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BOOK REVIEW

HINDU 8.2.11 BOOK REVIEW

A historical document on Emergency

B. SURENDRA RAO

SHAH COMMISSION REPORT — Lost, and Regained:
Compiled and edited by Era Sezhiyan; Aazhi Publishers, 12, First
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We have heard a great deal of eloquent plaudits and sceptical comments about Indian democracy. We should reckon that both vouch for its strength and resilience in different ways. Dissatisfaction with its functioning is not a bad sign. That it has been creaking and huffing, apparently blundering on from strength to strength, is in itself a measure of success that should fly in the face of those who had predicted that the tender plant of democracy would not survive in the land of 'Oriental Despotism'.

But there is a difference between democratic functioning and strengthening the democratic values. The latter is a slow process that involves a conscious and sustained act of political and cultural cultivation. It is also about overcoming the subversive challenges built into the functioning of a democracy. The biggest test to Indian democracy came when Emergency was declared in 1975. The memory of this unsavoury interlude tends to be either revived or swept under the carpet, depending on the political expediency of the person or party concerned.

The Shah Commission, set up to go into the various kinds of 'excesses' committed during the Emergency, submitted its report in three parts, the last one on August 6, 1978. If the sheer size of the

report — it had 26 chapters and three appendices running to over 530 pages — reflected the enormity of the violence done to democratic institutions and ethics, it also expressed grave concern about the happenings and the damage they had inflicted on the system.

Regime of repression

Sadly, there have also been some eloquent, unrepentant apologists, who spoke of it as a “shock treatment” needed for restoring Indian democracy to its healthy and disciplined ways of functioning. But the abuse of power and authority and the assault on the Constitution-guaranteed fundamental rights were too naked and brazen to be draped in flimsy defences. That the whole operation was designed to pander to the ambitions of an authoritarian leader, Indira Gandhi, who aided by a coterie of cronies unleashed a regime of repression in the name of implementing the tawdry 20-Point Programme, made it particularly galling to the nation's dignity.

The midnight knocks and arbitrary arrests; censorship of the press; premature retirement or supersession of inconvenient officers, including members of the higher judiciary; bulldozing of the slums; and forced sterilisation of men — all these sullied the claims of the country to the virtues of toleration. If the results of the 1977 national elections testified, at the popular level, to the veracity of the reported ‘excesses’, the findings of the Shah Commission came as a judicial confirmation.

The reported ‘loss’ of the Commission's report, after Indira Gandhi's return to power in 1980, showed that the old totalitarian instinct was still in place. Withdrawing or destroying the copies of the report is too naïve a method to tidy up one's place in history. Many despots have tried it before, and failed.

Posterity

In 'regaining' the report and publishing it, Era Sezhiyan has ensured that an important document related to one of the aberrant phases of Indian democracy is not lost to posterity, especially to the students of Indian political system. By this, he has done a signal service to democratic education. It is easy to use the report as a weapon for running down the architect of the Emergency or those who operated the vicious engine or the party that endorsed the exercise. But political mud-slinging tends to become a case of 'pot calling a kettle black'. Indian democracy has known, and faced, other variants of subversion too. But a more abiding significance of the Emergency and the impulses behind it is the lesson it holds for India — the imperative to strike a fine balance between democratic compulsions and despotic instincts nurtured in its history. The colonial rule defended itself on the basis of many virtues, but it had the capital vice of denying freedom to the colonies. Independence did not quite achieve a clean break from the colonial past, as suspension of liberties under the Emergency showed. Behind the misadventure was the assumption that India was habituated — and hence was willing to submit — to despotic personal rule. But the bruised electorate proved quick to learn its lessons.

Precious

The learning and unlearning of lessons are, of course, part of the evolution and frustrations of democratic life. That makes the Shah Commission report a precious document. As Era Sezhiyan points out, "...it is more than an investigative report; it is a magnificent historical document to serve as a warning for those coming to power in the future not to disturb the basic structure of a functioning democracy and also, for those suppressed under a despotic rule, a hopeful guide to redeem the freedom by spirited struggle."

HINDU 8.2.11 BOOK REVIEW

Politics of ethnonationalism

K. N. PANIKKAR

This work, a collection of essays, focusses on major sites of ethnonational politics

ETHNONATIONALISM IN INDIA - A Reader: Edited by Sanjib Barua; Oxford University Press, YMCA Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi-110001. Rs. 995.

John Stuart Mill in his celebrated essay, *Considerations on Representative Government*, had advanced the view that democracy is “next to impossible” in multiethnic societies and completely impossible in linguistically divided countries. By this yardstick, Indian democracy is a prime candidate for collapse. Nevertheless, it has survived, even if not ideally, as a puzzle for all those who expected the doom, particularly because ethnic discontent and violence have been endemic since the inception of the Republic. The essays brought together in this collection seek to solve this puzzle.

Contentious

Ethnonationalism has been a contentious concept, particularly among scholars who attribute primacy and privilege to mainstream nationalism. It was Walker Connors, a pioneer in this field of study, who brought about terminological clarity as well as popularity for the term. According to him, the concept “denotes both the loyalty to a nation deprived of its own state and the loyalty to an ethnic group embodied in a specific state, particularly where the latter is conceived as a nation state.” This dual allegiance is bound to generate considerable tension. In India, ethnic allegiance has been in conflict with mainstream nationalism, or the other way round, in

many regions and the attempts to find a solution have not been successful. In this political context, the essays in this volume are particularly significant, apart from being academically salient.

In the political domain, ethnic nationalism and identity politics have become intertwined, blurring the distinction between ethnic identity and identity politics in popular perception. Consequently, primordial and ethnic identities are invoked in politics to such an extent that democratic principles tend to be replaced by caste and religion. The religious politics of Bharatiya Janata Party and the Akali Dal and the caste politics of the Bahujan Samaj Party are good examples. While the power of ethnonationalism is undeniable — because of the close linkages within the community and the sense of identity it creates — the politics of ethnicity-based identity is likely to be anti-democratic and anti-secular in a multi-cultural society like India.

