

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

**Series of Weekly Lectures by Sri Devendra Swarup**

**LECTURE XI, Saturday, September 08, 2012**

## **SUMMARY**

In the eleventh talk in this series, Sri Devendra Swarup carried his exploration of the development of Indian national consciousness and Indian polity further up to 1909.

He began by recalling to the issue of geographical unity of India that had arisen towards the end of the last talk. Several early texts describe the precise physical shape of India. Dighanikaya, one of the earliest Indian texts, offers the simile of a stretched bow for the land, thus accurately capturing the wide arch of the Himalayas above and the sharply narrowing peninsula below. Many other equally precise similes are given in other classical texts. The five parts that comprise India have also been mentioned from the ancient times; Greek geographers borrow these descriptions while they mention the “five Indies”. Sri Devendra Swarup wondered how the ancient Indians arrived at such accurate descriptions of the geography of India in epochs that supposedly lacked any means of surveying, imaging and mapping. This, at the very least, indicates that the people of India were moving across all parts of this geography and sharing their observations. Classical Indian literature treats the whole of India as sacred and enjoins the people to visit various *tirthas*, which are situated in different directions across India; and, the people of India endeavour to follow this injunction till today.

This early identification with, and idolization of, the land held no meaning for the British, who denied any pre-existing sense of an Indian nation and claimed credit for unifying India geographically and politically, and thus forging the Indian nation, for the first time in history. John Strachey, the celebrated British administrator-scholar, declared that India had no national consciousness before the British.

The English educated Indians were confronted with a peculiar situation. The pull of their ancient traditions remained strong; but the new language, ideas and idioms that they had acquired were antithetical to those traditions and to any expression of Indian national consciousness. Even the most Westernized of the Indians, however, could not entirely disregard the pull of the tradition.

Bengal was the first Indian province to take to the English education at a large scale. And, it was a steady stream of Western-educated Bengalis that spearheaded the nineteenth century “Indian renaissance”. In the last lecture, we referred to the pioneering role of Rajnarayan Bose. His

“Prospectus”, published in 1866, was a blueprint for the revival of ancient traditions in all walks of life. He had even entitled his work as “The Prospectus of a Society for the promotion National Feeling among the Educated Natives of Bengal”. Nabgopal Mitra was so inspired by this work that he instituted the Hindu Mela in a bid to implement the Prospectus. The name of the Mela was later changed to National Mela; Mitra explained that the two terms were synonymous and interchangeable.

Lord Lytton found the vernacular press too nationalist and anti-British; he passed the Vernacular Press Act to tame it. To bypass the Act, the Amrit Bazaar Patrika switched to English overnight.

Alexander Duff, a Christian missionary, made it fashionable for Bengali Christians to write in English. In a countermove, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee began to write his fiery compositions in Bangla. He gave us the resonant phrase “Bande Mataram”, which became the battle cry of the freedom movement.

Perhaps not many remember that the movement to enshrine Hindi as the national language of India began in the English-educated Bengal. They demanded the replacement of English with Hindi as the language of administration. The movement won wide support in Maharashtra, which was another centre of national awakening.

Other symbols of Indian nationhood also began to be invoked. Anti-kine-killing movement began in Punjab. Many Kukas sacrificed themselves for the cause of protecting the cow. They were tied to the mouths of canons and blown to pieces. The movement soon spread throughout India. Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj, wrote a stirring text, extolling the sacredness of the cow.

Attempts of the British to sway the English-educated Indians away from nationalist thinking were proving counter-productive. In 1837, the British had replaced Persian with Urdu. In 1863, while discussing the nature of real Hindi and real Urdu, Strachey wondered why Bengali, as a result of this change had got sanskritised instead of getting anglicised. That showed that the Bengali mind was still rooted in the ancient tradition of Sanskrit.

