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Report

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➤ Will India Become a Superpower?

Ramachandra Guha

More than sixty years ago, in the summer of 1948, the Indian nation, then newly-born, was struggling for its very survival. It was pierced from the left by the Communists, and pinched from the right by Hindu extremists. And there were other problems aplenty. Eight million refugees had to be resettled; provided with land, homes, employment and a sense of citizenship. Five hundred princely states had to be integrated, one by one, a process that involved much massaging of egos (for the Maharajas tended to think very highly of themselves), and just a little coercion.

Few Indians now alive know how uncertain our future looked in the summer of 1948. The question then being asked everywhere was 'Will India Survive?'. Now, sixty-four years down the road, that fearful query has been replaced by a far more hopeful one, namely, 'Will India Become a Superpower?'.

This new, anticipatory, expectant question has been prompted by the extraordinary resilience, in the long term, of India's democratic institutions. When the first General Elections were held, in 1952, they were dubbed the 'Biggest Gamble in History'. Never before had universal adult franchise been tried in a poor, divided, and largely illiterate society. Evidently, it is a gamble that has worked. The country has successfully held fifteen General Elections to the national Parliament, as well as countless polls to different state assemblies. Rates of voter participation are often higher than in Western democracies. And after what happened in Florida in 2000, we can add that the conduct of polls is at least as fair.

Back in 1948, doubts were also being cast about the Indian experiment with nationhood. Never before had a new nation not based its unity on a single language, religion, or common enemy. As an inclusive, plural, and non-adversarial model of nationalism, the idea of India had no precedent or imitator.

In the words of the political theorist Sunil Khilnani, India has been 'a substantial bridgehead of effervescent liberty on the Asian continent'. As such, it inspires hope that the largely poor, still divided, and formerly colonised countries of Africa and the Middle East can likewise move towards a more democratic political system. Meanwhile, through its collective co-existence of different faiths, languages, cultures, and cuisines, India is a better model for world governance than more homogeneous countries such as China, Japan, or the United States. Once, the heterogeneity of India was seen as its greatest flaw; now, it may justly be celebrated as its greatest strength.

India was not expected to survive as a democracy nor hold together as a single nation; but it has. These manifest successes, achieved against the odds and against the logic of human history, have compelled worldwide admiration. If calls are now being heard that India must be made a Permanent Member of the Security Council of the United Nations, then these demands are not just legitimate, but also overdue. It is India's long-term record as a stable, multicultural democracy that lies behind its claims for a place at the High Table of Global Affairs. But if politics were all, then we would not be asking whether India will become a superpower. That question is prompted also by the spectacular success, in the short-term, of the Indian economy, the impressive growth rates of the past decade, the entrepreneurial drive manifest in such crucial, cutting-edge sectors such as information technology, and the creation of an ever larger and ever more confident middle class.

Superficially, India seems to have travelled a long way from the summer of 1948. Now – despite the dissensions in the borderlands, in Kashmir and the north-east – it is clear that India is and will be a single country, whose leaders shall be chosen by (and also replaced by) its people. Indians no longer fear for our existence as a sovereign nation or as a functioning democracy. What we hope for instead is a gradual enhancement of our material and political powers, and the acknowledgement of our nation as one of the most powerful and respected on earth.

But, the more things appear to change, the more they are actually the same. For today, the Indian state once more faces a challenge from left-wing extremism. The Prime Minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh, has identified the Communist Party of India (Maoist), known more familiarly as the Naxalites, as the ‘greatest internal security threat’ facing the nation. The Home Ministry lists more than 150 districts as being ‘Naxalite affected’. This is an exaggeration, for with even one single, stray incident, a State Government is moved to get a district listed under that category, so as to garner more funds from the Central treasury. Still, the Naxalites do have a considerable presence in some forty or fifty districts spread out over the central and eastern parts of the country. Their greatest gains have been among tribal communities treated with contempt and condescension by the Indian state and by the formal processes of Indian democracy.

The conventional wisdom is that the erstwhile Untouchables, or Dalits, are the social group who are most victimised in India. In fact, the tribals fare even worse. In a recent book, the demographer Arun Maharatna compared the life chances of an average Dalit with that of an average tribal. On all counts the tribals were found to be more disadvantaged. As many as 41.5 percent of Dalits live below the official poverty line; however, the proportion of poor tribal households is even higher, at 49.5 percent. One-in-six Dalits have no access to doctors or health clinics; as many as one-in-four tribals suffer from the same disability.

