

## Getting back on the democratic path

India flag illustrated with gradient mesh tool.

Howsoever anniversary stock-takings assess pluses and minuses, one conclusion is surely inescapable: India remains woefully short of its potential. Whatever our excuses, one cause is equally fundamental: the decisions shaping our destiny are themselves shaped by considerations increasingly unworthy of a serious nation. Yes, we are a difficult country to govern, none ever coped with so many competing diversities, rights and claims, in such huge proportions — and through democracy. This makes it all the more necessary to employ common sense, vision and judgment, balance and largeness, and above all reason. The less these matter to us, the farther back must we fall.

“The whole essence of... Parliamentary Government lies in the intention to make the thing work... [its] strength... is exactly measured by the unity of political parties upon its fundamental objects.” Lord Balfour’s perception pinpoints why we have mangled our system out of recognition: far from seeking congruence of fundamental objectives, leave alone unity, our parties compete to prevent things working. Our needs, long incompatible with the forces working amongst us, have moved into mutual conflict.

Our social tensions need sensitive healing, but suffer ever harsher divisiveness; our political institutions and processes need to address rising challenges but sink ever deeper in backwardness; our administrative machinery desperately needs efficiency but corrodes into dysfunctionality; we live in a turbulent, dangerous world but have neither time nor expertise to attend to it. Our security challenges become more complex while both our conceptual and procedural drawbacks retard our response-capabilities.

India is not alone in such difficulties. Countries worldwide find existing governmental systems unable to cope with contemporary challenges or people’s expectations, some even with basic needs. Particularly alarming is the condition in democracies, where the ideals and concepts, the very essence of their being, are threatened. Widely idolised till now, with even those trampling it claiming to uphold it, democracy has never had many practitioners. A few North Atlantic states apart, most even in Europe, claiming to be exemplars, actually became democracies after India. Almost all colonised states started as democracies, almost all turned rapidly into autocracies. We Indians could long claim shining exception, but the ease with which the Emergency could be imposed is warning enough how fragile our version is.

Democracy depends on the Enlightenment’s ideals — the ceaseless expansion of liberty and equality, the impartial functioning of impersonal law and institutions, the reconciliation of society’s differences by accommodative compromise, above all the primacy of reason. India’s democracy, howsoever imperfect, worked awhile because those who led us into Independence had imbibed these ideas. Always hugely disproportionate to their tiny size, their influence is finished; Enlightenment teachings no longer resonate with electorates in which group obsessions stultify basic national interest. Most stunningly is this manifest today in the U.S.; ugly forces prevail there periodically, somehow the humanist Enlightenment principles come back. The world needs that to happen there again, but our active concern must be at home.

That our democracy is seriously ailing is so obvious, one wonders why our political parties are so oblivious. The party claiming, not unjustifiably, to have led us to freedom seems devoid of ideas — offering no vision, no version of our future, which could possibly inspire anybody. And others are

worse. The greatest success story of our times, the astonishing speed and extent of China's rise, surely shows that the decisive cause is that a directing mind chose specific objectives and worked for them with determination. Authoritarianism doubtless made possible advances open societies cannot match, but dictatorships abound which keep their countries backward, whereas there are serious democracies seriously striving for betterment. Originally denoting differences in economic levels and ideologies, 'Third World' also represents backward, if not chaotic, ways of governance — selfish, often barbaric despotisms ruling by whim over peoples depressed and oppressed. The key difference that separates properly run states lies in seriousness of decent purpose. We Indians lose our way in tangents: Third World conditions beckon.

China's record over the last century is hardly edifying — revolutions, civil war, famines, war-lords, etc. Corruption is rampant, sloth and incompetence hardly unknown, but things get done because there is a directing force which devises and executes forward-looking plans for national greatness. How many shaping our destinies have any real sense of national, as distinct from personal or sectional, purpose, leave alone greatness? China is both a yardstick and a warning: fall behind and we fall under. We have no option but to make our system functional and to the right purposes. We gave ourselves a great system but have not known how to keep it up to standard. Currently resurrected, Alexander Hamilton is appropriate: "A government must be fitted to a nation as much as a coat to the Individual... what may be good at Philadelphia may be bad at Paris and ridiculous at Petersburg." People end up with governments functioning like themselves, and we have transmogrified our original system through our own weaknesses.

The dispersion of power between executive, legislature and judiciary is undermined by both our traditional acceptance of personal rule and the appalling incompetence of each branch. Our political executives are self-seeking while the permanent branches are dysfunctional; our legislatures hardly meet and when they do there is bedlam; our judiciary, the last remaining estate to retain some public respect, has discarded it along with the decorum of self-respect; and the Fourth Estate, so essential a safeguard, competes in descent. That we blithely carry on as though it will all come out in the wash is as incredible as it is fatal. We must realise what we have done to our system and repair it urgently.

Diagnoses upon diagnoses, what is the cure? It is hard not to conclude there is none: some problems have no solutions, one can only manage things as best one can. In 150 years of modernising influences we never grew out of our old ways. Enormous reforms we need we reject: how can any society advance when saddling itself with khap panchayats, disgraceful dowry systems, blatant practice of untouchability, acceptance of castration and other primitivisms? Ways of thinking and behaving are universally intractable. Claiming Europeanism, and with generations of modernising after Kemal Ataturk, Turkey clings to old tendencies. For all its astonishing progress, China practises female infanticide. One Western humanist state after another is rocked by tribalism. But civilisation evolves through efforts to change, even if change itself keeps resisting, but the effort must be forward-looking, not regressive.

We need a planned, determined push to make our system work and modernise. Only an organised body with such a purpose can do anything. Despite the obstructionism we have made our norm, this government is positioned to get things done — if it only will; no other force seems at all likely. This Prime Minister, particularly, has built a personal position of great possibilities, and his international approaches show the imagination and dexterity needed for national greatness. His party's electoral calculations present our greatest obstacle: of course, elections need winning ways, but at what cost? The furtherance and exploitation of obscurantism and regression will only help our enemies, denying us the progress essential for handling modern challenges. Can (re)building legendary temples help us handle a China already reaching the forefront of technological innovation?

“Forget the excuse that politics is the art of the possible, remember leadership is the art of making even the impossible possible.” My father Girija Shankar Bajpai’s observation points to the prime necessity: the will to succeed, a carefully thought out plan, a commitment to fulfilment, obviously not to reviving a past irrelevant to today, if indeed it ever existed, but to a state and society adapted to our times. We the people are ultimately responsible but political leaders have to lead. We can only appeal to them to do so — or meander into the anarchy we seem most at home in, or authoritarianism — or both.

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