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DEMOCRACY IN INDIA: SOME ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROBLEMS*

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IN THE CONTEXT of contemporary Afro-Asian developments India stands out by its combination of political stability with democratic growth. The combination certainly has not been easy of achievement, nor is it without serious threats from within or without. None-the-less, India's political record of the last decade and a half presents on the whole a hopeful contrast to many of her neighbours who have either known no internal peace or have fallen under one form of dictatorship or another.

Of course, India has not been lacking in factors which usually lead to chaos or invite despotic rule. On the contrary, they are still present in unhappy profusion. India has a total of 845 languages and dialects; the major linguistic groups number a dozen and vary in size from five to about 140 million speakers. As to religion, although Hindus are in absolute majority (about 84%), they are divided into an endless number of sects, castes and subcastes. Moreover, there are more than 43 million Muslims, about 10 million Christians, and over 7 million Sikhs. Then there is the inherited problem of the Scheduled Castes (in someways comparable to the Negro in the United States); treated traditionally as “untouchables” by caste Hindus and segregated in every way; they number today 64.5 million. Besides, there are the Scheduled Tribes (comparable to the aborigines in Australia) who number about 30 million. When one also remembers that the living standard of the overwhelming majority of the people is submarginal (the country's per capita income today being about £A 31), that 76% of the people are still illiterate, and over the last ten years the population has increased by 21.5%, it seems nothing short of a miracle that such a country should at all be able to achieve and main-

* This paper was read during the regular Lecture Forum Series held at the Library of the Institute of Asian Studies on January 17, 1964.

tain political unity and stability and strive consistently in the direction of peaceful democratic advancement.

At independence India's future certainly did not look very bright. The British were leaving behind them over 600 big and small native princely states covering two-fifths of the land and nearly one-fourth of the population, ruled by hereditary princes, who would become independent with the lapse of the British paramountcy and could threaten India's *balkanization*. What was called British India had been partitioned into two dominions, India and Pakistan, bringing in its trail large scale communal riots in both and massive movements of refugee populations. Then in January, 1948, India's most charismatic political leader, Mahatma Gandhi, was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic. Soon after in February the Indian Communist Party, following the militant Zhdanov line laid down by Moscow, launched on a course of insurrection, guerilla warfare and industrial sabotage. While the Communists were mostly active in the coastal areas and in the South, the extreme Hindu Communal right wing was being reconstituted in the North and in central India under the leadership of a fascist type organization, the Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh, which in 1948, claimed a disciplined membership of between four to five hundred thousand. A year after independence, it thus looked as if India's future was as bleak as that of most South and South East Asian countries.¹

And yet by 1952 the position had changed substantially so much so that India could hold its first general elections (1951-52) on the basis of adult suffrage. Foreign observers who came to study the experiment reported almost unanimously that the elections were "fair and free by recognized western democratic standards". Of the 176 million eligible voters slightly more than 50% actually voted. According to Professor Palmer, the first Indian elections "were an encouraging demonstration that masses of voters, mostly illiterate, could act with dignity and with a fair measure of judgment in selecting those who would represent them in the Central Parliament and the State Assemblies".² That the elections were conducted in such good order were due among other things to two fortunate factors. India inherited from the British an administrative system of proved integrity and efficiency. Though admittedly not adequate to the new tasks of a developing society, it none-the-less proved good

¹ For a description of India at independence see L. Mosely, *The Last Days of the British Raj*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson. For the Communists and the Hindu extremists, see M. R. Masani, *The Communist Party of India—A Short History*, Derek Verschoyle, and J. A. Curran, *Militant Hinduism in Indian Politics*, Institute of Pacific Relations, New York.

