

## Whither India?

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2013 draws to an end and as we enter the year 2014 I would like to begin by wishing everyone a very Happy New Year, with a prayer that the Almighty gives us all the sanity to view our country and the world through the lens of fair play, honesty, peace and goodwill. This is all the more so because 2014 will witness the quinquennial general election to Parliament, the run up to which is already surcharged with political abuse and vituperation of a kind not witnessed before. When the first NDA Government was formed and Atal Behari Vajpayee became its Prime Minister we had passed through an extremely unfortunate phase of the breakdown of relations between communities, very largely because of the movement centred in Ayodhya to build a Ram temple. I mention this specifically because whereas after partition Muslims were treated with suspicion because Pakistan had been created on the basis of religion, the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pakistan wars finally buried the ghost of Muslims being crypto Pakistanis because Muslims had been as faithful to this country as the followers of any other religion. The Ram temple movement was a cruel jolt which did disturb communal harmony. The resilience of this country enabled us to overcome even this shock. The very diversity of India, the multi ethnic, multi lingual, multi religious structure of our society have enabled this country to hold together and emerge as a nation unique because every religion, every ideology has the space and environment in which to flourish. This is India's strength.

This is not an exercise in originality but rather an essay on stocktaking of what we were, what we are and where we are going. We cannot, therefore, ignore the fact that India is a pluralistic society and despite every effort of some extreme groups to make society uniform and narrow minded, our very pluralism is also our greatest asset. We must recognise this and all political parties must ensure that the pluralistic nature of our society remains a constant factor and if anything attacks this, it is the duty of the State to quickly suppress such hostile action. This pluralism is reinforced by the fact that we are a democracy which took on Mrs. Indira Gandhi's effort to establish a form of totalitarian rule through declaration of an Emergency and sent a message that neither will India accept a one party monopoly of power, nor will it tolerate any attempt at authoritarian rule. Many people call this an imperfect democracy, but is there perfection even in heaven? Is there not the fear even there that Satan may be up to mischief which could disturb harmony in the universe? The fact is that our democratic system ensures that beyond a point people will not accept absolutism and whenever such a threat prevails the people will throw the government out of power. This also means that the institutions through which a democracy works, whilst being under stress in India, have held together and provided the medium through which people exercise the freedom of choice in electing a government. When we Indians become pessimistic about where our democracy is going, we must also remember that we are a country which has a proactive electorate which clearly defines the limits within which the game of politics must be played.

Let me illustrate the above point by a few examples. In a way, through the declaration of Emergency, Indira Gandhi herself contributed to the breakdown of the monopoly to power hitherto enjoyed by the Congress. In fact at the national level the two-party system was virtually amended to ensure that an era of coalitions as an alternative to single party rule had set in and transformed the political scene. This both weakens democracy and strengthens it, strengthens it

because no single party now dominates the political arena; weakens it because now, in order to stay in power, the lowest common denominator of the coalition, which may be a small party not known for integrity, whose members want to misuse power to enrich themselves, has become extremely important because without it the coalition will collapse. To that extent principled politics has suffered a severe body blow because to hold the coalition together the lead party is prepared to concede everything, including principled politics and instead increasingly resorts to extreme populism just to stay in power. The reverse of the coin of democracy as it has developed in India is a farewell to ideology, plans, programmes and good, honest government. I have written about this extensively in the past and need not elaborate on the issue here, but the fact is that political parties must recognise the depth to which we have sunk, the depth to which certain political parties have descended and the dangers this creates for the future of democratic government in India. Let us beware of a Thailand type of situation in which the main opposition has rejected the ruling party's offer to hold fresh elections by stating that the people of Thailand as represented by the agitating opposition have lost faith in democracy itself. If, however, we continue with unprincipled politics a disgust with politics itself may cause complications in India.

Indian elections, because they cover such a huge electorate, have always been exciting affairs. In much of rural India an election campaign is like carnival time, the candidates and the supporters tour the constituencies, which may be quite far flung, requiring hours of driving from one end to the other and in such places a visiting political cavalcade is almost as interesting as a *nautanki* or a *katha vachan*. The language is colourful, choice abuse is reserved for one's opponents, all sorts of promises are made and everyone has a wonderful time till the next rally. At the local level the political rhetoric, the abuse heaped on one's rivals, is quite entertaining and the speech making itself is a source of entertainment. So long as certain well recognised norms are followed electioneering in India, especially in rural India, should be left alone, unless prescribed limits are crossed. By and large village folk know what the people need and the pattern of their voting hitherto has indicated that they are clear about the kind of government they want and are quite happy to communicate this in their own way to the candidates.

It is at the national level that one is a little worried. For example, at the national level all parties play the communal card. The present election campaign is a clear fight between the BJP and the Congress in which the Congress is vituperatively attacking the BJP for being a communal party, whereas BJP, through its prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi, is trying to down play its aggressive Hinduism and instead is trying to send a message across that it is not inimical to any religious group and that harmony is the need of the hour. However, in the process the language of the two major parties has now deteriorated to the level of a fish market and this does not bode well for us. One of the problems with communally tinged politics is that it tends to divide, a process which is fraught with great danger, including the possibility of degeneration into extreme violence. We have seen one example of this recently in Muzaffarnagar and some other districts of Western U.P. This region, which has a large Muslim population and a proximity to Delhi, was fortunate enough not to experience mass migration of Muslims to Pakistan in 1947 because by and large the Muslims were cultivators, many of them being of Jat extraction, who preferred to stay on the land. Between the Muslim Jat and the Hindu Jat there was affinity, which led to harmony. Unfortunately in the 2013 riots in Muzaffarnagar, the cause of which was a quarrel between one Muslim boy and two Jat boys, the district administration did not react forcefully, various political parties, especially the Samajwadi Party and BJP, instigated people to blow up the incident and this has resulted in about fifty people

being killed and over fifty thousand people being rendered homeless, all within a hundred miles of Delhi. Who benefits?

