

## **India: A paradigm for managing complexity**

*C.P. Ravindranathan*

“India is a massive piston that the British had dragged out and held in position by brute force. The Indians who had taken over were clinging to it with aching arms. There is not a hook or rope anywhere to secure the piston; they lack the muscle to hold on. Inch by inch it is slipping in. One day our strength will fail and the piston will slam back with a tremendous roar, plunging India again into the anarchy and bloodshed of pre-British times”.

*Nirad Chaudhury*

Nirad Chaudhury, who was one of the finest writers in English during his lifetime, chose the telling metaphor of the massive piston to describe India's complexity. The elements of complexity here are of the garden variety: the structure of the system, its behaviour and interaction with other systems – in this case the hapless operators. Not the least, the hypothesis that complexity resides as much in the eye of the beholder as it does in the structure and behaviour of a system itself is also borne out by the metaphor.

What makes India complex should be obvious enough. There is the bigness of size, the seventh largest in the world and, in population, the second largest with 1.1 billion. The effect of size is vastly accentuated by the diversity that is the quintessential aspect of India – of geography, ethnicity, religious faiths and observances, languages, social groups, economic and social conditions and traditions of all kinds. The political diversity of India is incarnated in 28 states mostly constituted on the basis of language; there are over a dozen major languages with indigenous scripts and literatures of several centuries old. Apart from English, which is a link language, along with Hindi, there is the vast number of dialects in addition. The country has the world's largest population of Hindus and Sikhs, it also has the second largest population of Muslims.

Now despite India's disproof of a whole range of qualifying criteria for national coherence, the country has had an overall identity for centuries – which the ancient Greeks called Indica – an identity as much territorial as cultural and social. Speaking of territorial identity there is a geography of India that Indians have carried in their psyche through centuries, comprising specific places and physical features of the land from the Himalayas to the seas – 'himavat setu paryanta' – as part of their sacred lore. Above all, in its social organisation, with the caste system as its mainstay, India has had not just a country-wide institution, but a shared way of life for ages. That overarching social institution could coexist comfortably with other religions – partly making inroads into them.

Now, as you may know, the overwhelming reality of India before the British colonial rule had been not so much the state, but the self-sustaining social order – caste system, the distinct form of community groups of jati and a firmly-entrenched social ethic embodying normative and prescriptive elements which the state had to uphold but which did not depend on the state power to prevail. Such a complex social order with its four basic dimensions of social stratification, cultural heterogeneity, caste hierarchy and religious plurality, to quote the Indian sociologist, T.K. Oommen, kept Indian society intact over centuries as kingdoms and empires made their entries and exists. The function of the state, to the extent that it performed its proper political role, was to protect the social order, as said before, but the social order itself was hardly ever seriously threatened at anytime. (In a trenchant analysis, an Indian sociologist has described the traditional Indian society as resembling a sponge colony that had reached a cul-de-sac in evolution). The pan-Indian empires which established their sway over India unified the country into an imperium, notably the Mauryas in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and the Muslim Moghuls in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, but none of these came to supplant the social order which both defined and secured India through history.

As for the British colonial rule, it was its distinct achievement to have created a fully fledged state in India, to cite the political scientist Sunil Khilnani. While that also goes for British colonial rule elsewhere, what was remarkable in this instance was the

configuration of the state that the British built in India – with a body of laws, a three-tiered bureaucracy which even Peter Drucker could admire as having anticipated the knowledge society and a suzerain equation with the Indian princely states, which accounted for a quarter of the country’s population. As Khilnani also argues, to have taken over and used the British-created state and establishing it at the core of Indian society has been the singular achievement of Indians. Perhaps he exaggerates; this phenomenon has also occurred in all post-colonial countries with varying degrees of success – the African example being particularly relevant. What perhaps distinguishes India, however, is the comprehensive way in which Indians have sought to utilise the instrumental role of the state – in building democracy, fostering secularism, pursuing modernisation and promoting economic development.

