

Democracy, Ecology and Culture : The Indian Experience¹

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Abstract

The twentieth century has been most disastrous in human history in social and political terms - nearly 200 million men and women have died in military or political conflicts. The generation of three powerful forces, which if properly nurtured, could make the coming century an era of peace and harmony in the world. These three forces are Democracy, Ecology and Culture. India is unique and well placed to give strength and meaning to these three "forces" of democracy, ecology and culture. India's rich culture will contribute to the ways in which democratic institutions, ecological concerns and our rich traditions will support each other. The locus of power in the twenty-first century may shift to Asia. The economic strength of India will no doubt increase. A rapid economic growth at a rate of 10 per cent or more for next 10 to 15 years will help India to achieve world respect in the same manner as it has done to China.

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I WAS INVITED to deliver the Sardar Patel Memorial Lecture in the year 1999. It may be mentioned that this series of lectures was started in 1955 by the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting with broadcast of the Lecture by All India Radio, in the memory of Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, India's first Minister of Information & Broadcasting and Home Minister. Fondly remembered as the 'Iron Man of India', Sardar Patel made a remarkable contribution to nation building by means of consolidation of the princely States. A galaxy of eminent leaders, scientists, and historians have adorned this podium in the past to deliver the Lecture.

The recording of this lecture is broadcast on Sardar Patel's birth anniversary i.e. 31st October on the national hook-up by All India Radio.

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II. Introduction

The twentieth century has been the most disastrous in human history in social and political terms – nearly 200 million men and women have died in military or political conflicts. Three great struggles, spread over more than one half of the century – World Wars I and II, and the Cold War – made cannon fodder out of human beings. Many other battlefields, from anti-colonial movements to civil strife, contributed to this carnage. A large number of persons – men, women and children – died in preventable famines and epidemics. Many brutalities such as torture and female genital mutilation have been widespread and lack of compassion in dealing with human beings and nature have been a distinctive feature of the present century. And yet, as this century comes to a close, and a new millennium begins, we clearly see the generation of three powerful forces, which if properly nurtured, could make the coming century an era of peace and harmony in the world. These three forces are those of Democracy, Ecology and Culture.

India is well placed to give strength and meaning to the ‘forces’ of Democracy, Ecology and Culture. As the world’s largest democracy and a plural society in terms of ethnicity and religions, languages and art, climates and eco-systems and a well-developed culture, India is unique. Surely such a country is thus entitled to play a major role in the new millennium.

III. Democracy

Let me begin with democracy. Democracy emerged in 1947 in a mood of triumph despite the pervading gloom unleashed by the partition of India. There was an ennobling spirit in this mood; for democracy was associated with freedom, equality and equity. Introduction of universal adult franchise – both for men and women and assertion of secularism became core elements of the value system of the new Republic. There were many who had doubted and have continued to do so until recently as to whether India would survive as a democracy. Several elections in the past and the recent one, as well as the functioning of the democratic institutions in the country have fully established that governance in India can be only in conformity with the people’s will.

It is not that democracy and secular values were unknown to India. Democracy had received some expression more than 2 millennia ago in Vaishali in Bihar, like that of Athens in ancient Greece. Recent excavations have established that the republic of the Lichhavis had a common meeting place where assemblies were held at regular intervals to decide matters falling in the public domain. In this assembly both men and women participated, although the seating arrangements were separate. The republic has been popularly referred as the Vajjian territory and it was a well established institution in the 6th century B.C. Buddha spoke very highly of this republic and revealed its important feature on which depended its strength and security in the following dialogue.

“And the Blessed One said to him : “Have you heard, Anand, that the Vajjian (Confederacy of Republics at Vaishali) hold full and frequent Public assemblies?” ‘Lord, so I have heard’, replied he.

“So long Ananda, rejoined the Blessed One, ‘as the Vijjians hold these full and frequent public assemblies, so long may they be expected not to decline, but to prosper’.

Similarly, the inscriptions of Ashok – in the 3rd century B.C. clearly enjoined upon the people to respect different faiths and that it was the duty of the State to protect minorities. Several of our scriptures and folklores gave tremendous support to such concepts of pluralism.

