

Diversity in Unity *

LT COL L JOAWN (RETD)

INTRODUCTION

In his 15 August, 1985 Independence Day speech, Rajiv Gandhi had assured the nation that, in the days to come, the country would become stronger and united. In support of this he had mentioned the accords with the Akalis and the Assam agitationists and the Bills dealing with anti-defection, company donations to political parties and the proposed induction of the 'Lok Pal'. The two accords he had referred to just mark the beginning of a phase. Responsible opinion has it that the implementation of these accords would demand the exercise of the greatest measure of goodwill and give-and-take on the part of all concerned.

But these are not the only problems that beset our country. At a meeting that he addressed at Visakhapatnam on the eve of the eighth general election, Rajiv Gandhi himself had said that 'the Opposition parties with all their ideological differences have been encouraging disruptive forces working in the name of religion, language and regionalism'. And while inaugurating the new building complex of the Andhra Pradesh Assembly at Hyderabad on 3rd August last, he had stressed that 'all-out efforts should be made at all levels to root out corruption'.

The state of the nation is not such a closed-door affair that we need to probe into public speeches of politicians, whichever party they might belong to, to get to know what is going on around us. However, it might serve as a beneficial cross-check to recall the opinions voiced by some of the public-spirited men in different segments of the society. R.M. Lala says that in May 1968, Kamaraj told him : "Nationalism is going down; regionalism is coming up". And a couple of months later, Dr Zakir Hussain had expressed his fears to Lala thus; "We are witnessing the atomisation of our country".

B.G. Verghese, Editor, 'Indian Express' had said in a signed article: "Until and up to Independence the only kind of riot with which the country was sadly familiar was communal. Politicians mobilised people on religious lines and there were periodic clashes. Communal rioting after Partition primarily related to residual issues of security and integration. Gradually

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socio-economic issues have come to the fore. Political mobilisation has diversified into numerous categories from religion to caste, language and region. The dormant scheduled castes and tribes and other backward classes have begun to assert themselves.

Colonel CL Proudfoot (Retd) is of the view : "And the decline in law and order is one of our gravest problems today, one that is deteriorating rather than improving".

The above quick survey of the state of the nation should make us realise how grave is the prevailing situation. It is said that abnormal situations warrant abnormal remedial measures. But having opted for a democratic form of government we shall have to ensure that whatever steps we might devise are in tune with democratic principles.

Problems faced by our country today are many and varied. One senior columnist has bluntly said that the State has already 'withered'. Though we may not take such a pessimistic view, we shall still have to do an urgent reappraisal of the past and present and evolve at least skeletal projections for the future. To start with, it might be rewarding to do a self-introspection to understand our own 'id' and to satisfy the query whether our mental and ethical make-up is good enough for an intellectually advanced nation that we claim to be.

WHAT AILS INDIA?--WRONG NOTIONS

We seem to be harbouring many wrong notions about ourselves. Some of these notions are deliberately cultivated in order to satisfy our vanity and ego while others are being continuously picked up quite unwittingly. We are concerned in this essay with a few of these notions which keep retarding the nation's progress by leading us astray. We shall take them up for scrutiny where relevant. Here we may mention two of them by way of introducing the subject.

The first is the oft-repeated cliché that the Indian Nation is a fine example of unity in diversity. While probing the roots of instability in India, T.C. Joseph explodes this myth thus: "The characteristics of an unstable society are a weak governing elite and a volatile population divided into groups and sub-groups based on affiliation that do not promote humanistic values ... The Indian character had greater mental equilibrium during British rule, with opposition to colonialism acting as a unifying factor Once freedom had been won and the British had left, there was no common

enemy; (therefore) enemy camps were formed within the country, and hatred grew under the influence of irrelevant factors such as religion, class and caste differences The egocentric Indian ethos is responsible for the country's ills

The second is the senseless belittling of the benefits that have accrued to us as a result of British rule over India. People forget that even the Indian National Congress, the residual party of which Rajiv Gandhi is the present head, was the brain-child of an Englishman, Alan Octavian Hume. Colonial rule is the scapegoat for all our ills, and there is endless adverse criticism of it, day-in and day-out, much of which is imaginary. Media, both governmental and private, leaders in all walks of life and even scientists, do not seem to be immune to this form of hysteria. A recent example (September 1985) was the announcement calling for questions to be addressed to the Union Minister for Industries for the 'Janvani' programme on Doordarshan. The announcers, both at Delhi and at the regional centres, had been given scripts which read: "Prior to Independence not even safety pins were being produced in India".

