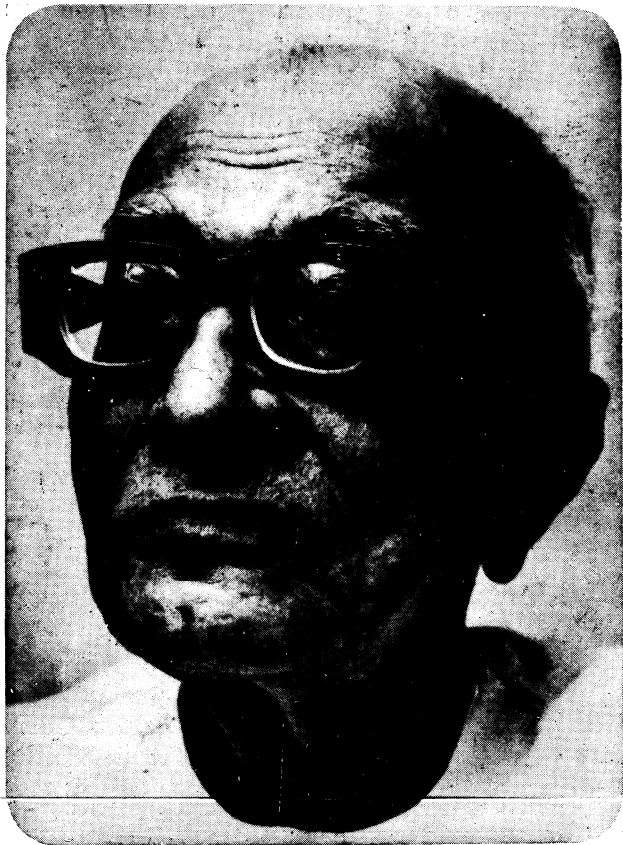


Towards A New Polity

Abid Hussain

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RAJAJI BIRTHDAY LECTURE, 1993

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RAJAJI BIRTHDAY LECTURE, 1993

It is a great honour for me to be invited to deliver this year's Rajaji Birthday Lecture. Rajaji was an intellectual colossus. He would take up ancient wisdom and reconcile it with modern enlightenment and cut out whatever was repugnant to reason or to moral sense. Rajaji never failed to speak out his mind or the truth however bitter and unpalatable. Gandhiji had once described him as his conscience-keeper. With extraordinary clarity of vision, he foresaw things ahead of others and constantly crusaded for reform. Rajaji was, indeed, an outstanding representative of that class of politicians which is now virtually extinct in India. It is in memory of Rajaji and what he strove to accomplish in the shaping of our policy that I decided to deliver my lecture on political issues rather than on economic or developmental issues with which I am a little more familiar.

Abid Hussain

Mr. Abid Hussain

Member of the Indian Administrative Service, Mr. Abid Hussain has held various senior and executive positions in the State and Central Governments. Thrice seconded to the United Nations. Returned to India as Secretary, Department of Heavy Industries and later, Secretary, Ministry of Commerce in 1981. Took over as Member, Planning Commission in January 1985. India's Ambassador to the United States of America from May 1990 to July 1992.

Chaired a number of Committees set up by the Government of India, including Trade Policy, Project Exports and Textile Policy.

Mr. Hussain was also Chairman of a number of bodies including the Institute of Foreign Trade, the IIM, Ahmedabad and the Delhi Urban Arts Commission.

Mr. Hussain was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1988.

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TOWARDS A NEW POLITY

Abid Hussain

Intelligent, ingenuous and committed men have not only diagnosed our political problems but have offered solutions. I should like to draw on these and in some instances perhaps go beyond them to suggest how we may proceed towards a new polity in India.

It is generally held that one cannot have political stability without a firm economic base. In our case I believe that while our economy is being reformed, our political system is getting deformed. This holds a threat to the growth of the economy as well, and might deflect the forces of development from their liberating course. A growing, outward-looking and futuristic economic policy is just not compatible with obscurantist political ideologies that fan the flames of caste and religious hatred

and seek to pit Indian against Indian. A thorough reform of our political system is absolutely necessary. Unless this overhaul is accomplished soon, I am afraid, our economic reforms programme will carry us only this far and no further and India might become an economic waste-land.

Joan Robinson, an eminent British economist, once remarked: All economic answers are political questions. It is in the political arena that the gains and pains of economic growth and technological transformation get distributed and it is through political parties that people are mobilised to further a public cause and sectoral interests. It is the political system that ultimately decides on whether a particular economic initiative is feasible or not. It is, therefore, necessary that the political system functions in tune with our economic thinking. Our economic thinking has made a bold and radical departure from past ideologies which had outlived their utility. Similarly our political thinking too must have a new and over-arching vision if our society is to be regenerated and remain united.

