Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha and All India Radio Discussions – Summaries

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The Big Picture – Thrust on Agriculture and Rural Economy: Is it a game changer?

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It has now been agreed upon by almost everyone that the recent budget has a distinct tilt towards agriculture, farm sector and rural economy. It is being argued that this tilt is due to the impression or rather criticism against the government that it was pro-capitalist, pro-industry and anti-farmers. The finance minister has listed a series of policies and measures that are aimed at alleviating distress in agriculture and rural economy.

Background:
Agriculture is a major contributor to the nation’s economy and it provides livelihoods for more people than any in other economic sector, particularly in rural India. About 68% of the country’s population lives in rural areas, according to the World Bank.

- However, agriculture industry has struggled since the monsoon rainfalls have been poor for two consecutive years, which has severely affected crop production. This, in turn, has hit rural spending. Several farmers have taken their lives following crop failures, unable to cope with the burden of their debts – an issue that has gained worldwide media attention in recent years.
- Mr Jaitley’s focus on rural India in his budget was seen by many as an effort to win over voters, but the country’s rural and farming economies desperately need some help.

What’s in the budget for Agriculture?
Finance Minister has announced the allocation of almost 360 billion rupees (more than $5.25 billion) toward agriculture and farmers’ welfare. More than two-thirds of that money will go toward irrigation and sustainable management of water resources.
Another 55 billion rupees (over $800 million) was allocated for a government crop insurance scheme. A separate corpus of 150 billion rupees (almost $2.2 billion) was provisioned for subvention of interest on loans taken by farmers.

In addition, the focus on organic farming is expected to help farmer incomes in rain-fed and stressed areas.

The proposed allocation under the Pradhan Mantri Grameen Sadak Yojna has been increased to 27,000 crore, with the aim of connecting 65,000 eligible habitations by constructing 2.23 lakh km of roads by 2019. This is expected to significantly improve farm-to-fork linkages, facilitate expansion in distribution for consumer goods companies, and reduce wastage in the value chain.

The government also announced its commitment to achieving 100 per cent village electrification by 1 May 2018, for which 8,500 crore has been provided for Deendayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojna and Integrated Power Development Schemes. This will further benefit the rural markets by improving cold chain infrastructure thereby reducing wastage, improving availability of perishables and increasing farmer income by reducing dependence on fuel.

To improve supply of farm credit, the target for agricultural credit has been increased to 9 lakh crore for FY17, with a provision of Rs 15,000 crore towards interest subvention.

The allocation under the MGNREGS has been enhanced from 34,700 crore to 38,500 crore in FY17. This is expected to provide an additional safety net for the rural workforce during the non-harvest season.

Is it enough?

Finance Minister, in his budget speech, talked about doubling farm income in the next five years. While this promise is certainly laudable, the blueprint to achieve this appears doubtful—at least going by the numbers in this budget.

While the budget of the ministry of agriculture has been enhanced from Rs.17,000 crore in the last budget to Rs.36,000 crore now, most of this increase has been in the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana and interest subsidy on short-term credit to farmers. Excluding these two programmes, the ministry’s budget has been increased only marginally. While the fertilizer subsidy has been cut by Rs.2,438 crore, the amount of expenditure budgeted on irrigation is only Rs.2,340 crore. Besides, the delay in implementation of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) and the reduction in food subsidy by Rs.5,000 crore in this year’s budget do raise concerns on the government’s intention on the NFSA.
But what is required at the time of rural distress is not just long-terms plans of rural rejuvenation and crop insurance but also policies to provide relief in the short run. The announcement for an increase in expenditure on MGNREGA and Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana is welcome in this regard. Both these programmes have not only proved useful in building rural infrastructure, one of the nine pillars mentioned by the finance minister, but they have also been able to generate employment and income for the rural poor.

As against the actual expenditure of Rs.35,766 crore last year, this year Rs.38,500 crore has been allocated for MGNREGA. While this is an improvement over the last year, it is less than the total commitment of Rs.39,000 crore promised by the finance minister last year (Rs. 34,000 crore in the budget with an additional provision of Rs.5,000 crore). Nonetheless, the increase is a welcome step toward recognizing the potential of MGNREGA in reducing distress in rural economy as well as in infrastructure creation. Similar increases in other rural development schemes such as the Indira Awaas Yojana will certainly contribute toward creating demand in rural areas.

