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CONTENTS

Editorial: National Integration After Six Decades		171
National Integration: A Historical Overview	Mukul Kesavan	173
National Integration: A Socio-Political Perspective	Prashant Bhushan	176
National Integration: A Second Freedom Struggle	Rudolf C Heredia	180
Influencing Change	Vinod K Gaur	184
Poem: The Poet-Fishmonger	Zoya Zaidi	192
Book review : Reclaiming the Nation	Vineeta Sinha	195
News and Notes		
- New UN resolution deplores religious defamation		198
- Freedom is in decline in many places around the world		

The Religion of Wholeness*

At this point I wish to mention briefly my own beliefs and feelings in this matter. I do not believe in personal immortality. There is some evidence that the human psyche may survive physical death, but immortality is very different from survival. In accepting death as the end of my existence as an individual, I have no feeling of merely reconciling myself to what is inevitable, for I do not believe that personal immortality would be a good thing, if it were true. Radhakrishnan's question: 'Russell's humanism may prepare us to die with dignity but does it inspire us to live with hope?' is based on the assumption that there can be no hope for me unless my future as an individual is assured. But that is not true. I believe that all things that exist are in some way connected with one another and form a whole. I am a part of that whole in intimate connection with the rest. My individuality, which I value so much, has come out of the whole and at every moment depends on it. This individuality is only a temporary phase in the march of life. The desire for the indefinite continuation of this individuality is something which we have to outgrow, as a child out-grows his fondness for toys. Not that I do not shrink from the thought of death, but it is like shrinking from a surgical operation which I know is going to do good; it is simply a weakness of the flesh.

The doctrine of immortality of souls as a remedy for human pessimism, not being based on reality, was bound to break down sooner or later. The insight of Gautam Buddha and of the mystics of all religions have already been referred to. But these insights did not play a great role because they failed to disentangle themselves from the religious tradition of the worthlessness of human life on earth. There was a failure to realize that the earth, in the words of a poet, "is crammed with heaven" (There is plenty of hell too!). The real remedy for pessimism lies in a more active identification of the individual with the life around him. The individual thereby shares in a larger life and becomes more truly himself.

** An extract from Narsingh Narain's Essay: 'The Religion of Wholeness'.*

EDITORIAL



National Integration After Six Decades

As we approached the sixtieth anniversary of the Republic, a discussion on 'National Integration After Six Decades', jointly organised by IHU and IIC, was held in the India International Centre on 31 October, 2010. The panel speakers were three eminent persons from different fields: Mr Mukul Kesavan, Professor of History from Jamia Millia; Mr Prashant Bhushan, Senior Advocate in the Supreme Court of India; Mr Rudolph Heredia of the Indian Social Institute.

In my opening remarks I said: "In November 1949 the Constituent Assembly adopted the Indian Constitution which of course was formally introduced later but that was the day - 26 November 1949 - that the Constitution was adopted formally and given to us. A great Constitution there is no doubt about it. Thanks to the staunch secularism of people like Nehru and - in his own way, as Dr. Heredia has also written - Mahatma Gandhi himself, post partition India adopted a secular constitution while Pakistan and Bangladesh chose to become Islamic Republics.

For India it was clear that secularism was the only cement to hold together this great and disparate nation. Our record of 60 years shows that we have had to face great odds but, by and large, we can say that secularism has met with more success than failure. But this may be a good time to review after 60 years where we stand and where we are likely to go and see if there is any need to intervene and alter the course of events. Of course, in this story of success and failures, I think it is more productive to pay greater attention to our failures because that is where corrective action is needed.

As I see it the chief impediments in the way of our national integration are casteism and communalism, linguistic regionalism, and class disparity. There may be some more that one could add to the list but to me it seems that these are the three main factors which have acted against national integration. I also feel - it is subject to discussion - that many of these arise due to the nature of our electoral politics, because periodical elections tend to unravel the social fabric. Political parties widen divisions where they exist and find new ones where they do not."

Professor Kesavan, giving an insightful historical overview, speaks of India's "strange nationalism". He says: "It is not a nation that seeks to valorize homogeneity. It is not a nation that puts great store by the idea of uniformity: quite the opposite. It actually valorizes or celebrates the notion of diversity." Of course, while celebrating diversity, it has to be recognised that it gives

scope to divisive forces such as communalism, linguistic chauvinism and aggressive regionalism. Nehru was acutely aware of this, as Kesavan himself has pointed out.

Prashant Bhushan draws attention to the actual sociopolitical situation on the ground. We have a secular Constitution, he says, "But in actual practice what we are seeing being practised on the ground is that there are large communities - whether they are Muslims or Christians, minorities of all kinds, the Dalits - who are facing enormous discrimination and who are facing enormous hardship in this country. This is one fact, and the other is that as yet we have achieved very little by way of actual understanding across communities."

In my view, three factors seem to be mainly responsible for this. One: that there are inadequate safeguards in the Constitution to prevent majoritarian misrule. Secondly; the electoral process relies heavily on divisive politics; and thirdly: the policy of widespread reservations promotes - and perpetuates - the fragmentation of society along caste/ communal lines. This, however, is a highly controversial issue.

Rudolph Heredia, rejecting a Hobbseian view of the world, asks: "National integration for what?" And answers: "The freedom struggle was for national integration for peace, for progress, for harmony, for enrichment and that is why it privileged diversity over homogeneity and uniformity. There were practical and political exigencies that helped this, but I think there was a vision behind it and I think it was essentially a Gandhian and socialist vision." He touches on the question of identity, and on peoples' perception of the Other. "... the kinds of identities that are being privileged today in India are exclusive identities and at the end of this road there cannot be anything other than violence. Now why do we construct identities negatively.? I think we need to examine this a bit once again."

Part of the problem, I think, is that our policies have converted the relations between 'carriers' of different identities into a zero-sum game. What one caste/ community gains in in terms of privileges, another loses. Inevitably, the Other is seen essentially as a rival claimant. How much better it would be if everyone had a reasonable share of the fruits of good governance. But that requires the honest application of resources, which is perhaps a tall order.

The issue of class struggles was not explicitly touched upon, but the recent escalation in Maoist violence has brought into sharp focus the threats that it poses to national security and integration. A defining characteristic of the State is that it has a monopoly over the legitimate use of force within its own territory; and a failed state could well be defined as one which has substantially lost this monopoly. The most drastic steps are needed to ensure that this does not happen to the Indian Republic.

NATIONAL INTEGRATION: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW*

Mukul Kesavan

Let me begin with a disagreement. You said in your preliminary remarks that the things that actually stood in the way of national integration in India were broadly a group of things that represented differences of one kind or another: caste, religious communities, class. Speaking as a historian, which is what I do for a living, I will try and explain my objection in terms of a brief historical introduction.

It seems to me that the politics that was created by the primary agent of Indian nationalism - the Congress - is a nationalist politics, but it does not pay homage to the same shibboleths of homogeneity and integration that most nationalisms do; and this is partly because of the nature of the origins of the Congress. When the Congress was born in the late 19th century it was a middle-class urban organization trying to lay claims to representing the nation which is obviously an implausible claim. So it finds a trick to do this by, in a sense, claiming to represent the diversity of India - literally the census-diversity of India - claiming in a sense the presence of the Parsis, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, in its own ranks. In a sense this entitled it to speak for India's diversity. And the nationalism that it sponsors consists of two parts essentially. On the one hand there is this representation manoeuvre, this 'zoological' nationalism where the Congress says that it represents India's species. On the other, of course, is a sense of grievance that in a sense speaks to today's topic as to how do you create a sense of cohesion or integration amidst this diversity; and the way the Congress does it is to find anti-colonial grievance. By find I don't mean invent, but rhetorically take advantage of the fact that the colonial state could stand as a universal bogey man that threatened the interest of all classes of Indians.

