

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GSA-7
India: It Ain't Necessarily So

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22 December 1960

Dear Dick,

It is nearly impossible to say anything simple about India. Things often aren't what they seem. Words don't mean what we expect them to. Every sentence seems to need a paragraph of explanation and qualification. A huge and varied land and 400 million individuals in various stages of sophistication preclude the handy generality. And Indian thought delights in shades, being less interested in the difference between black and white than in their belonging to the same spectrum. The Indian thinks in levels. Ideas that, to the Anglo-Saxon thinking in two dimensions, seem to collide, would be happily compatible to the Indian thinking in three dimensions. There may not be a contradiction in all India.

To start you off in the pastel world of Indian thought, I would quote you some verse. Two blocks from the Marina Hotel where I lived all summer, a white bearded Sikh had a furniture store. He dispensed his cogitations and judgements along with his bedsteads and chairs. These are his comments on birth control by sterilization -- a method presently being fostered by the Indian Government.

"Man wants women to be sterilized
While woman prefers man to be sterilized.

Who is right and justified
Is a question to be verified,
For woman's machinery is more complicated
than a man's.
So sterilization of a man is better than a woman.

God made man and woman
To live for each other
With a purpose of production and creation
And not with the aim of recreation,
For no work in the world have a completion
Without help and cooperation.

So let both be sterilized
Or none be sterilized
Is a true justice
In action and practice,
But cooperation for recreation
Is a natural ovation."

Back to our goal of simplicity. How is one to write simply,

for example, about the resignation that could almost be called India's national attitude? Not everyone in India is resigned. Different groups of the population have this outlook in varying degrees. It has long historical roots as well as current causes. It is wearing away at different rates among the various groups. The symptoms vary among the groups. Resignation has had, I think, both good and bad effects on India. Resignation becomes a word one must explain.

Resignation in India means acquiescence to fate. The Indian peasant--who makes up nearly 80% of the population--has for centuries been caught in a squeeze between man and the weather. Droughts and floods have starved him or left him homeless. Scrooge landlords or moneylenders have bled him of his bits of gold or silver. His government has worked from afar and in mysterious ways. His caste and immediate society have largely controlled his behavior--though his caste also gave him aid and security. Priests have told him to have little regard for this world and to put his faith and hope in the next. So the Indian peasant has learned to accept good or bad fortune with equanimity if not passivity. He hasn't been unhappy, except in times of stress, but much of life has been beyond his control. The peasant's resignation has begun to wear away since Gandhi came on the scene in the Twenties and showed the peasant that he could take fortune into his own hands. The present government is fighting this apathy by propaganda, community development projects and so on. But the accretions of several thousand years are not washed away without long scrubbing.

The factory worker also can do little to help himself. He may be no better educated than the peasant. His living conditions may be more squalid and his diet worse. His employer probably exploits him, and collusion between his employer and the government to his detriment is not uncommon. But the worker probably has seen that labor unions can help him or that he can protest loudly through a Communist-led strike. So the worker, though resigned, is less so than the peasant. Both workers and peasants will slowly conquer their hopelessness as they discover that by unified action they can make a dent in society.

The intellectuals, the people who should be the dynamic leaders of the others, are resigned in their own way. By intellectuals I mean here the semi-educated to the well-educated, the government clerk, the shop clerk, the bank clerk, the student, the company director, or the cabinet minister. These people are generally resigned because the rest of India is resigned. How can one move the masses, they ask, and shrug. The hugeness of India's problems paralyzes them. The clerks are resigned to a life of red tape and no freedom for initiative; and they jealously guard their prerogatives and stretch them as far as their ego demands and the situation will bear. The student is often resigned to becoming one of the educated unemployed. The higher ranking officials are often resigned to the inevitability of crippling bureaucracy, of the system. "You can't beat Tammany" becomes almost a creed.

There are many exceptions to all these assertions. India has many live-wire intellectuals who are determined to fight the system and the general lethargy. The peasants are coming out of their shells as land reform acts, rent control acts, and moneylender control acts give them some protection. Factory workers and union members are learning the power of unity. All of India has now voted in two honest general elections; people are learning that their votes are powerful. As time passes, the degree of resignation diminishes, I think. But there is still a very long way to go.

