

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

Series of Weekly Lectures by Sri Devendra Swarup

LECTURE IX, Saturday, August 25, 2012

SUMMARY

In the ninth talk in this series, Sri Devendra Swarup explored the evolution of British policy concerning India following the failure of the 1857 revolution. The revolution had a very deep impact on Indian society and British policy.

After the revolution, the first concern of the British was to re-establish their rule on a firmer footing. They began by carefully separating those who stood with them and those who took part in the revolution. They generously rewarded the former, and meted out fearsome punishment to the latter. The British media at that time was vociferously demanding that those Indians who had revolted against them should be treated like wild animals undeserving of any human consideration; they should be punished so brutally that their future generations might not ever entertain even the thought of rebellion against the British. Following this policy, the British carried out large-scale oppression through much of north India. The stories of oppression of that time make one tremble even now.

On the other hand, those who had stood by the British were handsomely rewarded. The Sikh states of east Punjab, which had provided crucial help in the re-conquest of Delhi, were given many honours and privileges. In 1861, when the Indian Council Act was enacted, the Raja of Patiala was one of only three Indian to be accommodated in the Council.

But, the British were very careful in choosing the groups that they wanted to reward. At that stage, they were not yet willing to bring the English-educated Indians into positions of power or responsibility. By that time, a class of English-educated Indians had developed only in Bengal. Many such educated persons from Bengal had been incorporated into the British administration, mainly as clerks, and appointed in different parts of India; the Bengali settlements in all those cities and towns of north India, which became the centres of British administration, were a consequence of that process. The educated Bengalis had supported the British during the revolution, as we have seen earlier. But, the British did not trust the Bengalis. They consciously decided to keep them out of all positions of power. They were not incorporated in the Assemblies and, within the administration, they were relegated to lower positions, mainly in judicial and revenue departments.

The British attitude towards English-educated Bengalis is reflected in the correspondence between the high British administrators and statesmen of the time. John Lawrence, who as the Chief Commissioner of Punjab was mainly instrumental in mobilising the forces and resources for the re-conquest of Delhi and who later served as the Governor-General of India from 1864 to 1868, wrote to one of his correspondents that the Bengalis might talk about sedition but they were mentally cowards and physically weak, and he asserted that they were entirely unreliable.

After 1857, the British redefined their goals in India. Earlier they thought of withdrawing, but now they began talking of and planning for a permanent stay in India. They began to assert that they had conquered India through the sword and would continue to rule over it through the sword. They also began to count the tremendous advantages that had accrued to them through their conquest. It had given them the stature of a world power. The wealth of India and the opportunities of investment that it offered were crucial in making Britain and her people wealthy. In the immediate aftermath of 1857, the British were in no mood to give up these advantages or to share the administration of India with Indians.

The office of the District Collector was the key position through which the British ruled the country up to the lowest level. Administrators like John Lawrence recognised that it was they pivot of their administration. Therefore, they determined that Indians would not be appointed to the office the District Collector and above. In 1853, officers of the Indian civil services began to be recruited through an open competition rather than through patronage, as was the practice till then. In theory, the competition was open to English educated Indians also. But the competition was held in England, and the higher age limit was just 21 years. It was long before the Civil Services had any significant Indian participation and even then it was rare for an Indian officer to be appointed as District Collector.

The British in fact kept the key levers of power in their own hands till the end. At different stages, Indians were given representation, but all control remained with the British. Even in the Act of 1935, which purported to considerably expand Indian representation, effective power was kept with the Governors. That was why Congress was initially reluctant to accept the Act, though later they acquiesced as a consequence of carefully thought out strategy.

After 1857, the internal British discussion was all about keeping India under control through force and keeping the Indians out of the centres of power. But for public consumption, the British also presented a façade of reconciliation. The Queen's proclamation granting Indians the status of equal subjects of the Empire and promising non-interference in their religious affairs, amongst other things, was an attempt in that direction. Incidentally, the proclamation was issued on November 1, 1858. The rebellion and the revolution in Avadh and in Madhya Bharat continued till 1859. Tanya Tope was hanged in 1859. But the British were convinced of their victory already towards the end of 1858.

The military conquest of India that began in 1740 was in a way completed in 1857. The British military expansion in India came to an end with this, and the Queen's proclamation guaranteed that there would be no more conquests or annexations. The Indian princes were from then onwards seen as "breakwaters" of any future storm and therefore were to be retained as allies of the British power. After 1857, the British began a concerted intellectual effort to convert their military conquest into a permanent civilisational and cultural conquest. They began to present their victory as the triumph of a superior civilization. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution through unending conflict between the species and the survival of the fittest amongst them had been published in 1859, and had soon acquired the place of foundational principle in European philosophical thought. For the British, the Darwinian theory confirmed their conviction that their victory over India was the natural and just consequence of their inherent superiority; it also gave them further reason to try and conclusively conquer India at the cultural and civilisational level. New sciences of ethnology and anthropology also began taking shape from that time and concepts like "primitive societies" began to take hold of the European thought.

The medium they chose for this conquest was the English-educated Indian. The response of this class of Indians to the events of 1857 had convinced the British that this class indeed had become subservient to their interests, had adopted their civilisational and cultural ideals, and wanted to mould its life according to the British ways. The British were sure of the continued allegiance of this class even if it were to be kept out of any share in power.