So the point of speaking of this strange nationalism that tries to marry diversity with the notion of a common external enemy to keep everyone on board is just to remind us that the nation that we speak of when we talk of national integration within the republic over the last 60 years is not the nation as usually conceived of by nationalist movements. It is not a nation that seeks to valorize homogeneity. It is not a nation that puts great store by the idea of uniformity: quite the opposite. It actually valorizes or celebrates the notion of diversity. We have all heard that diversity is celebrated so often and so literally over our lifetimes that we tend to be cynical about say for example Chacha Nehru in different costumes. The theatre, if you will, of pluralism. I think it is important to remember that it had a specific purpose: the purpose being the Indian state's ability to put on motley to represent itself in all manner of ways so that people could identify with it. On the matter of republican integration - the idea of national integration within the republic - I think it is fair to say that what the Congress and Nehru wanted in the decade after independence, or in the first

phase of the republic's career, was literally a sense of bringing over the state as geographically defined by colonialism. I mean their first most epic achievement they thought would be to simply preserve the empire transformed into the republic. So the external boundaries of this nation state - arbitrary colonial boundaries to which this new nation state is completely attached - suddenly become the organic frontiers of the Indian republic. There is no possible way in which you can actually defend this intellectually but what we are saying is that this is what the colonial state left us and this is what we shall therefore keep. So a commitment to the external borders of a nation state isn't particularly remarkable. All nation states seek to protect their frontiers. What is interesting is that not only does this prime agent of Indian nationalism - the Indian National Congress - want to preserve such borders as survive Partition, they also want to pretty much preserve internal borders as far as possible as they were before 1947. So, one of the reasons why someone like Nehru was opposed to the linguistic reorganization of states is partly because it could promote linguistic-regional chauvinism. This is the idea, that an emphasis of any principle of local homogeneity would in a sense disrupt the idea of India as a place wherein people of all regions had equal rights.. So essentially Nehru wants, for example the Presidency of Bombay, to remain the Presidency of Bombay. He has no wish to see it resolve into a Gujarati-speaking state and a Marathi-speaking state.

What is interesting, however, is the flexibility with which the goal of keeping what must have seemed at that time a fragile post-colonial nation together was approached. So while Nehru is instinctively skeptical of any kind of community solidarity whether this be the notion of linguistic homogeneity or communitarian religious politics as far as the language is concerned through the 1950s he gives ground steadily on some of his most cherished beliefs. Essentially as far as language is concerned he sponsors two ideas. One: the idea of a supple Hindi, a kind of everyday Hindi, that would act as a *rashtra bhasha* or a national language along with English. Secondly: that linguistic states were not a good idea. But, by the time the fifties end, a combination of things persuaded Nehru that perhaps national integration or cohesiveness is better served by acknowledging some principles of difference: in this case linguistic difference. The idea that we might be better off by allowing the consolidation of linguistic states instead of actually opposing them. Just to move ahead quickly I want to say that it is not a good idea to construe national integration as a Utopia: as a place where people don't think of themselves as for example Hindus or Muslims or Kayastha or Banias or Iyengars or, if you will, other form of identity defined by difference. I think a remarkable thing about the Indian nation state, and the nationalism that sustains it, is the fact that it has always entered the battle for sustaining the nation state with a fixed notion that diversity can be managed. That India's overwhelming census-diversity can in fact be managed through a combination of principles derived from secularism and the rigorous practice of democracy.

What is also important is that, precisely in the interest of national integration, the Indian state has always acknowledged difference and has also moved to protect difference. I would just like to give you a couple of quick examples. One is of course affirmative action through reservations where the Indian state explicitly recognizes the principle of caste and the related principle of discrimination. And while some would argue that this should have been a time-bound thing. But the nature of the discrimination that this measure was intended to address remains, and so does the institutional remedy to it. It is also I think important to remember that in 1955 - in the mid-1950's when the Hindu Civil Code was passed - many questions were raised as to why this principle was not extended to Muslims. This remains something that in a sense haunts our politics to this day, and I think one can have differences in good faith about this decision. I think the principle behind it was the principle that always sustained Indian nationalism, and the principle simply was that it is unrealistic to assume that in a country as diverse as ours one size will fit all. It is impossible to believe that every policy can be universal. There will be times when policies will be policies that make distinctions and discriminations and that it is appropriate for a State to do this.

Just a final possibility for discussion perhaps: Today we commemorate 25 years since Mrs. Gandhi's death; and I would just like to say that, given all the different ways in which we remember her and given the assessments that we read in the newspapers, during the 60s and 70s and during the time of her Prime Ministership one of the things that happened to India was that, as a result of matters partly out of her control - war, famine political changes in the world outside India's border - and partly as a result of her own angularities, India as a national project became a more ordinary state than it had been before. I think this has a great deal to do with war. Post 1971 there is a sense in which the move towards the emergency in 1975 is presaged by the fact that India becomes to seem more and more like a Latin American republic sustained by populist sloganeering, by a notion of nationalism stoked by victory in war. And I think one of the ways in which Mrs Gandhi's legacy has been corrected or read-dressed fortunately in my view is in the politics of India in the 80's and 90's through the return of coalition politics which helped in a sense institutionally to reinstate the notion of heterogeneity and difference at a political level

**Edited transcript of a talk given at the India International Centre on 31 October, 2009.*

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NATIONAL INTEGRATION: THE SOCIOPOLITICAL REALITY*

Prashant Bhushan

If we look at the situation of India today and we ask this question: to what extent do we think that the various diverse communities in this country - the religious the caste and other tribal communities - have managed to integrate themselves in two senses: firstly, do they really enjoy equal rights in this country? Is there discrimination against different communities in society, and to what extent people across communities understand or are empathetic towards the concerns of persons of other communities? If we ask these two questions and we use this as a measure of national integration that we have achieved in this country, the answer unfortunately would have to be that it is very little. It has been largely a failure rather than a success. I mean nominally it is true that we have a secular Constitution, secularism is still a basic structure of the Constitution and we have essentially secular laws. But in actual practice what we are seeing being practised on the ground is that there are large communities - whether they are Muslims or Christians, minorities of all kinds, the Dalits - who are facing enormous discrimination and who are facing enormous hardship in this country. This is one fact, and the other there is that as yet we have achieved very little by way of actual understanding across communities.

One example would illustrate this quite well. All of you must have heard that in Karnataka there was a recent case in which the High Court, while refusing a Hindu girl who is a major of 25 years to marry a Muslim boy and forcibly against her wishes asking the police to put her in control of her parents and asking the police to investigate what they call what the hindutva organizations in Karnataka are saying that there is this practice of love jihad going on in the Muslim community. I mean this particular case is a very stark example which shows the extent to which we have not succeeded in integrating other communities, and not even succeeded in secularising large sections of our establishment. It is utterly ? if there were secular laws in this country and if there are secular instruments of justice in this country then there is no way that this kind of an order can come to be passed by a Judge of a High Court. And this is not the only example of this kind today. These kinds of examples can be multiplied. We have been seeing in this country successive waves of communalism. And of course the most well known of these waves are the whole anti Sikh or the Sikh massacre of 1984 which was essentially organised by the Congress Party which is supposed to be a secular or secularizing force in this country and which thereafter fought the next election on a totally communal plank - on a totally anti Sikh divisive communal plank - and won that election on that communal plank thereby leading the BJP to thereafter embark on a course of communalism. Actually when the BJP was formed it was formed on an explicit understanding that it would not espouse any hindutva communal cause etc. But after this 1984 elections when the Congress embarked upon a totally communal campaign, the BJP got totally decimated. Even the RSS deserted the BJP and joined the Congress. That was one election where the RSS supported

the Congress. Thereafter the BJP gradually embarked on this communal campaign of Ram Janam Bhoomi etc which then led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. This whole Babri Masjid campaign, leading to the demolition, can be said to be the second wave of communalism that we have seen. Serious, strong, overt, stark waves of communalism that we have seen in the country. Then comes the Gujarat genocide in 2002, and lastly in 2008 this whole business and specter of Islamic terrorism which has been created in this country by both the BJP governments as well as Congress governments in various states. They have all combined together to create this specter of Islamic terrorism which has been an enormous divisive force in this country particularly between Hindus and Muslims.