Over the 63 years since Independence, the principle of federalism within the overall structure of a liberal, democratic and secular state has informed national consolidation. Over a period of time, however, several fissures developed within, mainly because Indian nationalism was not sufficiently inclusive and the aspirations of several ethnic groups remained unfulfilled. India, as Alfred Stephen describes in his article in this volume, is a “robust politically multicultural” nation. Whether the Indian state took adequate cognisance of this reality and recognised the “emotional depth of ethnonational identity” is doubtful. But tensions and violence have been endemic. If the massive deployment of troops has not been able to curb it, it is because the Indian elite took a modernist view of nation and nationalism, without addressing the overwhelming influence of ethnic identities and primordial loyalties.

Periodically these identities and loyalties surfaced in Indian polity, using different strategies and methods. Witness the Nagas and Mizos in the North East; the Sikhs in the Punjab; the Dalits in Uttar

Pradesh, and the tribes in Jharkhand. Unfortunately, the state responded to the aspirations of these marginalised groups by methods that relied more on force, and this led to greater alienation of these communities.

The essays are organised in six sections focussed on major sites of ethnonational politics. Most of them have drawn upon extensive research. Apart from an overview of the ethnic situation in India, there is a detailed coverage of the developments in Jammu and Kashmir, the northeastern States, Punjab, and Tamil Nadu.

Overview

In the opening essay, Kanti Bajpai provides an overview, even if rather sketchy, and comes up with a positive assessment of India's achievements in dealing with language, caste and religious issues. Paul Brass concurs with this view insofar as it relates to the language policy. Gurharpal Singh, on the other hand, has a different take. Contesting the “conventional wisdom”, he suggests an “alternative interpretation of the Indian state and its relationship with ethnicity.” He argues that the inability of the state to manage the ethnic problem has led to the loss of thousands of human lives.

Descriptive

The volume is rich in empirical data, but short on conceptual and theoretical formulations. This is perhaps understandable, given that this is still an emerging field. Most of the essays are descriptive rather than analytical. The exceptions are the ones by Arand Lijpart, Steven Ian Wilkinson, Atul Kohli, Gurharpal Singh and Narendra Subramanian. Lijpart and Wilkinson take opposite positions on consociational theory. The former argues that the incidence of ethnic violence in India was relatively low until the 1960s when Indian state followed a consociational policy and it rose thereafter as the polity became less consociational. Wilkinson, however, contends

that the level of ethnic violence increased during the recent decades when India followed a more consociational policy. More relevant, perhaps, is the question whether India has ever followed a consociational policy successfully. Sanjib Barua, as the editor, has provided a short but lucid introduction to a useful 'Reader' on a theme that requires considerable theoretical clarity to distinguish between ethnic and national identities.

CORRUPTION

Reboot the system

P C SHARMA

History books have divided India's past into different periods like the ancient age, the Mughal period, the British period, etc. However, the last few decades, of the age which began after Independence, would certainly compel historians to describe it as the age of corruption and kickbacks.

Unprecedented corruption, a proliferation of scams, growing involvement of public servants occupying high positions (including chief secretaries, directors-general of police, senior judges, ministers, heads of financial institutions, chairmen of regulatory boards, etc) and media reports of about \$500 billion stashed in foreign banks, would all justify this categorisation. As a result, public faith in the government has plummeted to new depths.

Safeguarding the financial integrity of the country is as vital as protecting its territorial integrity. But if institutions like the Central Vigilance Commission — set up in 2002 with a renewed mandate to cleanse public life — become the focus of national controversy, there are natural doubts on the system's intention and the capacity to confront corruption. These doubts are only deepened when it is revealed that these institutions are failing to fight, collectively and resolutely, external intrusions into their defined roles.

Besides impeding growth and development, corruption has caused several upheavals in independent India's history. A major state government was dismissed on charges of corruption and president's rule imposed following the Sarkaria Commission's report. The JP movement,

launched in 1974, caused a political turmoil in the country. The bank security scam of the early 1990s conceived and carried out by Harshad Mehta and senior bankers subverted the banking sector. The Telgi scam undermined the very credibility of our currency system. The fodder scam of Bihar caused convulsions in both administrative and political fields. Refreshingly, in 64 cases of this scam which involved politicians, public servants and other individuals, 935 convictions have been awarded. The impact of this all-pervasive corruption is palpable, on our economic growth, development, health, education and, above all, on the public distribution system and on welfare schemes like NREGS.

In a PIL in the Supreme Court, it is alleged that a large part of the NREGS funds in a state have been siphoned off by corrupt officials. Startling instances of poor landowners compelled to part with their small holdings under duress for most inadequate recompense, prosecution of those who declined to oblige the corporate body, have also been reported. These are some of the dismal features of governance today.

The lust for lucre and clout are the motives that impel an individual or a group to commit fraud. But the culture of impunity and the collapse of vigil are responsible for widening the scope and territory of corruption.

What is the remedy? Investigations are integral to finding out the truth and bringing the corrupt to book. There is a plethora of investigating agencies, vigilance organisations, ombudsmen, lokayuktas, etc, but their record falls far below public expectation.

One more special law, the Lokpal Act, is under consideration to combat current levels of corruption, especially in the political field. Special laws may be an answer to special situations, but adding to the list of existing

laws without critical appraisal of their implementation may not be the right remedy.

Access to law is not the same thing as access to justice. Therefore, expeditious trials and the certainty of conviction are needed to dispel the growing dissatisfaction with justice-delivery institutions. But this task will remain incomplete if rooting out corruption from judiciary is not accorded the same, if not greater, priority as other wings of governance are. The corrupt are often shielded by their colleagues, which thwarts the efforts of honest public servants. This is an internal challenge the system must confront.