While concerns will remain on the ability of this budget to deliver on the promise to revive the rural economy, this budget has certainly shifted the focus of government policy to the crisis in the countryside. This budget may avert the crisis in rural areas and may stop it from worsening, but prudent government policy also requires that some of these measures are backed up with long-term measures to insulate the rural economy from such episodes. This requires re-energizing the rural economy as an engine of growth at a time when other parts of the economy are not doing well.
**The Big Picture: Union Budget – Arun Jaitley’s roadmap**

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley recently presented his 3rd budget amidst mixed response. While the focus is on agriculture and rural development, he also laid emphasis on infrastructure and public investment in it to kick start the flagging economy. Though the GDP growth rate has been pegged at 7.6%, in many sectors the growth is not encouraging. Meanwhile, the Finance Minister has laid out what he calls the nine pillars of the budget, which will be guiding light for him. The fiscal deficit target is retained, but the development agenda is not compromised. It lacks out-of-box measures, but comes with some major reform promises. There are obviously some turn offs, but overall the arithmetic seems commendable, particularly considering the additional fiscal burden likely to be added due to 7th Pay Commission award and implementation of OROP.

During 2009 crisis, it was the rural economy which insulated Indian economy and helped it maintain its growth rate. Having realized this fact, the finance minister has rightly emphasized on rural economy and agriculture. The Budget gives its thrust on strengthening the agricultural and rural India. Several measures proposed — including allocation of Rs 35,984 crore for agriculture and farmers’ welfare, Rs 86,500 crore for irrigation for five years, Rs 15,000 crore interest subvention for agricultural loans, Rs 5,500 crore for crop insurance, Rs 38500 crore for MNREGA, Rs 8500 crore for rural electrification — show this shift of focus, which will help boost farm sector growth and rural demand that have been hit by two consecutive droughts. Also, employment creation, socio-economic progress and long-term economic growth will also get a big push by these measures in the long run.

However, experts believe that rural distress is mainly caused by the loss of construction labour. Almost, 55 million workers are in the construction sector, who are mostly migrant workers. These migrant workers often head back to their villages when they do not find any jobs in the cities. This causes rural distress. The budget, however, has failed to take note of this. Although, MGNREGA is in place, it does little to help these migrant workers. Hence, these experts argue that the target which has been achieved by cutting down the plan expenditure is not a good thing. Fiscal space, measured in terms of expenditure/GDP ratio, has come down by almost 1% of GDP. This clearly defines the direction in which the government is heading.
Finance Minister, through this budget, has tried to balance both development and growth. However, for investments to grow, changes need not be the part of budget alon- GST for example.

The Budget gives a much-needed push also to the infrastructure sector. Jaitley announced Rs 2.21 lakh crore for the sector. Of the total, a sum of Rs 55,000 crore is allocated for roads and highways, which will be further topped up by additional Rs 15,000 crore to be raised by NHAI through bonds. The total investment in the road sector including PMGSY allocation would be 97,000 crore. It is also encouraging to see the Budget’s emphasis on affordable housing.

For the public sector banking sector, a sum of Rs.25,000 crore is allocated towards their recapitalization, but the amount is woefully inadequate, considering severity of the NPA problem. In addition, the Budget promises financial reforms, but no concrete measures are proposed for addressing the sector’s woes. However, to improve the efficiency of the banking system, the government has constituted the Banks Board Bureau, naming former comptroller and auditor general Vinod Rai as its chief. The board is an attempt to separate the functioning of the banks from the government by creating another entity in between to act as a link between the two.

Employment generation in the formal sector was explicitly mentioned in Budget 2016-17 through various means. Additionally, several sectors such as housing and transport have received a boost and would contribute to more employment. The different policies for entrepreneurship development such as amendments in Companies Act, entrepreneurship training in colleges and schools, and relaxation for small enterprises under presumptive taxation scheme would also aid setting up of new enterprises that generate jobs.