*** The media has also been used to a very great extent to create this bogie of Islamic terrorism and create this specter of Islamic terrorism and thereby inflame the feelings of Hindus against Muslims and prevent any kind of integration taking place. Now as I said the media has been a very important player in this last round of communalism in this country which we have seen since 2008. One of the reasons for that is the fact that media in this country has become totally commercial and runs after TRP ratings and therefore has to seek sensational news. And one of the ways of providing sensational news to the media was for the police and the IB etc to feed these kind of stories about Islamic terrorism: this particular terrorist did this, planted this bomb here and thereafter he procured these materials here and these kind of stories were planted in the media through various embedded journalists. They are there in virtually every media organization in this country. The media get selective leaks from the police, from these anti terror organizations in the police, and from organizations like the IB RAW etc which have over the course of time been thoroughly communalized. Then there is the nature of electoral politics in this country which is also adding to it. If you see what happened in Gujarat. Gujarat is a case where a political party and Chief Minister has managed to stay on in power successively and has achieved an extent of communal polarization in that state that even nobody dares to confront him and the Congress and all the other political parties there feel compelled to just play along with that kind of communal politics. Another example is the riots of 1984. So the question is if we have this kind of electoral system whereby playing communal politics and thereby polarizing people on communal lines you can hope to win electoral power then everything else fails. I mean we have excellent laws against communal politics, we have excellent criminal laws against any kind of appeal to inflaming sentiments on communal lines etc. but none of that works. Because the entire machinery: the police, the judiciary, the media, everybody gets communalized in that kind of atmosphere and therefore all these laws are given a go by.

So the question is how do we tackle this problem? Because clearly what we are witnessing in this country is that on the one hand it seems to pay electoral dividends to various political parties to play communal politics on the other hand it seems to pay dividends to the media to play a kind of communicati

onal politics or to do a kind of communal propaganda of this kind. That is when you try and give sensational news about certain persons from certain communities becoming terrorists etc. How do you control that and how do you deal with this kind of situation that is the challenge before us. I will just mention a few suggestions as to how these can be tackled. Of course to tackle the media we need two things. One is we need to decommercialise the media. There has been a lot of discussion on this. In fact, just recently here in the IIC there was a meeting about how in this last election, P Sainath wrote an article, about how the various media organizations openly offered financial packages to candidates that if you buy our package and pay us 5 crores we will give you so much space in our newspaper. And we will print as news what ever hand outs that you give us and so much space will be reserved daily for you. And this was virtually across the board. Most of the major media organizations the print as well as electronic media were offering these kind of packages to the candidates. So it is just rampant commercialization of the media which has led to lots of problems and in my view I have always been of this view for a long time that we need to have a law which prohibits any news media at least from being run on commercial lines for profit, and therefore, news media organizations must be regulated to run only by non profit societies or trusts. This is one suggestion that I have been making about regulating the news media. The other is of course we need to have a media council which has teeth. Today the press council firstly does not deal with the electronic media and secondly it has no teeth and we need to teeth to the press council and have a proper system of appointment to the members of the press council which is transparent. This is a common problem which we are facing in appointment of all our regulatory bodies, the Human Rights Commission etc. We need to have a transparent system where a criteria is laid down for selecting members. Different criteria are laid down for different organizations and that process needs to be done transparently. So that is one way of dealing with the media. Then regarding the enforcement of these laws. That is a very big challenge to ensure that these laws will get enforced One of the ways of doing that is to sign this international Criminal Court Treaty. Because while you can communalise even a whole country, if the major political parties just decide blatantly to run communal campaigns. You can do that but that will not cut across these boundaries of this country and therefore if India signs the ICC treaty then at least Mr. Modi could have been prosecuted before the international criminal court and that would act as a deterrent if there were some international bodies or international organizations which could prosecute and exercise some kind of authority over these kind of communal crimes committed by political parties or by leaders by political parties or by other persons. The other thing which has been suggested often is a communal crimes Act in which we define command offences. Which means

persons who are charged with the duty of enforcing the law if they willfully fail to enforce the law - whether they are in the police or whether they are in the judiciary . That means it is not a matter of opinion if it is clear that this person has willfully failed to prosecute a person responsible for a communal crime that would be treated as an even more serious crime and that person would be prosecuted may be before an organization like the Human Rights Commission. But we have seen that the National Human Rights Commission has also failed, and failed primarily because we have not been able to set a proper system for the appointment of members of the NHRC. There is no transparency in the system and therefore we need to set that body right as well. So it is really a crisis that we are facing in this country. It is a crisis which is very difficult to deal with because we are seeing a situation where virtually all institutions are failing because of the communalization of institutions across the board in this country. To deal with that kind of situation is always very difficult, but transparency in appointment of such bodies will certainly help in signing the International Criminal Court Treaty. Having a media council with teeth would certainly help. Decommmercialising the media by law would also help. But still it is a huge challenge and it is still difficult to see how we will be able to tackle it.

**Edited transcript of a talk given at the India International Centre on 31 October, 2009.*

NATIONAL INTEGRATION: A SECOND FREEDOM STRUGGLE*

Rudolph C Heredia

I would like to start with an apology. I am not intending to be practical because I believe a good theory is the most practical thing. So I will start with that and position myself. I am not speaking from the point of view of real politics. I am not adopting a Hobbesian understanding of human society and human life. Because I think this is the very opposite of what inspired the freedom struggle and I think this is where we must go back to if we want to do anything about national integration once again; and I am suggesting a second freedom struggle in this direction. I think we are at that point in time now. So for Hobbes human life was *homo homini lupus*. Each one is a wolf to the other. Human motivation was the lust for power after power, after power, after power which ended in making human life poor, nasty, brutish and short and the only way to remedy this was to have a competent authority of a sovereign either dictatorial or democratic by democratic representations. It is an upward imposition of authority and order on society on which the modern state and modern political understanding is based.

Whatever way you look at it, even John Rawls will come to a contractual understanding of society and tries to make it as liberal as he can. Amartya Sen finally says: look we have to go beyond, that this is not enough. So this is where I am coming from. If I look at the Gandhian understanding which I think inspired the freedom movement was essentially about human life being about dharma, satya and ahimsa. Now we may disown it but I think this is our heritage that should keep us going; and if anybody thinks it is impractical please think of the alternatives to this. So I am saying is that the model for us in our second freedom struggle would be to go back to the inspiration of the first: *swaraj*: *swadeshi*, *satyagraha*. These I am saying need to be understood critically and contextually because the context is no longer colonial, it is no longer the same. But I do believe that there is a core of truth there that we need to recapture for ourselves today.