² Norman D. Palmer, *The Indian Political System*, Allen & Unwin, 1961,

enough for even specialists like Paul Appleby to rate the young Indian republic "among the dozen or so most advanced governments of the world".³ Secondly, thanks to the spread of modern university education and the long experience of organized peaceful struggle for self-government, India had produced a sizeable political intelligentsia which appreciated the values of democracy and possessed a fair knowledge and experience of democratic political behaviour. Between the India Independence Act of 1947 and the first elections, Indian political leaders, working under tremendous handicaps, have had at least four significant achievements to their credit. The princely states were merged and integrated with the rest of India and their autocratic systems replaced by responsible government.⁴ Except in West Bengal, the refugee problem was largely solved through re-settlement in various parts of the country. India evolved a written Constitution (1950) unambiguously committed to the principles of parliamentary democracy. And it drew up its first Five Year Plan of economic development (1951-56) to "raise living standards and open out to the people new opportunities for a richer and more varied life".⁵

Thus by 1952 India had virtually emerged from its uncertain years of trial and strife, and was well launched on a course of stable democratic growth. In the following decade, further political consolidation has been achieved through more rational re-organization of the federated units of the Republic. This has gone hand in hand with efforts to strengthen the democratic foundations which were clearly laid in the Constitution. According to the Preamble, the basic objectives of the Republic were: "to secure to all its citizens justice, social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation". These objectives have been spelled out in the form of Fundamental Rights guaranteed to every citizen irrespective of "religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them," and in the Directive Principles of State Policy.

That the Constitution was not just a pious gesture is amply shown by the evidence of the last thirteen years. Three general elections have already taken place, and to quote Palmer again, "measured by one of the severest tests—the holding of free, direct, general elections—democracy in India worked".⁶ Despite strong pressures from extremist groups and

³ Paul H. Appleby, *Public Administration in India*, Delhi.

⁴ For a detailed account, see V. P. Menon, *The Story of the Integration of Indian States*, MacMillan, 1956.

⁵ For the Constitution and the Five Year Plans, see M. V. Pylee, *Constitutional Government in India*, Bombay, and H. Venkatasubbiah, *Indian Economy Since Independence*, Second Revised edition, Asia Publishing, Bombay, 1961.

⁶ Palmer, *Ibid*, p. 233.

divisive forces, the rights to freedom of expression, association, movement, occupation, etc., have not in the least been curtailed. The universities enjoy complete academic freedom; the Press is as independent as in Australia or any Western democracy; opposition political parties and groups function without any restrictions other than those which equally apply to the party in power. The Indian judiciary is universally acclaimed for its independence and integrity; and the highest courts in the land have generally proved to be the most reliable defenders of the rights of the citizens against any arbitrary encroachment by the government. Moreover, important steps have been taken to promote and strengthen democratic institutions at the village level. The three-tier system of village *panchayats*, *panchayat samitis* and *zila parishads*, adopted by most of the states, is intended to develop in rural areas effective units of local self-government which would also serve as "institutions for securing social justice and fostering corporate life."⁷ By 1961 over 193 thousand elected *panchayats* were set up in the country. Owing to the backwardness and passivity of the rural people many of the *panchayats* unfortunately are still not functioning satisfactorily; but the process has been started, at least on the institutional level, which may eventually make grass-roots democracy a reality in India.

Significant advances have also been made in containing centrifugal forces and in diminishing age-old forms of social inequality and injustice. The problem of multi-linguism still continues to baffle the Republic; but its urgency and divisive potentialities have been noticeably reduced in recent years, thanks to a more rational re-organization of the states on linguistic basis with guarantees to linguistic minorities in each state, and even more to the sensible policy of continuing English along with Hindi (the most widely spoken language of the Union). The secular approach laid down in the Constitution and followed in practice by the Union and the State governments has greatly blunted the edge of communal and sectarian conflicts. "Untouchability" has been legally abolished and its practice forbidden in any form. Special protection and safeguards are provided for Scheduled Castes and Tribes.⁸ Seats for their representatives are reserved in the Parliament (107 out of 500) and in the state Legislatures (693 out of 3196). Also posts are reserved in Government services (in 1962, more than 330 thousand persons belonging to these castes and tribes were in governments service); and many steps are being taken to provide them with increased educational facilities and economic oppor-

⁷ See R. L. Khanna, *Panchayat Raj in India*, Chandigarh; also S. K. Dey, *Panchayat Raj*—a synthesis. Asia Publishing House. Bombay, 1961.

