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister – received kickbacks from liquor companies in exchange for giving them preferential treatment and these, in turn, were used to influence the 2022 State Assembly elections in Punjab and Goa. These kickbacks amounted to more than 100 crores used to fight Punjab elections. This preferential treatment included relaxation in license fee, various other waivers on penalties, relaxations during the COVID-19 pandemic etc. In 2021 itself, the ED had, in its first report, maintained that the excise policy was formulated with deliberate loopholes which could be exploited and promoted cartel formations. It led to a loss of nearly 600 crores to the exchequer within 8-9 months.

As per the ED investigation, the scam involved giving wholesale liquor businesses to private companies with a fixed margin of 12% in return for a 6% kickback. Over the last few months, the ED had arrested several top AAP leaders – apart from businessmen involved in the scam – with direct links in the money trail. These include well-known names like Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh (released on bail), apart from others. Attempts by the accused to erase evidence include misplacing at least 171 gadgets, including 14 mobile phones and 43 mobile SIM cards belonging to Sisodia alone (Ranjan, 2024). However, it is for Mr. Kejriwal that the ED reserved the distinction of label as the kingpin and key conspirator of the scam.

The ED also maintains that the excise policy was drafted, with direct involvement of Mr. Kejriwal, to, particularly, give favors to what is known as the South Group – which includes influential

people in southern India who received favourable terms in setting up alcohol businesses and in turn paid around 100 crore rupees to AAP. Around 45 crore rupees received from the South Group was also allegedly used by AAP, again under the direct control of Kejriwal (as evident through video calls and other corroborative evidence) during the Goa assembly elections. In connection with this, the arrest of K. Kavitha, daughter of former Telangana Chief Minister, K. Chandrasekhar Rao, from Bhartiya Rashtra Samiti, was one of the most high-profile arrests in the scam.

The ED chargesheet explains how AAP was a beneficiary listed as a company which would directly receive the kickbacks. To investigate money laundering, a political party can be treated as a company incorporated under the Companies Act, 2013. Therefore, people responsible for the company become liable, with Mr. Kejriwal not only being individually liable, but also indirectly liable by being the national convener of AAP, under whose decision-making laundered funds were used in Punjab and Goa elections.

LACK OF PUBLIC SYMPATHY

The arrest of Mr. Kejriwal in the excise policy scam, towards the end of March, has come amid campaigning for the Lok Sabha elections. As such, it prevents him from campaigning for the elections. Not only that, but over the past year, most of the senior party leaders and ministers from AAP have also been languishing in jail over various corruption charges. The arrest of the Chief Minister, therefore, raises the vital question of whether it has evoked public sympathy for Mr. Kejriwal and his party.

Interestingly, despite enjoying popularity and winning elections in Delhi over a period, the reputation of the party and of Mr.

Kejriwal has been dented and their misdeeds exposed to such an extent that this time ***there appears to be little public sympathy.*** This was visible from the fact that when the AAP attempted to mobilize the people in the wake of Kejriwal's arrest, it received a lukewarm response. Further, immediately after the arrest, when Arvind Kejriwal's wife attempted to mobilize people by asking them to send messages in his support to a phone number, it also backfired, as people overwhelmingly sent rude messages and abuses asking him to resign, leading Mrs. Kejriwal to retract the number (Singh, 2024). There was little by way of any mass public protests, and ***despite generating some surprise, the arrest did not cause any significant impact on the public psyche.*** The arrest of a popular, sitting Chief Minister caused no public disruption, with the normal routine being followed and with many people not even expressing sympathy with Kejriwal (Gandhiok, 2024).

Indeed, it may have had the opposite effect. For, after the arrest, Mr. Kejriwal refused to resign from the position of the Chief Minister, insisting on managing the government from jail. This was the first instance of its kind. In the past, when any Chief Minister was arrested, their arrest would be preceded by a resignation from their post. The most recent example of this was Hemant Soren of Jharkhand. However, ***Kejriwal's greed for power was exposed unabashedly in this case, reflecting utter disregard for basic moral obligations towards the public and taking public support for granted.*** Coming on top of already massive corruption scandals in which half of his ministers are imprisoned, the situation is unlikely to inspire any public support or confidence.

