

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

Series of Weekly Lectures by Sri Devendra Swarup

LECTURE VIII, Saturday, August 18, 2012

SUMMARY

In his eighth talk in this series, Sri Devendra Swarup continued his exploration into the meaning and lessons of 1857. Sri Swarup began by emphasising that we are looking into the important landmarks of Indian history only to understand the present and search for a way out of the impasse in which the nation is currently stuck. Many of the problems that confront us today have their genesis in the past. It is only from a proper comprehension of the bygone times that we can begin our search for the road ahead.

1857 is a very significant turning point in our history. From 1740 to 1857, the expansion and consolidation of British presence in India happened through military conquest. 1857 marks the culmination of this process; in 1857, the remaining Indian kings and the organised Indian military forces, including a majority of Indians who had entered the military service of the British, made a concerted, great and massive effort to finally dislodge the British from India. The failure of that effort marked the end of Indian military challenge to the British. From then onwards, organised Indian effort against the British in India was led—excepting a few early exceptions like the anti-cow-killing agitation of late nineteenth century—by the newly emergent class of English-educated Indians and was largely confined to “constitutional methods”. The process of evolution and implementation of the current Indian Constitution thus begins with 1857, though many of the governing structures that were also incorporated in the Constitution had been already established in the earlier decades.

Unfortunately, the momentous events of 1857 have not been fully studied by Indian historians. Indians do not seem to have grasped the great significance of this turning point of modern Indian history; but, the contemporary world had clearly seen the historical importance of these events. The happenings in India were carefully watched in the rest of the world then, and were covered extensively in the press of many European countries and of the United States of America.

The New York Daily Tribune (NYDT) of USA carried extensive reporting on the events and published several unsigned articles which were sympathetic to the Indian cause. In the period following Independence, especially in the fifties, the leftists made what seems like a planned

effort to attribute many of these unsigned articles in the Tribune of this period to Marx and Engels and thus claim credit on behalf of the founders of Marxism for supporting Indian nationalism. After a gap of a century from the original publications of the unsigned articles in NYDT, in the year 1959, a collection of these articles was officially published from Moscow under the title, “Indian War of Independence”, and their authorship was assigned to Marx and Engels. The attribution of those unsigned articles to Marx and Engels was patently fraudulent as has been meticulously documented in Sri Devendra Swarup’s own researched monograph on the subject entitled “Did Moscow Play Fraud on Marx”.

The real Marxist position on the British occupation of India had been clearly and authentically enunciated in three signed articles that Karl Marx wrote for the Tribune in 1853. In these articles, Marx gave credit to the British for serving as the handmaidens of history in destroying the “stagnant” traditional structures and industry of India, and forcefully ushering the country into the modern age. While making his argument, Marx used strong language, bordering on the abusive, against the ways and manners of India; he abhorred the idea of a civilisation where “man the sovereign” was inclined to kneel before “Hanuman, the monkey and Sabala, the cow”. He said India had no history of her own, except that of her invaders and their conquests. In his view the British in India were performing a double function in India, one of destruction and the other of regeneration. Therefore, he was willing to forgive all the inhumanity and oppression practised by the British to destroy the Indian civilisation, which to him seemed to be the embodiment of evil. Obviously these views of Marx were not in tune with the unsigned articles on the events of 1857 carried in the NYDT. Following Marx, early Indian Marxist ideologues like M. N. Roy and R. P. Dutt had presented 1857 as a retrograde feudal outburst.

Like the Marxists, Muslims have also tried to appropriate credit for the events of 1857 as was described in some detail in the previous lecture. But, what is the accepted Indian position on the events of 1857? It seems we have not yet formed a firm opinion on that. Surendranath Sen, who wrote what can be called the official history of the event, tried to present all positions. He did not even clearly define it as a nationalist effort, preferring to look upon the events as early stirrings of the national feeling. In order to avoid taking a position he did not even give a name to this historical event; he titled his book simply “1857”, thus refusing to choose between calling it the “Sepoy Mutiny” as the British preferred and the “First War of Indian Independence” as Savarkar had named it.

To form a proper appreciation of any historical phenomenon, it is important to study the events in detail; you have to document what happened in hundreds of individual cities, towns and villages. We have not yet undertaken such a detailed study of any of the historical phenomena that concern us. Therefore, we are also not in a position to comprehend the events of 1857 from our own perspective.

P. O. J. Taylor, a foreign scholar of India, has attempted to give a detailed event-wise chronological account of 1857. A fact that clearly emerges from this account is that it was the Bengal Native Infantry that led the rebellion everywhere. In every instance, the events began with a revolt by this force and other forces joined in only later. The British were in fact shocked by this fact. The Bengal Native Infantry was the largest army that they had raised in India. This was the army that they had used for their extensive conquests here. They had nurtured this army for almost a century. They had carefully catered to its caste and religious sensibilities. And, they were proud of its prowess and loyalty.

The Peel Commission set up in the aftermath of the Revolt looked into the causes of the revolt by such a supposedly loyal army. It sent three sets of questionnaires to the most experienced and senior British administrators and army officers. Based on the responses, the Commission noted that the Infantry had a disproportionately large representation of Brahmins and Rajputs from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The British recruiting officers were deeply impressed by the personal qualities of Brahmins; they noticed their commanding personality and noble demeanour, the great importance they attached to cleanliness and hygiene, and their great valour in the battlefield. It was this appreciation that led to large-scale recruitment of Brahmins in the Bengal Army; ultimately Brahmins formed 40 percent of the Infantry. To ensure their recruitment in large numbers, the British even accepted the requirements of their Brahmin status and gave them various concessions, including the permission to cook separately for themselves.

