

## **Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture**

**Delivered on November 21, 2011 at Chatham House**

**Bhikhu Parekh**

### **The Crisis of Indian Democracy**

I am most grateful to the trustees of Jawaharlal Nehru memorial Trust for inviting me to deliver the 32<sup>nd</sup> Nehru Memorial Lecture. Previous speakers have all been men and sometimes women of great distinction, and I apologise at the outset that I will not be able to meet the high expectations that this series of annual lectures has rightly come to arouse. The subject of my lecture this evening is the crisis of Indian democracy.

Four important ideas lie at the heart of democracy. First, popular sovereignty or people as the ultimate source of political authority. Since they are too many in number, as well as because governing is a highly complex and full time activity, they transfer their authority to their representatives thorough the medium of elections, and confer on them the right to act in their name and take collectively binding decisions.

Secondly, equality. All citizens enjoy equal civil and political rights, are subject to the rule of law, and their interests make equal claims on the government. Citizenship might be defined narrowly and limited to certain groups, or it might be defined broadly to include all adults of sound mind. Since democracy is based on the belief that participation in political life requires no further qualification than the ability to form independent judgements and accept responsibility for one's actions, and that interests of all citizens matter equally, it involves universal adult suffrage.

Thirdly, public deliberation. Since matters requiring collective action affect all and citizens hold different views on how these should be addressed, collective affairs should be publicly discussed and based on a consensus. Different points of view should have opportunities to express themselves and engage in a public

dialogue. Parliament or the representative assembly is the ideal and formally constituted place for calm and impartial deliberation, and its practices and procedures are so designed as to make this possible. Discussion and deliberation also take place in countless formal and informal public spaces including the media. There is a constant flow of ideas and information between these fora, each shaping and being shaped by the others, and collectively creating the conditions of political rationality.

Public pressure and peaceful protests constitute the fourth important component of democracy. An elected government might misuse its power, disregard important views, replace deliberation with shallow polemics, ignore issues that deeply matter to people, neglect collective or important sectional interests; or reach decisions that go against the considered judgement of large bodies of citizens. Citizens may then feel that they cannot own what is done in their name, and need to protest. The point of the protest could be simply to say, 'not in our name', or to put pressure on the government to rethink. Protests affirm and keep alive the citizen's sense of agency and responsibility, throw up formal and informal organisations that empower people., keep government on its toes, counter the subtle and silent pressure of entrenched interests, and for these and other reasons constitute the life blood of democracy. They have, however, their limits. Protests in a democracy cannot usurp the authority of the elected government, nor dictate what it must do. Their purpose is to express dissent, place neglected issues on the public agenda, put pressure on the government to reconsider its decision, and thus to facilitate or energise the process of democratic deliberation.

All four components of democracy are closely related, and equally important. Mere elections are not enough to make a country democratic. The elected representatives are expected to act rationally not on a whim or by consulting a soothsayer, and to choose a course of action best supported by evidence and argument. Public deliberation by itself is not enough either. A government might allow it, but that does not make it a democracy if people have no power to replace it or hold it accountable. Nor are public protests enough to make a country democratic because people might not elect the government or be able to participate in the public deliberation on issues affecting their lives. Democratic politics is institutionally mediated, and representative institutions are at

its centre. People decide who to put there, check them, are in constant contact with them, expect them to stay in tune with public opinion, and express their dissatisfaction through protests of which the representative institutions should take full account. The quality of a country's democracy is best judged by what goes on at these four levels. I shall examine Indian democracy within this theoretical framework.

### **Popular Sovereignty**

India opted for a full-blooded democracy in its Constitution. The latter affirmed the sovereignty of the people, established universal adult suffrage, committed itself to equality of rights and opportunities for all its citizens, and ensured protection of minority religious and cultural identities. It also enshrined a historically unprecedented programme of positive discrimination in favour of socially and economically backward groups.