Indeed, some basic public surveys did reveal this to be the case, with majority of people being either divided over the question of intention and timing of the arrest, and feeling convinced that

no person can be arrested without any reasonable grounds thereby justifying the arrest (Mahajan, 2024). The *doubts of the public may centre around the intent behind the arrest, but not about the grounds of the arrest. This shows the massive repercussions of the corruption cases that have resonated with the public.* This is true not just for Kejriwal's arrest and the woes of AAP, but of the state of the Opposition in general.

For, the arrest of Kejriwal has also taken place in the context of enforcement action against other Opposition parties and leaders – such as, arrest of Hemant Soren, freezing of bank accounts of the Congress party by the Income Tax department etc. Yet, none of these enforcement actions appear to have generated any public sympathy for the Opposition, despite the Opposition spokespersons constantly manufacturing the discourse of rising authoritarianism of the BJP-led Centre (Gupta, 2024). This shows that *in the mind of the common public, enforcement action on corruption issues resonates with some element of guilt. There is, thus, no public sympathy for politicians or criminals prosecuted for their misdemeanors, regardless of how popular they were.* The same goes for Kejriwal.

At the same time, there is no public outrage over these corruption scandals either, reflecting that the public has become highly accustomed to expecting such low behaviour from their political representatives. This is true in the present scenario as well. *Corruption has become such an ingrained part of public life that it has ceased to evoke either sympathy or outrage from the public towards those being prosecuted.* Therefore, on the streets of Delhi, among the common person, there is no surprise at the arrest of Kejriwal. Having ignored multiple summons from the ED and with a foundation already laid by having half his

government ledged in jail, this arrest was well expected. Perhaps that is why AAP had conducted a ludicrous public survey in 2023 which asked the people whether Kejriwal should run the government from jail if he is arrested. Without any basis, the party soon made its own survey findings public, saying that people believe that Kejriwal should indeed run the government from jail if he is arrested.

THE MALADY OF DEVELOPMENT

“The uplifting of a nation cannot be accomplished by a few diplomatic politicians. The spirit to serve, the spirit to work, the spirit to suffer must be roused. Men in their ordinary utilitarian course of life do not feel called upon to serve anyone except themselves...we must continuously appeal to his better nature, we must evoke the spiritual in him, we must call forth his moral enthusiasm.

These may not be human nature’s daily food, they may not be necessary for our daily life, they may not have their use in the ordinary selfish pursuits, but they are essential for working a change in our social or political life...England is commercially great because Adam Smith gave her the secret of free-trade. England is politically great because her national ideals have been bold and high, not because of her parish work and municipalities.” – Sri Aurobindo (CWSA 7, 880).

The corrupt trajectory followed by the AAP may have been finally exposed convincingly in the minds of the people, yet it only goes on to show that *AAP is merely one element of an increasingly deteriorating Indian political culture*, albeit an element that is more pathological than others. Yet, *over the years, Indian politics has been compromised, thanks to the*

overwhelming focus of our political representatives on the idea of development. Even the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) ruling at the centre under PM Modi has not been immune to this disease. The party has been swinging confusedly between nationalism and development.

In the lexicon of Indian politics – right from Nehru to Modi – development has always been defined in terms of the lowest common denominator. It has been defined in terms of access to basic material necessities of life. Nehru prioritized this view because India was emerging from the difficult and broken phase of Partition and Independence at the time. Indira Gandhi went a step further and developed this idea into a whole new discourse. She interweaved development with socialism and sought to cultivate the poorest as her vote-bank, while at the same time using her populism as a cover to consolidate her power. Indian leaders following Mrs. Gandhi adhered to the same script, despite the rupture brought about by the 1991 liberalization reforms in India. *The present government, under Mr. Modi, continues to stick to this plank of development or vikas, despite vigorously prioritizing nationalist cultural revival as well. Many times, the two aims produce contradictory effects; for, while the development plank focuses on the utilitarian idea of fulfilling selfish needs, nationalism has as its element leaving behind selfish attitudes and working towards collective revival* for the sake of the country.

