The Dawn of the New Millennium: Achievements, Problems and Prospects

As we proceed further into the new millennium, fundamental questions confront us. What has India achieved so far? What problems does it face? And what are the tasks and prospects for the future?

Today, our newspapers, weeklies and books on current affairs, besides many intellectuals, tend to see India since independence as an area of darkness. In 1993, a writer, C. Thomas, pithily summarized, the 'torrent of wretchedness', though not sharing it, as follows:

> . . . language riots, caste riots, communal bloodshed, the assassination of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, wars with Pakistan and China, secessionism in Punjab, an uprising in Kashmir, bloodshed in Assam, anti-Hindi movements in the South, starvation, corruption, pollution, environmental catastrophe, disparities of wealth and poverty, caste prejudice, burning brides, *sati,* killing girl babies, bonded labour, child labour, criminalization of politics, discrimination against women, human rights abuses.[1]

This ran contrary to the optimism which many intellectuals maintained till Nehru was alive. But, as S. Gopal, one of our tallest historians, put it in 1984, with the passage of time, the Nehru era began to

> . . . appear more and more of a faded golden age . . . It is as if, when he died, he took a whole epoch with him. The Nehru age, of confident assumptions, high aspirations and considerable achievements, seems today a vanished world. There is a sickening sense of lost ideals and missed opportunities. Public service is no longer a selfless pursuit, politics in India has become dispirited and the objectives which he gave his people, then so challenging, now seem tired and muddled . . . The collective self-confidence of India has received severe jolts, making the people less optimistic and economically self-assured and more fragmented socially and politically.[2]

There is, of course, much in India of yesterday and today which gives rise to despair and despondency among many, for who can deny the existence of mass poverty, gross inequality, intolerable illiteracy, social injustice, gender discrimination, social oppression, corruption, casteism and communalism and poor quality of life in general. But these and many other weaknesses should not cloud our vision. There is not enough reason for us to allow ourselves to be stifled in a pall of gloom, to be drowned in a sea of depression.

Certainly, we have by no means solved all our problems—some quite serious—even after sixty years of independence. Not all that the Indian people had hoped to achieve during the heady days of the freedom struggle or set out to accomplish on the eve of independence has been achieved. Undoubtedly, serious deficiencies have remained; fresh weaknesses have emerged; new dangers have arisen.

Still, it would be wrong not to acknowledge that India has made substantial all-round progress; its achievements in the last sixty years have been considerable by any historical standards, especially if we keep in view the level from which it started and 'how difficult was the terrain along which we had to tread'.[3] Vast political, economic and social changes have taken place. In the process, a lot of scum, gathered over the centuries, has also come to the top. But the legacy of the freedom struggle has held—and not got diluted significantly. The qualitative advance made by India in many areas has been ignored by many because it has occurred gradually and without any ostentation or drama. India is now making a breakthrough in many areas. The advance already made in the political, economic and social spheres, when taken in its entirety, should give the Indian people faith in their capacity to find solutions to the many remaining problems and ills of their society.

National Unity

A major Indian success has been scored in the strengthening of Indian unity politically, economically and emotionally and the pushing forward of the complex process of nation-in-the-making. India's immense diversity has not hampered the process, even while this diversity has been sustained and has, in fact, flowered. Also, tensions generated by immense social churning have not come in the way of further developing the sense and sentiment of Indianness, of Indians being one people.

There have, of course, been several challenges to Indian unity but they have mostly been overcome. The solution of the divisive official language issue, reorganization of linguistic states, refusal to counterpoise regional and cultural identities to an Indian identity, sympathetic handling of the problems of the tribals and their integration into the national mainstream, firm treatment of separatist movements even when showing an understanding of the feelings underlying them, genuine efforts, even when not very successful, to reduce regional inequality, have gone a long way in ensuring that Indian unity is no longer fragile and that the existence of India as a viable and assured political entity is under little threat.

Disparities between states still remain, but they do not threaten Indian unity, for they are often caused by infirmities internal to a state and are not the result of internal colonialism or sub-colonialism where a backward region is subjected to economic subordination and exploitation by another more advanced region or by the rest of the country.

A large number of regional or one-state parties have come into existence over the years. They have freely assumed power in the states and have even shared power at the Centre by allying with one or the other national party or becoming part of an alliance on an all-India basis. These parties fight for greater access to central resources and not for their own separate and fuller control over the region's resources for they already enjoy that.

Moreover, Indian politics, both electoral and non-electoral, has increasingly become national in nature. As a result of regular countrywide general elections, the dominant presence of all-India political parties, especially Congress, nationwide campaigns on economic and political issues, and the operation of all-India transport and communication networks, including radio, TV, newspapers

and films, a single political culture—a unitary 'language of politics'—pervades all parts of the country. It has, therefore, not been accidental that even after the end of the Nehru era the electoral waves affecting the 1971, 1977, 1980 and 1984 general elections were national in character, as was the victory of the BJP-led NDA in the general election of 1999.

