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Honors Plan

22 March 2018

India's Survival and Evolution as a Complex Modern Nation-State – Part IV

The Conclusion: Why India Survives?

After the era of the Emergency and the subsequent failure of the Janata Party to complete its term, Indira Gandhi and the Congress were reelected to power in 1980. The early 1980s was marked by the emergence of the Khalistan movement, which called for a separate homeland for the Sikhs. The movement grew militant in nature and one of its leaders, Jarnail Singh Bindrawale, took refuge in the Golden Temple at Amritsar, one of the holiest sites for Sikhs. As the situation worsened, Indira Gandhi initiated Operation Blue Star, in which the army moved into the Golden Temple with arms and tanks. This controversial decision led to a three-day battle in the Golden Temple, and around 500 militants were killed, along with thousand army casualties. Operation Blue Star served a major blow to the militant movement, yet it had tragic consequences. It led to the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, which in turn provoked the brutal Hindu-Sikh riots of 1984. Ramachandra Guha asserts that “even by the standards of Indian politics, 1984 was an especially turbulent year” with Operation Bluestar, the assassination of Indira Gandhi, and the devastating Bhopal Gas Tragedy. The Bhopal gas leak would lead to 2000 deaths by direct exposure, while another 50,000 would suffer from its side-effects. After the death of Indira Gandhi, her son, Rajiv Gandhi was sworn-in as the prime minister. Rajiv Gandhi was India's youngest prime minister but a reluctant entrant into politics. As an outsider, he was charismatic and “was compared to John F. Kennedy, who had likewise

‘symbolised youth and the hope of a new generation’” (572-73). During his tenure, the secessionist tensions with the Mizos, Sikhs, and Assamese eased through negotiations, and India began its transformation to the computer age. His administration had the “intention to take India directly from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first, from the age of the bullock cart to the age of the personal computer” (573). Yet, his term was marred by the divisive Shah Bano case and the Bofors Scandal, which subsequently led to the loss of the Congress Party in the 1989 elections. In the international frame, Rajiv Gandhi sent peace keeping forces during the Sri Lankan Civil War and intervened in the Maldives coup. A couple of years later, while campaigning for the 1991 elections, Rajiv Gandhi would be assassinated by members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who had opposed Gandhi for his role during the Sri Lankan Civil War. 1991 was also a breakthrough year for India as Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh liberalized India’s economy and moved from the socialist models of the past. All in all, the early 1990s was marked by the era of coalition governments, rise of the backward classes, movement against affirmative action, and the rise of the right. The rise of Hindu fundamentalism was apparent on December 6th, 1992, when a nationwide campaign caused the chaotic demolition of the Babri Masjid, a historic mosque located in Ayodhya, regarded as a spiritual city for Hindus. This generated widespread communal violence across India, which in turn, provoked the 1993 Bombay Bombings. Along with these occurrences, the consequences of other major events during the 1990s are still unwinding today and hence, will not be discussed in this essay. Rather, we will conclude “India’s Survival and Evolution as a Complex Modern Nation-State” by analyzing Guha’s riveting epilogue, ‘Why India Survives?’ from *India After Gandhi*. In the following essay, three aspects of India’s survival will be analyzed—the factors that contributed to India’s nationhood,

the state of Indian democracy, and a brief comparison of India with other nations. India's story of survival can be attributed to the work of its founding fathers, the commitment of its citizens to protect India's plurality, secularism, and diversity, and the importance of social and cultural cohesion.

Before analyzing India's journey as a nation, let us first analyze factors that have historically fueled nationalism. Isaiah Berlin asserted that the "'necessary' condition for the birth of nationalist sentiment" to transform into a "widespread political movement" requires a "general unifying factor or factors—language, ethnic origin, a common history" (739). In the western world, "a shared language, shared religious faith, shared territory, or a common enemy" were evident in forming a national spirit. For example, the majority Protestant British united over an island in opposition to the French, France "combined [language] powerfully with religion," Americans utilized a "shared language and a widely shared faith" with "animosity toward the colonists," and "the Poles, the Czechs, the Lithuanians, etc." were "united by a common language, a mostly common faith, and a shared bitter history of domination by German and Russian oppressors" (739). None of these factors are major unifying aspects of Indian nationhood. India does not "privilege a single language or religious faith" and "although the majority of its citizens are Hindus, India is not a Hindu nation" (739). One could view India's nationalism based on the opposition to British colonialism, but even in this aspect, India's journey is slightly unique. The British historian, Michael Howard, "claims that 'no Nation, in the true sense of the word...could be born without war...no self-conscious community could establish itself as a new and independent actor on the world scene without an armed conflict or the threat of one'" (745). Although the independence movement united the Indian people, the non-violent approach was unique to other independence movements worldwide (745).