The revolution had made the British conscious of the importance of modern means of communication. Steamships and telegraph had proved crucial in ensuring their victory. After 1857, the British expended major effort on expanding telegraphs, railways and postal system to have a better grip of the country. And they determined to carry out a similar expansion of English education to substantially expand the numbers of the emerging English-speaking class.

It was not enough merely to impart English education. They also wanted to ensure that this class behaved and thought like the British. They therefore began to create an intellectual apparatus and climate to facilitate this task. The Aryan race theory was fully used for this purpose. Henry Maine propounded the theory that the higher castes of India had in fact come from the same stock as the British themselves; they were kinsmen who had been left behind in the progress of civilisation. It began to be said that the British were in India only to help their Indian brethren achieve a higher level of civilisation; it was a burden – the so-called Whiteman's burden – that the God had imposed upon them! They were not here for any selfish end, but only to perform their duty towards the Indians. This thought they spread systematically.

Before 1857, India was always called Bharatavarsha or Hindustan. After 1857, the British stopped using these terms and began using "India" instead. Till then, the British believed that

there was an India, an Indian nation, prior to their coming to India. But now they began to argue that there was never a single political, national or civilisational entity implied by that name; and that Bharatavarsha was merely a geographical entity. They began to present India as a land of diverse groups with no internal relation or coherence amongst them. The censuses, gazetteers, ethnographical and linguistic surveys were all utilised in the service of the imperial purpose of depicting India as a divided land. This literature is important; it offers a great deal of information. Even now this vast literature serves as the basic reference material on India in our university system. But we have to use this literature with discretion, keeping in view the disruptive and divisive worldview with which it is seeped.

Till then, the term Hindu denoted a geo-cultural identity and not a religious category. Even the Muslims were called Hindus when they visited Islamic lands. But British Census policies transformed the term Hindu from a geo-cultural to a religious category. And then they began further limiting the category, counting large groups and communities as separate from the Hindus. Tribal communities, Sikhs and Jains were one by one taken out of the “Hindu” category. In the 1881 census, the Sikh identity was reduced to include only the Khalsa. Enormous effort was invested in defining and continuously limiting the term “Hindu” in the census operations; yet, the best definition that the Census Commissioner of 1891, J. A. Bains, could offer was that anyone not a Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain or an Animist was a Hindu. One of the consequences of the policies that the British adopted after 1857 is that the term “Hindu”, which was a term that united and covered all Indians, has come to represent only one of the many sections of Indian society and has become divisive. Every group now wants to be counted separately from the Hindus.

Another example of the British divisive policy is offered by WW Hunter who prepared the Imperial Gazetteer of India. Writing the entry on India, he said that when the British came to India they saw only Hindus and Muslims, but as they studied the society further they saw several distinct categories within the Hindu society. These included: the descendants of the Aryan invaders, who were the Brahmins and Kshatriyas; the original non-Aryan inhabitants; the mixture of Aryan with non-Aryans, who constituted the middle castes; and so on. This racial classification led to the creation of artificial divisions in the Hindu society which nowadays have become formalised as Upper Castes, Backwards Castes and Lower Castes.

Through such efforts, the British created the image of a finely graded Indian society. The early census commissioners introduced the principle of “social precedence” in the Census operations. Following this, the census enumerator was asked to not only enquire about the caste and sub-caste of the respondent but also about the standing of that particular caste with respect to other castes. On the basis of this, the British attempted to create a social ranking of all castes. Predictably, it led to protests and countless representations by different groups claiming Kshatriya and Brahmin ranks. The trend has changed now. Different caste groups now agitate not for a higher but a lower social rank.

The British had adopted a two-pronged approach to caste. One, they made strenuous efforts to enhance caste consciousness through census operations and ethnographic surveys, etc., and to make different castes rivals and competitors through their system graded ranking of castes. Two, they convinced the English-educated Indians that Caste is the main obstacle in the path of Indian nationhood and progress and gave them the dream of a casteless Indian society.

The British emphasis on castes was at odds with the times; caste consciousness and caste-rigidities were at that time on the decline because of the spread of modern means of transport and consequent increase in mobility. People of all castes travelled together in the railways and people of all castes worked in close proximity in the offices and factories that were then coming up.

The dream of ultimately creating a casteless society was also at odds with the more learned and informed European opinion. Max Muller, for example, had said that the institution of caste was part of the Indian psyche and as such it could never be abolished. The more prescient members of the British administration were aware that the modern political and administrative systems being introduced by them would only further entrench caste. The eminent administrator historian, Vincent Smith, in his monograph entitled *Constitutional Reforms in the light of History*, had prophesied that with the introduction of electoral politics, caste would become the determining factor in Indian polity.

In conclusion, after 1857, the British began to argue that it was wrong to regard Hindu society as one entity as it was fragmented. They began to use theories like the Aryan race theories to give a racial complexion to the Indian diversity. The various complimentary castes and institutions of India were turned into competing rivals. They also disarmed India, about which even Mahatma Gandhi spoke strongly when he came to India in 1915. They undertook a major re-ordering of the army. The Brahmins were nearly excluded from it. They realised that the Brahmins as an agency of all-India integration and therefore they made all efforts to systematically present them as a malevolent and oppressive force of India.

When we examine the political situation in the India of today, we are struck by the extent to which we continue to embrace the thoughts, ideas, categories and institutions that the British ingrained in us through their systematic effort to conquer us culturally and civilisationally and to entrench their rule after 1857.

In the next talk scheduled for Saturday, September 01, 2012, Sri Devendra Swarup shall be exploring the development of Indian Polity in the period 1858 to 1893.