

PRESIDENT'S CAUTIONARY NOTE



- ❖ Against social, economic disparities
- ❖ against tinkering with the Constitution and
- ❖ on the legal system

President of India Thiru. K.R. Narayanan addressed the nation on 3 days last month - one on 25th January on the eve of Republic Day, the second one on 27th at the Central Hall of Parliament to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution and again on 28th at Vigyan Bhavan, Delhi to mark the golden jubilee of the Supreme Court.

Perhaps, never before has an occupant of the Rashtrapati Bhavan spoken with such candour and poignancy about the state of social and political affairs. It was simply the most significant speech made by a head of the state in independent India's history. But it is ironical that most of the newspapers did not cover the speech with the merit it deserved. President's focus was on the rapidly widening inequality that marked Indian society in the 1990s. It was the first honest appraisal of the state of the nation in the post-1991 era of liberalisation and globalisation.

Excerpts from his speech :

Social disparities :

"It seems in the social realm, some kind of a counter-revolution is taking place in India". There are signs that our privileged classes are getting tired of the affirmative action provided by the Constitution provisions.. as a society, we are becoming increasingly insensitive and callous".

"On this golden jubilee I would like to say that let us not get tired of what we have provided for our weaker sections, for otherwise, as Dr. Ambedkar pointed out, the edifice of our democracy would be like a palace build on dung heap."

"It is forgotten that these benefits have been provided not by way of charity, but as human rights and as social justice to a section of society who constitute a big chunk of our population, and who actually contribute to our agriculture, industry and services as landless labourers, factory and municipal workers".

"Fifty years after our Constitution, the plain truth is that the female half of the Indian population continues to be regarded as it was in the 18th and 19th centuries".

".. the infamous practice (of sati) still manages to raise its head and, what is worse, even gets explained away as 'suicide' or as saintly sacrifice".

"In parts of rural India, forms of sadism seem to be earmarked for Dalit women. From the time of Draupadi, our womenfolk had been subjected to public disrobing and humiliation as a means of vendetta - individual, social or political. For Dalit women, it has become a common experience in rural areas".

".. the manner in which we squander or pollute precious reserves... the way we allow children to be exploited, the disabled to be passed by, speaks of a stony-hearted society, not a compassionate one that produced the Buddha, Mahavir, Nanak, Kabir and Gandhi".

"..our greatest national drawback is the status of our women, and our greatest national shame, the condition of the Dalits"...

"Untouchability has been abolished by law but shades of it remain in the ingrained attitudes nurtured by the caste system".

"What one finds disconcerting is even the absence of political rhetoric on these social evils".

"Many a social upheaval can be traced to the neglect of the lowest tier of society, whose discontent moves towards the path of violence."

Economic disparities

"The benefits of our economic growth are yet to reach them. We have one of the world's largest middle class, but also the largest number of people below the poverty line and the largest number of children suffering from malnutrition. Our giant factories rise from out of squalor; our satellites shoot up from the midst of the hovels of the poor. Not surprisingly, there is sullen resentment among the masses against their condition, erupting often in violent forms in several parts of the country".

"Violence in society has bared a hundred fangs as advertisement-driven consumerism is unleashing frustrations and tensions in our society. The unabashed, vulgar indulgence in conspicuous consumption by the nouveau-riche has left the underclass seething in frustration. One half of our society guzzles aerated beverages while the other has to make do with palmfuls of muddled water. **Our three-way fast-lane of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation must provide safe pedestrian crossings for the unempowered India also so that it too can move towards equality of status and opportunity**'

'Beware of the fury of the patient man,' says the old adage. One could say "beware of the fury of the patient and long-suffering people".

Constitution Review

In the Constituent Assembly, Dr. Ambedkar explained that the Drafting Committee in choosing the parliamentary system for India, preferred more responsibility to more stability, a system under which the government will be on the anvil everyday... The Constituent Assembly... chose this system because they preferred more responsibility to stability, which could slip into authoritarian exercises of power. Another factor to be borne in mind is the immensity of India, the perplexing

variety and the diversity of the country, the very size of its population and the complexity of its social and developmental problems. In such a predicament, described by one writer as one of a "million mutinies", there must be in the body politic, a vent for discontents and frustrations to express themselves in order to forestall and prevent major explosions in society. The parliamentary system provides this vent more than a system which prefers stability to responsibility and accountability".

"In my opinion, we should avoid too much rigidity in our system of government as in a very rigid system, there is the danger of major explosions in society taking place. The possibility and the facility of a change in government is itself a factor in the stability of the political system in the long term because then the people will be more inclined to tolerate a political situation they do not approve of or find difficult to cope with for long".

"The founding fathers deliberately made the amendment process of the Constitution easy so that shortcomings or lacunae in the Constitution can be rectified by the Parliament without too much difficulty. There are other changes that can be brought about, like changes in the electoral law or the functioning of the political parties. Whatever we may do, and we have a right to bring about necessary changes in the political and economic system, we should ensure that the basic philosophy behind the Constitution and the fundamental socio-economic soul of the Constitution remain sacrosanct. We should not throw out the baby with the bath water".

On legal system

"Mysterious are the ways of justice, that is why it has been said that a law court is not a cathedral but a casino where much depends on the throw of the dice".

**Compiled by : G. Karunanidhy, General Secretary,
All India Union Bank Backward Classes (OBC) Employees' Welfare Association,
37 College Road, Numgambakkam, Chennai - 600 006.**

G. Karunanidhy
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