A THOUGHT FOR TODAY

Any community that espouses...fair, balanced, transparency and accountability will never see a disaster.

N R NARAYANA MURTHY, chairman, Infosys Technologies

Watch The Watchmen

There is an urgent need to clean up India's corporate governance structure

The Satyam saga continues with the Pricewaterhouse (PW) auditors' claim — of being taken in by the false records shown to them — coming under attack in the Central Bureau of Investigation's (CBI) chargesheet. The auditors' defence, always on shaky ground, has become even more so with the CBI's list of charges. It is, if not entirely unexpected, an unwelcome reminder of just how far the ripple effect of the Satyam fraud has spread. But it is also an opportunity for us to examine the system's shortcomings.

Increasingly these days, the leaders of India Inc are lionised and called the architects of India's rising global profile. But the Satyam debacle has revealed how shaky the foundation of the corporate governance structure is. The problems of transparency, accountability and governing culture that allowed the Satyam fraud to happen are endemic to large sections of India's private sector. This has been mostly overlooked so far with the corporate governance model being held up as an example to be emulated in even public administration. But as N R Narayana Murthy of Infosys puts it in an interview with our sister daily, The Economic Times, the current corporate management paradigm is a form of feudalism, with opacity and centralised authority creating an environment where best practices are subordinated to quick profits and dissent becomes an impossibility.

At a time when the Indian economy is hard-pressed to attract investment, this model is unsustainable. For Brand India to retain value, there must be seen to be checks and balances. This is where auditing firms form an integral part of the system. When a corporate entity falls foul of these, there must be a transparent process of accountability. No system is without flaws — witness Enron — but it is only when transgressors are seen to be the exception and punitive action meticulously taken against them that credibility can be retained.

Resolving this issue must go beyond subjecting those directors suspected to be involved in the Satyam fraud to the due process of law. Auditing firms are the watchmen of the entire system, and must in turn be watched. The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India's move to have all companies audited only by peer review certified firms is a good step in this regard. Further, an auditor's association with a particular company must be for a limited period of time, reducing opportunities for long-term mutually beneficial relationships. Uncomfortable questions should also be asked of PW regarding the lack of follow-up when their auditors ignored recommendations regarding Satyam made by other PW teams. The current situation has handed the Indian corporate structure a reason to clean up its act. The opportunity must be seized.

Let There Be Light

California utility considers space-based solar power arrangement

This sounds like an idea from the more speculative realms of sci-fi. But a leading American power company, which provides power to the US state of California, plans to purchase clean energy generated by a satellite beaming solar power from orbit. The aim is to provide 200 MW of power by 2016. An array of solar panels around 22,000 miles above the earth's equator will generate power and beam it back through radio-frequency transmissions to antennae in California, where they will be converted into electricity and fed into the regular power grid.

The premise behind space-based solar power has long been considered scientifically feasible. With panels in orbit, where the sun shines brightly and all the time, solar power could meet a substantial part of our energy needs. However, the costs involved have so far been considered prohibitively high. But given the urgency of climate change and the decreasing costs of solar technology, experts believe an energy revolution may be in the offing. The challenges of space-based solar power remain formidable. Even with reduced costs, it is likely to be an expensive exercise. And though scientists have dismissed the idea that the beam being sent back to earth would act as a death ray of sorts and fry any birds and planes that get in its path, it remains a concern.

Still, innovation is what is required if we are to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. Several countries are taking steps to protect their environment and cut emissions. Britain has announced incentives of up to £5,000 for consumers to purchase an electric car, as part of a larger strategy to slash the country's carbon dioxide emissions by 26 per cent by 2020. The British government is also investing money in developing infrastructure to charge electric vehicles, besides offering car manufacturers £100 million for research to ensure that the UK takes a lead in manufacturing electric vehicles.

India should be trying to do everything it can to reduce its dependence on oil and to bring down emissions. It can offer incentives to auto manufacturers to bring green technology here and provide them with adequate infrastructure to research and build the next generation of automobiles. At the same time, the government could take advantage of the country's geography and commission research into producing solar power on a commercial scale. But, will it?

