

The state of the Indian union

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India is celebrating its 72nd Republic Day on January 26. Flaunting its status as the world's most populous democracy, it nevertheless continues to drift away from the ideals of the drafters of the declaration of independence who had resolved in their 'Purna Swaraj' declaration as far back as 1930 that India was to be completely independent.

India was supposed to be a secular, sovereign and democratic republic as per that momentous declaration. It is eye-opening to see how far it has really drifted from that idealistic vision after 72 years.

A union of disparate nationalities, India lives in several centuries at the same time as per Arundhati Roy. At one level it aspires to lead the pack as a modern democracy, at home with the technology driven information age, while at another level it panders to the Vedantic age of apocryphal tales and myths as an anocracy. The India of Dadabhoi Naoriji, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Subhash Chandra Bose, Gandhi and Nehru has been taken over by the likes of Modi and Mohan Bhagwat. From a socialism tinged democracy to an authoritarian spirited democracy, it trudges haltingly towards a totalitarian rule of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) under the BJP's political cover.

According to Hannah Arendt there are two characteristics of totalitarianism. One is the ideological indoctrination of a large unorganised mass of people and the other being the demonisation of undesirable minorities referred to as the other groups. India fits the bill on both the scores. RSS cadres are on the increase in India with greater membership of minorities like Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs through pressure tactics and inducements. Cooption and demonisation go hand in hand. The notorious statement of Indian parliamentarian Dr Subramanian Swamy, in the context of infamous Citizen Amendment Act when he stated that "we know where the Muslim population is large, there is always trouble... if Muslims become more than 30 percent, that country is in danger," is emblematic of the totalitarian approach of the RSS-BJP combo.

Totalitarian movements according to Arendt tend to extend beyond political affiliations to other groups like paramilitaries, unions for labourers, students and lawyers sharing the same ideology. In India this totalitarian proclivity is personified by the Sangh Parivar's violent spirit nourished by the RSS's Hindutva ideology. It is the same militant spirit that led Uma Bharti, former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, to say that, "today is the most blissful day of my life", after the demolition of the historic Babri Masjid at Ayodhya with the help of the Hindu Karsevaks.

A tour d' horizon of the state of the Indian Union would show a progressively weakening national cohesion despite the totalitarian glue of RSS-BJP. Research shows that, while intra-group cohesion is on the increase in keeping with the totalitarian ideology of RSS, inter-group cohesion is on the wane. While Hindus are being wooed through attractive slogans of a revivalist nationalism towards the RSS fold, minorities like Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs are being pushed out. According to research by Neel Madhay and Alishan Jafri, 300 attacks on Christians were conducted by Hindu zealots under RSS influence in 2021 alone. Most recently, a conclave of various Hindutva groups has called for mass exodus and genocide of Muslims on patterns similar to the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar.

Indian human security indices display a precipitous drop under the BJP's government since 2014. India has been demoted from a free democracy to "partially free democracy" status by Freedom House in its annual report in 2021. The Economist Intelligence Unit was less sparing as it placed India at 53rd position in its Democracy Index as a "flawed democracy". In a similar vein, the V Dem Institute's latest report on democracy relegated India to the status of an "elected autocracy". The country's ranking plummeted further to 142nd position from the previous 141st on the World Press Freedom Index 2021 prepared by the RSF. In the Rule of Law Index by the World Justice Project, India's position fell from 66th in 2014 to 69th in 2020. In the Cato Institute's Human Freedom Index, India fell from 75th ranking in 2015 to 111th in 2020. Another dubious distinction in 2021 is India's ranking as the topmost dangerous country for women in the world.

In the WEF's Global Economic Competitiveness Index India slipped to 68th position in 2020 whereas in the WEF's Human Capital Index, the country moved from 78th position in 2013 to 116th position in 2021. Placed in the "mostly unfree" category, India stood at 121st position in the Heritage Foundation's Global Economic Freedom Index 2021. On the Global Social Capital Index also India stands at 121st position behind Myanmar and Ethiopia.

The cumulative impact of the above has been a decline in social cohesion, democratic freedoms and economic performance in India. As a result the Indian rupee is likely to end the year as Asia's worst performing currency as per a Bloomberg report. The trade deficit has also risen to an all-time high – \$23 billion in November with a recent outflow of \$587 million of foreign stock.

Instead of pausing to reflect on the downside of the divisive ideology of exclusion, the Hindutva-inspired Indian ruling junta refuses to smoke the peace pipe. It has recently refused to participate in the Saarc conference, a forum that hopes to increase trade amongst South Asian countries from the measly five percent to 25 percent.

As the largest country in South Asia, India has failed not only its own people but the rest of the region as well, due to an inability to privilege geo-economics over geopolitics. The state of the Indian Union therefore calls for serious introspection instead of celebration in the interest of regional peace and development.