However, regional economic and developmental disparities still pose serious problems along with the communal and caste divide. Communalism, in particular, continues to stalk the land. For decades, communal forces were being contained electorally, and their ideological spread was also restricted. But in the last three decades or so, there has been a weakening of the anti-communal consensus among secular forces. Quite often, as in 1989, and more recently in 1998 and 1999, they have directly or indirectly allied with communal forces, thus giving the latter credibility and respectability. Communalism is today the chief threat to Indian unity for India cannot remain a strong and united nation except on the basis of secularism. We have seen in the chapter on Punjab, what can happen if communalism is not dealt with firmly and squarely in time, if religion is not completely separated from politics and if, instead, an effort is made to compromise with and conciliate communal forces. In this respect, an area needing particular attention and innovation is that of culture and tradition. Indigenous cultures and traditions and popular religions play an important part in the life of a people. If the communal and obscurantist forces are not to be permitted to appropriate India's cultural heritage, it is necessary for modern and secular forces to establish creative and critical links with the country's cultural heritage and tradition. They have, unfortunately, not fully explored this area of public life. In particular, secular, democratic elements must distinguish between religion as philosophy, spiritual experience, guide to morality and psychological solace and religion as dogma, bigotry and a vehicle for communalism.

In any case, it is very necessary to carefully nurture the process of nation-in-the-making as it is not a unilinear process and can therefore suffer setbacks and interruptions as it faces new challenges.

Democratic Political Systems

The great success story of independent India has been its secular, federal and multi-party political system. The nation has had to face tasks of immense magnitude and confront numerous problems, for example having to function in a backward economy with an impoverished citizenry, being torn by violent social conflicts, having to wage three major wars and face high costs of national defence since 1947, gradual weakening of many of its institutions and being constantly under international pressure. Despite all this, the political system has, however, shown remarkable resilience and flexibility and has stood the test of time and exhibited an ability to overcome several crises, for example those of 1967–69 and of 1974–77. Indira Gandhi was to put it pithily in August 1972 when asked to list India's achievements since 1947: 'I would say our greatest achievement is to have survived as a free and democratic nation.'[4]

Political stability has been an important characteristic of independent India's political system. There have been, since 1967, rapid changes of governments in the states and, since 1989, at the

Centre, but political stability has persisted. Different political forces and formations have waged their political battles in the political arena prescribed by the constitution. Changes in governments have taken place according to constitutional and democratic rules and have invariably been quietly and often gracefully accepted by those voted out of power by parliament or the electorate. People have taken it for granted that elections, largely free and fair and held regularly, would decide who would rule the country, a state or a panchayat. Greater political participation by the people, including in its agitational forms, has not led to political instability.

The political system has also acquired more or less unquestioned legitimacy; the few who have questioned its basic tenets having fallen in line in the end. Thus, the Communists for several decades challenged, though only in theory, the basic constitutional structure as being geared to domination by the ruling, exploiting classes. But today they are among the more vocal defenders of the constitution. The communalists have been trying from the outset to undermine the secular character of Indian society and polity but even they pay verbal obeisance to secularism though they try to distort its character through redefinition. Similarly, though Jayaprakash Narayan questioned the multi-party parliamentary system during the 1960s and the early 1970s, in the end he too accepted it after the lifting of the Emergency in 1977. It is also significant that new aspiring groups have been increasingly functioning within the broad parameters of the political system to advance their interests. In fact, the very longevity of the system, its continued functioning for over six decades has given it strength and enabled it to strike deep roots. What W.H. Morris-Jones wrote in 1966 is equally valid today: 'The combination of political stability with establishment of a free, and freely moving, political system is what we entitled to call India's political miracle.'[5]

Entrenchment of Democracy

Perhaps the most significant of India's achievements since 1947 is the firm entrenchment of political democracy and civil liberties which have become a basic feature of Indian life. Indians enjoy today a free Press, the freedom to speak, travel and form associations, the right to freely criticize the government; they have competitive elections, unrestricted working of political parties, an independent judiciary, the right to participate in political life and to change the government through the ballot box, and freedom from fear of arbitrary arrest.

India alone among the post-colonial countries has sustained a democratic and civil libertarian polity since its inception. Commitment to democratic values has deepened over the years among most Indians. Paradoxically, even the experience of the Emergency underlined this attachment. The belief has also taken root that social transformation through a democratic political framework is possible. Nationalization of banks and several industries, land reforms—even quite radical as in Kerala and West Bengal—and effective functioning of Panchayati Raj, with its provision for 30 per cent reservation of seats for women, and successful and unopposed working of the system of reservations for the SCs and STs in several states, has shown that political democracy as such is not an obstacle to social transformation and socioeconomic reforms in the direction of equity and equality.

A prominent and positive feature of Indian political development in the post-independence

period has been the steadily growing political awareness among the people and their greater direct and indirect participation in the political process.

The freedom struggle had already politicized large sections of the people. Popular agitational and electoral politics have pushed this process further. India has certainly become over time a politically more active society with an ever larger number of people and social groups being politically mobilized and 'incorporated into the body politic'.

