

India 1947-1964: Events and their background

A tentative note

When I first read President Roosevelt's advice on India to the British in August 1942 (India: The Transfer of Power, vol 3), I took his statement to imply that the British should "act in such a way that India stays in the western orbit", quite literally. It was only years later that I understood that Roosevelt was not thinking in terms of his preference for the West or the USSR, but rather that they, he and the British, "should try to think of some arrangement by which India found its place in the European and American, i.e., western orbit, rather than the Asiatic." Quite naturally, Roosevelt and his friends could not conceive an India run according to the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi.

The western conquest of India by the British in the late 18th and early 19th century, with the agreement and support of most of Europe, seems to have been a major achievement for western man. It is pronouncements of men like Roosevelt, and much more so of Clement Attlee, British deputy Prime minister, in January 1942, after he had read the report of his Indian viceroy Linlithgow, that "it is an astonishing statement to be made by a viceroy. It sounds more like an extract from an anti-imperialist propaganda speech. If it were true it would form the greatest possible condemnation of our rule in India and would amply justify the action of every extremist in India. But it is not the whole truth. All India was not the fruits of conquest; a large part of it came under our rule to escape from tyranny and anarchy. The history of at least 150 years has forced close links between India and the United Kingdom." The viceroy had written, "India and Burma have no natural association with the Empire, from which they are alien by race, history and religion, and for which neither of them have any natural affection, and both are in the Empire because they are conquered countries which have been brought there by force, kept there by our control, and hitherto it has suited to remain under our protection." Attlee then congratulated himself and the British and said, "It is one of the great achievements of our rule in India, that, even if they do not entirely carry them out, educated Indians do accept British principles of justice and liberty. We are condemned by Indians, not by the measure of Indian ethical conceptions, but by our own, which we have taught them to

accept.” From Attlee to Mountbatten is an easy journey. After he had accepted the viceroyship of India, which the British Prime minister Attlee had offered him a few days earlier, Mountbatten, after narrating his talk with Attlee to his cousin King George VI, wrote to him on 4 January 1947, “Meanwhile, as he [Attlee] said I could have any team I liked, I dashed round and asked Pug Ismay and Eric Mieville to chuck everything and come with me to start the last Chukka in India – 12 goals down! Both agreed at once though one has to chuck a 4-months holiday in Australia and the other one his new job.”

But it is not merely the Western rulers of India who thought and expressed themselves in the idiom of conquest. Even a dedicated Indian like M.R.Jayakar, fairly close to Mahatma Gandhi from before 1920, stated in 1933 to the British parliamentary conference on India, that as the British were all the time trying to block India’s way to advancement, the Indians wanted independence from Britain so that India could advance fast and become modernized soon. While Jayakar made such a statement and quite possibly several lakhs of western educated Indians by then thought in a similar way, the ordinary Indians on the contrary, from at least 1920, believed that the *Swaraj* for which they were striving under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi would end all British oppression and oppressive British institutions and governmental infrastructure and in their stead, India would start rebuilding a society and polity on foundations of a very ancient period in India which had served India well till the British came and began dismantling and playing havoc with them.

The limitless slaughter of Indians in the great Indian clash with the British during 1857-58, and the resulting realization by Indians that their resistance and opposition to British enslavement had largely collapsed, made the western educated and oriented Indians begin to abandon the Indian society altogether and turned them speedily into toadies of the British. A large part of such growth of toadyism in North India may have been fairly old perhaps originating in the 14th-15th century, and had begun to look honorable amongst the Persian-educated Indian gentry. It was therefore fairly easy for toadies of Islamic origin to convert themselves to toadies of the British. Even the great 19th century writers in

Indian languages, including Bankim Chatterji, Bhartendu Harischandra and the Gujarati author of Saraswati Chandra could not escape such surrender.

