

# Babudom and the Future of India

## *Two New Books*

We are all quite familiar with reading a plethora of glossy annual reports of the various departments of Government, of National Laboratories, of Public Sector Undertakings, of Institutes of Technology and of University Departments, invariably devoting several pages to listing their 'achievements' during the year. Naturally we get a rosy picture of what is happening but seldom is any thought given to listing of our failures with an analysis of what went wrong. A few individuals, however, crop up now and then who make a survey of the Indian scene, focussing on contemporary happenings, especially their awful dimensions in a globalizing world. Two books have recently appeared, one by A. D. Moddie entitled "*The Failed Mahabharat the Making of an Indian State*", published by Allied Publishers, Mumbai, and the other by Pushpa Mitra Bhargava and Chandan Chakravarti on "*The Saga of Indian Science Since Independence*" published by the Universities Press. I shall take the first of these books in which Moddie, formerly of the Indian Administrative Service, tries "to compare the lessons of twenty-five centuries of recorded history of the world's most plural society in vulnerable state making." Most of the material presented in the following pages is summarized from the writings of Moddie with only occasional comments by me on aspects of some specific value.

### *Historical Nature of Indian States*

The first few chapters deal with the historical nature of the Indian States, their decentralized and regional character, from the time of Ashoka, Akbar, the Vijayanagar Empire and the British rule down to the period preceding India's independence. Regionalism emerges as an enduring feature of India based on culture, language and geography. It is an endless struggle of regional powers which even Gandhiji's nationalism or the British rule was not able to surmount.

### *British Policies and their Effects*

British rule was a graft on an earlier culture which tried to introduce and even force alien practices over the people of the country. The centralized system of British rule failed to grasp the good features, the efficiency and low cost of traditional systems and

introduced middlemen, contractors and along with them corruption (*theka*). Centuries old customary systems of local management of local resources were allowed to decay and die. People were not allowed to do anything on their own but were forced to obey and be dependent on the *Sarkar*. Time-tested know-how was lost and a costlier, inefficient, heavy overheads-laden, graft-ridden system was imposed. Moddie regrets that there is no appreciation of this gruesome loss to the Indian economy and considers this action as the root cause for the failure of all our rural development schemes, depriving the village community of all initiative and opportunity to manage its affairs in all spheres and become abjectly dependent on government. The introduction of the British judiciary system with its emphasis on 'evidence' brought with it the evil of 'cooked evidence' (supported by vakils or lawyers). Justice was denied because it was delayed inordinately in the endless process of gathering and sifting evidence.

### *Forests Plundered*

British rulers had no regard for the preservation of India's environment. Forests became revenue earners and the forest departments instead of protecting their charges became exploiters of forest wealth. This system still continues and it is an irony of fate that the very same forest department which had earlier destroyed hundreds of square miles of virgin forests of the country now presides over the Environmental Ministry as the guardian and protector of forest wealth!

### *Privatisation of Commercial Property*

Minerals became overnight the property of governments. People were deprived of the benefit of owning mineral-bearing areas and became paupers with no share in the mineral wealth, all the profits being siphoned off by lease holders and governments.

The unholy eyes of government have now fallen on even water which it wants to appropriate for itself and give exclusive rights to multinational companies for developing bottling industries for drinking water. Highways are being privatized with the right of collection of toll being given to the companies who have financed the projects. A similar fate is in the

offing for privatizing public water supplies in metropolitan cities. Irrigation too will become privatized with the rights of rationing water release being passed on to water lords who will sell water at a price. Sugarcane growers will have a hey-day being able to pay higher rates, while farmers growing ordinary food grains will be starved of water. People's government will only be in name with all the powers being in the hands of financiers and money lenders. Following such policies will only hasten the ushering in of a water famine. Blaming the rain gods has become a habit with those in authority to cover up most of the distress felt by farmers which is man-made and avoidable.