The first essential requirement in this process of political reform has to be a reiteration of the pluralistic nature of Indian society. ~~India is not a melting pot like the USA.~~ It is a mosaic, a kaleidoscope. Unfortunately, today it is in danger of becoming a boiling cauldron! The strength of Indian Society has been its diversity and its plurality, whether in terms of language, culture or religion. It is this diversity and the tolerance of this diversity that has enabled Indian civilisation to survive for over 3,000 years. It is this very diversity that is responsible for the democratic urges among our people. Every time this diversity is threatened, Indian civilisation and its polity suffer a severe setback. Homogenisation has always been resisted by the Indian people.

Unfortunately, in the last few years this essential characteristic of our society has been under sustained attack not by the poor illiterate masses but by sections of the educated and intellectual classes. It is the paradox of India that economic advancement, urbanisation and education, instead of liberating the mind and expanding its horizons, is actually leading to its enslavement, whether it be in terms of caste, religion or language. I do not want to enter into a debate on emotive terms like "secularism" or "communalism" but it does seem to me that we need to pause and reflect on this disquieting trend in our society where urban, educated and articulate sections have questioned the very foundation of our philosophy. Religion is confused by them with bigotry and redressal of past grievances - some real and some imagined.

But what is encouraging is that it is the verdict of the poor, deprived and disadvantaged which has always set the scale back in favour of compassion, democracy and diversity. This happened earlier and it has happened in Uttar Pradesh now. The answer to the retrograde ideology has come from the socially and economically depressed sections of our people. A new and renewed emphasis on the secular aspect of our society is, therefore, called for. Along with this, we need to give to Indian society an over-arching vision.

While communal and fundamentalist elements are chipping away at the edifice of our civilisation from one side, casteist forces are attacking from the other. Affirmative action to end the discrimination of centuries is certainly called for. But this is no excuse for the way in which political parties are pandering to caste. Elections for them is just not a matter of casting your vote but voting your caste! Affirmative action programmes have to be designed in a manner that the really needy among

the discriminated and disadvantaged benefit. Benefits can be monopolised by a few, while the costs are borne by many. For this, we must have faster economic growth without which people cannot come out of the wretchedness and heal the wounds of several layers of cruelty and deep emotions of deprivation stirring their soul.

The process of pauperisation has to be steadfastly arrested and turned around, lest people prefer the caste route, escalating attitudes of negation, which will not take them far and would further narrow the basis of nation-building. But there are other issues as well on which we need a dispassionate debate. For instance, what would be the desirability of a uniform civil code which would ensure equality for all women irrespective of religion. Women are worst affected by the nexus of material deprivation, powerlessness and oppression which lies at the heart of the problem faced by Muslim divorcees and Hindu widows in old age. We should not react to such an issue by saying that it is a demand articulated by a particular political party. We have to discuss these issues openly and objectively and come to certain conclusions without arousing sectoral passions.

Our political disarray is also the result of the decline in political accountability and effectiveness which has been due mostly to over-centralisation, gigantism, intrusiveness of government into all sectors of our lives and an almost pathological attachment to secrecy. At the same time we have an administration that is getting institutionally weak in the sense that it cannot, with consistency, implement good policy. We must therefore downsize the swollen, over-extended government and strengthen weakened institutions.

In this respect, we need to look at the size of government in India and not shy away from taking hard decisions. Government in India must be cut down in size. But let me hasten to explain what I mean by this. In the past, we have tended to conflate and confuse two very different things: the gross size of the government on the one hand and the ability of governments to get things done on the other. A large government is not necessarily a strong and efficient State; rather, the reverse is usually the case. In India, government is everywhere: it performs too many functions, few of which it performs well and it passes too many laws, few of which it can truly enforce.

What we need in India in the next century is a federation of small but efficient governments. This type of State would intervene directly not in micro-economic decision making but in infrastructural and human resource development, particularly in giving us good public health and education. A minimal but strong State has three benefits: it will reduce the size and awesomeness of the State; it will make the State more efficient in areas where intervention is essential, that is, where the efforts of ordinary men and women do not suffice; and it will force citizens to take greater direct responsibility for their fellows and their communities instead of leaving things to government.

The Indian state is also consumed by a passion for secrecy and control over information and the electronic media. Lack of transparency is fatal not just to democratic polity but to the efficiency, relevance and rationality of policy in a big and complex country like ours. Greater transparency and free media are not the enemies of government but are indispensable assets to good governance.

While I am on the subject of Indian government, let me also suggest that we need to cut down the size of the larger Indian States. This is an unfashionable subject. But it is an aspect of decentralisation and the reform of federalism that we can no longer ignore. Some of our States are bigger in area and population than most countries in the world. The physical, psychological and administrative distance between state capitals and mofussil towns and humble villages is as great as the distance between State capitals and the national capital! "*Dilli dur ast!*" But for a Garhwali hillsman "*Lucknow bhi dur ast!*" Gigantism is the enemy of development, democracy, and civic responsibility, and it must be dismantled. A second States' Reorganisation Act will give us States that are effective, accountable and accessible, without being obtrusive and arbitrary. This will encourage good citizenship and a growth in civic virtue.

