DOES INDIA NEED NEW POLITICS?

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&
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Foreword

This lecture titled "Does India Need New Politics?" by Lord Meghnad Desai was delivered at Baroda at a seminar jointly sponsored by The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda and the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, New Delhi, on November 22, 1999. In his typical provocative style, Lord Desai forces us to think about the broader political framework in which development is taking place in India, and offers some speculations on what framework will be most conducive for India's economic and social development. Not all will agree with his prescription. But I have no doubt that this lecture will stimulate debate in this very important area.

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Introduction

This is an apt moment for giving a lecture on new politics for India. We are celebrating this month the fiftieth anniversary of the completion of the drafting of the Constitution of India, and the fiftieth anniversary of the Republic is only two months away. After a decade of unstable politics, there is now a government in power which has sufficient parliamentary strength to be able to last, bar accidents, the full five years in power. It is a coalition of the BJP and many small caste and regional parties though some carry ideological labels. On the eve of a new century and a new millennium [though both in my view start on 1st January 2001] I want to ask whether time has come for India to reconsider the nature of its politics.[1]

The reason for this reconsideration are three fold in my view. India has made an outstanding success of being a democracy. Indeed, I think no

[1] This lecture is dedicated to I.G. Patel for being a constant example to us all. As this is a controversial lecture. I have made it clear in many places that these are my views rather than take an anonymous "objective" tone

theory of democracy should be seriously entertained which does not explain the success of Indian democracy.[2] Yet India has disappointed the hopes raised when it gained independence. India has slipped in the league of industrial countries from the seventh place it had in 1947 [in volume terms] to somewhere below twenty. Half the children are malnourished and despite some progress, 35% of the population is still classified as poor. India's Human Development Index ranking is very low and so is its Gender Development Index. India is on the other hand a nuclear power in all but name and can deploy missiles. Despite high aspirations, India's international standing in Asia and in the UN is not high. When they speak of Asia, people round the world exclude South Asia. In March 1947, Pandit Nehru was able to host an Asian Relations Conference since India was obviously the leader in Asia.

The reasons for this under performance in some aspects and outstanding achievements in others are I think threefold. First is that Indians are confused about their national identity. The question posed by the colonisers: Is India a nation and if so why? is still one which raises a lot of controversy. I shall argue that it is the confusion about our identity which has been one of the root causes of the uneven performance. The second aspect is related to the first. India has never had a clear

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[2] A large literature has been surveyed in Liepjhart

response to modernity. The current contradictory response to globalisation to the world at large and to rationality and secularisation arise, in my opinion, from this lack of clarity about modernity. The connection of these two reasons with politics is that India now has arrived at a point where it can be much bolder and clearer about these two issues but to do that also requires adopting a new style politics. Luckily the results of the recent election create the opportunities for implementing a new politics.

Nationhood

Ever since British domination and the rise of nationalism in response to that domination, a question has haunted Indians. Are they nation and if so why? The British argued that India was a collection of many races [using the word race in the sense of nation or a people] and religions but not a single nation. The response of Indian nationalists over the hundred years preceding independence can be starkly put into three categories.[3]

[1] A secular liberal democratic India defined by territory that comprised India. This strand started as loyal Imperial subjects fighting against "UN-British" policies in India under Naoroji and Gokhale. With Gandhi and Nehru

[3] I have dealt with this in greater detail in my article in Leifer (ed) *Asian Nationalism*, Routlege (forthcoming).

it became a much more assertive theory of Indian citizenship independent of religion or region. Partition dealt a blow to this theory in as much as the India it was proposed for was not the India that became independent. But Nehru quickly redefined Indian nationhood in terms of secularism, non alignment and economic development [socialist pattern]. The Nehruvian vision held India together upto the early 1960's. China, the two famines and the two wars with Pakistan placed a great strain on it. Mrs Gandhi departed from it in practice though the rhetoric of secularist India was maintained. It is this model that has lost out in the 1990's.