So let me start with this. National Integration for what? And national understanding for what? We never question this. We assume that we must have national integration. Why? I am glad that Professor Kesavan had pointed out that this is a very odd kind of integration that India has had. It is not the integration of a nation state as privileged in Europe and I think both these questions were answered in the freedom struggle. There has been a rupture. There has been a rupture with a partition with a two nation theory it may now proliferate into a multi nation theory. With the regionalism and so on. But once again we have become nation states. The model for India is a multi-nation state and this is extremely problematic. The answer is not separation into individual nations and then come together as a union as Europe did. I will come back to that in a little while, but I think the model is something else. The freedom struggle was for national integration for peace, for progress, for harmony, for enrichment and that is why it privileged diversity over homogeneity and uniformity. There were practical and political exigencies that helped this but I

think there was a vision behind it and I think it was essentially a Gandhian and socialist vision. Traditionally Indian society coped with diversity by hierarchy. And this is why to my mind caste prevails so much. All traditional societies integrate by hierarchy. Whether it was feudal Europe whether it was the patricians or plebes of the Roman empire or whatever or the slaves and citizens of Greece or whatever. In India caste gave each community a niche but it was a forced integration. It is ascription by birth which however much it was internalized it was still forced, it was not voluntary, it was not democratic.

If we now want to integrate in a democratic manner we have two choices. One is to do it the way Europe has done by atomizing society into individuals. So it is much easier to integrate individuals. But individuals will finally make lobbies, will make industrial military complexes and they will come together around interests which then becomes a challenge to democracy. We have chosen the path of collective rights and I believe - Mr. Bhushan could correct me on this - ours is one of the few constitutions that privilege collective rights. And the UN followed it much later. The first charter of rights was essentially individual and later on it has become more collective. So I think we are ahead of the curve and ahead of the times in many ways and we do not give ourselves enough credit of it. How we came to it is another problem, maybe by historical accident, but that is where we are now and this is the meaning of minority rights as has been pointed out. Protection and promotion precisely of the kind of diversity that will keep our country together. But I think we need to examine now how we construct these identities of individuals and communities.

India is essentially a place where individuals have to have multiple identities. And I think this is what causes both the problem and the possibilities of national integration. This is for individuals and this for groups but to keep these identities together I think we need to have first open identities, multiple identities. We need to have a group of citizens that is critical and aware; and we need to have a vibrant civil society. This is not a situation that can simply be ruled by politics. Politics is the question of power and it only increases the democratic deficit. Let me come to the question of nationalism for what? There is a long discussion between Gandhi and Tagore on this and Tagore is completely unhappy with what he has seen in Japan when he visited there after the Russo-Japanese war and he questions Gandhi on this and there is a long correspondence. The conclusion is this: that Gandhi wants Indian freedom to be an example for the freedom of all oppressed people, to be a beacon in the world against colonialism, against imperialism and he says we must not exchange white sahibs for brown sahibs and perhaps we should reexamine ourselves on this in our current republic. I found a quotation and I don't know if it is true. It was attributed by an advertisement by JRD Tata. Needless to say this is the old TATA and it was sponsored by TATA and it may not be true but what it says is very important. It is: "I do not want India to be a great power but I want Indians to be a happy people". This is what our nationalism should be. In the world today it is very difficult but, again, what is the alternative? Samuel Johnson

once said. - I think he was speaking in 1775 - "Patrotism is the last refuge of scoundrels" And this is true. We see it again and again. We hide behind this cloak of nationalism. Graham Keyes points out how nationalism is an ideology of the elite to establish hegemony on the others. Finally: who dies in Kargil and who took the credit. I think we need to examine things like that. Who builds this nation and who takes the profits? And all is done in the name of nationalism. The end-point of nationalism is national socialism and this is I think where authoritarian states finally land up. There are four to five ideas that have changed the world, according to Barbara Ward in one of her books. And the first one she mentions nationalism, colonialism communism, international issues. But there is a very positive aspect to nationalism particularly for developing countries. It is a great motivator. If Vietnam could stand up to the super power of the world at that time the US it was because it was a national war of liberation where people were prepared to die whereas the Americans were not. The nation state was premised on this kind of nationalism: homogeneity, one language. The nation state in Europe can trace its origin - at least George Bernard Shaw would have it that way - to Joan of Arc, and he quotes her in his play by saying that if God wanted the English to be here he would not have given them their language which they speak there and our language which we speak here. Nationalism based on linguistic identity that can change, it can become race, it can become religion.

Identity tells me who I am and it gives me a way of understanding a vision and horizon of my world. If I don't know who I am I never fit in. Dignity tells me what I am due what respect I have, I can claim. This gives me an idea of fairness. Identity should give me a meaning and value that I have and hopefully the meaning and value of others if my identity is open and not closed. Both these are constructed in a social context for individuals and for groups. We do not do this alone and I do not think it is true to say these are what you call identities that we are born with. We are not born human, we become human, we learn language we don't speak it at birth but identities can be inclusive or exclusive. They can be constructed in a positive way by affirming who I am or in a negative way by affirming what I am not. If I am not this and not that and not that, my identity becomes more and more confined, more and more defined and more and more exclusive and ends up being totalitarian. So I am a Hindu first last and always. I am a Muslim first last and always. Then I cannot be anything else. And you cannot have integration that way. Whereas if I am open if my identity is open I can be a Muslim, I can be a Maharashtrian, I can be an Indian, I can be a citizen of the world. Because they are open. Amartya Sen explores this very nicely in his book Identity and Violence. You can see immediately the kinds of identities that are being privileged today in India are exclusive identities and at the end of this road cannot be anything other than violence. Now why do we construct identities negatively? I think we need to examine this a bit once again. Identity is constructed always in oppo

sition or in encounter with the Other. To know who I am I must meet someone else. If the Other is perceived as a threat the Other always puts a question to me whether the difference is by gender or by race or by language or whatever. If the Other is different I am posed with the implicit question as to why I am not like that and why am I different? And I have to answer the question if I perceive the Other as threat I will answer it one way and so on. The clash of civilization of Samuel Huntington is premised precisely on this assumption and the historical evidence has piled up is: the Other is perceived as a threat.

The clash of civilization between Christianity and the Muslim world the West and the rest. Amartya Sen very gently - he must be playing cricket as we talk of cricket being a gentleman's game - dismisses it by very indirectly saying sophisticated intellectual arguments sometimes cover crass prejudice. This is in his book, I think *The Argumentative Indian*. Samuel Huntington is now fading off. He wrote a second book *Who Are We?* And it is a complete invective against the Hispanics who refused to be Anglicized. They are going to make Spanish the language of US. How dare they? As if that country was born to speak English. So I think this construction of the self and the other. We see it happening it around. We see it happening in negative ways and we see it happening now in our own country.

So I will finish quickly with this idea of tolerance and dialogue. I spoke about how we perceive the Other. If I perceive the Other as a threat I have one level of tolerance. If I perceive the Other as a complement I will have another level, but I am still instrumentalising the Other. I am not really not tolerating or reaching out to the Other. If I perceive the Other as a responsibility then I would call that an ethical level of tolerance, and then I relate to the Other differently. But I can also perceive the Other as a spiritual or a mystical fulfillment of who I am and I think this is one of the quests of Indian civilization. Ashish Nandi very well says in one of his books the quest of Indian civilization has been to convert all self-other dialogues into self-self-dialogue. To discover myself in the other and other in myself and I think this is the meaning, finally, of the Vedanta. And I think this is the mystical insight of any true or deep spirituality. If this sounds impractical thing this Ahimsa, Satyagraha we can trace it to all these levels. Surely he is very politically savvy. He understands that tolerance must have limits and it is a mutual thing. He is very humble about his satya. He says this is my truth and I am committed to it but I am willing to learn. It is the responsibility he feels but it also always a quest for Moksha. And again this is something that we need to explore. If we are going to have tolerance it has got to be mutual, it has got to be reciprocal and it can only be sustained by dialogue. Dialogue is not only in words. Dialogue happens by living together, by acting together, by sharing experiences together, and last of all by articulating them. I think I will stop here and may be we can have a discussion.