For healthcare, the extension of cover to Rs 1 lakh per family and introduction of Jan Aushadhi Yojana stores can be life-savers for poor families. Similarly, the initiatives on promotion of skill development, setting up of 1500 multiskill training institutes, and a financing agency for higher education are welcome for building human capital.

The Budget also continues on the path of simplification and rationalization of tax administration. The Finance Minister reiterated his commitment to providing a stable and predictable tax regime. Dispute resolution is sought to be strengthened under the Budget through various means and a time limit has been introduced for disposing of petitions on interest waiver. The increase in limits for
cases under single-member Benches and creation of new Benches would also fast-track dispute resolution.

The budget however lacks concrete measures towards building efficacy in the education system and making it more learner-centric. The need of the hour is to improve the quality of Indian education, and focus should be on imparting faculty training, building robust assessment framework, more so at the school level. The budget is also silent on measures to further boost private sector investment in the education sector.

**The Big Picture – Legislative backing for Aadhaar: How will it help?**

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After years of criticisms and discussions over Adhaar, the unique identification number, the NDA government has decided to give legislative backing to it. This move was, however, initiated earlier by the UPA government. The Adhaar bill has now been introduced as a **money bill**. It is being said that this move is aimed at avoiding any possibility of the opposition blocking the bill in the Rajya Sabha where the government does not have a majority. However, even this bill has been criticized by some quarters for some issues in the bill including privacy issues. But, the government has insisted that the Adhaar is not compulsory and only those who wish to avail government services like subsidies and scholarships among others need to have it.

What’s good about Adhaar?

Adhaar gives every resident an opportunity to possess a portable national identity. It is unique because it anchors demographic attributes such as name or gender to biometric attributes like iris patterns of individuals. When this unique identity is combined with universalisation of banking and communication through mobile telephones, we have a historic opportunity to transform the leaky and corrupt distribution of welfare. The benefits of a transition to direct transfer are twofold: price distortions in the economy will end and people will be liberated from local power brokers.

What’s there in the new bill?

The stated idea of the **Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and Other Subsidies, Benefits and Services) Bill, 2016**, is to provide for “efficient, transparent, and targeted delivery
of subsidies, benefits and services”. This, along with a clause that says the unique numbers will not be considered as proof of citizenship, is welcome.

- The Bill seeks to give statutory backing to the processes of enrolment, authentication and use of Aadhaar-related information for delivery of various benefits, subsidies and services by the government.
- Also, it has provisions to guarantee the security and confidentiality of identity information and authentication records of every individual who has been issued an Aadhaar number.
- To ensure that the number of people excluded from Aadhaar’s fold is minimum, the bill also talks about special measures that will be undertaken by the Authority to issue numbers to women, nomadic tribes, street dwellers, senior citizens, persons with disability and unskilled and unorganized workers.

Why we need legislative backing for Aadhaar?
The fact that there is no law in place, based on which the Aadhaar enrolments and use in government programmes have been happening, always makes the UID scheme open to challenge. Nor is there any legal recourse now for a person in the event of any misuse of identity information collected in the course of enrolment or authentication. All this uncertainty would end once there is a law governing the Aadhaar project.

How critics view this bill?
They see it as a move which is meant to dilute whatever is happening in the court. The court has already systematically and consistently said that Aadhaar cannot be made mandatory. But, government, through this bill, is making it mandatory.

Concerns:

1. **Introduction as a money bill:**
The process of legislating for Aadhaar has not been wholly reassuring. The Bill has attracted immediate criticism for being introduced as a money bill, by virtue of which it does not require approval of the Rajya Sabha. Bypassing the Upper House’s vote does give the Bill an easy route to becoming law. The question is, given that Aadhaar was a signature project of the Congress-led UPA, could not the government have made the effort to reach out to lawmakers across the board on such a crucial, bipartisan issue?
2. **Data protection:**

Another key concern over the collection of personal information on this scale is data protection. There are provisions in this Bill that seem to address the concern, including one that prohibits any official from revealing information in the data repository to anyone. But the exceptions cause unease. Two provisions are particularly troubling:

- The first is Section 29(4), by which no Aadhaar number or biometric information will be made public “except for the purposes as may be specified by regulations”.
- The second, which experts have already flagged, is Section(33), under which the inbuilt confidentiality clauses will not stand when it concerns national security.

