

Should we continue to ignore our rank in Global Indexes?

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No government or leader in authority can afford to confine to realities. Today this has become a universal phenomena. That is how often what is claimed and what is on ground are not the same. Political leaders play ping-pong between these two different positions. That keeps them alive and get going. In that process exaggeration has become a routine. Flabbergasting is another thing and those in command get away with. Then there are some who are hyperbolic, insist and claim opposite of the reality strategically but in an innocent way and get way too. No scruples. These days it is difficult for people to make out where between these three postures one is in.

I recall in 1975, against the background of just proclaimed Emergency, when the Ministry of I and B was planning a campaign of "Decade of Achievement," I reminded to Jamal Kidwai, then secretary. about the phenomena of boomerang as the proposal was more than a flabbergasting. He looked at me helplessly as it was a political decision from above. No sooner he was of course out of the scene. After that a series of such achievement eulogies were ranting all across.

When achievement claims of leaders in authority are exaggerated beyond, they miss pointers of corrections. 23 years ago when Transparency International came up with hyped ranking of countries on corruption showing India irrationally, I was one of the critique not only the methodology but the way their reports were covered by news media. I argued that surveys and indexes are irrelevant unless they prompt and facilitate initiatives. That was how I took to annual corruption surveys in India on the extent and circumstances experienced by citizen in availing basic public services. And that PEE methodology prompts implementing agencies take initiatives. There after the Transparency International changed the scope of their perceptions-limited reports.

Last week news media of India reported India slipping further on Global Hunger Index 2021, than what was it all about. Not surprisingly the govt. was quick to debunk the report. Easily there would be a dozen such global indexes ranking countries on different aspects. I discussed some of these in my recent books. I criticised reports of some indexes. Some others I critically reviewed. These indexes are being brought out

by different agencies, mostly from US and Europe. Many are linked academically, some although claim independence their origin is not clear. Media hypes these global indexes sometimes without indicating their origin and even methodology.

But what should be of concern is why successive governments never bothered the fact that most of these global indexes were showing India much behind many countries for some years. Even more curious is why governments did not consider it important to do something about since these indexes are showing India similarly year after year for a decade or more? This is despite that we have experts on the subject with insights and credibility globally. Many of our academic bodies and research outfits could have as well come up with global indexes. "Article 15" a Hindi feature film released in 2019 has tellingly brought out poverty, untouchability, discretion based exploitation, a root cause for India faring low in indexes. This film, reminding Satyajit Ray films, was released without much publicity but won laurels despite it was not given tax exemption. But it has not sensitised the authorities despite it depicted consistent violation of an important Article of the constitution. How else such situations get larger attention? Against such background some of these Global indexes are viewed also because the government's continue with claims of all kind.

The Global Hunger Index 2021 depicts that India had slipped to 101 position out of 116 countries, dropping from 94th in 2020 and 55th of 2014. This was based on four parameters...undernourishment, child wasting (of under-five), child stunting and mortality rate. These were measured using data officially supplied by India to the UN. This Report was prepared jointly by an Irish aid agency, Worldwide, and a German NGO, WHH. The government last week refuted the claims of the report and accused it as based on a Gallop survey as in the case of some other indexes. This Report also showed improvement in India on some indicators like under five mortality rate, stunting rate among them and prevalence of undernourishment. But news media have not reported these.

Environmental Performance Index by two US universities (Yale and Columbia) have been ranking India very poorly year after year for over a decade. What has been our reaction or initiatives? The 2020 Index in fact showed India as "fourth Worst country" at 168 out of 180 countries against 118 in 2008. Consider another example of

Democracy Index annually by three different global agencies. The most quoted one is by the London based Economist Intelligence Unit. It measures state of democracy in 167 countries on 70 indicators falling under five categories, electoral process being one. In its 2020 report India was not included in "most democratic" category but viewed as "flawed democracy" showing India at 53. Sweden based V-Dem Institute was even harsher in its Democracy Index describing India as an "electoral autocracy". The other US based Freedom House, downgraded India as "partially free" in its Democracy Index. Similar has been the trend with some 15 Global Indexes. Also, on liveability criteria no Indian city is in the top hundred, no Indian university is in the top hundred of the world. Implementation of smart city scheme, for example, is only 17 percent according to government's own review and for three years the new education policy is yet to take off. What have we done to correct these assessments and rankings over the years? Do we ignore or counter or take course corrections?

Governments should be concerned about relevance of global indexes of all kind and undertake parallel exercise for our own good. Stopping release of data from our own credible sources is not a way out. Not even hyping "market indexes". Instead of merely refuting or shouting when something is favourable as a Minister did in 2020 when an unknown global agency rated a couple of offline beaches of India as environmental friendly, he described it as a "pride moment" and a "great achievement". (And, after that beach-sand mining was opened up to the private sector, going against its own declared policy). Instead of trying to remotely influence the very global agencies (?), governments should conduct own analysis, and then question the indexes. The governments should activate our own agencies already engaged in such analytics and strengthen, already existing credible institutes, provisions and Acts like RTI and measures like social Audit, citizen charter and the like are activated to avoid embarrassing rankings from outside. News media should double check before covering all kind of such rankings, ratings and indexes. They should be concerned about credibility of the agencies and the methodology and should include vitals before hyping. And such index should be covered along with field comments.

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<https://www.primepost.in/should-india-continue-to-debunk-global-hunger-index/>