

India's Democratic Dictatorship



SHASHI THAROOR

AMID much fanfare, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has completed a hundred days of its second term. Despite his government's poor record, Modi remains immensely popular personally. This does not bode well for Indian democracy.

The Modi government's supporters tout a slew of new repressive legislation—including the criminalisation of *talaq-e-biddat*, the Muslim practice of “instant divorce”—as a display of resoluteness. Likewise, Modi's recent abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status, guaranteed under Article 370 of India's constitution, was undertaken amid a state-wide lockdown. Political leaders were arrested, and telephone and Internet services were suspended. There is no telling what will happen when the lid is taken off the pressure cooker. Yet most Indians are offering unstinting support.

Modi's supporters have less to say about the economy, which is in free fall, and relations among religious communities, which have never been tenser. (The unmanned Moon landing of which they had hoped to boast failed when the robotic rover crashed on the lunar surface on the eve of the hundred-day anniversary.)

Modi's enduring popularity may mystify his critics. Most of the out-of-the-box solutions he has attempted have done more harm than good. For example, his government's disastrous

demonetisation of 86 percent of India's currency in 2016 was probably the single biggest blow to the Indian economy since independence, costing millions of jobs and undermining growth. But that does not seem to bother most voters, for whom he comes across as a decisive, no-nonsense leader who is willing to break with tradition and attempts bold solutions to India's intractable problems.

This response has left many in India scratching their heads. Here is a prime minister who has upended practically every civilised convention in Indian politics. He has sent law-enforcement authorities to pursue flimsy charges against opposition leaders, promoted ministers whose divisive rhetoric has left Muslims and other minorities living in fear, and intimidated the media to the point that press coverage of his administration is an embarrassment to India's democratic culture.

Moreover, Modi's government has discarded, for the first time in the history of India's parliamentary standing committees, a bipartisan tradition that accords a member of the leading opposition party the chair of the External Affairs Committee (a position I previously held). Instead, Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has decided that it will hold its own government accountable.

For many of Modi's admirers, such flagrant authoritarian displays simply don't matter. In their view, after decades of too much “soft-hearted democracy” and pandering governing coalitions, a “tough” Indian leader was long overdue. Those of us whose faith in India's democratic system was absolute now face the sobering realisation that its roots may be shallower than we had allowed ourselves to believe.



The government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has completed a hundred days of its second term.

PHOTO: REUTERS

India is now in the throes of a fervent nationalism that extols every Indian achievement, real or imagined, and labels even the mildest political disagreement or protest “anti-national” or even “seditious.” Almost every independent institution has been hollowed out and turned into an instrument of the government's overweening dominance.

In the case of the tax authorities, this is less surprising. But now agencies responsible for financial investigations, law enforcement, and the government's intelligence-gathering machinery, and

even famously autonomous bodies like the Election Commission and the judiciary, are not exempt from such concerns.

Under Modi, political freedom is no longer regarded as a virtue. The new standard of social order is control (by the authorities) and conformity (by everyone else). As the scholar and commentator Pratap Bhanu Mehta recently noted, “it is difficult to remember a time” when the “premium on public and professional discourse marching to the state's tune was as high.”

Predictably, communal relations have worsened dramatically under BJP rule. The alienation of India's Muslim community is so severe that even some of the government's staunchest defenders have acknowledged it. For 3,000 years, India was a haven for the persecuted of all nations and faiths. Today, it rejects Muslim Rohingya refugees from Myanmar and publishes a highly polarising National Register of Citizens (NRC). There are also murmurs of a new push to eliminate the personal laws that minority communities are allowed to retain to govern their family practices, and to adopt “anti-conversion” laws aimed at restricting missionary activity.

Before our eyes, India's very character is being transformed by a government with no regard for institutions, understandings, and practices maintained since independence. “Boldness,” it seems, is all that matters.

For liberal democrats like me, the increasingly salient concern is that this could be what the Indian public—modestly educated and misguided by the BJP's skilful propaganda—really wants. As Mehta asks, “Is, somehow, this exaltation of power, control and nationalism a completion of our own deepest desires?”

In any case, if these first hundred days of Modi's second five-year term are any indication, India may well soon cease to be the country Mahatma Gandhi struggled to free.

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Giving the elderly their due respect



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CENTURIES ago, Plato in line with Socrates had said that the real wisdom is in “knowing that you do not know” and such wisdom, according to them, is not gained before the age of 50. In the period of early democracy, during the 5th century, we see the practice that citizens over 50 years of age would speak first, and only after their say, younger citizens would speak. This was quite the established rule, followed out of respect for the elderly and to exploit their wisdom to manage state and societal affairs.