Attempts to pervert history might boomerang on us some day! Besides, as a nation we should learn to differentiate between reality and illusion, truth and untruth, right and wrong, and good and evil.

THE INDIAN ETHOS

As a race, we are lethargic and ease-loving. We have made it a habit to blame the climate and the weather for these failings of ours. In most parts of India, rural in particular, the womenfolk work both at home and in the fields or factories or offices, whereas men spent part of the day sleeping, gossiping, smoking 'hukah', or even drinking local brews. As a result, duties and responsibilities of different members of the household are often forgotten or neglected. Children grow up unaided with respect of canalisation of thought processes. Therefore, many of them gradually become unmanageable at home, unmanageable at the educational institutions they attend, and unmanageable later on, in adult life. Probably India is the only country in the world where educational institutions remain closed for the slightest political excuse.

This state of affairs can be changed by prescribing 'Civics' as a compulsory subject upto and including University level, and 'Logic', in addition, for college students. Fresh text-books may have to be compiled taking advantage of the experience gained during the last 38 years. (Student misbehaviour may be a growing world phenomenon today. But we are presently concerned with reshaping our country).

It is often said that ours is a tolerant and peace-loving society. This cliché might have gained currency because some religions, other than 'Hinduism', have managed to get a slight foot-hold in the country. But it is not true. This should be apparent from the treatment meted out to Buddhism in this country, -- the land of its birth. Our literature is full of accounts of religious wars among our own countrymen. (Those wars still keep breaking out, only they are nowadays referred to euphemistically as 'communal clashes').

Next in the order of importance is our perception of loyalties. This failing is considered an appreciatory quality and is indulgently referred to as 'strong family ties'. That even our elders of today subscribe to this contrariness in our attitude towards fellow humans -- that of 'concentricity' with respect to one's kith and kin and of 'centrifugence' with respect to others(outsiders).

It would appear that the forces of 'progress' were defeated then. Over the years the 'status quo' forces have gained considerably in strength and support and, as a result, it might prove very difficult to uproot them from their entrenched positions. But a sincere, all-out effort will have to be made to rid India of such corrupting and corroding influences by including these aspects also in the moral instruction to be imparted to our countrymen as suggested earlier, and by leaders in all work-spheres setting a good example for others to follow.

The average Indian is highly secretive by nature. When this failing stops with the individual only mental development of fellow humans tends to stagnate, or is even retarded, e.g., an expert artisan vis-a-vis his pupil. It is said that many skills and arts have been lost to the Indian people because of ultra-secretiveness on the part of the elder experts. When this failing pervades organisations like the government, for instance, the whole nation suffers. Openness is a consciously cultivated habit. It takes time to become a second nature, but we may plan to make a beginning now.

Outside the limits of social intercourse within a family or a 'jaati', the Indian is an unsocial being. We do not have people's organisations worth the name, and if we do have any, they are those that have been set up for someone in particular to climb up the ladder-individually, just by himself.

The answer to this is, first, to buttress our democracy with popular, people's organisations, and second, to wean away trouble-makers from their intent and canalise their energies in gainful pursuits. A possible third is the flourishing of the 'co-operative' instinct in people leading to more satisfying results in the 'co-operative movement'.

People should welcome any organisation that would represent their cause collectively as is evident from the tremendous popularity of a network programme on Doordarshan portraying a woman crusader against social evils.

But liking a television programme and wanting to take collective action against social wrongs will not by themselves bring about organisations. We need initiators, organisers, administrators, fund collectors and unassuming, willing workers. At the present juncture such volunteers are difficult to find. However, with proper 'status' incentives we may succeed in attracting the right types.