**Edited transcript of a talk given at the India International Centre on 31 October, 2009.*

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INFLUENCING CHANGE

Vinod K Gaur

Our age is characterized by an unprecedented rate of change mediated by a phenomenal growth of knowledge and information. Can we use these very agents *to influence change* rather than be overtaken by it. Change is a universal process. It was born ~ 14 billion years ago, when a primordial concentration of energy suddenly exploded with a bang, creating a universe of time, space and matter - all in a flash. The universe has been expanding ever since, setting in its wake the scene for the development of stars, planetary systems and life itself. The time evolution of these processes, albeit unceasing, was not always smooth, but punctuated with sudden changes, often catastrophic. Survival of life on earth through such vicissitudes is a saga of *adventuresome adaptations* whereby the more *innovative* of its species lived to lead the next evolutionary advance. The emergence of humans at the end of a long chain of *more* efficient, oxygen breathing creatures, itself became possible because a particular strain of the primordial algae *learned* to use solar energy to build their stocks. In the process, they oxygenated the atmosphere. This was the first historic environmental change influenced by life itself. Ironically, humans have significantly reversed this billions of years long standing process, within just about a century. The atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration today is well over a third higher than the maximum attained during the past 750,000 years. As a result, sea levels have risen perilously close to many coastal habitats, and weather patterns generate more frequent extreme events.

Other developments too have overtaken our society since the opening of the Indian economy two decades ago. The nation has since been integrating intensively into global circuits. Consequential changes in the economic, social, cultural, and political spheres have also gathered pace, proliferating marginalities and exposing serious issues of governance. A particular concern for the future arises from the apparent unpredictability of large coupled systems such as society. This was tellingly demonstrated by the recent financial crisis in the US that rapidly cascaded across the globe. One of the most dramatic insights gained in the early years of computer age, was the recognition that even mathematically well determined systems exhibited widely divergent behaviour, with only a slight change in their initial conditions. They, thus turned out to be inherently unstable. And when two or more such systems are coupled, the instabilities developed by one, feed into the other, eventually resulting into a new emergent phenomena not recognizable in their individual dynamics. These results dealt a serious blow to the prevailing paradigm of analyzing nature by superposing the behaviours of its constituent elements. Indian society is already a complex network of multiple identities and entrenched hierarchies. They have their own peculiar strangleholds in perpetuating disparities and stalling more efficient utilization of human and natural resources. In the aftermath of its globalization, therefore, we are faced with an

even more serious challenge: of anticipating *emergent* events in their wider perspective, and designing constructive responses so as to influence their future course.

The challenge is principally for the young, destined to live through decades of frequent and qualitatively different kinds of change. The quality of their endeavours would determine the texture of our social fabric in the coming decades. It will require an understanding of *emergent change* exhibited by all large composite systems, as well as, ways to dream of creative paradigms of responses radically different from the current prevailing fixes devised to manage small organizations. Above all, it will require a commitment and sense of values that are more consistent with the enterprise of knowledge and information which would be the key drivers of the new paradigm. Sadly, it is not much in evidence in our contemporary society.

The Nature of emergent phenomena:

The universe that we live in, is fundamentally different from its idealized model of a static machine whose future state is a deterministic extension of its past. This latter view has been long supported by the spectacular successes in describing and predicting planetary motions as well as those on earth. Indeed, it regarded Nature as an efficient system which, shorn of its minor randomness, was constant - with no potential for chance, no possibilities for creative variabilities. And, it widely encouraged the practice of scientific study and analysis which stabilized the variables in a problem by screening out apparent irregularities, regarded as insignificant. This view was severely strained by the discovery and formulation of quantum mechanics in the 1930's and its corollary in the uncertainty principle exposed by Heisenberg. But, its implications to the macroscopic world of our lives were still too small for general notice. We have since learnt to respect these deceptively insignificant aspects of nature, as containing the seeds of momentous events and discoveries.

In the 1960's Lorentz at MIT, stumbled on a chance discovery, while testing how the differential equations of fluid motion, marching in time on a computer, would predict future weather. One of his several runs of the test in which he had abbreviated an atmospheric constant by leaving out the figures after the third decimal place, began to produce violent fluctuations in the weather pattern, creating a storm on the computer. The weather equation was showing an extraordinary sensitivity to initial conditions. This is a property since shown to be true of all real world systems. Open systems such as the atmosphere and ecology, that include human societies, are forever at work to maintain a dynamic state of identity by appropriately using available materials and energy and reconstituting their discharge. Sensitivity to initial conditions, therefore, has some startling implications for such large multiply connected systems. For, even an infinitesimal change in the variables of any of its constituent parts can generate a range of possible behaviours of the composite system. Some of

these are disproportionately large compared with the initial cause, earning the metaphor: the *butterfly effect* which underlines the imperative that we study such systems carefully for their possible adverse impacts. Furthermore, the incessant act of seeking equilibrium, forces a system to respond to new influences by proceeding to reorganize itself into a new state. This, in general, is a critical state, poised to be tipped by the slightest contingencies. When this happens, the system exhibits an unusual form, qualitatively different from its preceding state. This is the *emergent phenomena*, the response of the system as a whole, an integral result of wide communication between all of its elements, not recognizable in the individual behaviours of its parts.

Influencing change

However, it is the ubiquitous presence of emergent phenomena that has made the world rich in form and texture: graceful limbs of a fawn or a fern, the extraordinary beauty of ice crystals, majestic landscapes. Sublime experiences of human sensibility too, inspired by transcendental visions of an all pervasive unity, have given us timeless treasures: unworldly music, poetry, temples, mosques and cathedrals of indescribable beauty. But, both human and natural systems have suffered grievously wherever human acts of influencing it have been indifferent to the structure of its organized whole.

The examples are legion, which make the present juncture particularly historic for sharpening our sensibilities and, for taking advantage of the extraordinary offerings of the information age, to reorient our ways of influencing change. Such an enterprise may, at first, appear to be a daunting task in view of the complex structure of large systems apparently characterized as being quite unpredictable. But, new light has been shed by reframing our questions. If the variabilities reflect the essence of the real world, there can be no possibility of condensing all details of observation into a small number of mathematical equations. Indeed, the very accurate description of details may have the blinding effect of masking the perspective. Rather than asking about the fate of a constituent element of the system, therefore, we seek a description of all possible scenarios that the system has the potential to evolve into. For example, if we consider an animal brain which is a multiply connected composite of neurons, our description should be able to elucidate the mechanisms of cognition and responses expressible by the brains of most species, rather than describe the acts of individually firing neurons. Thus, whilst it may not be possible to predict or follow the trajectories of a part of a system, its eventual equilibrium state – a predictable *attractor*- can often be visualized. In fact, even when a system has a dynamic that refuses to settle into a steady state such as a tornado, it is instructive to ponder over the extraordinary configuration of forces and their interactions which sustain its funnel shaped concentration of energy without the security of a container. This is in many ways analogous to how social and some natural systems organize themselves. This is in many ways analogous to how social and some natural systems organize themselves. The

challenge is to visualize the structure that sustains their characteristic activity and to reflect on how their energies may be turned towards a purposeful goal. Its objectives are not so much to forecast their future behaviour as to develop foresights to imagine the various ways in which they could reorganize in response to different stimuli. These are the new paradigms of thought and analysis for designing imaginative influences to steer their course in a desired fashion

Avoiding the Pitfalls

The most enduring lessons about the behaviour of complex systems such as society, are to be found in honest analyses of failures. Shortly after independence, the Indian nation chose to set its store by installation of heavy industries, largely imported, lock, stock and barrel, and a little later, on technical education ostensibly to generate manpower for running these industries.

However, whilst there was nothing wrong with these initiatives, a concomitant indifference to strengthening cultural strengths at a more basic level through education for all, greatly impoverished the gene pool of educated young people. More grievously, the structure of technical education iconized by the IITs, also borrowed lock, stock and barrel, while alienated from the Indian humanistic traditions, also remained untouched by the aesthetic sensibilities of the west, even as technical skills were imbibed with considerable success.

