

## **The Season of Unreason**

Dunu Roy

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79,000 three-wheelers, 28,000 buses, and 13,000 taxis were plying on the streets of Delhi in 1996 when the Supreme Court was seized with the matter of air pollution. These vehicles constituted only 4.6% of the total number of vehicles in the city, but were carrying over 65% of the commuters. So if they were to be made to change to cleaner fuels, pollution levels should come down dramatically – right? Wrong! The Central Pollution Control Board maintains seven pollution-monitoring stations in the city. The data for the one at ITO is regularly cited since it is supposed to be most representative. But if one were to take the data from the other six (two of which are in industrial zones), between the years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 (when the Supreme Court's orders to change to CNG were implemented) the pollution levels came down by barely 10%. In the process, commuters were hugely inconvenienced, massive investments were made in new vehicles and fuels, and there were (and continue to be) significant financial losses for commuters waiting for public transport and vehicles waiting for fuel. A conservative estimate suggests that in the last six months alone there have been cumulative losses of Rs 2000 crores. Since there has been no corresponding benefit to the ordinary citizen, who is to be held responsible for this degeneration of the quality of life in the city?

Unfortunately, processes of reasoned thought and accountability no longer seem to operate in our liberalised (but polarised) society. That section of the population that drives around in its air-conditioned cars is happy enough with the 10% decrease in pollutants and touts it to push its own agenda further. Take the case of the Delhi Vidyut Board (DVB), whose distribution network was recently sold to private companies in order to “increase efficiency”. In the one month since privatisation took place, the city has been plagued by unprecedented power shortages. The minimum power available to the city is about 2,600 MW. Divided by the total population of 27 lakh households (of which only 15 lakh have connections), that comes to an average of 1 KW per family. So why is there a shortage? The argument of illegal connections in the slums does not wash because the power companies are on record as saying that the major theft is in the posh colonies and industries. Furthermore, it has suddenly come to light that DVB already had 600 contractors who were doing 90% of the repair and maintenance work. What has not been mentioned is that there has been no new recruitment in DVB for the last 25 years and old employees have been allowed to retire. In other words, DVB was already “privatised” well before its sale for a song to BSES and the Tatas. Yet, the ‘rationale’ that privatisation equals efficiency is regularly and unquestioningly trotted out.

This ‘rationale’ is similarly offered for the privatisation of the Delhi Jal Board (DJB), the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC), the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), and the Delhi Development Authority (DDA). Few commentators reveal that DJB already has 400 private contractors doing all the construction maintenance and repair work; the number of DTC buses is less than half the number of private buses; MCD hires over 5,000 contractors as compared to the 48,000 employees it has in the sanitation department; and a large chunk of DDA's budget for developing colonies and providing

infrastructure goes to contractors. Thus, these ‘public’ agencies are already in the hands of ‘private’ parties and this policy was adopted over two decades ago in the name of ‘cost-cutting’ and ‘improving efficiency’. Instead of examining the dismal performance of this kind of ‘privatisation’, policy makers and the media are pushing for more of the same. Is it because the contractors, the bureaucrats, the legislators, the professionals, and the media barons all belong to the same class in society?

The abandonment of reason appears to be part of the nation’s drive towards ‘modernisation’. Thus, more zones are being created in the Railways in the name of ‘better efficiency’ and ‘safety’. What is not disclosed is that, in the last four decades, traffic has tripled while there has been no recruitment and almost all the maintenance and servicing tasks have been parcelled out to contractors. With fewer hands to do more work, is there any wonder that efficiency and safety have suffered? In Andhra, Vision 2020 projects that vast mechanised agricultural units will be developed to grow genetically modified crops and medicinal plants for export. What will happen to the over 2 crore people who will be displaced from small farms and will have little or no means of survival? In Madhya Pradesh, the innovative Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme is shut down while Rs 1360 crores obtained as damages from Union Carbide is distributed amongst the non-affected population in all the wards of Bhopal. In Rajasthan, the future Vice-President of India pours milk over an idol while 150 Phalodi pundits chant shlokas so that the rains may come. Is this part of the thrust to include Karamkand and Jyotishsastra in University curricula? And in Gujarat, the Chief Minister dissolves the Assembly while his mentor, the Deputy Prime Minister, claims that the State is “normal” and the Chief Minister has a right to seek the people’s mandate. But if all is well in his State and he already has the electoral majority, then why does he need to summon the “moral courage” to dissolve the entire House – including all the Opposition members?

Such questions are no longer considered to be necessary in our society. The season of unreason is upon us and all dissent is dismissed as ‘anti-national’ or ‘pseudo-secular’ or ‘against popular sentiment’. Democracy is not to be governed any more by the scientific temper that provides work for the idle and food for the hungry but by the technology that puts missiles into orbit and resources into export. This ‘war against terror’ is, in fact, a wave of violence against all those who dare to challenge the politics of our masters. And the ‘terror’ comes from the exposure of facts, of reason, of the questioning mind.

(1030 words)