In 2006, I visited the districts of Dantewara and Bastar in the state of Chhattisgarh. Here a civil war was under way between the Naxalites and a vigilante group promoted by the State Government. The revolutionaries identify with the tribals in the short-term, fighting for better wages for forest work and against their harassment by petty officials. Their long-term goal, however, is the capture of political power by armed struggle. In this the tribals are merely as a stepping-stone, or, one might say, cannon fodder. The Maoists use violence regularly and recklessly. Policemen are slaughtered in their police stations; civilians killed by land mines set off on main roads. Their treatment of dissenters is especially savage; these are tried in ‘peoples courts’ and then sentenced to amputation or death.

When I was in Bastar, the Nepali Maoists had just declared a cease-fire. Their leader, Prachanda, had gone so far as to say that multi-party democracy was the political system most suited to the twenty-first century. I put it to a Naxalite ideologue we met that perhaps they could think of emulating their Nepali comrades. He was contemptuous of the suggestion. He insisted that in India bourgeois democracy was a sham; here, the state had to be overthrown through the use of force.

Tragically, the vicious and violent methods of the Maoists have been reproduced by the State Government of Chhattisgarh. They set up a vigilante army called ‘Salwa Judum’, composed of tribal youths equipped with rifles. Bands of vigilantes roamed the Bastar countryside accompanied by the police and paramilitary, in search of Naxalite sympathisers, alleged or real. They attacked dozens of villages and burnt hundreds of homes. They killed many innocent people and terrorised many others and in the process greatly increased the level of violence in Dantewara. Villagers were forced to choose one side or the other. Those who hesitated to join the vigilantes were savagely set upon. The Salwa Judum and the State Government between them forcibly uprooted some 50,000 villagers and put them in camps along the main roads.

An atmosphere of fear and terror pervaded the district. Families, clans, tribes and villages were divided by the civil war. The majority of villagers were not interested in this fight at all. They were dragged into it by the Maoists on the one side and the Salwa Judum on the other.

Salwa Judum is a model of how not to fight left-wing extremism. The menace of Naxalism can be tamed and tackled in two ways: by prompt and efficient policing, and by providing the tribals a greater share in political power and in the fruits of economic development. Unhappily, even tragically, the tribals have become the main victims of economic globalisation. In the days when the state occupied the commanding heights of the Indian economy, these *Adivasis* lost their lands and livelihoods to hydroelectric power plants and commercial forestry schemes. Now, they lose their lands and livelihoods to mining projects which excavate the vast amounts of iron ore and bauxite found on or under land the tribals live on, but whose ownership (or rights of disposal) are claimed by the state. Non-tribal politicians hand over these resources to large firms, foreign and Indian, in exchange for a share of the proceeds. All that the tribals get, in exchange, is dispossession.

In naming themselves after Mao Zedong, the Naxalites hope to do in this country what that Chinese revolutionary accomplished in his – that is to say, to build a single-party dictatorship that calls itself, in Orwellian fashion, a ‘Peoples Democracy’. This dream is a fantasy, but, since the Maoists are determined to play it out, a bloody war of attrition lies ahead. The Indian state will neither be able to easily recapture the hearts and minds of the Adivasi, nor authoritatively reassert its control in the territories where the extremists are now active. At the same time, if the Maoists try to move into the open country, they will be mowed down by the Indian Army. But in the hills and forests of central India, the conflict will persist, without any side claiming a decisive victory. In the next decade, thousands of lives will be lost, some of policemen, others of Naxalites, the majority perhaps of *Adivasis* caught in the cross-fire.

There is then this serious threat posed by left-wing Communist extremism. And – as in 1948 – there is also a serious threat offered by right-wing religious fundamentalism. However, while the Maoists are implacably opposed to the Indian Constitution, the religious bigots work within the democratic process, seeking to divert and distort it. Their ideology, known as ‘Hindutva’, argues for the construction of a Hindu theocratic state in India.

The threat to India from religious bigotry was at its most intense from about 1989 to about 2004. The campaign to construct a Ram temple in the northern town of Ayodhya brought together a large number of believers spread across the country, by no means representing the majority of Hindu public opinion, but still large enough to provoke a series of communal riots (in which the main victims were Muslims), and to bring the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in many States and, eventually, in the Centre.