This soggy blanket of resignation over individualism, initiative, and effective cooperation has greatly slowed India's agricultural and industrial progress. But there has been a beneficial effect as well: there has been no bloody revolution. If the urban workers and the peasants hadn't a patience bordering on apathy and a sense of humor and dignity, they might have risen long ago to murder their landlord, rape the boss's daughter, and put India in flames. If for some reason India's slow evolution toward social justice should become slower or stop, if those on top should insist on the docility of those below, the resignation could turn to rage. I don't think that this will happen in India--though there may be some violence for other reasons--and credit must go not only to the peasant and to circumstance, but to the government which, for all its faults, is doing a remarkably good job at helping so many people to better themselves.

There are other words, phrases, ideas, "facts", that the student of India cannot accept without explaining them or qualifying them or dissecting them to study apparent contradictions.

Indians have their own ideas about Socialism--as does nearly everyone else. Some want government control verging on State Capitalism, while others believe in a milder government role. Some Indians believe that the rejuvenation of the country must come from government development of agriculture and rural life. It might seem a contradiction to you or to me, for example, that one could be a Socialist and still favor a weak central government, but many Indian Socialists do. It seems equally odd that a Socialist could be suspicious of government per se, but many Indian Socialists are.

Socialism to most Indians means land to the tiller, government ownership or control of key industries, government sponsorship of large capital enterprises important to national development, and government responsibility for the material welfare of the people. All these financial and administrative burdens would seem to demand the resources of a strong central government in New Delhi. A number of members of the Constituent Assembly believed and some political figures today believe, that the responsibility for the citizen's welfare should be assigned to the States instead of keeping it with the central government. This group of people would like the States to own more industries and would like the States to have complete say in executing their own five year plans. In general these people think of the States as freer of central control than they presently

are, as autonomous units in a loose federation. While this might or might not work, there are precedents for it. The present welfare activities of the Centre are administered in their areas by the States. The States now draft their own portions of the five year plans and send them to New Delhi where they are often adopted with little change--usually a reduction in expenditure. Many States already own industries and most have their own land reform programs. Besides this, the States of India are large--some with populations exceeding 50 million--and those containing large industrial cities such as Bombay and Calcutta have a great deal of taxable wealth in their areas.

There are other arguments used to support decentralized socialism. That the villages of ancient India had a socialist society is a popular Indian myth only partly supported by evidence. To some Indian political thinkers--a few of them slightly Marxist--and to many members of the Hindu Orthodox Right, the ideal pattern for India today would be the Socialist villages of 1000 years ago. The legend of this ideal socialism does not relate it to central government or to government power. As Socialism was simply a condition in these ancient villages, some thinkers today are prone to say that India should achieve Socialism at the village level through cooperative living. Though those who believe this also think that the government should own large industries; they do not concern themselves with this side of the problem. To them the ideal village socialism and the socialism of the machine age appear to be separate worlds with rural India going its merry way on a much different level than the industrial areas of the country.

The people who are most interested in the fact of Socialism are the peasants and the workers. Illiterate, the word means nothing to them. They only want a square deal for a change, some land, decent wages and food, relief from the landlord or moneylender, and so on. They look to the government for help--no matter whether it be federal, state, or local government--because they have no where else to look.

The irony of the thing is that most Indians are suspicious of government. They fear it may act arbitrarily and use its power indiscriminately. Yet the majority of Indians do favor government ownership of major industries and a watchful governmental eye over private business. These seeming opposites have been "resolved" in India by having government ownership and control: Indians fear business men more than they do the government. This is mainly because the vast majority of voters own barely a cow or a few cooking pots, let alone a small business or a farm, and they vote the government power to watch those whom they think have been exploiting them.

Apart from any relationship to Socialism, Indians just are suspicious of government. Their suspicion focuses on the Executive branch. This is certainly a hangover from Imperial days when all the reins of power led to the Viceroy's hands--though legislatures,

governors, and other officials wore cloaks of authority. A good deal of judicial power was also vested in the various officials of the Executive in British days and one manifestation of Indian distrust of the Executive was the very vocal insistence in the Constituent Assembly on a clear separation of the Judiciary from the Executive under the new Constitution. During the Assembly period, members and political figures outside the Assembly suggested that more power should be given to the States to keep the Central Executive (not the National Parliament or the Central Government as a whole, but the Executive itself) from having too much power.

One would hardly expect a group of men generally wary of Executive power to create an Executive with power to govern by Ordinance, take over State governments without the State's permission, practice preventive detention, and do a variety of other things that could destroy democracy in India. But most of the best minds in the Assembly voted these powers to the Executive and those with whom I talked this summer defended their decision. Why? Because the security situation in the country was so shaky from 1945 to 1950 that they believed that only these undemocratic powers would protect democracy. Most of those I interviewed were aware that this policy could be dangerous; they would like to see some of these extraordinary powers taken away from the Executive as soon as possible--there was vocal but inadequate resistance to the renewal of the Preventive Detention Act both in 1957 and this past autumn. If Indians don't suspect government so much that they hamstring its power, if they aren't so resigned that they leave everything to the government, if they can conquer their tendency to worship their leaders and achieve a constructive skepticism, they will have reached the goal they have set for themselves.

