Declining Standards

The Law Of Social Thermodynamics

By J.V. NARLIKAR

THE other day, through the courtesy of a friend employed in the railways I was able to secure a copy of the railway time- table of the year 1932. Just for a lark, I decided to compare the scheduling of some important trains. Here is a sample of what I found. The Deccan Queen, the prestigious train between Bombay and Pune, left Pune at 7.40 a.m. and arrived at Bombay at 10.25 a.m. while in the other direction the train left Bombay at 5.15 p.m. to reach Pune at 8.00 p.m.

How does it compare with the Deccan Queen of today? Today's Deccan Queen enjoys the "superfast" status and for the privilege of riding it the passengers have to fork out a surcharge. Yet on paper it leaves Pune at 7.15 a.m. and reaches Bombay at 10.40 a.m. and for the return journey it leaves Bombay at 5.15 p.m. and arrives in Pune at 8.35 p.m. In other words, to undertake the same journey it takes 40 minutes longer than it did six decades ago.

One wonders whether this is all we have to show for after so many advances in train technology. The example of the Deccan Queen is not an isolated one but, as I discovered from my perusal of the time-tables, it is generic. Today's trains like the Bombay-Calcutta Mail run slower than the trains of old whereas in any country that boasts of modern technology the trend is the other way.

Dangerous Fact

This is not an article on trains. I chose the above example to illustrate a point that over the years we have steadily allowed standards in all fields to slip. And the slippage has occurred imperceptibly but inexorably and the dangerous fact is that over the typical span of one year it goes unnoticed. Thus the Deccan Queen losing 40 minutes over 60 years average only 40 seconds per year ... and who cares about such a tiny rate as that?

This casual acceptance of a slight lowering of quality is more dangerous than a catastrophic fall such as after a major war or a natural calamity like an earthquake or a tornado. In the latter case, society at large sits up and takes notice and some drastic measures for recovery are set in motion. No one bothers about a steady and imperceptible decline and the effect builds up steadily and relentlessly. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the quality of urban life. Ask any long term resident of a city, be it Bombay, Delhi or Bangalore, he or she will wistfully recall how much more pleasant it was to live in that city 20 years ago. Over-industrialisation leads to over-population which leads to over-building which leads to over-clearing of trees and other green areas and this chain goes on and on and soon it is all over with the city as a livable place.

In his book, *The New Landscape*, on planning for large cities like Bombay, Mr Charles Correa has compared the decline of quality of life in Bombay with the state of a frog in water which is being slowly heated. The frog feels uncomfortable as the temperature rises by a tiny amount but somehow adjusts to the worsened surroundings. This process goes on for a long while until a critical stage is reached when the frog goes into a stupor, ceases to struggle and finally succumbs. The patient Bombayite has been undergoing this treatment but can hardly be expected to go on forever adjusting to worsening amenities. The civil disturbances, bandhs, rise in organised crime, increase in the frequency of suburban train disruptions are symptoms of an impending collapse. Such events would have been considered inconceivable in the 1950s: today they are taken for granted.

Living Conditions

Perhaps a comparison might be useful. In the 1950s the living conditions in Singapore and Bombay may have been comparable. How do they compare today? At the time of the outbreak of plague last year, there were highly publicised events of civic drives for cleansing garbage-infested areas in cities. Why should it take a plague to make us aware of these public health hazards? More importantly, what is the state of those same areas today, after the newshounds and television cameras have moved out? In the final analysis, it boils down to the truism that we get the environment we are willing to settle for. And as a nation we are willing to settle for anything howsoever poor in quality.

Scientists are familiar with the laws of thermodynamics. The second law tells us that a physical system left to itself will tend to evolve through states of increasing disorder. I suspect that there must be a corresponding law of social thermodynamics that tells us that human societies do likewise unless they reverse the trend through collective resolve and self-discipline. Only a few of us seem to have the resolve and still fewer the discipline to implement it. At the leadership level both seem to be absent.

In the mid-eighties a five-day 40-hour week was introduced in many government offices. A simple arithmetic tells us that with a half-hour lunch break this corresponds to a typical working day from 9 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. Reality may, however, be otherwise, for in my very occasional encounters I have never found offices in Delhi bustling with activity shortly after the official opening hours. Perhaps I may have chosen the wrong days and my statistics could be open to criticism. But a survey by an enterprising journalist would be very revealing as to what fraction of government staff are attending office as per rules. And since the trendsetters are the central government offices in the capital, it will not be surprising to find a similar work culture in the state government offices and universities.

A typical instance of this work culture is readily verified through the letters one receives from government offices. A typical letter may be typed with one date which is struck off and substituted by a handwritten date a couple of days later and if one looks at the envelope and can decipher the postmark (a feat in itself) one finds that the dispatch date may be as much as a week later. And how often does the bureaucrat tell you that he or she cannot trace the letter you sent by registered or speed post? I have learnt to keep several xerox copies of the original I sent just to cover this eventuality.

The situation in the educational field is equally dismal. Because education enjoys a low priority in the reckoning of governments of all political parties there is a reluctance to construct an adequate number of schools, appoint enough properly trained teachers, and provide even the minimum amenities and teaching aids to schools. And because many schools are not doing adequately what they were meant to do, a parallel system of coaching classes has emerged.

Corrupt System

Further, our examination system has become so corrupt that we have come to accept malpractices as routine. With copying condoned even at the highest level the examinations conducted by boards, colleges and universities are losing their credibility as a means of assessing the candidate's performance. No government, state or central, has either the will or courage to restore a sense of discipline to the system. Because of this many specialised institutions have introduced their own entrance tests like the IIT-JEE. Even official agencies like the CSIR and the UGC have the NET examination.

So I have the following constructive suggestion to make in this otherwise dismal sounding article: Appoint a central examination commissioner who shall be constitutionally above political pressures of any kind. The CEC shall be a tough person whose job is to lay down and rigidly enforce a code of conduct for examiners, examinees and conduct of examinations. This may well work and restore credibility to our examination system.