

NEWS WRAP

AGD

After being defunct for two years, the National Advisory Council has been revived with the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi as Chairperson, and members which include Aruna Roy (of Right to Information Act fame) and Jean Dreze (of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme fame). The NAC remains an important channel for monitoring the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) of the ruling alliance. In the parliamentary form of governance CMP is the only official channel for the poor people's agenda, other than measurements by sensex, World Bank and internet. But beyond monitoring of the CMP, the NAC has few other constructive activities. Though ad hoc, it has been institutionalised, and was never envisaged in India's constitution. The NAC is an extra-constitutional power, without any accountability. However, the NAC can channelise certain ideas and policy planning in governance. The danger lies, when at a future time frame, right wing politicians and religious fundamentalists join the NAC. The Rajya Sabha mechanism already allows for the induction of people with talent into positions of governance. The activists and politicians who comprise the NAC, enjoy the rights of being inside and outside the government superstructure without accountability, and without mandate or electoral support.

BEING SUCCESSFUL

One of the reasons cited for India's suicide figures for young people is the intense pressure to get near 100% in examinations, throughout secondary school, university and entrance tests for post-graduate studies. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, out of every three cases of suicide reported every fifteen minutes in India, one relates to a youth, belonging to the 15 to 29 years age group. Failed examinations provoked 2730 students to commit suicide in 2008. Shame in the family conceals thousands more exam related suicides, which go unreported. 42% of India's population is below the international poverty line of \$1.25 per day. Better degrees fetch better jobs, which in turn assure better socio-economic conditions. About 2200 applicants or 1% of total aspiring candidates obtain a coveted place for an MBA at any of the seven Indian Institutes of Management (IIM). The IIM MBA is a two-year programme, taught after an undergraduate degree, identical in syllabus and structure, to many masters in management degrees in Europe. The MBA degrees are considered guaranteed escape from the poverty, engulfing India. There are at least 100 IIM MBA qualified applicants for every job placement. Qualified students in secure, well paid jobs are now India's young, energetic and consumer-oriented middle class, who are driving India's impressive economic growth.

CHINA'S LABOUR STRIFE

Workers in China are sharing their country's rising prosperity, by the rapidly rising industrial wages. Worker solidarity in southern China is overtaking suicidal anxiety. The strike at a Honda transmission factory in Foshan, about 160 kms northwest of Hong Kong, forced Honda to suspend production at its joint venture assembly plants in China. The Chinese authorities are now willing to tolerate work stoppages, even at high technology operations, on which many other factories depend. China is permitting wages

to rise, in order to create the foundations of an economy, driven by domestic demand, without upsetting the export apparatus, which has produced strong economic growth, over the last three decades.

The labour strikes in China involve blue collar workers in the export factories of Guangdong Province, where wages have already doubled in the last five years. China has rapidly expanded its universities and built new ones, creating a surplus of more highly educated workers. The wages of new college graduates have actually declined in recent years. With a large number of young Chinese going to university and declining birth rate, the number of young Chinese available for factory work is declining, far short of the demand from employers. This is leading to higher wages for blue-collar workers, and providing a leverage to demand higher remuneration, as the recent labour strikes indicate.

TURKISH ACTIVISTS

The Turkish activists who survived Israel's raid on a flotilla convoy to Gaza, belong to the "Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief", known by its Turkish acronym IHH. The ethos of IHH is more Islamist, than is typical in secular Turkey. It draws on widespread sympathy for the Palestinian cause, in Turkish society. IHH was founded in the 1990s, and its early work was aiding Muslims in Bosnia. Fearful of fundamentalism, the Turkish government scrutinised the organisation. The Turkish army had excluded the IHH from official efforts to help victims of the 1999 earthquake. The IHH had recruited veteran soldiers, in anticipation of the forthcoming "holy war". The IHH president Bulent Yildirim is urging engagement with Hamas, in the Gaza Strip. IHH's staff and resources have grown steadily. The socially conservative Anatolian businessmen are natural supporters of Turkey's ruling AK party. Though IHH is politically closest to the Islamist Sadedet Party, its board includes at least one AK member. □□□