

## The quest for an Indian social democracy

Introductory preface by Prof. Rehman Sobhan

I was recently in Delhi for a conference of the Indira Gandhi Memorial Trust (IGMT), convened by Sonia Gandhi who is the Chair of the Foundation. This conference is organised periodically with a view to bringing together a variety of well known figures -- academics, policymakers, business, civil society -- to address policy issues of the day. This programme has been going on for the last 10 years.

I was invited to one of the first of these conferences 9/10 years ago when Sonia Gandhi had first made her entry into the world of Indian politics. The recent conference of the IGMT was the 10th in this series. I noted that much had changed in these 8/10 years. At the earlier conference Sonia Gandhi was a novice in politics and the conference, whilst well attended by leading personalities, was essentially academic in its orientation where Sonia demonstrated a rather casual interest in the proceedings.

By the time I returned to Delhi for the 10th conference, Sonia had evolved into the most powerful figure in India's politics -- the president and mainstay of the Congress Party and the leader of the ruling coalition in the Lok Sabha, who had twice led her party to victory in national elections.

In recent years these IGF conferences had been transformed from essentially academic gatherings into brainstorming events designed to provide policy guidance to India's most influential leader. This 10th conference, was titled, "An Indian Social Democracy: Integrating Markets, Democracy and Social Justice." Amongst some of the significant participants in the event were Nobel Laureate for Economics, Joseph Stiglitz, the Norwegian Minister for Development Cooperation, the Director General of the UK aid agency, DFID, the Director General of WTO, Pascal Lamy, Kumi Naidoo, Director General, Greenpeace, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, the Deputy Chairman of the Indian Planning Commission, leading business figures such as Kumar Mangalam Birla, Govind Nilekani, the co-founder of India's IT giant, Infosys, leading social activists, such as Aruna Roy and Sunita Narain along with a number of eminent Indian and foreign academics covering a range of disciplines.

Over a long professional life I have attended quite a few such high-powered gatherings around the world so there is no reason for me to write about one more such event. In my mind, what sets this particular confer-

ence apart to merit comment from me is that it was convened by a powerful and politically active political personality such as Sonia Gandhi, whose influence extends across not just Indian politics but into the government of India.

This was manifest in the presence of the prime minister of India to inaugurate our conference, with half his cabinet in the audience, and the willingness of the prime minister to host an intimate dinner for the conference participants at his residence. More significantly, Sonia Gandhi spent the two full days of the conference as an attentive participant, taking copious notes with the diligence of a graduate student.

Those of us who came from other countries found this engagement of a major political figure, who normally has an over committed diary of public programmes, in an academic conference, close to unprecedented for any country. Across South Asia we are only too familiar with the presence of such public figures at our academic programmes, in the role of chief guest, who remain for the duration of the inaugural session, deliver their address and then move on to meet their, no doubt, more pressing official engagements.

We can but presume that if Sonia Gandhi is willing to invest two full days of her busy schedule to listen to a debate on ideas, which she herself has initiated, that she is anxious to learn and put such ideas to use in her public life. The subject matter of the conference, to discuss an Indian Social Democracy, was itself of some significance given that the government with which Sonia is associated appears committed to a market driven, private sector oriented

development strategy.

The message from Sonia Gandhi is worth reproducing for a Bangladeshi audience, because it points to an emerging tension within the policymakers in India, between an exclusively growth driven development agenda and the recognition of the need to address the inequitable distributional outcomes emerging from this agenda.

In Bangladesh and across South



Asia, similar social disparities are dividing our respective societies. There is, however, little indication, that these injustices are being recognised by our policymakers to a point where they are willing to engage in a serious exploration as to how these disparities may be reduced. It is here that Sonia Gandhi's engagement with the wider world of ideas, her willingness to educate herself on policy issues and her concern with issues of social justice demonstrated in her inaugural address to the conference, reproduced below, merit our attention.