Students of my generation frequently participated in or witnessed lively debates on Marxism versus Gandhism, democracy versus dictatorship and between the development models of India, China and the Soviet Union. It was widely believed that the Soviet Union and China grew faster than India because these two countries had jettisoned the basic democratic rights of the people. In recent years, the enormous success of the economies of several countries in East Asia in 80’s which did not have full democratic forms, strengthened this belief further. More recently, however, scholars and social workers, economists and politicians are increasingly advocating that for sustainable development, a transparent and participatory democracy is essential.

50 years of democratic experience provide us with two important lessons. The first is that democracy requires a continuing expansion of its processes to stay in front. The second relates to the critical area of governance to enable democracy to promote meaningful development.

It is my belief that the Constitution of India would have been different in its character if India was not partitioned in 1947. The heavy reliance of the Constitution on the framework of the Government of India Act, 1935 was a result of the need to preserve unity and integrity of the country in the aftermath of the partition. Otherwise the constitution would have reflected more of the spirit of the freedom movement and Gandhiji’s philosophy of village republic as well as several of our cultural and ecological concerns. There is no denying that Chapter 4 of the Constitution dealing with Directive Principles of State Polity, which was made non-justiciable, reflected some of these concerns. The amendment of the Constitution establishing Panchayati Raj institutions in the villages in the year 1992, however, is an important further step in this direction.

The elections to Lok Sabha, the State Legislative Assemblies and several of our Panchayats have not only created a large group of democratic leaders in the country but have also strengthened the democratic processes themselves. The reservation of 33 per cent of seats to women in Panchayati Raj is a welcome step and this experiment in India would be of particular relevance to the global community. We have to ensure in coming years that elections are held to the Panchayati Raj institutions all over the country and that sufficient powers are delegated to them to manage primary and secondary schools, primary health centres and development and revenue offices. However in a job starved society the temptation among Panchayati Raj leaders to offer employment in Panchayat office to their supporters would need to be resisted. Such a tendency would commit the financial Resources of the Panchayats to salaries of grade C and D staff and thus divert the

developmental capacity of the Panchayats to provide infrastructure and services in the village. A large number of States are already using their entire revenue resources on meeting salaries and pensions of their employees at the cost of development works. The need therefore is to strike a balance in the powers to be delegated to the Panchayati Raj institutions to allow them to take decisions on local issues which can combine more responsive and efficient local governance with prudence in financial management while restraining their more profligate tendencies.

In a country with 4694 ethnic groups with different economic, social and religious practices, it is only to be expected that leaders would soon draw upon their traditional constituencies in seeking political support. As is well known, the social milieu of our traditional society was tied in relationship of the subordination and super-ordination to each other and thus cementing an intensely hierarchical order. Such a society was also characterized by profound inequities and multi-layered formal and informal exploitation mechanisms. The Dalits and the Adivasis, the backward classes, the minorities and the women suffered greatly under this order. The advent of democracy and adult franchise under the Constitution gave a severe blow to this exploitative system. The land reforms (though inadequate), the community development programmes and rural employment schemes, and industrialization, provided meaningful opportunities to the people and successfully challenged the very basis of this cruelty. The liberation of Dalits from the control of the upper-castes is one of the greatest achievements of our liberal democracy. The demographic expansion of the middle class both in urban and rural areas is another positive feature. Another significant development relates to the fact that the social background of ruling elites as well as major political parties has undergone changes in several States as well as at the Centre. Such changes have been negotiated through the mechanism of democracy without any exceptionally violent alteration in the content or procedures of the business of governance and orderly political processes.

Our experience has clearly shown that the governmental response to people's problems at times is directly related to the pressure that people put on the system. The exercise of franchise rights as well as the role of the press make a real difference to the quality of response of an administration. It has been our experience that while we had series of famines in the first half of the 20th Century, there had been none in democratic India.

We have witnessed a profound value shift in the mindset of people in India over the years. The poor are no longer blaming fate for their living conditions nor do they believe in Avatars. Today they are trying hard and struggling to change their environment. It is for the system to reach them with a helping hand. It is our experience that whenever in India policies to encourage growth and development of human resources and infrastructure have been effectively combined, poverty diminished rapidly and social indicators improved.

Another aspect of the deepening of democratic process relates to the civil society. Powerful civil society at the village or town level can play an

important role – not only in strengthening the resolve of the poor to fight for the betterment of their conditions but also in making the administrative system more responsive to the needs of the poor. Mahatma Gandhi more than anybody else in this century, showed that the poor have the capacity to alter their lives and also their environment.