In our society as well, we observed a similar culture where older people had the respect they deserved. Our society relied on their experience and wisdom. The cultural norms, social structure and social expectations had placed them in such a position that nowadays is ebbing faster than ever. Wrinkles in the skin, grey hair, a few missing teeth, trembling limbs, tremulous tones, forgetful minds, a bent walk, poor eyesight—all such indicators that were once considered deserving of proper care, attention and respect in the past have now become reasons for the older people becoming prey to our growing intolerance and insensitivity. We have to remember that such attitude comes at a price. It could very well be one of the crucial reasons for the growing depletion of our social harmony where we are losing the culture of treating age with respect and care.

In Bangladesh, more than 10 million people are 60 years or more. This is estimated to become around 21 million in 2030 and would reach 42 million in 2050. If we see this number in terms of the percentage of the total population,

it might not alarm us. However, have we ever reflected properly on how the older people live their lives and what their future would be? Some studies suggest that the majority of the older people live in poor conditions and may belong in the bottom quintile of those living below the poverty line without proper policy and programming response from the state. Conventional discussions on poverty in general and ageing in particular have stressed mostly on economic and resource deprivation. This approach grossly ignores the fact that human beings do not want to survive barely on a subsistence level but live with dignity (also care and attention). Human beings in general endeavour to live a dignified life throughout their lives. Maybe we are going to see soon that the global society has adopted the right to die a dignified death within the human rights framework. Indirectly, this is already reflected in many of the human rights principles.

Interestingly, discussions regarding the extreme poverty of a specific section of the population, in this case the aging population, were sidelined because of overemphasis on GDP-led growth, where the assumption is that everyone is getting a share of such growth. The other tendency is to have a tick-box approach through which some token programmes are initiated to escape the accusation of doing nothing. Thus, the impact of such initiatives do not result in success to the level expected, keeping the extreme poverty persistent in our societies. Unless we understand growth as “growth in human capability” or human development, the quality of life of the citizens would remain an illusion and impossible to attain.

Nobel laureate economist Joseph E Stiglitz, one of the many economists who consider GDP not a good measure of wellbeing, says, “If we want to put people first, we have to know what matters to them, what improves their wellbeing and how we can supply more

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of whatever that is.” For Amartya Sen, another prominent Nobel laureate economist, poverty is the end result of capability deprivation, where capability may refer to all the things that people may value to live a valuable, dignified and flourishing life. Extreme poverty in this sense may refer to an extreme form of capability deprivation. It would not be unrealistic to argue that we know little about the lived experience of the older people living in extreme poverty or what they value, or what they lack, or what constraints they live with. While poverty would be there in the world in different forms despite the progress we make, living in extreme poverty is a form of deprivation which must not exist in our society. This requires special policy attention to bring especially vulnerable people (e.g. the older people or the disabled) first and foremost in the policy and programming agenda.

The UN General Assembly adopted

the resolution 46/91 in 1991 which sets the principles for older persons. It encouraged governments to adopt five principles in their policies and programmes to ensure or guarantee: 1) Independence, with access to basic needs and a safe and adaptable living environment; 2) Participation, with full participation in social life and in formulating policies and in their implementation with the ability to unite themselves; 3) Care, with access to services along with family and social care; 4) Self-fulfilment, with opportunities to develop their full potential; and 5) Dignity, with ability to live in dignity and security along with fair treatment regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background or other social status. Our national policies and programmes should have those principles reflected in them to bring changes in the quality of life of the older people. At the same time, an intergenerational approach should be encouraged, because ageing is not an issue only of the people who are ageing. The younger generation has much to learn and benefit from the wisdom and experience of the older people.

Maybe in today's world, more than poverty, the worst is the undignified life that people live. In many societies and communities of the world, older people are treated with utmost care, attention and dignity. And this is equally happening in cultures where resources are limited, which demonstrates that care, attention and respect do not require affluence as a pre-condition although the need for state intervention through social policies and programming cannot be undermined. It is just a question of the mind-set. Maybe we have to revive our past traditions that respected age and considered it an asset that benefits rather than burdens society.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



September 16, 1963
Malaysia is created

The Federation of Malaya united with Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore to create Malaysia. Singapore left the arrangement two years later.

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QUOTABLE Quote



MANLY P HALL
(1901–1990)
CANADIAN-BORN AUTHOR, LECTURER, ASTROLOGER AND MYSTIC.

Once men died for truth, but now truth dies at the hands of men.