Religion and its effect on society are other matters that need qualification; our experience doesn't apply in India. When we or Europeans think of religion, we predictably think in terms of Christianity or one of its subspecies, the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, the Baptist Church, etc. The word church signifies to us a fairly well defined system of beliefs, an administration, a building and perhaps other property, and organized clergy, and an entity distinct from other churches.

Hinduism is one of the world's great religions, but none of the above follows from this. There is no Hindu Church. Because there is no Hindu Church, there is no one system of beliefs; there are many beliefs and none claims ideological superiority over the others. It is Hinduism's pride that anyone can be a Hindu from agnostic Nehru, to the most scrupulous Brahmin, to a Christian, to anyone. Tagore said that all religions--and this presumably includes the faiths within Hinduism--were but different paths to one God.

Nor among Hindus is there an organized clergy or any church administration--though a temple may have a cohesive body of priests running it. Where the priests aren't organized there

will be no set creed. The traditional priests and teachers of India are the Brahmins, but they aren't the only sages. All of India's wisemen preach as individuals, teaching the scriptures as they appreciate them, or in some cases along the lines of an informal school of thought. But Hinduism has no sectarian organizations as does Christianity.

This aspect of India, so fascinating of itself, becomes of great importance when one is studying the origins of the Constitution. The attitude of Hindus towards economic and social reforms is but one place where its importance shows.

Because there was no Hindu Church there could be no resistance to or support for any proposition in the Constituent Assembly on a Church basis--no pressure by an organized clergy, no pressure by the Church as a property-holding vested interest, in short, no Church lobby. By watching the behavior of individuals and groups within the Assembly, however, and by examining their religious beliefs, we can learn a good deal about what effect Hinduism had on the economic and social reform aspects of the Constitution.

Let's, for ease, confine economic reform to the expropriation or forced sale of farm land from large landowners in order to resell it to the peasant, and to nationalization of major industries--both popular ideas in the Constituent Assembly. In Europe and America, the "Church" with all its organization and power has usually come out strongly against such socialist measures and wanly acquiesced to them only if forced to do so to maintain its power and prestige. Not only did this not happen in India, but the most orthodox Hindus were often the most ardent socialists. This is partly because, as I mentioned earlier, socialism is considered to have been the ancient Hindu way of life and also because the church as a vested interest did not rally the orthodox to its support.

The situation with social reform was just the other way round. For ease, again, let's confine social reform to the sweeping one foreseen in the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution: the introduction of a uniform civil code throughout India. From the time the British gained control of India, the country was governed by British criminal law and Common law and the personal law of the various religious groups of India. This personal law held for marriage, divorce, inheritance--for family life. A uniform civil code would have largely supplanted personal law, and the reaction of orthodox Hindus was quick and heated. There was resistance to the intention of having a uniform code as expressed in the Directive Principles; and when the Constituent Assembly, sitting in its legislative capacity, began debate on the Hindu Code Bill--the bill that would have secularized personal law--opposition flared to such a point that special securities measures were taken to protect Prime Minister Nehru and Dr. Ambedkar, the Law Minister. Frequently the same Assembly members, public figures, or newspaper editors who had strongly favored the forced sale of land and

nationalization of industry strongly opposed the Hindu Code Bill. But as there was no Hindu Church, there was no church opposition to this invasion of what was then the prerogative field of priests, judges advised by priests, and codes of law based exclusively on scriptural sources. Opposition came from the traditionally-minded acting as individuals.

In the United States we live under civil law, religious law rarely affects us and I don't believe that there is any personal law at all. In India an individual could live his entire life under his personal law (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, etc.) and be barely touched by civil law.

The fundamental difference between the interaction of religion and society in India and the United States becomes apparent. It is another case of not finding what we expect to find, of finding that a given English word, phrase, or concept has different meanings and a different history when used in the environment of India.

India in her own context, however, becomes intelligible, if not entirely agreeable or comprehensible. A sentence about India often needs a deal of qualifying to put it in context and even then perhaps it should be followed not by a period but by a question mark.

Sincerely yours,

Granville Austin

Received New York January 3, 1961