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KARMA, DHARMA AND INDIAN DEMOCRACY

By **GOAN OBSERVER TEAM** 🕒 NOVEMBER 5, 2016

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BROWN SAHIBS: The British colonists attempted to convert Indians into native versions of themselves, but never considered them equal to British officers

By Teotonio R de Souza

MUCH of the democratic politics in India – not very different from what is reported from elsewhere, except its cultural idiosyncrasies – is now concentrated on winning elections and preparing for the next ones. In between there is a great hurry to loot what one can, and

amass wealth that can ensure the financial stability for the rest of one's life, and if possible, of more than one generation.

Few successful politicians know, or care to know (if sufficiently educated), that democratic governance resulted from many centuries of evolution, marked by a particular philosophical trend that defined its aims and objectives.

CROWN JEWELS

INDIA owes its political traditions to its former colonial masters, who left the jewel of the crown after a long-drawn process of the so-called "devolution of powers", ending it most reluctantly after World War II with a "transfer of power". The terminology of independence or decolonisation was never officially used.

This was intentional, and conveyed the underlying fact that it was a transference of power by a colonial bourgeoisie to a native bourgeoisie, moulded hopefully in the image and likeness of the colonial masters, and as such, prepared to take over and continue the governance of the country as responsible representatives of its people.

Most Europeans whose descendents love pointing at the caste system as the original sin of Indians and consider it a prime cultural indicator of incapacity to meet the qualification of equality required by democratic rule, were convinced of their racial superiority during their colonial control of India.

Setton Kerr, a Foreign Secretary of the government, once remarked that it was a cherished conviction of every Englishman in India, from the highest to the lowest, that he belonged to a race chosen by God to govern and subdue.

Lord Kitchener, a commander-in-chief in India, asserted that “however well educated and clever a native may be, no matter what rank we bestow on him would not cause him to be considered an equal of the British officer”.

The Empire in India rested on the principle of race supremacy, buttressed with umpteen expressions of public prestige through *darbars* and *kurzi nishan*. There were rules and regulations to impress the natives by the shades of discourtesy shown to them by the *sahibs*.

PORTUGUESE GOA

IT WAS not very different in Portuguese Goa. Despite the Portuguese pretensions of being more sympathetic than the British in handling the native subjects, or the prevailing idea among Goans that Christians were privileged subjects of the colonial government, State Secretary Cunha Rivara's published documentation in *Arquivo Portuguez-Oriental* produces illustrations of how poor Christians resented the way they were kept standing and waiting, while rich Hindus were given preferential treatment and chairs to sit in the government offices.

The converts were thereby made to feel they would be better off by retaining their former faith. By adopting Christianity they had lost their self-respect in the eyes of the Portuguese, who tended to look at them as weather-cocks and time-seekers.

MARK OF HONOUR

EVEN if Indians, like all people everywhere, love *tamashas*, anyone with a normal vision could have told those *sahibs*, that generally in India what conferred prestige was neither rank nor power, but the reputation for goodness and holiness, reflecting the Hindu cultural

behaviour ruled by *karma* and *dharma*. **If Lord Ripon or Lord Irwin were remembered for their impressive *darbars*, it was largely because they were considered “good”.**

The same was true of several lesser personages, whose good works and religious faith earned them respect, while *darbar*-holding viceroys and officials made themselves ludicrous in the eyes of the people. It was due to the racial superiority that the Europeans in India, however long they lived there, remained strangers in the country.

It was true till the very end of British rule in India. They loved India, but not the India of the Indians. It was the India of their own conception, the India that provided a life-long career to many Europeans and gave them prestige. That was true of all colonial powers.

Ramchandra Guha, in his monumental ‘India after Gandhi: The history of the world’s largest democracy’ (2012), refers to lectures by Sir John Strachey in Cambridge. Strachey had spent many years in India and had been a member of the governor general’s council.

According to him, “The first and most essential thing to learn about India – there is not, and never was an India, or even any country of India possessing, according to any European ideas, any sort of unity, physical, political, social or religious”. Ironically, just when he was passing his judgement, a group of Indians had set up the Indian National Congress, seeking to unite the diversity of Indians into a single Indian nation.

There were many who endorsed Strachey’s views. Among them Rudyard Kipling. Once asked if India could have self-government, his derisive answer was: “Oh no! They are 4,000 years old out there, much too old to learn that business. Law and order is what they want and we are there to give it to them.”

Winston Churchill had survived his fading political career on the plank of opposing self-government for Indians. Till the very end he made it clear that he was not elected to preside over the liquidation of the British empire. One is left puzzled by such convictions if we trace utilitarianism that served to legitimise the imperial rule.

RADICAL LEGACY

JAMES Mill had been able to get into a well-paying job at the East India Company. His radical philosophy can be garnered from his *The History of British India* (1818), wherein he defended a position that was midway between Whig and Tory positions. **He was open to re-structuring social and political institutions under the explicit guidance of principles of reason (eg the principle of utility).**

His son James Stuart Mill carried on his father's and Jeremy Bentham's radical legacy further, combining it with romanticism, partly imbibed from Wordsworth's poetry, and eclectic thought of several of his contemporary thinkers like August Comte, Thomas Carlyle, Alexis de Tocqueville and others.