The disadvantaged—women, agricultural labourers, small peasants, the urban poor—have increasingly come to believe that their social condition is unjust and is capable of being changed and that the desired change can be brought about through politics and by the assertion of their political rights. The people in general want a share in political power and a greater share of the wealth they produce. They are also no longer willing to tolerate certain naked forms of oppression, discrimination, deprivation and neglect. For example, a government which would let a large number of people die in a famine, as happened during the droughts in the colonial period, would not last even a few weeks.

People have also become aware of the power and value of their right to vote at various levels from the panchayats to parliament and of the benefits to be derived from its exercise. The politics of booth-capturing, sale and purchase of votes, vote banks and patronage have been gradually receding and the voter's choice becoming more autonomous. One example is the increasing refusal of women to vote according to the wishes of the male members of the family. Moreover, the poor and the oppressed no longer accept dictates in regard to their choice of parties and candidates. Though they are still open to populist appeals or appeals on grounds of caste, region or religious community, they can no longer be easily bullied or bought. People now tend to vote according to issues, policies, ideologies or group interests so as to garner greater advantage from the government's development and welfare schemes.

It is true that the role of caste in electoral politics has increased in recent years, but quite often caste as a political factor has come in primarily when other social, economic and political issues have been absent in the electoral arena or when such issues have got grouped around caste as in the case of jobs and educational opportunities. However, caste as a factor in politics has invariably receded when broader national issues have come to occupy centre-stage as in the *garibi hatao* election of 1971, the JP Movement of 1974–75, the anti-Emergency election of 1977 and the 1984 election, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, when the country was seen to be in danger.

The voters have not only become more sensitive to the larger social, economic and political issues but are also more assertive and demanding—the people they vote for have to respond more actively to their needs and demands. A major reason for the volatility of the voters' behaviour in recent times, resulting in wide swings in electoral mandates, is the heightened voter expectation from the electoral process and the pressing demand by the voters for performance and fulfilment of the promises made during elections. Interestingly, elections at all levels have repeatedly shown that people have little hesitation in voting against those in power because they are no longer in awe or fear of people in authority.

Politicization and mobilization of the hitherto unpoliticized, which has been a continuous and ongoing process, has sometimes taken the form of popular agitations, which have involved many of the urban and some of the rural sections of society. They have, however, so far left the rural poor untouched in large parts of the country. The politics of protest has fed on demands for social justice, a share in the gains of development and participation in decision-making. It has grown as the more disadvantaged and oppressed classes and groups have come on the political stage. Power struggle and popular mobilization in rural areas has, however, often taken a casteist form in the absence of mobilization around class and of struggle against the caste system and caste oppression and discrimination.

A major step towards further democratization of the political system and greater people's participation as also greater control over their own lives has been taken with the inauguration of the freshly designed Panchayati Raj.

Popular Participation in the Political Process

Perhaps the most important political task today is to deepen democracy and make it more meaningful for the mass of the people by enabling their greater participation in the political process. Voting in periodic elections should not be regarded as the only form of such participation.

So far there has been a general failure to politically mobilize the poor and the disadvantaged and to shift the balance of social and political power in their favour. The capitalists, who are major beneficiaries of economic development, the landed peasants, who have gained most from land reforms and the Green Revolution, the intelligentsia, the professionals, and the middle classes, for whom immense opportunities have opened up after 1947, the government and public sector employees, the organized working class and the upper layers of the SCs and STs, all have been able to find various means of protecting and promoting their interests. They have thus been able to tilt democracy in their favour. But the poor have been unable to do so to any great extent. They have been left out of the larger decision-making process and have had little voice in the day-to-day decisions affecting their lives. Their access to resources being generated in the economy and the social system has remained limited. They have been unable to turn the strength of numbers into effective power because the level of their mobilization has been low. Their political self-activity has lain dormant. Even the radical parties, groups and organizations have tended to neglect their organization and mobilization. The poor do, of course, at times rise up in protest and sometimes even revolt, and at elections exercise, often enthusiastically, their voting right in the hope that the persons elected would help improve their social and economic condition. But much more accountability to the agenda of the poor is needed.

The widest mobilization of the bottom millions is also necessary because neither development nor social change and not even national unity can be fully promoted without their active involvement. That this should have been forgotten by the heirs to the freedom struggle is ironical, for was not a hallmark of that struggle the active role of the masses in it? And did not Gandhi's greatness lie precisely in promoting the non-violent mobilization of the common people, thus

making India's freedom struggle perhaps the greatest mass movement in world history. Jawaharlal Nehru's design for development and social transformation too depended on active pressure from below; that he failed to implement his own design is another matter.

Forms of Political Protest

Political protest, along with the right to vote, is one of the basic ingredients and a normal part of democratic politics. For the oppressed sections of society, it is a critical part of their effective participation in politics and is essential for the expression of their demands and grievances. India is, therefore, going to have more, not less, protest as different sections of society awaken to political life and work for faster changes in their social condition. Protest movements are also very important means for the people to force those in authority, particularly those wielding political power, to respond to their demands. For the poor, perhaps this is the only means of doing so. All this should be taken for granted. The important question, therefore, is what are to be the forms of protest in a civil libertarian representative democracy? As of now, Indians have, however, failed to evolve appropriate forms of protest or a consensus on what they can or cannot do.

