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Redesigning the Aeroplane While Flying: Reforming Institutions

Arun Maira

Rupa, New Delhi (2014)

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Arun Maira, unassuming and soft spoken, is an iconic figure to those that know him, one who has thought through the layers of baggage that hold down India from achieving the socio-economic growth that is its potential; he is deeply committed to charting the path forwards. As a business consultant, he has worked on system reform and the human face of change.

Since 2000, at the Confederation of India Industry (CII), and then as member of the Planning Commission (2009-14), he has worked at ‘scenario planning’ (SP), a method for crafting consensus among mutually opposed stakeholders on complex eco-societal issues (16-38). Since the initial SP effort, the method has been refined in 2005, when NCAER was brought in, and predicted that the heady days of 9% growth would not last because of structural deficiencies, and finally in 2012, when a quasi-official exercise at the Planning Commission threw up the same deficiencies. SP permeates the entire book, and it concludes with four future visions for India: Scenario I, ‘Buffaloes Wallowing’, riven by lethargy, none able or willing to break out; Scenario II, ‘Peacocks Strutting, Birds Scrambling’, with the peacocks well fed, hungry sparrows waiting for another day; Scenario III, ‘Tigers Growling’, tigers and wolves roam, small animals live in fear; Scenario IV, ‘Fireflies Rising’, change occurring through complex self-adaptive systems, uncontrolled by a single center. A graphic picture accompanies each, which all coexist in our country. The question: which one will dominate?

Elegant as they are, it is not the scenarios but the necessity for institutional reform that is the book’s leit motif. The ‘institutions’ to which Arun Maira refers include

also the ways in which things are done, and ‘the norms of society’. The core of his message: ‘It is no longer enough to tinker with institutions or merely change personnel at the top. The structures of institutions must be fundamentally changed’. The book is devoted to the ‘how’ of achieving this.

In seven short pages (5-11) the author paints with rare elegance the many-layered global storm and the tectonic shifts of a planet in stress, in the situation India confronts. He takes the reader across a series of writings and global think-fests, to hammer home his basic message that India has the capacity to become a society that is ‘inclusive, democratic and capitalist’ (192), harmonizing the contradictions that are inherent in each of these three core concepts.

In essence, the way to achieving this entails achieving real ‘democratic deliberation’ as exemplified in an effective scenario building process, where three prior conditions are fulfilled: political equality, deliberation that is rich in mutual understanding, and mass participation. Such deliberation can take place in a ‘democratic home’ that is marked by ‘six Ls’: *listening* (through a deep engagement); *localization* (an expression of ‘complex self-adaptation’ where citizens and managers spread power around); *lateralization* (a horizontal process of mutual communication); *learning* (by setting targets for gaining new capabilities); *leadership* (where vision of the end objective is understood and shared by all); and *locus* (where the institution works on knowledge and skills that improve its learning).

This also adds up to the notion of a learning institution. The author tells us of a World Bank seminar in October 2013 that looked at ‘state learning’ in terms of generation of new information, its’ transmission horizontally and acting upon it. China and India were compared and it was found: 1. China’s public administration has undergone reform every five years since 1978; India has seen two reform attempts in 65 years, and recommendations of the Second Reform Commission remain unimplemented. 2. Chinese thinktanks and their provincial

branches work on change; Indian thinktanks are concentrated in Delhi and work mainly on theory. 3. China uses its federal structure for learning; while learning among our states is yet to develop. 4. Human resource management in China uses modern concepts, including ‘360 degree appraisals’ and performance; we do not do this.

The book has two deficiencies. It has no index, but that actually works as an advantage, as it forces the reader search to trawl through the entire work, which is short and an easy read. Also, comprehensive references are provided. A bigger flaw is that it leaves out external inputs into the development process, as also the contribution that sound foreign policy governance can make to the growth and democracy paradigm. Too many in India fail to treat with the needed finesse and thoroughness this domestic-external connect.

Arun Maira asks if it is India’s destiny to show to the world how a bridge can be made between the seemingly opposed notions of inclusiveness, democracy and capitalism, in the finest sense of these concepts, fulfilling the vision of Gandhiji and Rabindranath Tagore? ‘If we don’t create the future, the present extends itself’, declares Toni Morrison, in *Song of Solomon* (37). This is a simple thought, easy to grasp.

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