THE NON-EXISTENT INTELLIGENTSIA

The 'intelligentsia', as different from the 'literati', is the back-bone and life-force -- the 'kundalini' -- of a nation. Like the 'kundalini', it remains inert and passive until it is energised for action. But the intelligentsia is ever vigilant to impropriety, injustice and exploitation, and does not hesitate to take up the cudgels whenever necessary. Thus the intelligentsia is the rudder of the nation and in its absence or malfunctioning, the dependent people lose their moorings and bearings.

We have to face the fact that India does not boast of a robust intelligentsia unlike most advanced countries. From the literary and academic angle we are an advanced country, but we sorely lack a substantial intelligentsia which serves as a bulwark against authoritarianism and all forms of injustice and exploitation. Until we acquire one we are not likely to overcome the obstacles on the way and commence our journey on the road to progress.

The non-existence of an intelligentsia group among our people is not peculiar to modern times only. The lack of it was commented upon by Alberuni as early as in the 11th Century A.D.

It is not that we do not even have individual crusaders among us. We also have organisations like the People's Union of Civil Liberties, People's Union for Democratic Rights, Citizens For Democracy (CFD) and so on. But their strength is so small and, therefore, their voice is so weak that they are easily silenced; for example, the CFD is presently in trouble over its report on the Punjab.

Intelligentsia would not take root in rocks or barren ground. It requires fertile soil. Turning over the All India Radio and Doordarshan to the control of autonomous corporations might help -- in the long run.

SECULARISING INDIA

The gravest danger India is now facing is the lack of harmony among various religious communities, or rather, between Hindus on the one hand and Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, etc., individually, on the other. The reason for the disharmony is no longer a nebulous concept. Subsequent to the partitioning of India, some of the Hindu leaders have begun to feel that what is left over belongs to the Hindu religious community only, and so all other communities may continue to live in India subject to the Hindu community's sufferance only. Unfortunately for this small group within the majority community, the Constitution is not on their side. Nor are any right thinking people. However, since elections have now become a mere numbers game, and as any party which is assured of wholehearted support from the majority community is sure to win, some of the political parties in the field have started wooing the Hindu voter. As a result, already large-scale polarization has taken place in the body politic.

We are now sitting on the lid of a powder keg with people and parties preaching for the transformation of India into a 'Hindu' State, and even hinting that they would not be averse to the use of violence. Any time the explosive inside may go off disintegrating everything in sight. Therefore, immediate action is needed to defuse the situation.

Indonesia is trying to keep its multi-religious citizenry in check by compelling all political parties and organisations by law to adopt the State philosophy of 'Pancasila' (Panchsheel) as their own. 'Pancasila' stipulates: (a) belief in God, (b) humanism, (c) democracy through consultations and consensus, (d) national unity, and (e) Social justice. We may adopt a similar measure as suits our peculiar conditions.

CROWDING INDIA

At the time of partition, the population of residual India was approximately 350 million. During the last 38 years we have added another 400 million to this figure. The Union Ministry of Health has urged on all States to achieve a birth rate of 21 per 1,000 and a death rate of 9 per 1,000 by A.D. 2000. Due to this imbalance between the birth and death rates, the country's population will record further growth. According to P.H. Reddy, Director of Population Centre, Bangalore, based on the 1981 Census the population of India as on 1.3.1985 was about 685 million. This figure is likely to increase to 1,003 million by 2001. He predicts that as per present indications there will not be any food problem in A.D. 2001. But food is not the only need of humans; living space, house building materials, medical

care, clothes, education, recreation, employment, travel facilities and so on will have to be provided for this increased number. According to the Planning Commission, we already have 320 million below the poverty line, and this will increase to 500 million by A.D. 2001. So the struggle for grabbing the meagerly available 'fishes and loaves' will get intensified. And how are we to find so many extra jobs?

In the opinion of the Worldwatch Institute, India has to strive for the goal of the one-child family norm if it is to avoid a decline in living standards. India has rejected this suggestion as unsuitable to our country. Similar opinion has been voiced by Mrs Avabai B.Wadia, President of the International Planned Parenthood Federation and President of the Family Planning Association of India. The Government has also ruled out any compulsory family planning (FP) measures as we are committed to the democratic approach.