The only reassurance could be that in such cases the direction has to come from an official who is not below the rank of a Joint Secretary to the government. Nonetheless, without robust laws to protect their data, citizens would be rendered vulnerable. It is not about just snooping. It is also being said that in order to be useful and effective, Aadhaar data might have to be used alongside other databases. That could trigger further privacy questions.

**Other concerns:**

- The bill also does not speak about the rights of people.
- And, Section 7 of the Bill makes proof of Aadhaar necessary for “receipt of certain subsidies, benefits and services”. This must be read in the backdrop of a Supreme Court ruling that said Aadhaar cannot be made mandatory.

**Conclusion:**

While a law enabling Aadhaar which will pass judicial scrutiny will go some way in plugging leakage in the payment of subsidies, it is important to point out that even biometric determination of identity will not be a panacea. Leakages through impersonation and duplication of payment will be curtailed, but eligibility for subsidies is governed by determination of income. Electronic systems are no help there. Hence, the government should find ways to address these issues too.
**The Big Picture – World Culture Festival: NGT order, defiance, outcome**

**Summary:**
After a high drama the decks were finally cleared by the NGT for the three-day World Cultural recently. The Festival was inaugurated by the Prime Minister and was held on the banks of Yamuna right in the heart of the capital city. The controversial event, more so the venue, was almost cancelled based on a petition. However, after having found that the event is causing some damage to the environment and ecology, the NGT imposed a fine of Rs. 5 crore on the organizers of the event and gave a go-ahead signal. However, this fine is substantially less than the 120-crore fine earlier recommended by a committee appointed by the NGT to assess the environmental damage on the Yamuna flood plains. The NGT, also, reprimanded both the Centre and the Art of Living Foundation for environmental violations. It also imposed fines of 5 lakh on the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) and 1 lakh on the Delhi Pollution Control Committee for failing in their duty.

The Tribunal also pulled up the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change for declaring that no environmental clearance was needed, which is contrary to official notifications. The whole event raises two central issues that need to be carefully addressed. The first relates to the “ecological, environmental and biodiversity damage done to the river and flood plains” in holding such a cultural extravaganza. The second is about the propriety of the use of Army troops and equipment to level the flood plains and build pontoon bridges for what is, ultimately, a private event. Even, many of the farmers are upset with the festival. They have also complained about the compensation offered.

Besides, many environmentalists are not happy with the NGT’s order since, if the potential damage is as great as it is being made out, surely a Rs 5 crore fine isn’t going to make things okay. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) allowed the event to take place on the ground that it was approached too late to cancel. The NGT order also highlights the absence of clarity about the process of obtaining clearances for activities of this kind.

It is being said that the Central and Delhi governments have, in a display of extraordinary non-application of mind, allowed a private entity to take over part of the Yamuna floodplain, an area with well-known ecological vulnerabilities, for a ‘show’. The low priority accorded in recent times to environmental impacts of official decisions is manifest here: large parts of the biodiversity-rich
floodplain have been irresponsibly levelled, provision made for approach roads and vehicle parking, and a massive, 40-foot-high stage with garish symbols built for the event.

This has set a bad precedent. The Yamuna is a major resource for Delhi, and there is a great deal of scientific literature on why it should be protected and rejuvenated for the benefit of the national capital region. Studies done on Delhi’s water needs indicate that there are twice as many people living in the city than it can support based on carrying capacity norms. The imperative therefore should be to help the Yamuna use its full potential of recharging its aquifers using monsoon flood flows across a generous one-kilometre width, bringing more precious water to Delhi.

The NGT has rightly ordered an exhaustive review by a special committee of the damage caused to the river and its floodplain. The only option for the Foundation should be to meet the full cost of scientific restoration, consistent with the polluter-pays principle. Having claimed the participation millions of people from 155 countries, it should not be difficult for the organisers to mobilise the funds needed to restore the ecology of an invaluable part of the country’s natural heritage.