Back in 1968, the scholar-statesman C. Rajagopalachari observed that the Jana Sangh (the predecessor of today’s BJP) was a party which ‘has quite a few good leaders’. Then he added: ‘What is needed however is a broadmindedness that not just practices toleration but looks upon Mussalmans, Christians, Parsis and others as politically and culturally as good as Hindus’. Four decades later, Indians still wait for that broadening of Hindutva minds. Perhaps the wait has been in vain. For in its origins and core beliefs, the BJP and its sister organisations, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), are motivated by values and ideals that are antithetical to those of modern, secular, liberal democracy.

Some commentators use the term ‘Hindu nationalists’ to characterise the members and leaders of the BJP and RSS. It is a label that we must reject. How can they be called ‘nationalists’ when they would withhold full citizenship from those Indians who are Muslims or Christians or Parsis or atheists? The correct characterisation of their ideology, therefore, is ‘Hindu chauvinist’.

That the politics of the BJP and RSS is exclusive and divisive has been demonstrated in the hundreds of reports published by civil liberties groups, extending over four decades and covering at least a dozen states, that document their hand in communal riots big and small. Although they work within the Indian Constitution they are, in effect, as opposed to its underlying ideals as are the Maoists.

To be fair, there are also other kinds of religious fundamentalisms lurking around in India. Some Christian and Muslim groups in India are as convinced of their theological superiority, as sure of their victory at the altar of history, as any bigot of the RSS. There is, indeed, a reassertion of religious orthodoxy in all faiths in modern India – among Muslims and Christians as well as Sikhs and Hindus (and even, as it happens, among Jains). It is the illiberal tendencies in all these religions that, at the present juncture, are in the ascendant. But simply by virtue of numbers – Hindus are, after all, more than 80 percent of India's population – and their much wider political influence, Hindu bigotry is indisputably the most dangerous of them all.

IV

The political history of the modern world can be written in terms of a three-way contest. On the left, there are varieties of socialist or communist extremism. On the right, there are varieties of national or religious fanaticism. Placed in the middle are the forces of liberal, constitutional democracy. When the centre is fragile, as in Russia in 1917 or in Germany in 1933, one or other form of extremism will triumph. When the centre is resolute, as in India in 1948, liberal democracy can consolidate itself.

Indians less than seventy years of age – that is to say, ninety-eight Indians out of one hundred – are insufficiently aware of, and possibly insufficiently grateful to, the great democrats and patriots who, back in the late 1940s, successfully stood their ground against the challenges of revolutionary communism and religious fundamentalism. Nehru, Patel, Ambedkar, Rajagopalachari, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and others, working together, made sure that the Centre held, that the princely states were integrated, that the refugees were resettled, that the Hindu extremists and the Communist insurrectionists were tamed and

conquered. They united a diverse and fragmented country, and then gave it a democratic, plural, federal, and republican Constitution.

Who, now, are the Indians who shall hold the Centre against the challenges from left and right? Here lies a fundamental difference between the India of 1948 and the India of today. Then, the Government was run by men and women of proven intelligence and integrity, who were deeply committed to the values and procedures of democracy. Now, the Government of India is run by men and women of limited intelligence and dubious integrity, who know little about and care less for the ideals on which the Republic was founded.

The current state of Indian politics is exemplified above all by the state of the Indian National Congress, which was once the vehicle of a great, countrywide, freedom struggle, but is now merely a vehicle for the ambitions of a single family. In the 1970s, Mrs Indira Gandhi destroyed the Congress organisation. Her successors have since rid the party of any vestiges of liberal or progressive thought. The terms that came to mind in characterising an earlier generation of Congress leaders were: patriotic, efficient, social democratic, incorruptible. The terms that come to mind now are: selfish, nepotistic, sycophantic, on the make.

However, the decline and degradation of the Congress is symptomatic of the decline and degradation of public life in general. Other, lesser, parties have taken inspiration from the Congress and converted their parties into family firms. These include the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, the Akali Dal in Punjab, and the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, all of which are controlled by a single family, with the leadership passing from father to son.

In the year 1948 or thereabouts, it was not just the politicians who were patriotic and incorruptible – the civil servants were, too. Without the work, for example, of Sardar Tarlok Singh in resettling refugees, or of Sukumar Sen in organising our first, definitive, General Elections, or of V. P. Menon in integrating the princely states, there would be no India, still less a united and democratic one. The example they set was carried forward down the line – much as the example set by Nehru and company

was deepened by provincial Congress leaders, most of whom were likewise capable and efficient. Now, however, unelected officials at times surpass elected politicians in the scale and ambition of their corruption.