Mill joined the East India Company in 1826, working under his father, and after his retirement in 1857, rose to the same position as his father, chief examiner, which put him in charge of the memoranda guiding the company's policies in India.

His job was not very demanding time-wise, paid him well, and gave him ample opportunity for political theorising and writing. In tune with positivist thinkers, he was committed to the idea that the best methods of explaining the world are those of the natural sciences. All we can know about human minds and wills comes from regarding them as part of the causal order investigated by the sciences.

MORAL SYSTEMS

IN HIS 1789 *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, J S Mill had attacked non-utilitarian moral systems:

“They consist all of them in so many contrivances for avoiding the obligation of appealing to any external standard, and for prevailing upon the reader to accept the author’s sentiment or opinion as a reason and that is a sufficient one for itself.”

He saw his own commitment to the naturalism and empiricism of the “a posteriori school” of thought as part of a broader social and political agenda that advocated for reform and also undercut traditional foundations of conservatism.

In *Utilitarianism* (1861), Mill defined that “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong if they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure.”

Utilitarianism had a long history. The earliest supporters of the principle of utility were the religious utilitarians represented by William Paley, whose 1785 *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* was a frequently re-printed and well-read book of moral thought of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Religious utilitarianism was very popular among the educated classes and dominated in the universities until the 1830s.

Religious utilitarians sought in God the guarantees that an individual’s self-interest lies in virtue, in furthering the happiness of others. Without God and his sanctions of eternal punishment and reward, it would be hard to find motives that “are likely to be found sufficient to withhold men from the gratification of lust, revenge, envy, ambition, avarice.”

SECULAR MOTIVES

BUT FOR Mill and others linked to Bentham's legacy, there could also be a non-religious — or secular motivation. Herein lies the ambivalence and its consequences for the Indian democracy. Though proclaimed as a secular democratic republic, the religious cultural base continues ever present, for good and for bad, with intermittent surges, as at present, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the helm.

In keeping with Churchill's expectations, the Declaration of Independence was marked by barbarism that accompanied the creation of two nations. The British had prepared the ground for it by setting it up as a time-bomb through the Indian Councils Act, 1909, also known as Minto-Morley reforms. **Indians were granted representation in the legislative body, but the British government also introduced separate electorates for the Muslims.**

POISONED GIFT

THE concession, a poisoned gift, was meant to quell the political turmoil caused by some young radical Hindus, like V D Savarkar and his Mitra Mela, as a direct consequence of the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905) that was a revelation to the Asian youth that Europeans were defeatable and they did not have to follow their elders who were cowed down by colonial powers.

The Surat split of 1907 in the Indian National Congress was marked by the formation of moderate and extremist wings. This was the phase marked by return of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to India. His arrival with the message of *satyagraha* was a timely godsend to the colonial authorities that were being targeted and shot by radical youth. It suited the British authorities to play up the role of Gandhi

and project him as a model representative of Indians, a strategy to save their skin.

COLONIAL RULE

IF I delved somewhat at length into details of the utilitarian thinkers and their thought that guided British politics, it was meant to confront their principles and objectives with the reality of their colonial governance in India. The latter is filled with ambiguities and machiavellic underplays. **The only happiness they pursued consisted in upholding the prestige of the empire and ensuring the careers of their colonial administrators and job seekers, whatever the cost for the masses of the Indian people.**

Utilitarianism really meant using others profitably. After centuries of engagement in India, their loud predictions of doom only confirmed the failure of their political ideals.

No Indian will deny the fact that India presents a vivid kaleidoscope and a wide spectrum of democratic failures and successes. Against India's massive scale of operations, hardly any western country should have courage to teach Indians the lessons of democracy.

Some of those countries with around 10 million people, could provide access to much more than basic comforts to the totality of their citizens, but still have nearly 10 per cent of their populations below poverty line, including many without shelter, or a meal a day. We may rarely, or never, hear these cases in the West classified as democratic failures.

The moderating influence that keeps Indian diversity from a doomsday collapse as predicted by many is its invisible tectonic cultural structure of common mythology that unites over a billion Hindus, and others who retain subconsciously their pre-

conversion thought pattern, be they Indian Christians, Muslims or others.

No matter what their languages, they all understand and share the value symbols transmitted by the Epics, Puranas and other varied folkloric channels, like the stories from Pancha-Tantra, Hitopdexe, etc.

All Indian languages contain the concepts of Karma, Dharma, Sansara, Satya or Ahimsa, even if some of them, particularly the last two seem to be presently on the wane, despite the proclamation of Satyameva Jayate.

This '4,000-year-old' legacy of India cited by Kipling provides the Indian masses their Utilitarian alternative for endurance and survival, while ideal democracy is yet to be discovered anywhere in the world.

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