

# **THE STATE OF THE NATION**

## **The Four Costly Failures**

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# THE STATE OF THE NATION

## The Four Costly Failures

By

**Nani A. Palkhivala**

The issue of **The Illustrated Weekly** dated August 11, 1974, carried an article by me ("The Mess We Are In") which contained the following passage:

"A highly reputed agency, known for its perceptive analysis of world events, has recently made a major attempt to forecast the future of the Indian Ocean region in the 1982-1991 era. One aspect of the studies focussed on the internal stability of the countries in the area. The result indicated that in that decade India is likely to have the highest level of general political violence (demonstrations, riots, internal armed attacks and assassinations) — a higher level than will probably be reached by any country of Africa or the Middle East".

This forecast for the decade of which we are about to finish the first year, is not rendered implausible by the present state of the nation.

1982 has been the Year of Disorder — an omnibus and ominous word which covers violence, indiscipline and corruption.

**In the land of the Mahatma, violence is on the throne today. Its victims, among others, are helpless**

passengers in trains, loyal workers in strike-bound factories, and innocent citizens on riot-stricken roads when the Bandh-mongers claim the freedom of the city. Our militant trade union leaders are well-qualified to adopt the words of Konrad Lorenz, the Nobel prize-winning naturalist, "I believe I have found the missing link between animals and civilized man — it is us".

Civilization is an act of the spirit. Ancient India was far more civilized than modern India with its satellites in space.

In recent months "the banality of evil" has come home to us with a strange poignancy. The recurrent looting of banks in broad daylight arouses as little public attention as the going down of the sun in the evening. Not since the abolition of thuggery by Lord William Bentinck in the 1830s has violence characterized our national life on a scale so widespread and so unchecked as today. **Our legal system has made life too easy for criminals and too difficult for law-abiding citizens. A touch here and a push there, and India may become ungovernable under the present constitutional setup.**

## **Unconcern for public good**

There are two main reasons for this sordid state of affairs. *First*, as a nation, we have scant concern for public good and far too few citizens are interested in public welfare. We forget that crime is not a problem for the police only but for the whole society.

Lack of concern for public good manifests itself in many ways—in the way we walk or drive on the road and in more significant things like our attitude to encroachments on or destruction of public property. The general reaction to the millions of encroachments which are suffocating the cities is governed by what is loosely assumed or hastily glimpsed or piously hoped. We have no sense of pride in our city, country or history. How many citizens are willing to stand up and be counted in support of the Municipal Commissioner who is left with the odium of discharging his statutory duty of protecting national assets?

**We are as careless about public property as we are careful about our own property. Those who would not allow any trespass on their private estate are willing to contemplate, with total equanimity, encroachments on public property and destruction of public amenities. Bombay and other cities are in a state of galloping decay partly resulting from public property being encroached upon with impunity, with the misguided sympathy of a section of the citizens.**

**Humanitarianism must be distinguished from mis-carriage of mercy.** Countless slumlords who have grabbed public lands are making large untaxed incomes every month out of the miseries of the homeless. No doubt, shelter for every citizen is an imperative of any good government, but there are cleaner ways of achieving that goal than converting public property into slumlords' illegal estates.

No city, no democracy, can survive without law and order. Public interest requires promotion of law and order, not its denegation and destruction. Those who support encroachments may be motivated by kindness, but good motives are not enough. Many Naxalites are impelled by good motives to criminal action, and even Naxalite courts claim to proceed on notions of social justice.

### **Moral recession**

**Secondly, the alarming rise in the incidence of crime is partly due to the general lowering of standards in public and private life. The economic recession is, no doubt, disquieting, but infinitely worse is the moral and spiritual recession. The roots of disarray are in our minds and not in the price of fish or fowl. Inflation—the erosion of our currency—has been checked, but not erosion of national character.**

The quality of our public life has reached the nadir. Politics has become tattered and tainted with crime. **The moral standards of our politicians, policemen and criminals are indistinguishable from one another. India today is a living example of the fact that cynicism corrupts and absolute cynicism corrupts absolutely.**

### **Four costly failures**

The four costly failures of the Government and the people, which are the direct causes of the present sorry spectacle, are:

- (1) **Failure to maintain law and order. We have too much government and too little administration; too many public servants and too little public service; too many controls and too little welfare; too many laws and too little justice.**
- (2) Failure to bring the unbounded economic potential of the country to fruition.
- (3) Failure to make human investment—investment in education, family planning, nutrition and public health, in contradistinction to physical investment in factories and plants. Gross national happiness should have been given priority over gross national product.
- (4) Failure to provide moral leadership. We do not live by bread alone, and we are greater than we know.

The blame must be shared by the people along with the Government; because it is the public who elect politicians to power, and because private initiative of the citizenry could have gone a long way towards counteracting the deficiencies of the Government.

### **Mortgaged bedding**

India still continues to be the fifteenth poorest nation in the world, with a per capita income of less than 200 dollars per annum, the rise in per capita income since we became a republic having been only 55 per cent in real terms. Half of our

people on the 80 million farms in the six lakh villages still live below the subsistence line. The rural labourer's plight seems timeless and unchanging.

**"His speech is of mortgaged bedding,  
On his vine he borrows yet,  
At his heart is his daughter's wedding,  
In his eye foreknowledge of debt.  
He eats and hath indigestion,  
He toils and he may not stop;  
His life is a long-drawn question  
Between a crop and a crop."**

We are second to none in intelligence and the spirit of enterprise and we have all the skills and capability to be a great economic power. How we manage to remain poor is an uncomfortable question, the answer to which would not be flattering to our politicians and ideologues.

