

Book Review

Courtesy: Daily Dawn

SOCIETY: Behind the smokescreen

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Book: Making India Work

Writer: William Nanda Bissell

Publisher: Penguin Books, India

ISBN 978-0-670-08321-3

248pp. Indian Rs499s

While democracy and human rights exist on paper in India, only a small minority have the money, connections or luck to be able to exercise these rights. For the rest of India, the constitution is simply a piece of paper. When the only way to achieve anything is to leverage a relationship of patronage, the nation has failed.'

One may or may not agree with what author William Nanda Bissell suggests in his book, but in it he not only analyses a whole system in terms of governance and resulting progress, he also suggests an alternative based on rational analysis. For many of us in Pakistan, where we share many of these problems, Making India Work will prove to be interesting read.

For Bissell, who belongs to the elite class in India and who made Fabinda, the company his father established, into one of the world's largest craft-based marketing organizations, it is the failure of leadership and the government's criminally inept mismanagement that is responsible for poverty in India.

He argues that chronic mismanagement and corruption ensure that access to basic resources is in peril, while an establishment drunk on visions of grandeur is constantly feeding expressions such as the 'world's next superpower,' 'the Indian Century' and 'the future is India.'

The country cannot be a superpower while 60 per cent of its population lives in miserable conditions, he says. The Naxalites, armed left-wing extremists, now affect over 170 of India's 602 districts — a red corridor stretching through central India from the country's border with Nepal in the north of Karnataka in the south and covering more than a quarter of the country's land mass.

The author appears to have a vision to change the entire system through an almost new system. Though it may seem like a Utopian dream, his goal is to reduce poverty which he defines as the absence of adequate nutrition, clean water, basic sanitation, education, enforced constitutional rights and basic healthcare.

Bissell writes that although India is the world's largest democracy, 'but in reality we face a huge democratic deficit.' He thinks that the political institutions are failing and so proposes a system comprising tiers starting from the citizen to the community, area, region and the nation.

The story of welfare in India is a story of abuse and the process of alleviating poverty could help build-up quality public services. The author suggests a system whereby when the income of a person falls below a certain level he or she automatically receives credits to be used against six essential services: nutrition, drinking water, sewage disposal, education, healthcare and legal assistance. He suggests a new tax system where taxes on wages and profits are eliminated and instead windfall taxes are introduced.

At present the Indian government employs 23 million people, the size of a small country. There are 50 ministries and two departments (the departments of atomic energy and space) overseen by 79 ministers. The government is seen as a cash cow, and everyone wants to milk it. Among other changes the author pleads for a unicameral model of government, consisting only of the directly elected representatives of the people. There will be the constitutional authorities which apart from performing other functions would be institutions of accountability.

He also suggests that organizations such as the National Exchanges should set standards, regulators and exchanges which would allow communities and individuals the right of exchange and to use the markets for optimal resource allocations.

The author points out that India's grindingly slow wheels of justice are too often steered by corruption, with the public paying an estimated US\$580 million a year as bribes to lawyers, police and court officials. He proposes a number of laws that would change this corrupt system.

A key principle of the book is 'right scaling' of institutions for 'deeper democracy'. It offers many more such useful solutions that the Pakistan government and people would also do well to apply.