The Indian nationalists as they set about drafting the country’s constitution (1947 to 1949) had not merely to preserve the useful and well-tested features of the system left by the British, but also to redesign and transform it. In doing so, they addressed the fundamental questions of Indian polity and made choices that would serve to make the new republic a paradigm for managing systemic complexity. If, throughout the freedom struggle leading political figures had spoken of India’s different nationalities, – the national poet Rabindranath Tagore said that India trying to build a nation was like Switzerland trying to build a navy – and significant autonomy had been promised to the states, the constitution they drafted set up a strong central authority, not only retaining the inherited powers of the colonial state but endowing it with the potential to assume more powers through enabling provisions. This was regarded as essential for the unity, defence and nation-building of the new India. Another fundamental choice was to make India a secular state, a historic decision in the wake of the grievous experience of the civilisational state’s partition on the basis of religion. Equality and guarantee of fundamental rights were another constitutional stipulation – in the face of the gross inequalities and denial of rights that were so much part of the Indian system. By way of policy and political praxis, India’s political class also opted for a positive state with a commitment to economic development, social change, redistributive justice and an independent foreign policy, in later days based on non-alignment.

If, unlike many other newly independent states India was by and large able to live upto such momentous political choices in its constitution and political process, all that was not merely due to the dominance of the party of the freedom struggle – the Indian National Congress – and the transformational leadership of the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Equally important was how the political system rested on a kind of perturbed equilibrium among different imperatives of the Indian political enterprise and how trade-offs and concessions figured constantly within the space for political action.

Two examples : in regard to the rural economic order involving the sensitive issues of land legislation and social and economic reform, the power of the state came to be vested not with the centre but with the state legislature and governments. This meant more pragmatism and avoidance of ill-considered policies – indeed there was a downside to this as well, evidenced by the low agricultural productivity and retarded rural development of India, compared to other Asian countries like China and South Korea which could accomplish the much-needed land reforms and their benefits. For another, fundamental rights and equality of opportunity could have led to persons favoured by birth becoming the beneficiaries, and at the same time, structural inequalities in society due to the legacy of the caste system continuing. So positive discrimination, specially reservation of jobs in public service and of educational opportunities for lower castes, became a prominent feature of the country, making it one of the most expensive practioners of affirmative action.

While social justice and national solidarity have been safeguarded through these provisions, in such preoccupation with accommodating various and often competing interests and socio-political impulses and groups embodying them, the Indian system is condemned to lose its traction. But, democracy has been the gainer. And without democracy the multitude of demands from the ordinary citizens have little possibility of bringing their weight to bear on the Indian state.

Yet the capacity of the Indian state in this regard has been tested more and more in the last few years with manifold consequences. There has been an increasing contest among the interests involved – land-owning farmers vs tenant farmers, lower castes vs higher castes, majority Hindus vs minorities, locals vs outsiders in employment in states and sometimes states themselves pitted against each other on shared resources like water and energy. Political parties have sprung up around these issues, some of which having already grown into influential regional or sectarian formations, as the national parties are increasingly hard put to reconcile the national with the local or secular with the communal within their own ranks. And as these regional and caste-based parties have grown, coalition governments have become more and more the normal feature in the states and the centre. Coalition governments at the centre, which have been the rule since 1996, have often had to contend with self-debilitating problems, from incoherence in policy to the ever-present threat of instability. For the foreseeable future, coalition rule at the national level appears to be the likely prospect. While governmental policy and action are bound to lack in focus and predictability as a result, the rise of regional and caste-based parties also underlines the dynamism of Indian politics and the citizens' insistence on the legitimacy of governments.

The big issue in Indian politics, however, is between the secularists (Congress Party, communist and some regional parties who among themselves contend for power) and the anti-secularists (BJP and its adjunct RSS, although the former tends to make tactical accommodation with secularism in view of electoral considerations). Since this contest arises from the basic hypothesis of the Indian polity (on occasions like the episode of Babri Masjid having the potential to create grave political crises and apocalyptic violence) it is a reality that India has to live with. For India like the US, has a political culture which is deeply influenced by religious traditions as well as a secular political culture (Robin Archer). It is important that the Indian political system does give sufficient scope for the juxtaposition of these “two powerful sub-cultures” (Ibid). Each of these have their limits in Indian politics, though on balance Hindu religion-based nationalism that the BJP espouses is bound to be tempered, if not significantly constrained, by the salience of caste-based and regional parties.