Drastic administrative measures like Article 311(2) of the Constitution have become necessary to weed out the corrupt. Recall how the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) set up in Hong Kong in 1974 led to the summary dismissal of hundreds of public servants. The result is almost zero levels of corruption.

For a permanent bulwark against corruption, the public must maintain its own vigil and express its rage, so necessary in a democracy.

The prime minister's recent exhortation to chief secretaries to take on corruption "frontally, boldly and quickly" is both a cry of anguish and a call for action. The state has no other alternative than to assume this role, to satisfy popular yearning for a clean, corruption-free environment, which is a human right.

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Growth and other concerns

Amartya Sen

While economic growth is an important boon for enhancing living conditions, its reach depends on what we do with the fruits of growth.

I was awakened early one morning recently by someone who said he was enormously enjoying my on-going debate on economic growth in India. I was very pleased that I had given someone some joy, but I also wondered what on earth he could be talking about, since I have not been involved in any such debate. As it happens, I am getting a steady stream of telephone calls and electronic communication about this alleged debate. Since I could not generate the memory of any such debate, I tried to recollect any solitary remark on economic growth in some other context that I might have made in the last few months. I managed to resurrect the memory of having said in passing, in a meeting of TIE (The Indus Entrepreneurs) in Delhi in December, that it is silly to be obsessed about overtaking China in the rate of growth of Gross National Product (GNP), while not comparing ourselves with China in other respects, like education, basic health, or life expectancy. Since that one-sentence remark seems to have been interpreted in many different ways (my attention to that fact was drawn by friends who are more web-oriented than I am), I guess I should try to explain what that remark was about.

GNP growth can, of course, be very helpful in advancing living standards and in battling poverty (one would have to be quite foolish not to see that), but there is little case for confusing (1) the important role of economic growth as means for achieving good things, and (2) growth of inanimate objects of convenience being taken to be an end in itself. One

does not have to “rubbish” economic growth — and I did not do anything like that — to recognise that it is not our ultimate objective, but a very useful means to achieve things that we ultimately value, including a better quality of life.

Nor should my remark be taken to be a dismissal of the far-reaching relevance of comparing India with China. This is a good perspective in which to assess each of the two countries and a lot of my past work — on my own and jointly with Jean Dreze — has made use of that perspective. It is of some historical interest that comparing India with China has been the subject matter of discussion for a very long time. “Is there anyone, in the five parts of India, who does not admire China?” asked Yi Jing (I-Tsing, in old spelling) in the seventh century, on returning to China after being in India for ten years, studying at the ancient university in Nalanda. He went on to write a book, in 691 AD, about India, which presented, among other things, the first systematic comparative account of medical practices and health care in these two countries (perhaps the first such comparison between any two countries in the world). He investigated what China could learn from India, and what, in turn, India could assimilate from China. Comparisons of that kind — and more — remain very relevant today, and I have discussed elsewhere the illumination we can get from such comparisons in general, and in comparative medical practice and health care in particular (“The Art of Medicine: Learning from Others,” *Lancet*, January 15, 2011).

What goes wrong in the current obsession with India-China comparison is not the relevance of comparing China with India, but the field that is chosen for comparison. Now that the Indian rate of economic growth seems to be hovering around 8 per cent per year, there is a lot of speculation — and breathless discourse — on whether and when India may catch up or surpass China's over-10 per cent growth rate. Despite the interest in this subject, comparable to that in the race course (the betting comes from the West as well as Asia), this is surely a silly focus. This is so not merely because there are so many elements of arbitrariness

in any growth estimate (the choice of prices for weighting is only one of the problems, as any serious economist knows), but also because the lives that people are able to lead — what ultimately interest people most — are only indirectly and partially influenced by the rates of overall economic growth.

Let me look at some numbers, drawing from various sources — national as well as international, in particular World Development Reports of the World Bank and Human Development Reports of the United Nations. Life expectancy at birth in China is 73.5 years; in India it is still 64.4 years. Infant mortality rate is 50 per thousand in India, compared with just 17 in China, and the under-5 mortality rate is 66 for Indians and 19 for the Chinese. China's adult literacy rate is 94 per cent, compared with India's 65 per cent, and mean years of schooling in India is 4.4 years, compared with 7.5 years in China. In our effort to reverse the lack of schooling of girls, India's literacy rate for women between the ages of 15 and 24 has certainly risen, but it is still below 80 per cent, whereas in China it is 99 per cent. Almost half of our children are undernourished compared with a very tiny proportion in China. Only 66 per cent of Indian children are immunised with triple vaccine (DPT), as opposed to 97 per cent in China. Comparing ourselves with China in these really important matters would be a very good perspective, and they can both inspire us and give us illumination about what to do — and what not to do, particularly the glib art of doing nothing.

Higher GNP in China has certainly helped it to reduce various indicators of poverty and deprivation, and to expand different aspects of the quality of life. So we have every reason to want to encourage sustainable economic growth, among the other things we can do to augment living standards today and in the future. Sustainable economic growth is a very good thing in a way that “growth mania” is not. We need some clarity on why we are doing what (including the values we have about our lives and freedoms and about the environment), and getting excited about the

horse race on GNP growth with China is not a good way of achieving that clarity.

Further, we have to take note of the fact that GNP per capita is not invariably a good predictor of valuable features of our lives, for they depend also on other things that we do — or fail to do. Compare India with Bangladesh, where, as Jean Dreze pointed out in an article many years ago, “social indicators” are “improving quite rapidly” (“Bangladesh Shows the Way,” *The Hindu*, September 17, 2004). In terms of income, India has a huge lead over Bangladesh, with a GNP per capita of Rs.3,250, compared with Rs.1,550 in Bangladesh, in comparable units of purchasing power parity. India was ahead of Bangladesh earlier as well, but thanks to fast economic growth in recent years, India's per-capita income is now comfortably more than double that of Bangladesh. How well is India's income advantage reflected in our lead in those things that really matter? I fear not very well — indeed not well at all.

