

Has India Aged Prematurely?

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The Oudh and Tirhut (O and T) Railway preceded the North Eastern and Northern Frontier Railways. So inefficient was it that it was generally referred to as the Old And Tired Railway. The question is, has our republic ,too, become old and tired? As a concept, as a culture, as the land of the Sanatan Dharma India is thousands of years old. As a modern nation state, however, India is only sixty six years and two months old. In the cosmic time frame this is but the fraction of a fraction of the smallest unit of time. Metaphorically, the baby has yet to learn to walk and it has no business to feel or look old, become frail, stumble or otherwise show the symptoms of extreme old age when body systems shut down in rapid, sometimes cascading, succession. Age catches up with all of us, but if we live regular and healthy lives, the symptoms of old age, fading eyesight, impaired hearing, body aches and pains, creaking joints, loss of memory can always be kept at bay. But a nation which allows systems and institutions to decay is in deep trouble, especially if it is as young as India.

Empires rise and fall. That happened to the Roman Empire, the British Empire and the short lived Third Reich. It is in the nature of empire, or conquest by one nation over another, that initial vigor is replaced by enjoyment of empire, then complacency, then the indolence induced by over-indulgence, then the uprising of slaves and vassals, finally the collapse of empire. But nations which are strong but avoid domination over others not only survive, they actually renew and reinvent themselves to always remain contemporary. Some, like Britain, do this by genetic re-engineering through infusion of new blood, either of Romans, the Anglo Saxons, the Vikings or the Normans, or by immigration and the infusion of new races. The United States of America is a prime example of renewal through immigration. What this does is not only to reinvigorate what exists, but also infuse new blood which by hybridisation constantly rejuvenates the rootstock. This is biological reversal of the decay of old age and a psychological renovation of the mind by injecting new ideas. Such nations both age over time and restore youth simultaneously. The whole of Scandinavia is a fine example of this phenomenon. These are the nations which maintain continuity, but equally importantly keep modernising.

Why do I call India prematurely aged? We started in 1947 as a supremely confident nation, partition notwithstanding. Our leadership had been tempered by the furnace of the independence movement and deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's austerity, honesty and his mantra of satyagrah and ahimsa, or the persuasive power of truth and active non-violence. They were patriots, men of integrity, dedicated to the nation, frugal, austere and deeply committed to the welfare of the people. From 1947 to 1967 India was so governed that in every field of endeavor we succeeded beyond our initial dreams. Almost overnight great dams and irrigation projects, power stations, capital goods industries, fine education institutions, hospitals, agriculture universities, scientific establishments were created, built and made operational. A single Bhakra-Nangal Project made a hitherto backward East Punjab the granary of India. India was a forward looking, extremely exciting nation and it felt good to be an Indian.

1967 changed all that, as the old leadership faded and new power equations were created by bribing legislators to overthrow elected governments through the machination of defection.

Every value we stood for was pummelled into the ground as politicians jockeyed for power through money, blackmail or even physical liquidation. This loss of innocence, of moral values did not lead only to bad politics, it led to downright bad government. The austere became ostentatious, the honest became corrupt, the truthful became liars and everywhere amorality replaced morality. The nation, the people and their welfare had no place in the new scheme of things.

Ageing can be caused by the flux of time, but it can be hastened if the body is sick. Our body politic is sick, the political parties are rudder less and bereft of ideology, the leaders are venal and this has hastened the process of ageing. On vital issues of national importance decisions are not taken. We lack the will to combat terrorism, separatism and the violence that goes therewith, whether it be in Kashmir, the Naxal effected districts, or in the North-East. Rising prices, a Rupee declining in strength, faltering of economic growth, unemployment, falling education standards, all are symptomatic of an increasingly ineffective government. Nothing moves without a bribe, not even the simplest service which government is bound to provide. It is almost as if a kind of paralysis had overtaken our government in which nothing moves. That is what happens with extreme old age, to be accepted and lived with as a human being, but to be totally rejected in the matter of government.

India has to reinvent itself if it is to restore the vibrancy, vigour and energy of the first twenty years of independence. To make government honest and effective let us reduce the role of money in gaining and retaining power. Can law alone achieve this? We need to make our democracy truly representative if we want to make it honest. We need the firming up of the will to govern, but that can only happen if our politicians do not look upon a period out of office as a tragedy. That is the way to end cheap popularism, which I consider one of the main reasons why India has prematurely aged. The best anti ageing compound is good government because that creates the environment for effective government.

One political reform needed to make government workable is to end the tyranny of individuals and small parties, who hold government to ransom under threat of withdrawing support. If we debar from parliament parties which are confined only to a particular area they will be unable to threaten the government by fear of defection. Let us make it mandatory for a political party to have at least five representatives each in the legislatures of at least three states. That will keep much of the lunatic fringe out of parliament and enable it to function. Perhaps it will also give the ruling group the desire to govern well and take hard decisions and on that very day India's ageing process will be reversed.