Elections have been regularly held in India since 1952, and on average sixty percent of the electorate vote, reaching as high as 85% in some states in some elections. The poor generally tend to vote in higher numbers. Elections are governed by the Model Code of Conduct, which becomes operative when elections are announced and is strictly enforced by the independent Election Commission. They are free and fair, and their results have been subject to few challenges. Indians often pride themselves in calling theirs the largest democracy. If this means that India has a huge population of 1.3 billion people, it only reflects a biological phenomenon, and is neither a collective achievement nor a matter of pride. However there is a deeper sense in which India can be proud of being the largest democracy. No other country in human history has conducted elections so smoothly and effectively among such a large population at so many levels. In India elections occur at several levels, including the villages, blocs, districts, states, and the national. There are 2,27,000 villages councils, 5900 block councils, and 470 district councils. There are 5,000 MLA's and over 500 M.P.s. As many as just over three million men and women at any given time hold elected offices.

In India elections have come to dominate the public imagination so heavily that they are often equated with democracy. There are several reasons for this. They give voters a sense of dignity. Poor voters are courted, respected and valued in a way they are not in other areas of life. Elections also give them a sense of power and an opportunity to press their demands. Lower castes rub shoulders and enjoy equality with higher castes, which they do not in their normal relations. And they can punish their erstwhile masters in a polling booth which they dare not even imagine in the ordinary course of life.

While elections have made a great contribution to the empowerment of people and the integration of the country, they have not been very successful at producing high quality representatives. Political parties, between which voters choose, have no clear programmes, and are often at the mercy of dominant individuals, whose loyalty is not to the party or its programme but largely to themselves. The voter is therefore denied a meaningful choice. Since political parties do not have grassroots support or nurture such support as they do have, they cannot generally rely on the latter's loyalty. As a result, patronage and handouts and therefore money have come to play a very big role with all the corruption that this entails. Either the candidate must find the money or, as is generally the case, depend on his party which has its own dubious ways of obtaining it. With weak regulations on who can stand for election, candidates with dubious credentials have often got elected. In the Lok Sabha of 2004-9, 128 M.P.s had a criminal record, including 83 who were charged with murder. In the current Parliament, their number is roughly the same. In some state assemblies, the situation is even worse.

Constraints on the conduct of elected representatives are rather limited, and that leaves considerable room for corruption. Some cabinet ministers at the national level have accumulated huge assets that could not have been honestly acquired. Current regulations require them to declare their assets but not to explain how they acquired these. Once elected, representatives have no close and continuous contacts with their constituents. They hold no surgery, are not often in their constituency, pay little attention to their constituents' views and grievances, and give no regular reports on their parliamentary activities. In fact although they are elected, they are in no

meaningful sense representatives. Not surprisingly, as various polls have shown, a large majority of Indians neither trust their representatives nor have any way of holding them accountable.

### **Quality of public deliberation**

Indian democracy began with an excellent record of public deliberation. The Constituent Assembly, stretched over three years, included and encouraged a dialogue between diverse points of view, and built a vital consensus on the design of the new polity. As many as 7500 amendments were tabled, of which 2500 were moved, and nearly a fifth accepted. Post-independence Parliaments saw great debates on large issues such as the Hindu Code Bills, the linguistic reorganisation of the states, the role of planning and the nature of the mixed economy, and set an example of what a deliberative body should ideally look alike.

During past few decades, the quality of public deliberation at all levels has suffered a dramatic decline. Parliament meets for far fewer days. As opposed to the annual average of 124 days between 1952 and 1961, Parliament met on average for 81 days between 1992 and 2001. It met for 50 days in 2008 and 64 in 2009. Even when it meets, there are regular interruptions with members rushing to the Well of the House, leading sometimes to the suspension of the day's proceedings and the wiping out of the vital question hour. As a result Bills of momentous importance are sometimes passed without careful scrutiny, and in one recent case as many as ten were passed in less than twenty minutes. State assemblies meet for even shorter periods, and are far less deliberative. Kerala assembly has the best record, but it too has met on average for only 40 days a year. In Gujarat it has met on average for 22 days during the past few years. Some other state assemblies have an even worse record.

Parliament has several committees to examine legislative proposals and departmental policies. They include three finance committees, twenty two departmentally related standing committees, and several ad hoc committees on particular issues. Some of them do excellent work but not others. They are reconstituted every

year and their members do not build up experience and expertise. Their recommendations are not binding on the government, which does not even have to give reasons for rejecting them. They often lack adequate research staff and are sometimes outwitted by government departments. As for the ad hoc committees, they are at the mercy of their chairmen who decide how often to meet. The one on such an important subject as the Right to Education met only twice, and many in the country felt that it did not give the Bill the detailed scrutiny it merited.

