

Hope springs eternal

DH deccanherald.com/content/378516/hope-springs-eternal.html

January 4, 2014



Shefali Tripathi Mehta, January 5, 2014, DHNS:,

- JAN 04 2014, 19:53 IST
- UPDATED: JAN 04 2014, 19:53 IST



Hope springs eternal

We are stepping into the new year with a bagful of hopes. Hopes for an improved economy, good infrastructure, freedom from corruption, safety, stability of prices... Above all is the hope that we, the people, will effect change, writes Shefali Tripathi Mehta

January, that leads us into the new year, is named after Janus, the two-faced Roman god of beginnings and transitions, looking ahead and behind at the same time. All our hopes and aspirations for the new year are likewise tethered to the happenings of the past year.

The year gone by has been rife with political and economic uncertainty, so the mood this year is of watchful optimism. The overall sluggish rate of growth, inflation, rising prices, cuts on spendings, restrained raises and the lurking global slowdown — there has been little to cheer. But look deeper and we realise that the grim environment has perhaps offered us a chance to slow down and pay attention to life, family and friends; spend more time with those that mean most; revisit life's priorities; and empathise with those that are struggling with less. Pessimism or apathy cannot last, only hope can. The start of a new year infuses us with hope, fresh as itself.

The old order changeth

The most significant demographics of recent times is that at 60-plus, India is a young country with more than 65 per cent population below the age of 35 years, and by 2020, we are expected to become the world's youngest country with 64 per cent population in the working age group. The collective aspirations of a young country are indeed inventive, avant-garde, and forward-looking.

On a busy evening, an ambulance blared its siren through the thick traffic on MG Road, unable to move. Everyone watched helplessly, until a group of young boys got on to the road and pulled away a set of barricades to make way for the ambulance to pass through the oncoming traffic. The youth thrives on challenges, they want participation. With technology at their fingertips, they are well-equipped with information, issues and solutions. Driven by dreams, they are not hesitant to apply themselves to unfamiliar situations, or to give back to the society. The caution — good or bad — comes with age, as does resignation to circumstances. The challenge today is to nurture and promote this spirit, to allow the youth to accomplish their potential; provide them environment for transformation; and to not drag them down to the age-old, unchanging ways of 'this is how it is done'. "Generally, an idea that has succeeded becomes the enemy of new ideas and prevents new ideas from succeeding." (Narayan Murthy) But wisdom and good judgment that come from experience cannot be discredited.

We hope the mentoring and guiding roles will be taken on earnestly so that youngsters can be groomed for their critical roles in society, as in sports, music and dance, in business, politics, public life and social entrepreneurship too.

People power

When Mazloom Nadaf, a 70-year-old rickshaw puller in Bihar, applied for a home under the Indira Awaas Yojana, a rural development scheme that provides housing to the poor in rural areas, the authorities demanded Rs 5,000 to process his application. He filed an RTI with the help of an NGO and was given his due. After waiting for five years without any reply from the income tax office, 60-year-old Tushar Dalvi, an NRI living in Mumbai, filed an application under the RTI Act and got his income tax refund in a week without bribing. The RTI Act is being used effectively by the poor, illiterate, marginalised and vulnerable sections of the society who were meant to be its main beneficiaries. The inevitable is happening. Power is gradually changing hands, moving to the people.

It is the election year and as the country readies itself to bring to power the 16th Lok Sabha this May, we do so with a keen awareness of being at the threshold of change and tie all our aspirations — of an improved economy, infrastructure, freedom from corruption, safety, stability of prices — to it. But we must remember, “The fall of one regime does not bring in a utopia. Rather, it opens the way for hard work and long efforts to build more just social, economic and political relationships and the eradication of other forms of injustices and oppression.” (Gene Sharp, Dictatorship to Democracy)

Social media activism, though sometimes tiring for its empty, armchair rhetoric, has given people a platform to express and form their views and take informed decisions. People’s awareness and involvement in issues of national importance have taken a leap.

The December state assembly elections are an indicator that the man on the street is no longer a mute spectator of a democracy-in-name; that we are now ready to reinvent it. The apathy of the urban middle class towards elections leading to political parties playing vote-bank, divisive politics and becoming smug and self-serving on assuming power, is a thing of the past. There is hope that we, the people, will effect change.

Corruption & leadership

The mightiest, most stubborn bug that we want to be rid of is corruption. Exposés, scandals and cover-ups are so commonplace that they have ceased to be breaking news. The movements against corruption, the impetus given to it by Anna Hazare, have seen public, especially youth, participation like never before. The media too has kept the pressure stepped up on cases of corruption by people in power. People are finding the courage to assert their rights and stand up against bribery and bias. Banabai Kumre of village Kharula in Maharashtra, a woman in her 70s, who when she complained against an erring supervisor of the agricultural department for constructing a cheap dam, was threatened with dire consequences by the official, claiming he had greased the palms of the district collector and the chief minister, travelled to Mumbai and confronted the chief minister with the question if he had indeed been silenced by money.

The TV exposé of the district president of a political party making a party corporator hit himself with a shoe and touch his feet begging forgiveness in a police station with police officers watching, is not a rare incident in a country where power means privilege to get away with the worst crimes. The recent Supreme Court ruling to disqualify convicted netas rekindles hope for a cleaner public life.

Narayan Murthy said in a recent interview, “...our leaders must be ready to communicate, that is their primary job, they have to raise the confidence of people, they have to give new hope to people, they have to walk the untrodden path and then discover the extraordinary potential of this country and convert it into reality.”

