

The 66th year of Independence

As we begin the 66th year of independence from British rule, we can all feel proud of being perhaps the only developing/emerging/newly independent country in the world practicing democracy in a practically uninterrupted fashion. The other side is the quality of the democracy. In a report on his recent marriage to his long time companion (Indian Express July 22nd), R.K.Dhawan (the Ahmed Patel of Mrs Indira Gandhi) was quoted saying that *"Sonia Gandhi is running the party as democratically as Indira Gandhi did."*

As it happens, I am currently reading Pranay Gupte's *Mother India*, a biography of Mrs Indira Gandhi. The first chapter describes the utter chaos in the PM's household after her assassination. Nobody knew what to do. To her great credit, Sonia Gandhi was the only one in the household who kept her head, took charge of the situation and removed Indira Gandhi to the hospital in a car (the ambulance supposed to be in readiness 24 hours a day was not available). As reported by Vichitra Sharma, then a correspondent of Hindustan Times, there was utter chaos in the hospital as well: nobody seemed to be in-charge and the access to the dying PM was unmanned by security guards. Ms. Sharma has been quoted by Gupte as saying later *"What kind of men were these? I realized then that she had made puppets out of every one of them – and now she was no longer around to pull the strings. In her years of power, she had taken away the manhood from every one of these men – so now they were ... not knowing what to do."*

It is worth pondering over the last part of Ms. Sharma's comment, with most of the present central cabinet and the chief ministers "appointed" by the Congress President, with no power base of their own. They have never hitched up their trousers or *dhotis* and trudged through muddy roads to build a support base. In fact, like the senior Mrs Gandhi, the present congress President also does not like leaders with mass followings. No wonder Sharad Pawar had to leave the Party and Harish Rawat of Uttaranchal was not appointed the Chief Minister. As Pratap Bhanu Mehta wrote (Indian Express, August 2), *"the recent cabinet reshuffle suggests the leadership's lack of trust.... in the rest of the Party"*. Mehta also commented in an earlier column that *"Congress has consistently*

used the same argument of virtue to duck its responsibilities. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is a virtuous man. Indeed he is". But "innocence has acquired a new meaning; ducking of institutional responsibilities." One example: the Prime Minister has recently instructed ministers to keep the PMO out of PILs (Hindustan Times, July 22), and seems to act more as an adviser to the government than its CEO!

There is another common factor in the two Mrs Gandhis – their belief in the politics of distribution. To recall a personal experience from 1977, as the news of defeat after defeat for the Congress Party in the post-emergency election was being broadcast, I was in a Kolkata bar with my good friend and close trade union colleague, (the late) Rajib Roy, a lifelong communist. As the scale of the defeat became clear, his comment was that "I hope the politics of distribution now gives way to the politics of production". (Mind you, this comment came from a committed leftist!) Unfortunately, even 35 year later, we are committed to below cost, subsidized power, water, train travel, diesel, kerosene, fertilizers, etc., at the cost of investments. Are we going back to being an economy of shortages? Below cost pricing of such services means that the first items to be neglected are maintenance and investment. The recent blackout over half of India could well turn out to be the first of many to follow. In my city, Mumbai, train service breakdowns have become a routine with millions suffering. We often forget that the costliest service – whether water, power, hospital, or travel – is the one not available when needed! To quote Pranay Gupte again, *"vague socialist shibboleths became the magic mantras of Indira's time; and her promises of an egalitarian society created instead an elite bureaucracy that prospered and perpetuated itself."* We are fast going back to those days, perhaps forgetting that today, in Asia, only North Korea is still enamoured of that model!

In a conversation with Dom Moraes a few years after the Mahatma's assassination, Nehru said "I do not think any of the Mahatma's ideas are applicable today". Would the currently ruling Mrs Gandhi have the intellectual courage to see that nor are her mother-in-law's? That the politics of distribution need to give way to the politics of production? That, paraphrasing management Guru Peter Drucker, fast growth is a need of the economy, if the social objectives of policy are to be achieved; that a bottom up model of development, would release the enormous innovative talents (*Jugaad*) of our people;

that a top down, bureaucratic model ignores the *Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* as C.K.Prahalad termed it.

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