In facing systemic threats, of which there have been several in the last few years, the Indian polity has so far found in its constitution and laws sufficient scope and flexibility to deal with them – a variety of instrumental roles have been tried from substantive administrative measures to judicial intervention or constitutional amendment. And as the final resort the state has also used its coercive resources – of which it happens to have not an inconsiderable amount, as in dealing with the secessionists in the Punjab and in recent years in Kashmir.

As mentioned earlier, an important part of the Indian paradigm of managing complexity has been the positive role in the economy that the state had chosen from the beginning. At independence there was no clarity on the policy that the state had to adopt to develop the economy, although there was a body of opinion that favoured free enterprise and a mere facilitative role for the state. The policy that prevailed, for more reasons than one, however, was that of a directive role for the state which morphed into a policy-formulating role for the technicians or economists in the Planning Commission and later into a joint enterprise of politicians, planners and bureaucrats, leading subsequently to state control of the commanding heights of the economy. This policy has had mixed results for economic development; five year plans have been an integrative influence, but in securing high rates of growth and reducing poverty planning was largely a failure, for a variety of reasons, the most important being the role of the bureaucracy as a sub-centre of power which also explains the dysfunctionality of the Indian state in much of state-citizen interface. The gradual move of the Indian policy to a liberalised economy since 1991 has improved the country's economic performance, but it has also created problems like increasing inequality between classes and regions which in its turn could undermine the stability of the Indian system, unless effectively addressed. That India's combination of an increasingly liberalised economy with vigorous democratic politics has not yet created integrative bonds strong enough to avert anti-state politics is a fact – movements of secession in regions like Kashmir and of extremist communist movements like the Naxalites are proof. The latter, pursuing armed struggle has an increasingly visible

presence in states like Jharkhand, Orissa and Chattisgarh. Besides these are the smaller, less visible efforts to resist particular actions of the state or manifestations of state power, “the million mutinies”, as V.S. Naipaul has called them. Their point of view has been powerfully articulated by the writer Arundhati Roy “the Indian state is not a state that has failed. It is a state that has succeeded in what it set out to do. It has been ruthlessly efficient in the way it has apportioned India’s resources – its land, its water, its resources and redistributed to a favoured few. Again “India does not live in her villages. India dies in her villages, India gets kicked around in her villages”. Now it is not only continuance of economic development at sustainable high growth rates and inclusive economic growth that would effectively address the challenge to the Indian state from these movements, big and small, but clear policy initiatives and measures to make the Indian state more efficient, responsive and caring – facing up to a well-known commentator’s indictment that Indian state is everywhere except where you need it.

Two such structural and long-term measures are by way of substantial devolution of political power from the federal and state levels right down to the villages under the innovated traditional institution of the Panchayati Raj – currently under a steady and sometimes restrained pace of implementation, it involves 250,000 elected institutions of local self-government; 3.2 million elected members and 1.2 million elected women members; “it has ushered an astonishing social revolution on a scale that is without precedent in history or parallel in the contemporary world”, in the words of Mani Shankar Aiyar, one of the architects of the scheme. The other is the enactment by the federal government of the Right to Information Act which enables citizens to seek information on the reasons or background of any executive decision of the government – a radical measure of citizen empowerment, although encountering formidable obstacles in implementation in these early days. The Act is at the heart of governance and few issues in India figure as high public concern or merit as much serious attention as governance, which involves, in particular, corruption. And the problem of corruption, in turn, needs to be addressed both on its demand and supply side, commencing with more effective rules and enforcement on financing of elections. Above all, eradication of corruption and establishment of good governance, require a

instructed, vigilant and caring middle class which is yet to become an integral and functioning part of Indian democracy. Much as the Indian middle class is variously estimated up to 260 million, they have been largely apathetic to questions of governance, while not failing to ensure that state policies broadly favour their economic interests. Indian masses, whose poverty and problems receive but marginal attention, retaliate, as it were, by making their own electoral choice as majority every time – which these days is increasingly for coalition governments, at the risk of political instability.

Now let me end where I began : the massive piston in Nirad Chaudhury's imagination that is India. By all evidence, the Indians have been able to operate the massive piston well enough; the piston itself has only gained in mass and efficiency. Perhaps Chaudhury's error is fundamental – using seductive metaphors to describe realities which are almost always complex and messy. There are better counsels than metaphors in social sciences.

\* \* \*