



Business Standard



Friday, April 02, 2004

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Weekend Ruminations : T N Ninan

The power of one

Business Standard, November 08, 2003

In all likelihood, you would not have heard of Parth J Shah. But as you may have guessed from his use of a middle initial, he spent many years in the US — after getting a degree in pharmacy in Baroda.

He realised that getting economic policy right did more to increase human welfare than discovering a new drug or two, and switched to economics, got himself a doctorate and taught the subject at Michigan before he decided to return to the mother country and started a modest NGO, which he called Centre for Civil Society.

Devoted to what one might call market liberalism, and inspired by such think-tanks in the US as the libertarian Cato Institute, Shah launched the Centre on the 50th anniversary of India's independence in 1997.

He also roped in a bunch of familiar worthies to sit on his advisory boards, with the chairman being Kanwal Rekhi of TiE fame (he is also one of the primary financiers, the other being the Ratan Tata Trust).

When you meet him, Shah comes across as earnest and well meaning. He is obviously quite effective, because the Centre has a pretty good record for just six years of existence.

It has published some 15 books —some of them admittedly slim, and modestly priced, and some essentially reprints, like Milton Friedman's memorable minute on Indian planning and economic policy.

This was written back in the 1950s but its practical wisdom and economic common sense were officially ignored, to our great cost, and would have been lost to history if the Centre had not brought it to light all over again.

The Centre does other things too. It maintains a medium-sized library which is open to everyone; it analyses every Bill presented to Parliament; and it gets into public interest litigation (to support the privatisation of Balco, and to stop the harassment of ordinary commuters in the name of VIP security).

Predictably, of course, it also organises seminars. I attended one where those who would not be convinced could not be convinced.

The Centre has now brought out what it calls a 'Delhi Citizen Handbook 2003', perfectly timed to focus on governance in the capital just ahead of state elections.

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For what it contains in its 346 pages, the remarkable fact is that it took only a dozen young and enthusiastic people, working just three months, to unearth a set of devastating findings about various Delhi government organisations and their activities, to then pose fundamental questions, and to underline the scope for corrective action. And so it shows how NGOs can be a force for change, even with relatively limited resources.

To register how much of a force, look at what the handbook unearths (these are just the highlights): The prevention of food adulteration department has 28 inspectors to oversee 1.5 lakh registered food establishments. At one outlet per inspector per day, an outlet would be inspected once in 17 years.

Or: a study found that more than 80 per cent of the children who pass Class V from municipal schools, cannot read or write their names (India's demanding test of literacy). Or: Farmers pay 5-7 per cent of sales to commission agents at the wholesale markets that are the monopoly of the Delhi Agriculture Marketing Board.

So what does one do? The handbook has some practical advice. For instance, it shows how even simple queries to various government departments, under the right to information law, gets remarkable results.

Residents of a 'colony' asked for information on a contract under which a garbage bin was supposed to have been built but had not; before they knew it, the bin was built properly.

An industrialist whose factory was closed under court orders for being polluting, kept getting power bills till he asked for information on the person responsible; the bills were rectified in a fortnight. And so on.

In places, the advice is simplistic, but in others the point is well made: for instance, how are two private sector monopolies for power distribution better than one public sector monopoly?

If one small NGO can put all this together, think of what our mass circulation newspapers could do if they chose to be newspapers instead of advertising gazettes.

BS Opinion Poll

Will corporates continue to report good numbers in the forthcoming quarters?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Can't say

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Business Standard Ltd.
Nehru House, 4 Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi - 110002. INDIA
Ph: +91-11-23720202-10. Fax: 011 - 23720201
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editor@business-standard.com