Even the Bombay Army was beginning to be dominated by Brahmins; if 1857 had not happened, the Bombay Army would have certainly gone the way of the Bengal Army. The Madras Army, however, had little representation of Brahmins and other upper castes; the British were able to use this Army in their favour in the events of 1857.

In their review of the situation after the events, the British officers noted that the Indian *sepoys* of all castes showed the highest deference to the Brahmins. A non-Brahmin senior in the Army hierarchy would lie prostrate before a Brahmin *sepoy* immediately after the parade. The British then came to the conclusion that the Army they had created was more loyal to the Brahmins, whose invisible influence pervaded the ranks, and to the traditional Indian elites. That is why the revolt spread quickly when the Brahmins were incensed by the British plans to use cartridges coated with cow and pig fat designed to destroy their caste and religion.

Another fact that emerges from the detailed recounting of events is that wherever British administration collapsed, power was seized by old Muslim *zamindars* or old ruling houses. There was also a clear division between the Hindu and Muslim *zamindars* in the districts like Bijnore in Uttar Pradesh. A district-wise analysis of the Revolt is absolutely necessary for understanding its myriad manifestations

Even a cursory examination of 1857 would reveal that the English-educated Indians stayed aloof from the Revolt. In Bengal, *Hindoo Patriot*, a journal edited by H. C. Mukherjee, gave the reasons for the detachment of this class. There were several memoranda submitted to the British on behalf of this class in which it was asserted that the petitioners wanted “progress” and for that to happen it was essential that the British rule continued. Already in 1851, the British Indian Association had passed a resolution demanding legislative assemblies on the British model in India. Bengal, the seat of British power in India and where the English-educated Indians were the most dominant, remained aloof from the rebellion.

Punjab was another region that not only remained aloof from the uprising, but also actively helped the British in defeating it. The reasons in Punjab were different from Bengal. Here several contradictory forces were at work. Muslim-Sikh tensions were a major factor. Ranjit Singh’s rule was and had been viewed by the Muslims as Hindu rule. Ranjit Singh had banned *azan* and in Punjab under him, the penalty for cow-slaughter was nothing short of death. The British were to later exploit this anti-Sikh sentiment among the Punjab Muslims.

Punjab had been defeated just a few years before 1857. The British agency for the conquest of Punjab was the Bengal Native Infantry, which was also spearheading the uprising. Units of the Infantry were deployed in all the cantonments and forts in Punjab. The British officers were able to successfully present the Bengal Army as the occupation army and incite Sikh soldier in opposition to it. Units of Bengal Native Infantry stationed in Punjab got no local sympathy in their revolt and were brutally suppressed by the extraordinarily competent and ruthless British officers there. The punishment of being tied to the mouths of canons and shot into smithereens that was meted out to the rebellious units in Peshawar is the stuff of tragic legend. The British officers were also able to incite the Sikh soldiery to take revenge for the treatment of their Gurus at the hands of the Mughals. The British fully exploited an apocryphal prophecy attributed to Guru Tegh Bahadur that white men would arrive from the sea and save the Sikhs from the Muslims. The *Cis-Sutlej* Sikh States of Patiala, Nabha and Jind extended full support to the British. All this ensured that Punjab could send quick reinforcements to Delhi, which proved crucial for the British.

The British learnt several important lessons from 1857, which were reflected in their future policies.

First, they fully realised the significance of Caste and Brahmins in Indian polity. They decided to do their best to reduce the stature of Brahmins. They began rewriting Indian history to present the Brahmins as the main oppressors and villains of India. And, they began to encourage anti-Brahmin movements in different parts of the country. On Caste, the British response was more nuanced. They studied the phenomenon in great detail. In 1858, large amount of literature was published on the subject. Scholars, administrators and missionaries, all contributed to this effort. The Caste was generally presented as an evil, but the British also felt that the institution could be used for perpetuating their rule. Risley, the great scholar of

Caste in India, believed that the Caste could be used as the most effective antidote against Indian nationalism.

The second important lesson the British learnt was regarding the place of Sikhs in the Hindu community. They realised that they could derive advantage by encouraging the development of a separate Sikh identity. Enormous effort was spent in carrying out this task at both the scholarly and the administrative levels. The dominant place of the Brahmins in the British Indian Armies was anyway re-assigned to the Sikhs; later Muslims also began to be given preferential treatment in recruitment in the Army. Thus the British were able to create a long-lasting division between the Hindus and Sikhs; the Sikh elite remained largely loyal to them even though Sikh masses and soldiery did participate actively and bravely in the many movements and revolts that took place against the British in the twentieth century.

The third and perhaps the most significant lesson that the British learnt from 1857 was that the traditional Hindus and Muslims both could not be trusted as their allies in ruling India. The events of 1857 were the result of both these forces joining hands against the British. The only elements in which the British could really put their trust were the then miniscule class of English-educated Indians. This class had realised that their interest was in the continuation of British rule in India and amply demonstrated its loyalty to them. The British therefore decided to substantially expand this class and put it in positions of power at different levels in Indian society. It was this decision of the British, endorsed by high statesmen and administrators like Travelyan, which largely determined the development of Indian polity after 1857.

In the ninth lecture, Sri Devendra Swarup shall further explore the impact of 1857 on the evolution of British policy concerning India.