

BOOK REVIEW

INDIA—A CULTURAL DECLINE OR REVIVAL?

Bharat Gupt

New Delhi: D K Printworld, pp 236, 2008

CÔME CARPENTIER DE GOURDON

Bharat Gupt throws an original light on the vast and controversial subject of “India—A Cultural Decline or Revival”. He is a rare bird among Hindu nationalist scholars—a Hellenist by training who teaches English Literature. Thus, he cannot be suspected of the chauvinism that leaves many “right wing” Hindu intellectuals open to charges of being ill-informed about other civilisations and lacking objectivity as a result.

Gupt starts by attacking the generally uncontested premise that India has achieved cultural and social freedom together with political independence and that the country enjoys the West’s admiration for its ancient and modern achievements. Thus, he questions the self-satisfaction that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) often evinced during its term in power and submits to the contrary that India is on a declining course, at least as far as its native civilisation is concerned. Gupt partly faults the type of atheistic Fabian

socialism that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first and longest serving prime minister adopted, while acknowledging that other factors are also at work. Indeed he takes the BJP and other Hindu nationalist parties to task for indulging in cultural tokenism—displayed in the feud over the Ayodhya Ram Mandir—and pseudo-secularism for short-term electoral ends. He points out, “this is not the age of territorial invasion, it is an age of cultural invasion and subversion”.

Gupt then enumerates three major forces arrayed against India—commercial globalism, *jihadi* Islamic imperialism (mainly from Pakistan) and Evangelical Christianity (mainly from English speaking countries). He accordingly proposes to identify and utilise the country’s cultural assets to protect it from those threats. Taking a leaf from the *Mahabharata*, he sets out to consider one after the other six expanding units that make up the Indian traditional universe, namely the individual, the family, the village or urban community, the country, the world as a whole and the soul or spirit.

Gupt is exceptionally perceptive when he points out that much of the entropy that affects the Hindu–Indian cultural space is caused by the neglect of traditional oral and aural techniques of

transmission and representation (including the plastic and representational arts). This according to him is a consequence of the supremacy of the written and printed word—a legacy of the British colonial presence—that has made official “post-colonial” Indian education and society “bookish, intellectual, sceptical and agnostic”, indeed, leftist in the Marxist sense. However, that supposedly modern materialistic culture has not kept pace with the latest developments in science and ecological awareness and has remained ideologically stuck in the first half of the last century. Conversely, attempts have been made in various quarters to “semitise” Hinduism by adapting precepts, rules and uniform practices inspired by Abrahamic religions and those attempts at reform have generally done a disservice to the genius of the native civilisation in its diversity and flexibility.

While advocating a revival of at least some of the sixty-four arts known in Ancient and Medieval India with the remark that “theatre, dance, painting and music are the best instruments of personality development for children”, he does not subscribe to the programme espoused by Hindu parties for the teaching of Samskrt by rote at school

for six or seven years. This imposition he believes will make the subject-matter unpopular while keeping the language alienated from daily life usage and irrelevant to most career goals. Instead, he proposes to bring to all levels, from primary school to college, original and translated versions of classical texts in a way that makes them attractive and relevant to students’ daily experiences.

Guided by the same practical considerations, Gupta points out that the mobilisation promoted by Hindu nationalist champions to prevent or reverse conversions to Christianity or Islam is generally ineffective and ill-advised as it resorts to legal means and sometimes to intimidation, which do not work in matters of individual conscience. As an alternative, he proposes the re-evaluation and rejuvenation of Hindu culture to replace the currently enforced form of secularism, which he says is only “watered down Westernisation”. He urges, “More creation (*mandana*), than refutation (*khandana*)”, adding, “if the deeper springs of religions and social beliefs are not studied, dilated and analysed, measures to keep the adherents of these faiths in harmony are not going to succeed”. Gupta’s vision of the right kind of secularism, which he calls “radical” is

an “active engagement in imparting the basic tenets of all faiths in the world”, as opposed to atheism or theophobia, too often present among militant secularists.

There are many judicious practical suggestions in this book that deserve to be earmarked, such as Gupt’s submission that “the state is obliged to support but not to define education”, thereby leaving greater freedom and initiative to the dispensers of knowledge. He believes that reserving seats in the elite primary public schools for deserving poor pupils, irrespective of their caste or creed could largely eliminate the need for reservations in universities, which are mostly granted on communal grounds and not, as they should be, on economic considerations.

