

The damage to life and property. the challenges



The Renaissance in Europe sowed the seeds of scientific enquiring, which was earlier considered Heretic Industrial -Revolution came in the wake of scientific and technological breakthroughs. The strength of brute force was replaced by technological know-how and quality. Industrially advanced countries created roles to suit themselves and conquest for getting natural resources was legitimised.

Now comes the Information Revolution and in its wake comes the ' network society'. It has opened new horizons and tests the limit and the ability of political and economic leaders. Suddenly those great walls and formidable borders and barriers seem ridiculously meaningless. The Internet leaps borders with impunity-a click of your mouse and the material held on a computer in Indonesia gives way to material compiled Sweden. If Indonesia has different rules of decency or probity from Sweden, nothing much can be done. Furthermore, in the network society, demarcating public from private communication simply fades away.

All this appears reprehensible to most of us, for change, and that too rapid change, is not easily accepted by all. Easy, quick and wide access to information in combination with the ease of communication between individuals interested in the same fields, the rapid advance in and simplification of many technologies- have all led to the empowerment of the individual. While this is seen as a positive step by some, there are others who anxiously point to the negative aspects.

Crime has become easier: sitting in their rooms persons operating their computers have been able to spirit away billions of dollars from bank

accounts easy access to common chemicals and readily available knowledge have enabled men to create explosive devices, which have caused frightful damage to life and property. The challenges posed by the Information Revolution are serious. Governments are being thrown into disarray as they do not know how to regulate or control the free flow of information that transcends national boundaries. That is only too good, say the liberalists, who feel that 'market forces' will ultimately put in place the checks required, and government's role in everything will decline. It is not so simple, however.

Some key issues certainly demand attention. Without decisive policies in the area of education and training, the gap between the knows and know-nots is found to increase. The 'network society' could be much less fair, much less socially cohesive, than what has existed so far. Individuals must be trained to keep up with technological changes, and policies directed to this end must emanate from government and implemented with the cooperation of the private corporate sector. The Information Revolution and the emergence of the network society are at the root of the lightning speed at which capital flows take place around the world. A permanent pressure is thus built up to attract investment by providing an environment most conducive for it.

In the prevailing conditions, capital markets are seen as dictating the course of events, practically forcing the hands of policy makers. Today, manufacturing capitalism is being overtaken by financial capitalism. Already the idea is gaining currency that these changes have benefitted the shareholders and financiers while the workers were left to bear the costs. Tackling such issues is made more difficult with the weakening of political

power. Privileged information was until recently a classic instrument of power with governments.

With the beginning of an era of instantaneous and multi sourced communication, this power has suddenly slipped out of the grasp of governments. They are called upon to act and react at a pace for which their structures and modes of decision-making are, in most cases, unprepared. It is worth repeating here that a flippant dismissal of government as an anachronism will not do. Government's role remains crucial to help balance conflicting interests and ensure that the most vulnerable sections of society get protection and necessary attention.

Governments will still need to cope with threats to security; indeed, new forms of security systems will have to be devised to cope with terrorists, for instance, who could safely operate from beyond a nation's boundary and escape detection. True, out of such a situation may grow a lasting and genuine cooperation among nations working for mutual interest. World organisations may have to be restructured to reflect the new realities. The patriotism of the 19th century and the proud assertion of " My country, right or wrong" are archaic, even slightly ridiculous, in the present circumstances. A new consciousness of a world community has to develop on all fronts.

It is true that, in many cases, existing laws can be used to regulate the Internet. In others, it is quite possible that solutions will emerge from usage: while the Internet may make it easier to break copyright laws, it also makes it possible to find and police the instances of abuse. Already there are service providers who have devices to protect children from viewing

offensive material. Parents could choose such sources for their Internet access. Again, dubious businesses may be easier to establish on the Internet, but the readily available information makes it easier for consumers to investigate such businesses. Of course, it means an empowerment of the citizen hitherto unheard of.

However, in the process, individuals may grow more responsible, may be able to take decisions and use the freedom available in a mature manner.