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“An Authority-Failings by Prime Ministers” by S L Rao

Writings about past Prime Ministers tend to focus on their achievements, and at times touch on their failings. Here I propose to look only at their mistakes and their failings.Thus I shall not dwell on Pandit Nehru’s essential role in building and respecting democratic institutions in India, crafting an extraordinary foreign policy that insulated India from Great Power rivalry; or Shatri’s role in leading India to victory in war with Pakistan; of Indira Gandhi in tackling a massive refugee influx due to Pakistan Army atrocities in East Pakistan and supporting East Bengali insurgents to create their own nation of Bangladesh; of Rajiv Gandhi initiating the information technology revolution and the first hesitant steps towards rconomic reforms; Narasimha Rao in dramatically changing economic direction of India from state control towards market economy; Vajpayee in offering friendship to Pakistan and beginning the process of public sector disinvestment; Manmohan Singh in getting India accepted as a nuclear power an so ensuring uranium supplies.

What emerges is that India has never taken easily to a democratic Cabinet form of government. The Prime Minister’s opinions are final. There is little dissent even in Cabinet. When the party in power has an authoritarian Prime Minister and few talented Ministers, as is the case with the present BJP government, mistakes are made and decisions are often rolled back.

Since independence India has been plagued by frequent demands by Pakistan for a United Nations monitored plebiscite in Jammu and Kashmir, committed to by Nehru. J & K was to choose between acceding to India or Pakistan. Pakistan tried wars and “civilian” infiltration to win J & K. India defeatedall of them. India then declared that J & K was an integral part of India. Without offer of a plebiscite the rancour in Pakistan might have been less. In taking the dispute to the U.N. after removing Pakistani invaders from much of Kashmir in 1948, Nehru coloured Pakistan’s perceptions of India for decades.

It is said that in 1946 the then Great Powers offered Nehru a permanent seat for India in the new United Nations Security Council. Instead he asked for it to be offered to Chna. For decades since, China has used its veto in the Security Council to obstruct many matters of interest to India.

India has since Nehru’s time hesitated to use recognition of Taiwan which China regards as an integral part of China as a counter in other negotiatiosn with China.

When China overran Tibet, India recognized Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. If that had not been so categorical, India could have used Tibet s a bargaining counter with China in later years.

In the China war in 1962 Ibdia was was ill-served by India’s belligerence and poor leadership. The Army was very ill-equipped due to Nehru’s appointing his close friend, VK Krishna Menon as Defence Minister. Menon deprived the Army of essential supplest for a war at high altitude. General Thapar to lead the Army at war, superseding other officers, is said to have led to India’s comprehensive drubbing.

Indira Gandhi persuaded Nehru as P.M. when she was made Congess President, to dismiss the first elected Communist government in India in Kerala. This led to a spate of such dismissals of state governments by her and her successors in later years. It was controlled only when the Supreme Court intervened to prevent this misuse of Constitutional power.

The mystery of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose’s death or disappeasrancve is unresolved. Bengal police files suggest that his family was under surveillance till 1972.

Indira Gandhi is widely believed to have by her policies put the Indian economy back by 20 years. Her leftist orientation severely strained india’s relations with the USA. She was inherently suspicious of other politicians and hungry for power. This reflected itself in nationalisation of banks and insurance to control all financial resources, get private enterprise hinder her control and regulate its every step, stifling entrepreneurship and innovation. She made the Indian economy inefficient and uncompetitive in the global economy. Even the Green Revolution which she initiated under C Subramaniam, had little follow-up by her or her successors.

She led the war that led to dismemberment of Pakistan and the formation of Bangladesh. Millions of Bangladeshis illegally entered and settled in India, creating a Muslim vote bank for her party.

During the Simla negotiations, after the stunning defeat of the Pakistan Army in War she chose not to settle the Kashmir dispute once and for all. Bhutto immediately initiated a nuclear programme (by theft). Pakistan could send soldiers into India and yet escape retaliation by brandishing the nuclear threat.

She surrounded herself with sycophants and imposed an Emergency to keep power in response to an unfavourable Court verdict. An “extra-Constitutional” authority, her son Sanjay, exercised vast powers over government. She tampered with the integrity of the democratic institutions (judiciary, legislatures, state governments) that her father had nurtured. TheCongress partywas converterd into a family business which it still is. This has had severe adverse effects on governance of India.

Narasinha Rao presided over the demolition of the mosque at Ayodhya, considerably heightening communal tensions in future years. His tenure witnessed the unseemly “cash for votes” scandal when money in payment for for M.P.s’ votes was displayed in Parliament.

Rajiv Gandhi presided over India’s the first major (Bofors) defense scandal (the jeep puirchase scandal by Menon under Nehru was small). Purchase pf Bofors guns siphoned big sums. It is still unsolved. Blatant use of connections by Snam Prtogetti represented by Quatterochi in contracts for new fertiliser plants was another landmark event.

Rajiv Gandhi also badly mishandled the LTTE threat to Sri Lanka. He initially sided with the Tamils. Then he responded to Sri Lankan pleas for help and sent the Army to root the LTTE out. The Indian Army returned in ignomy.

Rajov passed a law to reverse the Supreme Court order on payment of alimony to a Muslim woman, Shah Bano. He thus halted progress to reverse gender discriminatory Muslim personal laws. He initiated the Ayodhya temple agitation by breaking the lock on Babri Masjid to allow Hindu worship there.

Succeeding him were the miscellaneous Prime Minsiters- V P Singh, Deve Gowda, Gujral and Chandrasekar. They presided over the decline of the Indian economy at a time of a world crisis caused by shortage and rising prices of crude oil.

Manmohan Singh’s term was of 10 years. For the second time in our history (after Indira Fandhi with her son Sanjay) India experienced the subjugation of the Prime Minister’s authority and leadership to an unelected person, the Congress President. It was more blatant than in Sanjay’s case since his authority was limited unlike that of Sonya Gandhi. Indira exercised Prime MInisterial decision making powers. In the xase of P.M. Singh it is alleged that confidential files were sent from the PM’s office to the Congress President for decision.

The Singh tenure saw the largest scams in Indian history. Ministers and officials were found to have made vast sums of money by favouring select firms and giving away government owned natural resources. There were other such allegations. More than one Cabinet Minister had to resign.

Vajpayee’s tenure witnessed no big failures. He could have stuck a Kashmir deal but for Musharaff’s vacillation.

Indian democracy panders to a single Leader as Prime Minister (unless he surrenders it to an outside authority). The democratic institutions of Legislatures and Cabinets, and now the independent fourth estate, are ignored or subverted with “loaves and fishes”. We must find ways to moderate such unbridled exercise of power by a Prime Minister. We need Ministers who are talented and Prime Ministers who will listen to all views.

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