Across the political spectrum, the idea of development has been difficult to discard thanks to its electoral appeal. It was under the garb of this idea that AAP had been able to effectively hijack the public mind and get away with numerous misdemeanors. For, *the discourse of development thus fostered has its deeper roots in the malady of Utilitarianism.* In India, what is visible is its

lowest common denominator in the form of *elevating “bread and butter” issues to the pedestal of supreme importance in public life, resulting in the inculcation of acute selfishness in the functioning of individuals and groups.* This has manifested in the form of a singular obsession with material success at the cost of forsaking all higher values and nobler aspirations that can improve the fabric of national life and character.

Thus, if carefully looked at, it is visible that this discourse of development has become a major barrier towards collective national growth.

THE WEB OF CORRUPTION: SACRIFICING NATIONAL CHARACTER FOR DEVELOPMENT

Development, as has been conceived in Indian political discourse over the years, has neither meant real individual development to create better citizens, nor has the political class ever attempted to go beyond the issues of basic needs to include larger issues of national and collective growth under the conception of development.

Any form of true national development should include within its ambit not only the issues of material growth, but growth of individual psychological and spiritual development. The latter alone can contribute to the strengthening of national character, without which all talk of development will ring as a hollow perversion. *Ironically, the growth of national character which is the most important element of national growth has rarely ever formed a part of Indian political discourse of development,* with the masses being completely alien to this concept. *Perhaps that is why the Indian public space has such a large bandwidth and tolerance space for corruption.*

In the Indian public life, *for over many decades, corruption has not simply been an aberration visible in the public sphere but has been an integral part of the public and private life in the country.* Thanks to the rigidly twisted framework of rules conceived during the decades of socialist dominance, corruption became more like a survival instinct of the common person, a way to navigate the rigid and irrational design of systems. Presently, we may not have socialist dominance anymore, yet the tolerance for corruption persists.

For, over the years, the idea and practice of corruption has gone from being a survival instinct to becoming normalized and acceptable. This especially happened during the years of Congress dominance under the two successive UPA coalition regimes. Here the idea was that everyone should be freely allowed to commit corruption, right from the political class and bureaucrats to the businesses and common masses. The system pervaded all levels of public life, without much outcry or objection from the public, resulting in numerous high-profile scams. With this kind of public culture being so deep-rooted, it is not surprising then that despite being a den of corrupt practices from the very beginning, AAP has enjoyed a great degree of tolerance and latitude in the public psychology.

Although it came to power with the obviously false promise of weeding out corruption from public life, *AAP and its leaders have come to represent some of the worst and most perverse forms of psychological, moral, and material corruption far exceeding anything committed by political parties before it.* Due to its ostentatious aim of focusing on the so-called common man or *aam aadmi*, it has also come to represent some of the worst forms of utilitarianism, manifested in the selfish obsession with

acquiring as many material goods as possible with as little effort, thereby making politics about identities and entitlements instead of about effort and growth.

Its rise has wrought immense damage to the public psychology. ***Its manipulation of issues like religion-secularism debate and issues of national identity with the aim of depoliticizing them and debasing them to the singular lens of individual selfishness has wrought more collective psychological damage than even the explicit appeasement policies of the Congress party.*** It was no wonder that there was a phase when much of the Delhi populace fancied themselves depoliticized do-gooders unconcerned with major issues afflicting the nation, until rude shocks were received in the form of the communal riots, utterly selfish and anti-national mismanagement during the pandemic, and exposure of a series of scams. With this high intensity, but brief lived trajectory, AAP has now come full circle. Its saga has been a valuable and instructive phase in Indian politics; for, its coming to an end has created an awareness like never before, sensitizing, both, the people, and the political class to the true dangers confronting the nation in the form of subtle forces that attempt to break it apart.