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Speech given by Sonia Gandhi

THIS year's theme of An Indian Social Democracy may not appear apt, at a time when social democracy is under stress in the very countries where it was born and where it flourished. Today, those countries are all much wealthier than India, and sceptics might say that it is too soon for India to talk about social democracy. That misses the point. In country after country, where social democracy took root, it was once for them a dream for their tomorrow. It was built, brick by brick, over many gen-

eration, to all through universal and better education, health care and skills. This is not a matter of choice.

It is a known fact that unequal societies cannot achieve their full potential or even sustain a high level of growth indefinitely. In other words, islands of prosperity in a sea of deprivation can only give rise to storms of conflict and instability. The story of India's contrasts is well known: ability, aspiration and achievement coexist with injustice, inequity and inequality. We have more millionaires than ever

before, alongside millions who struggle for two square meals a day.

We are right to celebrate our high rate of economic growth. We must do all that we can to sustain it. However, let us not forget that growth is not an end in itself. Much more important to my mind is what kind of society we aspire to be, and the values on which it should be built. Our economy may increasingly be dynamic, but our moral universe seems to be shrinking. Prosperity has increased but so has social conflict.

Intolerance of various kinds is growing. Graft and greed are on the rise. The principles on which independent India was founded, for which a generation of great leaders fought and sacrificed their

all, are in danger of being negated.

A coherent social democratic agenda is therefore essential. It must be based on rights and entitlements, not charity. The Right to Information, the Right to Work, the Right to Education, and the proposed Right to Food Security, represent a landmark shift in our approach to issues of welfare and human development. Under the leadership of our prime minister a new architecture of social provisioning is being put in place.

I am, of course, conscious of the gap between promise and delivery. The debate on social democracy in the West is often about "big versus small government." This is less relevant to India. What we need is more effective and efficient government.

The Indian state, at its many levels, needs to augment its financial and managerial capacity to deliver public goods and services better. We need greater probity, more transparency, an open attitude and a willingness to try out fresh ideas.

No social democracy is possible without a thriving and dynamic business sector generating wealth. There is a new spirit of entrepreneurship, a new awakening of enterprise in India, which needs to be encouraged. But surely, it is in the interest of business to be a major partner in promoting social objectives and caring for the environment. Some corporate leaders stand out for their dedicated engagement in purposeful and meaningful philanthropy. It is my hope that the swelling ranks of India's wealthy will be inspired to follow their example.

Civil society has been in the forefront of giving voice to the underprivileged, organising them collectively and mediating on their behalf. It is also able to provide models of service delivery that are, at times, more effective than those of the government. Partnerships with NGOs can only enrich our social democracy.

India has long presented the paradox of a democracy, where the poor majority, despite its voting power, has not always commanded its due. The challenge before us is to transcend the divides in our society to ensure that this changes. Social democracy is not populism. It is not generosity. It is the justice that our Constitution promises. The backlog is huge. Without social democracy, Indian democracy could well be undermined.

Much of what I have said reflects Indira Gandhi's own vision of An Indian Social Democracy. As I understand it, this had four essential pillars:

First, a belief that social democracy must not only be responsive and responsible, but also representative of the many diversities in society;

Second, a conviction that social democracy is unachievable unless economic growth empowers the disadvantaged, deprived, and discriminated against;

Third, a yearning for social democracy that pays the highest attention to the preservation of the environment and regeneration of natural resources;

Fourth, a passion for social democracy that provides for a nation-state as an instrument of change and protection of national sovereignty.

These issues are central to the welfare and future of any society. Drawing inspiration from this vision we in India will continue to work towards a consensus for a social democracy that will truly ameliorate the lives of our people.

This speech was delivered by Sonia Gandhi at the 10th Indira Gandhi Conference 2010 on "An Indian Social Democracy" on November 19.

## The charade of Israeli Palestinian talks

The issue of settlement expansion is simply a diversion. The real issue is the existence of the settlements and related infrastructure developments. These have been carefully designed so that Israel has already taken over more than 40 percent of the occupied West Bank.

NOAM CHOMSKY

WASHINGTON'S pathetic capitulation to Israel while pleading for a meaningless three-month freeze on settlement expansion -- excluding Arab East Jerusalem -- should go down as one of the most humiliating moments in US diplomatic history.

