

Fraternity and economic transformation

The preamble of the Constitution resolves to “constitute India into a republic” and to *secure* justice, liberty and equality for all its citizens. These can be secured by law and policy action. But the preamble also seeks to *promote* fraternity amongst its citizens. Fraternity is secured in society, not by government.

Fraternity is an often overlooked challenge. Until we see Indian society demonstrating much more fraternity than I have seen in my life, there will always be authoritarian and sectarian voices that justify limiting liberty and equality. Low fraternity societies are low trust societies and this is then reflected in curbs on individual and collective initiative. It necessitates state action that would not be required, were there greater fraternity.

The Delhi Police caught one million two-wheeler riders last year for not wearing helmets as prescribed by law. This is a staggering number. However, helmet-less travel is the norm in Delhi. This collective disdain for a protective law reflects low fraternity, as society does not accept its validity, and violates law in numbers that make enforcement impossible. This is true of countless other laws. As a consequence, we are a high litigation society. The load of litigation results in justice delayed and, hence, justice denied.

This has immediate economic consequences in raising the cost of doing business, by necessitating expenditure on micro level state interventions that would not be necessary, were laws to have fraternal acceptance. Thus, lack of fraternity promotes exceptionalism, which raises the cost to society of working together, with hugely negative consequences for the economy.

The independent houses of the Delhi of my youth had separate “service lanes” for use by garbage collectors, vendors etc. Contemporary high-rises mimic this. This is satirically captured in a recent cartoon in which a family is on holiday in Egypt, while their flat is being renovated. They decry the inhuman treatment of slaves

carrying heavy stones to build the pyramids. At the same time, workers renovating their high-rise flat are not allowed to use the elevator and climb steep staircases with 50 kg cement bags on their backs. A renovation that should take a few days, takes weeks. Workers on construction sites are routinely forced to defecate in the open. Construction workers build roads for SUVs and live in deplorable conditions with their little children in roadside shanties. Society is unmoved, and has no fraternal feeling for these fellow citizens. As a consequence, the built environment is violated, productivity of construction is low, and needless environmental damage is caused.

Think how routine it is for thefts to occur in school mid-day meal schemes. In a low fraternity society, there is little guilt in such theft as there is no fraternal feeling for children other than those in one’s family or kin. There is no social sanction when such egregious theft occurs, but such social sanction is the only effective way such morally reprehensible theft can be prevented. No amount of law making and enforcement will compensate for the lack of social fraternity that has allowed this to happen in India for decades.

I have deliberately chosen “small” examples of the consequences of low fraternity but I will point to its systemic manifestations — low levels of trust within the government leading to poor decision making, caste and religious barriers preventing effective implementation of government programmes, lack of fraternal feeling for the girl child resulting in lack of opportunities for women. All this ultimately lowers productivity, raises costs of doing business, and necessitates the deployment of costly legal and executive manpower.

People often aver that the Indian economy is

complex. I disagree. There is nothing inherently complex about the Indian economy. It is complexity of the Indian society that generates economic complexity. Low fraternity prevents things from working when brought from pilot-level to mass scale. It forces us to think of manufacturing as possible only in industrial estates and special economic zones, where the cost of low fraternity can be bypassed by creating a bubble. The rich bemoan the poor quality of services provided by plumbers, waiters and carpenters, not realising that, unlike in other emerging economies, these workers do not use the services that they produce. They do not use anything like the same sanitary facilities, eateries or furniture that the rich do. How, without fraternity, can they be expected to comprehend what it is that they must deliver in the modern world of consumption?

Other than civil war and violent revolution, the question of fraternity is best addressed through social reform movements. Advances in health, education, sanitation and women’s equity have not been historically spearheaded by government fiat, but through social movements to lower unacceptable societal barriers to development. The genesis of Kerala’s human development was a social movement, as was the case with advancement of education in the Bombay and Bengal presidencies, and the Punjab. Conversely, lack of fraternity with our tribal citizens has led to disempowerment and, ultimately, expression of violent resistance across almost all of India’s tribal population. The fact that political competition has reinforced sectarian lack of fraternity has compounded the problem, but is not a root cause.

As an economist, I cannot claim to understand the root causes of this lack of fraternity. But, as a social scientist and thinking citizen, I realise this is an important binding constraint to the success of India’s development transformation.

The writer is director, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy and member, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister. Views are personal



PUBLIC INTEREST

RATHIN ROY