Life expectancy in Bangladesh is 66.9 years compared with India's 64.4. The proportion of underweight children in Bangladesh (41.3 per cent) is a little lower than in India (43.5), and its fertility rate (2.3) is also lower than India's (2.7). Mean years of schooling amount to 4.8 years in Bangladesh compared with India's 4.4 years. While India is ahead of Bangladesh in male literacy rate in the youthful age-group of 15-24, the female rate in Bangladesh is higher than in India. Interestingly, the female literacy rate among young Bangladeshis is actually higher than the male rate, whereas young females still do much worse than young males in India. There is much evidence to suggest that Bangladesh's current progress has much to do with the role that liberated Bangladeshi women are beginning to play in the country.

What about health, which interests every human being as much as anything else? Under-5 mortality rate is 66 in India compared with 52 in Bangladesh. In infant mortality, Bangladesh has a similar advantage,

since the rate is 50 in India and 41 in Bangladesh. Whereas 94 per cent of Bangladeshi children are immunised with DPT vaccine, only 66 per cent of Indian children are. In each of these respects, Bangladesh does better than India, despite having less than half of India's per-capita income.

This should not, however, be interpreted to entail that Bangladesh's living conditions will not benefit from higher economic growth — they certainly can benefit greatly, particularly if growth is used as a means of doing good things, rather than treating it as an end in itself. It is to the huge credit of Bangladesh that despite the adversity of low income it has been able to do so much so quickly, in which the activism of the NGOs as well as public policies have played their parts. But higher income, including larger public resources, will enhance, rather than reduce, Bangladesh's ability to do good things for its people.

One of the great things about economic growth is that it generates resources for the government to spend according to its priorities. In fact, public resources typically grow faster than the GNP: when the GNP increases at 7 to 9 per cent, public revenue tends to expand at rates between 9 and 12 per cent. The gross tax revenue, for example, of the Government of India now is more than four times what it was in 1990-91, at constant prices — a bigger rise than GNP per head.

Expenditure on what is somewhat misleadingly called the “social sector” (health, education, nutrition, etc) has certainly gone up in India, and that is a reason for cheer. And yet we are still well behind China in many of these fields. For example, government expenditure on health care in China is nearly five times that in India. China does, of course, have a higher per-capita income than we do, but even in relative terms, while China spends nearly two per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on health care (1.9 per cent to be exact), the proportion is only a little above one per cent (1.1 per cent) in India.

One result of the relatively low allocation to public health care in India is the development of a remarkable reliance of many poor people across the country on private doctors, many of whom have little medical training, if any. Since health is also a typical case of “asymmetric information,” with the patients knowing very little about what the doctors (or “supposed doctors”) are giving them, the possibility of fraud and deceit is very large. In a study conducted by the Pratichi Trust, we found cases of exploitation of the poor patients' ignorance of what they are being given to make them part with badly needed money to get treatment that they do not often get (we even found cases in which patients with malaria were charged comparatively large sums of money for being given saline injections). There is very definitive evidence of a combination of quackery and crookery in the premature privatisation of basic health care. This is the result not only of shameful exploitation, but ultimately of the sheer unavailability of public health care in many localities around India.

The central point to seize is that while economic growth is an important boon for enhancing living conditions, its reach depends greatly on what we do with the fruits of growth. To be sure, there are large numbers of people for whom growth alone does just fine, since they are already privileged and need no social assistance. Economic growth only adds to their economic and social opportunities. Those gains are, of course, good, and there is nothing wrong in celebrating their better lives through economic growth, especially since this group of relatively privileged Indians is quite large in absolute numbers. But the exaggerated concentration on their lives, which the media tend often to display, gives an incomplete picture of what is happening to Indians in general.

And perhaps more worryingly, this group of relatively privileged and increasingly prosperous Indians can easily fall for the temptation to treat economic growth as an end in itself, for it serves directly as the means of their opulence and improving lifestyles without further social efforts. The insularity that this limited perspective generates can even take the

form of ridiculing social activists — “jholawalas” is one description I have frequently heard — who keep reminding others about the predicament of the larger masses of people who make up this great country. The fact is, however, that India cannot be seen as doing splendidly if a great many Indians — sometimes most Indians — are having very little improvement in their deprived lives.

Some critics of huge social inequalities might be upset that there is something rather uncouth and crude in the self-centred lives and inward-looking temptations of the prosperous inner sanctum. My main concern, however, is that those temptations may prevent the country from doing the wonderful things it can do for Indians at large. Economic growth, properly supplemented, can be a huge contributor to making things better for people, and it is extremely important to understand the relevance and role of growth with clarity.

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POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

Leadership deficit

Pankaj Vohra

The UPA will face its toughest test next week when Parliament reconvenes and takes up a whole lot of issues including the scams and acts of omission and commission by the government and the Congress's key functionaries. While there are ample indications that the government, after its bitter experience during the winter session, may agree to the Opposition's demand for a joint parliamentary committee probe into the 2G scam, there are many Congressmen who are sure to resist such a move.

Amid this confusion, the onus of coming out clean rests with the government. The manner in which some of its ministers are conducting themselves in public, particularly those who have made a lateral entry into politics, has only added to the perception that there is no cohesion within the ruling combine. The fact that the Congress core committee, which takes decisions on important issues, does not have any member from its coalition partners has only strengthened this impression. In other words, the UPA does not seem to be following the coalition dharma in its true spirit. Instead, it is dependent on a handful of leaders for major decisions. This has led to a power struggle within the Congress and this is hurting the government as well as the party.

Congress president Sonia Gandhi has been caught in the crossfire and appears confused while dealing with important matters. Her weakness is that she wants to maintain a status quo and this stems from her inexperience. The enthusiasm with which she had started her political innings seems to be diminishing thanks to the power play within the Congress and the UPA. It seems she is slowly losing control.