The results are all too evident in the way we planned, designed and engineered our industrial structures, with scant regard to the sensitivities of the ecological systems and the culture and concerns of native human settlements. Meanwhile, the new arising issues of a swelling population were addressed by a host of fruitless measures, but, not by empowering women with education, although statistical studies had amply demonstrated that this was a major determinant of a planned family.

The above examples of influencing change were planned by people who energetically strove to do well by the nation. To cite these for having failed to produce the desired effects is not to question their sincerity of purpose, only the paradigms of their thinking and design. And this too, not as idle criticism but a context for learning to envision the larger perspective for identifying fruitful strategies. Indeed, some farsighted initiatives in Science and Technology have paid rich dividends to Society, especially in the sectors of Space and Agriculture.

Critique of the new planning paradigms

We are living in momentous times. Two recent epoch making legislation have the potential to greatly empower civil society and enrich India's transforming culture: the right to Information, and the right to Education. For the first time in decades one hears of some principled political declarations that refreshingly depart from the morass of stale custom, chauvinistic ideology and stereo

typed thought: commitments to inclusive growth, to capping future rise of planetary temperature to 2°C above its pre-industrial value, and *creative, non-combative*, approaches to engagement with neighbouring countries. These are utterances of great statesmanship. Precariously, they appear to be limited to the sensibilities of a single man, Mr Manmohan Singh, who was roundly criticized for forthrightly stating and committing these.

But the potential for success, lies in *clarity of thought, meticulous planning of details*, the sense of *democratic values* and above all, *the quality of mind* of those whose charge it is to lead and educate. Unhappily, these are some of the grounds on which we have witnessed a monumental failure. Some reflections should prove instructive.

First the clarity of thought, and I shall take just one instance of our response to climate change issues. Whilst, we rightly welcomed the principled stand of the Kyoto convention spelling out the common but *differentiated* responsibilities of nations to reduce carbon emissions, we seemed to have stood still there for the past dozen years. Instead of taking steps in the interim, to add force to our arguments for an equitable treaty, we have been largely busy sharpening rhetoric and unimaginatively singing the Kyoto concession of *differentiated responsibility* which has already suffered attrition at the hands of a changing world.

The recent uncritical report released by the Ministry of Environment denying the unusual retreat of Himalayan glaciers, flies in the face of satellite data. It is a sad rejoinder to the scientific spirit of our age. The conclusions drawn on the basis of short term observations, if the data are indeed correct, can be explained by the well known behaviour of critical systems such as glaciers that recede in sudden steps. In response to higher temperatures, they begin to internally degrade for a while, showing no signs of the impending catastrophe, only to precipitate sudden floods by glacial lake outbursts. Several such are known to have occurred in recent years, in Nepal Himalaya and elsewhere, wiping out entire villages. Credible steps to earn a compelling regard for our stand on equity, require a genuine demonstration both of reduced energy cost for every unit of new development, and rising equity in our own society. With one of the most wasteful industrial systems in the world and growing social inequity, over 30% living on the margins and a third of India's children malnourished, what conviction can we hope to carry in our insistence that there should be equity at the global level. On the meticulousness of planning, we fare no better. Let me take just two examples: The Indian economy is planned to grow at 6% annually, if not 8%. This implies doubling of our economy every 12 years or a four fold increase within a quarter of a century. Amongst the various natural resources demanded for every unit growth of economy, through increase in industrial output, agriculture and services, water is the most universal. India's total annual rainfall is 3,840 cubic kilometers. Of this, on a conservative estimate, ~60% is returned to the atmosphere through evapo-transpiration. Half of the remaining 35%, must be allowed to flow through natural ecosystems

to sustain their integrity. The remaining 17% or 650 cubic km, available for utilization is uncomfortably close to our current consumption of 634 cu km. Yet, the entire planning of 6% annual growth rests on a scientifically untenable figure of 1,123 cubic km available, plied by the planning Commission, predicating a highly inaccurate surplus of ~ 490 cubic kilometers available for future development. Meanwhile, ground water aquifers in their largest reservoir underneath the Ganga valley, have been shown to be irreversibly mined. In the face of these stark realities, India's expectation for even moderate future growth is greatly compromised. They can be redeemed only by hard decisions to infuse efficiency in agricultural use of water, and new legislation that is informed by the science of groundwater flow. Another casually flaunted figure for solar energy generation, promises 10,000 MW of solar power installations in the country over the next 10 years. A rough calculation based on a conservative estimate of about 10 tons of polysilicon required for each MW of power generation, leaves one with grave concern about the realism and foresight invested in our planning process.

Democratic Values

It is now generally acknowledged that with all the positive indicators of neo-liberal India, we are unlikely to make marked progress towards forging ourselves in a modern democratic society as envisioned by Professor Amartya Sen, unless we revolutionize the ethos of governance as well as, ways of designing and implementing the new development initiatives: the Panchayati Raj, the National Rural Employment Guarantee, the Right to education and others yet in being, such as right to health and healthful environment and right to clean drinking water.

Six democratic values that I consider indispensable for the envisioning, planning, and execution of new revolutionary ideas, are: **Humility, Integrity, Respect for diversity, sensibility to equity and justice, Commitment to give one's best** to the charge in hand, and **zero tolerance for violence**. Many of us do not find evidence of these attributes in critical enough numbers amidst the drivers of our society, to sustain the hope that we will fare forward into the future. This warrants some elucidation. Governance in our country remains feudal in practice and spirit, witness the official clamour for whittling down the right to Information Act. Even as the continuity of regular elections as the visible form of democratic governance is celebrated, serious defects of efficiency, transparency and equality before the law, are widely exposed in the run up to daily news, with little expectation of redress for the common citizen as authority mocks humility by assuming a 'know all' air. We rarely have public hearings - a hallmark of democratic sensibility- to elicit views of those to be impacted by development plans, often sketched by persons far removed from the scene.

Equally unfeeling is the way our law and order agencies seek to enforce law, not only inconveniencing but demonizing many an honest citizen,

particularly if they have a view that is inconvenient, even if correct. Thus, one cannot but share the anguish of extraordinary human spirits such as Irom Sharmila of Manipur who has been on fast for nine years, demanding the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. Currently, she is being force fed. One can gauge the poignancy of such use of force by reenacting it in one's mind. Imagine a similar treatment meted to one of our freedom fighters.

Admittedly, our soldiers and police have a difficult task in the face of a host of terrorist causes, real or imagined, but the State cannot respond to a situation like an angry individual. Indeed, theirs is a highly complex task but the methods have to be different, based on better information and diagnostic systems, and of course modern tools for intelligence gathering and inference.

Integrity too does not happen to be a prized attribute of our society today. What is more, the implications of its absence are rarely recognized openly, and when detected, invite no ostracism. Not too long ago, the nation had a miraculous escape when a plagiarized policy report for guiding parliamentary legislation, produced by an 'expert' committee chaired by one of India's distinguished scientist, was timely discovered to have been copied from the work of a US scholar.

Respect for diversity is one of India's long embedded traditions, still living in the behaviour and responses of its ordinary citizens across the country. A worrisome trend of growing religious and linguistic chauvinism, however, espoused, intriguingly, by the urban educated, not only cuts at the very root of Indian culture and philosophy, but results into injustice and discomfiture for some or other section of our society. A most bizarre case which incidentally highlights the pathetic impotence of our civil society in protecting individual liberty of thought and expression, has forced a celebrated artist to remain in exile for years. One of the greatest challenges to democratic India is the existence of more than a third of its people on the margins of society and a proportional incidence of child malnourishment, threatening to debilitate our gene pool.