Around 1830, Lord William Bentinck, the newly appointed British Governor-general of India, during a discussion with his colleagues on the question of whether British rule was secure in India, stated that it seemed to him that prosperous Indians in Calcutta seem to be abandoning the care they earlier used to take of the Brahmans, Bhikshus, etc, and instead they had begun to pay far more attention to the feasting and the ostentatious entertainment of the Europeans. This seemed to reassure Bentinck about British rule having taken roots in India. Earlier, Bentinck had been Governor of the Madras Presidency from 1803-1807, and at that time, had stated to London that “we have rode the country too hard, and the consequence is, that it is in a state of the most lamentable poverty. Great oppression is I fear exercised too generally in the collection of the revenues.”

When I first read it, Bentinck’s statement seemed rather far-fetched. But recently I saw an entry for 1895 in a Panda’s (an assistant to a temple priest) register in Haridwar, which instead of being written in Hindi or Urdu, which would have been the normal thing to do, was written in very legible English, and that by a person who had belonged to a small town in West UP, to which I also belonged. It seems that even persons from small towns by this time had begun to take pride in their English literacy. Sometime later around 1940, I found that M.R.Jayakar, writing in his autobiography, stated that a certain village in Maharashtra where he was taken for rest and recuperation was as beautiful as a village he had seen or lived in Scotland. The Western educated Indian seemed to have lost all sense of relationship and had forgotten to discriminate between what was one’s own and what was alien.

The Swadeshi movement of 1905 and the return of Mahatma Gandhi to India in January 1915 seemed to have made the ordinary Indian regain his self-respect and confidence, and the alienated western-educated began to look somewhat shame-faced. By 1920, most westernized Indians seem to have gone into low-key; even confirmed westerners like

Jawaharlal Nehru or even modern industrialists or officers of the British created ICS and IPS began to be relatively less haughty and arrogant. The period 1900-1930 also seems to have been a time of national self-discovery and substantial exploration and research got done about the state of Indian knowledge in the earlier period. Many scholars also tried to re-forge the links between India and its neighbors, especially in South East Asia and East Asia. But by the beginning of the 1930s, Indian scholarship seemed to fall again into the theoretical traps and outlook of western scholarship, especially the Marxist way of looking at historical development, and work on India's past went into a state of decay. By about 1945, westernism and modernism seemed definitely to be on the rise again in large parts of India. Perhaps an impression had arisen in India that the British were soon leaving India and the reins of government and power would be transferred to those who were already managing the British system. But it is not as if the ordinary people, especially the peasants and the craftsmen, were downhearted or depressed. The peasants particularly seemed much better off than before 1939. The rise in food prices had helped them pay off substantial parts of their debts, and the changing political climate in which the peasant could claim occupancy rights on the land he cultivated made him feel secure and confident.

After the subordination of India to British rule some 90-95% of the Indian people – the peasants, the craftsmen, the shopkeepers and those engaged in service jobs in the socio-cultural-economic infrastructure of Indian public life – were by British policy reduced to extreme poverty and insecurity and reduced to a state of dumbness. They were in fact reduced to a similar condition in which the lower orders of Britain existed till about 1900 or even till later. India being largely constituted of communities somehow saved the India people from being wholly smashed by the British directed public order. Each community and its kinship groups somehow tried to help one another or cooperate with other communities till times changed. It is in such a situation that the middle-level communities began to demand participation in the managing of public affairs and institutions. The demand seems to have been first voiced in the 1880s in Mysore, and later in the Madras Presidency. By 1917 it was made into British government policy that all communities should have a proportionate share in lower level governmental and state supported jobs. It

would certainly have been of great benefit to India if the indigenous leaders of India in the late 19th and early 20th century had given more thought and support to the middle-level of Indian society – the sections which in recent decades have been termed the backward classes. Instead Indians were made to needlessly involve themselves in solving a newly created tension termed the Hindu-Muslim problem. Since the coming of Islam into India and it considering itself as some sort of conqueror of certain areas of India, and encouraging the settlement of certain number of non-Indian Muslims into India and converting a proportionately large number of Indians to Islam to serve as its support system in India, there always had been some sort of tension between the newly arrived Islam and the people of India. This relationship worked out with its ups and downs for over 5-6 centuries and by the 18th century, Islam's political supremacy in India seemed to be over. It is at that time that the French and the British entered India and started to pretend that they had come as the saviours of India and Indianness. Once established as conquerors and rulers the British also pretended that they were the legitimate successors of Islamic rulers and therefore they should see that the people of India pay due obedience to the laws and regulations of Islamic rulers. Eventually the British assumed the role of protecting the Islamic laws and institutions from the people of India, and at the same time, claimed to be protecting the non-Muslim people from Islamic power. Not having political experience for a fairly long time, the Indians fell into the European trap.