Today, the Centre is corrupt, corroded. Fortunately, the sense of Indian nation-hood cultivated over sixty decades has struck deep roots. India is not about to become a Hindu state. Nor is India about to become a one-party Maoist regime either. It is striking that the Naxalites have tried hard, but wholly without success, to impose a poll boycott in areas where they have influence. The habit, once acquired, of voting freely to choose one's representatives is impossible to shake off.

India remains a single nation. It continues to hold regular elections, permit the free movement of citizens, and encourage a moderately free press. But with a corrupt and corroded Centre, Indian democracy will not be able to win an authoritative victory over extremists of left or right.

The decline in the quality and capability of our politicians and public officials has been compensated, in part, by the rise of a vigorous and very active civil society. Back in the 1950s, there were a few dedicated social workers working in the Gandhian tradition, such as Thakurdas Bang, Baba Amte, Mridula Sarabhai, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. At that time however, hopes for reform and uplift were mostly entrusted to the state.

By the early 1970s, it became clear that the state was unwilling or unable to take on these larger responsibilities. In 1972, a Gujarati woman named Ela Bhatt started the Self-Employed Women's Association. The next year a Garhwali man of peasant extraction who shared her surname started the Chipko movement. These two Bhattas, Ela and Chandi Prasad, were in the vanguard of a much larger wave of voluntary action on behalf of the poor and marginalised of India. Through the 1970s and 1980s, hundreds of citizens' groups came into being, which sought to open schools and clinics for the rural and urban poor; to run co-operatives for farmers and craftspeople; to plant trees, revive village water tanks, and otherwise restore a ravaged environment.

Admittedly, many Indian NGOs are mere paper entities; many others, vehicles for personal aggrandisement or enrichment. That said, the flowering of so many good, committed, focused, civil society initiatives has contributed immensely to the nurturing of a democratic ethos in India. The space vacated by the state has at least been partially filled by individuals and groups motivated by a fine kind of disinterested idealism.

V

The brutal side to globalisation is manifested in the intensification of mining operations. But there is also a benign side to globalisation. In the tribal districts of Orissa, the opening of the Indian economy has encouraged short-term speculation via forms of resource extraction that are socially damaging as well as environmentally polluting. On the other hand, in cities with a skilled work force, such as Bangalore or Hyderabad, economic liberalisation has generated a huge amount of wealth through the provision of high-end, high-value services such as software and biotechnology. The proceeds from mining go to a privileged few; the proceeds from service industries to very many more. At the same time, the software boom has generated a new wave of philanthropy, with the promoters of companies like WIPRO and INFOSYS contributing handsomely to NGOs working on enhancing the quality and reach of education and health care in rural India.

For too long the creative energies of the Indian entrepreneur was suppressed by what C. Rajagopalachari memorably called the 'license-permit-quota-raj'. In the early years of independence, Indian industry perhaps needed protection – it certainly demanded it. The Bombay Plan of 1944, endorsed by G. D. Birla and J. R. D. Tata among others, asked both for curbs on foreign investment and for an enhanced role for the state. India had once been colonised by a Western multinational corporation – having, at last, gained its freedom, it intended to keep it. At the same time, Indian capitalists lacked the capital and knowhow to invest in sectors such as steel, power, roads, and ports. They were thus content to focus on the manufacture and distribution of consumer goods, leaving capital goods and infrastructure to the state.

The time to liberalise the Indian economy was the late 1960s. A manufacturing base was now in place; so, too, was a steady supply of skilled technicians and engineering graduates. However, for reasons of political expediency, the Prime Minister of the day, Mrs Indira Gandhi, chose instead to strengthen the stranglehold of the state over the economy. Key sectors such as coal and petroleum were nationalised. The licensing procedure in sectors still open to the private sector was at once made more arbitrary and more stringent. Those industrialists who knew how to massage political egos or hand over bribes had an advantage over those who trusted their entrepreneurial abilities alone.

The 1970s was verily the lost decade, in a political as well as economic sense (this was also the decade of the Emergency, of the nurturing of committed judges and bureaucrats, and, on the non-Congress side, of the elevation of street protest over the procedures of democratic deliberation). Government policies became somewhat more business-friendly in the 1980s; and, at last, more market-friendly in the 1990s. The surge in economic growth is a direct consequence of this greater (if also greatly belated) trust placed in the capabilities of the Indian entrepreneur. Along with software, other sectors such as telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, motorised vehicles and air transport have also made impressive strides in recent years.