[2] A Hindu majority oriented view of India's nationhood. This model was revived by Tilak and linked up with the dream of Hindu patpadshahi that the Maratha Empire cherished. In time the monarchical idea was dropped but the notion that India was a Hindu nation with minority other religions was put forward by many groups throughout the fifty years before Independence. The decay of the Nehruvian model has strengthened the Hindutva model. The rise of the BJP from two seats to one hundred and eighty in the course of the 1990's is a testimony to the popularity of that idea. [There had been before independence through the second half of the nineteenth century a parallel Muslim idea of a revived Delhi

Sultanate but this too had matured into a secularised demand for a Pakistan by 1940.]

Both these visions shared a common ideal- a strong centralised State. The nationhood was a single seamless one albeit with unity in diversity. All Indians were Indians first and anything else afterwards. Jinnah also shared that view for an independent undivided India – a unitary State with a single idea of nationhood.

[3] The third theory of nationhood has a long and chequered history which has been almost forgotten thanks to the Congress view of Indian struggle for independence which has been dominant in the history books. This view was articulated at the First Round Table Conference in London in 1929. It was here that India was represented not by a single party [as Congress insisted] but by a wide conglomeration of regional leaders, caste and religious leaders. Kings of native states, women's leaders. This was the way the British saw India but it was also the Indian reality. Nationality was local - religion based or region based at the first level and All India at the second level. The second All India level had to be created; it could not be presumed.

After two more Round Table Conferences and a White Paper, a joint committee of both Houses of Parliament [including representatives from India] and The Government Of India Bill

1935 – the longest piece of legislation ever passed by Westminster, this view of India was enacted. India was to be a Federation but a loose one with a lot of provincial autonomy. Hindus, Muslims Christians, Sikhs were recognised as separate entities. The Untouchables would have been too but for Gandhi's Yeravada fast.

In this view, India had to have a weak centre and strong states. India was a multinational community in which a single identity had to be forged in an evolutionary way, recognising minority rights and building a consensus from disparate elements.

Nation building on the Nehruvain Model

When independence was won, it was the Gandhi Nehru vision of nationhood that dominated. A single seamless nationhood was presumed in which Indians were neither Hindus nor Muslims, neither North nor South Indians. There was unity in diversity but no attempt at autonomy was to be tolerated. This vision had its own contradictions especially in the asymmetric treatment of Hindus and Muslims. These contradictions came to the fore in the 1980's in the Khalistan battle, a question of Muslim women's rights [Shah Bano case], the Ramjanmabhoomi temple issue when Congress played both sides of the religious divide.

But even before that in the 1970's another contradiction of the Nehruvian model had arisen. In the Navanirman andolan that JP led and the people's movement that started before the Emergency and continued after1977, a new politics was emerging which embodied the third nationhood model. Lokayan was a grassroots movement of tribals and dalits and backward caste groups, locally based and struggling against the Nehru-Gandhi State which had turned from being a friend of the poor to its enemy. The centralised State and its elitist development model had left theses groups out. They had to self organise outside the Congress system to defend themselves. The Janata Party was one concrete though unstable manifestation of this trend. The basic reason for this alienation of the masses from the State was, however, in the second of the three contradictions to which I now turn.

The Challenge of Modernity

When he wrote Hind Swaraj in 1909, his first book, Mohandas Gandhi was reacting to his recent trip to London where he had met Savarkar Shyamji Krishnavarma. They had a nationalist programme for making India a strong independent military power. Savarkar's hero was Mazzini, the Italian freedom fighter. A modern India was to be technologically up-to-date and powerful. It was against this rather than Western industrialisation that Gandhi put forward his philosophy which

rejected modernity, root and branch as far as India was concerned.[4] We know from his subsequent writings that Gandhi did modify his opposition to machinery but did insist on his rejection of a modern Western model for independent Indian State.

It is proper to say, in my view, that the modern Indian State set up by Nehru as its major architect followed the Savarkar and not the Gandhi model. India was meant to be a strong centralised powerful military State. Nehru chose the Mahalanobis strategy because it gave the promise of an early build up of national production capacity for defence equipment. Self-sufficiency in military production was Nehru's hope as he told Marie Seaton.[5] But this production had to be in the public sector. Modernity was acceptable to Nehru not in its Western capitalist form but in a modified Socialist form. In many sectors small scale production was perpetuated thus ruining the chances of a world class textile industry to grow and compete. There was an ambivalence about

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[4] See the excellent introduction to his new edition of Hind Swaraj by Anthony Pareil; Pareil (1997)