It has been forecast that very soon India would be overtaking China's population which country had pushed through draconian measures to achieve a 'zero' birth rate. It is a pity that when we are unable to absorb even the educated youth at the present level in jobs we are still not serious about our perceptions for the future. There is already a feeling that an overwhelming majority of the volunteers reporting at the FP clinics are those who would in any case have opted for FP, with or without governmental help. Therefore, the government's present programme touches only the fringe of the community groups for which FP is a must. The reasons are not far to seek.

Delivery of children is a natural function of the woman. Except in very rare cases it does not weaken her. Secondly, except at the time of labour pain a woman gets immense pleasure in being associated with babies. Thirdly, many-children norm is considered an index of the fertility of the woman and the prosperity of the family, in our society. Fourthly, bringing up many children is not a problem at all for people who know how to make the extra rupee. Fifthly, as parental care is minimum in our country, one or many makes no difference. And finally, as pointed out earlier, the concept of 'Indianness' and one's duty towards the community and posterity are yet to be even remotely felt by the average Indian. For example, it has been reported that, at the present rate of felling of trees, denudation of our forest wealth will be complete by A.D. 2000. Who cares?

Even in a democratic set-up many measures can be adopted with a view to discouraging the large-family norm. Prevention of plural marriages which are taking place throughout the country despite the law, open

encouragement of celibacy, abolition of maternity leave, stoppage of all maternity benefits including medical expenses, taxing of confinement charges, total lifting of prohibition, tax benefits to the unmarried, strict vigilance over cleanliness of streets and surroundings, compulsory free education to all citizens up to the high school level, prevention of begging and alms-giving, prevention of child-labour, compulsory national developmental work service, and so on are some of the measures which ought to be tried out. On the other hand, such welfare-proposals as mid-day meal schemes are likely to encourage large-family norm among Indians.

THE RESERVATION SQUEEZE

Next to the communal frenzy, it is the 'Reservation' issue that has taken the heaviest toll in human lives. At the time of writing, the beneficiaries of reservations constitute about 70 per cent of the population. More community groups are standing in the queue clamouring for inclusion in the list. The Centre has neither formulated nor intends formulating any common national policy to deal with this problem. At the State level there is utter confusion. Although the Supreme Court had directed in 1963 itself that reservations should not exceed 50 per cent of both jobs and seats in educational institutions this ruling is yet to be implemented in many States.

Reducing this problem to brass tacks we are faced with the following facts:

- (a) During the last 38 years India's population has more than doubled.
- (b) The increase in the number of educational institutions as well as seats in them (not universities, but certainly taking into account day-cum-evening colleges and correspondence courses) during the same period is not commensurate with the increase in population. With respect to schools up to Higher Secondary level, the growth is much less.
- (c) Any further increase in job opportunities, taking into account the efforts being made and planned in this direction, is going to be only marginal vis-a-vis the mounting population.

The turn-out of the backward castes at the polling booths is roughly 80 per cent of the eligible voters among them, which will stand in the way of any political party receiving a mandate to abolish or drastically amend the reservation policy. Hence the hesitation in the country. But reservation is not a statutory compulsion. Therefore, any bold leader should be able to revise the benefits and remove the element of injustice inherent in them.

The following suggestions are put forward as a possible way out:

- (a) Abolish all reservations.
- (b) Make available free educational facility up to Higher Secondary level to all the economically backward students, irrespective of caste or creed.
- (c) Select specific number of promising students from scheduled castes and tribes every year and give them expert coaching for higher studies, and any other assistance required to pursue the studies. (The Constitution does not specify 'Harijans' therefore, these benefits should be made applicable also to all members of the scheduled castes and tribes who had become Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, etc., and who continue to be economically backward).
- (d) Reserve for the scheduled castes/tribes only a small percentage of jobs at the lowest level of recruitment, and a reasonable number in senior positions for which direct recruitment is resorted to.
- (e) Subsequent promotions to be based on service-cum-merit.

THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE IMBROGLIO

The official language problem in our country, as far as national integration is concerned, has two aspects. The first pertains to the regional language. Subsequent to Independence, States were reorganised on linguistic basis. The reorganisation generated further discord in its wake. Though the disputes that arose as a result, such as the Belgaum boundary dispute, the 'sons of the soil' movement in Goa, the Shiv Sena stir against non-Maharashtrians in Bombay, and so on are still simmering they are fairly localised ones and are, therefore, controllable.

The second pertains to Hindi which has been declared as the official language of the Indian Union (and the mode of communication between various States) for the simple reason that its various forms are spoken by about 51 per cent of our population. Whereas the Hindi protagonists of the North wish to bring to fruition the constitutional provisions on Hindi, the Southern States, particularly Tamil Nadu are attempting to extend the moratorium on the use of Hindi. In the process, some basic facts about Indian languages either are lost sight of or have been elbowed away from the line of sight, they being unsavoury.

Let us put the record straight so that we do not keep chasing shadows. First of all, the commonly held belief that Sanskrit is the mother of all

Indian languages is incorrect. In the words of Kaka Saheb Kalelkar, noted Sanskrit scholar: "It is rather curious that Sanskrit should have been called the 'Deva-Bhasa' or the language of the gods when history shows that it is the result of the conscious efforts of the Aryans to fuse many original Prakrit dialects into a polished speech All the languages and dialects of ancient India have contributed to and enriched the vocabulary of Sanskrit"

Due to several centuries of neglect all the important languages of India had stopped growing and they are still at their original level of development. They have all seen their heydays and those days will never come again. It is unbelievable that we cannot even coin the name of a village or town as sweet-sounding as days of yore!

Sanskrit, of course, has a substantial vocabulary as the elite and the literati had spent all their time and energy only on the development of this single language. We can re-borrow words from Sanskrit and use them to express better in a different Indian language. But many key technical words in Sanskrit are jaw-breaking and are not suitable for general use.

Hindi, though a very sweet and easy language, being of very recent origin has very little tradition and only minimal literature. Its vocabulary is insufficient for modern use. Aware of this shortcoming, the Indian National Congress appointed a committee in the 1920s to compile an exhaustive dictionary. Half a century later that committee reported failure of its assigned mission. (It might interest the reader to know that when the Russians were faced with a similar problem they set up a committee in the 18th or 19th century. Those stalwarts laid the foundations of Modern Russian).

Language is meant for communication. If we have to continually borrow words from foreign languages, then Hindi can at best be only 'pidgin Hindi. Alternatively, students cannot make a sudden jump and learn a foreign language from scratch when they have to pursue higher studies. No, we have to have a language which will meet all our needs at minimum cost and effort. Additionally, Hindi has no market outside India. With our ever expanding population and shortening horizons of work it will be in our selfish interest to adopt an international language as our official language.

Many Indians are already well conversant with English. From 15 million at the beginning of the 19th century the number of people who speak English has risen today to 700 million. The number of non-native users of English around the world overtook the number of native speakers several years ago. We will not lose face by adopting English as our official language as already nearly one fourth of the world's population is using English. After all, how

much use does a villager put his mother-tongue to? Very little. He needs the assistance of a learned man or a specialist to take up his work for him. This way we can not only resolve the differences amongst us but also reap the benefit of putting an international language to greater use in India.

We can still find use for Hindi as the common language for spoken communication. By adopting the three-language formula all Indians will be on equal footing.

CONCLUSION

We have examined in this essay some of the very pressing problems that are threatening to disintegrate our country and have tried to find workable solutions for each. Very few political leaders seem to be able to gauge the desperate situation that our country is heading for. We seem to be going down an abyss and unless there are many willing and strong hands to pull the country upto the top, very soon we are likely to lose our foot-hold, shape and identity.

At this juncture it may be inspiring to recall what H.G. Wells had written of us: "Such was Asoka, greatest of kings. He was far in advance of his age. He left no prince and no organisation of men to carry on his work, and within a century of his death the great days of his reign had become a glorious memory in a shattered and decaying India."

There were no foreign invaders to cause the 'shattering and decaying' that our country underwent after Asoka's reign. The virus developed from within The consequential weakness persists to this day. We are presently witnessing a similar process taking place as it did after the death of Asoka. We should not allow history to repeat itself.

The world is expecting much from us.