#### *Indian Initiative in Development of Science and Industry*

Farsighted Jamshedji Tata started the Indian Institute of Science which is today in the vanguard of those providing leaders of Indian science. The iron and steel industry started by Tata has blossomed into an empire with Ratan Tata, as chief of the group, leading India's business with a capital of 40,000 crores. Ordinary IT companies have also done better than state governments and started building empires all over the country.

#### *Signs of Local Effort*

There are certain pockets in Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Gujarat, where people have organized for themselves better social service, have developed a certain sense of independent action and given up the habit of looking to government for everything. Leadership is, however, lacking and unless a selfless team takes over their administration, the little gains that we have witnessed will soon be lost. A strong NGO movement, with women taking a leading part, offers a viable solution.

#### *A Sick and 'Sauda' State*

Twenty-five centuries of recorded history that began with the highest ideals of Ashoka and Akbar, Moddie laments, have resulted in a 'soft, sick and Sauda State bereft of ideals, vision at the end of 2000, pragmatism forfeiting the Indian people's credibility and confidence." All Indian governments are bankrupt, sinking under unsustainable burden of massive debts, profligate financial expenditure, and no financial management worth the name. Corruption has become rampant, the whole state being labeled as sick and Sauda. Other terms with which we in the south are not familiar but *Delhiwallas* know are "theke",

'monthly mamool', 'hafta', 'chai pani', 'suitcase', etc. all referring to illicit transactions between officials and the people.

Law's delay, lack of discipline, political interference in maintaining law and order, lack of prompt reply to correspondence, slack administration, lack of transparency and lack of decision are at the root cause of corruption. Bureaucracy is to be held largely responsible for this rotten state of affairs. Adult literacy, a qualification for entry into any legislature has made them a home of thugs and dacoits with presiding officers having no control and unable to maintain discipline and order.

#### *Cost of Babudom*

The legacy of British rule, the army of Prime Ministers, Chief Ministers and their innumerable ministerial colleagues since independence has burdened India with the largest number of civil servants of the world. Most of us are not aware that the monthly salary bill of Central, State and PSU employees is a staggering sum of Rs. 70,000 crores! In some of the states, salaries amount to over 80% to 126% of the state's income while critical areas like education and agriculture hardly get 6000 to 8000 crores. 'The vast army of babus in government and quasi-government institutions have absolute security and large *sauda* and no accountability.' There is much truth in the statement that 'the immense poverty of India can only be the result of luxurious living of the ruling clan.'

Churchill had once warned that granting freedom to India will result in power going to the hands of rascals, rogues and free-booters. This was greatly resented when it was first uttered fifty years ago, but if what we see on TV is any indication, the picture was not much exaggerated. In Indian democracy, we are witnessing what Galbraith described as a 'ruling anarchy.'

Despite repeated promises to 'downsize' the bloated bureaucracy neither Central nor State governments have made any serious attempt to reduce their inefficient 'flab', while numerous PSU's have achieved some reduction through the 'golden hand-shakes' of VR schemes at the expense of the tax payer.

#### *Lack of Interest by Indian Media*

Is this the welfare state – *Rama Rajya* that we had dreamed?

The role of the media in this environment of

anarchy is most disappointing as there is no other forum which could awaken the babus and the people. Anil Agarwal laments "Though India is one of the worst governed countries in the world, cracking at the seams in just about every area, from social welfare, food distribution, to environment and riddled with rampant and shameless corruption it is clear that the Indian media does not take the issue of governance seriously."

What are we to say of a government which passes black ordinances which deny people's right to information on the ill-gotten assets of candidates seeking election? All parties were unanimous in passing such a resolution which reflects their contempt for honesty in governance. 'This one ordinance will ensure India remains feudal, backward, poor with no respectable face in the comity of Nations. Goodbye to any 'tryst with destiny' with a cover of political system, masquerading as a pro-democracy.' We are fortunate the Supreme Court of India has struck down the ordinance and saved democracy.

