



Foreign Policy Research Institute

FOOTNOTES

Vol. 11, No. 3

The Newsletter of the Marvin Wachman Fund for International Education

June 2006

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW ABOUT INDIA

A History Institute Presentation

by Ainslie T. Embree

Ainslie T. Embree is professor emeritus at Columbia University. This essay is based on his presentation to the History Institute for Teachers held in Chattanooga, March 11-12, 2006. The conference was sponsored by FPRI's Marvin Wachman Fund for International Education, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga's Asia Program, and the University of Pennsylvania South Asia Center, and made possible by a grant from the Annenberg Foundation.

Fifty years ago, when I began teaching American students about India, I would probably have begun a lecture on why it's important for Americans to know about India rather defensively and apologetically. Acknowledging the lack of interest at that time in India by the U.S. government, military, business world, media, and even academia, I would have argued that because of the greatness of its contributions to civilization in art, literature, history, and religion, India was worthy of sustained attention. That is still true, but changed relations between India and the United States have added a different dimension to the need for knowledge about the nature of Indian society.

Although Yankee clippers continued to make forays to the great ports of British India in the nineteenth century, and indeed into the twentieth century, the only significant American presence came from American church groups, which built some excellent schools, hospitals, and colleges, but these were on the periphery of Indian life. In the United States, Indians and India were even more on the margins. In the 1940s, however, interest in India increased because of the reputation of Mahatma Gandhi in the churches and the pacifist movement. Then came independence in 1947, with partition of British India into India and Pakistan along religious lines. This was accompanied by horrific riots in both countries as Hindu and Muslims attacked each other, providing an enduring image of a region torn by religious strife. This was followed by the beginning of the bitter estrangement between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, with the United States endeavoring, without much success, to follow a neutrality policy. This attempt ended, however, in the 1950s, when the United States, in the search for allies in the Cold War, gave military support to Pakistan, thereby souring relations with India.

During this period, the U.S. saw Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, with his policy of non-alignment, as a friend of the Soviet Union. Although the United States and India were not overtly hostile, the governments, politicians, and the press in both countries were sharply critical of each other's policies, marking the beginning of a long estrangement.

By 1991, however, quite radical changes were beginning in relationships between the two countries in the context of the end of the Cold War, the beginning of globalization, and the violent phenomena lumped together under the rubric of "Islamic terrorism." The dramatic ending of Soviet preeminence in international affairs ushered in more openness on the part of Indian politicians and intellectuals toward the United States. As for globalization, India had during the 1990s moved from a controlled economy towards a much freer market economy, accompanied by a lively interest in foreign investment and in expanding American exports to India. This was a move in a direction that successive American administrations had long urged but over which they had little leverage; the move was almost wholly dependent upon Indian decisions and initiative. Successive Indian administrations had long defined the uprisings in Kashmir as Muslim terrorism, inspired and financed by Pakistan and Afghanistan's Taliban. The Indian press also usually attributed bombings in India itself to Pakistan-financed groups. All of this encouraged more favorable views of the United States.

Three widely hailed public events can serve as markers of the changing climate of Indian opinion. One was the 2000 visit of President Clinton to India, where his extraordinary popularity was evidenced by the enthusiastic reception he received from the Parliament. Building on these warmer relations, in July 2005 Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made a visit to the United States that was heralded in the press and in speeches by the representatives of both countries as a triumphal expression of the enduring friendship that existed between "the world's two greatest democracies." More tangible was the promise by President Bush, according to accounts widely circulated in India, that the United States "would help India become a major world power in the twenty-first century."¹ It is hard to think of any

such promise having been made before by one nation to another. The startling feature was the promise to supply India with nuclear technology, defying not only the NPT, which India has not signed, but also U.S. law, which forbids the exportation of such technology. Politicians and the media in both India and the United States began to speak of the two countries as “natural partners,” sharing democratic and economic interests. Discussions were begun on provisions for joint weapons production, cooperation in missile defense, export of sensitive military technologies from the United States to India, encouragement of U.S. investment in India, and, most important, nuclear cooperation. All of this would have been unthinkable even thirty years ago.

