

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 5. Issue.2., 2018 (April-June)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

DISCOURSE OF IMAGES AND INSIGHTS – A PRESIDENT AND A DIPLOMAT

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ABSTRACT

K.R. Narayanan was the first Dalit President of India. He epitomizes the strong strands of unique feature of India – Unity and National ethos. Unity of India although is in question is of perception only. Regionalism, language, caste play their spoil sport. But science can construct an edifice discarding the unwanted and projecting the necessary. The insight of the Indian President is replete with concrete imagery for the visionary discourse for India.

Key Words: Discourse, images, insights, nationalism, reconstruction, India

K R Narayanan, the tenth president of India, was a diplomat. Born in a Dalit family he started his career as a Lecturer in English Literature, received training in Political Economy from Harold Laski at London School of Economics; he was in Indian Foreign Service. He was ambassador to the United States of America, Union Minister for Science and Technology and Foreign Affairs and Vice President before he took the oath as President.

K. R. Narayanan is the author of such works as *Non-alignment in Contemporary International Relations* (1981), *India and America – Essays in Understanding* (1984), *Images and Insights* (1987) and *Nehru and His Vision* (1999). The book, *Images and Insights*, deals with issues of national interest whereas the other books are on diplomacy and international relations as their titles suggest. The book *Images and Insights* is Narayanan's anthology of selected articles, lectures, and essays. This is a collection of reflections as well as insights on unity of India, nationalism, secularism, science and role of universities.

The unity of India has been a dream, an ideal and the focus of many an intellectual discussion. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, champion of the underprivileged sections of the Indian society, questioned the possibility of unity in a nation consisting of people divided into several castes and sub castes. Narayanan brands this 'fragmentation' of Indian social system as a "broken mirror".¹ The complex problem of Indian unity is to visualize its totality in a small piece and to consider the whole as compilation of several small units. He says that though national leaders believed in the unity of India, they did not deny the existence of steep differences within the country. However, they emphasized on the fundamental unity of India and encouraged its promotion. Narayanan says, "For Jawaharlal Nehru, India had been, throughout her history, haunted by a dream, the dream of unity, and he called ceaselessly upon all Indians to have that dream realized in practice."² He finds solace that after several general elections, five year plans and some wars India has maintained its unity especially in times of turmoil and threats to its national security. In spite of this there lingers a 'quivering uncertainty surrounding this reality' in the form of divisive forces and there is an undercurrent of apprehension about the future of India.

Regionalism, linguistic differences, and discordant caste and state relations are factors affecting the Indian unity. Narayanan says that Indians have the advantage of geographic, cultural and ecological diversity, which may in course of time blunt the edges of difference and weave it into a seamless society thus preventing it from further splintering. English language has played its role as a unifier and leveler in Indian society. Sharp socio-political differences exist at the lower level making it imperative for the government to enforce meaningful socio-economic reforms. Writing in 1979 Narayanan dismisses the predictions of some western political philosophers that India will be disintegrated by 2024 as a pitiable and dismal forecast.

Narayanan's observations on some aspects of Indian reality are very insightful: there is a routine allegiance to the civil state; public exhortations have been robbed of their conviction; that many reformist and revolutionary movements have been led by the elite and they have not come from the grass roots in spite of several isolated local initiatives. The process of modernization and democracy has accentuated the caste system instead of annihilating it which made the Indian social fabric porous. However, the Nehruvian measures of using legislative power and police power to some extent stopped the reverse momentum.

Speaking about the problem of minorities especially of Muslims Narayanan opines that until the problem is addressed comprehensively there will be disturbances in the unity and stability of India; there will be increased chances of external forces exploiting the situation stoking the fires of division: "What could lead to misgivings is an intolerant or obscurantist attitude on the part of the majority community and the inability of the government to give protection in such situations."³

Policy makers as well as people should learn from 'historic weaknesses' and any national policy on internal or external issues should be designed in such a way that it incorporates diverse views and ideologies. Indian policy is diluted by the diversion of energies to non-issues by faction ridden party system and dissipation of regional interests on narrow and motivated platforms of self interest. The current political scenario instead of being fragmented into several groups and subgroups can be consolidated in to a bi party or tri party system.

Narayanan observes that in the long history of India, for the first time, an economic aspect is added to the dream of Indian unity. Every section and every group of the Indian union are trying to get a chunk from the large economic meat of the nation. The economic reforms and liberalization of the nineties have ushered an unprecedented economic revolution to make an economic giant out of India. Above all, the belief of the people in their own sufficiency, the essential Indianness, is the key to the Indian Unity. They should have faith in their future and the machinery of the government. Otherwise, Narayanan cautions, there is always the danger of minor irritants assuming monstrous proportions. This was witnessed in the case of the Punjab and the North Eastern states of India. He says, "It is necessary to lift the minds and emotions of the people to larger and nobler causes which are vital to the future of the nation."⁴

Nationalism

The spirit and concept of nationalism is the guiding force for any society. However, many a nationalism has carried 'the unlovely form' as in the case of Japan, Soviet Russia and China. Narayanan terms this 'black role' of nationalism as outdated and draws a demarcation between the nationalism of a large industrial and military power in the international theatre and the nationalism of the new underdeveloped nations struggling to become independent units or consolidate their newly won independence.