We must also have drastic electoral reforms to rid our politics of the corrupt influence of mafia, muscle and money power. Unless we have a decent system of financing elections, government intervention in economic activity is bound to persist. State funding of elections is only one aspect of electoral reforms. ~~Mr. Seshan may be criticized for his style but should~~ command respect for the substance of what he is trying to do. People everywhere are fed up with our political system and our politicians and anyone who can stand up to the latter's antics is a hero. One has to see Hindi films now to appreciate this point. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was the trader, the mill owner, the landlord who was portrayed as the villain. Increasingly, box-office hits are those in which politicians and public officials are the villains. This signifies something - namely, the revolt of the silent majority.

Elections are a costly business in India and ways and means have to be found not just of funding them but also of reducing the influence of money power both in the choice of candidates and in the election campaign itself. Countries all over the world are having a relook at their political system. Countries which have a first-past-the-post system are thinking of proportionate representation, while countries that have the system of proportional representation are trying to experiment with the first past-the-post-system. The essential point is to challenge conventional wisdom and to provide a fairer and fuller representation to people in political life and activities. We have also to ensure that the business of parliament and legislative assemblies becomes more purposive and fruitful. These houses cannot become mere talk-shops or arenas where lung power is at a premium and intellect and reason at a discount. We have recently introduced the Subject Committee System. This is welcome. But we need to emulate the United States in this regard where Senators, Congressmen and judges all have full-time professional aides, researchers and trouble shooters.

This automatically brings me to my final point which is the need for the educated, professional and intellectual classes to play a more direct role in our politics. It is no use for our intellectuals and educated citizens to bemoan the decline in our political morality and standards. How is it that we had a generation in which the best intellects that India could generate were in politics? No country could boast of such a galaxy of names like Gokhale, Tilak, Chittaranjan Das, Abul Kalam Azad, Jinnah, Vallabhbhai Patel, apart from people like Gandhiji, Panditji and Rajaji himself. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, academics, scientists gave up their lucrative professions and joined political life. That spirit of sacrifice and

service is absent today. Of course, one could explain this phenomenon by saying that there is no demand for intellectuals from politicians and therefore the educated classes keep away. But this is being defeatist. I know many young friends of mine who have sacrificed a lot and plunged into politics motivated by a desire to change the established political order. A large number of youngsters have also launched grassroots voluntary agencies which, in a way is also political activity. We need a critical mass of such individuals to challenge the political establishment which is in an advanced stage of decay and which is best described as a vintage car rally - atleast the vintage cars shine and move. It will be a tough task but the challenge demands no less.

It is only young men and women motivated by the highest sense of idealism and concern who can respond to this challenge in a spirit of sacrifice. I have been a bureaucrat for most of my life and I find many of my bureaucrat friends joining politics. While this is good, my concern is that they are joining politics when their batteries are almost completely discharged. We need fresher faces and newer faces. It is paradoxical that in a society where 50% of our population is below the age of 40, the bulk of our political establishment is over the age of 60-65. Youth does make mistakes but let us not forget that mistake is the name that old and wise men and women give to their experience.

Allied with the issue of political reform is the area of judicial reform. A modern economy and polity can work only if contracts are enforced and if legislation is transparent. There is a backlog of nearly 14 lakh cases pending in the High Courts of the country and there are over 2 lakh cases pending in

the Supreme Court alone. It is true that the judiciary is one instrument that still commands respect but all is not well with our system of justice. Delays have become endemic.

There are many reasons for this. One important reason is that we have been a highly regulated economy and regulation inevitably leads to expanding judicial activity. Over 20% of the cases pending in the Supreme Court are on account of rent control laws which are clearly outmoded. The solution here is not to increase the number of judges but to scrap the legislation itself. The ordinary citizen finds himself helpless in getting quick decision from our judiciary at all levels and it is only the rich and powerful who seem to be able to get decisions in a matter of months while millions have to wait for years. It is really a shame on our democracy that we have allowed such judicial delays to proliferate. The reform of our judicial system, therefore, is an essential component of any programme aimed at revitalising the foundations of democracy in our country.

Friends I have attempted to put a few ideas before you today. Our country needs to evolve a new polity if it is to attain its full potential as a nation. Creating a new polity is not an easy task but if we were to put our shoulders to the wheel together we will surely reach our goal.

This is a goal worthy of Rajaji. He would expect nothing less from us.

The Project for Economic Education, the sponsor of this booklet, is a non-political, non-partisan programme established with the objective of enlightening the intelligent layman on economic issues. The Project is supported in this effort by the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung (Germany) which is a non-profit private institution primarily engaged in the strengthening of democratic and pluralist institutions in the underdeveloped world. Under the aegis of this Project, seminars and meetings are organised and a publications programme has been undertaken.

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