The third moment dramatizing the shift in Indo-U.S. relations came in Spring 2006, when President Bush visited Delhi. He was not invited to address Parliament, as previous presidents had been, but an agreement was reached that moved India and the United States to a new relationship by promising that the United States would supply India nuclear technology, which transfer was forbidden by U.S. law. Proponents of the agreement argued that through nuclear energy, India would be less dependent on oil supplies from the Middle East; that it would become more prosperous, thus becoming an immense market for American goods; and that a stable India would provide stability to the area and lessen the danger of an Indo-Pakistan conflict. An argument frequently heard in the United States, but seldom in India, is that by helping India become a world power, the United States will gain a counterweight to China.

Given these prospects for Indo-U.S. relations, it is surely in our own self-interest to know as much as can about India’s we embark on this momentous journey. A useful starting point is understanding India’s self-definition and self-image. A succinct and authoritative statement is the preamble to India’s Constitution. The Constitution was not imposed upon India by an outside force. It was made by a freely elected Constituent Assembly and was the work of Indian lawmakers, lawyers, and politicians. It was argued point by point in public, and was subject daily to criticism in the newspapers. It is the people’s document. The preamble is a remarkable statement flowing from, above all, India’s historical experience, as well as from the aspirations of the Indian people as they embarked on what Prime Minister Nehru famously called its “tryst with destiny,” and, finally, from the enormous tensions and dangers that existed for the newly independent nation in 1947 and still exist.

The Preamble as adopted in 1949, with amendments made in 1976 (shown here in italics), reads as follows, with words capitalized as in the official version of the document:

We, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN *SOCIALIST SECULAR* DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens: JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity *and integrity* of the Nation.

IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-

sixth day of November, 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION.

The words “unity,” “sovereignty,” “democracy,” “socialism,” “secular,” and “the people” resonate with India’s history and aspirations. They are particularly important for our understanding of India at present. While stated in the Constitution as if they represented the agreed aspirations of the Indian people, in fact, all of them have been fiercely contested in the years since 1947, and are the product of tensions woven into the fabric of Indian social and political life. Importantly, the terms do not necessarily have the same connotations in India as in America. The people of both countries should have a clear recognition that the two countries’ conceptions do not always coincide, despite.

The people. One notes that there is no mention of “God” or “natural rights” or of any blessing by a sacerdotal personage. Instead, “we, the people . . . give to ourselves this constitution.” It is a rejection the rights of kings and rulers, of priests; of special classes. Indians often express surprise that Americans open their legislative sessions with a clergyman of one or another faith praying for God’s blessings on the proceedings. India’s Constitution makes clear that all authority flows from the people: there is no higher power than the people. Furthermore, Americans generally regard religion as a vaguely good thing; Indians are aware how divisive religious commitments can be in a society, undermining the values and aspirations noted in the preamble.

Unity and integrity. Unity was in the original version; integrity was added as an amendment in 1976 with the intent of reinforcing the meaning of unity. The immediate historical context was the increasing sense shared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and some of her ministers that the country was threatened by a variety of forces inimical to its stability, including antagonism between religious groups, which Indians refer to as “communalism.” There were also, she asserted, political forces of home-grown fascism, arising from both rightwing Hindu groups and predatory capitalism. “Hostile foreign powers”—usually unnamed, but everyone knew the United States was meant—were said to pose threats.

But the almost obsessive emphasis on unity has a deeper root that Americans must understand in dealing with India. How nations remember their past determines their present and their future. The first modern histories of India were written by the British and formed the both Indians and foreigners’ understanding of Indian history. At least five emphases stand out in that version of India’s history: (1) the identification of Hinduism as defining the essential nature of Indian civilization; (2) that the country’s political history is a record of political fragmentation caused by internal and incessant internecine warfare; (3) that antagonism between Hindus and Muslims is a permanent feature of Indian social life; (4) that Indian history is characterized by foreign invasion; and (5) that political unity and freedom from communal strife had only occurred when imposed by a strong ruler. The last and most successful of invaders, according to this historiography, the British, had imposed a unity India had never enjoyed before. This was not just the view of British imperialists. President Teddy Roosevelt at the beginning of

the twentieth century stated, "If British control were withdrawn from India, the whole subcontinent would become a chaos of bloodshed and violence. . . . The only beneficiaries among the natives would be the lawless, the violent and the bloodthirsty."²

