

“Beware the Ends of June”

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Brexit, NSG, the Emergency: three unrelated events combining over that last June weekend, in one imperative lesson: put your house in order. Brexit shows the great, sudden ways of change in the world, and their effects on us; Seoul/Tashkent underlines how tough it is to secure our international interests, especially in face of China's power and purposes; above all, the June 25, 1975 Emergency, and how easily it was imposed, warns us of our internal vulnerabilities. Typifying our refusal to learn, it illustrates 2 particularly pernicious defects, since greatly expanded; the primacy of personal factors in decision-making, and the subjection of instruments of state to those in power.

Whatever its other aspects, our NSG bid served one great purpose: demonstrating that China is not helpful to us,(putting it mildly). How so many Indians happily devise excuses for China's most adverse actions, even blaming ourselves, is a baffling peculiarity. China's build-up of Pakistan's nuclear, and general, military capabilities is aimed directly at us; yet apologists would let Beijing brush this away as 'a thing of the past,' as though something permanently damaging can be called past. Granted, we handled China clumsily; but China's current ambitions- and continuing disregard of, if not hostility to, our interests, are another matter. Seeking positive relations is a sensible policy, but it does not- must not- exclude the fundamental reality demanding determination of policy as a whole: two neighbours have major claims on our territory, if these ever erupt in major conflict, nobody will help us. We would have to cope alone; we are hopelessly unready, and will be only more so if the defects exposed by the Emergency keep multiplying as they long have been. Only efficiency, the power and means to get on in a world of advanced states, in a word modern-mindedness, can serve us, but trends lead the other way.

The great commitment at independence to democracy entailed modern practices, total respect for institutions, due process of executive action as well as law, objective pursuit of national interest transcending personal or group advantage, in sum, the use of state power for state purposes. The Emergency's contempt for all that reflected a wider failing. Ever since, we have been reverting fast to our old, historically disastrous ways of attending to our affairs: everything is personal- and anti- modern.

The Emergency was cabal-contrived to serve one individual and party, feeling threatened by the admittedly dubious opinion of one idiosyncratic law officer. That the perpetrating party refuses to recognize the enormity of its 1975 betrayal of our democracy symbolises its inability to address reality. Today's voters don't bother about the Congress's Emergency responsibility; if only they could say ' we have changed, we give you new ideas,' they could regain vitality, and appeal to people. So what if the

Congress prefers suicide? Its willful blindness is as harmful as our obscurantist forces; democracy needs nationally competitive parties. And our democracy greatly needs nurturing.

Unintentional challenges to it feed the intentional; both are more active and dangerous than we seem to realise. The forces amongst despising democracy, or predisposed to authoritarianism, profit when ordinary citizens feel likewise, if only from frustration with non-performance. Too many of us are law-evading, partly because laws are oppressively out-dated and oppressively operated, mainly because of our underdeveloped civic sense. An unruly citizenry inflicted with an increasingly sloppy, harassing and corrupt state apparatus, serves only democracy's enemies.

Yet we are simultaneously making almost unprecedented advances into modernity. The imaginative deftness of this Government's- i.e. this Prime Minister's- initiatives in our international interactions could lead us away from the internally-obsessed backwater of our obscurantist tendencies, making us a major force in the shaping of a new world. There have been heartening signs of a practical awareness of our national security needs. Such awareness needs instilling in our wider national consciousness, above all in various parts of government itself. There is the rub: we cannot achieve anything abroad unless we function efficiently -and think modernly. Our domestic scene shows an alarming disconnect from our global challenges and opportunities.

Always obsessively inward-looking, most Indians are oblivious to the benefits of opening up economically or intellectually, many positively detesting such thoughts. The kind of thinking nowadays obstructing both nationally needed decisions and any approach to efficiency, also encourages those predilections for darbari rule which facilitated the Emergency, and have since burgeoned. So many deplorable happenings exemplify this daily, elaboration should be unnecessary. Traditional bad habits are blatantly returning, undermining stability, progress, all hopes of being a part, and not a victim, of the modern world. All institutions- the executive elected or permanent, legislatures, judiciary, not least our Fourth Estate, have distorted themselves; the instruments of state are too dysfunctional even to provide basic needs, even law- and-order, leave alone schooling, health-services, transport, even water, while those supposedly controlling these instruments misuse them for personal or group benefit. Our State Chief Ministers behave like dictators, powerful connections literally get away with murder, mafia-like groups flout law, imposing whims by violence. We all see this, but won't see the obvious consequences,

Bizarre cults, vicious outbursts of violence, preaching of prejudice- ugly things happen everywhere, but mostly as aberrations from decent norms. To ignore-worse, to excuse- the spread of such corrosion, destroys norms, reflecting that aversion to modernity that generates our recidivism. Usually classified by socio-economic backwardness, Third World countries also manifest primitive governance. Despite the Emergency, India long seemed a proud exception, consolidating ourselves among First World democracies, such as there are, on Enlightenment principles. Too much keeps happening that is dragging us back to Third World ways.

Vast differences notwithstanding, today's India also resembles the situation depicted in George Dangerfield's once-famous "Strange Death of Liberal England." *"Suddenly there lay before us, in darkness and confusion, a labyrinth of contradictory paths. Revolutionary methods appeared, but not revolutionary*

intentions; distrust of and respect for political democracy were hopelessly intermingled; the Government was simultaneously attacked and defended, and by the same people; reason warred with instinct...This was not a record of great events but of little ones, working with the pointless industry of termites. Indefinite as these forces were, alien one to another, inarticulate at times, unconscious even-- yet they turned into....rebellious energy..." There, Enlightenment values failed to adjust to change; here, they never extended beyond a thin crust, which has been becoming increasingly irrelevant to our rising political forces and processes, but they underpinned both our democracy and our modernity. Both are as threatened by now-rampant retrogressive tendencies as they were by the Emergency. Never more than a fragile seedling, Liberal India inevitably had such difficult soil, its death could hardly be called strange, but, oh, how infinitely sad.

(This is the unabridged version of an article "Bad Habits Return to Haunt" by K. S. Bajpai, which appeared in the opinion page of the Indian Express on July 9, 2016)

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