Popular protest movements by political parties, students, workers, farmers, government employees and common citizens have most often taken the form of demonstrations, hunger strikes, hartals, strikes in the workplace or educational institutions, dharnas, bandhs, gheraos, blockages of roads (rasta roko), satyagraha, civil disobedience or disobedience of laws, leading to mass arrests, and rioting. While some of these forms of protest are inherently coercive, others more often than not culminate in violence and breakdown of law and order and wanton violation of laws duly enacted by elected legislatures or rules laid down by those authorized to do so. In many cases the protesters coerce into joining their actions the very people they are supposed to represent. The protest, especially in the form of demonstrations, quite often ends up in attacks on cars, buses, trains, government and private property, college buildings and so on. The situation is quite often worsened by an overreaction and an equally and sometimes greater violent response by the authorities and the police, leading often to a vicious circle.

The purpose of such protest movements is, however, not to convince the concerned authority of the justness of their demands, or to win it over by 'changing his heart', to use a Gandhian phrase, but to erode its authority and to coerce it to accept their demands. The blame is, of course, not to be put only on one side, viz., the protesters. One reason why many take to violent protest is because those in power turn a deaf ear to peaceful protest and respond only to violent agitations. In this respect, what Myron Weiner wrote in 1962 continues to have relevance:

> Only when public order is endangered by a mass movement is the government willing to make a concession, not because they consider the demand legitimate, but because they then recognise the strength of the group making the demand and its capacity for destructiveness. Thus, the government often alternates between unresponsiveness to the demands of large but peaceful groups and total concession to groups that press their demands violently.[6]

In other words not only must the organizers of popular agitations not coerce the authorities but try to change their hearts, the latter too must be willing to undergo a change of heart whenever the protesters' demands are justified.

We believe that just as the effort to prevent or suppress peaceful protest is undemocratic, violent protest too poses a threat to the functioning of democracy.

We may raise another question in this context. Is even satyagraha or non-violent disobeying of laws legitimate in a democratic system, and, if so, under what conditions or circumstances? For some insights on this, we may turn for guidance to Gandhiji, the originator of satyagraha and in whose name protest movements have often been launched after independence. On the eve of independence Gandhiji warned the people that satyagraha and civil disobedience would no longer be the appropriate technique in free India against a government elected by the people themselves. Even against the British, he insisted on satyagraha and civil disobedience being completely non-violent in word and deed. In any case, they were to be 'the weapon of last resort' where gross injustice or immoral action by the government or other authorities was involved and all other methods of redressal had been tried and failed. The forms of protest tried out in independent India in imitation of Gandhiji's methods are, in fact, more akin to what he described as duragraha. We may give a long quotation from the *Conquest of Violence* by the Gandhian scholar Joan V. Bondurant to make the clear difference between satyagraha and duragraha as Gandhiji perceived it:

> In the refinement of language for describing techniques of social action, duragraha serves to distinguish those techniques in which the use of harassment obscures or precludes supportive acts aimed at winning over the opponent . . . In those instances where democratic procedures have been damaged through default or design, and where the legal machinery has been turned towards a travesty of justice, civil disobedience may be called into play . . . But if civil disobedience is carried out in the style of duragraha, and not within the framework of satyagraha, it may well lead to widespread indifference to legality and lend itself to those who would use illegal tactics to undermine faith in democratic processes.[7]

Gandhiji would never have advised giving up of protest which was to him the breath of the life of a citizen. But he would also not have followed the route which some of the Gandhians and most of the non-Gandhians have followed since his death.

Smaller men could only imitate him. He would, however, have, as he did promise, innovated and evolved new forms of protest as also political activism suited to a self-governing, democratic and civil libertarian polity. That is also the task which leaders and organizers of popular protest should undertake today. That this can be done is shown by the civil rights movement in the US and the anti-nuclear peace movement in Britain.

Economic Performance

Independent India's economy has been quite vibrant and its performance on the whole

satisfactory, as the chapters on the Indian economy bring out. It has made long strides in almost all its different aspects though the extent of achievement is not what was possible and what was needed.

India has overcome economic stagnation and broken the vicious circle of poverty–underdevelopment–poverty. It has also broken from the colonial economic structure and has been successful in laying the foundations of a self-reliant, independent economy. It has thus fulfilled the design of the founders of the Republic, to go from political independence to economic independence.

India has not been autarchic or self-sufficient or based on national seclusion, living within its own cocoon. That was in any case not possible. It could only develop as an integral part of the world economy. But independent India's integration with the world economy has been different from that of the colonial period; it is based on the needs of India's autonomous development and free of subordination to the economies of the advanced capitalist countries of Western Europe and North America. Nor has foreign capital any longer a stranglehold on Indian economy. In fact, dependence of independent India on foreign capital and foreign aid has been quite low. Today, neither finance nor any major or economically strategic industry is under the control of foreign capital. Multinational corporations have also played a relatively minor role in the Indian economy. However, for advanced technology India still continues to be dependent on some industrialized countries.