As for the media where public debates ought to take place, the picture is no different. India has some excellent political periodicals, but the same cannot be said of most of its print and visual media. Several factors are responsible for this. Massive growth in corporate power over the media and the nexus between them and the politicians have blunted their critical and investigative impulse. The media further are dominated by corporate economists, management gurus and financial executives, and have created a virtual consensus on India's direction of development. The consensus shapes popular thinking and policy making, marginalises dissenting voices, limits the political imagination, and discourage serious debate. The fact that sixty per cent of India's population is under thirty years of age has the potential of delivering a demographic dividend and bringing new ideas and sensibilities, but it also has its dangers. The youth forms a major media constituency and determines its circulation or viewing figures, upon which advertisements and profits depend. Since the youth is often poorly educated, lacks serious interests, has no historical memories, is obsessed with celebrity culture and seeks constant titillation, there is increasing tabloidization of serious newspapers and television programmes. Important problems bedeviling the country are avoided; serious differences of views are reduced to conflicts between personalities; complex matters of policy are reduced to shallow slogans. There is a heavy concentration on fashion, lifestyles of Bollywood stars, activities of cricketers, and so on. The rural India where 70% of Indians live receives on average between five and ten percent of media attention. It is striking that farmers' suicides, thousands of them, received less coverage last year than the Fashion week.

Another factor responsible for the biased coverage and poor quality of public deliberation has to do with the social background of those running or occupying the upper echelons of the media. Hardly any of the 315 editors and other senior members of the print and electronic media in Delhi belongs to the scheduled castes or scheduled tribes. Ninety percent of them belong to the upper castes, which form only sixteen percent of the population. This is also broadly true of serious columnists. Such a gross social imbalance distorts the moral sensibility and limits the intellectual perceptiveness of the media, and skews its sense of what is and is not significant.

Thanks to all this, the range and depth of non-official public deliberation in India is disappointing. This inevitably affects the formation of public opinion and the quality of political debate, and limits its capacity to compensate for the limitations of Parliamentary deliberation. Serious policy issues do, of course, continue to be debated, and important questions are raised from time to time about where the country is and should be going. After all, India has too long and rich a tradition of public debate for that not to happen. However such serious and probing discussions often remain marginal, episodic and patchy, and engage the interest of only a small section. In this respect the regional media sometimes do a better job. However their impact and resources are considerably limited, and their vulnerability to corporate manipulation and governmental pressure is much greater than that of their national counterparts.

### **Equal consideration of citizens' interests**

In recent years India has chucked up a remarkable rate of economic growth and is currently the second fastest growing economy. Between 2002-10, the GDP growth rate was around 7.8%, and sometimes as high as 8.6%. India's public revenue today is four times as much as in 1990, and is drawn from a variety of sources. The fruits of growth, however, have not been equitably shared. The poor have borne the burden and paid the price of growth, but benefited only marginally. While some of them have moved out of their wretched existence, others remain trapped in it, and even the former constantly run the risk of slipping back into it.

Poverty is a normative concept and its criteria are obviously subject to dispute. The government defines it in the most austere terms that equate it with bare survival in order to reduce its fiscal outlay and support its claim that the economic reforms are succeeding. Even it however puts the number of poor at around 25%. Others place it much higher. Multilevel Poverty Index developed by the Oxford University Poverty and Human Development Institute puts the number of poor at 645 million, and that is likely to rise by a further 30 million with the rising food prices. Acute poverty brings with it early death, illness, debilitating disease, poor intellectual development and other evils that reduce the individual's ability to climb out of it. Not surprisingly India has the highest rate of child and maternal mortality. Just under half of the world's malnourished children live in India. 21% of all under-five deaths occur in India, as do 25% of neo-natal deaths and 20% of maternal mortality. No other country has a higher proportion of underweight children. Its state schools offer substandard education, as do many of its colleges and universities, and do not equip their pupils with skills required for worthwhile jobs. The contrast between India's economic growth and poverty presents a most painful spectacle. As Jean Dreze and Amarta Sen put it recently : 'There is probably no other example in the history of world development of an economy growing so fast so long with such limited results in terms of broad-based social progress'.

