

Indian Democracy

What Gives It Stability?

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The relative stability of Indian democracy presents such a sharp contrast to the crumbling political structures of neighbouring Asian countries that it poses a question for all students of politics :

What is it that makes the present system so suited to India? What is the element of stability in it?

The pillars of the Indian Constitution — Federation, Fundamental Rights and the Cabinet system — have been strong enough to bear the occasional strains of linguistic division, irresponsible civil disobedience and indiscipline in the ruling party.

Without belittling the role of the personality of Pandit Nehru in Indian politics, it would, nevertheless be an over-simplification to attribute this stability to the quality of the leadership in India just as it would be to ascribe the crises in neighbouring countries to the poverty of leadership alone.

IF political stability were to depend on the personality of a single leader, Indian democracy would not have a life-span much longer than that of an individual. Complacency, however, is as unwarranted as optimism, and it is quite probable that what constitutes India's strength today may turn out to be the source of her weakness tomorrow. As new challenges are thrown up — which Chinese incursions, for one thing, have done — Indian democracy will either have to expand its base or collapse.

India's bigness in size, her industrial base, the existence of a developed bourgeois class undoubtedly make for some permanent elements of stability; however, they do not explain the present strength of the Indian system. For, bigger countries have known violent instability; even with the development of our industrial base, we are yet to reach the crucial 'take-off stage', and the mercantile character of Indian capitalism could well become a liability instead of an asset. The stake in the present system must be wider than that of the capitalist class to sustain its growth; the presence of Nehru at the head of Government for so many years reflects in a way the wide base of Indian democracy. The question, however, is whether this base is wide enough and whether it is capable of sustaining itself for long.

TRAGEDY OF DR JOSEPH

The case of Dr Joseph is in essence an index of our democracy's strength today. Joseph was a scientist who, while holding a minor job in the Agricultural Ministry, pursued his scientific career and acquired high distinction in the U S. But, on his return, he had to go back to

his old job — the Ministry would neither release him nor utilise his knowledge, talents and research experience itself. Unable to endure the boredom of a lowly job and the burden of maintaining a family and paying back in instalments the money he had borrowed to go abroad for higher studies, Joseph decided to end his life. It was not merely that a valuable life was wasted. Joseph's death was a blot on Government which swears by science and relies on science to lift the country out of its depth of despair; and where else could science find more fruitful application than in agriculture, in which India is so backward and her productivity among the lowest in the world? Yet, the Ministry of Agriculture could find no use for a research scientist who had specialised in this very field.

The public was deeply moved. Significance of the reaction to this tragic episode lies in the fact that the parties in Opposition and the party in power vied with each other in expressions of sympathy for the unfortunate scientist and promised or demanded radical improvement in the lot of the Josephs of India. Both the Congress and, Opposition parties compete for the political mind of the Josephs that are alive.

CONTINUITY OF WESTERN VALUES

It is the turbulence among Josephs and the quiescence and apathy among the rest of the Indian people which ensure the degree of stability which our political structure enjoys today. This statement needs elaboration. Whether it is the unity of the country or faith in the political values of freedom and democracy or the scrupulous observance, of a code

of political conduct, it is a function of the Indian *elite*, English education and expanding opportunities in new fields and shrinking opportunities in the old helped create in the early years of British rule an Indian middle class with a distinct outlook and attitude, detached from the old feudal class from which it had originated. The caste background of Indian society elevated this class of new Brahmins to a position of unchallenged supremacy.

This is the class which has been charged by the rest of the country to think and act on such matters as politics. To the British, this development was of immense interest: the national struggle in India was a struggle of those who spoke a common language in politics. This facilitated the transfer of power. India's automatic acceptance of parliamentary democracy and her continuance in the Commonwealth both stemmed from this development. The continuity of a western system of government in India is to be explained by the continuity of values from Bentinck to Nehru. Nowhere else did an opposition grow up so much in the image of the government it opposed as in India during her national struggle.

POLITICS OF THE ELITE

What lends strength to this system is that it is not the ruling party alone which is an assembly of the *elite*. Notwithstanding the earlier attacks on the Commonwealth link and the agitation for an alternative system of government, even the most radical of Indian parties ultimately sought to get the South African situation remedied through the Commonwealth Conference, and they

strive to bring about a socialist revolution through parliamentary democracy. These may well be the realistic goals of a party of socialism in an age of nuclear weapons; the point, however, is that realism is the primary virtue of a Brahmin in society. In other words, Indian politics is stable because it is confined to the *elite*.

