

The End of Secession: Why the elite withdrawal from public services is coming to an end

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With the approaching winter the air quality in many Indian cities, especially in Delhi, becomes a public health hazard. Something so fundamental as breathing easy can no longer be taken for granted. It's a wake-up call worthy of a civic revolution.

For decades now those who could afford it (very much including this writer), have seceded from public services. The Indian elite send their children to expensive private schools, bypassing the public school system. They have their own infrastructure for water, with sumps to store it, pumps to lift it, and fancy filters to de-risk from erratic, polluted government water. Most access private healthcare to bridge the health services deficit. Many have their own energy infrastructure, with diesel generators, solar plants, UPS and stabilisers, to safeguard against unpredictable energy supply. We have private cars and more rarely, private planes to bridge the public transport deficit.

The wealthy can vacation abroad and avoid poor domestic tourist facilities. Some have private security services to augment routine police protection. Some even have access to high-end private capital, or alternate currencies, hidden away from the public gaze, bypassing public sector financial systems or open stock markets. Finally, the elite have their walled and gated communities, islands of efficiency in a sea of broken promises.

The middle classes, equally frustrated with the poor quality of government services, have also drifted into this private world, withdrawing children from government schools, and mustering their own solutions for water, health, energy, transport and finance.

But what has this meant for hundreds of millions of people who cannot or will not bypass goods and services that the modern nation state is supposed to provide, or at least enable for its citizens? It has meant that the quality of public services has remained stagnant or even deteriorated, as all citizens with voice and power have fled from them. This has made even more people flee, as soon as they can afford it, finally leaving public services to those who have little choice.

In Scandinavian countries, which practiced social democracy and have created common taxpayer funded health and education systems, everyone experiences a fairly high quality of public service delivery. There is tremendous pressure on the state to keep elevated standards since everyone has skin in the game. In India, those who could apply that pressure have simply exited from the service, and therefore have little stake in its improvement.

Government after government has spoken of deeper investments in public infrastructure but the demand and supply mismatch are so great that every new power plant, every new road, every new water pipeline is soon overwhelmed. Plus, in representative democracies, political parties tend to favor short-term goodies, neglecting long-term needs. Government investments are also very vulnerable to capture by various lobbies that try to squeeze benefits for their own constituencies. Arguably though, the time for the richer Indian to secede has come to an end. The foul air in Delhi is a perfect example. It is a great leveler. Rich and poor alike must breathe in its health hazards. Facemasks and air purifiers can take the edge off, but quality of life declines regardless.

Issues of water are not far behind. The pollution of so many of India's rivers and aquifers affects everybody, no matter how many purifiers are installed. Urban floods and rural droughts have cascading effects on the whole population. Think of Chennai floods, or Punjab droughts.

Let's take transport. The fanciest Lamborghini can hardly race past potholed roads, traffic snarls and hazardous highways without personal risk. The lack of good healthcare and education for millions destroys lives but also comes back to encircle the elite by destroying the country's demographic dividend.

The list goes on. The wealthy cannot even escape the country easily anymore, what with tightening global movement across borders. There is, literally, nowhere left to hide.

This is a wonderful opportunity. The time is ripe for a full realization of the interconnectedness of a billion lives and destinies. The better off Indian can engage more deeply with political process to demand effectiveness from the institutions of the state. We can raise our voices for better

education and healthcare, for better public infrastructure, for cleaner air. Not just for us, but for all citizens. For good governance is not something citizens can just consume; we must participate in its creation.

A quarter century of liberalization has given crores of people a chance at a new kind of prosperity. It has also left crores behind, thirsting for more but anticipating less. They cannot wait any more.

Public goods and services are at the heart of the transformation India needs to unleash. People with influence, power and a moral vision for this country must speak up loud and clear. It needs that and more to build strong public pressure on the political class and the executive. We can commit to a society where every resident experiences the same basic quality of life that we have been so far privileged with.

As we draw bad fumes into our nostrils, let our suffering lungs issue a call to serious action. Let's fight for all, not just some Indians to breathe and live free.

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