Happily the government of India has in recent years begun to address this question. Rural employment, health, primary education and other programmes involving huge financial outlays have been launched. Some states too have embarked on imaginative programmes; for example, Kerala, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. In some cases, these programmes have been a success. In others their impact has been limited because they are inadequately thought out, poorly implemented, weakly monitored, or subverted by corporate interests and corrupt bureaucrats.

There are thus two Indias : one is rich, dreaming of becoming an economic superpower, globally integrated, minimally connected with the rest of the country, and leading a lifestyle that is beyond the reach of and even

offends the tastes of many Westerners; the other India is poor, decaying, hovering over the starvation line, confined to the villages, subject to the compulsions of but benefiting only a little from globalisation. The two Indias, the shining India and the dark India, are not passively co-existing and accidental products of India's path of development. They are causally and morally connected. Although it would be wrong to say that the shining India is built on and only made possible by the dark India, its prosperity is at least partly due to the latter. It is based on low wages, weak industrial regulations, displacement of tribal communities and poor urban slum dwellers, compulsory acquisition of land, and weakened trade unions.

The moral connection between the two Indias is even deeper. The shining India bears a moral responsibility for the dark India on both moral and prudential grounds. As citizens, poor Indians are entitled to a decent standard of life and to their share in the collective resources of the country. They can also destabilise and endanger the security of the shining India and need to be given a stake in its growth. Sadly the morally callous and culturally self-absorbed affluent India does not appreciate this. It not only does not discharge but even refuses to acknowledge its moral responsibility to the dark and decaying India, and often dismisses the welfare schemes for the latter as cheap populist gimmicks and a waste of resources that should be better allocated to fuel the country's rapid growth. Such moral blindness could have dangerous consequences for Indian democracy.

The poor India sees democracy as its best hope and is committed to it, though this could easily change if democracy fails to deliver; the shining India chafes at its restraints and seeks to bypass and even undermine in all too familiar ways. The shining India wants to reduce the state's role to the minimum; the other India wants it to play an extensive and radical role. The deep and growing hiatus of income, life chances, world views, political expectations and hopes for the future between the two Indias undermines the moral and political consensus that has sustained the country so far and bodes ill for its democracy. It also weakens the moral authority, even the legitimacy, of the state, and hence its ability to deal coherently and effectively with the ominous internal and external challenges facing the country.

## **Political Protests**

As I argued earlier political protests play an important part in maintaining democracy in good health, and paradoxically represent both its breakdown and its vitality. Under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, India developed a powerful tradition of protest in the form of satyagraha. That tradition suffered a decline after independence. Apart from a few cases, there have been no major satyagrahas or non-violent mass protests since 1947. Some naïve Gandhians including Vinoba Bhave even took the absurd view that satyagraha had no place in a democracy and should be replaced by moral persuasion and appeal. Protests by marginalised groups did continue to occur, and they either achieved their limited objectives, or fizzled out for lack of leadership and tenacity, or were put down by the state.

The first major nationwide protest movement was led by J.P. Narain in the 1970s. It emerged in a particular context and was deeply shaped by it. It had a strong anti-government character, and breathed a profound antinomian and quasi-anarchic spirit. J.P.'s demands included paralysing Indira Gandhi's government at every level, closure of colleges, non-payment of taxes, physically harassing the members of Legislative Assemblies, and even setting up a parallel government. He urged the police not to obey orders if these went against their conscience. J.P.'s movement led to the declaration of national Emergency, supported by not only the big business but also large sections of ordinary citizens.

J.P.'s movement has had a particular appeal in recent years. Ordinary people feel angry and powerless at their marginalisation and the corruption and inefficiency of the government. They are not sure who to blame, and hit out at something called the 'system'. They consider all political parties equally venal and do not think that any of them can be a vehicle of radical change. As a result of all this, political protests in recent years have resorted to violence as in the case of Naxalites, or to the bullying tactics of gherao, rasta roko, and so on, or to

fasts as in the case of Anna Hazare's movement. In each case the government was confronted with a stark ultimatum: do what we want or else we will paralyse you.