[5] Seaton (1965), 'Thinkin gof the development of defence production as a means of expanding India's public sector, Nehru said, "You cannot develop an isolated industry without a general background of industrial development." Nehru's immediate objective was to build up heavy industry to ensure self reliance in general economic development. The remark was made in Lok Sabha in January 1957', p.238

modernity in the economic sphere which in my view cost India a lot of economic growth[6]

The Consequences of Ambivalence

This ambivalence about modernity haunts India to this day, for example in its attitude towards globalisation. India has been a trading nation throughout its history. It was one of the earliest nations to take to modern industrialisation albeit not to the extent that the nationalist movement desired. There was, by 1947, a world class textile industry which was practically a century old. There were not only railways but since 1851 India had one of the major railroads in the world. But India was seen not as a putative capitalist country that could do better independently [say as Japan did] but as a victim which was deindustrialised by the Imperial power whose policies had to be reversed. Thus foreign capital was replaced by domestic capital in banking and commerce and manufacturing in the early years after independence. Self-sufficiency in investment funding became a major objective of planning until it was abandoned in 1980 by Mrs Gandhi.

The ambivalence about modernity has given India not only an economy that failed for many years to be a "tiger" and has thus fallen back relatively to other Asian countries. It has also fomented a mood which is simultaneously aware of India's failings

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6 I have argued this in Desai (1998), (1999a)

but reluctant to learn from other nations' example, simultaneously a victim and eager to take on the world at the slightest hint of a slur or mere neglect on part of others. Indians crave to be taken notice of but when that happens they are quick to see some insult to their culture or history. [As trivially in the recent episode of the TV adventure serial Princess Xena where reference to Lord Krishna was resented, though zillions of worse uses of the same name are made by Bollywood. What right had foreigners do what Indians did routinely?] There is a desire for Western level riches and a pretence at renunciation when the growth forecasts fail to match up to hopes. India does not know whether it wants to be top of the league in the world or reject the world and go into a cocoon.[7]

Erosion of Public Space

The centralised State created in the Nehru days became more arbitrary in the Gandhi period. The Westminster model of parliamentary democracy suits the Nehruvian vision of autonomous citizens. But it is also majoritarian in two senses. A majority can override all minorities and this was at the root of Jinnah's fears. But also a Prime Minister commanding sufficient majority in the lower house can ride roughshod over all opposition

[7] See my ICRIER/ASOCHEM lecture Desai (1999b)

as Mrs Thatcher proved. What is more under the First Past the Post system the Party that gets a majority of seats need not typically get a majority of votes. The discrepancy is quite wide so that 40% of the popular vote gets 75 % plus of seats. This benefited Congress immensely. The continual Congress rule except for 1977-1979 allowed the Prime Minister not only to amend the Constitution at the slightest pretext, but it also gave Mrs Gandhi power to suborn the judiciary, the police and the bureaucracy. Such separation of powers as there was, was abridged by the Executive. People could not get redress for their grievances except by a clientilist relation to the Congress. Thus it was that Lokayan had to take to agitation to defend the interests of the poor people

The arbitrariness of the Executive was not a Congress monopoly but a structural feature of one party majority rule in the Westmintser model. In the UK there have been calls for a change in electoral methods from First Past the Post to Proportional Representation. In India, the process was political rather than institutional. The ten years between Rajiv Gandhi's failure to obtain majority in 1989 to BJP/NDA coalition's victory with about 300 seats have seen an endogenous solution to the majoritarianist fault in the Westminster system as used in India. Thus the first move was to destroy the ability of Congress to come to power on its own. This was the anti Congress move of V P Singh and others in which CPM and BJP joined. Then came the years of the anti BJP coalition with

UF/NF governments of Deve Gowda and Gujral. The 1998 election did not settle the issue. It is only in 1999 that the issue has been settled.

New Politics

The way I will characterise the new dispensation in Indian politics is that no single one of the three theories of nationhood can command majority by itself to rule in comfort. A coalition of two of the three is needed. A Congress-BJP coalition which I advocated for some time would have continued a centralised monistic nation state unmindful of minorities except as came through as clients. A BJP/NDA coalition combines two rival theories of nationhood. One is centralist and the other confederationist/ decentralist. The NDA element will guard the rights of regions and caste groups and religious minorities because that is where its support comes from. The fears about secularism [rhetorical in light of the actual as against the pretended record of Congress through the 1980's] can be assuaged by the tension between the two partners. Of course it is not inconceivable that a Congress coalition with regional and caste parties could have come to power had the Congress not played its cards so badly. What is more that could yet be in the future. The point is that no single strand of nationhood commands absolute majority on its own. [I include the Left parties within Congress here as they share the same theory of nationhood.]