We want leaders, not rulers. Not long ago, most leaders lived exemplary lives. India’s second prime minister and one of her finest sons, Lal Bahadur Shastri, went on a foreign tour carrying two dhotis, one of which he had darned because he believed he represented a country where so many live in poverty. Our politicians today splurge public money

shamelessly on their own comforts. But the newly-awakened janta is demanding explanations. Armed with mobile cameras, people are exposing misdeeds of those drunk on power. We want leaders to live our lives — commute in our buses, stand in queues, 'buy' tickets.

Life in a metro

Touching one crore, Bangalore's population has almost doubled in the last decade as per the Census. India is experiencing a mass exodus of people from rural areas into the cities, putting overwhelming pressure on the economy and infrastructure of cities.

Bangalore today is a flourishing mall-and-swank homes city without adequate roads, public transport, pavements for pedestrians, or parking space for miles around schools, colleges, hospitals or markets. The ambitious metro line and monorail projects trudge through bureaucratic hurdles, as the city bursts at its seams. For two years, the much-looked-forward to Namma Metro has been running the six-kilometre stretch like a toy train. Just another token wish granted. We want better planning and maintenance of cities. Adequate water supply to all areas and proper garbage disposal mechanism are needed on an urgent basis.

At the individual level, most homes are segregating waste, disposing e-waste as required; housing communities are investing in solar lighting, rainwater harvesting and are reusing grey water. Communities are coming together to clean streets, drive awareness initiatives and maintain our beautiful lakes and parks. Non-profit initiatives like I Paid A Bribe (against corruption) and I Change My City (report a pothole and get it fixed) are trying to fill in the gaps that the government agencies have not been able to plug.

The hope for this year is that together, working in tandem, the individual, the community and the government will effect sustainable civic development. While the government agencies with their reach and resources must work top down, each one of us needs to contribute effectively to make a substantial impact.

Rural revival

Mumbai is said to gain 10,000 new residents a week in the hope of livelihood and a better life. Floating populations in search of a living pose problems of crime and rob us of the sense of community. The labour class in Bangalore today — plumbers, electricians, cooks, masons and carpenters from other states, who work here to support their families back home, are not just deprived of family life, but of much of the basic needs that come at a cost beyond their means.

Many social entrepreneurs are creating employment within rural communities to stop the migration of people to cities. The Barefoot College of Tilonia, Rajasthan trains the rural poor — housewives, farmers, daily wage labourers and small shopkeepers as midwives, handpump mechanics, solar engineers, artisans, weavers, balsevikas, masons, and teachers. Electricity has not reached more than half of our population, affecting

rural economy, health and safety. To these, private companies and NGOs are offering off-grid power, mainly solar energy, using inexpensive equipment, mini-power stations using hydropower or burning rice husks or cow dung.

Involving the stakeholders in the decision-making, contributing to the development and benefiting from it is the most effective way of rural development. There are several social elevation programmes being carried out in rural areas by grassroots rural organisations. We hope that more of us can take time off and do shramdaan or voluntary labour in villages, as Gandhiji envisioned.

Value for each life

We want strict and immediate punishment for those that encroach on the rights of others — robbery or rape. We will settle for nothing less than foolproof safety, value and respect for each life — women, children, people with disability, the LGBT community and the poor. We want authorities to take proactive and pre-emptive action so tragedies do not happen — no borewells left uncovered, no electricity lines left fallen to ground, no substandard walls or bridges. We demand safe schools and playing areas for children so they can learn and play to achieve their true potential, realise their dreams. We demand strictest punishment for those that engage child labour and those that poison midday meals.

We want people with disability to be treated with sensitivity and dignity; to enjoy equal rights to education and employment; and to have a barrier-free environment. Parents of students with disability are struggling to get the People with Disabilities Act implemented so, for example, a student with dyslexia is not compelled to appear for oral and descriptive-type written examinations instead of the prescribed multiple choice question format. We hope to see the end of foot-dragging on such fundamentally humanitarian issues.

One Nirbhaya united the whole country for a cause. While advertisements continue to commodify women, a new set of these honouring working women and remarriage herald the forward-thinking woman and the supportive man. Recently, unbeknownst to herself, Rupali Gawand made history as the first woman in the country to climb an electricity pole as a vidyut sahayak. She is among 2,200 women recruits recently employed as linewomen by the Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Company Ltd. We hope women's belief in their own shakti, their courage to stand up against harassment and bias, is strengthened; that their security and dignity is never compromised. We want humanitarian schemes for the poor, but not without tougher controls over implementation and strict action against those that lay their greedy hands over the entitlements of the poor and the needy. The Food Security Bill that gives legal rights to nearly 67 per cent of the population over a uniform quantity of 5 kg food grains at a fixed price of Rs 1-3 per kg through ration shops, aimed at hunger elimination, is riddled with apprehensions of the burden it puts on the state exchequer and a deep-rooted distrust of

the public distribution system. We hope the benefits of reforms will be evenly spread across the country, so that there is no unequal access to opportunity due to location, class or religion.

Into that heaven of freedom

The Better Life Index (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD) takes into account criteria such as income, housing, jobs, community, education, environment, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety, and work-life balance to measure and evaluate the quality of life. It is amazing that when we talk of wishes, we are still revisiting basic needs, year after year. The burgeoning populations of big cities have made scarce basic needs and infrastructure — clean drinking water, good roads and electricity — needs that are the same for those in far-flung, remote villages of the country.

If we think we've reached the nadir in corruption, poor governance, loss of moral values, it only means that the cycle is complete and the worst is over. Like the churning of the oceans, the rise of the Phoenix from its ashes, the populace is awakening to the idea of the power that is in their own hands, of assuming responsibility. As long as there are people with moral courage and conviction, there is hope. There is a new-found awareness in society towards a wide-spectrum 'justice' and 'correctness'. This is the first tick in the checkbox against our wish list, the rest cannot but follow. Gandhiji's words, "Be the change you wish to see....," never felt truer. Welcome to the year of the citizen's initiative.