The crucial issue is of governance. It has been my good fortune to work with early leaders of the Republic both in Assam and at the Centre and also with subsequent generations of leaders. One has come across a large number of persons of integrity and vision imbued with a deep sense of public service. In contemporary times, however, the spirit of service of the early Republic both in political leadership and in higher civil service is somewhat missing. One sees with pain that several of our leaders in command of different levels of governance are often busy either promising or politicking but not governing. There is lack of conviction and vigour among many of them to improve the conditions in the country in the area of their responsibility.

Let me say a word about the higher rung of civil service because it is so essential to the functioning of government. One of the key problems is that civil servants are overly engaged in relentless gossip about transfers and postings and in anticipating the wishes of their political masters. There seems little desire to improve and change the procedures, which cause delay. A pernicious consequence of this phenomenon is : frequent transfer of key functionaries like Secretaries to Government of India, Chief Secretaries and DGP's in States, District Magistrates and Superintendents of police in districts and so on. There is an imperative need to give fixed tenures to key functionaries and make them accountable for their performance and also to encourage innovations among civil servants.

Among permanent civil servants at decision making levels, there is an attitudinal problem as well. Decision making and monitoring authority are vested in officials above the age group of 45 in most of the Departments. There is in them a psyche of 'Vanaprastha' at that age which inhibits them from being aggressive. Many times I have myself felt tempted in this way. A conscious effort is needed to shake-off this attitude if results are to be achieved.

There is also a dangerous nexus between politicians, civil servants and businessmen for private gains. This can be broken only when investigation agencies show rare boldness to unearth the wrong doings of their own senior colleagues and political masters. Towards this, both the civil society and the judiciary have to support and encourage these agencies.

Whether it is Naxalite violence in Adilabad in Andhra Pradesh or caste violence in Jehanabad in Bihar or ethnic conflict in Kokrajhar in Assam, the problem needs to be seen from a local perspective. We find that conflict management capacity of the local institutions and local society are severely constricted compared to the magnitude of the problem. The interventionist capacity of the State and the Centre does not yield adequate results for lack of adequate capacities at the local level. We need to increase the capacities at local level and use optimally the resources that are available.

Democratic governance, notwithstanding its intrinsic value, will not by itself sustain and promote people's aspirations. We have therefore, to implement the suggestions listed above and that will help ensure a positive future, both for democratic institutions and our people.

IV. Ecology

Our own sages and scholars more than two millennia ago had conceived the world as a family and had proclaimed that "the earth is my mother and I am a child of the world". To them soil, river, trees, cattle and fire were sacred. In their perception, human destiny was inextricably linked with environment and conditioned by it.

During the last 50 years, however, we have altered our natural landscape in decisive ways replacing trees, shrubs and grasses with roads and buildings, dams and canals, townships and industrial structures. Notwithstanding our cultural tradition of according sacred status to our rivers like Yamuna and Ganga, we did not set up effluent plants for our industrial units and allowed the waste to directly flow into them. Similarly, the urban centres and small manufacturing units were allowed to freely emit sewage and other wastes to rivers. As a result the Yamuna has already been converted into a dirty *Nala* and the Ganga has been heavily polluted. The condition of and treatment meted out to other rivers and wetlands is somewhat similar. The magnitude of problems with respect to drinking water and sanitation facilities, soil maintenance, bio-diversity conservation and purity of air is such that it needs immediate attention.

The forest cover has considerably depleted with the rapid growth in population and industrial activities since 1947. The forests currently cover less than 20 per cent of the country's geographical area against the target of 33 per cent enshrined in our National Forest Policy. Fuel wood is still the most important form of household fuel in rural and urban areas and makes a heavy demand on our forest resources. India's forests are also subjected to pressure from logging to foot the demand for timber and pulp by industries and urban consumers. The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 is a landmark legislation in conserving forest wealth in the country. Efforts have been made in some parts of the country, most glaringly in Arunachal Pradesh, which is one of the India's richest ever green forest and bio-diversity regions, to by-pass the stringent provisions of law in the name of development. The Supreme Court has rightly intervened to ensure conservation of forests in Arunachal Pradesh and elsewhere in the country. The agricultural base of the Indian economy is dependent heavily on the nation's surface and ground water resources as also of monsoon. The problem of the depleting water tables is a major challenge. About 21 per cent of the rural population and 15 per cent of the urban population still lack access to clean drinking water.