While the prospects of industrial recovery are a mirage shimmering tantalizingly over the desert wastes of the current recession, the latest Report of the Reserve Bank gives a bright picture of the Indian economy. That Report shows that governmental ways have not changed since the British days when Kipling sarcastically noted, "The Indian Government being minded to discover the economic condition of their lands, sent a Committee to enquire into it; and saw that it was good."

## **Education**

Article 45 of the Constitution enacts, "The State shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten

years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years". Even 32 years after the Constitution came into force, 67 per cent of our people are literally illiterate, making meaningful democracy impossible but making it easily possible for politicians to have a vested interest in illiteracy and public ignorance.

**Thomas Jefferson, one of the founders of the United States of America, remarked, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be". When a republic comes to birth, it is the leaders who produce the institutions. Later, it is the institutions which produce the leaders. The question — where are the leaders of tomorrow? — can only be answered by the other question — where are the nation-building institutions which can produce the leaders of tomorrow?**

We do not have a single educational institution which aims at generating excellence, and which is equipped to produce "movers of people, mobilizers of opinion" — integrated personalities whose minds, hearts and character have been developed in the noble traditions of our priceless heritage.

**I am using the word "education" in its profound sense. Animals can be trained; only human beings can be educated. Education requires personal participation and transformation. It cannot be given to anyone; it must be inwardly appropriated. It involves cultivation of the mind, not merely with a view**



**to offering it as a commodity for sale in the marketplace.**

H. G. Wells wisely observed that human history is becoming more and more a race between education and catastrophe. This observation indicates what our people without education are heading for.

The child is the father of the man. The quality of education of the children of today will determine the quality of life in India tomorrow.

**“In ancient shadows and twilights  
Where childhood had strayed,  
The world’s great sorrows were born  
And its heroes were made.  
In the lost boyhood of Judas  
Christ was betrayed.”**

We are very poor at maintenance — whether it is the maintenance of our power plants or factories, historical monuments or buildings, cities or universities. So far from establishing elitist educational institutions, we have downgraded and devalued the fine universities which existed when we became a republic. In those days college buildings did not leak — nor did examination papers. The Bombay, Calcutta and Madras Universities are 125 years old. Nature has kindly denied us a sense of history and therefore we are saved the anguish of realizing the contrast between what these educational institutions were during the first 100 years and what they have been reduced to in the last 25.

When we became a republic, we forgot that freedom is like alcohol,—it must be taken in moderation. We discarded the old norms of discipline and decorum, dignity and decency, in our universities. Today the university student is aware that what he knows does not count in the examination half as much as who he knows. At best, our presentday universities are academic cafeterias offering junk food for the mind. At their worst, they are the breeding-grounds of corruption and indiscipline, dishonesty and irresponsibility.

## **Leadership**

**There are two basic lessons of Indian history. First, our people have always taken their moral standards from their rulers: the people have risen to great heights when they have basked in the glow of noble kings or leaders. Secondly, regimes and kingdoms have been destroyed not by adversity but by corruption. Corruption is the greatest solvent of public institutions; poverty poses a far smaller threat.**

**So far from giving the moral leadership which the people are yearning and waiting for, our politicians are only occupied in maintaining a system which is poisoned by collective bad faith and polluted by individual avarice. They are served by deception and craftiness, instead of vision and imagination. The caption of a famous cartoon, "The world is neither flat nor round—it is crooked", aptly sums up the world of Indian politics. In modern India,**

**Machiavelli would have remained unemployed on account of his *naiveté*.**

Our ministers look with austere disfavour upon any attempt to depict the reality. They find something indecent in the naked truth, — hence the enactment of the Bihar Press Bill. They wax eloquent on the blessings of the Government they represent. It is interesting to recall that eloquence flourished most in Rome when public affairs were in the worst condition.

## **Disenchantment**

**If we are asked what the three and a half decades of self-government have taught us, we must admit ruefully in the words of T. S. Eliot, "We had the experience, but missed the meaning".**

The man who did not miss the meaning and implications of freedom was C. Rajagopalachari who clearly foresaw what freedom without education would bring in its wake. While in jail for civil disobedience he made the following entry in his prison diary on January 24, 1922:

**"Elections and their corruptions, injustice and the power and tyranny of wealth, and inefficiency of administration, will make a hell of life as soon as freedom is given to us. Men will look regretfully back to the old regime of comparative justice, and efficient, peaceful, more or less honest administration.**

**“The only thing gained will be that as a race we will be saved from dishonour and subordination.**

**“Hope lies only in universal education by which right conduct, fear of God and love will be developed among the citizens from childhood.**

**“It is only if we succeed in this that Swaraj will mean happiness. Otherwise it will mean the grinding injustices and tyranny of wealth. What a beautiful world it would be, if everybody were just and God-fearing and realized the happiness of loving others! Yet there is more practical hope for the ultimate consummation of this ideal in India than elsewhere.”**

Rajaji's words contain an amazingly accurate prediction of our disenchantment with the present state of affairs, while they also provide hope for the unfolding future.

Finally, a word to clarify that I am by no means unmindful of all that we have accomplished as a young republic. The whole point of this piece is to stress that our innate potential is far, far greater than our actual achievement. Creative dissatisfaction is the surest way to fulfilment of the dreams of our founding fathers.

*Courtesy: “The Illustrated Weekly of India”  
(Nov. 21, 1982).*

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