Most of India's freedom fighters were fortunate enough to live through its first couple of decades. Guha stresses that "few nations have had, living and working *at the same time*, leaders of such acknowledged intelligence and integrity as Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, and B.R. Ambedkar" (744). Mohandas Gandhi had passed away a year after independence, and by 1950, "Patel had died, and Ambedkar had left office; but by then [Patel] had successfully overseen the political integration of the country and [Ambedkar] the forging of a democratic constitution" (744). Furthermore, Nehru completed three full terms and set defining precedents till his death in 1964. He had the support of "outstanding leaders in his own party—K. Kamaraj and Morarji Desai, for instance—and in the opposition, in whose ranks were such men as J.B. Kripalani and C. Rajagopalachari" (744). Other nations in South Asia such as Myanmar, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal did not have such luck as their founders passed away or lost power within a few years of the country's independence.

The founding fathers' work laid the groundwork for the country's stability. Important decisions during India's early days that helped preserve the nation included establishing the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), forming an apolitical army culture, and keeping the English language. When the British departed, although it was "expected the Indians would embrace metropolitan traditions such as parliamentary democracy and cabinet government," it was surprising that the Indians "endorse[d] and [retained] a quintessentially colonial tradition—the civil service" (746). Various members of the legislative assembly did not support the Indian Civil Service because of its role during the colonial era. Vallabhbhai Patel, though, understood the importance of the bureaucracy and was impressed by their loyalty to the previous British Crown. Members of the civil service were crucial in "those first, difficult years of Indian freedom" as "they helped integrate the princely states, resettle the refugees, plan[ned] and

overs[aw] the first general elections, maintain[ed] law and order in the districts, work[ed] with ministers in the Secretariat, and supervis[ed] famine relief” (746). Today, along with the IAS, the Indian Police Service (IPS), Indian Forest Service (IFS), and other sub-branches complete the bureaucracy. The elite civil service, which was a crucial investment made by the founders, remains “an essential link between the Centre and the states” and “more generally are a bridge between state and society” (747).

Along with the civil services, the army has played an important role in India’s survival. As mentioned earlier, India had to face four wars in the first twenty-five years. The fact that India’s geography was not greatly altered is a reflection of the Indian military. Yet, there were major losses on the way and “although its reputation as a fighting force has gone up and down, as an agency for maintaining order in peacetime the Indian army has usually commanded the highest respect” (748). Apart from external warfare, the army has been crucial in maintaining domestic peace, especially during communal riots. In addition, “in times of natural disaster the army brings succor to the suffering” and is “always the most efficient and reliable actor around” (748). Furthermore, the culture of the Indian army has been a major reason that Indian democracy did not fall into military dictatorships like several other countries in South Asia. The author describes the Indian Army as a “professional, wholly non-sectarian, and apolitical body” (748). Jawaharlal Nehru stressed that any member of the army is “subordinate to the elected politicians,” and “the pattern set in those early years has persisted into the present” (748). As Lieutenant General J.S. Aurora observed, “Nehru laid down some very good norms,” which ensured that “politics in the army has been almost absent” (749). Lastly, it is astonishing that “no army commander has ever run in an election” and if officers “have held public office after

retirement, it has been at the invitation of the government,” usually in the form of ambassadors or state governors (750).

Apart from the army and the civil services, the preservation of the English language was another important decision which has had a lasting impact. One of India’s foremost leaders, Rajaji, stressed that “The colonial rulers, had ‘for certain accidental reasons, causes and purposes...left behind a vast body of the English language.’ But now that it had come, there was no need for it to go away” (750). Along with Hindi, English is the other official language of India. In the Constituent Assembly, it was decided that although Hindi would be the official language of the Union, English would be used for all official purposes for fifteen years. After the fifteen years, English was renewed as the joint official language, and it has remained such ever since. Throughout the years, “English has confirmed, consolidated, and deepened its position as the language of the pan-Indian elite,” has “become the language of power and prestige, and the language of individual as well as social advancement” (751). English “is the passport for employment at higher levels in all fields, is the unplanning to migrate abroad, has meant a tremendous enthusiasm since described as the only non-regional language in India (751). The founding fathers anticipated that English “might help consolidate national unity and further scientific advancement,” “but its role in economic growth has been largely unanticipated” (751).