Besides, women in many areas spend upto 8 hours a day just to collect water. Our development policies have also caused hardships to people. Terming dams and power stations temples of modern India, we called on tribals and peasants to sacrifice in larger national interest. Sacrifice they did. When their lands were submerged under dams, they received a pittance

in compensation. Paper mills were granted bamboo at throwaway prices, which they promptly exhausted switching to eucalyptus when bamboo was no longer available. But lakhs of rural artisans dependent on bamboo had no such option and were turned into ecological refugees. No serious effort was made to educate or impart employment skills to them. Indeed, development had quickly been equated to channelizing nation's resources to a narrow elite of omnivores – powerful landowners and urbanites in the organized industries and services sectors. These resource flows were driven by large scale state sponsored subsidies. This created a system of highly inefficient resource use, a system that led to resource exhaustion even as it fostered social inequities and regional imbalances.

We cannot afford to continue like this. Happily, both the government and the people are responding to these challenges.

There has been good work in several parts of the country to increase the tree cover through development of forests, plantations, natural generation programmes on the one hand and conservation of traditional forests. In the North-East, I had the occasion to see some of the 'Scared Groves' in Meghalaya which are the best representative of tropical/sub-tropical vegetation. These forests are "sacred" groves and are traditionally managed by either families or clans and are very rich in floral and faunal diversity. Unfortunately, these sacred groves are increasingly coming under threat both on account of demography and change in belief systems. However, a visit to these scared groves gives one the feel of the attachment of the tribal society to 'groves'.

Our experience has shown that environment awareness is an area that needs constant attention of the Government, the private sector, the NGOs and the concerned citizens. A decade ago, I had the pleasure to watch the school-going children participate in a nation-wide painting competition programme on environment awareness. I was surprised to see both the level of awareness and the quality of paintings. Several of the paintings of our young children were adjudged to be of world standards by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). There is need to continually involve the students as well as the professionals in creative efforts that would give them deep understanding and fashioning of development programmes, keeping in view the ecological concerns. School children in particular, would need to be made aware of both their natural and cultural heritage in their locality, rather than to be aware of only such aspects of our heritage, which are of national or global significance. This would enable them to see these places in a new perspective that in turn would create a degree of attachment as well as concern and that would be the greatest source of guarantee for their conservation and upkeep.

The task of integrating environmental concerns in our development programme is not always such a complex phenomenon as is widely believed. The success in implementation of development programmes would invariably depend upon peoples' cooperation and that would be forthcoming more easily if the development projects are sensitive to the purity of soil, forests, air and water. The wise use of natural resources alone would

guarantee sustainable development. The villagers are steeped in the Indian culture of reverence for nature. It is this culture that is responsible for the rich network of banyan, peepal and other Ficus trees that continues to cloth our undoubtedly much devastated rural landscape. The need to improve access of our managers to clean technology in execution of industrial projects is another area of concern and would have a direct bearing on purity of air and water resources and optimal use of energy resources.

The future of ecological restoration lies both in efficacy of the legal system and belief in shared values. A dedicated cadre of civil servants and police personnel supported by the local leadership would ensure that those indulging in destruction of forests and wildlife trade would be punished under law. But power of law by itself can not be a reliable guide to ecological order. The rule of law inhibits the capacity of poachers and traders to indulge in wanton destruction of forests and illegal trade in trees and wildlife. We need a democratic culture of sharing and informing between people and the government. We must also draw upon our religious and spiritual strength that favours conservation and also our rich history of ecological movements and the traditions of ecological prudence among several of our ethnic communities. Only then we can hope to vanquish the forces of environmental destruction.

V. Culture

The third area on which I would like to dwell is culture. What is India's culture? This is a question that can not be easily answered. And yet India's culture which blossomed more than three millennia ago, has given successive generations of Indians a world-view, a value system, and a way of life, which has been retained with remarkable continuity – this despite the passage of time, repeated foreign invasions, enormous growth in population and expansion in human consciousness. It gives to Indians as well as to people of Indian origin, a unique, a unique personality today, as it has done in the past. By the year AD 1, India had a highly developed culture. The achievements in the realm of literature, art, dance and drama, poetry, economy, astronomy, and religion before the beginning of the Christian era have continued to influence its people during the last two millennia.

India, Egypt, Iraq, Greece, and China have been recognized as the five major cradles of human civilization. The ancient civilization of India, however, differs from the others in that its traditions have remained intact to the present day. In this respect it is like China. In fact, both India and China can claim to have the oldest continuous cultural traditions in the world.

