

## **Seeking independence from politics of divisiveness**

n k singh

*Posted online: Sunday, August 20, 2006 at 0000 hrs IST*

Independence Day speeches have now developed a stereotype which is difficult to shake off. But the Prime Minister spared us new announcements, foisting an unwholesome burden on the already over-stretched slew of populist measures. He concentrated on the basics, a report card on the recent economic success, particularly continued economic growth, and the need to create employment, mitigate growing income and regional divides, ameliorate the woes of farmers and to spur faster growth. No doubt it equally stressed our growing security concerns—cross-border terrorism and Naxalism, which needs better intelligence, policing and socio-economic measures.

The speech of the President was somewhat unusual because it concentrated on “Case Studies”, namely success stories of voluntary initiatives on agriculture, education, healthcare and rural development. The Prime Minister promised the launch of a Mission on Vocational Education to address our skill deficit. This does not come a day late. He ended his address by urging political leaders to think deeply and to “shun the politics of divisiveness and adopt the policies of change and progress. Our political parties and leaders must learn to work together to build a consensus around national issues”.

Similarly, the President said that he would be suggesting to the Government and both Houses of Parliament “to formulate a Citizen Security Bill (National Campaign for Eradication of Terrorism), formulate an Energy Independence Bill and adopt a resolution that India will be transformed into an economically developed nation before 2020”.

Both the PM and President clearly believe the need for sustained bipartisan support to address our major developmental challenges. Coalition politics often results in even small allies holding governments to ransom. Regional and fringe parties drive the national agenda. The lack of trust between mainstream parties gives regional parties a disproportionate say in national decision-making. This is neither reflective of a national consensus nor does it augur well for continuity of policies. Governments in office invariably hold the principal opposition party to be non-cooperative. At the same time they are embarrassed to seek its support lest their moves are misunderstood by their partners. This makes the emergence of consensus even more difficult. Nonetheless, there is no alternative.

So what should be the key ingredients of a national concordance? First and foremost, foreign policy and defence. For long, non-alignment was the bedrock of our foreign policy. In a vastly different world, strategic partnership with other major developed countries, particularly the United States, is an inescapable reality. The nuclear deal should have been a unifying ingredient considering its multiple advantages, and the approval process in the US government is clearly not to be blamed for the divisiveness introduced in what was hitherto an area of continuity.

Second, depoliticising public delivery systems. No monitoring of outcomes or increased public investment, particularly in rural areas through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme or Bharat Nirman, can be meaningful if the delivery system remains clogged with incessant political interference. Can there be consensus among parties on some accepted ‘rules of the game’, which would partially free public-delivery systems from discretionary political decision-making?

Third, public expenditure. Some consensus on areas where public expenditure would be justified. Evaluation of expenditure outcomes, more importantly the efficacy of subsidies, and the impact on intended beneficiaries is inescapable.

Fourth, the balance between development initiatives and their consequences for resettlement and rehabilitation. While some displacement and transitional difficulties may be inevitable, what would be the appropriate benchmarks for assessing the adequacy of compensation and apportioning of benefits?

Fifth, energy security not only in exploring alternative energy forms, economising its usage, concerted action on both demand and supply but pricing of energy among different users and the reasonableness of subsidised energy activity need rational review.

Sixth, Human Resource Development. In making educational systems inclusive yet not losing sight of merit and enhancing capacities to leverage the advantages of a young demographic profile need coherent and actionable milestones.

Finally, key legislations. Legislations in general will always be political, involving negotiations between different actors, but there are some which are so compelling in our broader economic interest that tardy action is clearly unreasonable