**The Big Picture – Haryana & Rajasthan: Education criteria in local elections**

**Summary:**
In an unusual move the opposition in Rajya Sabha led by congress recently managed to get an amendment passed to the president’s address delivered by the president at the beginning of the ongoing budget session. In what is considered as an embarrassment to the government the amendment expressed that the president address did not support the right of the citizens to contest Panchayat elections in the backdrop of restrictions (Minimum Educational Qualification criteria) imposed in Haryana and Rajasthan. Local body elections in these two states have already been held. Incidentally, these laws have also been upheld by the Supreme Court. On the other hand, both Haryana and Rajasthan state governments have defended their laws. They say there are already enough schemes in the country to ensure minimum educational qualification as required by the law. Also, according to them, such laws encourage people to send their children to the schools.
But, few activists argue that these laws are against the very spirit of 73rd and 74th amendments. These laws also violate the right of every citizen to vote and to contest elections, which form the basic structure of the constitution. It may be noted here that due to these restrictions, many able candidates were debarred from contesting elections. In one way, it can be said that this law has prevented many people from coming to the mainstream. Besides, such laws do not hold good for states like Haryana and Rajasthan. For example, in Haryana 83% of Dalit, 67% of general women and overall 64% of the citizens have been excluded due to the conditions imposed by this law. Also, the number of candidates contested in recent elections was one fourth of the previous election and 53% of people were selected unopposed. Activists also allege that all important organisations in the country, including the Election Commission of India, have failed to protect the rights of citizens. Therefore, according to them, Rajya Sabha has done the right thing by underlining this issue in the ongoing session.

The Supreme Court’s interpretation is based on the fact that uneducated or illiterate people getting elected to the local bodies can easily be misled by officials if they don’t know to write and read. In such cases, administrative actions that they are going can pose many challenges. The Court has further observed that it is only the education which can give people the power to differentiate between right and wrong, and good and bad.

However, this is seen as a setback for the evolution of democracy by some people. They argue that the primary role of public representatives is to put forth the point of his/her electorate. The court has also ignored the fact that it is the native wisdom of the people that has saved this democracy for years now. In all, it seems that the education criteria have been over emphasized. Some activists are also questioning the average education level of Legislatures which passed these laws. They say, if these laws are to be put in place then they should first be imposed at the top level, that is top-bottom approach should be followed. Besides, education in India is not yet universalized and we are not a 100% literacy country. Interestingly, such laws have also prompted persons to get false certificates to contest elections.

Following the footsteps of Haryana and Rajasthan, even the Maharashtra state government is planning to introduce such law. But, before proceeding further the Parliament should rethink on the whole issue. Because, such laws, in the long run, may also promote elitist representative systems.
The Big Picture – GST Bill: Why is it still not passed?

The first half of budget session of the Parliament has concluded. However, the much awaited legislation to usher in the Goods and Services Tax, which is expected to transform India’s tax structure, remains struck in the parliament. The bill hangs fire mainly because the government and the opposition are unable to work out a compromise on some contentious issues. The main issue is – what should be the rate of the GST and whether it’s possible to incorporate a cap on GST rate in the act itself. It may be recalled that finance minister last year had announced that the GST will be implemented from April 1 2016. That is now out of question. It is also true that the first half of the session was almost concentrated on Aadhar bill.

Opposition parties are demanding a cap on the GST and it should be incorporated in the Constitutional Amendment Bill itself. However, the government is not willing to include this clause in the amendment bill. According to the government, inclusion in the constitutional bill would make it more rigid and difficult for the government to change the rate as and when necessary. Moreover, worldwide, taxation issues are left for the government to work out. There is also an allegation that this bill, if passed, would give more powers to the Central Government with respect to taxation issues and would affect financial independence of states. This has also given rise to mistrust between the centre and States. And hence, states are demanding a constitutional protection in this regard. Opposition parties have also asked the government to do away with the 1% levy on inter-state GST and bring in place an Independent Dispute resolution mechanism.