Democracy. Americans tend to speak of democracy as if it were an ideological concept that all right-thinking people accept, along with a belief in God. In Indian usage it seems to imply acceptance of a system of laws and a legal structures for people to change their leaders. While this low-key understanding does not contemplate promoting democracy abroad, it does give Indians a sense of empowerment that the government belongs to them.

Socialism. Despite all the evidence that India is a capitalist society, its constitutional definition as socialist remains. The word's constitutional meaning has to be sought in two other words in the preamble: "justice" and "equality." Inequality and injustice were hallmarks of social relationships, but humanitarianism and practical common sense told the leaders of the new India that the country could never be a democracy or a modern state unless it did something to assuage to age-old evils of poverty and social injustice. They also recognized that state planning of an industrial economy was necessary. In this rush to modernity, Gandhian ideals remained in humanitarian commitments that united democracy and socialism in a quest for justice and equality.

Secularism. Of all the words of the Preamble, the ideas embodied in this one have been the most contested, not just in intellectual debate, but in outbreaks of murderous violence. The word was not in the original version of the Constitution, having been added in 1976, but the ideas associated with it had been part of political discourse all through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The relevant articles (25-28) in the Constitution declares that all persons are "equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practice and propagate religion." The sticking point was granting the right to propagate one's religion, understood as the right to proselytize. The idea of conversion is repellent to many Hindus on the grounds that it is socially destructive, breaking the bonds of family solidarity and introducing ideas and values that corrupt Indian civilization. Islam and Christianity, on the other hand, both stress that propagation of the faith is an essential command. The Constitution's insistence that the government treat all religions as equal, favoring and supporting none, was offensive to many Hindus, who pointed out that Indian civilization--its art, literature, architecture, philosophy, political thought--were all deeply colored by indigenous roots. To stress the importance of religions in modern India is not to say that Indians are more religious than any other people, but that in declaring India as a secular socialist democracy, the constitution makers were struggling with a number of closely related problems. One was to find unity in India's pluralistic and fragmented society; another was awareness of the communal riots that became increasingly common as India moved toward independence and that were to merge into the horrors of Muslim-Hindu riots that marked the partition of British India into Pakistan and India. During the national movement before independence, religion had become politicized, and politics has often adopted the vocabulary of religion, most notably in Mahatma Gandhi's great appeal and in the

Muslim League's demand for some form of an Islamic state.

Declaring India a secular state was an expression that appealing to religious identity would cease to be a factor in Indian politics, for, as Nehru put it, "the cardinal doctrine of modern democratic practice is the separation of the state from religion." As early as 1926, Nehru, who saw religious ideologies as an impediment to India's progress, had expressed the hope that the passage of time "would scotch our so-called religion and secularize our intelligentsia," lessening the appeal of religion.³

However much religious violence remains a factor in Indian life, it is important for Americans to understand that religiosity, which is so pronounced a feature of public life in the United States and so often appealed to by American politicians, has a sinister undertone of bigotry in Indian national life. A useful reminder in current dealings with India is George Washington's warning of the "horrors of spiritual tyranny." Modern India has experienced such horrors, and declaring itself a secular state was meant to guard against them.

Sovereignty. The assertion of sovereignty in the preamble and elsewhere in the Constitution has two major aspects, one relating to external factors, the other to internal.

External sovereignty carries the idea of freedom from intrusion by outside powers, which is of great historical importance in India because of its past history. This was demonstrated by the care that the prime minister took to assure his people that in the new relations with the United States there is no question of "succumbing to external pressures with regard to foreign policy."⁴ The move towards the United States seemed a rejection of the foreign policy India followed in the era after independence, which was known as non-alignment or neutrality, a refusal for any kind of alliances that would impinge upon India's sovereignty. To the United States, this always seemed a hypocritical policy, as during the Cold War India seemed to be an active Soviet ally, but it probably served India's national interests to keep the focus on India's internal needs. Most observers would now agree that Pakistan, in contrast, suffered from pursuing a policy of active military alliance with the United States. Pakistanis, with understandable chagrin, now see India being favored by the United States in terms of nuclear technology while they are ignored.