Neo-liberal developments of the past two decades indicate that our expectations of curing this grievous national disability, merely through the expansion of free economy is unlikely to bear fruit. We need more innovative approaches to address this festering problem, a charge most pressing for those entering the civil society as agents of change

Recently, at a meeting of the Indian Academy of Sciences, Professor C N R Rao, Chairman of the Scientific Advisory Committee to the Cabinet, expressed his anguish at the poor quality of education in our institutions, even at the celebrated Institutes of Technology whose protesting faculty were described by the Hindu newspaper, not too long ago, as being of world renown. He summed up his lament by asking as to where were hidden all those excellent academicians and scientists invariably paraded by heads of institutions around the country as their collective visible contributions to significant developments in science and technology amounted to a mere one per cent of the global.

A vision for the future

Clearly, India needs to design a *new turning point*. But, we do not have to go far to seek inspiration. Outstanding Indians not only secured freedom from colonial rule in a fashion so civilized as to have no historical precedent, but also laid enduring foundations which have stood us in good stead. Great names easily come to mind, of statesmen, scholars, scientists and public men who set extraordinary examples of visionary planning, great humanity and inflexible regard for honour and integrity: Jamshed Tata, Jawahar Lal Nehru, Homi Bhabha, C Subramanian, Mahalanobis, Vikram Sarabhai and that great educator Ravindranath Tagore who opened our eyes to the grand panorama of the human spirit and its hidden twinkling connections with the rest of nature that never cease to delight and amaze.

Every year, over the past decade, I have had a couple of students from different parts of the country, spending eight weeks of their summer holiday working on some problems of their interest. Most of them have deeply moved me by their intelligence, sensibility and creative determination. Sometimes they also filled me with concern on the realisation that they would be returning to their institutions to be limited by teachers less imaginative than themselves. Extending this perception statistically, I come to think that there should be thousands such around the country, at the threshold of their entry in a world where they would be largely concerned with the enterprise of knowledge and information - of generating or applying these to facilitate societal processes. This represents a fantastic human resource and intellectual force to realise our dreams of a modern democratic India. Thoughtful administrators, managers and teachers, can render a great service to the nation by helping these young people express their full potential. Some such initiatives to unshackle the imagination of the young are in evidence in scattered arenas of our vast system. Recent expansion of the IT sector, often derided as being non-creative, has had the effect of opening the doors of education to many more through enhanced purchasing power of their parents. And concomitant Government initiatives to enlarge educational opportunities, albeit of indifferent quality yet, is bound to add to our genepool diversity.

Hopefully, out of quantity, there will emerge Quality. And the foibles and failures of my generation will be avidly studied for cautionary guidance in generating new paradigms of belief and practice, more consistent with the democratic spirit of our age and the transcendental essences of our culture.

Hopefully, from amongst one of the largest population of the young in the world that inhabit this land, there would emerge a critical number with insights to *discern* the hidden connections between society and its environment, and an instinct for developing *foresights* to influence change.

Dr. Vinod K Gaur of the Indian Institute of Astrophysics Bangalore, is a distinguished scientist and a Life Member of the Indian Humanist Union.

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The Poet- Fishmonger

Zoya Zaidi

Inspired by reading about the true-life story of Pavithran Theekkuni, a resident of Aayancherry village, 60km from Kozhikode, Kerala, in Hindu, Sunday edition, 12th Nov. 2006. A poet who sells fish for a living...

I can feel your pain
On that Monsoon night
When you lay on your grass mattress
Spread on the clay floor
Clenching your tiny knees
To your cold chest
Watching the Kerosene lamp
Struggle with the wet wind
trying to snuff out its pale light,
And you tried to figure out,
Was it the hunger,
Or the cold,
that kept you awake,
or was it the thunderous wind
that howled outside?

I can feel your confusion
When your mother came to you
On that rain drenched night,
'Child there is a treasure trove
amidst the bamboo grove,
a little way out side'
she whispered gently,
'I am going to look for it,
You be a good boy and go to sleep!'
Leaving you alone she

Went into the wet night
Only to come back at mid night,
Without the treasure trove,
but clutching at a wet five rupees note,
And tried to dry her hot tears
By the flickering lamp...
I can feel your realization on
that tortured night-
That would haunt you all your life-
that robbed you off your innocence,
your boyhood pride...

I can feel your anguish
When once your drunken father
'Sold you off' for five rupees
And your mother again went out
'Treasure hunting' at night
To 'buy you back'...
And then again and again
Whenever you and your little sister
Howled with hunger pangs...

I know how you must have felt.
When, out of poverty and starvation
Your father went crazy,
And spend the remaining thirty years of his life
Roaming half naked on the streets,
Drinking and begging-
While you bore the humiliation
Of being jeered at by your peers and neighbours
As the son of a 'mad-father', a 'harlot's offspring'...

The deep scars of the burning memory
of your mother's nocturnal sojourns,
Your father drunken scenes,
Would turn you into a poet-
Pouring out the molten lava
Of your painful experience
Into your reader's hearts...

Sitting today, on the rock near your home
Reeking of fish you sell during the day
To feed your family of four-
A wife a daughter and an infant son-
You reflect on your growing-up years:
You grew up literally on the street
Doing odd jobs as restaurant-waiter,
Digging telephone-cable pits,
Barber, chef, stonecutter,
Head-load labourer,
And occasionally a beggar,
But you supported your self
and some how went to school
Which poverty forced you to leave after high school

You married early at twenty,
For money, a girl who was hardly educated,
And with the dowry money
Married your sister off
To save her from the clutches of poverty
That the marriage never lasted is another story...

Now you thank the fish vending
Which has given you
A thatched roof over your family's head-
Has anchored your vagabond life...

You even contemplated committing suicide,
Out of sheer poverty and hunger,
When you wrote those poignant lines:
'Is death more painful than hunger-
Harder than starvation?'
You went along with your entire family
and lay on the railway line,
but minutes before the train came
your three years old daughter woke up
and howled in thirst and hunger,
this awoke the infant son,
And while you tried to pacify them,
They refused to go back and lie
on the railway line...
and thus you were thrown back
Into the throes of life, to struggle again
with the travails of day to day existence...
That night the rain poured on the streets of Kerala,
And all four of you slept in a shed...

Now you sell fish by the day,
Your only source of sustenance,
And pour your heart out into your poems
By night to feed your soul
That keeps you going in this hard life:
Your poems they say smell of fish,
Of 'scorched reality of life',

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Book Review

Reclaiming the Nation; Muslim Women and the Law in India, Narain Vrinda, University of Toronto Press, Toronto

Vineeta Sinha

Narain's book is indeed a timely and welcome intervention in a range of diverse discussions about the containment of religious communities within the boundaries of a secular state and the effects of such framing for the rights of individual citizens. The book carries a superbly constructed narrative about the complex and ambivalent location of Muslim women within post-colonial, multi-religious India given the state's adopted ideology of secularism and the copresence of personal family law for religious communities. This book moves easily between contemporary and historical material, with a view to theorising encounters of the Indian state with religious communities and individual citizens. Specifically, Narain uses the categories of gender and religion to scrutinize the Indian state's discourse on citizenship and its claim about the equal treatment of all its citizenry, as carried in its Constitution. Calling this immediately into question, Narain begins with the stark observation that Muslim women in India face severe discrimination and are legally disadvantaged, being subject in the "private" domain to the contours of personal family law. Narain argues that "personal family law" – which is a combination of religious laws, customs and practices – frames Muslim women's experiences in the "private" sphere but ultimately shapes their marginalized status in the public domain as well. Muslim women's status as full citizens cannot be actualized in view of their subjection to personal family law on the basis of their religious identity.