One of the unique things about India is that it possesses a developed culture but not yet a developed economy. This cultural status is of special relevance today within a world that has changed substantially after the end of the world war, and radically since 1991. It is now widely assumed that the status of a country will be determined not by its military arsenal but by the power of its economy, which in turn has come to mean that countries with sophisticated technology and the largest share of world trade will be the most powerful and important. I am not one of those who overlook the importance of market forces or world trade, or who ignore military arsenals

as factors in international politics. However, I do believe that in the future culture will be an important variable, along with market and trade, in determining the position of a country within the comity of nations. This aspect needs to be kept in view not only by our leaders in the arenas of culture, security and trade, but also by our politicians, planners, civil servants, the media, and the academic world. It is in this context that India has to consciously adopt a policy of placing culture at the centre of things to create an environment that encourages self-expression by individuals and communities. Pride in India's culture is a concomitant of this, but we must realize that we can not be treated deferentially by others simply because of the fact that our ancestors were great people.

In a past publication, I argued that culture is power. I then defined culture as follows: "As expressed through language and art, philosophy and religion, education and science, films and newspapers, radio and television, social habits and customs, political institutions and economic organisations, culture heightens the skills of an individual and a society in its totality in all walks of life because it is by culture that a man or a society gets an insight into the whole.... Culture includes not only art, music, dance, and drama, but a whole way of life. In part, culture is 'sanskriti', or a process of refinement. It is in this broader sense that culture has to be viewed."

A number of scholars and civil servants told me that I had misused the word 'culture.' I still hold to my opinion because for me the term culture, in its most comprehensive sense, refers to the diverse creative activities of a people – to literature; to the visual and performing arts; and to various forms of artistic self expression by the individual (specialist or lay) or by communities. These activities give a sense of purpose to human existence and , at the same time, provide the reflective poise and spiritual energy so essential to the maturing of a 'good society'.

Culture is a dynamic variable, enormously potent and influential. When it is articulated in a manner aimed at achieving an objective, it releases the dormant energies of a community.

Among the factors that have contributed to the continuity and richness of our culture, the most important one is our plural character – ideas, languages, forms of worship, architecture, agricultural practices, dress, handicrafts, medicine, industry, science, and instruments of production and consumption. The answer lies in secular and fair policies in respect of rights over land, employment, economic benefits, education, use of language, political representation, and freedom of religion.

In fact, the approach to culture in India must positively encourage regional diversity and not just tolerate it. No region or group should have the feeling of a threat of being swamped. There are no 'majority' and 'minority' cultures. The smallest unit has its contribution to make to the enrichment of the national sum total, and must be respected. It is not possible, in our development paradigm, to support the concept of culture standing apart from social life. Culture has to be an active process in the movement of history.

We have to involve our people and also to manage our institutions in a better fashion. It is with this background that it has been decided by the Government of India to set up the National Culture Fund. Donations to the Fund are exempted from income tax. To attract the corporate sector and business houses, it has been provided that, while making donations to the Fund, it would be possible for a donor to designate a project along with any specific location/aspect for funding, and also an agency for the execution of the project, subject to general policy guidelines and rules in this behalf. The authorities of the Fund will respect the choice of the donor to the extent possible.

The National Culture Fund, launched in March 1997, is expected to become a new cultural centre – a nexus of invention and creativity. There is a need to strengthen the managerial capabilities of various cultural organizations. The tasks of service to heritage sites, archival materials, museums and art centres, libraries and anthropological research have all suffered for want of organized All India Services. It would, therefore, be necessary for the government to move towards the institution of an Indian Archaeological Service, an Indian Archival Service, Indian Museums and Art-Service, an Indian Anthropological Service, and an Indian Library Service. The creation of these service structures could go a long way in boosting the morale of employees in these organizations, improving their promotion prospects, and serving the wider cause of augmentation of efficiency in these fields of cultural pursuit.

It is the national government's policy to move in the direction of establishing museums and cultural centres at the district level. Efforts are being made to strengthen library and information networks at the grassroots level, and to take full advantage of the new leadership, particularly from among women, that is emerging as a result of the new Panchayati Raj democracy. We must not forget that to live without a cultural memory is not to live at all. Our cultural memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. As we have seen, our different ethnic groups have at different periods of their history found solutions to their problems and their culture has helped them resolve their crisis.