It is not merely in the sphere of party politics that the role of the *elite* is of such importance. When it is remembered that one of the rocks on which political democracy has foundered in Indonesia, Pakistan and Ceylon is lack of national integration, the point would be clear. The oft-repeated, traditional unity of India was essentially a concept of the socially mobile upper castes : knowledge and the study of Sanskrit and occasional visits to places of pilgrimage, scattered over the country, were a guarantee of the continued conceptual existence of Indian unity. The successor to the Brahmin has his own common language, English, instead of Sanskrit (even those who want Hindi want it to be difficult enough to be mastered by the non-elite). He has his own places of pilgrimage and areas to migrate to—the new industrial sites and rapidly-growing cities—and hence has an equal stake in unity. He has been leading linguistic movements but always within the bounds set by the overall needs of unity and stability. By continuously emphasising that the real struggle is socio-economic and not communal or linguistic, he has prevented these movements from taking the dangerous form of a mass upsurge. For, it is clear, once a linguistic or caste or communal slogan gets down deep enough among the people, who are untutored and politically uncontrollable in the present state of party organisation, it might spell disaster as it did in 1947.

BALANCE OF APATHY AND

TURBULENCE

The future of the present system may thus be said to hinge on the continued apathy of the rural masses and the quiescence of the countryside on the one hand, and an adequate stepping up of Governmental capacity to meet the increasing demands of the middle class on the other. It must be said to the credit of the present State policies and the technique of development followed so far that these twin aims have been pursued with great sagacity

and care. No other country with this level of development has been able to afford such a huge tertiary sector : in fact, the attempt seems to be continuously to expand this sector to absorb and meet the growing demands of the middle class. This explains the relative lack of emphasis on austerity and economy in administration. It is not inevitable that the bigger the Plan, the bigger should be the Planning Commission, but it tends to be so. Likewise, the huge buildings in the capital are perhaps not merely accidental. More important is the rapid increase in the number of Institutes, Councils, Schools and Academies. These hobbies of the developed nations are imperative adjuncts of a democracy in an under-developed society. The entire middle-class must be kept reasonably satisfied through gradual improvement of its social and financial status. There is little to threaten democracy so long as politics reflects primarily the urges of this class for a still higher status in society. It is perhaps a hopeful sign for Indian democracy that even in the Indian Communist Party, left tendencies are far more pronounced in that section of the party which draws its sustenance from the middle-class than among others.

As against this section, reasonably tractable, there are the vast rural masses whose reactions are uncertain and unpredictable. To disturb their tranquility and to strike at their apathy might raise a Frankenstein monster for Indian democracy.

POLITICAL RISKS VS ECONOMIC GAINS

Compared to the political risks involved, the economic advantages of expanding the Indian market or of securing "public co-operation" for planning would appear insignificant. The problem of markets is not a limiting factor in India's industrialisation at the moment; deficit financing and a degree of inflation can be depended upon to make the market keep on expanding. As for public co-operation it becomes necessary if development is to be extracted out of the people through mobilisation of man-power: in fact, public co-operation is one way of sugar-coating the bitter pill, and making the process of imposing development on the traditional pattern less painful. It is contrary to the essence of present day democratic planning.

For popular rule to continue, public co-operation for planning must be discarded. This uncertainty about the rural sector explains the quiet retreat from Nagpur and even the abandonment of the goal of food self-sufficiency. After the latest American wheat loan, stagnation in the rural sector would be a lesser hindrance to development. The distinctive technique of Indian economic development is its planning for industrialisation, side-tracking or by-passing the rural sector.

FOREIGN AID THE KINGPIN

In reality, foreign assistance which makes it possible to by-pass the rural sector, is the kingpin of Indian development and hence a fundamental element in India's democracy. It makes it possible to secure a reasonable rate of development superimposed from above and such development tends to be oriented towards the satisfaction of middle-class demands. It is essential for Indian democracy that foreign assistance must flow in in adequate quantity to develop the industrial base as fast as the number of new Brahmins seeking employment in the temples goes up. And this number is growing fast. According to the Prime Minister, there are more University students per one thousand people in India than in the United Kingdom!

The opportunities of securing foreign assistance are expanding even faster. The essence of Nehru's oft-repeated emphasis on (he importance to India of technological changes elsewhere is that such technological improvements lighten the burden of development for India. While this should be true of all developing countries, it is particularly true of India in as much as India today is the one area of agreement between Francis Powers and Marshal Malinovsky. If Soviet-American rivalries yield place to a rapprochement, as certainly seemed possible some weeks ago, and may be inevitable after some time, India may become the developed nations' model farm in the under-developed world. The political and strategic importance of India, the stability of her society, her contiguity to and the contrast with the anachronistic patterns across her northern borders are India's assets. In a world where economic aid is essentially a political decision, India may secure more than her due share of the developed nations' sur-

plus. It is here that her policy of non-alignment is an essential precondition for India's democracy. For non-alignment is another name for alignment with both the Big Powers. In fact, the role of the *elite* the technique of development and foreign policy are closely inter-connected and together hold the structure of politics in India. It is not possible to hold on to one and dispense with the others.