Why there is an urgent need to pass this Bill?
1. GST is crucial for India to reaffirm its reform intent to the world. If the government fails to deliver in this session, that would send a horribly wrong signal to the world on India’s prospects to advance on the reform front.
2. Passage of this bill will also be seen as a big victory of this government by the investor community and the biggest reform India has witnessed in a decade. The GST will subsume several different taxes into one and will significantly improve the tax revenues over a period of time. Economists estimate up to 2% addition to the country’s GDP when GST improves tax revenues.
3. Also, the extant tax structure of India is heavily fragmented, with multiple indirect taxes levied by different authorities at different stages of a transaction. This necessitates the urgent passage of this bill.

Conclusion:
The GST bill, which subsumes all indirect taxes to create one rate and integrate the country into a single market, is the biggest tax reform that is being undertaken since Independence. If the government fails to build a consensus it will face even tougher days ahead. More critically, it will send a bad signal to the global investors about India’s reform course and thus future investment prospects. As global rating agency, Moody’s Investors Service warned recently, there are clear potential headwinds looming over India from a loss of reform momentum. So now it’s up to the government to get this Bill passed.

**The Big Picture – Will reservation in pvt sector stem naxalism?**

The issue of reservation has been under discussion for decades in this country. While reservation for SCs and STs in public sector came with the constitution, it took many years for OBCs to get the same. However, ever since independence the demand for reservation in private sector has been made in one form or the other. It may be noted here that Dr. Ambedkar himself had made this demand. However, for marginalized groups reservation in private sector continues to be a distant dream. Though some affirmative action has been put in place by some corporates since 2004, the success of it remains remains blurred. Recently, a union minister also claimed that reservation in private sector would bring down naxalism in the country. Also, NCBC recently advised the government to enact a legislation to make it mandatory for private sector to reserve 27% of total jobs for backward classes.

**Do we need reservation in private sector?**

**Arguments in favor:**

- Reservations once accepted in the constitutional framework are not charity which is to be kept away from the ‘meritocracy’ of ‘private’ operations. Like all other constitutional guarantees, India must ensure all its citizens opportunity in all spaces; giving preference and quotas for socially and educationally deprived sections in the private space is therefore, in keeping with this fundamental tenet.
- As NCBC argues, with the number of jobs generated in the state sector shrinking steadily, for the promise of quotas in the Constitution to have any real meaning, it may be inevitable to
extend it to the private sector. An estimate has it that less than 1% (only .69%) of jobs in the country for educated citizens are covered by reservations. Hence, reservation in the private sector is necessary.

- Fair competition in a mixed economy means that the public sector and the private sector should have a level playing field. When the public sector is being asked to discharge its social commitment through the reservation of jobs, there is no reason why similar conditions should not apply to the private sector that has been given a lot of concessions by the government to enhance industrial growth.

- It is also true that our private sector takes a lot of money from public sector banks and financial institutions, and there is a huge default in loan repayment and taxes. Those whose land, labour and capital are being used by the Indian entrepreneurial class can definitely seek some modicum of equality in job distribution.

- Under the circumstances, to call upon only the public sector and government departments to discharge their social commitment, keeping the private sector insulated from the national goal of evolving social justice, would be contrary to one of the basic principles of governance in the country “to provide full equality of opportunity in employment for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward castes.”

**Arguments against:**

- The private sector is known for its innovation and performance and bringing the quota system in this sector would impede upon the progress of nation which is reliant on this sector for generation of new ideas and building a competitive advantage.

- Reservation of such kind will create a workforce incapable of meeting international standards resulting in loss in competitiveness of industries and promotion inclusion at the cost of growth.

- While there is reservation in government jobs, employment by government has fallen from 18.2 million in 2006 to 17.6 million in 2012. In contrast, private sector jobs have increased more than a third, from 8.77 million to 11.9 million over the period. It also points out that while there has been 27% reservation for OBCs in government jobs since 1992, only around 12% got jobs. Hence, it is first necessary to fill this gap.