Its case has been instructive in revealing the perversity at the heart of public policy process in India. As has been pointed out in A Divine Life Manifesto, “*The basic problem with the whole approach to public policy in India lies in its failure to recognise that: (i) at the present level of egoistic human consciousness, an overwhelming majority of the people cannot be induced to perform efficiently except through a system based on material incentives and disincentives, (ii) that no amount of planning and other efforts directed at achieving an ideal social state or condition can ever be successful in the absence of an accompanying higher consciousness. The experience of the past forty years amply bears this out*” (Sri Aurobindo Divine Life

Education Centre, 1998, p. 239).

The blind pursuit of the gospel of development by successive governments has borne this out. As we have seen, what such a pursuit led to was the development of a voracious vital appetite for ever greater material satisfaction at the cost of compromising with real development, which encompasses the growth of national character and demands, at the very least, a collective psychological change and, for greater progress, a movement towards collective spiritual transformation. While in India, we have seen how our inefficient developmental model, post-Independence, culminated in encouraging corruption and manipulations, yet even in its most efficient form, such a model can only produce worse perversities. Under the present government, the developmental model has been made efficient and largely corruption-free – as visible in the welfare system – yet it has generated perverse incentives which are now culminating in ecological disasters and psychological dissatisfaction.

The deeper reason for this lies in the fact that, “*the modern ideal of progress and material prosperity, even when pursued efficiently, cannot, however, lead us to a state basically different from the state of the modern industrialised societies. As long as we are shut up in our present narrow consciousness with its enormous concentration on material pleasures and comforts, the effective pursuit and attainment of a higher ideal state is not really possible. The key to the whole problem lies in a transition to a higher level of consciousness. For, at the present level of consciousness, no matter how ingeniously and efficiently we organise our society, we cannot basically do too much better than the other materially advanced societies*” (Sri Aurobindo Divine Life Education Centre, 1998, p. 240).

Presently, India appears to be traversing precisely such a trajectory. We have moved from a developmental system which encouraged corruption and inefficiency to the one where in the

name of efficient development, we are imitating all the precepts of western materialism and causing irreversible damage to our real collective growth. Our present development mantra is based on a blind faith in the idea of perfecting the outer institutional machinery, without realizing that such outer decorations mask the rot within. For, as Sri Aurobindo had said, *“This erring race of human beings dreams always of perfecting their environment by the machinery of government and society; but it is only by the perfection of the soul within that the outer environment can be perfected. What thou art within, that outside thee thou shalt enjoy; no machinery can rescue thee from the law of thy being”* (CWSA 12, 468). And for India, the law of her nature, her *Swadharma*, is not to blindly imitate the West, but to pave the way for humanity in the light of collective spiritual transformation. Just like in the case of individuals, so in the case of collectivities, to reject the law of our own nature and follow an alien law is as good as perishing.

Therefore, *“India can best develop herself and serve humanity by being herself and following the law of her own nature. This does not mean, as some narrowly and blindly suppose, the rejection of everything new that comes to us in the stream of Time or happens to have been first developed or powerfully expressed by the West. Such an attitude would be intellectually absurd, physically impossible, and above all unspiritual; true spirituality rejects no new light, no added means or materials of our human self-development. It means simply to keep our centre, our essential way of being, our inborn nature and assimilate to it all we receive, and evolve out of it all we do and create.”* (CWSA 20, 1997).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

CWSA 20. (1997). *Renaissance in India*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust.

CWSA 7. (1997). *Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo, Volume 7*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust.

Gandhiok, J. (2024, March 23). *Hindustan Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-news/kejriwal-arrest-a-bit-of-buzz-some-anxiety-but-largely-business-as-usual-in-delhi-101711133877964.html>

Gupta, R. (2024, March 28). *The Indian Express*. Retrieved from <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/indian-public-does-not-care-about-arvind-kejriwal-arrest-9234201/>

Mahajan, S. (2024, March 31). *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/people-on-the-streets-divided-over-kejriwals-arrest/article67999642.ece>

Mishra, A., Tyagi, A., & Kunal, K. (2017, April 6). *India Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/shunglu-committee-report-indicts-arvind-kejriwal-led-delhi-government-969710-2017-04-05>