CONFLICT WITHIN MIDDLE CLASS

Two questions, however, still remain to be answered. Will the apathy of the rural masses continue? And will not the middle-class in its sectional struggles carry rivalries to the breaking point? It is the latter question which is the more urgent. Fruits of development have not

been distributed among all sections of the middle-class; at any rate it can never be so distributed as to be considered "fair" by all. Certain sections of the middle-class due to early English education or their proximity to the political and financial capitals of India have attained a higher standard among the middle-class. They now demand the continuation of those privileges as a matter of right while new sections are coming up to press for their status as is evident from the acrimonious Hindi-English controversy. These sectional struggles may take a more violent form with the passage of time. It is in fact very interesting that instead of being a unifier, an external threat has given the green light to the nationalities to settle their accounts. The Akali decision

to launch a movement for the Punjab Suba, the vote in Calcutta's South West Constituency or the Manipur People's struggle for responsible government are ominous signs of the dangers inherent in building up a middle-class-dominated society.

While, therefore, India may have ample breathing time, thanks to a combination of circumstances, it would be both risky and futile to postpone agrarian reorganisation unduly long. The present advantages afford us the opportunity to introduce such reorganisation with the least upsetting effect and after making sure that the rural sector's role in politics becomes less uncertain. But the base of our democracy must be widened if the superstructure is not to prove too heavy.

A Profile of Maharashtra

S V Kogekar

A more rational approach to the demand for Maharashtra from the States Reorganisation Commission and a more sensible attitude on the part of the Congress High Command would have saved the country from the ugly aftermath of political decisions taken in defiance of the hard realities of the situation.

The effort to bring about the break-up of the bilingual State has, nevertheless, resulted in an unprecedented sense of unity and awakening in Maharashtra. The achievement of a unilingual State is considered not as the victory of any particular party but of the people.

The most dominant personality in Maharashtra today is the Chief Minister. Shri Yeshwantrao Chavan. He may well prove the greatest asset of Maharashtra in the critical times ahead.

The Shivaji Cult symbolises the emotional unity of Maharashtra but emotional integration of different regions and castes is yet to be achieved.

WHEN the people of Maharashtra started celebrations to welcome the establishment of the new State on April 27, many must have reflected on the needless struggle, suffering and recriminations of the preceding three years. A more rational approach to the demand for a Maharashtra State from the States Reorganisation Commission and a more sensible attitude on the part of the Congress High Command would have saved the country from the ugly aftermath of political decisions taken in defiance of the hard realities of the situation. Yet, the obvious had to be brought home to the powers that be, and Maharashtra seems to have gained greater strength in the process.

The parties in opposition to the Congress came together in a remarkable alliance under the banner of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti and won breath-taking successes in the 1957 General Elections both to

the State Legislature of the bilingual Bombay State and the Lok Sabha. The Municipal Corporation of Bombay was captured by the Samiti in a straight contest with the Congress despite the 'cosmopolitan' electorate of the city. In hundreds of village panchayats and scores of municipalities and district boards, the Congress leadership was successfully challenged. This made it clear that, unless the bilingual State was broken up, the Congress might as well wind up its show in this region. Old loyalties were stronger in parts of Maralhwada—the five districts of the former Hyderabad State—where the Congress was still esteemed as the party that had liberated the people from the Nizam's yoke. It appeared stronger still in the eight districts of old Madhya Pradesh where the demand for a separate Vidarbha State was raised in order to retain the importance of Nagpur as a State capital, a status it had en-

joyed for long.

The Congress Government which depended heavily on the support of Vidarbha members in the Legislature was unable to convince its supporters of the bright future that was claimed for the bilingual State. Those of them who wanted a separate Vidarbha State were in any case eager to see the break-up of the existing arrangement. Shri Brijlal Biyani who was courageous enough to come out openly in favour of the break-up was perhaps far more representative of opinion among Congressmen though his arguments for a separate Vidarbha State were not accepted by most of them. Members from Gujarat, barring some representing the Mahajurajat Janata Parishad, were the mainstay of Congress rule. Facile assumptions in certain quarters that some Gujarati Ministers might try to divert Plan funds, to their region had given rise to certain misgivings even among