The growth in investment and productive capacity has generated many jobs, and, through them, a substantial and rapidly expanding middle class. The term 'middle class' is very elastic, of course. Defined more capaciously, it may embrace some 200 million Indians; defined more rigorously, perhaps half that number. At any rate, there has been a distinct embourgeoisement of Indian society, with millions of previously working-class families now qualifying as belonging to the middle class.

There remain, of course, very many more Indians who still count as poor. Here, again, the estimates vary widely – roughly 300 million if one goes by official figures, perhaps twice that number if one adopts more stringent criteria. There are thus two nations, living side by side. In the words of Amartya Sen, the first India lives a lot

like California, the second (and more populous) India a lot like sub-Saharan Africa.

Marxist ideologues claim that one is the consequence of the other – that many Indians have recently become prosperous only because many other Indians are still poor. This is a gross simplification. A more nuanced, and more accurate, way to understand these differences in income and status is to interpret them through the lens of culture and geography. A certain kind of Indian, with a certain kind of social or caste background, living in a certain kind of concentrated settlement, and in certain states of India, is likely to be better off than Indians of other social backgrounds and other residential locations in other states.

One consequence of market-led economic growth shall be to accentuate these differences. Since upper castes tend to have higher levels of education and greater mobility across India, they are likely to garner the most profitable jobs. Since well-developed regions have a reputation for being rich in skills and open to innovation, the bigger investors will flock to them. Since cities have more resources and better infrastructure than small towns and villages, they will continue to get the bulk of new investment. In this manner, the already substantial gap between Bangalore and rural Karnataka, south India and eastern India, city-dwellers and country-folk, will grow even larger.

These inequalities of income and status are made more striking by their magnification by the media, with its breathless worship of wealth and success. A leading newspaper routinely speaks of the India that wants to march ahead allegedly being kept back by the other India that refuses to come with them. There is a kind of Social Darwinism abroad, where the new rich promiscuously parade their wealth, while insinuating that the poor are poor because they deserve to be poor.

Rising inequalities have historically been part of the growth process all across the world. In the early phase of industrialisation, the gap between the rich and the poor widens. Over time, however, these inequalities tend to come down. That, at any rate, was the experience of Europe and America. Will later industrialisers such as China and India

also follow the same route? In India one cannot be unduly optimistic. One reason that inequalities tapered off in the West was because their governments worked effectively towards providing equality of opportunity. The contributions of the European welfare state in providing decent health care and education to its citizens are well known. Less acknowledged, perhaps, is the part played in levelling inequalities by the outstanding system of public schools and publicly funded universities in the United States.

The situation in India is all too different. The inequalities in access to good education and health care are immense. The school my children went to in Bangalore is world-class; the school run by the state a few yards down the road is worse than third-rate. I can avail of top-quality health-care, by paying (admittedly, through my nose); my house help must go to the local quack instead. To address these disparities, outstanding work has been done by social workers in the fields of primary education and health care. Brave, selfless, utterly patriotic Indians have worked 24/7 to get slum and low caste children into school, and to provide them with protection against dangerous diseases. Ultimately, though, the scale of the problem is so immense that their work can only very partially make up for the apathy and corruption of the state. For only a properly functioning state can equalise the life chances of all Indians, whether men or women, high, middle or low caste, Hindus or Muslims, northerners or southerners.

In the West, the bulk of the population resides in the middle class. Will this ever happen in India? The prospect is uncertain, for two reasons. The first has been alluded to, the palpable failure of the state to provide education and health care to all its citizens. The second is the environmental constraint. Eighty years ago, Mahatma Gandhi had pointed to the unsustainability, at the global level, of the Western model of economic development. 'God forbid, he wrote, 'that India should ever take to industrialisation after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts'.

With India, China too is trying to ape the West, attempting to create a mass consumer society whose members can all drive their own cars, live in their own air-conditioned homes, eat in fancy restaurants and travel to the ends of the earth for their family holidays. Will these Chinese and Indian consumers collectively strip the world bare like locusts? Between them, they have set off a new scramble for Africa, stripping or at least strip-mining that unhappy continent to fuel their ever-growing appetite for resources. They have also consolidated the control of a brutal military junta in Myanmar, putting their own selfish interests in minerals and energy well ahead of the elementary human rights of the Burmese people.