Mukherjee, S. (2024, March 17). *Livemint*. Retrieved from <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/all-about-delhi-jal-board-case-in-which-ed-has-summoned-arvind-kejriwal-atishi-11710670420324.html>

OpIndia . (2024, April 27). *OpIndia*. Retrieved from <https://www.opindia.com/2024/04/aap-delhi-government-advertisement-expenditure-fifteen-hundred-crores-last-nine-years-rti-reveals-exclusive/>

PTI. (2024, April 8). *The Economic Times*. Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/djb-lacks-accountability-received-more-than-rs-28400-cr-since-2015-16-delhi-finance-secy-to-sc/articleshow/109133721.cms?from=mdr>

Rai, P. (2017). AAP has Decimated a Historic Mandate for Alternative Politics. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52:17.

Ranjan, N. (2024, April 1). *Panchjanya*. Retrieved from <https://panchjanya.com/2024/04/01/327153/bharat/genie-in-the-bottle/>

Rastogi, S. (2024, March 28). *Organiser*. Retrieved from <https://organiser.org/2024/03/28/229707/bharat/the-liquorgate-or-something-deep-the-spygate/>

Singh, A. (2024, March 30). *The Free Press Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.freepressjournal.in/india/aap-deleted-whatsapp-number-launched-to-support-arvind-kejriwal-after-people-sent-messages-demanding-his-resignation-claims-bjp>

A Divine Life Manifesto (1998). Jhunjhunu: Sri Aurobindo Divine Life Education Centre.

Srivastava, A. (2024, January 8). *The New Indian Express*. Retrieved from <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2024/Jan/08/mess-in-the-mohalla-2649004.html>

HIGHLIGHTS

DEVELOPMENTS IN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

The dynamics in the Russia-Ukraine war continue to exhibit same patterns as those seen in the recent past. These dynamics are characterized by the Russian inability to expand any further in Ukraine as well as the inability to consolidate a few areas that it has established its troop presence in, and the inability of Ukraine to evict Russia and secure a decisive victory. As a result, a stalemate continues to persist in the war, despite constant attacks by each side into the territory of the other, especially using drones.

However, what this stalemate is helping to achieve in the long run is a lot more significant. It is gradually bringing about a near-permanent crippling of Russian economy, society, and military capabilities from within. Already, in terms of military outcomes, the Black Sea standoff is going in favour of Ukraine; for, the Russian Navy's reserve of admirals and ships is steadily decreasing following numerous setbacks at the hands of Ukraine's drone and missile offensive, leading to the destruction of one-third of the Black Sea Fleet. Another significant development was Ukraine's drone attack on a refinery in Tatarstan, which hit a target 1,200 kilometers from the war frontlines and showed that Kyiv can bring the war far deeper into Russia than ever before. The attack provoked a rethink within federal Russian provinces, leading to doubts about Russia's ability to defend them.

Interestingly, Russia no longer terms the ongoing war as a special military operation and calls it a war. This means that the country is preparing itself for a long haul instead of a faster victory. However, the more this war of attrition drags on, the more will be the costs exacted from Russia, both materially and

psychologically. Terrorist attacks, restiveness and resentment among the locals, dependence on pariah states like Iran and North Korea, and becoming a Chinese satellite state have left Russia highly powerless and diminished. Most recently, the rise of independent and powerful right-wing, pro-imperialist, neo-Nazi paramilitary outfits within Russia – which have criticized Putin’s leadership as well as his calls to “denazify” Ukraine – are increasingly posing a challenge to Putin’s authority.

These long-term changes exemplify the real outcomes of the ongoing war. They are set to have long-term implications for European strategic calculus. The fact that this war has been going on for more than two years has left European security hanging in a delicate balance of power. So far, European response to the war has been determined by its selfish political interests – rather than any deeper moral vision. Threatened by Russian aggression and irrationality, Europe has determined that Ukrainian advances in the war might propel an insecure Russia to take the escalation to the next level, turning it into a disastrous thermonuclear war. This, perhaps, explains the lackluster European approach and lack of aid to Ukraine. At the same time, any meaningful Russian advancement in the war may lead to an overcoming of Ukraine entirely, thereby turning Ukraine into a Russian front to wage war against the rest of Europe and amplifying the Russian power manifold. This is also an unacceptable outcome for Europe. Any undesirable outcome for Europe is also undesirable for the United States, as the security of both are inseparably connected.