We are not without answers to our concurrent concerns. In the long history of Indian culture two personalities – Gautama Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi – stand out as world figures. If their message of peace and non-violence are properly harmonized with the social and economic realities of our life and times, it seems to have the potential to avert any future clash among civilizations and also to strengthen the forces of democracy, ecology, and culture. In the current global crisis of strife and violence, ethnic unrest and ceaseless materialism, ecological erosions, and overstretched resources, Mahatma Gandhi offers a human and humanizing alternative in which there would be enough for everybody's needs but not for anybody's greed. A uniform pattern of development – in whatever field – has to make way for alternative and multiple patterns. The Gandhian approach is a self-questioning, self-critical one, which, at another level, connects with the Buddhist approach as well, which is exemplified in the axiom: "Be a lamp unto yourself" (Appa Deepo Bhav).

VI. Conclusion

There is an intrinsic relationship between culture and democracy. Culture through its creative activities gives a sense of purpose to human existence. It embodies values that bind the society together. While democracy provides instrumentalities for implementation of governance and development, culture gives necessary light. In fact culture is a kind of lens through which we are capable of knowing and remembering the past, that is our heritage. It is capable of revealing the broader horizons of the past and illuminating the future – not in detail of course, but at least showing the direction in which the society is moving. Both democracy and culture in their finest expressions support each other.

In my view the relationship between culture and ecology exists at a deeper level in our heritage and could be made to operate in our personal life and in planning and implementation of developmental programmes. The role of an artist is to create a sense of reverence and beauty among the people for their environment. A work of art should inspire people, help them to see beauty in nature, and recognize beauty in themselves and in all human endeavours. Art has essentially been an inherent human technology for expressing consciousness in matter. Artists have created objects, rituals, and environments not only for subjective expression, but also as homage to the creator, to ensure harmony with nature and to promote the well-being of nature itself. According to the traditional Indian view, art is a living process. In this thought process, trees are sacred, earth is sacred, water is sacred, and above all, the environment is sacred.

It would seem that the threat to the environment through industrialization and urbanization is at the same time a threat to culture. The answer lies in the realization that there is a close relationship between spiritual, cultural, social and economic problems of a community. The belief systems of most of our Adivasis and believers in various religious faiths hold the natural objects as sacred. Consequently, the culture and life-styles that evolved treated Nature as sacred and did not exploit the natural resources without concern for their sustainability. The sustainable development philosophy therefore demands that the new paradigm of development must take social, cultural and spiritual values of a society into account for meaningful progress – a confluence too long neglected.

The heritage of the past, the bitter experience of violence, and the global sharing of information about violence and ugliness are helping in the emergence of a new mind-set. The concerns for ecology, human rights, democracy and pluralism should be sharpened by this sharing of information. The artists can help in learning the art of living, and of relating to people, to nature and the environment, which can provide satisfactory inputs towards a more contented existence.

Democracy needs social stability to succeed in its goals. The greatest threat to social stability emanates from unemployment and poverty. When we look at the world, we find that poverty and unemployment is at low level only in countries where people are educated and healthy. Poor health and

illiteracy are major sources of poverty and unemployment. This is also our own development experience. The success of democracy in India is therefore dependent upon how effectively and how rapidly we tackle the problems. The problems are acute in U.P., Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa and West Bengal and we have to take firm initiatives in respect of these States.

The need is for rapid expansion and strengthening of primary and secondary schools and primary health centres. Effective health programmes are needed to complement education, in raising the productivity of labour to reduce poverty. We have to place effective management of schools and health centres and all aspects related thereto at the centre of our work in government as well as in civil society. Towards this goal, we must utilize synergies available in our society. The Government must take the lead to involve NGOs, faith organisations and the private sector in this work. District/region based strategies should be developed and responsibilities should be clearly demarcated among organizations and powers delegated.

In view of the magnitude of the task associated with construction of schools, recruitment and training of teachers, finalisation of curriculum of studies and holding of examinations, we should associate cultural bodies and faith organizations like caste and religious societies in this work. While the Government should have full control over recruitment and training of teachers, course curriculum and examinations, funds and school buildings and day-to-day control over teachers and staff could be entrusted to these voluntary organizations acting in concert with the local Panchayat and the District Officer. The superannuated public servants should be engaged as school teachers up to the age of 65 after interview and willingness tests. We have a vast array of group of C and D employees and their productivity in offices is extremely low and at times they only impede work. They could be shifted to schools and health centres if they are so willing and proficient. Otherwise, over a period of time all these posts could be transferred to schools and hospitals.

