

People Power

Time to Rejuvenate the Republic

The shocking events of Jehanabad amply demonstrate the precariousness of the Indian state. Equally worrying, the abject failure of the state could easily undermine our quest for rapid economic growth. We are in a classic conundrum – only rapid growth will ease social tensions and promote peace and harmony; but unrest, violence and social conflict are seriously impeding growth, and exacerbating regional and social disparities. In that sense, the Indian economic engine is at the cross-roads: it could derail if we do not set our house in order; or it could accelerate if the road blocks are removed. The future depends on the nature of the polity's response: will it be business as usual?, or will we rethink the nature of politics and the role of the state?

One invaluable lesson of Jehanabad is that political process, quality of governance, economic growth and social cohesion are inseparable in a modern society. As Mythili Bhusnurmath points out (FE,Nov15,2005), even OECD countries cannot escape the consequences of extreme inequities and political failures. The critical failing of our politics and public discourse in post-independence India is our inability to clearly define the role of the state in a modern, civilized democracy. This failure led to three unhappy consequences.

First, the state failed in its vital functions, and ended up assuming many new responsibilities which it discharged ineffectually. Predictably, the state's capacity diminished, rule of law has been eroded, might has become right, and violence, real or implied, became the arbiter in social, political or economic interactions. It is no secret that people increasingly despair of getting justice in our courts, and either suffer silently or seek the shelter of criminal gangs or corrupt policemen to provide rough and ready justice for a price. There is now a market demand for criminals in our society. These organized criminals in turn have acquired levers of state power in a permissive political system. The parties needed unaccountable money power, muscle men and the local caste clout that armed gangs bring. The criminals in turn needed the state protection and control of the law enforcement wing. These mutually reinforcing needs have criminalized the political process to an astonishing degree, seriously undermining our democracy and rule of law.

Second, with the state's excessive and ubiquitous role in economic decision making and ordinary commerce, politics of pelf, privilege and patronage became the norm. In a license-permit-quota raj, phenomenal greed has overtaken the state functionaries, and rent-seeking has become pervasive. Robert wade

explained this phenomenon as a 'dangerously stable equilibrium'. The system is resilient because the price paid by an individual for non-conformity is unacceptably high. It is dangerous, because the society as a whole paid a far greater price for such conformity. Unsurprisingly, public office has become a marketable commodity, and vast and unaccountable sums are invested in acquiring power by any means. State power has become an end in itself, and politics has largely become big business and public office is now private property. Transfers and placements of officials, kickbacks in public procurements, and partisan control of crime investigation have become the chief manifestations of power. Such abuse of power has further eroded the state's capacity to enforce rule of law. The state machinery is increasingly perceived to be illegitimate, and this is fuelling further violence and disorder. This violence takes many forms depending on the local circumstances, but at the heart of this anarchy and easy recourse to guns is the perceived illegitimacy of the state apparatus.

Finally, with state failing in sensible allocation of resources and management of public services, education and healthcare suffered grievously. In the 1960's, there was still realistic hope for thousands of poor rural children. Opportunities for vertical mobility were available, and the hope of a better future made drudgery and pangs of poverty bearable. With the relative decline of public services, that hope yielded to despair. Even those who had a smattering of education have not been equipped with useful skills to be able to participate in wealth creation. After all, true wealth lies in production of goods and services to fulfil genuine human needs. There are probably more than 20 million 'educated' youngsters in India with no employment. This mass unemployment is a recipe for violence and chaos. Despair quickly leads to violence, particularly as unearned money replaces true wealth creation.

The roots of violence and lawlessness are indeed deep and wide-spread. Maoist expansion is just one major manifestation of it, with over a tenth of India under the sway of ideological violence. There is violence of other forms in several other pockets, and the underlying factors are similar. Short-term responses to restore some semblance of order and peace wherever and whenever violence breaks out are certainly necessary. But they are wholly insufficient to address the underlying malaise.

Are there reasons for optimism? Of course, there are. Despite all these perversions, ours is a 'functioning anarchy', as Galbraith characterized it decades ago. Economy is growing faster than ever before, though large segments and regions are left behind. The expanding middle class, the communications revolution, and the growing youth power are powerful forces of change. While institutions of state have under-performed, democratic process retains its vitality, as evidenced time and again. These factors give us both stability and opportunity to engineer and manage massive transformation of our polity and society.

The agenda is self-evident – restoration of rule of law and justice; comprehensive political and governance reform to alter the incentives in power and improve delivery, and massive efforts for human development and infrastructure.

All these are well within our capabilities as a nation. And our Republic is in crying need of such rejuvenation. Can we summon the leadership, will and skill to galvanize the nation into action?

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