⁸ See Part XVI of the Constitution of India entitled *Special Provisions Relating to Scheduled Castes*.

tunities. There have also been important changes in the pattern of land-ownership. In the past between the actual tiller and the state there were several intermediary landlords. This pernicious system has been largely abolished, and various measures taken for providing security of tenure and ownership to agriculturist-tenants. Ceilings on land-holding have been imposed in all the states except Punjab, and the surplus lands thereby made available have been leased out to landless agricultural workers. The vicious hold of private moneylenders on peasants is now almost completely broken; at the end of the Second Five Year Plan, loans issued to farmers through Cooperatives amounted to about £A200 million (an increase of 773% over advances given in 1950-51).

Slowly, but unmistakeably, therefore, a peaceful democratic revolution is under way in India. However, in one vital field, the progress so far is admittedly unsatisfactory. After ten years of planned effort, there is little improvement in the general standard of living. Between 1951 and 1961, national income increased by 42% while per capita income increased by only 16%. It is true that the actual growth potential built up in the economy during this period is not negligible. Thus, for example, production of iron ore has gone up from 3.2 million tons to 10.7 million, of coal from 32.3 million to 54.6 million, of steel ingots from 1.4 million to 3.5 million tons, of power (installed capacity) from 2.5 million kw. to 5.7 million, and particularly significant, of graded machine tools from about £AO.34 million worth to about £A5.5 million. The index of industrial production has risen by 94%, and the growth and diversification of industry have been quite remarkable. But under-employment in the countryside still remains as baffling a problem as ever, and since even today rural population constitutes 82% of the total, most of the people continue to live in appalling poverty. The most obvious reason for the failure to improve general living conditions is the phenomenal increase of population from 360 million to 439 million in a decade. While there are many more mouths to feed, index of agricultural production has gone up by only 41%.

Failure to tackle the problem of mass poverty is thus the greatest weakness of Indian democracy. For this the planners are partly responsible (e.g., their neglect of small-scale rural projects and village industries, their obstinate refusal to plan effective birth-control measures, etc.), but the more fundamental reason would seem to be the stranglehold of a self-abnegating tradition in the countryside. As Kusum Nair has rightly pointed out, in India "a great majority of the rural communities do not share in the concept of an everrising standard of living. The upper level they are prepared to strive for is limited, and it is the floor

generally that is bottomless.”⁹ Consequently, without a radical change in their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, induced prosperity, even if achieved to a limited extent by the introduction of new tools and techniques, will not become a self-generating process. “The basic problem, therefore, of how to bring about rapid change in a people’s social and economic values within the framework of democratic planning, remains.”¹⁰ This points to the other basic problem that while India, on the whole, has a democratically committed and relatively competent leadership at the top, it has yet to produce such leadership at lower levels of responsibility without which the transformation of a stagnant, fatalistically oriented, caste-ridden society into an effective, self-propelling grass-roots democracy is hardly conceivable.¹¹ Thus the future of Indian democracy is vitally tied up with a socio-cultural renaissance in the rural areas.

Besides its internal weakness, Indian democracy also faces a major threat to its survival and growth from the aggressive expansionism of Communist China. India presents to Asia the possibility of democratic development which Red China, committed to militant Communism, cannot and will not tolerate. In its bid to bring South and South-east Asia under its ideological hegemony, if not under political domination, China sees in India a most serious obstacle. Its massive attack on India in October, 1962 was made after long and careful planning and was another phase of its unfolding expansionist strategy which had begun with the forcible seizure of Tibet and the war in Korea. India’s ability to defend itself against this threat depends at least as much on the effective support and cooperation of the free world as on its own determination, resources and leadership.

⁹ Kusum Nair, *Blossoms in the Dust; the human factor in Indian development*. F. Praeger, N.Y., 1962, pp. 192.3.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 197.

¹¹ An excellent symposium on various aspects of this problem is: Richard L. Park and Irene Tinker (Eds.) *Leadership and Political Institutions in India*, Princeton, N.Y., 1959.