As Legend Has It

Sadie Clifford

BIRTH OF ROME

The epigraph has it that Rome was not built in a day, but according to the Gruppo Storico Romano (Roman Historical Group), today is the 2,762nd anniversary of the founding of Rome. And they are having a procession to celebrate, despite the naysayers who claim that the actual date is lost in the mists of time. Even the Ancient Romans themselves were a little confused as to the year, although they all agreed the day was the festival of Palia, April 21. Such debates are common in the historical profession, in which arguing when a thing started generates research funding — literally meat and drink to scholars. As for groups like the Roman Historical, they cherish the romantic legends that keep love for these dusty subjects alive and provide the chance to dress up and party like it's 753 BC. The Ancient Roman society is important to modern times, especially in the West where it is seen as a touchstone of civilisation. They left behind detailed legal and civil documents, complex engineering solutions and the linguistic and political legacy of a unified Europe. Yet its foundation anniversary is based on the myth of twin brothers Romulus and Remus, sons of a priestess and the god of war, who were suckled by a wolf and each founded a city on the seven hills before Romulus murdered Remus.

A similar tangle of myth and history can be found in Indian memories of the same period. Rome was founded in the late Vedic era, during which sophisticated Indian civilisation and culture surpassed any in the West. They already had complex political and social systems, astronomy, mathematics, geometry, medicines and surgery, even veterinary science. They could cure cataract, calculate to the power of 10 and knew that calendars must include leap years. Those great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, were written, as well as sacred texts such as the Vedas. Innovations of the Vedic period like caste are still influential in modern India, whilst Sanskrit, like Latin, devolved into many languages spoken today. Modern India abounds in myths and legends, from the Holika's attempt to burn a little boy to the creation of the island of Sri Lanka. Television reproduces spectacle and ancient beliefs live again, if only for the length of the tale.

Obama's Af-Pak Quandary

Price of Pakistan's cooperation is US pressure on India

Haider Ali Hussein Mullick

Washington: Breaking away from President George W Bush's goal of democratisation of the Islamic world, President Barack Obama has placed defeating the al-Qaeda terrorist network at the centre of the US's policy goal in Afghanistan and Pakistan. While popular and logical from the American perspective, this approach fails to take into account the interest of the US's indispensable ally Pakistan, which is concerned with not just al-Qaeda, but also with what it sees as growing Indian influence in Afghanistan and the threat of subversion.

Recent interviews with senior Pakistani military officials make it clear that Pakistani cooperation will depend on the Obama administration's readiness to contain India's anti-Pakistan efforts in Afghanistan. While US troop strength in Afghanistan has increased, US officials have repeatedly said that al-Qaeda leadership is now located in Pakistan. How deep America will go, and how it will choose between employing drone attacks or deploying troops in the pursuit of al-Qaeda will depend on Pakistani cooperation.

In fact, the al-Qaeda is already moving beyond the tribal areas, facilitated by local alliances and motivated by counter-productive Pakistani counterinsurgency tactics that alienate people through brute force. In the past seven years while Pakistan made short-term political deals with the Taliban, al-Qaeda and associates assassinated national leaders, bombed munitions factories, police training centres, mosques and girls' schools. They even extended their attacks to Kabul, London and Mumbai. While angering the US, Pakistan's duplicitous policy, meanwhile, has failed to achieve its legitimate national security goals — that of fighting al-Qaeda with the Americans, but maintaining its influence in Kabul through pro-Pakistani Pashtuns as a safeguard against a precipitous US withdrawal and perceived threat from India in Afghanistan.

But why is this important? In the early years of the war that defeated the Taliban, leaders in Kabul failed to conciliate pro-Pakistan and moderate Taliban leaders, consistently ignoring their legitimate influence over south-east Afghans, thus increasing Islamabad's anxieties. President Hamid Karzai gave India unprecedented access, accepting large amounts of socio-economic aid worth $1.2 billion and military training — knowing that Pakistan with its $200 million programme could not compete. He also ignored Pakistani allegations of "India's financial support" for separatists from Pakistan's Baluchistan province, as military analyst Ayesha Siddiqa has noted.

If the US remains oblivious to Pakistani concerns and Pakistanis remain secretive about their duplicitous means in taking care of a perceived Indian threat, then US unilateral military escalation may be unavoidable. In that case Washington should have no illusions: if the United States sends troops, it would face an angry, 175 million-strong, nuclear-armed nation, willing to fight for every inch, attracting regional intervention and coalescing with the al-Qaeda. An imploding Pakistan could start a domino-effect-war with incalculable consequences for the United States and the world.

How can one stop this doomsday scenario? First, Islamabad must make its security interests clear to Washington: excessive Indian economic or military influence in Kabul believed to be aimed at destabilising Pakistan is unacceptable. Second, if enough moderate Taliban from the south-east, perceived to be pro-Pakistani, participate in the upcoming Afghan elections and are allowed to share power, Pakistan's clandestine support for the Taliban in Afghanistan is unnecessary. If not, then the Pakistani generals will continue to support the Taliban in Afghanistan, as combatants in "asymmetric warfare against a conventionally superior India", as military analyst Aqil Shah has noted.

