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INDIA---SEVENTY YEARS AFTER MAHATMA GANDHI

“Be humble. Be forbearing....Now you will be tested through and through. Beware of power; power corrupts. Do not let yourselves be entrapped by its pomp and pageantry. Remember, you are in office to serve the poor in India’s villages” advised Mahatma Gandhi when West Bengal’s first Chief Minister Prafulla Ghosh sought the blessings of the Father of the Nation on August 15, 1947. Five months and fifteen days later Gandhiji shed his mortal coil. Explaining the impact of Gandhian legacy on Indian democracy Ernest Barker famously wrote that Mahatma Gandhi was ‘a great bridge between a great Indian tradition of devout and philosophic religion and the western tradition of civil and political liberty in the life of the community’. The renowned political scientist thought that Gandhiji had ‘a Platonic feeling that governing and administrative persons should live on a simple pittance, content with the opportunity of service, and not expecting great rewards’. Those wise words must be recalled by all those in seats of power and authority at least on January 30 every year.

During the first ten years when India was hailed as ‘Asia’s role model democracy’ there was near unanimity among the political parties and leaders on the purpose of politics and importance of public life. Almost all the parties had leaders of impeccable integrity and cadres committed to disciplined service. Outstanding regional leaders strengthened the sinews of the young democracy with the largest electorate in the world. The successful conduct of the first and second general elections, despite low literacy, confirmed the stability of Indian democracy and the maturity of its electorate.

A combination of tragic and unexpected events--- aggression from across the border by China in 1962 and Pakistan in 1965 and the sudden death of the first prime minister and his successor a year and a half later severely jolted the nation. Kamaraj, the self-effacing statesman from the south ensured two smooth successions, first in 1964 and the second in 1966, through consensus. The rot, however, began to set in sooner than feared. Constitutional norms were flouted, conventions set aside and corruption was institutionalized. States came to be treated as vassals of the union. As Sunil Khilnani put it “Politics and the State once seen as the prophylactic that would invigorate the country, were now seen as the disease.” The national emergency imposed from June 1975 to March 1977 was the darkest period of Indian democracy. With indomitable spirit, despite failing health, Jayaprakash Narayan, a moral colossus and statesman led India out of the crisis with the people of India throwing the prime minister and her government out of power. Experts wonder how India functions as a democracy with such ‘a high level of political violence’ and with ‘highly competitive and distinctly adversarial system of politics.’ 5000 elected representatives including members of parliament continue to let down the people of India in their struggle for progress. The selected civil servants, expected to lend their creative energy for national development, have done no better, with many of them bowing and bending, if not prostrating before the political masters. Institutions have declined and professional autonomy has collapsed. The credibility of the judiciary too has plummeted. It is too much to argue that the crisis of the Supreme Court imperils the future of Indian democracy. As Nani Palkhivala observed ‘the people of India are the sole keepers of the Constitution.’ They are, indeed, the saviours of Indian democracy.

The stable BJP government led by an energetic prime minister is brimming with confidence. Still the goal of good governance remains elusive. Among the challenging problems are widespread corruption, frustration of the jobless younger generation, the plight of the poor farmers and the feeling of alienation among the minorities and disadvantaged sections of the people. Will ‘young India’ rise to the occasion and place the nation on the pathway to greatness?

The Editor

The bane of India is the plethora of politicians and the paucity of statesmen. We need a great leader to mould us into a single nation instead of a collection of communities.

Nani Palkhivala