

Calcutta Notebook

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The Government of India is promoting crude consumerism and destroying the social and emotional fabric of the country. Example of government's callous attitude is the unabated pollution of the Ganga.

Two aspects of river pollution are huge amount of pollutants disposed in the river and less flow of water. Industries do not want to invest money in the installation of treatment plants or in running them because that leads to higher cost of production. It is cheaper for the owner to pay Rs 1 lac per month bribe to the inspector of the Pollution Control Board. The consumer is also happy. He would have to buy a copy book for Rs 15 if the paper factory were to run the treatment plant and spend Rs 25 lacs per month. He gets a copy book for Rs 12 because the treatment plant is not running and cost of production of paper is less.

The consumer has to balance between the benefit he derives from cheaper goods and the benefits derived from enjoying the beauty of, or taking bath in a clean river.

Control of pollution is presently done by officials of the Pollution Control Boards. They have powers to stop the factory but that is easier said than done. The task will be made easier if financial incentives and penalties are provided. A high level of tax must be collected on the pollutants disposed in the river. It will then become profitable for businessmen to run the treatment plants. The Government does not want to implement such a scheme because that will reduce the opportunities of corruption for the officials of Pollution Control Boards and ministers.

Another major source of pollutants is from municipal sewage. The treatment plants are of small capacity in comparison of the sewage being produced. The Ministry of Environment and Forests is giving huge amounts of money for installing new sewage plants. It is beneficial for officials to install new plants because it provides them with opportunities to collect commissions. But they have no interest in running the plants because it involves expenditure of money.

Solution is to exploit the sewage commercially. Well, electricity can be generated from the sewage at a cost of Rs 10 per unit. Methane gas is emitted upon fermentation of sewage and it can be used to run the turbines. In the process the sewage gets partially treated automatically. This is less than Rs 14 at which solar power is produced. The government is providing subsidy for generation of *solar power* but not for *sewage power*. Provision of subsidy of Rs 6 per unit on sewage power would make it profitable for businessmen to put up these plants. But the government is not interested in giving such subsidy because that will close the gates for collecting commissions in setting up of sewage treatment plants.

Higher flow in the rivers makes it possible for the river to bear the load of pollution. Beneficial bacteria are present in river water. They eat up pollution. But they require oxygen to

survive. Less flow of water combined with large amount of sewage leads to fermentation of organic matter and that absorbs the oxygen available in the water. As a result the water becomes oxygen-less and these beneficial bacteria die and they cannot eat the pollutants.

Almost 95 percent of the water of the Ganga is removed at Narora for providing irrigation. Water is supplied to farmers on the basis of area irrigated. For example, the farmer is required to pay 'x' amount of money for irrigating a hectare of sugar cane. He can irrigate his crop any number of times once he has paid this money. As a result there is no incentive for farmers to conserve water. They use excess water. Solution is to recover price of water from farmers on the basis of volume. The reduced flow in river leads to more pollution and more need to set up treatment plants and more opportunities to garner commissions.

It is a solemn responsibility of the government to strike a balance between material consumption and emotional aspects of the people's welfare. Electricity, water and food grains must surely be provided but at a certain point these have to be limited lest the emotional fabric of the country is destroyed. Unfortunately, the government is promoting unbridled consumerism and is totally disinterested in emotional aspects because consumerism provides more opportunities to generate commissions and bribes. □□□