The British did their best to stymie this nationalist assertion based in an Indian cultural and civilisational revival. But it was difficult to stem the tide led by great Indian savants and saints. Swami Vivekananda aroused such pride in the spiritual heritage of India and its message for the world that India plunged headlong on the path of reconnecting with her soul. Impact of Swami Vivekananda on the English-educated youth was extraordinary. On his return to India in 1893, he was given a grand reception in Colombo, and the youth of Taminadu expressed their gratitude by yoking themselves to his chariot. This indeed presented a grand spectacle of all-India nationalism. Swamiji’s message awakened the English-educated youth all across India, from Colombo to Almora, to their great civilisation heritage.

The British did not know how to frustrate this rapid flowering of national consciousness. They tried in several ways, but failed. Finally, they determined to fashion and use the Muslim card. In 1903, a plan to partition Bengal on religious lines was prepared. Ostensibly, Bengal was to be partitioned to achieve greater administrative efficiency. But the plan was clearly to divide the Hindu and Muslim parts of Bengal. Bengal was to be split into East Bengal, which had a Muslim majority and West Bengal, where the Hindus were dominant. When the plan leaked out there was uproar. Nationalist Indians argued that if the purpose was only to advance administrative efficiency, then it would be logical to separate Orissa and Bihar from Bengal and make them independent provinces.

The movement against the partition of Bengal that followed was the first major manifestation of the new national consciousness and determination. Even the forms of protest were derived from Indian tradition. One of the means of protest was the observation of “Shok Diwas”. On the designated day, the protesters were expected to get up early, go barefoot to the Ganga, take a dip in the Ganga water, tie yellow *rakhis* to each other and take the vow not to use foreign cloth and to boycott shops that sold foreign goods. This form of protest was devised by Rabindranath Tagore himself, who also played a leading role in organising the movement. Vande Mataram was the *mantra* of this movement. Banga Mata, Kali Mata and Bharat Mata were the rallying symbols of this movement. S. N. Mukherjee, an English-educated Bengali, describing his experience of how when he beheld the image of Kali Mata, he saw Banga Mata and Bharat Mata reflected in her.

The anti-Partition movement assumed all-India dimension. It was at this time that the triumvirate of Lal-Bal-Pal burst forth on the national scene.

In this atmosphere of growing nationalist consciousness and assertiveness, the then Viceroy Lord Minto engineered a petition from the Indian Muslims demanding separate electorates. It is known that the petition that was presented to the Viceroy by leading Muslims in 1905 was drafted by the secretary to the Viceroy. The following year, the Muslim League was founded at Dacca and it declared its loyalty to the British. Around this time, serious riots broke out in East Bengal.

The Indian Councils Act, introduced in 1909, brought the elective principle into the polity of British India for the first time. This first introduction of elections in a minimal form was preceded by the generation of much disharmony between the Hindus and Muslims. And the Act formalised this divisiveness by granting Muslims a separate electorate. The Congress did not accept the Act till 1916, when it signed the Lucknow Pact with the League.

And partly to teach a lesson to the nationalist Bengal, it was decided in 1911 to shift the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. Bipin Chandra Pal, however, welcomed the shift, saying that Delhi indeed had been the capital of India since the ancient times. Bipin Chandra Pal has not been given his due place in Indian history. He was an extraordinarily perspicacious leader. At that

early time, he had prophesied that the coming era would see the rise of three pan-World formations – pan-Islamism, pan-Mongolism and pan-Europeanism, and that India would have to ally with the latter to deal with the first two.

---

The twelfth lecture scheduled for September 15, 2012 had to be postponed because of the sad demise of Pujya Sri Sudarshanji that morning at Raipur. The lecture shall now be held on Saturday, September 22, 2012.

In this lecture Sri Devendra Swarup shall cover the period up to 1916 and also discuss the Muslim question that began acquiring salience along with the assertion of Indian nationalism and the consequent efforts by the British to accommodate the educated Indian through a highly limited franchise, thus beginning the process of constitutional evolution.

---

Beginning with this lecture the venue is being changed to: Lala Diwan Chand Trust Complex, 2 Jain Mandir Marg, Cannaught Place, (near Shivaji Stadium Terminus, behind Madras Hotel).

---