The environmental challenges posed by the economic rise of China and India are of three kinds. First, at the global level, is the threat of rapid and irreversible climate change due to the accumulation of greenhouse gases. Second, at the regional or continental level, are the environmental (and social) costs of the ecological footprint of China and India outside their own national borders. The West has for some time worked to relocate its dirty industries to the Third World, passing on the costs to the poor and the powerless. In the same manner, the externalities of Indian and Chinese consumers will be increasingly borne by the people of other lands.

The third challenge is that posed to the environments of these countries themselves. Chinese cities have the highest rates of air pollution in the world. Rivers such as the Ganga and the Jamuna are effectively, dead. India and China both have unacceptably high levels of air and water pollution. They have also witnessed, in recent years, the large-scale depletion of groundwater aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the destruction of forests, and the decimation of fish-stocks.

There are two stock responses to the environmental crisis in India. One is to hope, or pray, that in time and with greater prosperity we will have the money to clean up our surroundings. The other is to see ecological degradation as symptomatic of the larger failure of modernity itself. The first response is characteristic of the consuming classes; the second, that of the agrarian romantic, who believes that India must live only in its villages, and indeed, that the majority of Indians are happy enough to live on in their villages.

Both responses are deeply wrong-headed. Contra the rural romantic, life among the peasantry can be nasty, brutish and short. Most Indian villagers would cheerfully exchange a mud hut for a solid stone house, well-water for clean piped-water, kerosene lanterns for steady and bright tube lights. The living standards of the majority of Indians can and must be enhanced. At the same time, the living standards of the most wealthy Indians must be moderated.

The demands placed on the earth by the poor and excluded are disproportionately low; the demands placed by those with cars and credit cards excessively high. A rational, long-range, sustainable strategy of development has to find ways of enhancing the resource access of those at the bottom of the heap while checking the resource demands of those in positions of power and advantage.

Once, the media played a catalytic role in promoting environmental awareness. However, when liberalisation got underway and the economy began to show higher rates of growth, there was an anti-environmental backlash. Now, environmentalists are portrayed as party-poopers, as spoilers who do not want India to join the ranks of the Great Powers of the world. In response to these criticisms, and sensible also of the pressures of commercial advertisers, most newspapers laid off their environment correspondents or perhaps sent them to cover the stock market instead.

The campaigning journalist Anil Agarwal once wrote of the environmental debate as being 'beyond pretty trees and tigers'. In India, at least, the state and fate of the natural environment is intimately linked to livelihood and survival. Without sustainable irrigation practices, Indian farmers cannot assure themselves a long-term future. Without decent public transport and energy conservation, India will be beholden to the whims and fancies of countries with more oil than ourselves. Without clean air and safe drinking water, our children will be far less healthy than we want them to be.

However, in the eyes of the new, excessively market-friendly media, the environment is only about pretty trees and tigers. They wish their readers to live resource-intensive lifestyles and yet be able to glory in the beauties of the wild. They cannot, or will not,

see that the one imperils the other. Nor will they acknowledge the persistence and significance of more local, less glamorous, environmental issues – such as the state of the air and the water, the conservation of energy, the provision of safe and affordable housing. These issues affect the lives of hundreds of millions of Indians. However, by succumbing so readily to the cult of wealth and celebrity, the media can find no space for them.

The market is good at producing consumer goods efficiently and cheaply, and at distributing them quickly and widely. But the market cannot provide fair access to education or health care. And the operations of the market can actually promote environmental destruction. The value of clean air and species diversity cannot be assessed in monetary terms. Energy and transport policies that are suitable from the point of view of a city, a state, or a nation, cannot be designed by a single private enterprise. A sustainable path of economic development thus depends crucially on a far-seeing state as well as a vigilant media. Tragically, India currently has neither.

VI

For very many years, the Indian experiment with nationhood and democracy was written off by Western observers. Indians were informed, through a series of premature obituaries, that our country was too diverse to be a single nation, and too poor to be run on democratic lines. To be sure, the nation was scarcely stable or secure – it lurched, as it were, from crisis to crisis, from riot to assassination to border conflict to open war. But somehow, India survived; somehow (and despite the Emergency) it even stayed democratic.

When, finally, did foreign scholars and travelers concede that the Republic of India was here to stay? I think it was the year 1997 that marked the end of Western skepticism about the fate of India. That year, this unnatural nation and unlikely democracy officially marked five full decades of its existence.

Now, of course, we are told, not that India is going down the tube, but that, with China, we are one of the rising superpowers of the century.