There were other traps set for the Indians by British rule. Many were overcome but some were not. It is in this situation that Indians realized around early 1946 that in some way or the other, the British may be preparing to leave India by handing over power to some such groups whom they could trust to continue carrying forward the policies laid for India by 200 years of British rule.

The main issues that faced India in 1946 were firstly whether India should be divided into two, and secondly what sort of political formation and administrative structure India should have after the British left. Ultimately, India was divided and both the divided parts continued to work with the legal and administrative structure created by the British. While in a sense the formal leaving of the British gave a sense of freedom to most

Indians, the manner of the leaving which the British chose led India into not only a state of unimaginable chaos and bloodshed but also released vast amounts of violence, hatred, greed and hidden cruelty. The brotherliness and concern which Indians were understood to possess in abundance for one another was torn to bits and has yet to be recreated in Indian society and polity.

It took at least 2-3 years for things to settle down and the uprooted, perhaps numbering 50 lakhs to 1 crore, moved from temporary encampments to towns and cities and villages. Several new towns were built like Faridabad and Chandigarh, and with time new educational institutions (mostly replicas of the old) came up, as well as hospitals, playgrounds and parks. But most of that which had been thought of about the reconstruction of India during the freedom struggle just turned into empty dreams. Yet the westernized and the modernizers, mere textbook imitators of the 19th century West, perhaps quite seriously began with their national planning, the Five-year Plans one after the other, the huge dams for irrigation and generation of electricity, and 4-5 steel mills contributed to India by the British, the Russians, etc. The late 1950s also saw the setting up of the five Indian Institutes of Technology, and many engineering and medical colleges and many more universities, replicas of the old. By 1960, the enthusiasm for these gigantic constructions, however, had worn out, and even to the modern Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru it all began to look rather futile. But the modernization, the multiplication of airports, the long highways, the high speed trains and a large number of them, the posh hospitals, the management institutes, and some mediocre industry of foreign origin still continue after half a century of the era of planning, and help protected metropolitan enclaves of India shine, while most of India looks abandoned and barren.

While most of Indian physical resources and wealth has gone for modernization and to make some 5% of India's population live a seemingly prosperous life, it is the transformation in Indian society which is much more remarkable. The nearly complete disappearance of what was termed as untouchability – 50 years ago¹, in practically all places in India is by itself a marvel. It is true that a very large proportion of those who

¹ and was assumed by modern scholarship to be of very ancient and India-wide origin.

were classed as untouchable are still very poor and deprived. Their learning, schooling, health services etc are still of low quality. But as individuals or community they have achieved citizenship and reasonable status. A proportionate number, in terms of the population of India, from amongst them have now been running the administrative apparatus of India for more than two decades and in the last decade or two they have begun to have proportionate enrolment in advanced technical institutions as well.

The other transformation relates to those termed as the Backward Classes. Only 200 years ago, those termed as the Backward Classes were the producers of India's agriculture and its industrial products. They were also the protectors of Indian territory and were those who selected and appointed the kings and other ruling authorities in India. These classes, who were impoverished and downgraded by the British, have emerged as the backbone of India since about 1940, and in a large way are beginning to be the crucial constituents of Indian polity. If one were to have a community wise census, one may find that most of these backward communities now have a fair share in the running of Indian social and public life. It is the shortsightedness of India that the 1st Backward Classes commission was constituted only in 1954.

The other transformation is in relation to the education of girls. According to educational data, 1/3rd of the students in the University system are now girls. There may be similar enrollment of girls in schools also.

