

Constitutional Framework and Structures of Governance in India: A Historical Perspective

Series of Weekly Lectures by Sri Devendra Swarup

LECTURE IV, Saturday, July 21, 2012

SUMMARY

In his fourth talk in this series, Sri Devendra Swarup began his exploration of the founding of British power in India and the subsequent development of the colonial institutions and structures of governance which, as we have seen in the previous three lectures, were incorporated almost unaltered and nearly in their entirety in the Constitution of India. At the outset, he once again emphasised that even after six decades of independent functioning, India had not developed any institutions of her own in any walk of public life. We have been merely expanding the structures and institutions established by the British. He pointedly asked: If we wanted only to perpetuate what the British had established, why did we seek Independence? How would the Indian public life have been different, had the British stayed on? What has stopped us from changing the institutions established by the British? Gandhiji repeatedly said that if the British left but their civilization stayed, that would be no Swaraj, it would be no independence. But we have reached precisely that condition. After the British left, we adopted a Constitution that perpetuated the entire institutional framework and system of governance set up by them and we continue to walk on the path laid by the British.

How have the British been able to influence us so deeply? In her long history, India has seen many foreign invaders. But, they were hardly able to dislodge India from her civilisational anchor. The invaders who came before the Muslims were in fact fully absorbed into the Indian civilisational milieu, and became indistinguishable parts of India. The invading Muslims, of course, chose to remain separate. They could not be absorbed; and this has led to political disruptions, social disharmony and even geographical vivisection of the country. Yet, India has hardly accepted the Islamic civilisational ways and institutions, or accorded any superiority to these. But unlike the Muslims and the earlier foreign invaders, the British seem to have succeeded in changing Indian thinking and replacing Indian public institutions with their own.

How have the British achieved this? What were their strengths and what were our weaknesses that have led to this situation. A small group of people, thousands of miles from their homeland, not only succeeded in establishing military and political control over India, but also swayed the Indians so thoroughly as to make them continue with their ways and institutions even after they left! How could this happen? The British boasted that they only

came to trade, but India fell into their lap; that they conquered India with Indian blood and Indian money; and, that in fact the Indians did not even take them to be foreigners.

The conquest of India was certainly not as simple as that. It is commonplace to date the founding of British rule in India to the battle of Plassey in 1757. But the British had begun to acquire foothold in India more than a century earlier. Fort St. George near Madras was established already in 1638. Bombay was “gifted” to the British Crown in 1661, and the latter gave it to the East India Company. Thus the British had acquired control over Madras and Bombay already in the seventeenth century, well before Plassey. Both the settlements played a major role in the conquest of India which took place largely in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, after the decline of the Marathas.

We shall look into the process of conquest in some detail in the subsequent talks. But let us first look at the British of that period. The British society up to the eighteenth century was not economically advanced in comparison to India. It suffered from a high incidence of poverty. There was only a very small group that had become rich during the previous couple of centuries mostly through dubious means. In Elizabethan England of late sixteenth century, which is often depicted as the golden age of English history, adventurous Englishmen regularly intercepted Spanish ships bringing gold and silver from America. Britain at that time was described as a nation of sea pirates. There were several islands of vulgarity based in wealth earned through trade in slaves and Indian manufacture and through the loot of colonies. In fact, this ill-earned wealth had given rise to a new class of *nabobs* in England.

Holland played a major role in the overseas conquests of the British, though that is now almost a forgotten story. Holland was the first to challenge the might of Spain; that challenge helped the British defeat the Spanish armada in the late sixteenth century. Holland was once among the richest nations in the world; it started the modern banking system; the factory system wherein large numbers of workers were gathered at one place for mass production also originated in Holland. It was a producer of textiles and was technologically more advanced than England. In fact it was on the ships of Holland that the British first reached India. But, being a continental power, Holland had also to grapple with first Spain and then France. Britain by contrast was an island and thus enjoyed great security from attack.

Britain, even in the eighteenth century, was deficient in many ways. It had no system of education except religious education available to a few; the masses were irreligious. Britain of the time had no high moral qualities to demonstrate in the political realm; and, there was a lack of patriotism. It was only towards the end of the eighteenth century that a group of men, later christened the Clapham Sect, inspired by religious zeal and a sense of shared political morality, attempted to radically change things. The revolt of the American colonies had demonstrated that they had no love for the mother country, while a bigger threat was posed by the French Revolution. In response to these challenges, the Clapham Sect started Sunday

Schools and the dissemination of religious sentiment. They are credited with having played a major role in the development of what is known as “Victorian Morality”.

It is therefore no surprise that in the earlier period of their presence in India, the British expressed great admiration for Indian civilization. The English of that time had inherited a high opinion of Indian civilisation; and, therefore, young Englishmen coming to India were getting Brahmanised, which was a source of worry for the people back home. But as the conquest proceeded, they began to ask themselves how they could entrench themselves in the country and stabilize their rule. One possibility suggested was to Christianize the country, which would unite the rulers and ruled in one religious sentiment. This was first proposed by Charles Grant, who had lived in India for many years and amassed great wealth. Later he rose to be Chairman of the Board of Directors of the East India Company and joined the Clapham sect. Other members of the Sect, including William Wilberforce and Zachary Macaulay, father of T. B. Macaulay, adopted his view on the Christianisation of India. They were joined by the so-called Utilitarians, the most celebrated of whom were Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and James Mill. The latter held that a change in the religion of all Indians was not necessary; establishment of the British system of law, governance and education would suffice to change India so as to perpetuate British rule there. High politicians and statesmen like Edmond Burke, Thomas Pitt were also working in the same direction, emphasising the need to change India and Indians.

