We are never contemporary with our present. History advances in disguise. It appears on stage wearing the mask of the preceding scene…

– Regis Debray

Introduction

Sixty-six years after independence, India is not the country it was in 1947. Our geography has remained more or less static since partition, but our demography has changed drastically, altering all ratios such as mouths to feed, jobs to be created, housing needs and natural resources to share, especially land and water.

Nothing is the same. Yet we all too often hear nostalgic references to the past, especially with reference to the environment.

The exponential growth of numbers has not merely been quantitative but qualitative. At the commencement of the first Five-year Plan in 1950, no more than 50 million elite lived in a modernising, industrialising and largely urban India, while the vast majority of 300 million others resided in the traditional and largely agrarian recesses of Bharat. With education, communications development and social change, maybe 500 million live in ‘India’ today while over 700 million inhabit ‘Bharat’. Millions graduate from Bharat to India every year, but especially during general elections that are greatly empowering political and social mega-convocations.

There is another qualitative difference: the country’s astonishing diversity lends it richness and hybrid vigour. This has gradually telescoped into a larger sense of ‘Indianness’ without necessarily affecting pride in ancient identities and heritage. Thus, it is difficult to define emerging India in simple categories despite visible convergences.

This upwelling from below of newly empowered cohorts has necessarily resulted in new political formations giving rise to coalitions as the alternative to former single-party dominance. This is a natural progression and the fact that intelligent persons should baulk at the rise of local and regional parties betrays a deplorable lack of understanding of the nation’s social dynamics. This phenomenon will

Box 1: India in 2035

India is no longer an agrarian society, though a slight majority still lives in the countryside. Manufacturing contributes more to GDP than farming, with services accounting for the largest share. Agriculture can no longer absorb growing numbers as farm holdings shrink under population pressure. Greater agricultural production has to come from increased productivity and better land and water management. In another 20 years, India will be a predominantly urban society, which it already is in some regions. All children should be in school by then. But there will be no demographic dividend unless jobs and skills multiply.

The urban configuration will change. Mega-city peripheries will cease to be noisome shanty towns sheltering Malthusian refugees. Instead, rural growth centres will multiply as hubs of small and tiny enterprises servicing the countryside and supplying the cities. Urban India will also spawn satellite towns, green cities along radial axes with rapid connectivity. This is already happening. The east-west railway corridor, with planned industrial hubs alongside from Punjab to Mumbai via Delhi and Ahmedabad, is the first manifestation of this new ribbon architecture. A national grid of super-highways will perform a similar role. Here is a huge new challenge for well planned urbanisation, with sanitation as a central concern.

All this will happen within a democratic framework. India, uniquely among post-colonial nations, deliberately determined that it would make full-fledged parliamentary democracy the instrument of economic and social transformation and poverty alleviation rather than its end product. The world, and even some in India, scoffed and wondered about what would be the result of this brash experiment, standing history on its head. They have remained to marvel. The Indian elections are a wonder of the world with a vibrant electorate larger and more diverse than that of all of Europe, including Russia, and North America combined.

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maybe take 20 to 30 years to spend itself before a natural process of social aggregation lays the basis for the rise once more of a few dominant political parties.

**Urgency and balance**

No one can get away with the empty promise made to Oliver Twist of ‘jam tomorrow’. Yet few seem to recognise that time is a most precious but wasting resource. Critics or busybodies, as many of them are, demand more and still more time for ‘democratic’ consultation and review in the market place instead of getting on smartly with the job through due constitutional process.

The nation needs to add ten million jobs per annum, or 100 million jobs over the next decade, just to keep pace with the annual growth in the labour force commensurate with population increase. That is a stupendous task by any yardstick, anywhere.

Where are these jobs to come from? National Sample Survey studies indicate dwindling numbers among mainline farmers. Marginal farmers are leasing in land where they can to make up more economic holdings, or selling their land and, with the landless, migrating to the big city in search of gainful employment. Studies done around the time of the Singur-Nano controversy in Bengal suggested that the first priority from sale of land was education of the children to give them a better chance in life and, thereafter, investment in self-employment.

A small-scale industrial sector is not going to be enough to stimulate and sustain high growth and exports so essential to generate the wherewithal to invest in uplifting the poor and alleviating poverty. For this the country needs to expand and upgrade its limited, creaking infrastructure – the railways, highways, power plants, ports, telecommunications, irrigation systems, cities, water supply and sanitation systems, and educational and health facilities. This in turn is going to require further and more efficient exploitation of natural resources such as land, water, minerals and forests, while not ignoring the need for conservation and sustainability. The key consideration here is balance.

Poverty has been the worst polluter.