Immediately after independence, India successfully developed an economic pattern of its own, namely, a mixed economy, which placed equal emphasis on the active economic role of the state and the market and developed a complementary relationship between the public and the private sectors. Since 1991, India has also been able to carry through economic reforms; dismantling bureaucratic controls and the licence quota raj and developing a closer integration with the world economy, through a gradual process, without hurting the economy or the people's living standards.

India has also been able to transform its landlord-ridden, semi-feudal agrarian structure, though with many weaknesses and not to the benefit of the landless.

India has had consistent growth over the years in agriculture and industry and in national income. Indian economy has been remarkably stable and little susceptible to world cyclical swings. It was able to withstand without serious damage three major adversities in the world economy: the oil shock of the 1970s, the collapse of the socialist countries of Europe with which India had close and significant economic ties, and the East and South-east Asian economic crisis of 1997. It was also able to recover from the 1991 fiscal and foreign exchange crisis without serious cost or dislocation.

Stagnation of the colonial period in agricultural production and productivity has come to an end with agriculture growing more than three and a half times since 1950. India has achieved self-sufficiency in food with foodgrain production having grown at 3 per cent per year. Famines have become a distant memory, despite periodic droughts. The effect of the monsoons on agricultural production, though still there, lessens with the passage of time.

Industry has grown more than twenty-two times since 1950. It has, moreover, undergone structural transformation and considerable diversification. The weakness in the basic and capital goods sector has been overcome to a considerable, though not to the desirable, extent. The share of this sector in total industrial production has gone up sharply, and India's dependence on the advanced countries for basic goods and capital equipment has been greatly reduced.

There has also been a massive expansion of the power, transport and banking sectors. India has also become more or less self-sufficient in defence production with capacity to produce long-range missiles and atomic weapons, though it still has to purchase some highly sophisticated defence equipment from abroad. It has also acquired a large trained scientific and technical force.

India's national income has grown more than tenfold from 1950 to 2004–05 and its per capita income by 3.3 times despite a very high rate of population growth.

Referring to the Indian economy, a sympathetic scholar, Francine R. Frankel, had written in 1978: 'During much of the later 1960s and into the 1970s, there were chronic food shortages, sharp inflationary price spirals, low availability of domestic raw materials, shortfalls in industrial output, underutilised capacity in consumer goods industries, stagnant or declining rates of public investment, and diversion of scarce foreign exchange for imports of foodgrains and raw materials.'[8] Such a situation is not easy to conceive today. And her prediction that India was likely to 'return to a low-level equilibrium in which growth rates did not significantly exceed the rate of population increase' was proved false in the 1980s itself.[9]

India has during the last few years entered a period of high economic growth and is on the way to becoming an important global economic power. As such it is bound to play a major role in the world economy of the twenty-first century.

Economic Problems and Dangers

All the same the economic problems that India is yet to solve are enormous. It is likely to face major new challenges in the next few years. India is still a poor and backward country by world standards, and the economic gap vis-à-vis the advanced capitalist countries has widened instead of narrowing. This is especially true of the technological gap between the two. Despite the long strides Indian economy has taken, it still does not manage to fully satisfy the basic needs of all of its people, what to speak of their aspirations, in part because of the skewed income distribution.

Nor is India's economic independence irreversible. We are living in a world capitalist system which is utterly unequal and still divided into core and peripheral countries. The world system even now consists of competing sovereign states and national economies; and the core, developed countries do everything to maintain their privileged position in the world economy, while trying to weaken still further the relative position of the states and economies of the periphery. India's economic development, though independent so far, has not reached that stage where its economy, because of being incorporated into and integrated with the world capitalist system, no longer faces the danger of re-peripheralization, that is, subordination and subservience to the core

economies.

Under Nehru and Indira Gandhi it was attempted to bridge the gap between India and the advanced countries by concentration on heavy industry and electricity generation. This was a necessary task for India had to compress in a few decades what Europe had achieved in more than 150 years. But while we were running to catch up with the past, the present was moving into the future in the advanced parts of the world. While the vision and the objectives of the Nehru era —that of catching up with the Western world while being self-reliant and retaining economic independence and on that basis building a more egalitarian and just society—have to continue to inspire the Indian people, the means and goals of technological transformation have to undergo a change. The world economy has entered a new, momentous phase. Application of science to industry, agriculture, trade and communication has taken another leap forward.

Today, economic development or the fourth industrial revolution is based on microchip, biotechnology, information technology, new sources of energy and advanced managerial techniques. All these rely overwhelmingly on the development of intellect or what may be described as 'brain-power' or the developed scientific, technical, managerial and other intellectual capacities of the citizens. There is every danger that there may be a new international division of labour where advanced technology, research and development and other 'brain' activities would get concentrated in currently advanced or core countries while India and other underdeveloped and developing countries would be confined to production of traditional consumer and producers' goods and to 'muscle and nerves' activities.