Deploring the criminalisation of the economy and politics—consequence of the current national “culture of hypocrisy”—the author rightly notes that until and unless a new ethic is adopted “the degradation ... will not go away with the coming of any other kind of liberalised post-socialist economy” as can be observed in the present situation. Hence, he wonders whether this present India, which combines “feudal obsequiousness and modern populism”, has evolved into a senile culture. These are harsh words but the allegation needs

to be analysed in the light of current developments, which confirm the permanence of a sclerotic caste system harnessed for political ends—on the model of American ethnic communalism—and the sacrifice of merit to tokenism or seniority. Gupt’s opinion also shows that being an outspoken nationalist need not make one blind to the shortcomings of one’s culture or society.

Of particular interest is the book’s attempt to define a specifically Indian concept of nationhood devoid of the mainly linguistic and alphabetic foundations of Western (or Chinese) nationalism. Indian South Asia, even in remote times, was inhabited by people who spoke different languages, often concurrently without calling any their mother tongue. Successive waves of settlers and invaders only added to that polyglot tapestry without notably affecting a civilisational unity, which he argues, “is beyond the grasp of modern secular notions of citizenship and state”. The British changed that state of affairs for their own colonial ends and Gupt justly fears the perverse effects of a narrow imported form of nationalism, which he wryly observes, “like older technology, is now for the consumption of poorer nations” and may lead to the

further breakup of an already divided subcontinent. However, he is also aware of the pitfall of what seems to be the modern alternative—a “hyper-internationalism”, which he suggests is but another kind of covert Americanism.

The most apt conclusion for the book is perhaps the author’s proposal for evolving a new cultural anthropology for global harmony, based on a “fresh theory of cultural comparison and exchange”. In Samskrt, he recalls, his concept equates to *samvada*—a way to harmonise differences within a pluralism acknowledging that separate identities “are meaningful only as long as they interact”.

FOREIGN POLICIES OF INDIA’S PRIME MINISTERS

Harish Kapur, (New Delhi: Lancer, pp 444, 2009)

RENE WADLOW

Harish Kapur, emeritus professor at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, has written three recent books on Indian diplomacy: *India’s Foreign Policy 1947–1992*, *Diplomacy of India: Then and Now* and *Diplomatic Journey: Emerging India*.

His new book details the role of Indian prime ministers in setting out the goals, strategies and day-to-day execution of foreign policy. Each prime minister is discussed in chronological order, with Indira Gandhi and A B Vajpayee having two chapters each since they held the post twice.

As Kapur notes “The personality factor is being increasingly recognised as a crucial dimension in foreign policy making, perhaps as crucial as the established institutions ... It is thus increasingly argued that to understand the foreign policy of a nation, it is necessary to understand the decision maker, his background, his education, his perceptions, his biases and prejudices, etc; for they all are, in many ways, vital inputs responsible for a decision”. Kapur combines a use of archival documentation with interviews of prime ministers, foreign secretaries, and high level officials of the Foreign ministry and the prime minister’s secretariat.

India began its independent life with Jawaharlal Nehru as prime minister — a man educated for leadership with wide experience in Europe in the 1930s where he met others, active in the anti-colonial struggle and who were to play important roles in their countries. With his close friend Krishna Menon, who shared a

similar background, Nehru had a vision of the high profile role that India could play in world politics. He had a free hand in setting foreign policy goals and in creating a diplomatic style. There was no counter-weight to Nehru's views neither in the foreign ministry nor in parliament, and Nehru chose ambassadors who carried out his wishes. It was only after the 1962 frontier conflict with China that critical voices were raised in parliament and the press that Nehru had not been vigilant enough about the Chinese menace. Nehru died in 1964 before he could reverse this image of defeat for India.

Kapur deals with each prime minister's decision-making on issues concerning the structures of world politics and India's more visible neighbours—Pakistan, China, Bangladesh (after 1972), Sri Lanka, Nepal and Burma. He also analyses the role in the decision-making process of the foreign ministry, the prime minister's secretariat, informal but sometimes influential advisors, even household members such as Sanjay Gandhi during Indira Gandhi's first government.

There is always a broader world structure which has an impact on domestic politics regardless of the skills of a prime minister. There have been two

major shifts in the world political structure since the independence of India and thus two prime ministers had to set their policies against the background of major reordering of world society. It is interesting to contrast the history and style of the two: Jawharlal Nehru (1947–64) and P V Narasimha Rao (1991–96).

Nehru faced the first violent clash of the USA–USSR Cold War with the 1950–53 Korean War, which many feared was the forerunner of a broader armed conflict, especially in Asia as the French-led conflict in Vietnam was underway at the same time. The civil war in China had just ended, but the future of the Chinese Nationalist government on Taiwan was unclear. The Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950 was a potentially destabilising factor. The world situation called for neutral, non-aligned mediators for at the time no one could predict how stable the bi-polar world system was to become.

Nehru rose to the challenge, and India was able to play a mediator role in the Korean conflict, especially dealing with the contentious prisoner-of-war issue as well as proposing compromise formulas during the 1954 Geneva Conference on Indo–China. After the 1953 death of Stalin, the Soviet Union

seemed more stable in its policies and Nehru was able to play an important role in the creation of a non-aligned group of countries, a policy followed by his successors.

