

Both India and Pakistan "celebrate" fifty years of independence this year, as Sri Lanka will be doing next year. We print two articles on their record of "independence". The one on India concentrates on what has happened to the Indian state during the past fifty years; on Pakistan, we have a critically annotated calendar of events.

INDIA'S POLITICAL ORDER MAY CHANGE, ON ITS OWN.

Jayadeva Uyangoda

In this age of nation-state fetishism, what better opportunity could one get to bash the modern nation-state in South Asia than the event of the golden jubilee of its Indian version?

When Raja Rao, one of India's great writers to remain ignored in the rest of South Asia, called his classic of a novel *Serpent and the Rope*, he was alluding to a key component of Sankaracharya's Hindu philosophy - *maya*, illusion. In the *maya* doctrine, illusion and reality are hardly distinguishable: the serpent is the rope and the rope is the serpent. Reality is couched in illusion and vice versa.

India is not a Hindu land, nor is it a Hindu state, not at least in the wording of the marvelously secular constitution of India; and at the same time, India is the Hindu land and the Hindu state in the ideology and practices of a variety of dominant political forces. This is the political serpent and the rope, the *maya* of the Indian nation-state that has been constructed through fifty years. After fifty years of its formation, modern India remains torn between two mutually-exclusive historical tendencies; one is represented by the grand old illusion of a multi-national plural polity while the other by the harsh reality of India moving towards a multiplicity of many nations and states, born out of enmity. Paradoxically, both these — the enduring illusion and hard-to-accept reality — appear to be working in harness to keep intact the India we know for some more years to come.

India and the rest of South Asia have gone through political modernity of a sort. The nation-state is both the central product and the main agency of this modernity. Building a unified nation, within the fixed and unalterable boundaries of the state, has been at the center of the task that history has entrusted to the modern ruling classes of each of these countries. India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka dramatically encapsulate South Asia's failure to build unified nations and cohesive states, as demanded by the modernist compulsions of history. The record of India, at least till about the early eighties, had been an exceptionally good one. Having overcome the terrible human tragedy of 'Partition' — this dreadful term, no matter who invented it, still captures the predicament of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh — the Indian ruling class tried its best, and indeed managed, to lay the foundations for a pluralistic nation-state for India. With its quasi-federalist constitution adopted in the early fifties, India was believed to be moving in the direction of becoming an exemplary state in South Asia, accepting both diversity and political unity.

Neither Pakistan nor Sri Lanka have had a ruling class that possessed even the limited political imagination of their Indian counterparts of the fifties. From the word 'go', Pakistan was destined to dismember itself and it actually happened in 1971 when East Pakistan of the Bengalis decided to secede. And in Sri Lanka, the blindness of the Sinhalese ruling class to the country's bi-national social composition has been remarkable only in its intractable consequences.

India, in a way, encapsulates, in a scale larger than life, most of the contradictions of post-colonial South Asia, despite, or because of, the fact that it had the most progressive ruling class in the region. The Indian ruling class had a vision of a tolerant state; it had a sensitivity to the multi-national composition of the Indian nation, as captured in the quotation from Nehru prominently displayed, even today, at the arrival lounge of the New Delhi International airport, just behind the immigration counter. But, after the seventies, India's centralizing federalism proved inadequate to keep this vision from deteriorating into a massive prison house of nations. First in Punjab and then in Kashmir, deep cracks began to appear in the nation and the state; notions of separate sovereignties began to erupt, a process which all nationalists and Marxists of Hindu India — from Mumbai to Calcutta — would agree to oppose and loathe. And now, the North-East of India too is in similar turmoil.

Separatism is too tendentious a term to describe the historical trend in India which is being enacted in these regions where nationalist groups have been rising in insurgency demanding greater or complete political sovereignty. Indeed, separatism is a term invented for the modern state which is distinguished from the previous forms of the state on account of two of its defining features: fixed territory and unalterable sovereignty. The message coming from the north-Eastern and north-Western regions of India is a fairly old one. Communities living in the margins of the state are the first voice of an inexorable historical fact: that is, the existing form of the state is decaying.