Sovereignty was more severely challenged internally than externally because of serious uprisings rooted in demands for self-determination. It was such a demand that brought India its freedom, but when the various declarations of rights by the UN implied that groups within a sovereign nation had the right to self-determination--meaning, the right of secession--India made a vigorous protest that such rights applied only to peoples under foreign domination. "To make it applicable to an existing nation," the Indian delegate to the UN declared, "would undermine the very essence of its integrity."⁵ For this reason, the Indian government has been involved in three bitter struggles by groups demanding self-determination: in Nagaland in the northeast India, in Kashmir in the northwest, and in Punjab below Kashmir. In all three provinces, the leaders of militant uprisings based their demands for autonomy on common historical experience, shared history, territorial contiguity, language,

and religion, all of which they alleged were threatened by oppressive rule of the government of India, which had no legitimate claim to the area. The uprising in Panjab was ended, but with much violence, while in Nagaland, sporadic resistance continues and in Kashmir successive attempts at negotiating a peaceful settlement have broken down through mutual mistrust.

These uprisings have special relevance for the U.S. relationship with India because the Indian government sees the long and violent confrontation with the militant forces in Kashmir as linked with the larger U.S.-led war on terror. The United States also shares strategic interests with India, and possibly the opening of the Indian markets to American business will benefit both sides. India's energy needs are great, and nuclear technology may help it meet these demands. But beyond what is good for India and the United States looms the darker question of whether the nuclear deal, which weakens the already fragile international containment of nuclear proliferation, is good for the world. Many people, including in the United States, see the United States' contributing to advances in Indian nuclear technology as a giant step towards a world where more and more nations are armed with WMD. In the long run, however, a more robust U.S.-Indian relationship could mean not just a more prosperous India, but a United States more constrained in its use of power for preemptive strikes against weaker nations.

Long ago two Americans looked at the possibility of forming a new U.S.-India relationship and imagined good coming from it. One was the Rev. Ezra Stiles, president of Yale University (then Yale College), who in a remarkable address in 1783 entitled "The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor" insisted that the new union of states would become a great nation, because, among other reasons, navigation and commerce would carry the new American flag "around the globe itself, and display the thirteen stripes and new constellation at Bengal and Canton, on the Indus and the

Ganges, on the Whang-ho and the Yangste-Kiang." Our ships would bring back not just material goods, but also "the wisdom and literature of the East." In America this wisdom would be digested and carried to its highest perfection, and then, refined and transformed, their wisdom and ours would "reblaze back from America to Europe, Asia, and Africa and illumine the world with truth and liberty."⁶ That was truly a vision of how the Indo-American relationship might change the world.

Walt Whitman in his famous, enigmatic poem saw both danger and new possibilities in a passage to India:

Passage to more than India! . . .
Sail forth! Steer for the deep waters only! . . .
For we are bound where mariner has yet not dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all . . .
O daring joy, but safe! O farther, farther, farther sail!⁷

*

¹ Harsh Pant, "Natural Partners: US and India engaged, no longer estranged," *Statesman Weekly*, July 30, 2005.

² Quoted in H. W. Brands, *India and the United States: The Cold Peace* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), p. 3.

³ Quoted in Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics India, 1885-1930* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1991), p. 285.

⁴ *Statesman Weekly*, Apr. 22, 2006.

⁵ M. H. Halperin and D. J. Sheffer, *Self-Determination in the New World Order* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment, 1992), pp. 22-23.

⁶ Quoted in Robert McCaughey, "Four Academic Ambassadors," in *Perspectives in American History*, vol. 12, pp. 563-607.

⁷ Walt Whitman, "Passage to India," in *Leaves of Grass*.