Narayanan states that nationalism in the Indian context should be understood in the sense of a 'constructive and liberating force'. It can best be described as a movement of people towards national independence, self-respect and enlightenment which have liberated India. The idea of reviving past glory and revamping of the existing social structure is implicit in the Indian concept of nationalism and its synthesis of renaissance and reformation. Nationalism derived its social and economic content from the conditions of society; its technological changes from the British and reform policies from the Indian National Congress; spiritual force from the unique method of struggle adopted by it. Indian nationalism not only acted as an instrument of political freedom but also as a voice of social and economic revolution. As Nehru observed political freedom without economic freedom is ineffective. The Five Year Plans of Nehru governments have been formulated with this objective in view.

Narayanan makes a comparison between Nehruvian and Gandhian nationalism. Gandhiji's social and democratic aspect of development, slightly different from Nehru's absolute socialism, tries to eradicate poverty, disease and ignorance through self-help and self-discipline. His 'constructive programme' tried to address the root causes of the social and economic perils. It sought at improvement in the condition of the masses. Narayanan sees the ideas of Gandhiji and Nehru as the life breath of Indian nationalism.

Secularism

The historic genius of India has been more of accommodation than assimilation, more of toleration than absorption, more of coexistence than extinguishing of differences. India is the one exception where neither Islam has been overpowered by India nor India has been absorbed into the Islamic fold. Nehru responding to Andre Malraux's query about the most difficult problem he faced said: "The problem of building a just social order by peaceful means, and of creating a secular state in a religious society."⁵

Without modernization, India would always be a 'cow dung palace' as in the words of Ambedkar. In spite of the ideals for which the constitution of India stands for – there seems to be a diabolic resurgence of communalism and superstitious practices. Narayanan opines that it is more dangerous when it is practiced by the so called educated lot than by the illiterate people. It is surprising that the youth of today while happily aping western dance, music, fashion and gadgetry - cling unconsciously to many feudalistic practices in their daily lives as well as the vital areas of life like marriages, divorces, treatment of women and the lower castes.

Narayanan adds the term, caste-ridden democracy to Nehru's term, poverty-stricken socialism and points out the incompatibility of caste-ridden society with a secular state. The ugliness of the caste system, caste psychology, caste polarization and caste dynamics has added considerable venom to the specter of communalism. The guiding principle of secularism of Indian version is that all men are equal before God and that in judging a man's merit the communal or caste label attached to him has no significance or relevance. Amartya Sen notes, "Indian secularism has tended to emphasize neutrality in particular, rather than prohibition in general."⁶

Science: Of Human Progress and Enterprise

The Scientific Policy Resolution of Indian Parliament of 1958 states that it is necessary for India - with its traditions of scholarship, thought and cultural legacy - to participate in the march of science which is mankind's 'greatest enterprise' today. Narayanan advocates Nehruvian scientific humanism and Leon Trotsky's threefold structure of technical mastery of nature, social constructiveness, and psychological self-education. He says, "...it is important to reflect upon the philosophy of scientific humanism as a practical guide for survival in the nuclear-missile-satellite age."⁷ Narayanan wants the scientists and technologists to become philosophers and devote their energies and mind towards the larger concerns of the society. The technological despotism will be more hideous and totalitarian than in the past unless India humanizes science while developing it fully.

Narayanan implores political and scientific leadership to develop mutual cooperation; it needs identification of areas of scientific research which are beneficial and detrimental to the society. He observes that channeling of resources towards technologies of mass destruction is the reason for the delayed development of world society and the new trend of technological imperialism. Narayanan emphasizes the recovery of eco and user friendly traditional technologies which have played a role in the development of Asian and other third world societies. Development of fundamental sciences and their applications should go together and a balance is necessary between science and society, technology and culture, knowledge and psychology and knowledge and values. Unless science and technology are used to save the needs and values of the society, it would not be possible to lead a healthy life.

Schools and Teachers

Narayanan desires the strengthening of educational system which would contribute to the development of the nation. The objective of free universal compulsory education can be fully realized only when there is sufficient infrastructure. The school should not be treated as just another building but as an institution for grass root development. Schools should extend and incorporate midday meals schemes and programmes of health. Schools cannot be expected to play a purposeful role unless teachers have the power and status as instruments of social transformation. He says, "...Competence, dedication and social motivation

have also to be acquired in sufficient measures. Well-conceived training and orientation programmes directed towards the enlarged role of the teacher in society are essential”⁸ Education system needs to be revamped to give learners problem solving abilities from the beginning.

University and Society

India is a land where human mind has soared to heights of thought and plumbed the depths of the soul and it is where fundamental questions are asked on the origin and nature of the universe and the predicament of humanity. The tradition of knowledge was nurtured in the form of *gurukulas*, *ashrams*, and *viswavidyalayas*. However, Narayanan observes, “knowledge in this elevated form was the preserve of a creative minority at the uppermost layer of society though a few from below often managed to slip to the top through the meshes of the social network.”⁹ Even today, gaps exist between the educated and the ordinary people in spite of popular democracy and socialist practices.

Narayanan looks at the university as a sphere of freedom where opinions and ideas interact to participate in the development of the nation. However there is an alienation of Indian universities from the society due to lack of effective relationship between the university and industry. He laments that except the specialized institutes of science and technology Indian universities are not contributing to the growth of science and technology. He says, “In the famous Silicon Valley... the genesis of the great electronics revolution centered on the university – the University of Stanford. ...the electronics industry developed out of the intellectual and productive interaction and collaboration between industries and the university.”¹⁰

In this book, *Images and Insights* Narayanan creates the past, present and future of socio-economic image of the nation through his insights about unity and nationalism. He explains the ideation in an analytic manner. His views on caste and its ramifications in Indian society are pragmatic and progressive. Narayanan is persuasive about a casteless society where humanism would be guiding spirit of the nation.

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