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Lesson from Taj Nagar

'Agar koi problem ko solve karna ho, to khatam hone tak lage raho.' If you want to solve a problem, keep at it until it's finished.

This is sterling advice in a nation notorious for not finishing a job.

We build roads but are too lazy — or simply don't bother — to build pavements.

We build up well towards rival goals in football and hockey, but we are infamous for not getting the ball in the net. Indigenous manufacturers of cars, including — and particularly — the Tatas, are notorious for poor finishing.

The advice didn't come from a management guru, a sports psychologist, and certainly not from a political leader.

It came from the village of Taj Nagar, a settlement not far from the bright lights of Gurgaon. Through the week, some Delhi FM radio stations called the folk of Taj Nagar to their studios to share their happy tale.

In a rare Indian display of industriousness and cooperation, Taj Nagar built its own railway station. Frazzled by long commutes and anxious late-night waits for family who often stagger home well after dark, and a railway refusal to build a station, Taj Nagar got each family to contribute Rs 3,000, and then persuaded the railways to fork over some land and technical help to build a station on the mainline that passes outside the village.

The railways, charged the village Rs 5.6 lakh, which includes land, four display boards, project reports and supervision.

They also offered a bargain: You build the station, we'll stop the trains there.

So, a 30-year wait is over, and the men of Taj Nagar are the latest Indian heroes. This is a tragedy.

Don't get me wrong. I loved hearing Taj Nagar's story, but we celebrate it because it isn't often that Indians work together as a community — that's the tragedy.

Isn't it funny how the West treasures individualism yet works wonderfully as a community, and we in the third world treasure our community ties but settle for an every-man-for-himself approach in our shambolic public spaces and public actions?

This question clearly troubled Jay Desai, the CEO of a Mumbai-based company called Universal Consulting. So, after the 26/11 attack, he ran a year-long study that tried to understand why there was so little public accountability in India. One of the questions the study asked: Is a relatively collectivist society as we find in India, a barrier to achieving higher public accountability?

Using a variety of World Bank governance indicators, Desai's study found a high correlation between the West's rugged-individual culture and public accountability. In India, he concludes, the culture of community could be a barrier to better public accountability because responsibility is often diffused among groups.

The same morning that Taj Nagar's people were showcasing their collective responsibility on the airwaves, Delhi's 10th Auto Expo opened with much grandeur.

As you read this, we bask in the glory of being one of the world's fastest growing auto markets, of knowing the big boys honoured us — our willingness and ability to keep buying more cars actually — with 10 global launches.

We are proud that the Japanese, Koreans, Americans, Germans, the British, even the Chinese, streamed in to pay homage to the Indian customer.

Yet, how horrified they were when they got to Pragati Maidan, Delhi's biggest fairground, and found it a giant garbage dump.

I am not exaggerating.

You had to have the vision of an elephant (they don't see too well) not to see the overflowing garbage bins, waste food, packing material and other trash. As I made my way to some stalls that housed cars with the best of first-world technology, I could not but help wrinkle my nose at the pong of stale urine.

Astonishing, isn't it, how we can send work together to send a spacecraft to the moon but can't work together on creating a trash-disposal system that works?

Of course they still come — many of them sporting masks. India is too important to ignore. They come because India has promise, and they are in trouble. If we don't get our collective act together, they will one day gladly consign us to the anonymity we enjoyed in the poverty stricken 1960s, '70s and '80s.

To truly find our place in the sun, we must change our we-are-like-this-only attitude. As Taj Nagar shows, we need not always be like this only. There are some — sorely inadequate — indicators that we are attempting to pull together as a nation.

One example is the long-delayed attempt at a general sales tax (GST) across India. Today, state finance ministers meet to discuss a Rs 50,000 crore compensation package evolved by the 13th Finance Commission as a sop to states that routinely stonewall attempts to rid the nation of its chaotic, damaging system of cesses, surcharges and multiple taxes, levied by both state and Centre.

The GST is a way of life in almost every country larger than ours. We know it would be a huge boost to the economy and growth, the single most important tax reform since Independence. But we could not collectively meet the April 2010 deadline for its introduction.

Look at the bright side. That we are even committed now to making the GST happen implies the Taj Nagar mentality may slowly be spreading. It must.

Now, if only we could agree on how to handle our trash.

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