Equally dangerous is the fact that several bureaucrats have assumed more power than is permissible in a democratic set-up. They are playing a proactive role in the decision-making process but have no accountability. This has emboldened the judiciary to give directions in areas that it used to leave alone.

The result of all this is that at one level, the executive is either a prisoner of indecision or is oblivious of the many wrongdoings. The legislature is indifferent or has not been able to make any impact on decision-making due to the nature of coalition politics. Naturally, the judiciary has become proactive. Politics thus is the biggest casualty and politicians are bearing the brunt. The agenda of the Congress to strengthen itself in the Hindi heartland lies unfulfilled because of three reasons: first, some deliberate activities of some of its key players; inability of Gandhi's advisers to give her sound guidance; and the failure to comprehend the ground realities accurately.

At one level, the Manmohan Singh government is functioning on the lines of the PV Narasimha Rao government. It's allowing things to drift and the party to weaken. Perhaps this is a key to its survival. The coalition partners are either under attack (A Raja and now Sharad Pawar) or unhappy the way Mamata Banerjee keeps on expressing her disenchantment with some decisions. To add to the misery of this government is the growing belief - rightly or wrongly - that differences between the top two leaders of the government and the party are growing in these troubled times.

This session is crucial for the future of this government and the coalition. It is in everybody's interest that the UPA as a coalition and as a government exhibits greater cohesiveness and speaks in one voice. The two top leaders must bury their differences, if any, and lead from the front. The errant leaders should be strictly dealt with. Otherwise the writing is on the wall for all to see. Between us.

LET IT WORK

Indian democracy is poised to enter another phase of tests. It failed one test at the end of last year, when Parliament failed to meet even for a day during its winter session. The budget session, arguably the most important session of Parliament, is slated to begin in a couple of weeks' time. There is no indicator that the impasse that stalled the functioning of Parliament in its previous session has been resolved or is, in fact, close to some kind of resolution. In the winter session, the Opposition — there was a bizarre coming together of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Left on this issue — refused to allow Parliament to function because it wanted the government to give in to its demand for a joint parliamentary committee to review the granting of the 2G licences. It did not strike the Opposition that the proper functioning of Parliament is absolutely critical to the democratic process. The functioning of Parliament is more important than any protest, even one focussed on corruption within the government. The Opposition was well within its rights to demand a JPC but once it was not conceded, Parliament should have been allowed to function so that debate could ensue and legislations could be passed.

The government's efforts to diffuse the tension and enable parliamentary work to proceed during the budget session have not made much headway. The Opposition is in no mood to let the government off the leash of the JPC, especially since other revelations about corruption have come to the surface. What is not clear is what the Opposition hopes to achieve by stopping Parliament from functioning. The failure to pass the budget and the finance bill in the forthcoming session could seriously jeopardize the present political dispensation. But will anybody gain from that? Is any political party prepared to face the electorate in the immediate future? There are even more profound issues involved here. What will it mean for democracy in India if Parliament is made

dysfunctional by protests from the Opposition? No one in the political class recognizes the significance and the weight of this question. The mode of protest adopted by the Opposition has made it clear that it makes no distinction between the politics of the street and parliamentary procedure. The victim of this confusion is the democratic process, which is being held at ransom by political parties eager to score short-term points.

INDIFFERENCE OF BIG MEN

- Justice is less important than holding on to power

Ramachandra Guha

I am presently embarked on an exercise that is both utterly exhausting as well as truly educative — the reading, line by line, of every volume of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. After several weeks of dogged work I have completed Volume XII; a mere 88 remain. I shall now take a (possibly extended) break, since Gandhi has now just left South Africa for good, and I need to distil all that I have read (and learnt) before moving with my subject to another country, another continent.

In a previous column I reported an early fruit of my research — an article speaking with admiration of the mystic, Jalaluddin Rumi, whose disregard for monumental temples and mosques Gandhi shared, in a non- institutional spiritual ecumenism that might possibly show a way to resolve the destructive dispute in Ayodhya. Let me offer another illustration of the continuing relevance of Gandhi's writings. In the late summer of 1909 he was in London, lobbying for the rights of Indians in South Africa. The lawyer-activist met with British journalists, members of parliament, senior officials, and cabinet ministers, urging them to press the governments of Natal and Transvaal to allow Indians the freedom to trade, the freedom of movement, and protection against laws and practices that discriminated against them on account of their race.

After a month of running around in London, Gandhi wrote in exasperation that, "The more experience I have of meeting so-called big men or even men who are really great, the more disgusted I feel after every such meeting. All such efforts are no better than pounding chaff.

Everyone appears preoccupied with his own affairs. Those who occupy positions of power show little inclination to do justice. Their only concern is to hold on to their positions. We have to spend a whole day in arranging for an interview with one or two persons. Write a letter to the person concerned, wait for his reply, acknowledge it and then go to his place. One may be living in the north and another in the south [of London]. Even after all this fuss, one cannot be very hopeful about this outcome. If considerations of justice had any appeal, we would have got [what we wanted] long before now. The only possibility is that some concessions may be gained through fear. It can give no pleasure to a *satyagrahi* to have to work in such conditions.”

I knew exactly what Gandhi felt —and meant. Ninety-seven years after his fruitless exertions in London, I spent several weeks in New Delhi, seeking appointments with the most powerful men in the land. I was not alone — with me, indeed leading me, were the senior journalist, B.G. Verghese, and the brilliant anthropologist, Nandini Sundar. We had been part of a team of independent citizens who had recently returned from a trip through the district of Dantewada, in Chhattisgarh, where a bloody conflict raged between Maoist revolutionaries and a vigilante group promoted by the state government. Dozens of villages had been burnt, hundreds of people had been killed, and tens of thousands had been rendered homeless.