In addition to the remarkable work conducted in the first decade, India’s commitment to preserving diversity is one of unifying factors of Indian nationalism. Two of the main pillars of Indian diversity are religious and linguistic diversity. Although Mahatma Gandhi’s revolution was “built on harmony and cooperation between Hindus and Muslims,” the Partition of India could not be prevented (739). The pain of Partition and creation of Pakistan solidified India’s desire to be a secular country and convinced the founders that “if India was anything at all, it was

not a ‘Hindu Pakistan’” (739-40). Seventy years post-independence, has India’s secularism survived? The answer is yes, but there is a wide room for improvement. The Constitution provides protection for the minorities and “membership in a minority religion is no bar to advancing in business or the professions” (740). At the time of writing, “the richest industrialist in India”, Bollywood stars, singers, cricket captains, “three presidents,” four chief justices, and other influential officials have been Muslim (740). In addition, “many of the country’s most prominent lawyers and doctors have been Christians and Parsis” (740). Yet, communal riots have occurred, and discrimination still exists in certain areas of society. The rise of the right-wing parties has caused concerns to the supporters of secular India. The “nationalism once promoted by the old Jana Sangh and promoted now, in a more sophisticated form, by the BJP” have historically invoked a “common ‘Aryan’ ancestry for the Hindus, a common history of suffering at the hands of (mostly Muslim) invaders,” and created a “popular slogan: ‘Hindi, Hindu, Hindustani’” (739). Over the course of the past seventy years, imposing a national language has slowly dwindled, “but the desire to impose the majority religion persisted,” which has generated “much conflict, violence, rioting, and death” (743). In 2002, a couple of thousand citizens lost their lives in the dreadful Gujarat riots, which “to some extent was approved by the central government,” which led to “fears about the survival of a secular, democratic India” (743). Regardless of these occasional occurrences, democracy has laid its root in India and even if right-wing party members “privately wish for a theoretic Hindu state, for public consumption they must endorse the secular ideals of the Indian constitution” (744).

In addition to secularism, “pluralism of language” is one of the “cornerstones of the Indian Republic” (740). After the State Reorganization Act of 1956, the linguistic states have stayed. In the past sixty years, linguistic states have become a pillar of unification because “a

common language has provided the basis of administrative unity and efficiency” and has led to “an efflorescence of cultural creativity, as expressed in film, theatre, fiction, and poetry” (740). The creation of linguistic states did not cause separatist sentiment, but only emboldened regional pride. On the contrary, it was “religious and territorial, not linguistic distinctiveness, that incited the three “major secessionist movements in independent India—in Nagaland in the 1950s, in Punjab in the 1980s, and in Kashmir in the 1990 (741). India’s pluralism is best demonstrated on its currency. Apart from being printed in Hindi and English, the currency is also printed “in all the other languages of the Indian Union” in smaller font. At least “seventeen different scripts are represented” on one note (741). All in all, after seventy years, it has “proved possible—indeed, desirable—to be Kannadiga and Indian, Malayali and Indian, Andhra and Indian, Tamil and Indian, Bengali and Indian, Oriya and Indian, Maharashtrian and Indian, Gujarati and Indian, and, of course, Hindi-speaking and Indian” (741).

Economically, India has progressed as a united nation as well. Its “economic integration is a consequence of its political integration” since “the greater the movement of goods, capital, and people across India,” has given a greater sense that India is, “after all, *one* country” (752). In the early days, Nehruvian socialism helped grow India’s economy and solidified the sense of unity. For example, “Bhilai and its steel plant were seen as bearing the torch of history, and as being as much about forging a new kind of society as about forging steel” (753). After the country had stabilized, in 1991, India moved from socialism and liberalized its economy. Now, the “private sector, if with less intent, has furthered the process of national integration” (752-53). The IT boom in India occurred in the early 2000s, especially in the southern cities like Bangalore, the ‘Silicon Valley’ of India. Rise in economic opportunity has increased migration

throughout the country. The free movement of people and cross-mixing across states through employment has been one of the major factors of India's unity.

