

8 things India needs to do urgently

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On the occasion of India's 63rd Independence Day, former Union agriculture secretary T Nanda Kumar offers an 8-fold path to claim our rightful place among the world's best.

I was not born in 1947. Therefore, I have no memories of the euphoria of the first Independence Day.

My early memories of the day are the celebrations in a small government school I attended. Crisp starched and ironed clothes, national flags made of paper, singing the National Anthem, and a speech by the headmaster were the highlights.

I was allowed to pin a small flag on my shirt and hold a slightly bigger one in the school. Those were proud moments! Even after 63 years, the pride remains.

Later days were different. It was more about the country, our country! There was nationalism all around. Even as young kids, there was unflinching commitment to the country. Reading Gandhi and Nehru was a passion.

The first few images of post-Independent India were ones of food shortages, poverty, hunger, inadequacy of almost everything. But there was hope!

Where are we after 63 years, and where do we intend to go?

Things have changed and, in many ways, changed for the better. We still have poverty, but we have increasing prosperity as well. We are not worried whether the next ship will bring enough food or whether we have enough foreign exchange to buy fuel for the next month.

Our choice of cars is not limited to the Ambassador and the Fiat, we do not live in a black and white TV era with just one channel anymore, we are not in a long queue for allotment of scooters or telephone connections, we are not looking to developed countries for aid or to the World Bank for more loans, we are not scared of competition any longer, we are a confident lot ready to take on the world.

Yes, we have come far. We have progressed. Does that give us comfort? Probably, not. We have to solve more complex problems to move forward and we are impatient.

What could be the most important things that we need to do urgently?

One, contain divisive forces and actions. We seem to divide ourselves in the name of caste, region, religion, group, sub-group, vote banks, constituencies though we unite in times of crisis.

There are a number of external forces which may not want India to become developed and powerful. These forces could create difficulties both inside the country and outside.

It is important that, as a pluralistic society, we learn to live and grow together and to resolve our differences through dialogue and reconciliation.

Any form of violence, for any reason whatsoever, should be avoided. Instead of expecting the government to solve all our problems, let civil society take its role seriously and do its bit.

The large majority in India wants to get on with their lives and want peace. This majority needs to assert its presence.

Two, release the energy of India's youth to generate growth and prosperity. Look at any educated young man or woman in India today. There is a new level of confidence, a confidence to take up a challenge to better the best in the world, provided they are supported with education and infrastructure. They are willing to work extra hours, learn new things, and innovate.

It is this confidence and the attitude of "we can do it" that is India's most valuable capital today.

We need to support this with the best quality education, infrastructure and training and research facilities, be it in the private or public sector. Most of these youngsters are above the issues of caste, region, language or religion. They are focused on their careers and their growth, which will in turn be India's growth.

Three, get the infrastructure right. Young India is impatient, and rightly so. They want to get going. Inadequate infrastructure, whether it is physical or social, is holding them back.

Roads, power, basic services like water and sanitation, social infrastructure like healthcare, education need urgent attention if we want India to grow.

Many of these could come through private sector investment, innovation and efficiencies. The government will still play a major role both in terms of providing funds, encouraging investments and ensuring regulation.

Instead of focusing on ownership issues, we need to focus on quality and cost of services.

Four, fight inefficiency and corruption. Most Indians are worried about corruption. But when it comes to standing up against corruption, there aren't many.

While all forms of corruption are bad, big corruption is fodder for television news channels, and petty corruption is like cancer. It affects the poor more and makes life miserable for the average Indian.

Civil society needs to stand up and make/force the change.

Luckily, we have the Right to Information Act which is an effective tool in the hands of the Indian citizen to ensure transparency.

India, the global software power, should be the global leader in ensuring transparent e-governance. We do not need technology from outside, we just need the will to change age-old and opaque processes.

Society needs to make its demand for this change loud and clear.

Five, invest in innovation and research. The future belongs to technology. We need to develop technologies that suit us. Research in frontier areas of science and technology should become a national priority. This should not be the task of the government alone, corporates need to support this effort. Society needs to give greater respect to scientists and technologists.

There are innovators at every level in India. Quite often their work goes unnoticed. They can make a difference to our lives. We need to create a simple and useable platform for them to collaborate. All of us cannot be innovators, we must become adept at adopting innovations.

Six, respect other's needs and feelings. It is often said that obedience to the unenforceable rules is the hallmark of a civilised society. Quite often, our behaviour in public is despicable, be it our civic sense, or adherence to discipline or our commitment to the environment around us.

The rich and the powerful need to set an example since they are probably the worst offenders.

Seven, care for the environment. While we are in a hurry to grow faster, we often forget concerns of sustainability. All of us need to give something back to the environment even if it means giving up some comfort and doing a little more.

Our ability to sustain our resources over a longer period is key to our growth.

Eight, care for the poor and the disadvantaged. There are many in India who are poor and disadvantaged, mostly for reasons beyond their control.

While policy interventions need to take care of those, a caring society needs to ensure that they do not feel left out, be it the economically weaker sections, women or socially or educationally backward classes.

It is important to show that society cares.

Can we do it? If everyone does a little bit more, we can and we should!

T Nanda Kumar, a former Union agriculture secretary, is a member of the prime minister's economic committee on Kashmir.