#### *Democratic Modernisation has not really Affected India*

The authoritative colonial 'raj' had destroyed village level institutions and claimed authority over land, water, forests and minerals. This policy is being continued and extended with many anti-people measures, the latest being the appropriation and privatization of water resources.

Various schemes are formulated at Delhi and forced on the people. If they fail nobody cares and no careful examination is made. There is no effective supervision or accountability, no questioning in the Press. 'A mindless bureaucracy neither examines nor changes. Forty years of planning represents a gigantic uncomputed loss which would have been the envy of Md. Ghazni and Nadir Shaw.'

India has come to the end of its excuses, yet there seems to be no end to opulence, chicanery, corruption and state authoritarianism in the entire political community of all parties and their henchmen babus. India does not yet know the people's democracy of S. Korea, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland because the spirit of democracy and modernization has not entered the doors and minds of the State.

#### *Scope for Reform*

What a sad commentary on fifty years of lost opportunities and waste of talent. The atmosphere within the country is so corrupt and hostile that

entrepreneurs are seeking opportunities elsewhere. The NRIs have built a world of their own outside India.

There is still hope that if our babudom, consisting of some of the best (but misdirected) talent available in the country, throws away its blinkers and starts thinking and reforming itself, great things can be achieved within a short time. The courage of A.D. Moddie, one of the insiders, in laying bare the ills that are plaguing the country will be rewarded if the thinking apparatus within each one of us is revived and made to work. Decentralise power, give it back to the people and allow them to manage themselves with more attention to development of human resources so that increasing population becomes an asset instead of a liability. Help them work to develop their land and water resources, by providing them with new technology. A new transformation can yet take place, despite the many ills and deficiencies documented by Moddie if genuine efforts are made.

#### *NGO's have an Important Role to Play*

People are slowly becoming alive to their rights and we find them in dispersed pockets. Sunderlal Bahuguna in Garhwal, UP, Anil Agarwal in Delhi, Rajendra Singh in Rajasthan, Balakrishna Hazare in Maharashtra, Medha Patkar in Gujarat and Arundhati Roy in Kerala have demonstrated undaunted courage in fighting against evil forces at work, official apathy and malfeasance. There are signs of other NGOs raising their heads here and there but at the moment they lack leadership. If they could grow in size and number and become active at village level much is still possible. We can only wish their tribe will increase. Enlisting judicial intervention through public litigation petitions may help to correct official delinquency. Such NGO's have the potential of restoring people's confidence and the revival of traditional practices in the development of resources which have sustained us for over 2000 years. Given full scope for development the Ambani's, the Hinduja's, the Ratan Tata and now the new IT giants can be expected to carry the banner of India into uncharted territories of achievement.

#### *India's Reform*

The tremendous burst of activity in the fields of information technology, international sports and literature reflects the young spirit of India unbound. This should not take the easy path of mimicking

western ways but rooted in traditional skills and culture these should go to conquer new fields. To this tribe of enterprising youth, the dismal picture which has been presented in the second half of the book should not be a damper but a warning to avoid the pitfalls which beset their fathers and forefathers in the path towards progress.

Will India rebound? Is there a good future in store? Moddie quotes from a travelogue from Paul William Roberts:

'Everywhere you looked in India there was evidence of a past that had attained mythical heights. From philosophy to architecture, few civilizations have left such an awesome record. It was reported to have made even the gods jealous of humanity. And now the place that once had all the answers - from the meaning of life outlined in

the Vedas, the Upanishads, or the Bhagavad Gita, to the zenith of architectures in the Taj Mahal or the great temples of the south - India has now become the place that had only questions. It questioned its past even, but most of all it questioned its future, and questioned whether it had one.'

What is the way out of this impasse? Will we be able to create for ourselves and for our progeny a better future? The answer appears to me to depend a great deal on our ability to reform and transform our Babudom from the present state of colonially inherited consciousness of being masters of the people into true servants of the people and the society.

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