Apart from the political and economic perspective, the social cohesion of India has proved to be just as important. Indian cinema and sports are crucial part of individuals' livelihood. Bollywood is the "great passion of the Indian people, watched and followed by Indians of all ages, genders, castes, classes, religions, and linguistic groups" (753). Mumbai is the center of Bollywood, but there are other regional film centers like Tollywood (Telegu), Kollywood (Tamil), Mollywood (Malayalam), etc. industries that thrive as well. India produces more films than the United States, numbering to approximately 1,600 films throughout the different languages and grosses third-largest revenues in the world. Film has made an immense impact on the social sphere, with "movie theatres dominat[ing] town" centers of smaller towns, and theatres "strung across [larger metropolises] locality by locality" (711). Actors have become revered members of Indian society. The "actors, musicians, technicians, and directors come from all parts of India," and the nationwide adoration for movies have created another form of social unity. Apart from movies, sports are a major unifying form of entertainment. Traditional games like as kho-kho and kabaddi along with field hockey, football (soccer), and cricket are extremely popular. India won eight consecutive Olympic golds in field hockey between 1928 and 1956, and field hockey remains a popular sport. Soccer is prominent, especially in the northeast regions. Cricket, though, remains the most popular sport, especially after India won the 1983 World Cup. This achievement "coincided with the spread of satellite television, which took the game to small towns and working-class homes" (721). This victory led to the widening of the "social base" as players emerged from smaller backgrounds. Now, "cricket ha[s] come to equal film in mass attention and popularity" and India versus Pakistan games can even take

nationalistic tone. India would later win the 2011 World Cup and with the advent of the lucrative Indian Premier League (IPL) in 2007, it has become the center of world cricket economically. Aside from team sports, India has also produced billiard and chess champions and more recently, in badminton, wrestling, and boxing. Lastly, other than movies and sports, classical Indian music, dance, and live theatre are important social pastimes. Altogether, sports and movies have blurred state lines and have provided the general public something to cheer upon.

National unity was one of the pieces in India's survival—the stability of its democracy is the other. The right to vote remains and has largely remained uncorrupted over the years. More people vote today and vote from different backgrounds. Yogendra Yadav, a political analyst, points out, “India is perhaps the only large democracy in the world today where the turnout of the lower orders is well above that of the most privileged groups” (716). Ramachandra Guha has an interesting view on the state of India's democracy. He emphasizes that looking at the “hardware of democracy, self-congratulation is certainly merited” since “Indians enjoy freedom of expression, movement,” and the right to the vote (738). On the other hand, if one considers the details or “examines the software of democracy, the picture is less cheering” (738). Guha exposes that “political parties have become family firms, most politicians are corrupt, many come from criminal background, institutions central to the functioning of a democracy have declined precipitously, and the percentage of truly independent-minded civil servants” and “fair-minded judges” has deteriorated as well (738). Given the extremes, how should India's democracy be viewed? According to the author, India is neither a ‘proper’ democracy, nor a ‘sham’ democracy. He answers this question by employing “an immortal phrase of the Hindi comic actor Johnny Walker—‘Boss, *phipty-phipty*.’” The actor in the movie answers that he has

a “50% of success and 50% of failure” regardless of the question he is asked, whether that is the likelihood of him marrying or getting a job (738). Guha asserts that, likewise, India is a ‘phifty-phifty’ democracy. It is a functioning democracy because of its history of “holding election[s] and permitting freedom of movement and expression,” yet it is not as functioning because of its “politicians and political institutions” (738). Another political scientist, Pratap Mehta, exhibits that India’s political class has become full of “corruption, mediocrity, indiscipline, venality and lack of moral imagination of the [Indian] political class” and that “the lines between legality and illegality, order and disorder, state and criminality, have come to be increasingly porous” (745). Yet, Ramachandra Guha concludes that the fact that “India is even 50% a democracy flies in the face of tradition, history, and conventional wisdom” (738). Guha asserts that “the distance—intellectual or moral—between Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, or between B.R. Ambedkar and Mulayam Singh Yadav, is not necessarily greater than that between, say, Abraham Lincoln and George W. Bush” (745). Although ‘visionaries’ and statesmen are required to establish democracies, “they can be managed by mediocrities” (745). In India, Guha states, “the sapling was planted by the nation’s founders, who lived long enough (and worked hard enough) to nurture it to adulthood. Those who came afterwards could disturb and degrade the tree of democracy but, try as they might, could not uproot or destroy it” (745).