The urge to perpetuate the conquest led to a strenuous effort to denigrate India and her civilisation both by the Evangelists, the Utilitarians and other scholars. James Mill’s history of India became the standard text from which the English educated Indians formed their opinions about India and Indian history.

Interestingly the focus of the missionaries was always Hindus, never Muslims. And the Evangelists of that period began portraying Hindus and their ways in a manner that was defamatory. We have absorbed much of that defamatory view of ourselves from their writings. One example of such defamation was the way the practice of Sati was portrayed by the missionaries in India and their highly placed patrons in Britain and in the British parliament as a widespread barbaric practice. There is enough evidence to show that the practice of Sati, self-immolation of the wife after the death of the husband, was an extremely rare occurrence and it was never forced. A study of contemporary records reveals several eye-witness accounts of Sati, recorded by travellers before 1803; these give altogether a different picture of Sati as a voluntary and spiritual institution. The practice was a demonstration of great courage and bravery in upholding the ideal of perpetual unity in marriage. And those who displayed such courage and bravery were revered as divine personages in whose honour temples were constructed. After 1803, as a part of evangelical propaganda against the Hindus, the missionaries began to portray this rare practice as a day-to-day barbaric occurrence, and fabricate stories of how women were forcibly consigned to fire.

The British then began to claim that it was their mission to civilise India. The colonial conquest began to be represented as the White Man's burden; the British were not here for any imperial motives, they were here to perform the onerous duty of civilising us! And, we began to believe this also.

In this new way of presenting the conquest of India, the future of British rule in India became a subject of intense discussion among British statesmen and intellectuals. They discussed how long they would have to carry this burden of civilising us. They believed this could happen either by Christianising India or by changing the Indian ways of thinking in a manner that would make them behave and act like the English. Lord Macaulay was of the latter view; he believed that English education would create a class of Indian who were virtually English and thus perpetuate English rule. It is a different matter that he also believed, as he wrote to his father, that such education would make the educated Indians renounce their own faith and accept Christianity.

Either Christianising India or creating a new class of Indians who thought and behaved like the English became a pressing concern of the British in their urge to stabilise and perpetuate their rule in India. Charles Trevelyan, brother-in-law of Macaulay, while serving as a young colonial administrator in Delhi and Calcutta, wrote in 1838 that he smelt revolt in the air; the Hindus regarded Englishmen as *mlechhas* and the Muslims viewed them as *kafirs*. He went on to say that the Englishmen had the choice of being pushed out suddenly by a violent stroke or withdrawing at a time and mode of their own choosing and leaving behind an India beholden to them. Already at that time, he was able to identify a small group of English-educated Indians, mostly in Bengal, who regarded the British as benefactors. It should be the State policy, he suggested, to expand, strengthen and promote this group and to leave India only after ensuring the ascendance of this group in the polity of future India. The British seem to have succeeded entirely in their plan.

A study of the rise of British power in India must also accord due place to the role of technology in the consolidation of their power. It is a coincidence of history that the rise of British power occurred alongside the modern scientific and industrial revolution, which was transforming the civilisation of Europe. Earlier invaders lacked this technological strength. Britain took full advantage of the steamer, telegraph, and railway system to establish and maintain its ascendancy in the country.

But, the British were always clear that they could not rule India for long without either Christianising the Indians or making them English in their outlook. This thought remained with them always. It was thus they thought of attempting to Christianise the Army, which they knew was the mainstay of their power in India. As is well known, the widespread fear of conversion and the spread of reports that *sepoys* were being forced to lose their religion and convert were amongst one of the causes of the events of 1857.

The talk was followed by a lively discussion. The questions concerned mainly two issues: One, the desirability or otherwise of the practice of Sati; several interlocutors felt that the practice was abhorrent irrespective of how the British chose to present and use it against the Hindus. Two, the civilisational and technological superiority of the British; some of the interlocutors suggested that the British could not have conquered India, if their civilisation was as low as presented in the talk.

It was, however, generally felt that on both these issues, all of us need to study further and it would not suffice to rely on the received textbook opinions on such matters. One of the books mentioned for study in this regard was *Women, Church and State: A historical account of the status of woman through the Christian ages with reminiscences of the Matriarchate* by Matilda Joslyn Gage, 1893, reprinted by Voice of India, Delhi 1997. The book describes the unfortunate and pathetic state of women in European history and offers a counterpoint to the description of Indian women in the missionary propaganda against Sati. The story of systematic defamation of India by the British is narrated in detail in, *Despoliation and Defaming of India: The Early Nineteenth Century British Crusade* by Dharampal, Bharat Peetham, Wardha 1999.

For his fifth lecture, Sri Devendra Swarup proposes to look at the process of conquest of India in further detail and recount the history up to the ultimate defeat of Marathas in 1818.
