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Reimagining abundance in post-Covid-19 India

Move away from a mindset of scarcity. Redefine prosperity and retool GDP. Build on the nation's strengths

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At 13 million, it also has the most number of teachers. It has health care professionals, from super-speciality doctors to accredited social health activists (Asha)(Sanjhi Khanna/HT PHOTO)

As people return to life and work post the lockdown, some predictions point to a mad rush to do even more than before. Travel more, buy more, meet more people, eat out more — do more of more. The government too is expected to do more to restore economic growth and livelihoods. Much more is anticipated from the State. Some see it as an opportunity to overtake China.

To achieve this, many states might roll back labour laws that took decades of human rights movements to build, and push aside hard-won environmental protection.

If we succumb, will we return to the old normal, or an even older 19th century normal? Will the “more” being planned heal the economy or plunge us faster into the next disaster? Is there another imagination to achieve the common goals of opportunity and prosperity for all?

This crisis has demonstrated that prosperous, healthy and well-governed communities can tackle public health emergencies well. But how do we define prosperity and move towards such a society?

For centuries, prosperity has been easy to define in material terms. At a personal level, by how much one earns; how much one has. At a societal level, through Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a computation of all assets and interactions within an economy. GDP cannot discount products and services that are bad for society, such as the output of polluting industries, or of sweatshops. Several attempts to retool GDP have made little headway.

However, during the pandemic, most people, including the elite, experienced different forms of frugality, simplicity, and dignity associated with personal labour. After decades, urbanites also encountered purity — of air and water, and diversity — of flora and fauna. Simple things acquired fresh value for many. The time may be ripe to retool GDP. We now hold a brighter vision of how things can be, and can converse creatively with our future from an altered present.

One pathway is to shift from a mindset of scarcity to a mindset of abundance. For there is abundance everywhere, if only we look for it. If this profusion of resources goes from being just abundant to being effective, perhaps we could lean away from economic choices that appear inevitable, but that destroy natural capital and human well-being.

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Let's list some things that are abundant in India.

At a societal level, India has the world's largest working population. At 13 million, it also has the most number of teachers. It has health care professionals, from super-speciality doctors to accredited social health activists (Asha).

At a physical level, India is blessed with a rich biodiversity of flora and fauna. We have a predictable monsoon, and a vast network of rivers and water bodies. We have one of the longest coastlines. We have enormous access to solar energy.

We also have among the world's most sophisticated digital infrastructure, and an increasing penetration of Internet services and smartphones.

At a spiritual level, we have a plethora of practices and leadership across religions. And we enjoy the affluence of volunteer energy, as evidenced recently. This is not just an inventory of our assets, but the robust foundation for what we want to achieve.

During the pandemic, food bloggers came up with a simple and potent idea. They asked what was left in people's refrigerators, and helped them cook up wonderful new recipes with existing ingredients. They re-purposed what existed, and allowed people to experience plenty from paucity.

This is a perfect analogy for what the nation could put into practice, and, is already experimenting with.

Using digital infrastructure, like Diksha, millions of teachers are creating and sharing better content and classroom practices, both physical and virtual. Parental creativity and peer groups, both plentiful resources, are also being engaged to help children learn better.

Using the Extension of Community Healthcare Outcomes (Echo) model, health care workers are receiving virtual, guided mentoring. This moves knowledge instead of people, to build faster, more sustainable capacity across the chain.

Overnight, you can overturn an apparent scarcity — the lack of good teachers or skilled health workers — into an abundance of distributed, empowered talent.

Opportunities are everywhere — in energy, in mobility, in agriculture, and in livelihood generation. If we can use this flipped thinking, it can create more headroom for those who genuinely need resources — more carbon for the energy-deficient; more land for the landless; more mobility for transport deficit areas, and more potential for sustainable and meaningful livelihoods everywhere.

For example, India's ubiquitous building infrastructure can be re-purposed to harness solar energy, or for vertical and terrace farming. Work from home will relieve the pressure on urban infrastructure and land, which can be released for mass housing or public transport, and critical lung space.

Last but not least, let's unlock our spiritual treasure trove. Most disciplines invite us to more mindfulness, and more contentment. Not by consuming more externally, but by harvesting more from within, and by sharing more without. Neurosciences and behavioural sciences increasingly corroborate this ancient wisdom — joy can come from giving, and unlimited happiness from bonhomie.

Flipping to an abundance mindset is a creative-yet-practical task for *samaj* (society) first, but also for the *bazaar* (market) and *sarkaar* (State). We know now that we need to emerge from this crisis together. Let's boldly use the stimulus to redefine prosperity and redirect resources to make abundance effective.

Rohini Nilekani is chairperson, Arghyam. The views expressed are personal

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