The danger of peripheralization also takes the form of domination through the investment of financial or industrial capital. But, obviously, not all foreign capital investment poses this danger. Indian economy, the Indian capitalist class and the Indian state have reached a stage where they can definitely take in a certain quantum of foreign capital, especially to serve the dual purposes of absorption of technology and organizational structures and skills and provide a degree of competition to indigenous entrepreneurs, private or state. What India has to avoid is the pattern of Latin American-style dependent development where the multinational corporations control key economic sectors and positions and determine the predominant patterns of internal production and international exchange. There is the great danger that though foreign capital investment would result in industrial development it would simultaneously perpetuate technological backwardness relative to the advanced capitalist countries. While some industries of the earlier phases or even of the latest phase of industrial revolution would be transferred to India, the advanced 'brain' activities would largely continue to be kept out of it and would remain the monopoly of the core, that is, advanced countries. While there is a need to moderate our former hostility to foreign capital, the policy of controlling its direction and role has to be continued.

Because the latest phase of the Industrial Revolution is based on brain activity, education, especially higher education, acquires great significance. However, its quality and not merely its spread is important. The fact that the education imparted to the overwhelming majority of students in rural as well as urban areas is of extremely low quality means that the country is deprived of the vast potential of its brain-power. In fact, this weakness may be described as internal brain drain. The task of renovating the utterly insufficient and defective educational

system, therefore, acquires added urgency. Any populist effort, in its many guises, to neglect the quality of education has to be opposed, for the cost of neglect in this sphere is as great as the neglect of machine-making and other capital goods industries in the earlier periods.

For various reasons, India has been subjected to large-scale brain drain to the US and Europe. Ways and means have to be found to prevent and reverse this trend. More than NRI (nonresident Indian) capital we need the NRIs physically back in India; and we have to find ways to somehow check the continuing outflow.

Planning and an active role of the state in economic development, including the role of the public sector in production, still retain their great significance for without them India cannot hope to compete in the new technology sector. However, the public sector has to be made more productive through the more efficient use of resources and competition with the private sector. It also needs to be freed from the stranglehold of political patronage and the ill-fitting and incompetent bureaucracy.

The Areas of Darkness

Wide prevalence of poverty, inequality and social injustice and the poor quality of life of the vast majority of the people are the major areas of darkness in India's social and economic development. The Indian people enter the twenty-first century with a low per capita income, an intolerable level of illiteracy and a lowly position on the world index of human resource development, despite commendable achievements in terms of economic growth and political democracy. A change in the social and economic condition of the people has occurred since independence but at too slow a rate.

Putting forward the social objectives of planning before parliament in 1954, Jawaharlal Nehru had said:

> We are starting planning for the 360 million human beings in India . . . What do the 360 million people want? . . . it is obvious enough that they want food; it is obvious enough that they want clothing, that they want shelter, that they want health . . . I suggest that the only policy that we should have in mind is that we have to work for the 360 million people; not for a few, not for a group but the whole lot, and to bring them up on an equal basis.[10]

When placing the Second Five Year Plan before parliament, Nehru defined socialist society as a 'society in which there is equality of opportunity and the possibility for everyone to live a good life'.[11] These objectives have been only partially fulfilled. A humane, egalitarian and just social order has still to come into existence. For too many, 'a good life' is still a pie in the sky.

We have dealt with social injustice and the efforts to overcome it in the chapters on caste and communalism. In the next two sections we will deal with the problems of poverty and the quality of life.

Poverty

Independent India has failed to eradicate poverty despite consistent economic growth in the years since 1947. This is a major blot on its record. Yet, it is also true that though poverty remains, it has been lessened.

In the early 1960s, the Planning Commission formulated the concept of the poverty line. Below this line were people whose consumption, especially of foodgrains, did not come up to a minimum level in terms of calories. While no figures were available for the colonial period or the early years after independence, it was calculated that in 1970–71 nearly 59 per cent of the population was living below the poverty line. Since then, this figure has been steadily going down. It had declined to 51.3 per cent in 1977–78, 44.5 per cent in 1983, 36 per cent in 1993–94, 26.1 per cent in 1999–2000, and 22.1 per cent in 2004–05. The obverse side of these figures is that over 244 million people are still below the poverty line. Moreover, poverty varies across different states, being as high as 42 per cent in Bihar and 9 per cent in Punjab in 2004–05. The main brunt of poverty is borne by landless agricultural labourers, small and marginal farmers and the urban poor.

The reduction in poverty levels was largely the result of various anti-poverty, mostly employment generating, programmes initiated in the mid-1970s by the Indira Gandhi government under the guidance of one of India's finest and socially committed economists, Sukhamoy Chakravarty. These programmes have been pursued more vigorously, though still inadequately financed, since 1984–85. As the figures show, they have had a significant impact despite corruption and the failure to always reach the targeted groups. Particularly effective has been the Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra which has been replicated by an act of parliament all over India from 2006. In this context, it may be pertinent to point out that what made possible the taking up and implementation of the anti-poverty programmes was the radical restructuring of the Indian economy brought about by the Nehruvian planning strategy during the 1950s and 1960s.