India during the 1950s played an important role in United Nations agencies and was considered “the voice of Asia”—all the more so that the communist government of China did not hold the China seat in the UN. Many people outside India looked to Nehru for leadership, and his physical bearing and sophistication enhanced his image.

P V Narasimha Rao came to centre stage as the Cold War bi-polar world ended with the break up of the Soviet Union, the end of Soviet influence in much of Eastern Europe and the end of the appeal of the Marxist–Communist ideology. Narasimha Rao came to power after the short-lived governments of V P Singh and Chandra Shekhar, neither of whom prepared India for a post Cold War world, although Singh had the advantage of having I K Gujral as his foreign minister. Gujral had earlier been ambassador to Moscow and understood the changes taking place. However, as Kapur writes “Singh’s personality also did not lend itself to playing an assertive role. Though some have characterised him as ‘a sycophantic careerist’ and ‘the former

courtier of the Gandhis’, he was generally perceived as a mild mannered, incorruptible and highly principled person who believed in governance by consensus, and who is known to have delegated authority and respected institutions that had been established”.

Thus it fell to Narasimha Rao to deal with the new world structure while as he faced a difficult domestic socio-economic situation and that too without the domestic political support that Nehru had enjoyed. Fortunately, as Kapur points out, “He was one of those few Prime Ministers who was savvy in international affairs since he had often held posts of Foreign Minister under the Gandhis even if they did not use him optimally”. In the new world structure, India faced very real difficulties. India’s non-alignment had become dependent on the Soviet Union and the new Russian leadership, especially Boris Yeltsin was more concerned with relations with Western Europe and the USA. As Kapur writes, “India’s other relations were also on the decline: the interaction with the non-aligned world had become disarranged, the North—South negotiations had virtually stopped and the wax and waning Indo—US relations were in a state of flux with Rao apprehensive of how Washington was

going to react, now that it was virtually on the top of the world and was busy reflecting on the post-war configuration of international forces”.

Narasimha Rao undertook to restructure India in three fundamental ways. The first was economically. As Kapur notes “During the five years of his mandate, he deregulated the economy loosened state control autarkic system, opened up to the world economically, and encouraged the private economy to go forward”. In this he could depend on the support and leadership of his Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, who had an important role in both domestic and international economic affairs.

The second lasting re-structuring concerned relations with the major external powers: Russia, China, USA and the European Union. The continental European countries had never figured in an important way in India’s foreign policy considerations. However, with the new open economic policy, issues of trade, technology and investments with Europe became important aspects of foreign policy.

The third re-structuring concerned the nuclear sector. Kapur writes, “Rao was indeed faced with a difficult and troublesome international environment

when he became Prime Minister. The *de facto* strategic alliance with Moscow, that had hitherto guaranteed India’s security, was in shambles. The Indo–Soviet link, for long perceived as central to Indian diplomatic behaviour, had become history. And, China, its big neighbour, had gained nuclear superpower status, with implicit US acceptance, thus generating deep Indian resentment that China was taken more seriously than India. Worse were Pakistani pretensions, which had been claiming—unofficially since 1987 and officially since 1992—that it possessed all the components of a nuclear bomb, and the knowhow to assemble one ... Though Rao never conducted the nuclear test, there appears to exist a general consensus of opinion that it was he who had really operationalised the nuclear programme. Vajpayee, who carried out the nuclear test, declared after Rao’s death, that it was Rao who was really the father of the country’s nuclear programme”.

As Nehru had developed a diplomatic policy to respond to the world structure of the late 1940s, so Narasimha Rao responded to the new challenges. Nehru’s policies were largely followed by his successors though their personalities differed and the

administrative structures to carry out the policies were more institutionalised. Likewise the foreign policies of Rao have been carried on by Vajpayee, Gujral and Manmohan Singh.

As Kapur sums up, “The main thrust of this study is that the decisional process is contingent on two factors: the dimension of the Prime Minister’s intellectual interest in foreign affairs, and the nature of his real power within the political system. Prime Ministers, who have personal interest and fascination for international affairs, and who have not been sapped by coalition politics, have invariably arrogated to themselves the whole process, ably supported by their

advisers centred in and around the Prime Minister’s Secretariat ... On the other hand, in the case of Prime Ministers, who have no intellectual interest in foreign affairs, and who are politically debilitated by coalition politics, the whole decisional process results in decentralisation, and in the diffusion of the whole process, with different institutions having a greater role to play”.

Fortunately for India, at the two moments when the world society was at the start of major structural changes, there were prime ministers who saw the challenges and responded appropriately. ❧