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INSIDE

Editorial	
Privatization: Bane or Boon!	5
<i>B.K.</i>	
Nuclear Politics: Issues of Non-Proliferation	7
<i>Dr. Irshad Perwez</i>	
Women Participation in the UN Peacekeeping Operations	11
<i>Ms. Shivani Seth & Prof. Poornima Jain</i>	
US Military Assistance to Pakistan and its Impact on India	16
<i>Dr Alok Kumar & Dr Vijay Kumar Verma</i>	
Impact of Poverty on Children: A Human Rights Perspective	20
<i>Rajumoni Bhuyan</i>	
Tax Evasion – Impact on a Developing Economy	23
<i>Dr. N. Prasanna & Mr. K. Prabu</i>	
Swami Vivekananda: The Making of a Visionary	27
<i>Dr. Rosy Sinha</i>	
‘Dalitism’ in Dalit Literature	30
<i>Palash Biswas</i>	
MGNREGA Workers and their Reticence....	33
<i>Farah Naz</i>	
Kuki-Naga Conflict of the 1990s	36
<i>Dr. Ruolkhumzo</i>	
Deconstruction of Dominant Narratives	39
<i>Sayar Ahmad Mir</i>	
Caste, Gender and Education.....	42
<i>Deepan Das</i>	
Relation between Parenting Style	49
<i>Shashi and Dr S.K. Srivastava</i>	
Fourth Industrial Revolution and its Impact ...	53
<i>Sufia Anjum, Prof. Anis Jahan, and Dr S. K. Nisar</i>	

Privatization: Bane or Boon!

In recent months, privatization has fast become a buzzword in India's ongoing economic discourse, especially after Modi government's emphasis that government has no business to be in business and a clear push for disinvestment and privatization of public sector undertakings (PSUs). Undoubtedly, the avowed objective of the government may seemingly be to steer stuttering economy towards a more productive path through privatization-led economic reforms with a view to bolster resources or plug the yawning budgetary deficit; nevertheless, the past economic measures like demonetization and implementation of flawed GST have played pivotal role in pushing the economy into a mess. Most of the measures taken by Modi government in recent years have been taken in a hurry without much groundwork and now it is contemplating of privatizing the PSUs – airlines to oil refineries, coal mines to shipping lines and railway freight – with a view to shore up the economy, and even dispassionate observers of Indian economy are not optimistic about positive outcomes of this over emphasis on privatization and their skepticism is based on the existing global realities and internal political dynamics, and in the wake of shifting global business landscape, the possibility of Modi government missing the woods for trees again cannot be ruled out.

Privatization of coal blocks seldom stands a fair chance of attracting investors or buyers, either nationally or internationally. Globally, big mining giants are currently under pressure from the international money managers to either abandon their business or taper off production and the big coal mining giants have started retreating from Europe and beyond. Undoubtedly, in the Indian context, availability of limited hydrocarbon reserves, non-availability of fledging clean tech alternatives and the absence of sufficient natural gas to feed the electricity grids to meet growing demands of energy-guzzling economy, the coal retains relevance to meet growing electricity demand. Concurrently, it is equally worrisome that economic case for coal for thermal power is fast becoming under eclipse, especially at a time when RBI's estimates show that as many as 34 thermal coal projects have been declared as non-performing assets. At a time when Indian investors are moving towards increasingly cheaper and efficient renewables, prospects for coal blocks seem very dim.

In the wake of declining refining margins for diesel and jet fuel in countries like Singapore and China, the prospects of privatizing oil refineries in India don't seemingly stand a good chance. China, world's second largest oil refiner, is shoring up its refining capacity to make cheap fuel available. Observers opine that there are few who have sufficient economic clout to buy or take charge of India's 14% oil refining capacity and then invest at least another \$ 5-6 billion in upgrading them. India's oil refinery sector can attract private investment only if New Delhi can attract oil-producing countries of West Asia as its clients via back-to-back deals. Undoubtedly, Air India with its prized assets like bilateral rights routes, valuable landing spots, 128-aircraft fleet may appear an attractive proposition for eliciting private investment; nevertheless, at a time when global aviation is down in the dumps, it is unlikely to succeed in the immediate future.

There are very dim chances of Modi government raising resources through monetization of PSUs at a time when just less than six months are left to let the current budget come to an end. The current overemphasis on privatization entails political risks. Apart from the warning signals from some segments of Sangh Parivar, there are stirring of unrest among trade unions. Undoubtedly, with its brute majority, Modi government may override such protestations; nonetheless, as some critics point out, privatization in many countries, including India, has come arm-linked with controversies. As one critic has aptly observed that risks get heightened when decisions on complex financial questions about long-term leases are hurriedly taken – without mandatory consultations with Opposition parties or Parliament – and the question of lease of airports to the Adani group is an instant case. Under the prevailing circumstances, this decision of monetization of PSUs is unlikely to meet its desired goals and the government has undertaken this decision in a hurry without doing much-needed ground work. Inability of the government to tone up the health of nation's ailing economy will render this privatization more of a bane than a mere boon.

— BK