

THE CRUMBLING STEEL FRAME

By

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I joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1963 and as part of the training spent a few months on 'district training' in Dharwar district in Mysore. Though already coming under pressure from politicians the administrative and police services by and large still performed the functions of the steel frame that had been established by the British Raj in the late 19th century. As I saw in my travels around the district with the SP and the DC, they performed their duties without fear or favour. To give one illustration, I was asked towards the end of my stay by the DC to adjudicate in a land dispute, which involved a powerful local politician. I adjudicated to the best of my lights and against him. The DC accepted this, and just made sure to counter the physical threats made by the politician's agents that I had an armed guard till I left the district. There was no question of giving into the politician's threats. Similarly, the police were aware of the local 'goondas' who could foment riots, and kept an eye on them and would round them up as soon as there was any danger of a flashpoint, which might lead them to incite a riot. While, if a riot did occur, it was clear that the civil and police authorities first duty was to restore order, without any consideration for the politics, if necessary by resorting to police firing. This meant, as I then thought that, despite the pressures of a democratic polity this British legacy would survive and ensure that the first task of any government to protect the life and property of its citizens would still be fulfilled. As the tragic events in Gujarat have merely highlighted, this presumption was steadily belied. But, how did this come to pass, when at least in the Nehruvian era despite political pressures the steel frame still by and large was in place?

From press reports it appears that many believe this erosion and the consequent failure of the Gujarat government is due to the rise of what many have termed Hindu Fascism with analogies with the rise of Hitler and Mussolini. But this will not do. Political parties in India of every hue have tried to mobilize caste and ethnic vote banks, ever since the British instituted limited forms of democracy at the end of the 19th century. Also ethnic conflict has been endemic in India. To argue, as many have done recently that, there has been some sea change in inter-ethnic conflict as represented by Gujarat is a travesty of the unchanged social realities on the subcontinent for centuries, if not millennia. Neither Nehruvian socialism nor reciting of the 'mantra' of secularism has changed this reality, and for a very important and elemental reason.

Socio-biologists who claim that our basic human nature was set in the Stone Age, argue that we have an inbuilt instinct to distinguish between people based on ethnicity. The reason is that on the savannahs of Africa where Man first evolved, rapid 'species' relevant judgments had to be made on the basis of quick impressions. It was a matter of life and death to judge from whatever signs were available if a dangerous member of a predatory species was at hand. The decision, moreover, had to be instantaneous, without any time being spent on continuous sampling to confirm one's

conjecture that a yellow shape with stripes in the distance was indeed a tiger. We are therefore naturally primed to make 'species' judgments.

Given, the divergence between different human groups in physiognomy and culture, once our ancestors spread throughout the world and rarely came in contact with their genetic cousins, it is hardly surprising that when we do come across another ethnic group we are primed to look upon it as a different species. Intermarriage and long familiarity might change these natural instincts, but as the bloody outcome in the successor states of Yugoslavia (and the endemic ethnic conflict in India) demonstrates this might be a very long run. This provides, an important reason, rooted in our biology, why the Enlightenment hopes of the reduction- if not ending- of ethnic differences and conflicts have not been fulfilled.

It also explains why it is foolish to claim as the Congress president recently is reported to have said that the fact that this latest bloody episode occurred in one of the most prosperous States in India, which has taken most advantage of economic liberalization, suggests that there is something dangerous about the processes of globalization. If ethnic differentiation is a basic instinct, it is not going to be suppressed by the size of one's bank balance. In fact, given these unavoidable ethnic tensions, they have usually had to be contained in a multiethnic empire- from the Ottomans to the Hapsburgs, to the British, to Tito's Yugoslavia, to India- by an Imperial State, which maintains its Pax by putting a lid on these endemic ethnic conflicts. The British Raj and its legatee the Nehruvian state in its first two decades by and large maintained this Pax, through the steel frame. It's the subsequent erosion of this frame, which has put the survival of this multi-ethnic empire at risk, of which the events in Gujarat are just the most recent horrific symptom.

As with the erosion of so many other institutions nurtured by her father, the erosion of the steel frame began under the watch of Indira Gandhi, and her leftward shift with the defeat of the Syndicate, the splitting of the Congress, and her massive victory in the "Garibi Hatao" elections. The induction of Communist fellow travelers like Mohan Kumaramanglam in the higher counsels of the state, and the demand by the ideologically committed head of the PMO, P.N.Haksar for a 'committed bureaucracy' were the start of the process whereby the higher bureaucracy was essentially browbeaten into political submission. Thereafter, it was merely a matter of time before the message went down the line in the bureaucracy that in the chain of command one could not count on one's superiors to stand by one when one did one's duty. The instruments used to bring the bureaucracy to heel and to become the politician's creature were the stick of transfers, and the carrot of 'meaningful' jobs at the Centre, and remunerative foreign postings. For this mess of potage did the Guardians give up their birth right, while making sure that their progeny found lucrative jobs in the US and UK.

The second cause of the erosion of the steel frame, were the system of controls, which was an integral part of the Nehruvian economic settlement. For the relatively idealistic bureaucrats this extension of bureaucratic power meant that the carrot of a 'meaningful' job in one of the central developmental ministries became that more enticing, while for the naturally corrupt it opened the avenues for untold riches. The current goings on in the Punjab Public Services Commission are only to be expected, as even the institutions established to choose the Guardians have become a cash generating machine. Prospective bureaucrats, who have paid Siddhu the enormous sums he is

claimed to have acquired, naturally gave them in the expectation that their jobs would yield more than their investment.

It is difficult to judge how far this crumbling of the steel framework has gone, and whether there are still enough idealistic recruits to the central services who might in time be able to stem the rot. For to expect our politicians of whatever hue to change their spots and refurbish the steel frame is to ask for the moon. Gujarat, therefore, merely highlights how far the rot has set in, and despite the hand wringing and name calling on all sides of the political spectrum, the essential lesson is that, the whole of the administrative and political class have been agents in the dismantling of the steel frame which alone can maintain the Pax in a multi-ethnic empire, ever since Indira Gandhi and the Left launched their campaign for a 'committed' bureaucracy.