The Maoists are accountable to nobody, but we felt that the depredations of the vigilantes (who called themselves Salwa Judum, which roughly translated as ‘Peace Hunt’) had to be stopped by the state. When we found that the Chhattisgarh administration was complicit in these crimes, we decided to bring the matter to the attention of the Central government. After many phone calls, we were able to secure appointments with the then home minister, Shivraj Patil, and the then national security adviser, M.K. Narayanan. We acquainted them with what we had found — that is to say, with displaced tribal people living in pathetic camps along the road, their homes damaged or destroyed,

their women violated by the vigilantes, all part of a general atmosphere of terror and intimidation that pervaded the district.

The NSA met our presentation of this firsthand evidence with indifference, the home minister with irritation. The NSA said condescendingly that as a former policemen he did not need lessons on how to deal with Naxalism. The home minister went a step further, accusing Nandini Sundar and the present writer of being Naxalite sympathizers ourselves.

Later, I was able to secure a one-on-one meeting with the prime minister, Manmohan Singh. He pleaded helplessness. To my recounting of the crimes of the vigilantes he replied that “they say that these methods are necessary”, without specifying whether “they” were his own advisers, or the Chhattisgarh state government.

Almost five years have passed since our meetings with these three big men. I did not write about them at the time, since these were private discussions, and I hoped that the advice of experienced and independent-minded Indian democrats would effect some slight changes in state policy. If I recall these meetings now, it is for two reasons: first, because I now find that the greatest of all Indians had a similar experience (albeit with *firangi*, rather than *desi*, big men), and second, because the sufferings of the tribal people in Dantewada still persist, in good part because of the unwillingness or inability of the Central government to hold the state government and its functionaries to account for their gross (and sometimes barbaric) violations of the law of the land.

Earlier this month, while hearing a petition filed in the public interest, the Supreme Court instructed the Chhattisgarh state government to disband Salwa Judum camps, restore villagers to their homes, and provide proper compensation for victims of violence. It also asked that schools and *ashrams* be vacated by security forces. In previous hearings, the Supreme Court has criticized the state government for distributing

arms to untrained and frequently under-age men. Its strictures are wholly merited, but as things stand, the court has no powers to supervise matters on the ground. Its instructions have been ignored in the past by the state government, and it is unlikely that the Chhattisgarh government will work overtime to honour them now.

There are only two ways to tackle the menace of Naxalism: prompt and efficient policing by trained personnel, and sustained efforts to provide education, health, security of livelihood and mechanisms of self-governance to tribal communities. Instead, the Chhattisgarh government has promoted vigilantism on the one hand, and, on the other, shut down schools and clinics and handed over tribal land to mines and factories. As a consequence, the influence of Naxalism has actually increased, leading to an escalating spiral of violence and counter-violence, with the *adivasis* caught in the crossfire.

If the Central government had acted in 2006, on the basis of the massive evidence presented before it, the situation might yet have been retrieved and remedied. Reflecting on its inaction five years later, it seems to be that it stemmed from several causes. There was the fear that the Bharatiya Janata Party would charge it with being soft on extremism, and the further fear that since law and order was a state subject the Centre should be cautious in intervening. But the main reason, *pace* Gandhi, was the general indifference to the claims of justice of men in high places, whose “only concern”, in India now as in England a hundred years ago, was and is “to hold on to their positions” of power.

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SOCIAL JUSTICE

A DIFFERENT POLITICS

- Indian society can barely stand equality

Anuradha Roy

The Swedish writer, Henning Mankell, was in Delhi this January, doing what he does very well, telling stories. One of the stories he told was of a morning years ago, during the civil war in Mozambique, when he was walking on a dirt path in the hinterland. Everything there had been burnt and destroyed in the fighting and, as he walked through that scorched wasteland, he saw a man approach from the other side. The man was starvation-thin. Most poverty-stricken people Mankell had seen were unshod and in rags, yet this man was wearing shoes.

It was only when the man came much closer that the writer realized those were not shoes at all. The man was barefoot. To conceal his wretchedness he had painted the shape of shoes onto his feet.

Writers write the stories they want to read, said Mankell, and he is one with all writers in this. At the same time, whatever he is writing — theatre or fiction — the singular image inspiring him on is those painted shoes, the human need for dignity in the worst deprivation.

Writers who situate their work in war zones like 9/11 or the Holocaust are revered as “political”. Mankell writes crime fiction and his novels are not concerned with apocalyptic, epochal violence. Because people think in genres, he is not generally seen as a political writer. But his books are deeply concerned with the role of society in crime, about the violence people do to each other, the violence in the home, the violence caused by bigotry or poverty. Others who write of the violence of the everyday — the small, individual acts that corrode our daily lives — are also seen as unpolitical; quiet, domestic, feminine, and Jane Austenish are the usual labels with which to pat down writings on the subdued

savagery of mundane experience.

Best known as the writer of the Kurt Wallander series of Swedish detective novels that are translated into 32 languages and sell millions, Mankell could live on an island of his own. Instead, he gives away half his income to charitable causes and spends half of each year in Maputo, Mozambique, where he is artistic director of the Teatro Avenida. His theatre, like his life, is immersed in social and political issues; he was recently part of the Gaza flotilla attacked by the Israeli army.

In my small Uttarakhand town there are also, surprisingly, several Scandinavians — not of Mankell's eloquence or fame, but equally at home in an alien culture. It began with one couple, who came many years ago to set up a trekking company. (I will call them Eva and Tor.) Now there are several from Norway and Denmark too.

I first encountered these Scandinavians when I was invited by Eva to 'open house' for Christmas. It was a brightly lit, cosy home, and was quite literally open: for the first time I met — socially — the neighbouring *dhobi*, the town's main electrician, and our plumber. There was also a school principal, a retired civil servant, and a doctor. We ate home-baked cookies and rice pudding and chatted. It felt novel. It is almost inconceivable, given the extreme hierarchies in our society, for middle-class Indians to spend an evening with their plumber, however nice the plumber.