It is in this context that it is possible to situate the USD 60 billion in aid cleared by the US House of Representatives which will act as a big morale booster for Ukraine. In terms of military advantage, it may pave the way for Ukraine to continue resisting

Russia and perpetuate the existing balance of power but is unlikely to assure decisive victory.

DEVELOPMENTS IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

As the development of technology scales new heights, its applications are diversifying in more and more areas, and the deployment of Artificial Intelligence (AI) across all these areas has become a constant factor. While – as discussed in previous issues – governments are grappling with the question of how to regulate AI, they are also hastening to enter an emergent arms race driven mainly by AI capabilities, which seeks to change ideas of military strategy completely.

A recent example of this is the development of the Strategic Support Force (SSF), developed by China over the last few years, and increasingly being deployed to supplement Chinese military intelligence and capabilities across all domains, particularly *domains like outer space, cyberspace, electromagnetic and psychological warfare domains*. China defines the development of these new capabilities across these unexploited domains as building “strategic capabilities in emerging areas” which will give the country “asymmetrical” advantages and “hugely” change the military balance between rivals.

However, even as AI scales new heights, there is also now a dawning realization of its limitations. The speed with which generative AI technologies are being developed reflects the mechanical nature of the entire process. As soon as a model is developed, its competitor comes forth and the earlier one becomes outdated. Technologists have called this the scaling hypothesis, premised on the idea of exponentially limitless growth of

technology and its potential to overtake human abilities based on more and better data and more advanced computer chips.

The one inherent limitation of this hypothesis, which is now increasingly visible, is that AI models will precipitate in the absence of data. In the mad rush for data, data is not only being bought, but also being made by AI companies by creating large networks of people for this purpose, which would ultimately be used to train AI models. Very soon, the process becomes inefficient. There is also an increasing realization that no matter how refined the data and the process through which it is generated, the AI models based on it can never master real life situations and dilemmas faced by human beings. They will always be limited by data. An instructive example of this is that current generative AI models are only capable of *system-1* thinking. In human beings, this corresponds to an automatic mode of thinking based on instinctual decisions. In their present stage, where scientists are making painstaking efforts to apply AI models to more and more complicated applications, they are also increasingly realizing the superiority and necessity of the human brain.

Going a step further, what the scientists do not seem ready to admit is the nature of the human brain itself. They assume that AI models – as neural networks – can mirror the brain, assuming that the human brain is constituted of such biological neural networks which give rise to its functions, spanning understanding, intelligence, emotions, and sensations. However, the human brain is not simply a product of biological mechanisms, but is also dynamized by consciousness, which determines everything else. This is what makes human intelligence real. Artificial intelligence will continue to remain artificial precisely because it is constituted of and limited by its human-made composition.

ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

The Israel-Hamas war witnessed an unprecedented rupture in the form of a barrage of more than 300 Iranian drones and missile attack on Israel. This was stated to be in response to the Israeli attack on an Iranian consulate in Syria which led to the killing of two top Iranian officials. The Iranian counterattack on Israel was unprecedented as this was the first time that Iran was directly getting involved in the ongoing conflict, the first time that Iran was directly confronting an enemy (Israel) and represented the biggest crisis in the region since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. After the attack, while Iran proclaimed that it had accomplished its mission and declared retreat, Israel was left in a difficult spot.

The biggest dilemma before Israel, and its ally United States, was how to respond to the Iranian aggravation without causing a regional escalation of the war. The US made it clear that it did not want Israel to attack Iran directly as it would expand the war regionally. Israel also probably did not want that, as such an escalation would inevitably draw Hezbollah and Lebanon into the war, thereby cornering Israeli manpower and resources into another active front. At the same time, Israel could not rest the matter without some kind of retaliation, lest it give a victory to Iran and embolden the enemies of Israel to cause further damage.