There are a large number of nationwide and regional political formations in India after 1947. In 1948, the socialists (including Acharya Narendra Dev, J P Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia, Achyut Patwardhan, Asoka Mehta and numerous others prominent in different regions of India) left the Indian National Congress and formed the All India Socialist Party. Within a year or two, J.B. Kripalani and his admirers also left the Congress and formed the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP) and within a year or so, the KMPP combined with the socialists. Around the same time, a large number from the Hindu Mahasabha and allied groups formed the Bharatiya Jana Sangh with Syama Prasad Mukerjee (a major leader of Bengal, coming from an academic family, himself having

been the vice-chancellor of Calcutta University) as its President. Similarly new political formations got formed in various regions of India, or older regional formations like the Dravida Kazhagam in Tamilnadu tried to gain more widespread acceptance. In the same way, the Communists tried to make themselves strong in regions like Kerala, Bengal, Manipur, etc. Industrial labor also got organized in many more trade unions, but on the whole, the Indian National Congress was still the major Indian political formation with various splits within it.

The main political leaders of India in 1947 were Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru, C Rajagopalachariar, Rajendra Prasad, Govind Ballabh Pant (Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh from 1937 onwards and Home minister of India from about 1956), J.B. Kripalani, D.P.Mishra, Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad, B.G.Kher, Sri Nijalingappa of Karnataka, Sri Hanumanthaiah of Karnataka, Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon - all in the Congress; J.P.Narayan, Acharya Narendra Dev, Ram Manohar Lohia, Asoka Mehta, Achyut Patwardhan in the Socialist Party; Syama Prasad Mukherjee, and many others in the Hindu Mahasabha and the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, and a large number of persons in the Communist Party of India (CPI). Outside the main political parties, there were B.R.Ambedkar, C.D.Deshmukh, Shanmukham Chetty, etc. There were religious leaders like Karpatriji or the Sankaracharyas but the days of their unchallenged hold on Indian society was yet to come. There were academics and scientists but none of them of world renown. Similarly there were the Birlas and the Tatas, and many other leaders of business, banking and industry. But our understanding of the world seemed to be poor as it still is. Around 1946, G.D.Birla thought that India could soon take over the place of Japan as the leading industrial nation in Asia.

The major Indian event of the period 1947-1964 seems to be the reorganization of India into states based on the commonality of language. The issue of language being the basis of statehood seems to have been of much concern to the people of India from before 1920, and in 1920, the new constitution of the Indian National Congress prepared by Mahatma Gandhi recognized the principle of language as the basis of large political units. Hence the Congress built up its nationwide organization by dividing India into linguistic

provinces. Naturally the redrawing of the political map of India according to language became a major priority after 1947. Ultimately after many arguments and controversies, most of India became a union of states based on language from 1956 onwards. The Madras Presidency being the largest formation was split into Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, bits of it were given to Orissa, and several districts to the newly formed Karnataka, while Malabar and adjoining areas became Kerala. The Bombay Presidency despite the protests of Morarji Desai and the Gujarati business community in Bombay, was split into Gujarat and Maharashtra. Further, some areas from the Hyderabad state and the old central provinces were joined to Maharashtra. In the last two or three decades, many more smaller language areas have been made into states, especially in North East India.

It is perhaps the formation of the states based on language which gave impetus to what is known as the Backward Classes movement. Or, quite possibly, the pressures exerted by these classes during the freedom struggle, and from much before, made India realize that to enable these classes, who formed the majority of the Indian people, to fully play their part in Indian public life, India required that it was reorganized on the basis of language.

Besides, the much talked of planning and the gigantic plants and structures in various spheres, the changes in social formation and controversies about whether it should be individual peasantry or collective agriculture, or the constitutional banning of the killing of the cow, and the like interested and excited Indians much more. But these problems could not be settled easily especially as the ruling strata, especially Pandit Nehru and those who shared his outlook did not want India to become like what it was before the invasion of Islam, or before the British. But new issues arose despite the wishes of India's leaders; one major intervention in India was the arrival of the Dalai Lama and about one lakh of his followers into India in 1958 due to the Chinese wanting to crush them in Tibet. Most of India had great sympathy and respect for the Tibetans, and in fact their arrival in India seems to have spread the awareness of Buddhism not only in India but also in large parts of the world. The entry of the Dalai Lama and Buddhism in the world has added much charm and friendliness to an otherwise harsh and ugly world.

