

SIXTY-FOUR YEARS OF INDEPDENCE – WHERE DO WE STAND?

• **By Dr. M.N. Buch**

In the life of man sixty-four years represent about three-fourth of the time allotted to him, but in the lifespan of a nation it is on the one hand a passing flicker and in another sense it is an entire era. In the sixty-fourth year of our independent existence where do we stand as compared to India on 15th August, 1947? How do we evaluate our growth during this period?

Any review has to have a longitudinal dimension, that is to say, there is a reference point in time from which one starts and moves through an arc which carries us to the present day. If we are to judge ourselves by only the contemporary events of today our evaluation would be lopsided because it has no depth. If we have to do a flat two-dimensional review of ourselves as we are today the picture would very bleak. There is hunger, poverty, malnutrition, poor public health, unemployment and lack of sanitation even today. Kashmir remains a centre of discord between India and Pakistan and between us and the Indian citizens of Kashmiri origin. The heartland of India is wracked by the problem of Naxalism which is anti establishment, violent and highly disruptive. There is a great deal of corruption and the media, particularly certain channels of the electronic media, delights in exposing all our dirty linen in public, not so much in order to improve matters as to gain cheap publicity for that particular channel. In the process the picture of India held out to the world is of a bumbling nation which is inefficient, corrupt and incapable of quality performance. We have a cabinet, the ministers of which have forgotten that under Article 75 (3) of the Constitution they are collectively responsible to the House of the People. Ministers publicly quarrelling over the individual departmental turfs certainly do not represent collective responsibility. Prices are not under control, our failure on the power front is shameful, the public services are in shambles and Parliament itself has virtually painted itself into a corner where the relevance of Parliament itself is in doubt. Even the judiciary and the armed forces are not free of the stain of corruption. Judged from this perspective does it not appear that India is a failed State?

My answer to the above question would be a resounding “No”. Going back to 1947, only five thousand towns and villages were electrified. Today we have almost hundred percent availability of power supply with periods of power-cuts is certainly better than no supply. In Gujarat, where management of the power sector is businesslike, the State gives uninterrupted power supply even to the villages, the Electricity Board regularly collects tariff and in fact the State is now marginally surplus in power and in revenue. In Bihar a determined and purposeful Chief Minister, Nitish Kumar, has very substantially improved the power situation. These examples are given to prove that we can, by correct management practices, tackle any problem, including power. In any case power shortage is indicative of a growing economy where the demand for power, both rural and urban, is growing at a rapid pace because of new economic and productive activities. Power shortage is an annoyance but it is also indicative of growth.

Undoubtedly the road network in India was miserable and anyone who has travelled from Bhopal to Jabalpur via Sagar in the past would inevitably need to visit his orthopedic surgeon after even one journey. Today the road to Sagar is superb and soon the road to Jabalpur will also come in that category. Indore and Bhopal are now joining by a four-lane highway. The Prime Minister’s Gramin Sadak Yojana has improved village connectivity and the Golden Quadrilateral and the North-South, East-West corridors have changed the road picture nationally. New technologies, new partnerships such

as build, operate and transfer and public-private projects have all contributed to a completely new network of roads. India is on the move.

Education is still not altogether satisfactory but the passage of the Right to Education Act is forcing the government to provide for improvement of the school infrastructure. Ten years from today I think every child in India will have access to education of standard quality. The massive upsurge in technical education, in the social sciences and humanities, in science and in professional education is giving India the edge in high-level manpower. There is a great deal of breast beating about the U.S. Government under the leadership of President Obama trying to restrict jobs being transferred to India or to Indians. This is looked upon as discriminatory and anti Indian. However, it also shows how the world has changed in favour of India. Till quite recently America projected itself as the Promised Land to which people from countries such as India flocked for advancement. Today the Americans are afraid of the Indian economy and the country is moving towards a protectionist mood. This can only hurt the U.S. but it certainly fills us with pride that America now envies India.

There are certain other fronts on which our success story is spectacular. We have been able to build a parallel development administration to supplement our regulatory administration and there is no clash between the two. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is now statutorily applicable and one of the fallouts has been that people who were subject to distress migration and come and work in cities and cheap labour are now finding employment at home. The main complaint of the Advisor to the Chief Minister of Delhi on the Commonwealth Games is that migratory labour has substantially reduced and this has affected construction because the industry is now facing a real labour shortage, especially in the context of the Commonwealth Games. Cheap labour from Bihar is no longer available to the Punjab agriculturists, who are forced now to offer high wages and other incentives to attract Bihari labour. Are Raj Thakeray and Udhav Thakeray listening? As connectivity improves the rural economy is bound to grow and, therefore, the basic equilibrium of settlement from village right upto metropolis is likely to be maintained. In other words, we are unlikely to emulate countries such as Thailand, Mexico and even China in the cities overpowering the countryside.

On the health side primary health care is still a major problem, especially because doctors are not prepared to serve in remote rural areas. Despite this we have been able to control epidemics and at least provide that level of health care which has almost doubled our life expectancy. At the high end of the medical spectrum India today has some of the finest hospitals in the world and people from abroad come to India for treatment of serious health problems. Equity in health care is unsatisfactory but it is not a problem which we cannot solve.

It is alleged that in the matter of development China far outstrips us because decision-making is firm and final in that country, whereas India vacillates. In China in the construction of the Three Gorges Dam the Chinese Government displaced thirty lakh people and the system did not allow any protest. In India thanks to activists such as Medha Patkar no displacement is possible without co-opting displaced people in the project itself. This may delay a project but it certainly makes the people partner in development rather than a victim of development Democratic India's system is definitely better than that of China and if we do not build a new Shanghai or a new Beijing, at least our cities are not built on a foundation of the multitude of the dispossessed. This is an achievement to be proud of.

One of our greatest achievements is that the economy has the strength and resilience to be able to resist the Asian meltdown and recently the global economic crisis. The Indian economy was shaken for a while but bounced back stronger than ever. The managers of our financial systems such as Y.V. Reddy, an IAS officer who headed the Reserve Bank of India, have ensured that our banking remains

strong and able to withstand shocks, something which neither the Bank of England nor the U.S. Federal Reserve were able to achieve.

Where we need to substantially improve is in the field of governance. Jawahar Lal Nehru, Sardar Patel, the Chief Ministers of that period and Indira Gandhi had the will and ability to govern. Our present day politicians do not seem to have the will or the desire to govern, with the result that everything is ad hoc. We react to situations like those in the Naxalite affected districts or Jammu & Kashmir, but there is no proactive government to ensure that such situations do not develop. We talk of corruption but there is no will to fight it. We talk of policies for the common man but there is no desire to actually frame such polities or to implement them. We talk of integrity of the nation but we do not build the structures to fight divisive forces. We talk of government of, for and by the people, but most governments do not co-opt the citizens in the process of decision-making. In fact one is sometimes doubtful whether there is a process of decision-making at all in the country.

In the sixty-fourth year of independence how does the report card read? We are a vibrant democracy, a society of laws, a country which may develop fitfully but the momentum is always forward. We seem to muddle our way through but we do manage to achieve our goals. We have developed centres of excellence which the world envies, though we still have not been able to give every village a decent school. In such fields as information technology we are the best in the world. The day our people and our politicians decide to govern, the day we all come together to use technology to lift us to the next century India will be the greatest country in the world. But miracle of miracles seemingly without a blueprint of development before us we still are one of the fastest growing economies. The day we are really organised one could safely say, "Watch out, world, here comes India!!