The unselfconscious egalitarianism of that evening seems evident in everything the Scandinavians do. They are religious, and I went once to a sort of *bhajan-sandhya* they organized in a hall where hymns to Jesus were sung in Hindi to the twanging of a sitar. Again, they invited the whole town, disregarding disparities in social status. They live in humble houses in working-class neighbourhoods when they can afford bungalows. Eva's children run wild with the local children, always in and out of the home of the electrician who is their next-door neighbour.

Eva is a Viking-blonde woman who could be singing German in Wagner's *Rheingold* but speaks a Hindi that is fluent, even slangy. Her friends wear *desi* clothes, their daily food is *daal-bhaat*. At Diwali time, they are enthusiastic and noisy with the fireworks.

Apart from the trekking, which provides their livelihood, the Scandinavians run two small NGOs. One of these teaches rural youth spoken English — the course is structured so they learn to cope with social situations and handle job interviews. It is such a success they hardly have enough room.

Their other NGO makes greeting cards. I visited their workshop one afternoon, at the start of winter: three rented rooms in a ramshackle building. The walls were painted a sparkling lemon and covered end to end with *durries* and big heaters. The workers — all destitute or widowed village women — sat cross-legged on mattresses, surrounded by paper, beads, other tools of trade. There was an atmosphere of camaraderie and hard work. They were being supervised both by the Scandinavians and by Indian volunteers responsible for buying the material to make the cards with, and for quality control. The cards are eventually sold in Norway for a profit that is put back into the NGO.

The NGO started small, just two women in Eva's living room. Now, in an odd paradox, much as Gujjars agitate for low-caste status to be able to get the benefit of reservations, women in our town clamour to be seen as more deservingly wretched than the neighbour who has been given a job by the NGO. The competition to outwail the employed is serious, because it is not only the job. The NGO also pays for the education of the women's children. Once a year, they take their workers out of town for a day of pleasure — lunch at a fancy restaurant, boat rides on the lake.

One of the old workers said to me, "This is the difference between foreigners and Indians. If I was working for an Indian *sanstha*, they

would not heat the room, they would not cover the floors to make it comfortable for us. They would never take us on an outing. Indian NGOs would eat up all the extra money to buy themselves cars and new buildings.”

Of course this is not true, but it is the perception all the same. There are many Indian NGOs equally committed, perhaps as egalitarian. But Indian society is not. I have no way of knowing what society is like in Scandinavia, but in our town Eva and Tor’s lack of hierarchy does not go down well with some of the middle class. There are whisperings that it is not innocuous, their way of life; it is a devious way of converting illiterate people to Christianity, by giving them “ideas”, by showing them a different way of life. The disaffected women who are not given jobs at the NGOs add to the whisperings with innuendoes about why some women get jobs and some don’t.

It has never gone beyond speculation, though, in our town. Another foreigner in a different part of the country was not so lucky. Graham Staines in Orissa had done social work among its poor for 30 years. Everyone knows what happened one day in 1999, while he slept in his van with his two sons, aged six and ten.

In one of Mankell’s novels, there is a vivid description of a woman set alight in a rapeseed field. If Mankell’s hands were not already full with Mozambique, he would have felt at home in India. Unlike our Scandinavians, Staines did missionary work too. Missionary work is not illegal, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad makes determined efforts to convert *adivasis* to Hinduism. But Staines’s killer Dara Singh, says our Supreme Court, was only trying to “teach Staines a lesson about his religious activities, namely, converting poor tribals to Christianity”.

Inequality is woven into our social fabric. *Khap panchayats* encourage the killing of people who marry out of caste. Missionaries are killed for showing marginalized people a different life. The man in whose honour

Mankell was delivering his Delhi lecture was Safdar Hashmi, killed exactly 10 years before Staines, on January 1, 1989, for acting in a play that demanded rights for workers.

Everything said, Henning Mankell is safer and better off doing his political theatre in Mozambique.

Befriending Dalits

Chandrabhan Prasad

They'll become acceptable when they learn to stand on their own

Forget friendships between Dalits and non-Dalits for a moment, and think of intra-Dalit scenario to begin with — between Dalit middle class and the Dalit underclass.

Whom do the children of Dalit civil servants get married to? Do they seek matrimonial alliances with Dalit youth driving auto-rickshaws and parents employed in Group C or D categories? It is no rocket science to find the answer.

Forget friendships between Dalits and non-Dalits, and consider the case of non-Dalits itself. A Brahmin as a priest in a noted temple is socially more 'correct' than a Brahmin who is a diplomat, or a civil servant or a newspaper editor. While the Brahmin as a priest is directly connected to the three thousand million Gods and Goddesses, the Brahmin as a diplomat or a newspaper editor or as a civil servant is deprived of that honour and settles at dealing with humans. But, can the son of a Brahmin priest, a potential priest himself, ever expect to marry the daughter of a Brahmin who is a diplomat/newspaper editor/civil servant? Brahmins as priests have a stereotype image that doesn't fit into the cultural context of the Brahmin elite.

Dalits ought to respect what is central to the human character; the strong seeks friendship with stronger/equals or near equals. None likes to seek friendship with the weak or persons below them. There could be

exceptions just as all other rules.

Thus, if in the popular public imagery, Dalits are seen as ‘weaker sections’ as they have been so for the past 60 years in all Government circulars, media publicity and NGO activism.

The impression in the popular non-Dalit public imagery is that Dalits can’t move on their own unless someone let his/her helping hand. The impression that Dalit students live on scholarships, their parents live on BPL Cards, and Dalit candidates seeking employment need lowering down of merit, puts Dalits into a very special category of human species.

Also, the everyday news that a modesty of Dalit women is attacked, Dalit man humiliated, and another killed, makes a stereotype of the entire Dalit mass.