Third, the trust gap between the Pakistani government and its citizens should be eliminated. To Pakistanis, the message should be unequivocal: while a reformed US-Pakistan partnership will centre on fighting the common al-Qaeda threat and deal with the challenge from radical Taliban and Indian subversion, Pakistan's sovereignty will not be violated without consent. Fourth, this should be aided by a massive 'transparency' campaign through electronic and print media and notably through radio — a recent survey states, 80 per cent of all tribal area denizens have radios — to explain the US-Pakistan partnership, its military and socio-economic benefits and its past failures.

Fifth, most US military and intelligence presence in Pakistan must be made public; and 'missing people', or cases of extra-constitutional detentions must be resolved by the newly reinstated judiciary. Sixth, despite the failure of peace deals between the Taliban and Islamabad, political reconciliation is still the only logical long-term solution to quelling the insurgency.

Finally, Pakistan must reject heavy-handed counterinsurgency that leads to heavy casualties and loss of popular support while waiting for the peace deal to break. The recently announced $3 billion in US military aid aims to enhance training and equipment. Moreover, the Pakistani law enforcement agencies should be a major recipient because 'holding' and 'building' relies on effective policing.

On balance, past US strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan to defeat the al-Qaeda failed. The old US joint counterinsurgency policy ignored a regional political strategy and relied on Pakistan's military to deliver without understanding its security concerns. Unless the US takes Pakistani concerns fully on board, its single-minded attempt to defeat the al-Qaeda risks dragging the US deep into Pakistan's quagmire.

The writer is a senior fellow at the US Joint Special Operations University. Copyright: 2009 Yale Center for the Study of Globalization.

EDIT PAGE MAILBOX

MY TIMES, MY VOICE

Curb monster teachers

Behaviour of some teachers, particularly in government schools, has become anti-social and hazardous. There should be strong legal provisions to deal with cases of inhuman behaviour by the so-called teachers who are responsible for creating responsible citizens even as they themselves are untrained to deal with children. In my opinion, the time has come for the government to impart training as refresher course to all the teachers periodically so that they improve in discharging their duties and, in future, no such inhuman case recurs.

A K Dubey, NEW DELHI

We believe teachers to be among the most respected persons in society. They make and shape young pupils. But alas! Sometimes they behave like butchers. The death of an 11-year-old girl after being punished is not a one-off instance. After a while, people forget about such crimes and they get repeated all over again. We must punish such barbaric behaviour.

Sudhangshu Laha, VIA EMAIL

Regressive ideas

This is with reference to the article 'Progress hatao' (Apr 15) by Jug Suraiya. In today's India, there is no place for regressive ideas such as those being propagated by the Samajwadi Party in its election manifesto. It is absurd to talk about banning computers and English language education which are key to India's dominant position as a large source of IT–qualified and English-speaking manpower for the entire world. Essentially, it is these two which have given India a solid edge over many other developing countries. These are our great assets. Only those who do not wish India well and would like to see it march backward in time are likely to think on those lines. Not computers, English language or machinery, but there is need to question the existence of political parties with such retrograde ideology.

Subhash Kaura, VIA EMAIL

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World Heritage Day to be followed soon by Earth Day celebrations

They're great reminders

TIMES VIEW

After all the excitement and publicity of Earth Hour on March 28 that drew worldwide attention to the importance of saving energy, came the turn of World Heritage Day on April 18, marked by events and lectures on the subject of preservation of monuments and other built-up and natural heritage. Next, it will be Earth Day on April 22...

There is widespread criticism of observing or celebrating special days. Many feel there is so much hype on one day and after that, nothing. That's not entirely true. There's nothing wrong with earmarking specific days for specific issues. Why can't several days of the year each be designated as a special day to remind us of specific issues that require our attention? Don't we celebrate relatively inconsequential — and mostly inevitable — events like birthdays and death days, with no other reason than to feel good or bad as the case may be?

Earmarking calendar dates to remind ourselves of the importance of saving energy, conserving water, renewing friendships, thinking of melting ice caps or the vulnerable ozone layer, or paying closer attention to women's issues is necessary to flag off long-delayed projects, awareness campaigns and educational programmes to initiate constructive action for the common good. Talking or writing about an important issue from time to time is one thing; putting it down in your diary to be conscious of a problem or taking participative action is entirely another.