A small window of relief was offered to Israel in that the Iranian attack did not cause any damage or casualties in Israel. With the help of US, UK and Jordan, Israel was able to anticipate 99% of the Iranian projectiles. As a result, Israeli allies insisted – and Israel also calculated – that the retaliation can be proportionate without causing excessive damage to Iran and prevent the further expansion of the conflict. Subsequently, Israel carried out limited

strikes in Isfahan in central Iran targeting an air defence facility. Satellite images showed that the strikes did not destroy or significantly damage the facility. Iran, on its part, denied that the airstrikes were carried out. With this, at least, the brief but extremely dangerous confrontation between Iran and Israel came to an end.

However, as far as the war between Israel and Hamas is concerned, Israel is continuing to press ahead in Gaza and has not let up on its offensive. After laying sufficient ground and giving warnings, Israel has now begun to enter Rafah, which is near Egypt and where majority of Palestinians are now concentrated. This offensive is happening even as Egypt and Qatar are continuing to make frantic efforts to come up with a palatable peace plan for stopping the war and ensuring the release of hostages. Israel, however, continues to stick to its original position that it requires a complete dismantling for Hamas for there to be any viable peace. Even though Israel has signaled openness to various peace proposals, none of them have yet come up to the mark, as all of them leave Hamas unpunished.

CONTINUING POLITICS OVER SANDESHKHALI DEBACLE

In the aftermath of the brutal Sandeshkhali issue (covered in the previous issue), the continuing politics over it reflect the depths that the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal is plumbing in a bid to prevent Hindus from consolidating. Over the past few weeks, the TMC has launched a relentless narrative war against the BJP, releasing videos in a bid to show that the entire Sandeshkhali event was orchestrated by the BJP. The video shows women saying that they were forced by the BJP to make rape allegations, another video shows people being made to sign

blank sheets where the BJP could then pen its own narrative, and yet another so-called sting video shows a local BJP leader saying that the whole Sandeshkhali event was a conspiracy.

That these videos being systematically put out by the TMC are fake is self-evident. In the wake of these videos, several women BJP workers clashed with TMC members over this issue. Women workers from BJP, under the leadership of Rekha Patra, beat up TMC men and even gheraoed the Sandeshkhali police station in response to the fake propaganda war unleashed by the TMC. BJP also released evidence and testimony of a woman saying that TMC had pressurized and threatened her to make fake statements.

The dirty politics being played by the TMC over this issue is unlikely to hoodwink the electorate. In a desperate bid to get votes, TMC had no strategy but to spin the ironic and ludicrous narrative that under a TMC-ruled state, BJP could engineer the entire Sandeshkhali saga. That this could have happened in a TMC stronghold, ruled with an iron fist by its goons, and under the nose of a TMC Chief Minister, is the biggest contradiction. Such twisting facts are unlikely to endear the TMC to Hindus. Indeed, it will be widely perceived as TMC attempting to defend the accused, Sheikh Shahjahan, who committed systematic land grabs and sexual abuse over a long period of time. The latest incident is yet another lesson about the depths to which power-hungry leaders can fall, condoning everything from gross injustice to anti-national activities.

UTTARAKHAND FOREST FIRES

Forest fires in the mountainous state of Uttarakhand have become a yearly occurrence in the summer months. This year they have taken a particularly virulent form, spreading over 1000

hectares, and raising questions about the likelihood of rising incidence of forest fires with the exacerbating impacts of climate change. Such was the incidence of forest fires this time that aid of the Indian Air Force, Army personnel, volunteers, and home guard personnel had to be called upon to control the situation. They mainly used Bambi buckets (which can carry up to 5000 liters of water) to douse the fires. The hotspots were Nainital, Haldwani, and Ramnagar forest divisions. The incidence of fires was to such an extent that there was a danger of the blaze fanning out to heavily populated urban centers including Nainital city, with poor visibility constraining the Air Force's firefighting efforts.