True, in the poverty index, Dalits can be over represented. True, on the atrocity index, Dalits can be over represented. True, Dalit women can be at a greater risk of losing their modesty than non-Dalit women. True, Dalit officers/employees can be more venerable to be described as ‘under-performers’ than non-Dalits. The list can be longer and limitless. This is our lived reality.

With this kind of imagery of Dalits, who would want to befriend Dalits? Why should the private sector get interested in employing Dalits when they think that Dalits are a very special category of people who need concessions all the time? Why should foreign companies give preferential treatment to Dalits when they are told what kind of people Dalits are?

The Dalit imagery is built on a single track narrative. The untold, unsold and unexplored story of the Dalit genius hurts Dalits most.

Were we ever told that there are Dalit students scoring 100 per cent in a

few subjects in examinations? Were we ever told that there are many Dalit Civil Servants sending their children to study in the US and UK who were selected purely on the basis of competition held globally?

Were we ever told that there are so many Dalits teaching sciences and physics in American and British universities? Were we ever told that many Dalit IT professionals earn jobs in the world's noted companies on the basis of their merit alone?

Were we ever told that there is rising class of Dalits as Capitalists who are employing even Brahmins and Thakurs? Were we ever told that there are dozens of Dalits who drive cars like Mercedes, BMW and Rolls Royce? Were we ever told that Dalit men are in get demand and hundreds of non-Dalit women are risking their lives to marry their Dalit colleagues?

The Brahmanical media and intelligentsia is not alone to blame for Dalits' one-sided imagery that they are weak and helpless while their women are molested Dalit men watch helplessly. Dalit writers, activists, and most notoriously, certain Dalit NGOs too contribute in the one-sided imagery of Dalits.

The sooner Dalits start looking good, the better. Remember, strong prefer befriending the stronger. The American Blacks got Affirmative Action/Diversity when they became stronger. India's OBCs got their Mandal when they became stronger. Dalits will become acceptable to the mainstream when they are seen as a class of people able to stand and walk on their own.

WOMEN

Democracy includes women, too

T K Arun

Yet more laws and VIP visits to the hospital beds of the victims or families of the deceased, as the case may be, will not stem the rising tide of crimes against women. Only democratic politics can. Political parties that are serious about the subject have to move beyond blaming the police and the government of the day, understand the issues involved, internalise the values that will make a difference and get its cadre and followers to actively enforce these norms in public life.

In India, it is easy to get inured to the raw deal that women get: female foeticide, neglect of infant girls leading to higher mortality and stunted bodies and brains, girls being withdrawn from school on reaching puberty, child marriages, privileging of sexuality, when it comes to women, over all other attributes as a human being, demands for dowry, often leading to violence, frequently fatal, in the marital home, a widespread notion that male hands have the licence to wander over the woman's body in crowded public spaces — these are unpleasant but commonplace parts of the Indian reality. Yet, some recent incidents shock even those who have slid into weary cynicism.

A Dalit girl in UP is kidnapped, supposedly rescued by an elected representative, raped by the putative rescuer and then framed in false cases and put in jail. Another Dalit girl is attacked when she resists an attempt to rape her: her ears are chopped off and she is grievously stabbed several times. In Kerala, which ranks the highest in social indicators among states, a one-armed beggar pushes a young woman, lone passenger in a women-only compartment of a passenger train, out of the train after she resists his attempt to snatch her purse, jumps out

after her and rapes the unconscious and badly injured girl.

These incidents have led to public outrage and media outcry. These tend to be evanescent, lasting till the next outrage or scam hogs the headlines, leaving the basic issues unattended. What are the basic issues? Gender inequality, layered by social inequality, is the basic issue. This gets compounded by poor laws, worse enforcement of the law and lax policing.

The plight of the unfortunate victim of violence in Kerala has raised questions about policing, the propriety of attaching the 'ladies' compartment' at the very end of the train, the failure to extend the length of railway platforms to match the length of trains, how unsafe it is for young women to travel unaccompanied and so on. The ridiculous extension of the discussion is, of course, in the realm of examining the position of the stars before a woman sets out on a journey.

Why not address the basic issue of gender segregation of public spaces, like train compartments ? The act of segregating women into a separate space is based on the presumption that when men and women are placed together, men will indeed misbehave. Only taking such misbehaviour for granted can lead to the prescription of a separate space for women. Does such taking of male misbehaviour for granted send out a signal of helplessness against it, if it does not legitimise such misbehaviour altogether?

Mental disorder apart, conduct in society is determined by social norms, which in turn depend on social values, and the disposition to abide by social norms.

Values that see women primarily as objects of sexual desire, with no right to agency of their own, lead to behaviour known as eve teasing. The opposite value is neither denial of sexuality nor sexual anarchy but

democratic equality, the woman's right to be treated on par with men as they go about the business of life, including in sexual choice.

This is blasphemy as far as traditional society is concerned. But democracy calls for such apostasy. A political party's commitment to democracy is not complete till it actively commits itself to women's equality as well. It is imperative to appreciate the difference between ensuring the security of women, conceived as a noble duty somewhat on par with preventing damage to precious paintings by visitors to a museum, and working for women's rights.

Policing will be a necessary part of both. But policing to enforce a societal norm is different from policing to secure the safety of objects. The democratic movement of Kerala has, quite clearly, failed the women of the state. The youth organisations, trade unions, etc that mobilise themselves on any number of issues do not act to enforce what they all would agree is an acceptable societal norm: women's equality with men.

Things are more difficult outside Kerala. Organisations that can sensitise their own members and society at large, and act to converge conduct towards desired societal norms, do not exist. They have to be created, there is no shortcut.

Political parties that take up women's equality as an integral part of democratic advance are likely to be pleasantly surprised to find a huge vote bank rooting for them. But this calls for a democratic movement, which is different from electoral mobilisation or the magnetic draw of charisma.