Harvard, Hard Work & Hard Facts

Modi believes Harvard and hard work aren't synonymous, whilst Chidambaram believes Harvard taught him hard work – the reality may be hard for both to swallow

:: Maitreesh Ghatak

I always thought there were two kinds of people in the world, those who work hard, and those who in earlier, less politically correct, times, we would call lazy and now would have to be called differently motivated. Similarly, I always thought there were two kinds of people, those who went to Harvard and those who did not. Actually, I even believed that this was true of any trait that a human could be associated with: either one has it or one does not, whether it is tall or short, owning an iPhone or not and so on.

However, in the ever-entertaining grand theatre of Indian politics, I learnt this week that I may have had this wrong. The Gujarat chief minister and the prime ministerial candidate of BJP in the upcoming elections Narendra Modi tells us there are instead two types of people, namely, those who work hard and those who go to Harvard.

Harvard=Lazy?

To illustrate this, he also provided examples in each of these categories. In a rare departure from his usual self-deprecating and modest style, he offered himself as an example of the former group. He also provided India's finance minister of India P Chidambaram as an example of people in the latter category.

This left me confused and depressed. Is Modi saying going to Harvard and being lazy are synonymous? Since at some point in my misspent youth I did go to Harvard, I realized that despite my lifelong efforts to prove that I am not a lazy no-gooder and thus, to get the approval of my mother, a stern taskmaster, I may have made a very basic error, no doubt because I was too lazy to figure this out.

Now, our finance minister politely refused to be drawn into what he called a "schoolboy debate" with Modi and said – when delivering the interim budget on Monday – that "his mother and Harvard" taught him hard work. Of course, to us Indians, "mere paas maa hai" will trump any argument. That aside, while Chidambaram's response did make me worry about the boys foolhardy enough to engage him in a debate when he was in school, I felt it also gives us some hope because it seems hard work can be taught and one is not condemned to be innately lazy.

One can be a hard working CM of Gujarat who did not go to Harvard but learnt it from the greatest school of all, the school of hard knocks, or one could be a hard working FM of India who did go to Harvard and learnt it there. And of course, one can be lazy whether or not one went to Harvard. There are all kinds of people in this wonderful world, and India after all, is all about tolerance and unity among diversity.

> The respective performance of Modi as CM of Gujarat and Chidambaram as FM of India make any hard sell from either side difficult to accept

Look at the Numbers

But as my mother would say, all this talk about hard work is all very fine but what do the hard facts say? What has Modi's and Chidambaram's hard work led to? What can we say about the respective performance of Modi as the CM of Gujarat and Chidambaram as the FM of India? During the 1990s, the average annual all-India growth rate of per capita income was 3.7%. During the 2000s this went up to 5.6%. In contrast, Gujarat's income growth went up from 4.8% in the 1990s to 6.9% in the 2000s. Since Modi was in power from 2001 onwards, he can take credit for Gujarat's performance in the 2000s. But can he take all the credit? After all, the whole country was growing faster in the 2000s, and so we cannot attribute all of Gujarat's growth acceleration to Modi's hard work. In fact, Gujarat grew faster than the all-India average by 1.1 percentage points in the 1990s and 1.3 percentage points in the 2000s. So a slightly better performance under Modi? Yes. But a significant improvement? No.

Let us now turn to the UPA's record. In the first term, during which Chidambaram was the FM, the average growth rate of GDP per capita was 6.5%. In the first half of UPA II, during 2009-2011, Chidambaram was not the FM and the corresponding figure is 7.06%. So there was a slight improvement of the growth performance of the UPA, but the change is marginal. But as we did with Gujarat, we need to have a benchmark. If we compare the performance of China during a similar period, it grew on average at 4.4 percentage points higher than India during 2004-2008 and 2 percentage points higher during 2009-2011. However, this improvement in the gap with our growth rate relative to China seems largely driven by a fall in China's growth rate.

So, whether it is hard work or Harvard, the hard facts make any hard sell from either side hard to swallow. ■

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