Even apart from the proof of the poverty line statistics, it is observed that Indians no longer live in abysmal poverty as they did under colonialism. The mass starvation of that period has been conquered. India has not had a major famine since the Bengal famine of 1943. In the worst drought of the century in 1987–88 very few died of hunger or disease. The same was the experience of the serious droughts of 1965–67 and 1972–73.

Similarly, in the colonial period and the immediate post-independence years a vast number of Indians went without two meals a day, several months in a year, and sometimes without even one meal. A recent study has shown that the number of people who could not obtain two square meals a day had dropped to 19 per cent of the households in 1983 and to less than 5 per cent in 1994.[12]

The reduction in the incidence of poverty is also indicated by the greater availability of foodgrains and other food items over the years. For example, per capita foodgrain consumption had fallen by over 24 per cent between 1901 and 1941; it increased from 394.9 grams per day in 1951 to 462.7 grams per day in 2002—an overall increase of 28 per cent. This growth in availability is also evident in the case of several other items of consumption. The annual

availability of cloth per head was 9 metres in 1950, 15 metres in 1960 and 31.4 metres in 2002–03. The table presents the picture of annual per head availability of certain other important articles of consumption.

Year	*Edible oils (kg)*	*Vanaspati (kg)*	*Sugar (kg)*	*Tea (gm)*	*Coffee (gm)*	*Electricity Domestic (kWh)*
1955	2.5	0.7	5.0	362.0	67.0	2.4
1975	3.5	0.8	6.1	446.0	62.0	9.7
2002	7.2	1.4	16.3	670.0	55.0	79.0

Similarly, from 1950 to 2005 production of milk increased by nearly six times, from 17 million tonnes to 97.1 million tonnes, and milk availability per capita increased from 124 grams per day to 241 grams. Production of eggs increased in the same period by more than twenty-four times from 1,832 million to 46,231 million, and fish more than nine times from 0.7 million tonnes to 6.7 million tonnes.

Still, the incidence of poverty and especially endemic undernourishment, particularly among children, is very much there, though not stark hunger or utter destitution, except among the very old and the handicapped. A dent in poverty has been made, though it is not deep enough.

The problem of poverty has been further compounded by the existence of glaring inequality, social and economic. While the poor have not become poorer and have derived some benefit from economic growth, the gap between them and the rich has grown before our very eyes. The fruits of this growth and the resulting significant rise in national income have been disproportionately gathered by a few belonging to the upper and to a certain extent middle layers of society. Maldistribution of income, opportunities and power has been, moreover, built into the very social and class structure of the country. With the onset of liberalization of the economy and economic development on the basis of 'the animal spirits of the capitalists', inequality is likely to grow unless counter-steps are taken, even if economic development is somewhat hurt.

Q uality of Life

Even apart from the problem of poverty, the quality of life of the masses in India is another major area of neglect as their physical and social needs have not been met even to a minimally desired level. Some progress has been made in this respect but it has been tardy and inadequate. India has been quite weak in the all-round transformation of human conditions. Its record is quite dismal when compared even with that of the other developing countries. In the latest index of human development, another name for the measurable parts of the quality of life, compiled by

the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 2004, India occupies the 126th position among the 177 nations covered.

Quality of life encompasses certain immeasurable components, such as love, human relationships, appreciation of arts, music, literature. But progress or lack of it in some of its other components can be measured. We will first take up three of these pertaining to health and education—life expectancy at birth, infant mortality rate (IMR) and literacy—which are most commonly used in discussions on the subject.

A comparison of the post-independence record in these fields with that of the colonial period shows that India's performance has been quite creditable during the last five decades. This despite the fact that health and education are two areas which have received low priority from successive central and state governments in India. However, a very brief comparison of the statistical progress made by some other countries such as China and Sri Lanka reveals how far we are lagging behind in regard to these important areas and what we still have to achieve.

An Indian's life expectancy at birth which was 32 years in 1950 rose to 45.6 years in 1970 and to 63.6 years in 2004—very creditable indeed. But it was already 71.9 and 74.3 years in 2004 in China and Sri Lanka respectively. The rise in life expectancy in India was basically the result of the steep fall in death rate per 1,000 from 27.4 in 1940 to 14.9 in 1970 and 7.6 in 2005.

IMR rate per 1,000 live births which was 227 in 1941 had fallen to 130 in 1970 and to 58 in 2005. However, it was much lower for China (36) and Sri Lanka (12) in 2004. Another sad fact observed is that too many women still die in India during childbirth. The current maternity mortality rate per 100,000 live births in India is as high as 407 compared to 58 in China and 92 in Sri Lanka. One reason for this is that 60 per cent of all childbirths in rural India are still attended to only by untrained persons.