In September the last settlement freeze ended, leading the Palestinians to cease direct talks with Israel. Now the Obama administration, desperate to lure Israel into a new freeze and thus revive the talks, is grasping at invisible straws, and lavishing gifts on a far-right Israeli government.

The gifts include \$3 billion for fighter jets. The largesse also happens to be another taxpayer grant to the US arms industry, which gains doubly from programmes to expand the militarisation of the Middle East.

US arms manufacturers are subsidised not only to develop and produce advanced equipment for a state that is virtually part of US military-intelligence establishment but also to provide second-rate military equipment to the Gulf states -- currently a precedent-breaking \$60 billion arms sale to Saudi Arabia, which is a transaction that also recycles petrodollars to an ailing US economy.

Israeli and US high-tech civilian industries are closely integrated. It is

small wonder that the most fervent support for Israeli actions comes from the business press and the Republican Party, the more extreme of the two business-oriented political parties. The pretext for the huge arms sales to Saudi Arabia is defence against the "Iranian threat."

However, the Iranian threat is not military, as the Pentagon and US intelligence have emphasised. Were Iran to develop a nuclear weapons capacity, the purpose would be deterrent -- presumably to ward off a US-Israeli attack.

The real threat, in Washington's view, is that Iran is seeking to expand its influence in neighbouring countries "stabilised" by US invasion and occupation.

The official line is that the Arab states are pleading for US military aid to defend themselves against Iran. True or false, the claim provides interesting insight into the reigning concept of democracy. Whatever the ruling dictatorships may prefer, Arabs in a recent Brookings poll rank the major threats to the region as Israel (88 percent), the United States (77 percent) and Iran (10 percent).

It is interesting that US officials, as revealed in the just-released WikiLeaks cables, totally ignored Arab public opinion, keeping to the views of the reigning dictators.

US gifts to Israel also include diplo-

matic support, according to current reports. Washington pledges to veto any UN Security Council actions that might annoy Israel's leaders and to drop any call for further extension of a settlement freeze.

Hence, by agreeing to the three-month pause, Israel will no longer be disturbed

by the paymaster as it expands its criminal actions in the occupied territories.

That these actions are criminal has not been in doubt since late 1967, when Israel's leading legal authority, international jurist Theodor Meron, advised the government that its plans to initiate settlements in the occupied territories

violated the Fourth Geneva Convention, a core principle of international humanitarian law, established in 1949 to criminalise the horrors of the Nazi regime.

Meron's conclusion was endorsed by Justice Minister Ya'akov Shimson Shapira, and shortly after by Defence

Minister Moshe Dayan, writes historian Gershom Gorenberg in "The Accidental Empire."

Dayan informed his fellow ministers: "We must consolidate our hold so that over time we will succeed in 'digesting' Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) and merging them with 'little' Israel," mean-

while "dismember(ing) the territorial contiguity" of the West Bank, all under the usual pretense "that the step is necessary for military purposes."

Dayan had no doubts, or qualms, about what he was recommending: "Settling Israelis in occupied territory contravenes, as is known, international conventions," he observed. "But there is nothing essentially new in that."

Dayan's correct assumption was that the boss in Washington might object formally, but with a wink, and would continue to provide the decisive military, economic and diplomatic support for the criminal endeavours.

The criminality has been underscored by repeated Security Council resolutions, more recently by the International Court of Justice, with the basic agreement of US Justice Thomas Buergerthal in a separate declaration. Israel's actions also violate UN Security Council resolutions concerning Jerusalem. But everything is fine as long as Washington winks.

Back in Washington, the Republican super-hawks are even more fervent in their support for Israeli crimes. Eric Cantor, the new majority leader in the House of Representatives, "has floated a novel solution to protect aid for Israel from the current foreign aid backlash," Glenn Kessler reports in *The Washington Post*: "giving the Jewish state its own funding account, thus removing it from funds for the rest of the world."



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continues.

Noam Chomsky's most recent book, with co-author Ilan Pappé, is Gaza in Crisis. Chomsky is Emeritus Professor of Linguistics and Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Mass.

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