The four substantial chapters of the book chronicle the fate of Muslim women through pivotal moments in Indian history. Narain shows how closely their position was tied both to the nationalist project and to the Indian feminist movement. The introductory chapter locates marginalised Muslim women in contemporary India, using the by now famous Shah Bano case as a starting point. The latter is used to highlight the numerous challenges and contradictions facing Muslim women today in the face of the uneasy co-existence of personal family law and constitutional law. Theorising the status of Indian Muslim women in the present required the author to journey into the colonial and nationalist moments of Indian history, and attend to crucial developments in the larger women's movement and the alliances it forged with the nationalist agenda, themes meticulously dealt with in Chapter 2. She deconstructs the colonialist, nationalist and post-colonialist discourses to reveal how the "woman question" was addressed therein. Narain demonstrates that through these varied ideologies (and inspired by conflicting motivations), women were presented singularly as "victims" and in "need of protection" — a view the author is highly (and rightly) critical of as one that does little to empower women or address the issue of equality rights. Narain offers much insight here about the feminist movement in India and its points of engagement with the colonialist

and nationalist agendas. Through these agendas, women have been perceived as carriers of culture and tradition and as a metaphor for group/collective identity, both of which deny their autonomous existence as individuals and as citizens.

The next chapter comes full circle with a focus on the postcolonial phase and examines the status of Muslim women within the context of constitutional law and the state's "secular project." In secular states like India, religious freedom and the state's promise of religious equality and religious neutrality are codified in legal documents that enshrine the state's formal commitment to the individual citizen's right to the express his or her religion without interference from the government. However, Narain argues that such a "hands off" policy is highly detrimental to Muslim women as ascriptive religious identity is prioritised over the constitutional guarantee of equal treatment and equal protection for all citizens. The workings of the personal family law system come into direct conflict with the formal guarantees of the Constitution, which are vacuous and meaningless for Muslim women. Narain demonstrates the complex and contradictory nature of the law: on the one hand, it perpetuates traditional gender roles and patriarchal structures of authority; on the other, she suggests that it could nonetheless be a tool for engendering social change, revealing her faith in the emancipatory potential of the law, while being fully aware that it is also "an emissary of the state" (p. 97). This chapter also teases out various strands of the vigorous debates over the formulation of a Uniform Civil Code (UCC), offered as a solution. We see how the discussion has been ideologically framed and variously manipulated by the British, the nationalists, the social reformers, the minorities and the Hindu fundamentalists to serve specific agendas. The incisive analysis offered confirms Muslim women's vulnerability under personal family law and hence the author's call for legal reform, including the possibility of enacting the UCC. The final chapter turns to the question of women's rights and argues that a personal law system and a Uniform Civil Code are not mutually exclusive options and could in fact co-exist, with beneficial outcomes for gender justice and gender equality. Narain makes the important argument that citizenship rights should be accessible to all without being filtered through religious or gender identity and explores the possibility that full citizenship can be a tool for the emancipation of Muslim women. The latter, otherwise, experience "differential citizenship" and remain outside the nation, in addition to being legally disadvantaged because of the ambiguity of state legislation and personal family law.

Narain argues that the status and citizenship rights of Muslim women have been compromised, given the inherent contradictions between several discourses: the constitutional guarantee of equal treatment for all versus the promise of religious freedom; the right of the individual citizen against the rights of the group and the state's selective commitment to religious rights and minority rights but not to women's rights. Muslim women are doubly disadvantaged as women and as Muslims, lacking access to rights and privileges that other Indian women and non-Muslims enjoy as citizens.

Through this discussion, Narain is critical of how the Indian state perceives and reads the Muslim community, as well as Muslim women and Indian women in general, in essentialist and homogenized ways. For instance, the state does not acknowledge diversity and dissent within the Muslim community but rather privileges the voice and agency of the traditional male, religious leadership, leading to the perpetuation of patriarchal normative practices that disadvantage Muslim women. She highlights that it is limiting to view women as “dependents” and “victims” and in fact provides examples to demonstrate women’s agency and self-determination in challenging the tenor of the personal family law, speaking up against gender discrimination, organizing themselves and demanding that the state fulfill its guarantee of full citizenship to Muslim women.

Narain adopts a historical, inter-disciplinary perspective and draws on insights from a number of different theoretical traditions, including feminist legal theory and post-colonial and critical race theory. This grounding facilitates Narain’s attempt to make sense of Muslim women’s predicament in contemporary India as well as to offer a way forward/out of the conundrum. Ironically, the author calls for the state to honour its commitment to, and defence of, the “secular project” and women’s rights. Narain reveals strong faith in legal reform, the UCC and citizenship rights through which Muslim women’s marginalised and vulnerable status could be altered. Easy solutions are neither desirable nor possible, and the search is further complicated by the fact of India’s multi-religiosity and its politics, not to mention the dynamics of Hindu–Muslim tensions and majority–minority relations with the spectre of affirmative action programmes. Above all, the inertia and inaction of the secular state is grounded in its desire to showcase its secularism, through its noninterfering stance, even at the cost of disadvantaging Muslim women and condoning systematic discrimination against them.

By focusing on the case of Muslim women in India, Narain’s book raises larger theoretical questions about the relationship between secularism, law and religion, transcending this specific substantive domain. Narain’s narrative raises crucial queries such as: Can the claim towards secularism be sustained in view of a secular state’s recognition of personal religious law? How does a secular state balance the desire of religious communities for autonomy and right to self-determination with its own commitment to equal treatment of all citizens? Do the guarantees of religious freedom and state non-interference in religious matters compromise the state’s commitment to the “secular project”? If the exercise of religious freedom is oppressive to particular segments of the community, is a secular state obliged to intervene? Would this be a violation of its promise of non-interference in religious matters? Is the secularist project inevitably doomed to remain incomplete? Expectedly, Narain avoids simplistic responses to this select list of questions.

NEWS AND NOTES

New UN resolution deplores religious defamation

United Nations, Dec 19 (AP) The UN General Assembly approved a resolution today deploring the defamation of religions and expressing concern that Islam is frequently and wrongly associated with terrorism and human rights violations. The nonbinding resolution, sponsored by the Organization of the Islamic Conference, was adopted by a vote of 80-61 with 42 abstentions.

The United States and many European and developed nations voted against it. Many see it as an interference in freedom of expression and freedom of religion. Rep Eliot Engel, a New York Democrat who is a senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said the resolution "fails to solve the very real problems of religious discrimination and hatred" and "further promotes intolerance and human rights violations by curtailing individuals' rights to express their religious beliefs.

Source: www.ptinews.com/news/431062_New-UN-resolution-deplores-religious-defamation

Freedom is in decline in many places around the world

Political rights and civil liberties around the world suffered for the fourth year on the trot in 2009, according to the latest report published by Freedom House, an American think-tank. This represents the longest continuous period of deterioration in the history of the report. The number of electoral democracies dropped from 119 to 116, the lowest figure since 1995. Six countries were downgraded: Lesotho to partly free and Bahrain, Gabon, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan and Yemen dropped into the "not free" category. Around a third of the world's population live in countries deemed not free, although over half of these live in China. In the Middle East and North Africa 70% of countries are not free. Still, freedom was on the march in 16 countries, notably in the Balkans, where Montenegro is now considered free, and Kosovo is partly free.

Source: *Economist.com*



continued from page 197

I highly recommend the book to all those who are interested in the subject of religion, law, secularism, gender justice, gender equality, citizenship and the nuanced relationships across these domains. This is a text which engaged my attention from start to finish, which taught me a great deal and which was thought-provoking — three strong reasons to highly commend the book.

Source: Women's Studies International Forum 32 (2009) 163–165. Reprinted from Women's Studies International Forum Volume 32 No 2, Vineeta Sinha, Book Review: Vrinda Narain, Reclaiming the Nation; Muslim Women and the Law in India, University of Toronto Press, Toronto (2008). with permission from Elsevier.



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