It is my belief that complete eradication of illiteracy in short period is only possible if we succeed in perceiving it as a cultural challenge. This requires explosion in creative energies of the Indian middle class, a willingness and determination on the part of political leadership to select teachers on merit and give them such training and salaries in order that they can ensure a generation jump of students particularly living in rural areas as they are lagging behind their urban counterparts in computer and internet education. During the freedom movement thousands of school were set up as this work became the pride of a village and /or a community. There is a growing feeling in the world that India is performing far below its potential, and that problems before the country are enormous. This is indeed true. We have a long way to go in the areas of democracy, ecology and even in culture. There is however, no need to be apologetic. The lists of India's achievements in the past and during the last 50 years are impressive.

We can reasonably take pride in the fact that during the period of recorded global history of the past 2500 years India was a major power for 1300 years (roughly up to 8th Century) and became again a major power for

over a period of 100 years during the Mughal rule. We developed rational traditions in this country "as this was a country in which some of the earliest steps in algebra, geometry and astronomy were taken, where the decimal system emerged, where taken, where the decimal system emerged, where early philosophy – secular as well as religious – achieved exceptional sophistication, where people invented games like chess, pioneered sex education, and began the first systematic study of political economy". The Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Upanishads and the Bhagavadgita, the finest works of art and sculpture of Ajanta and Ellora and various Buddhist shrines, the best universities of the world of their times at Nalanda and Vikramshila are achievements that should give us pride in our heritage.

In recent years, it has been possible for us to create a large pool of technical and scientific talent, eradicate famines, and ensure democratic functioning in our society. In fact the three organs of the government, namely, the legislative, the executive and the judiciary are functioning in a manner that does not allow authoritarian groups or regimes to emerge in the name of democracy. The world looks to India with respect for the manner in which we have permitted and practised a plural society. Our experience in turn should make us more concerned about our minorities and the weaker sections of our society. We must realize that only a democratic, secular India will command the trust not only of our own people, but also of the world.

The end of colonialism and the end of communism are the two seminal landmarks of this century. This double demise shifted the determinants of global status away from military might and towards markets. But the supremacy of the market may not be long lived unless spiritualization of market takes place. This is, of course, somewhat utopian. But as a barometre of international influence, the market in the long run will surely not be everlasting; it could well be replaced by another index composed of democracy, ecology and culture. As the new millennium unfolds, nations, which are strong in these elements, are likely to advance in the index of global importance.

In this mix, culture has a special place. The market and its cohorts, technology and multi-lateral, multi-national organisations, presently dominate. But this dominance, will lead directly to a psychologically and physically unbalanced situation creating a harsh universe, which will breed self destructive societies and individuals. The ethics, the balance and the restraints of democracy and ecology are required to temper this bleak prospect. And even that is not enough. Only culture can provide the human and spiritual dimensions which could restrain the worst of the techno-market imperative and offer the conditioning ethos for greatness.

India's contributions to world culture, its rich bio-diversity and great pluralism have generated awe, fascination, and respect. In 1915 Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy summed up the position when he wrote:

Each race contributes something essential to the world's civilization in the course of its own self-expression, the essential contribution of India, is simply her Indianness; her great humiliation would be to substitute or to

have substituted for this own character (svabhava) a Cosmopolitan veneer, for then indeed she must come before the world empty-handed.

The developments in India, particularly since 1947, have given us confidence that in the new millennium India will not face the world empty-handed, that she will continue to justify Iqbal's dictum that 'there is something that does not allow the Indian continuum to perish'.

The locus of power in the twenty-first century may shift to Asia. The economic strength of India will no doubt increase. A rapid economic growth at a rate of 10 per cent or more for next 10 to 15 years will help India to achieve world respect in the same manner as it has done to China. This is both possible and likely but one is not sure that India, like the USA and China, will emerge as a great world economic power having a decisive say in world market. Notwithstanding the various shortcomings and failures of India, Indian culture has continued to provide a distinct personality to Indians as well as to the people of Indian origin in different lands. One can be reasonably certain that the growing role of creative persons in India's society, polity and economy will ensure that India retains this personality and contribute to the ways in which democratic institutions, ecological concerns and our rich traditions will support each other.

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