Every conscientious executive maintains a diary of engagements, of to-do lists, of projects in the pipeline and ideas. The same logic could apply to a wide range of people being conscious and taking action on social, economic and political issues that, in the absence of an annual reminder, might get trashed — wittingly or otherwise — in the dustbin of history. So, let's prepare to be aware of, even if most of us don't actually participate in, Earth Day celebrations, a day specially designated to appreciate the Earth and its environment. The practice was started in 1970 by Gaylord Nelson in the US and will be observed worldwide, tomorrow.

It's a mockery

COUNTER VIEW

Yamini Lohia

Did you know that World Heritage Day was 'celebrated' on April 18? Before that, there was all the brouhaha about Earth Hour on March 28. And in a few days, it will be time to pay homage to Mother Earth yet again on Earth Day. It's said that one should live every day like it is one's last, and celebrate every moment. Well, there's surely such a thing as too much celebration. Because it seems that every time one turns around there's a new cause to promote.

It's hard to believe any of the hullabaloo created around these events actually benefits the cause it is purported to be in aid of. More likely, the carnival atmosphere created on those special days helps people make money out of selling silly souvenirs like cards or lapel pins or hats. Whether it is Earth Day, or Women's Day, the real victors are the merchandising giants, not the issue at hand. Indeed, by designating specific days to discuss specific issues, like women's rights or the environment, we are pigeonholing them. If there is one day when you have to think about human rights or civil liberties, you can feel justified in not thinking about it for the rest of the year. Far from raising awareness, all this hype trivialises the issue under consideration.

Big, symbolic gestures aside, special days are pretty useless when it comes to actually making progress on a particular issue. When was the last time anything worth noticing happened on, say, Earth Day? It's just another opportunity for a bunch of governments to make empty promises about how they're going to fight climate change and reduce emissions. It's good PR, certainly, and it gives the media something to write about. But in terms of bringing about change, such days are a waste of time.

There are no quick fixes to most of the world's problems. Rather than having a high-sounding do on a day's cause, media and civil society should work together to keep those issues in the public consciousness for longer than 24 hours so that we can work towards solutions most days of the year.

SUBVERSE

When nature calls

Roger Cohen

Here, courtesy of the Associated Press, is a morality tale for our age: A man who says he desperately needed to use an airplane bathroom after eating something bad in Honduras faces a felony charge after being accused of twisting a flight attendant's arm to get to the lavatory, the FBI said.

Joao Correa, 43, told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution he had a bathroom emergency 30 minutes into a March 28 Delta Air Lines flight from San Pedro Sula to Atlanta but found the single coach aisle on the Boeing 737 blocked by a beverage cart. He said he asked whether he could use the lavatory in business class but was told no.

When the cart wasn't moved after a few minutes, Correa said, he ran for the business-class lavatory. He said the flight attendant put up her arm to block him and he grabbed it to keep his balance.

I should begin by saying i've never been to San Pedro Sula so i don't know how bad the bad food there is. I'm sure Honduran cuisine — no oxymoron intended — is generally great, even though nobody has ever suggested to me: "Hey, how about Honduran tonight?"

Sure, you might get unlucky with a mondongo (intestine) soup — or notice teensy-weensy creatures doing the breast-stroke in your water — but i for one refuse to knock Honduran cooking or suggest it's bigger on bulk than finesse. I still think you have to accord great respect to a "bathroom emergency", especially in a middle-aged gentleman.

Imagine poor Correa, assailed by disquieting visions of the mountain of fried fish with jalapeqos he'd vacuumed down at the Bistro San Pedro Sula Del Mar, and then — the horror! The horror! — spotting the beverage cart (formerly the food cart) blocking his path to relief.

I can hear the snippy reply from the flight attendants, mostly middle-aged themselves, all of whom think the fun of flying disappeared some decades back — about the same time as their job security and sense of humour — and would rather be sipping mojitos in Sanibel than talking up seven-dollar "wraps". "You'll have to wait, Sir. We're doing the drinks and tiny pack of peanuts service." The intonation of that "Sir" will be familiar to many of you, a tone peculiar to American airline companies, one in which resentment, superiority, fear, contempt and impatience are coiled into a venomous parody of politeness.

Correa, the jalapeqos now fully fired up in his bowels, rues the fact he gave up the high-jump in middle school. He considers some metaphorical "arm-twisting" — like paying $50 for a "wrap". Not a great idea, he determines, good sense intact even over the clutching of his sphincter, before turning to see the aisle — empty as the coffers at Lehman — stretching away towards the flimsy curtain separating the business class section.

Come on, he thinks, that's over: that whole master-of-the-universe, platinum-card, us-and-them, you-line-up-over-there game. With five million lost US jobs in a year, that's history. He needs a lavatory pronto but there's a cartload of stubborn pique standing between him and a rightful salvation.

