
Few benefits

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INAUGURAL events graced by high-profile public figures can be costly in the extreme; these may even cost us our future — our Bismas who die because they cannot get medical help in time. What are the costs and benefits of such inaugural events? The cost includes time, money, effort, traffic delays and jams, extra fuel, the display of VIP culture, possibly public outrage and much more. Publicity is included in the benefits. A deeper look at the cost and benefit of inaugural events follows. I take up the costs first.

Time consumed: If the chief guest holds a high-profile public office, a security protocol is defined and followed. The security staff and event organisers spend valuable

work hours on this: there must be numbered security passes and invitation cards; mobile phones are disallowed; sniffer dogs, scanners and jammers are used; and a traffic route is planned. The number of people and those who receive the guest and see to security clearance is discussed as are the names of those who will sit on stage on the left and right of the chief guest — all worked out in detail. The audience, considered menial at best, is made to enter the venue two hours before the scheduled arrival of the chief guest and then wait — the chief guest typically arrives late, consuming everyone's precious time.

Also account for the time spent by an entire police corps, with tottering wireless sets, on trying to ferret out would-be suicide bombers while they hold up motorists to allow a fleet of 50 vehicles to zoom past. Do account for the time of the police escorts, not to mention the many minutes that motorists are made to wait at the traffic signals and then negotiate the ensuing traffic jams. For our young Bismas, the time thus spent is the difference between life and death.

Inaugural events can cost more than time and money.

The organisers spend days to write the speech that the chief guest may deliver. The guest instead, speaks extempore, thus wasting the writer's time and effort — not to mention the work hours of the audience, forced to listen to the chief guest as he or she recounts the performance and plans of the government for the umpteenth time.

Money wasted: Imagine the travel cost, especially if the venue is in a city where the chief guest is not based. Add to this the cost of running the security protocol — sniffer dogs, scanners, jammers, hooters, walkie-talkies, and the fuel consumed by the entourage, not to mention the extra fuel consumed by the motorists at traffic signals. The venue's rent, for extra hours needed to declare it 'clear' costs money. This also holds true for the hours spent waiting for the chief guest.

Cost of food served: What is the cost of a lavish menu? Much more than what is spent on the education of our young ones. Don't forget the cost of media coverage — the

tangible and intangible incurred in wooing the media to cover the event.

The highest cost to society comes in the form of a blatant display of VIP culture which is visible in what has already been described: traffic hold-ups, large fleets of cars, security and entry passes. This breeds discontent and could fuel the impatience of some for violent change.

Benefits of inaugurals: These are an opportunity to publicise achievements, views, manifestos and dreams. The footage serves electioneering later (is a cheaper option not possible?). Organisers, too, reap some benefits; even photographs of a handshake with the chief guest are seen as positive.

But are the benefits worth the costs? Here lies the problem: the two are not comparable. Benefits accrue to an individual or a small coterie at best while the public at large bears the cost. Can we do away with inaugurals? That would be difficult. The small but powerful ruling elite will not let go of the benefits.

How about e-inaugurals via Skype or any other video link showing the chief guest delivering the speech from the comfort of his or her home or office to the audience gathered at the venue of the event. Would this yield benefits? Yes. The media would still cover the event and take pictures, even if there is no ribbon-cutting footage. Is this too much to ask? To let our Bismas live, avoid inconvenience to the public and to raise the status of the waiting motorists and audience, allowing them some modicum of dignity?

The benefits would include the absence of traffic delays — ambulances could zip past VIP fleets. There would be no jammers, scanners, walkie-talkies or lavish menus at public expense. There would be fewer running and capital costs, perhaps even a smaller import bill. There would be more money for education, health and poverty alleviation. Our kids would go to school and the poor would not sell their kidneys.

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