This newer, more hopeful kind of prophecy is eagerly seized upon by two kinds of Indians: those who enjoy political power, and those who own vast amounts of wealth. Both see the bestowing of superstardom as not very much more than their due.

This new, self-confident, even arrogant India is on display most prominently in two cities, Bangalore and New Delhi. The latter is, for me, the place where the archives are; but for most others, it is the political capital of India. Bangalore is, from my narrow perspective, merely my home town, but in the eyes of the world it is the centre of a rising Asian giant's showpiece software industry. Not unexpectedly, the power elite of both cities are marked by a very high sense of self-regard. In the case of the Delhi politicians, this self-praise is essentially unearned. The self-esteem of the new generation of Indian entrepreneurs, on the other hand, is based on their own hard work and achievement. Given an opening, they have seized it; by building world-class companies on Indian soil with Indian capital and Indian workers. But here, too, there is a tendency for self-regard to shade into hubris. Having so successfully nurtured a private company, they see no reason why they cannot be part of a very successful nation-state, without quite understanding that the leap from one to the other involves agencies and processes of which they sometimes have little understanding and over which they often have no control.

The imagination of the Indian elite is constructed around these twin poles: one political, the other economic. But to fly from Bangalore to Delhi, and back, is literally to fly over a serious challenge to the emergence of India as a global superpower. Obscured from the bird in the sky is the Naxalite insurgency in central India, which covers at least one-tenth of the country's surface, and which has at its core the sufferings and discontent of tens of millions of tribal people.

For the middle class, the threat from the left is wholly hidden. They do not see or confront it in their daily lives. On the other hand, they do know of the threat from the right. Yet they tend to disregard it. Some middle class Indians think that India should be a Hindu state anyway.

Others believe – or hope – that with economic modernisation the religious extremism of the BJP will fade, with the party becoming an Indian version of the German Christian Democrats.

In the case of the dumbing down of the media, the middle class has been an active collaborator. So, too, with the degradation of the environment, whose links to their own lifestyles are scarcely understood or commented upon. The disparity between the rich and the poor is too obvious to be ignored; still, the hope is that with an even freer play of market forces, those presently at the bottom of the pyramid will come to occupy its middle ranks.

The one challenge to superstardom that is most clear to the consuming classes is the corruption and corrosion of the democratic Centre. They are witness to the shocking amorality of our political class; and subject in their daily lives to its consequences. The market, and their own ability to pay, can in part insulate them from the breakdown of public services. They can trust the courier service instead of the post office, get themselves a mobile phone and forget about the land line, and have a stand-by generator in case of a power-cut. And yet, every now and then, they are served a powerful reminder that they remain at the mercy of the malfunctioning state. Time is money, never more so when one is caught for hours in a traffic jam caused either by the precedence given to a politician's convoy or by the fact that the surface of a major road has suddenly caved in.

In the short-term, at any rate, the Indian political class can only get more corrupt, and the Indian state more inefficient. Multi-party coalition governments are already the norm in the Centre; they will become increasingly common in the states. As the price of joining a coalition led by one of the major parties, the smaller formations demand the most lucrative Ministries. In the current, fragmented, political scenario, short-term rent-seeking will take precedence over long-term policy formulation. This shall be true of governments in the states, as well as at the Centre.

VII

The challenge of the Naxalites; the insidious presence of the Hindutvawadis; the degradation of the once liberal and upright Centre; the increasing gap between the rich and the poor; the trivialisation of the media; the unsustainability, in an environmental sense, of present patterns of resource consumption; the instability and policy incoherence caused by multi-party coalition governments – these are seven reasons why India will not become a superpower. To this, so-to-speak objective judgment of the historian, I will now add the subjective desires of a citizen – which is that India should not even attempt to become a superpower.

In my view, International Relations cannot be made analogous to a competitive examination. The question is not who comes first or second or third, whether judged in terms of Gross National Product, number of billionaires in the Forbes or Fortune lists, number of Olympic gold medals won, size of largest aircraft carrier operated, or power of most deadly nuclear weapon owned.