**What needs to be done?**

The reservation system in India started with an objective of uplifting the underprivileged sections of the society, who were earlier discriminated against in the deep rooted caste system in India. However the reservation system of the kind that is prevalent in India is working to uplift one section
of the society at the cost of the other. What India has to failed to do is this context is to build capacity. Mere provision of a place in a company or education institute would not help in uplifting the weaker section, the concentration should be on generation of skill and competitiveness. Also needed is affirmative action, and that is through legislation.

Also, the quality of the education system in India needs to be uplifted in order to provide a equitable platform for all sections of the society to compete fairly. While programs like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Campaign for Education for All) have helped, the current state of school facilities is far from satisfactory, with a major proportions of primary schools in the country still without essentials such as drinking water, toilets, furniture, teaching aids and books, playgrounds and computers. The learning achievements of students in semi-urban and rural areas is poor as compared to their counterparts in urban areas. The high student drop-out rates and teacher absence rates raise further questions on the effectiveness of the education system. As a nation we should hope to empower the underprivileged rather than sympathising with them and giving them the option to escape the hard route. Offering them the same quality of education and training will go a long way in developing them and helping them rise above the ‘underprivileged’ status.

Relation between reservation and naxalism: Experts see no relation between reservation and naxalism. Lack of jobs is one of the reasons behind people joining naxalism. But, it is not the only reason behind this. Other reasons include non-availability of land, poverty, lack of jobs in general or government’s apathy. In this instance, forcing reservations on the corporate sector will not work and can also prove counterproductive.

Do we need reservation at all? The reservation system is fair as far as it creates skills and makes the underprivileged more employable. For this it is imperative for the government to identify the section that needs to be uplifted and support them with financial aid and capacity building (free quality education and training). Focusing on reservations in jobs as a way of uplifting the weaker sections is a very myopic view of the situation. These people need to be made tougher and capable of fighting out a fair battle.

Conclusion: Quotas are no silver bullet that deliver social justice. The only way to ensure that is to level the playing field, through better education and training, and a constant vigil that would ensure action against those who undermine the equality for all promised by the Constitution.
The Big Picture – Pak team in Pathankot: New Beginning or strategic folly?

The relationship between India and Pakistan has taken a new turn with the arrival of a joint investigative team from Pakistan to probe the Pathankot airbase attack which took place in January. The arrival of the team and the presence of it in the airbase has assumed new proportions as the opposition parties have attacked the government for allowing it. However, this decision has opened up new possibilities. The Indian government’s decision to allow the team apparently consisting of ISI and Military intelligence officials has surprised many.

This decision gives rise to the following questions:
1. Why has this been done?
2. What is expected of this visit and how will it help the investigating agencies on the Indian side?
3. Whether such visits become reciprocal and will lead to diplomatic breakthrough?
4. Or is it some kind of blunder?

Background:
Soon after the attack the attack India had announced that it would allow Pakistan investigating agencies to visit India and modalities would be decided in advance. The recent visit is the consequence of this decision.

Why this is a good move?
Such events have not taken place earlier. It is a new beginning showing some signs of maturity and positivity in the relationship. Since the fallout of meeting between NSAs positive developments have been taking place. Due to some shared intelligence between the two countries, two terrorist attacks were also neutralized in Gujarat. So, same kind of reciprocity from Pakistan can be expected.

Why this would make a little difference?
However, according to some experts, there was no need for Pakistan probe team to visit India. DNA and telephone details have already been given. Some of the evidences collected at the site have also been handed over. So, it is being said that such tactics are often used to delay the investigation. It
can be noted here that, after 26/11 attacks, despite the visit by a judicial team, nothing better was achieved. Also, no great insights can be gained by just a visit, say some experts. In the past too, Pakistan has failed to prove its credentials in combating terrorism. Hence, it is being felt that realism is being sacrificed in the whole event. And many are upset with the fact that the team consists of members from ISI. It is always claimed that most of the terrorist attacks are backed by the ISI.

Why, at this moment, it is difficult for Pakistan to control terror groups?
If it starts controlling now, there is a high probability that many of these terror groups would go and join the IS.

Conclusion:
While many are skeptical about the latest developments, some see it as a confidence building measure between the two countries. However, only time can tell about the seriousness of the investigation and its outcome.