None of these and such other methods of protest is democratic in nature, and they are even likely to subvert the foundations of Indian democracy. Many Indians have increasingly come to see the fast as the best way to secure desired changes. Anna Hazare successfully fasted nearly a dozen times against the government of Maharashtra, and has now done so against the central government in support of his Jan Lokpal Bill with much popular support. The fast as a form of political protest seems to be unique to India, especially the Hindus. Although it derives its legitimacy from Gandhi, enjoys a valued place in Indian thought and practice, and in certain situations can be a useful resource, it has its dangers. It can become a form of political blackmail, be undertaken for dubious objectives, provoke counter fasts, and could lead to violence if something were to happen to the person fasting. It is elitist and relies on one individual to do what is really the responsibility of all citizens. It also becomes a substitute for the politically vital task of educating and organizing the masses and building powerful nationwide movements.

India needs to develop forms of protest that deepen and do not weaken its democracy, facilitate and energise and do not replace dialogue, make the authority more accountable and do not undermine its basis, and acknowledge the central mediating role of and do not bypass representative institutions. It can obviously draw inspiration from Gandhi but could also learn from Martin Luther King, the protest movements of Eastern Europe and the recent Arab uprisings, all of which involve new forms of political mobilization, imaginative ways of creating consensus among competing groups, and good-humored ways of deflating the arrogant and cynical politicians. Violence in a highly fragmented country like India is fraught with great dangers as it can easily be given casteist, communal and other forms and become too diffused to be kept under control. However it cannot be ruled out altogether if the state remains deaf to democratic forms of pressure.

## Conclusion

I have so far argued that India's representative institutions do not command the trust of the bulk of the electorate, that the quality of public deliberation leaves much to be desired, that the two Indias whose destinies are deeply interlocked risk moving further apart in a spirit of mutual indifference and even hostility, and that the mutually reinforcing cycle of rage-driven protests and the state's heavy handed response to them threatens the country's stability. India's political system and culture badly need to be revitalized if it is to meet the challenges facing it and ensure its people a stable and decent life.

There is no danger of India rejecting democracy in favour of authoritarian rule. Indians know from their experience of Indira Gandhi's Emergency what havoc such a rule can cause. More importantly, Indians have invested too heavily, both politically and emotionally, in their democratic institutions to contemplate an alternative. Democracy continues to enjoy widespread, though uneven, support across different sections of society, and is the only way to hold together a country as diverse as India. The danger rather is different. The popular support for democracy might weaken; cynicism and apathy might lead to institutional decay and contempt for public norms; the state, held hostage by sectional interests, might be unable to take sensible decisions in the long term national interest; its weakened legitimacy might undermine its ability to impose its authority in difficult times; and a situation might even arise in which the long frustrated groups turn to religious and other kinds of dubious leaders and movements and gravely endanger social and communal harmony. After all, something like this happened to the Indian civilization itself. After a brilliant start, it became degenerate and corrupt. It lingered on for centuries but without vitality and energy, and became a constant prey to internal and external threats.

Could Indian democracy meet a similar fate or have we learned the lessons of our history? As of now there are grounds for cautious optimism. Imaginative proposals to revitalise India's representative institutions are being canvassed and seriously considered. Sonia Gandhi's National Advisory Council has been acting as a nursery of

radical ideas, and is introducing a much-needed deliberative element. Inspired partly by the Gandhian tradition, the civil society is throwing up new forms of nonviolent movements and protests. Despite its limitations the Anna Hazare movement opened up the novel possibility of state-civil society partnership, including the idea of the government involving concerned citizens in drafting important pieces of legislation. Although little is being done to tackle the hold of the corporate power and the nefarious nexus between politicians and large business houses, this is being repeatedly exposed, those involved are named and shamed, and there is a growing awareness that radical measures are badly needed to counter this trend. The recent open letter to the government by a group of major industrialists, the skilful use of the Right to Information Act, the increasing demand to ensure the independence of investigating agencies, etc. are all welcome measures.

The history of post-independence India also offers some ground for optimism. Born in the trauma of communal violence, the country has managed to contain it. Despite the intermittent pressure of the Hindu majority, it has retained its secular character. It has tamed caste prejudices and brought the vast masses of scheduled castes and other backward castes into the national mainstream. Once committed to strong centralization, the country is now at ease with its federalism. It has overcome its earlier obsession with cultural homogeneity and takes pride in its cultural plurality. India moves slowly, sadly too slowly, and pays a heavy price in human suffering, but eventually and belatedly it seems to get its direction broadly right. There is no reason why this should not continue in the future. If nothing else, at least the sheer survival instinct of the country and its understandable though occasionally obsessive desire for international recognition and respect should ensure that.