Correa snaps. If he can't high-jump, he can do the mile-high, eight-yard dash. As he accelerates past 8.5 miles an hour he glimpses a blur of a downy, female arm flung out to block him. Veering left, he stumbles on a protruding Louis Vuitton dog bag, and grabs the arm. "SIR!" "Hasta la vista, Baby!" With a non-metaphorical arm twist, Correa's gone. Nothing can stop him now. After which Uncle Sam's humourless reckoning begins. Far from a felony charge — a felony charge! — Correa should be honoured for his initiative. We're not going to get out of a crisis into which we were led, sheep-like, without thinking for ourselves. We're not going to get out this crisis without realising we're all in this together.

We're not going to get out of this crisis with petty regulations standing in the way of common sense and solidarity. We're not going to get out of this crisis with post-9/11 fear governing our actions rather than some more generous humanity. We're not going to get out this crisis without being grown-ups. Clear the ex-food carts, Delta. And America, clear Correa now.— *NYTNS*

Sacred Space

Puppets On A String

Whatever you do not
wish to do because of
your delusions,
You will do even against
your will, bound by your
natural duty karma.
The Lord, Arjuna, is
present inside all beings,
Moving them like puppets
by his magic power.
Bhagavad Gita 18.60-61

✣

It may be that one of
you will be performing
the works of the people
of Paradise, so that
between him and
Paradise there is the
distance of only an
arm's length, but then
what is written for him
overtakes him, and he
begins to perform the
works of the people of
hell, into which he will
go. Or maybe one of you
will be performing the
works of the people of
hell, so that between him
and hell there is the
distance of only an
arm's length, but then
what is written for him
will overtake him, and
he will begin to perform
the works of the people
of Paradise, into
which he will go.
Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi 4

✣

God has both the yam
and the knife;
only those whom He
gives a slice can eat!
Igbo proverb, Nigeria

✣

For citizens who think
themselves puppets in
the hands of their
rulers, nothing is more
satisfying than having
rulers as puppets in
their hands.
Pico Iyer

A New World Order Of Science And Spirit

A K Merchant

THE SPEAKING TREE

The most joyous days in our lives have been those associated with a fresh outpouring of Divine Guidance. A biologist said that we are shaped by the idiosyncrasies of the times we live in, much like the evolution on the physical plane. We are creatures, to a great extent, of our environment. But there is one being who is not a product of his environment, the one who appears among us as the manifestation or messenger of God, the avatara.

He is outside of and free of custom, tradition and environment. It is only by turning to this Personage that we too are released from man-made distortions and faulty lifestyles. A manifestation, according to the Baha'is, is a divine creation, an intermediary between the Creator and His creation. He stands outside the pressure of human society and above the limitations of human error. What He reveals may be manifested in the form of action and discourse, prayer or parable, but He declares the law, the truth and the love for a new age of human development.

In essence, He makes real the spiritual order in which the soul has life and destiny. He quickens the latent powers of humankind. He confers immortality. Faith in the supreme Divinity is recognition of His intermediary, the avatara.

The days of Ridvan are of special significance as it was during this period of 12 days that Baha'u'llah, founder-avatara of the Baha'i faith, disclosed his identity as a manifestation of the Cosmic Will. "My object", Baha'u'llah proclaimed, "is none other than the betterment of the world and the tranquillity of its peoples. The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established". This is the age, he further explained, when unity of humankind was to be achieved and the promises and prophecies uttered aforetime by prophets, sages and poets would be fulfilled.

His mission, Baha'u'llah categorically announced, was to gather the scattered fragments of humanity and lay the foundations of a New World Order. "A new life", Baha'u'llah asserts, "is, in this age, stirring within all the peoples of the earth; and yet none hath discovered its cause, or perceived its motive".

Baha'u'llah forbade the use of force and exhorted that His message be spread worldwide through eloquent utterance. He affirmed that the power of the vani or mantra would remove ignorance and purify hearts. Secondly, the duration of His dispensation would be a minimum of 1,000 years. Third was that with the commencement of the krita yuga, all created things had been infused with new powers and capacities.

The time has come when humanity has both the capacity and opportunity to see the entire panorama of its spiritual and material development as a single process. Baha'is uphold the Divine origin of the great world religions and believe Baha'u'llah to be the Promised One. He restores to a scientific age belief in the Divine, while revealing the indestructible unity of religion and science. His message they believe to be from that one Creator who gave the Ten Commandments, the Christian Gospel, the Quran, who spoke through Krishna, Zoroaster, the Buddha and other spiritual luminaries to guide humanity to carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation.

Baha'i festival of Ridvan: April 21-May 2.