In general, forest fires have been attributed to three key variables: fuel, heat, and oxygen. Dry leaves, pine needles, and other flammable materials act as fuel, while hot and dry weather conditions provide the necessary heat. Oxygen fuels the combustion process, allowing fires to spread rapidly. The primary cause for the fires in Uttarakhand has been linked to heightened dryness, exacerbated by a heat wave in Champawat and Nainital districts, and scant winter rainfall and snow in the Himalayas since September last year.

In addition, human negligence, changes in land-use patterns, cutting down of forests for agriculture, planting of pine trees, and lack of climate proofing mechanisms also contribute to the spread of forest fires. In the case of Uttarakhand, locals have been reported as setting deliberate fires for the growth of good quality grass, to cover up illegal cutting of trees, for poaching, etc., even though setting a forest fire is a punishable offence under the Indian Penal Code. Indeed, more than 95 percent of forest fires in India are initiated by humans.

These fires have a serious impact in terms of exacerbating

environmental crisis, as burning forests intensify heat and lead to black carbon emissions, thereby adversely affecting water systems and air quality. Not only that, but they also contribute to the mounting challenge of irreversible environmental degradation and climate crisis. In 2023, forest fires, globally, generated around 2,170 megatons of carbon emissions. The year 2024 alone has, so far, witnessed double the average number of forest fires world over compared to the last year. Last year also saw intense forest fires. In Europe, they burnt an area of more than half a million hectare, and in Canada, the estimated burnt area amounted to over 18 million hectares (roughly twice the size of Portugal).

In a state like Uttarakhand which is already being adversely impacted by climate change, the mounting intensity of forest fires serves to worsen the already fragile ecology of the state. In the past few years, the state has witnessed destructive floods, landslides, and land subsidence. These adverse environmental events have accelerated even as the so-called development model of the state is being advanced by successive governments.

In the case of forest fires, it must be noted that these occurrences have increased so much in frequency and intensity that they can no longer merely be dealt with as natural processes. Yet, governments across the world and their coterie of experts and scientists continue to exhibit this problem-solving approach, based on the assumption that implementing piecemeal solutions can lead to change. These piecemeal solutions include prescriptions such as raising greater awareness among people, changing agricultural practices, conserving forests etc. Yet, what these solutions fundamentally lack is the spirit with which they are implemented. Being mostly driven by a commercial motive they end up producing opposite results. Take the instance of

governmental targets to increase forest cover through schemes like compensatory afforestation. Paradoxically, while there has been a spree of tree plantations conducted in the name of afforestation, yet they have ended up planting monocultures and such varieties of trees which are harmful for the soil, bad for the environment and more prone to catching fire.

Thus, if it is the commercial motive which drives policy and action, little can be achieved by way of solutions. The need of the hour is to fundamentally change our collective attitude, motivated by a deeper psychological change, without which all solutions will continue to cause more harm than good.

Achievements of Europe

“For my part I see failure written large over all the splendid and ostentatious achievements of Europe. Her costliest experiments, her greatest expenditure of intellectual and moral force have led to the swiftest exhaustion of creative activity, the completest bankruptcy of moral elevation and of man’s once infinite hope. When one considers how many and swift her bankruptcies have been, the imagination is appalled by the discouraging swiftness of this motor ride to ruin. The bankruptcy of the ideas of the French Revolution, the bankruptcy of Utilitarian Liberalism, the bankruptcy of national altruism, the bankruptcy of humanitarianism, the bankruptcy of religious faith, the bankruptcy of political sincerity, the bankruptcy of true commercial honesty, the bankruptcy of the personal sense of honour, how swiftly they have all followed on each other or raced with each other for precedence and kept at least admirable pace. Only her mansided science with its great critical and analytical power and all the contrivances that come of analysis, is still living and keeps her erect. There remains that last bankruptcy yet to come, and when that is once over, what will be left? Already I see a dry rot begun in this its most sapful and energetic part. The firm materialism which was its life and protection, is beginning also to go bankrupt, and one sees nothing but craze and fantasy ready to take its place.”

– Sri Aurobindo
(CWSA 1: 556)