An intriguing way to analyze India’s modern history is by comparing its journey with other major regions. The author compares “independent India as being Europe’s past as well as its future” (755). Economically, Europe’s past is paralleled by India’s “modernizing, industrializing, urbanizing society,” but socially, India reflects the “European attempt to create a multilingual, multireligious, multi-ethnic political and economic community” (755). While India is the world largest ‘multiethnic’ democracy, the United States is the world’s first ‘multiethnic’

democracy. Yet, the way in which the two countries regulate “relations between its constituent ethnicities have been somewhat different” (755). Samuel Huntington describes the U.S. as being held together “by a ‘creedal culture’” which have revolved around the “Christian religion, Protestant values, moralism, a work ethic, the English language, British traditions of law, justice, and the limits of government power, and a legacy of European art, literature, philosophy, and music” (755). Diversity in both nations are slightly dissimilar. America encompasses cultures from all around the world, while India’s diversity comes from within. A salad bowl analogy has been utilized to describe both nations since different cultures do not necessarily melt together but coexist side by side. Next, China and India are the world’s two most populous countries, and both began their journey around the same time. The only difference was that China adopted communism, while India adopted democracy. Over the last two decades, China has rapidly progressed economically. Yet, even though “China might win economically, [it] will lose politically” (737). As opposed to China, “in India, the press can print more or less what it likes, and citizens can say exactly what they feel, live where they want, and travel to any part of the country” (737). Lastly, several other sub-Saharan African countries and smaller Asian nations gained its independence in the mid-twentieth century at the downfall of colonial era. In terms of stability and progress, India has done well compared to several others of these independent states. Altogether, analyzing India’s progress through the lens of other nations lead to some interesting insights.

All in all, India managed to survive and in several spheres of influence, even thrives. As seen in the previous essay, India’s democracy suffered a scare during the Emergency between 1975-77. Yet, the “elections of 1977 (called by an individual who had proven dictatorial tendencies) and the elections of 2004 (called by a party unreliably committed to democratic

procedure) both testified to the deep roots that democracy had put down in the soil of India (744). Scientist Haldane called India a ‘wonderful experiment’ and fifty years later, the experiment “might be counted as a modest success” (759). Although poverty persists in certain places, it is declining rapidly, and it is “certain that India will not the way of sub-Saharan Africa, and experience widespread famine” (759). Although secessionist movements are alive in certain regions, “there is no fear anymore that India will follow the former Yugoslavia and break up into a dozen fratricidal parts” (759). Although some politicians are corrupt and “powers of the state are sometimes grossly abused, no one seriously thinks that India will follow neighboring Pakistan” (759). Guha describes India’s journey as ‘simply sui generis.’ India’s story “stands on its own, different and distinct from alternative political models such as Anglo-Saxon liberalism, French republicanism, atheistic communism, and Islamic theocracy” (759). Guha concludes by stating the following:

“Speaking now of India the nation state, one must insist that its future lies not in the hands of God but in the mundane works of men. So long as the constitution is not amended beyond recognition, so long as elections are held regularly and fairly and the ethos of secularism broadly prevails, so long as citizens can speak and write in the language of their choosing, so long as there is an integrated market and moderately efficient civil service and army—and lest I forget—so long as Hindi films are watched and their songs sung, India will survive” (759).

India’s journey as a modern nation began at a troubling junction with the Partition, civil war, and refugee resettlement. Under Nehru and Patel, India integrated into one state and formed a stable democracy. In the 1960s, India lost to China, but revamped its military to survive the threats from Pakistan. In 1971, Bangladesh was liberalized and Indira Gandhi came to the forefront. A few years later, she would call the Emergency and paralyze Indian democracy.

After democracy was reinstated, the decade that followed would be filled with sectarian violence, riots, and assassinations. Yet, India would emerge at the turn of the twenty-first century as a rising modern nation. Over the last twenty years, three coalition governments have successfully finished full terms, which reflects the strength of its democracy. Even though the right wing party is in power, India's secularism is not necessarily in danger. MJ Akbar describes that a modern nation is built upon four pillars comprised of (1) democracy (equal rights), (2) equality and freedom of faith, (3) gender equality, and (d) economic equity. In his analysis of modern India, India is progressing well on the first three, but its challenge is to bring economic equity. In any case, India's transformation from a devastated state, economically, politically, and socially, to a stable democracy has been an astonishing journey.