We should judge ourselves not against the achievements, real or imagined, of other countries, but in the light of our own norms and ideals. The jurist Nani Palkhivala once remarked that 'India is a third-class democracy with a first-class Constitution'. Both parts of the equation remain as he stated them. In conception we are a unique nation, unique for refusing to reduce Indian-ness to a single language, religion, or ideology, unique in affirming and celebrating the staggering diversity found within our borders (and beyond them). The Constitution defied the Laws of Manu by giving women equal rights with men. It violated thousands of years of social practice by abolishing Untouchability. It refused, despite the provocations of bigots of both religions, to make India into a 'Hindu Pakistan'. And it challenged the evidence and logic of history by giving even unlettered adults the power to choose those who would represent them in legislatures and in Parliament.

That is the ideal, still first class; and then there is the practice, mostly third-class. The equality of women and low castes is denied in homes and villages across the land. There are chauvinists who privilege one language, setting upon those Indians who choose to speak another. There are religious fundamentalists who likewise harass and persecute those whose Gods are different from theirs. There are allegedly 'democratic' politicians who abuse their oath of office and work only to enrich themselves; as well as self-described 'revolutionaries' who seek to settle arguments by the point of the gun.

It was, I think, Jawaharlal Nehru who pointed out that India was home to all that is truly disgusting as well as truly noble in the human condition. The nobility and the disgustingness were abundantly on display in his day, as they are in ours. Contemporary India is home to pluralists and democrats as well as to fanatics and sectarians; to selfless social workers as well as to greedy politicians; to honest and upright officials as well as to officials who are time-servers; to capitalists who distribute their wealth quietly and widely as well as to those who seek only to publicly and provocatively display it. To redeem the Republic, to bring the practice of Indian democracy closer to the ideals of Indian nation-hood, is to valorise and support the first kind of Indian rather than the second.

Six months after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, my teacher, Dharma Kumar, wrote a short essay entitled 'India as a Nation-State'. Here, she took issue both with left-wing activists who thought the Indian state too strong, and with Hindu chauvinists who thought it too weak. She rejected both positions by affirming the inclusive and democratic idea of India upheld by its founders. As she put it, 'instead of deploring our lack of homogeneity we should glory in it. Instead of regarding India as a failed or deformed nation-state we should see it as a new political form, perhaps even as a forerunner of the future. We are in some ways where Europe wants to be, but we have a tremendous job of reform, of repairing our damaged institutions, and of inventing new ones.'

I have myself been fortunate in being witness to the work of many Indians who have sought to repair or redeem our institutions. I think of groups

like the Association of Democratic Reform, which succeeded in making the criminal records and assets of politicians public; or like Pratham, which works closely with the state governments to improve our public education system. I think of Ela Bhatt and Chandi Prasad Bhatt, respectively the grandmother and grandfather of modern social activism in India. I think of the scientists Obaid Siddiqui and Padmanabhan Balaram, who have nurtured world-class, non-hierarchical, research laboratories in a funds-scarce, anti-intellectual, and deeply inegalitarian society. I think, too, of my exact contemporaries and fellow PhDs Jean Dreze and Mihir Shah, who could have enjoyed comfortable careers as teachers and writers, but who chose instead to become full-time activists, and bent their expertise to making the Government of India more responsive to the lives and interests of the rural poor. And, since I have myself contributed in this essay to the growing cynicism about public officials, I think, finally, of the outstanding former Governor of West Bengal, Gopalkrishna Gandhi, whose understanding of and empathy with the citizens of his state was, in all senses of the word, exemplary.

The groups and individuals mentioned in the preceding paragraph are, of course, merely illustrative. The work that they and others like them undertake is rarely reported in the mainstream media. It is far easier to speak of a wholesale, structural transformation, to identify one single variable that, if acted upon, will take India up and into the straight high road to superstardom. Among the one-size-fits-all solutions on offer are those promoted by the Naxalites, whose project is to make India into a purer, that is to say more regimented, version of Communist China; by the RSS and the BJP, who assure the Hindus that if they rediscover their religion they will (again) rule the world; and by the free-market ideologues, who seek to make India into an even more hedonistic version of the United States of America.

To follow the Naxalites is to plunge India into decades of civil war; to follow the Hindu right to persecute and demonise large numbers of one's own countrymen; to follow the market fundamentalists to intensify the divisions between the consuming and the surviving classes (and to destroy the global environment in the process). Rather than nurture or act upon these Utopian fantasies, the Indian patriot must focus instead on the tasks of gradual and piecemeal reform. We need to repair, one by one, the institutions that have safeguarded our unity amidst diversity, and to forge, also one by one, the new institutions that can help us meet the fresh challenges of the twenty-first century. It will be hard, patient, slow work – that is to say, the only kind of work that is ever worth it. ■