Communal politics has the common objective of trying to polarise communities to vote in a particular manner. Incidentally, we look upon polarisation as a division of votes between Hindus and Muslims, but we forget that there is also a polarisation of votes based on caste, political affinities, region and language. Polarisation of votes automatically removes rationality from politics and replaces it by a herd instinct which causes people to vote in blocks which actually represent either blind faith or an extremely low grade appeal to communal and community passions. It is alleged that the Muslim, by appealing to him as a member of a religious group, can be so herded that every Muslim would then vote in a particular fashion. It is also believed that the Hindu vote cannot polarise. Both views are wrong because the Muslim has proved time and again that whereas he may not vote for a party which he considers to be hostile to Muslim interests, he is still prepared to vote for different parties and candidates according to his own perception of what is best for him. What is more, both in Gujarat and in Madhya Pradesh there are indications that some sections of the Muslim community have voted for BJP candidates. This does not mean that Muslim has been won over by BJP but it does show that he does not want to be treated as part of a monolithic group which can be driven in a particular direction by a religious appeal.

Unfortunately our parties are blind and, therefore, the Congress Vice President, Rahul Gandhi, whenever he goes to an area where there is a sizeable Muslim population, sports an incipient beard in the belief that this will make the Muslims accept him as one of their own. The Muslim, being as Indian as any Hindu, has moved away from the Muslim of 1947. To him India is home, including Gujarat and to him his future lies in India and not in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. His aspirations are the same as those of any Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Parsee, agnostic or even atheist. He wants security for himself and his family, he wants educational opportunities for his children, he wants the country to prosper and, through employment opportunities and business opportunities, he wants his fair share in the fruits of development. That is why he refuses to accept BJP as a monster to be fought or Congress to be St. George on a white charger riding to his rescue by slaying the dragon of Narendra Modi. When will our political parties accept this and cash in on our plurality, the Indianness of the Muslims or the basic tolerance of the Hindus? One word of caution to all the parties who are trying to polarise the Muslim votes. If the Hindu is convinced that the Muslim is voting against the Hindus rather than BJP, there may be a countervailing coming together of Hindu votes and if even twenty percent of the Hindu voters are polarised, no power on earth can keep BJP from winning the election. One hopes that sense will prevail, the development agenda of all parties will aim at fair play for the Muslims and the Muslim will respond with expansion of his own educational and employment horizons. In fact the future of India lies in inclusiveness, not divisiveness.

Politics alone does not constitute the sum total of a nation, not does it determine definitively where the nation is going. For that one has to look at the entire national canvas in which economics plays a vital role. There are certain factors which favour India as a centre of development. The first is the ratio of land under different uses. In India sixty percent of our entire land mass is arable, that is, amenable to the production of agricultural and horticultural crops, thirty percent of the land is available for forests and only ten percent is unculturable waste. In China, by contrast, only ten percent of the land is arable, sixty percent is unculturable waste and the remaining thirty percent is available for some cyclical use, including afforestation. This

means that the major part of land in India can be put to, in fact is put to, productive agricultural use. The Green Revolution proved that India is capable of dramatically improving crop yields. In some States such as Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh there has been about twelve to fifteen percent growth per annum in the agriculture sector. If we look at agriculture holistically from the time of land preparation, sowing, harvesting and ultimate marketing, if we apply appropriate technology to optimise yield, if we build the infrastructure whereby irrigation is made more extensive and scientific agriculture, combined with water availability, maximises yield, if the farmer to market to consumer link is smooth and strengthened, if the flow of credit and other such requirements to farmers become easy, if the market itself develops processing industries which add value to agricultural produce and pass a substantial amount of the profit to the producers, if the agriculture universities become vibrant centres of research and the extension facilities are expanded so that the benefits of research flow to farmers, then agriculture itself can become a major engine of growth in India. This is the direction in which India has to make a very sustained effort because if we cannot take advantage of the beneficial ratio of arable land to total waste, we would have missed a glorious opportunity for advancement.

India, because of its population, is a huge market domestically. Our foreign trade accounts for approximately six percent of GDP and our balance of payment deficit is about three percent. Total globalisation would only have a marginal effect on our total trade, because only a small percentage of our trade is in the form of foreign trade. With the huge domestic market still being available to us our main source of employment and industrial development will still be this market. But for that to happen we need more money in the pockets of Indians, especially those who live in rural India, so that they can purchase goods and services. If the purchasing power of the average Indian increases our entire industrial establishment would find a large enough market domestically not to worry about global trends. I am not suggesting autarky, but rather the development of a market internally which is large enough to shield us from the adverse impact of changing global market trends. In such a situation global trade would be the bonus and the economy itself would be so powerful that it can withstand any shocks administered by global ups and downs. Is any party willing to prepare and offer a blueprint of how this can be achieved?

There are other fields in which India can have a bright future if politicians address themselves to these areas. Education, healthcare and fundamental research are areas in which Indians have an intrinsic advantage, but for which an optimised level of infrastructure is needed. Whether India achieves its potential of being one of the leading economies in the world or whether it remains stuck in a state of stagnation will determine on how mature our political parties become. That is our real challenge.

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