

The welcome shift from rankings to lives

Viksit Bharat is a welcome citizen-oriented vision that hopefully will reposition our discourse about ourselves. It goes beyond the competitive chest-thumping of world rankings that has been in vogue in government and business these past few years — explicitly defining the goal of economic prosperity in people terms as providing opportunities and a high standard of living for all citizens (though several press reports have missed this point and read it the old way of aggregate gross domestic product and world rank improvement). If read holistically, it shifts the discussion towards building and utilising the potential of all Indians, rather than being content with hitting favourable world rankings by utilising the potential of only a small segment.

Our world rankings are, without question, a stunning achievement that calls for monumental pride. However, to declare victory based on that and say there's not much more to be done except hold the course and to dismiss as naysaying the view that there are still miles to go before we sleep, seems monumentally blinkered, if not callous. After the recent financial quarter ended, a flurry of business conferences were organised with discussions marked by this "tyranny of OR" (a phrase used by management guru C K Prahalad). One section held the view that the only truth to recognise was performance relative to others — the enormous number of gross domestic product (GDP) dollars added, and how much further this trajectory of just holding the course would take us in size and rank. This, its proponents felt, was at odds with another section that was being "impractical" in pointing out that a lot of work still needed to be done because much of the benefit was as yet con-



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finied to the top of the income pyramid—a reality that holds true even for the famed increase in stock market participation.

Viksit Bharat offers a people-oriented vision that ought to transcend this fruitless "either/or" conceptualisations. As is the hallmark of India, many apparently contradictory things are all true and equally noteworthy — the right to call victory over our superb world rankings, the truth that they are valid for aggregate, not per capita metrics, and the imperative that large numbers of people need to be both upgraded to decent living standards and equipped for upward mobility. The beacon it offers is around what India ought to be for herself and for all her citizens to improve their lives and realise their potential, not where we should stand with respect to others. It reminds us that the many people we have are not our burden to sidestep in the pursuit of economic growth but are the very purpose of economic growth and need to be equipped to be drivers of it too.

Competitive ranking is, of course, a useful metric for pulling in a larger share of global investments in a competitive world. However, there is no contradiction here. To paraphrase strategy guru Kenichi Ohmae, the heart of strategy is not about beating the competitor but about creating value for the customer and avoiding the competitive battle altogether. So if we achieve the Viksit Bharat vision by 2047, marching in that direction a little bit every year with broad-based improvement right across the socio-economic pyramid, the rest will follow. The world will come to our door, and power equations will be more balanced.

Granted that vision statements and high-level strategies are the talk that needs the walk of execution.

However, vision statements are the proverbial "well begun is half done." It can inspire and unite disparate segments towards a singular definition of success, and make everyone dream the same dreams (or smoke the same dope as we know from boardrooms, where aspirations are sometimes hallucinations of weak bodies winning Olympic golds in high jump).

There are points in history when vision statements can cause inflection points in the thinking of a country. Manmohan Singh's vision of reforms with a human face and the concept of "inclusive growth" did change the way we thought about ourselves. He too had people's well-being at the centre when he said, "We will take the process of development forward and create new opportunities for the poor and downtrodden people to participate in the development process." What is different is that Viksit Bharat is not offering new opportunities for weaker sections as a special strategy. It is offering to build people's potential and create enablers so that the weaker sections can have access to all opportunities that economic growth throws up.

The good news is that it is more concrete than slogans of the past, and its picture of what success will look like is more like an architectural drawing than an artist's impression. The worrying news is that the early execution rollout we are seeing seems to have the government telling the *aam janta* a lot more of "What can you do for Viksit Bharat?" and a lot less of "What can Viksit Bharat do for you?". It seems to want to harness youth power with the same old tired, poorly functioning educational institutions rather than reimagining them entirely. The people of India have always stretched for more rather than settle for less. That is the spirit with which Viksit Bharat has to come to life.

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