Perhaps India's biggest failure is the continuation of high illiteracy rates among its people. In 1950, nearly 82 per cent Indians were illiterate; this figure was still as high as 35.1 per cent in 2004. The comparative figures for China and Sri Lanka were already as low as 17.1 and 9.3 per cent respectively in 1997. Moreover, the gender gap in the case of literacy was astonishingly high in India, nearly twice as many women being illiterate as men.

As has been shown in earlier chapters, India's record in higher and technical education is far better. Also, there has been rapid expansion of school education in the last fifteen years with an increase in the percentage of school-age children going to school. The flip side is the deterioration in the quality of education in the case of both schools and institutions of higher education in recent years. With rare exceptions the system of public education has become virtually dysfunctional with the 'cooperation' of all concerned—the government, political parties, educational administrators, teachers, parents and students. The standard of rural schools has fallen so low that quite often a child who has spent five years in school is not able to read or write at all and is, at the most, able to write only his or her name, if even that.

Health care, especially in rural areas, is another area of human development that has been grossly neglected in the last fifty years. Large number of Indians do not have access to safe water supply, health services or sanitation. Forty-seven per cent of Indian children under five are

underweight, though this ratio has been declining in the last few years. The bright spot in this respect is the great success of the programmes for the immunization of children against polio, tuberculosis, diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough and eradication of smallpox.

As in the case of education, in the field of public health too, the quality of services provided is quite poor in most states, especially in the Hindi belt.

The housing situation shows improvement in rural areas of India where the number of pucca houses has increased dramatically, but it has been deteriorating in urban areas, with millions being homeless and living on pavements or in jhuggis (shanties), unprotected from sun, rain or cold and with hardly any provision for water, electricity or sanitation. Even otherwise, Indian cities have been declining in regard to many aspects of the quality of life—sanitation, housing, transport, electric supply, schooling.

Also, there is very low consumption, especially in rural areas, of goods which make life easier and more joyful: scooters and motorcycles, radios, electric fans, room coolers, telephones, televisions, electric or gas or even coal chullahs, refrigerators, washing machines, though their use is way above that at the time of independence.

On the other hand, the number of towns and villages electrified has expanded rapidly since 1950. In 2006, 86.2 per cent of the rural and almost all the urban households, except jhuggis, had acquired electric connections. Electricity generation went up from 5.1 billion kilowatt hours (kWh) in 1950 to 617 billion kWh in 2006. Indians, both rural and urban, have also acquired greater access to media and entertainment: newspapers, magazines, films, music and television.

The prevalence of large-scale under- and unemployment in India also has a highly adverse impact on the quality of life and not only at the level of physical existence. Economic development has failed to create enough jobs in industry and services to make a serious impact on the unemployment of the landless and the rural and urban educated, thus introducing serious psychological, social and economic disequilibrium in their lives.

We may make a few other observations. Both in terms of development and poverty and the quality of life, there exists a great deal of disparity between different states and among their sub-regions which has to be rectified. An improvement in the quality of life or in the indices of human development would invariably require the state to play a more active role in the social sector than before.

Agricultural labourers and marginal and small peasants, with no or small patches of land and increasingly unable to get employment, are the most deprived section of Indian society in all aspects of the quality of life and standard of living. They suffer more than others from poverty and disease and lack of education, housing, health facilities, protected water supply, sanitation, electricity, and cultural and entertainment facilities. They are also likely to be the victims of the most vicious caste discrimination and caste oppression. They are also least organized in class organizations and least involved in political processes.

Promises to Keep

No doubt we still have 'promises to keep and miles to go . . .' We still face the challenges of poverty, disease, illiteracy, inequality, social backwardness, and gender and caste discrimination and oppression. But there is no ground for pessimism or resignation, for frustration or lack of pride. Many of our current problems are the outcome of the tremendous changes we have undergone and not because of regression or stagnation. Despite many maladies and shortfalls, India has impressive achievements to its credit in the economic and political arenas. It has made significant progress towards social justice. As a result of economic development and transformation of the agricultural and industrial production base of society during the last half century, India has now the resources to further its social agenda. The earlier debate whether a poor society could pursue social justice is no longer relevant. There is no longer any need to counterpoise increase in production and productivity to the removal of poverty and better distribution of wealth and opportunities. Nehru's dilemma about how to combine development with equity has also disappeared, for we can now achieve this. It would, therefore, not be wrong to expect and to predict that in the next decade or so India is likely to make immense progress, to almost take a leap forward, in transforming the lives of the mass of the people and give them a decent standard of living.

The major reason for our optimism lies in our belief that a vibrant democracy can find a solution for these problems. Women, the rural poor and the oppressed have increasingly come to believe that a better, more humane life is possible. They have woken up to the political power that inheres in them. India's democratic political system, despite many weaknesses, provides them the framework in which to exercise that power. The power of the people in a democracy is the 'liberating deluge' that can, and we are sure will, sweep away the accumulated dirt of the ages. This is, of course, all the more reason for the preservation and deepening of democracy in India.