

## India's Representative Government & Education

By William R. Polk

Visitors to Asia like to compare India to China: China is growing at 10% or about 1% faster than India; China has concentrated on hardware while India has specialized on software; China has a unified dictatorship governing a highly disciplined population while India has a representative government elected by complex jumble of assertive, often violent and divergent electors. As one of the Cabinet ministers told me, "our differences with China come down to this: When its government issues an order, things immediately happen; when we do, committees are formed and discussions begin."

So what is India and how does it hold together. The Constitution of January 26, 1950 tells us that India is a "socialist, secular, democratic republic," but no visitor sees that India. India is the most un-socialist state in the world today. It is hard to find an Indian who is not a capitalist. Even the very poor, among whom about three in each four Indians are counted, tries to engage in commerce and places no reliance on the state. "Secular?" Religion permeates Indian society to a degree unknown in Europe. But it is "democratic republic" that needs to be understood for that is feature most striking about modern India.

The structure of the Indian republic, arising from a multi-lingual, multi-cultural, ethnically diverse and politically fractured society is suitably multiform. Its 25 states and 7 union territories are both self-governing under their own parliaments and centrally controlled by federally appointed governors. They, in turn, elect 233 members of the upper house of the federal parliament, the Rajya Sabha. Meanwhile, all citizens have the right to vote and do so for 543 of the 545 members of the lower house, the Lok Sabha. They also elect India's president. The president then appoints the leader of the majority party of the Lok Sabha to be prime minister. Theoretically, the prime minister is the country's chief executive, but in practice he must negotiate with all of the leaders of the states and territories and the largely autonomous bureaucracy. That is only the beginning: he has also to conciliate the powerful special interest, ethnic and religious groups and try to placate or suppress armed dissidents who form about 20 insurgent or terrorist movements.

As though this were no complex enough, India is now making a determined effort to reconstitute one of its most attractive and important heritages, the councils, known as Panchayat-i Raj, that traditionally ran India's 550,000 virtually autonomous villages.

The Indian Constitution guarantees every Indian citizen not only freedom of speech, belief, assembly, migration, and choice of occupation but also free education. This guarantee has not been fulfilled. About half the Indian population is illiterate today. Almost as inhibiting to the functioning of Indian society is linguistic diversity. Indians divide themselves among 96 major languages of which 15 are official; even a relatively "minor" language, Gujarati, is spoken by more people than live in Spain. The closest

thing that Indians have to a common language is English, and English is recognized as the key to economic and social advancement.

This is partly because, European and American companies have taken advantage of lower wages and higher technology to subcontract many of their book-keeping and other tasks to Indians. A telephone request for information in an American city, for example, is apt to be answered by an operator in Hyderabad. This has made the learning of English the most popular aspect of Indian education; every Indian city has at least one “academy” where “Computer English” is taught.

Indians worry that their educational system fails to meet demand. The number of uneducated Indians runs into the hundreds of millions. This is crucial to the health of the Indian republic because as the Indian Nobel Prize laureate Amartya Sen has written, “An illiterate population has no use for democratic rights.” They vote but they cannot read. Yet the Indian government spends far less than the world average on education. About 65 million child laborers in city sweat shops have little time or energy for education. The situation is far worse in the countryside where more than 35 million children get no schooling at all.

Even where education is available, quality is very low. As the well-known social critic Patwant Singh has written, “Out of the 2 million graduates who qualify every year in India, only 5 per cent meet international standards.” Less than one tenth of the already small budget for education is spent on higher education. So the more gifted – some 19,000 in 2006 – leave India to study in Europe. The disparity between the democratic republic that India is determined to have and the ability of its citizens to participate in it will be perhaps the most severe challenge India will face in this century.

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