Many people were unhappy during the 1990s about the loss of stability, i.e., Congress hegemony. But the confusions of the 1990's have to be seen as creative. They saw the assertion of the grass roots, in their own right and not as clients of the Congress, of their legitimate demands. Sometimes these demands were made in a seemingly irrational fashion. Thus Kanshi Ram has openly said that he does not like stability because "his people" – the dalits lost out in the days of stability and upper caste hegemony. The BSP behaved quite selfishly when in power in UP. But this is one democratic way for the excluded to assert themselves. The proliferation of regional, religious and caste parties is thus to be welcomed as a sign of an assertive democracy in India. The elitist assumptions of Congress hegemony needed to be challenged because whatever the good intentions of Nehru and even to an extent Mrs Gandhi, they could not presume to represent people's needs. People had to express it themselves through their own agents. The fashioning of a winning coalition has taken all of ten years but I believe it has done good to Indian democracy.

The tension between the two strands of the BJP/NDA coalition about modernity is not so straightforward. The Nehru assumption implicitly was that the Centre was modernising and as you went down to the lower levels backwardness persisted. India had to be modernised from the top. Fifty years on and with globalisation, the

pattern is more complex. Thus Andhra Chief Minister, Chandra Babu Naidu, is the ideal moderniser/globaliser and many states are far ahead in the economic reform race than the Centre is. The acceptance of IT technology when much else was resented as Western import is by itself revealing. The younger generation is not hung up about modernity as much as their elders are. There is no fear of competition in the newer service industries that exists in the older manufacturing industries.

The globaliser/anti globaliser divide is not the Left/Right divide nor the secular/ Hindutva one. CPM and RSS are anti globalisers. Parts of BJP and Congress are globalisers and NDA is similarly divided. But through the 1990's the reforms have gone on albeit at a sluggish pace and often by stealth. Now the parliamentary arithmetic is much more permissive and signs are that the globalisers are going to push the boat out quickly. The insurance bill has already gone through Lok Sabha. Fiscal discipline is promised. Much can be achieved if the pace keeps up. The Prime Minister's speech to the Economic Summit on 5th December 1999 confirmed this new climate.

The support for globalisation will come if growth rate stays up in the 7 to 8% range. The promise of globalisation is the promise of modernity - to make India a powerful, prosperous nation. The NDA groups gain from growth as they are the poorer people. The losers from reform are

the Congress created vested interests - Public sector employees and managers, large private sector industries established in the planning period who are protected by tariffs and subsidies. The newer younger entrepreneurs never had the subsidies and they know they have to compete to survive. As of now their support is scattered across parties but they are willing to lobby whoever is in power. They know political interference is expensive. They are not willing to defend the old privileges even under the name of swadeshi or socialism.

But these two dimensions of tension - centralisers v/s decentralisers and globalisers v/s anti globalisers will continue in the new century. I expect it to be healthy rather than not, because of the lack of one to one correspondence between the two. If all centralisers were globalisers and vice versa, there would be trouble. As it is these lines are much more complex and cut across. There is every expectation that the government will stay in power for the full term and this by itself will help. This is stability but without hegemony of a single group. This is plurality in diversity not a forced unity.

Conclusion

India adopted a Western style democracy but favoured a left variant of economic policy at Independence. In the fifty years since the problems created by a majoritarian form of democracy with

elite domination have been endogenously resolved. There remains a tension about the federalist/ conferderalist tendencies as about the victim/definat conqueror psyches. But I expect that if India goes ahead boldly with economic reform and as a higher growth rate follows some of these tensions will wither away. India will fashion a pluralist multi-layered ideology of nationhood. When other federations such as the USSR and Yugoslavia have fallen apart and Indonesia is facing separatist demands from Aceh, it is remarkable that India may have found a solution to its thousand mutinies endogenously.

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