**Land**

Like all development since the beginning of time, this requires changing land use patterns through land acquisition. With colonial principles of eminent domain yielding to participative development, resident communities legitimately claim stakeholder rights apart from fair, even generous, compensation and resettlement for involuntary displacement. India has been on a learning curve in these matters and past default cannot be reason to veto ongoing and future development through stubborn defiance or insistence on totally unreasonable demands.

It is routine to hear demands of land-for-land as compensation. There is less and less land available or, in some cases, none at all. Equally, people increasingly want to get off the land to better their economic and cultural lives. Yet the cry remains ‘land for land’ which, translated, means imprisoning people in a past from which they seek escape and emancipation.

It is as sad to see project clearance all too often become a long drawn out battle with final approval taking five, six, eight or ten years to obtain after second thoughts, litigation, retrospective application of regulatory laws, delays in framing of rules, violent protests, divergent interpretation of agreements, much back and forth on safety and impacts, consequent project reviews and so forth.

The giant 12 million tonne POSCO steel project, with mines, transport links and a captive port to be built with South Korean collaboration in Orissa, has been pending for years on grounds of displacement, compensation, and scepticism about local employment and ancillary arrangements. Land acquisition for it has just been completed, after eight years! Costs have meanwhile multiplied and benefits postponed. Who gains? In the case of the twin Vedanta bauxite mine-cum-alumina project, continued production at the current one-million tonne alumina plant at Lanjigarh, Orissa, is threatened by delayed clearances for bauxite supply even as the licence to mine bauxite at the nearby Niyamgiri site has been cancelled.

**Energy**

There has always been an anti-nuclear and nuclear power lobby in India. Following the tsunami that damaged the Fukushima power plant in Japan in 2011, local protestors, joined by ideologues, have continued their highly emotional agitation with reinforced zeal against the Kudankulam project, being built with Russian collaboration. Plant failure in tsunami-like situations, possible radiation leaks, loss of livelihoods, damage to fisheries by discharge into the ocean of return coolant water outflows at temperatures of up to seven degrees Celsius, and less than generous R&R have been variously pleaded. These fears and allegations have been carefully examined and answered, and safety and monitoring regulations have been tightened. Comparisons with Fukushima have been shown to be mistaken. Yet the agitation has long continued, delaying commissioning of the first of four 1,000 MW units by over a year in a power-starved state like Tamil Nadu. Fortunately, the project has moved forward and Kudankulam power will shortly feed into the grid.

Displacement caused by development, especially dams, is constantly cited. Yet who knows that 30 to 40 million distress migrants, families included, tramp the country annually in search of any seasonal work they can find for lack of development. Project displaced persons benefit from planned R&R. But distress migrants get nothing. They are ‘nowhere people’ without civic rights left to fend for themselves, human flotsam and jetsam. Who cares?
Approximately 80 to 90 per cent of India’s mineral, forest and headwater wealth (south of the Himalaya) is located in Fifth Schedule areas that are constitutionally empowered to provide tribal people a protective shield to develop at their own pace. The Fifth Schedule has however long been disregarded, even discarded, without a murmur of protest or concern at this gross violation of the human and constitutional rights of the tribal people. There is increasingly in place a new framework of law and administrative safeguards, vigilant NGOs and an alert media to monitor compliance and ensure against excesses. The Supreme Court’s Samatha judgement of 1997 in an Andhra mining case laid out a scheme of corporate social responsibility for leaseholders on tribal lands that has become a benchmark today. We must build on that.

Conclusion
Can high growth and more growth continue forever? As it is, the competition for natural resources is becoming unsustainable. Bhutan strives to maximise gross national happiness instead of gross national product. A blue ribbon commission under Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz, set up by former President Sarkozy of France after the Wall Street-led global financial meltdown in 2009–10, also suggested abandoning GDP as the ultimate measure of success. Instead it urged adoption of a new human welfare index that included yardsticks like culture, leisure, health and a pollution-free atmosphere.

Should India and China aspire to American living standards, the world would not be able to sustain the burden. Why then even try? The aim should be balanced growth with more public consumption than wasteful private consumption: public transport, public housing and so on. Pedestrianisation, higher vehicular taxes, congestion and time of day fees, and better public transport should be the aim if we are to reduce automobile pressure. This would call for new town and spatial planning models.

Panchayati raj or decentralised local governance would enhance participation and accountability and smaller states and districts would be a logical corollary making for more effective co-operative federalism.

India must move not merely with but ahead of the times to be contemporary with the present. With systemic and structural reform, it needs also to move more purposefully on a third front – building fraternity. Dr Ambedkar always said that without fraternity, liberty and equality would not be sustainable. Events have proven him right. Most of our current ills – caste and gender discrimination, communal stress, Maoism, language and identity differences – stem from derogation of fraternity, a larger idea than secularism that has usurped its place. Outdated social structures inhibit progress and change. National integration demands equal opportunity and cultural freedom and not a straitjacket framework based on any narrow political theology. India is in transition: beware the perils of nostalgia.

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