I am not sure how many in India — or South Asia, for that matter — would not be perturbed by this formulation. The Indian nation-state is decaying because the Indian ruling class has not reformed the modern Indian state since its Republican constitution was adopted in the early fifties. Such a reform exercise, as necessitated by the history of the past fifty years, could have turned the Indian nation-state into a more flexible association of regional communities and autonomous polities. Such a reform project could have been worked

out in ideal circumstances if the Indian center had listened to the demands made for many years by a number of opposition-ruled states for an advanced form of federalism. However, at the center of the Indian government, there has been a consistent refusal to admit the need to re-examine the territory and sovereignty principles of the modern state. Even moderate voices for a re-definition of these principles have readily been perceived as anti-state subversion. Even an enlightened member of the Indian ruling class can only view such voices as coming from 'misguided youth', as demonstrated in Prime Minister Gujral's recent comments on Kashmir.

India's predicament as a modern nation-state is also the shared predicament of her twin, Pakistan, born on the same day. The incredible obsession of their ruling elites with national security has made these two states totally crippled when it comes to the question of altering the existing forms of the state. Elites in India and Pakistan are extreme examples in South Asia of proponents of what can be termed as the fetishism of three markers of the modern state — fixed borders, centrally controlled sovereignty and national security. Those who study the anthropology of religion would know that people usually make fetishes of sacred representations of inanimate objects, not the objects themselves.

This is perhaps a good place to return to Raja Rao's quintessentially Hindu novel, *Serpent and the Rope*. In a piece of memorable dialogue, Rama, the protagonist, tells his fiancée: 'India is not a country; it is a metaphysical concept.' Fifty years of India's post-independence political history has made the metaphysics of the Indian-nation state the most-perplexing category invented by India's modern sages of progress. All, except the ragged trousered guerrillas in the plains of the North-West and in the mountains of the North-East, appear to believe that the modern Indian nation-state is one singularly holy political site, existing through many millennia. Little do even the gifted historians in India tell us that the Indian polity's contemporary form of the state has been in existence only for just half a century.

After fifty years of the modern state, India has now entered a crucial turning point in its history. The contradictory workings of three

historical forces that emerged in the twentieth century will determine, sooner or later, India's next turn. The first of these is the historical force of the Indian nation-state's existing form. With its political, bureaucratic, cultural and military resources — which are formidable by any standard — the Indian nation-state has the capacity to defy any conscious move aimed at altering its present political order, totally disregarding the consequences inherent in deploying that capacity. The second is a product of the present nation-state itself and has taken the form of ethnic-secessionist insurgencies which are presently located in the margins of the Indian state. The third is the structural dynamics of the Indian political order that appear to operate within an autonomous space. It is a matter for regret that there is no reformist/reconstitutionist force capable of shaping the next historical turn of the Indian state.

The third historical force mentioned above, the autonomous dynamics of the Indian political order, still remains virtually unrecognized, because it has only recently begun to shape itself. Its most visible manifestation is the recurring political instability at the center, accompanied by weak, short-lived and conflict-ridden regimes. When the center is weak, there may emerge the space for state governments and regional political forces to assert themselves with strength vis a vis the center, exercising *de facto* autonomy and independence. The recent emergence of the judiciary as the most autonomous institution of the Indian polity also demonstrates the capacity of the Indian political order to reconstitute itself, independent of the ruling class. The point is that the same space is available for India's multiple constituent parts — nations, ethnic groups, state governments and civil society — to actually exercise greater autonomy and sovereignty from the structures of central political power.

The most positive historical outcome of this scenario, if it works out well, would be the self-reconstitution of India's political order, grounded on a new principle of political association. In the absence of a better term, one may call it the principle of de-centered sovereignty. Ironically, there might not be any human agencies, conscious of their historical task, to lead this change.

Privatisation of Tea Plantations: The Challenge of Reforming Production Relations in Sri Lanka

by N. Shanmugaratnam

The Robe and the Plough

by R.A.L.H. Gunewardane

Available at the

Suriya Bookshop

425/15, Thimbirigasyaya Road, Colombo 5

Tel: 501339, Fax: 595563