

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

Series of Weekly Lectures by Sri Devendra Swarup

LECTURE V, Saturday, July 28, 2012

SUMMARY

In his fifth talk in this series, Sri Devendra Swarup concentrated on the political developments in the eighteenth century, focussed on the political developments in the 18th century. The importance of examining this period lay in the fact that many of the ills that plagued our polity then continue to do so today. As far as the character of our politics is concerned, we do not appear to have progressed much in the intervening centuries.

We also lack the ability to present our history from our perspective. The British were proficient in presenting their past from their viewpoint.

There is a common belief that British rule commenced in 1757, with their success in the battle of Plassey. It is, however, established that well before that date they had already entrenched themselves in parts of India.

The three skirmishes in the Carnatic (the Coromandel region), have been described as Wars in most textbooks.

Clive and Hastings were the early founders of the British Empire. Clive was unscrupulous. He was guilty of financial impropriety on a massive scale. Hastings was not wholly in that mould. He was an admirer of Indian civilization and believed that India should be governed according to her ancient institutions. He was tried by the British Parliament and Edmund Burke played a major role in his impeachment. Later, Lord Macaulay was worried that if such a picture of these two men remained before the British public, it would not inspire the empire or nationalist fervour. He wrote two essays on these two gentlemen trying to present them in positive light as great empire builders.

European history as taught in our universities was after 1815. Why? Because, Britain had by that date emerged successful against Napoleonic France of Waterloo and was set to become the dominant power in Europe.

What have been the turning points in our history in the 18th century?

One was 1760-61.

The Third Battle of Panipat was fought that year. If the Marathas were not devastated in that war history could have taken a different turn

The Anglo-French rivalry in Carnatic also ended that year, with the French defeat.

Also in that year, the Hindu state of Mysore was usurped by Hyder Ali, a junior army man trained in European warfare by the French.

Another turning point could be 1803.

The British entered Delhi that year and ousted the Marathas from the capital city. In 1772, the Marathas had escorted the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam, who had been reduced to the pitiable position of a British Pensioner at Allahabad, to Delhi and emerged as a powerful force. Mahadji Sindhia was granted the high office of Vizier-i-Mutlaq, empowered to make all the appointments below that of the Vizier (Prime Minister) by the Mughal Emperor; and, he exercised this power in the name of the Peshwa.

Maratha history has not been presented properly in our text books. They had kept Aurangzeb engaged in the Deccan for 27 long years. Thus, they had not only saved India from the fanaticism of that extraordinarily resolute Muslim, but also paved the way for the decline of the Mughal Empire.

Our weaknesses must be analysed. The Maratha leadership after Shivaji was mentally very different from the British. The British carefully examined the situation and prepared their strategy accordingly. Shivaji was a realist and a great strategist. He adopted guerrilla tactics against a superior Mughal force. He made his alliances keeping in view his relative strength vis-à-vis his opponents. One time he played Bijapur against the Mughals and at another the Mughals against Bijapur. He laid down a very far-sighted policy. His objective was to first establish dominance in the region below the Narmada. But the Peshwas saw the declining fortunes of the Mughals and shifted their focus to Delhi and the north. As a result the Nizam could entrench himself at Hyderabad. The Peshwas had to fight him again and again. As Maratha attention shifted, the English and French got an opportunity to intervene in Indian affairs.

The Peshwa could avoid two Mughal forces waiting to block his way and reach Delhi by another route. His arrival stunned the Mughals, and the Irani party led by Sadat Ali Khan invited Nadir Shah to invade India.

The invasion in 1739 was ruinous for the Empire. Dupleix then foresaw that with Mughal decline, the Marathas would rule the country. He was in favour of French intervention in this period of flux. He was then in Chandranagar. He wrote a letter to the French Governor in Pondicherry outlining his plan. When he was shifted to Pondicherry he tried to implement his plan.

The British had entered the struggle in the south due to their friendship with the Marathas. The Carnatic wars had nothing to do with rivalries in Europe. The main role in the wars was played by Dupleix. The rivalries were between the French and Marathas, not French and English. Bajirao had visions of all India Maratha Empire – from Cuttuck to Attok.

The British, by contrast, carefully calculated their moves. In 1814-16, they were involved in war with Nepal. They quickly understood the military valour of the Gurkhas and appreciated the difficulties of holding the region. They concluded a peace treaty with the kingdom and recruited the Gurkhas in their army.

Similarly, in 1846, during the first war in Punjab, they won even Kashmir, then part of the kingdom of Punjab. Henry Lawrence visited Kashmir and made a detailed study of the region. He prepared a note that if the British established direct rule in Kashmir, they would be involved in constant struggle and little economic gain would accrue to them. So they left it with the Raja of Jammu, who would be perpetually dependent on them.

The Marathas could not make such cold calculations. Raghoba reached Punjab much to the jubilation of the Marathas. They felt after Mahmud Ghazni's invasion, it was the first time the region was coming to the Hindus. But the Marathas did not calculate how they could consolidate their spread. The result was rout at Panipat in which the Rajputs extended them no support.

In the next lecture, Sri Devendra Swarup shall discuss the consolidation of British power in India from 1803 to 1857 and also describe the process of setting up the various structures of governance in this period that we have inherited from them.