After the arrival of the Tibetans in India and since the incursion by China along the borders of India and China, Prime Minister Nehru's patience as well as reputation began to decline rather fast. So much endless praise seems to have been heaped on him in the 1950s in India and in many other countries that he seemed to expect much more. But instead as years passed, people began to see large holes in what he claimed to be doing and he was also no longer young. By the end of 1962, his nerves seemed to have given way and the admiration and applause for him became less and less.

Some months after the skirmishes with the Chinese in Oct-Nov 1962, there were elections for four places in the Indian Lok Sabha. The persons who opposed Nehru's candidates were well known and admired national political leaders. Three of them, Acharya J.B.Kripalani, Ram Manohar Lohia and Minoo Masani (a great friend of J.P.Narayan till the end) defeated the Congress candidates and won the three constituencies. The congress won only one place by defeating the Jana Sangh leader Deen Dayal Upadhyaya.

Pandit Nehru was normally liked in the Congress but not taken very seriously. His friendship also was not valued that much. His reputation perhaps was of someone who would not like to burn his fingers and as far as possible not take a firm stand on anything. It is not correct to say that Sardar Patel was trying to create a Hindu state. For the Indians, the natural end of foreign invasions and occupations was to return back to Indianness and to get rid of the more glaring and ugly alien symbols. It is that which led to the rebuilding of the temple of Somnath or the opening of the doors of the Ayodhya temple by the District Collector in 1948, or later by the washing of the feet of Kashi Brahmin scholars by Sri Rajendra Prasad on the banks of the Ganga, after he had become the President of India. I have heard Sardar Patel say publicly (Dec 1946) that we would reply to the sword by the sword, but this was in the context of the Muslim League threatening to force partition on the whole of India. That the freedom of India did imply India reshaping itself according to *swabhava*, then or later, was an inevitability. In fact, the reshaping has been happening since 1964 but very haltingly and resulting in a sort of deformed Indianness,

with an increase in cowardice, loss of national confidence and continued dependence on the powerful in the world.

Mino Masani started as a socialist and perhaps was one of the founders of the Indian Socialist Party in 1934. He was quite astute and an able man and belonged to a Parsi family of considerable wealth. He perhaps was an anti-communist from the beginning of his political life. The center of Masani's political life was Bombay. Rafi Ahmed Kidwai was an equally able, astute and charming person but from Uttar Pradesh. He was a minister in the Uttar Pradesh government till 1952, when he was brought to Delhi as a minister. It was Kidwai who handled Sheikh Abdullah, then Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, when Pandit Nehru found it difficult to deal with him, and Kidwai got Abdullah removed from Chief Ministership and put into prison. Kidwai is said to have been very generous to his colleagues and dependents and a rather sociable man. He died early, around 1955.

Malcolm Darling was an ICS officer and perhaps a serious minded District Collector. His contribution to rural development in the districts he worked in was substantial, and he was perhaps considered friendly to the peasantry. But he did not have as much following as the American Albert Mayer had from about 1946 onwards; Mayer was, for reasons unknown, adopted by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as his village development messiah at a time that Pandit Nehru had treated the advice of Gandhiji on the place of villages in the future India with indifference. The community development projects and the 5,000 blocks in which rural India was divided into around 1950 was the creation of Mayer and his cronies. But the idea of India being divided into 5,000 units is perhaps old. The number of police stations in India is also around 5,000. I knew Albert a bit around 1960 or so.

India has yet to learn to have equal and trustworthy relationships with its neighboring countries. But having been enslaved by militarily strong and otherwise cruel nations, it has not yet learnt how to conduct itself with confidence and honour, and with regard for much smaller countries in the world. India's attitude to China, or even to Iran, strong and

determined countries, therefore, is hesitant and suspicious. It seems India does not wish them to do better than itself, and thinking that it has to protect itself from them, it continues to be dependent on the USA, or Britain, or even Russia.

Dharampal,

Sevagram, 8 October 2005