

## INDIA'S 60 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

The Tagoreans look back: *Sujit Bhattacharjee*

Late last year, a whole day seminar on "India's Tryst with Destiny" organised at the SOAS by the Tagoreans, the longest established Bengali cultural organisation in London, had participants and speakers leave the venue at the end of the day with no qualms over the difficult terrain that lay before the world's largest democracy, in the 21st century. Reflecting on the past 60 years, a panel of speakers and an audience that included a diplomat, a parliamentarian, economists, scholars, a former editor of the BBC (Bengali) World Service, an educationist and an author came together. Their views helped to piece together a picture of great promise, given the resoluteness of the Indian nation to face up to the challenges thrown up by a unipolar world and its concomitant uncertainties.

**Chief guest and Minister for Co-ordination at the Indian High Commission, Rajat Bagchi** set the tone for the discussions portraying India's journey since independence in a three pronged trajectory - economic: reflecting India's rise as a major economic power, political: that despite early misgivings, party politics and coalition governments had evolved into a national tradition, and social: the growing representation and assertion of their rights, by underprivileged groups in mainstream politics. Every major religion of the world had a place in India and had not merely survived but prospered - clear evidence of the truly multicultural nature of Indian society that had strengthened the nation, economically, socially and culturally.

Rabindranath Tagore a central figure in the lives of Indians, and very much so with the Tagoreans, figured early on in the seminar. **Scholar and translator of Bengali literature, Dr. William Radice** in leading the discussion on the theme, "Tagore: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow", reflected on Tagore's changing reputation with the changing times since independence. There was Rabindranath the Bengali writer and Tagore (anglicised from Thakur) the writer in English, two names that portrayed two different identities, yet belonged to a single personality. However the 'Tagore of yesterday' bestrode the world stage thanks largely to his writings in English. Translations of his works had increased peoples' perceptions of the man who came to be represented as the 'Tagore of today', while the 'Tagore of tomorrow' emerged through vastly improved translations of his works into many languages that included adaptations into operas and other performing arts. These thoughts of Tagore invited rigorous analysis that would clearly invest us with a deeper and abiding understanding of his universal message, reiterated Dr. Radice.

Then there was **Dr. Martin Kampchen, writer and translator of Tagore's poems**, and long time resident of Santiniketan. He saw in mythology an integration of Indians into a web of stories that had kept them from a feeling of existential empti-



Rajat Bagchi



Vincent Cable

ness and meaninglessness, a feeling that often afflicted the Western man. Mythology in India professed its own form of truth which needed no props of historicity. India's struggle for a proper integration of its ancient culture with modern European thinking continued to this day. There was a need for a third Indian voice to supplement that of the first which came out of India directly, while the second belonged to Western critics and well wishers. This third voice was that of Indians in the West, able to interpret their country to their adopted environment and vice versa, a crucial voice in the drive to curb iniquity in India considering that despite phenomenal growth, rampant poverty remained. Such a Third Voice also belonged to Rabindranath Tagore in whom there was a felicitous integration of Indianness and Europeanness, fused into a unique individual.

Moving the debate into the complexities of 21st century trade and commerce, **Liberal Democratic Deputy Leader and Shadow Chancellor, Dr. Vincent Cable** opined that India was fast re-gaining her economic prowess of the 15th and 16th centuries which had seen one of the world's thriving economies in that country. However Western perceptions of India's emergence as an economic power assumed that the country had "sprung into action" just the other day, that its growth, based largely on exports and IT outsourcing, posed a threat and that this growth amounted to a "zero sum game of the world" whereby India could gain or even suffer loss. The diffusion of technologies, the dismantling of the 'licence raj' coupled with the "Green" revolution leveraged the development boom. Fuelled by conspicuous internal

consumption, there emerged a picture of phenomenal growth that had the sceptics confounded. Undoubtedly, India's democratic traditions, with its capacity to absorb secessionist tendencies and the information revolution had helped consolidate the process: "now is the time for India to become part of global decision-making", emphasised Dr. Cable.

Nehru, in the immediate aftermath of independence, allowed over flights and temporary stationing in India, of US military aircraft engaged in fighting Chinese communists, who were at the time engaged in an undeclared proxy war with Tibetan guerrillas, supported by the CIA and IB. **Dr. Mahmud Ali, ex editor, BBC (Bengali) service** was on his feet and disclosed further that he had seen and perused documents that showed more Indo-US military collaboration when Indian and Chinese forces had clashed in October 1962 and at the time of Beijing's 1964 nuclear test. It was only after the Sino-Soviet split that the collaboration ended, and from 1970 there was a transformation in US relations with India, from that of tacit ally to that of tacit adversary, and the formation of a Delhi-Moscow axis as opposed to a Washington-Islamabad-Beijing alignment. This picture persisted until the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao sought to revive diplomatic activism with the USA about this time and military co-operation rapidly flowered since 1992 when the Malabar naval exercises commenced. India now had improved relations with China and had expanded its military and security ties with Japan, Australia and Singapore - the last three being US allies. At the heart of this growing rapprochement



Redice



Martin Kampchen

lay the blueprint for US-India nuclear co-operation and the tacit acknowledgement of India as a nuclear power.

It fell to **Prof. Sumantra Bose** to highlight the great success story of the post colonial developing world shown by the resilience of Indian democracy. The doomsayers of the early 50s had been proved wrong with India's two-party system taking root in sharp contrast, to her immediate neighbours to whom 'stability' had become an alien concept to this day. The 1989 election ended four decades of Congress Party or single-party dominance. The proliferation of parties representing castes, regional identities and divisions, Prof. Bose argued, had enhanced the representative quality of the Indian political system. There were the attendant perils of course, of political fragmentation, the emergence of power brokers, a lack of wider national goals etc., but the shock-absorbing capacity inherent in the Indian democratic framework had stood up to these tendencies successfully. India's semi-federal or quasi-federal political structure had lent support to the rise of coalition politics at the centre putting a period of political instability behind them, and striking a healthy balance between the national parties such as the BJP and the Congress and a plethora of regional parties. Nonetheless, he expressed uneasiness and concern over the refusal to recognise the demands of some clearly mobilised social groups, such as from Telengana and Gurkhland, to have more control over their own affairs. Then there were Kashmir and Assam where the strengths of India's democratic and federal structure had not been allowed to come into play: "a blot on an otherwise successful 60 years of

democracy in India which called for redress to provide more strength to India's participatory system" declared the **Professor of Comparative Politics and International Relations at the London School of Economics**.

It was left to the last speaker to point out to some glaring inequities that had dogged the Indian system which called for constitutional changes to allow effective monitoring of institutions responsible for tackling these inequalities. It was ironical that while India boasted more dollar billionaires than Japan, India's per capita income was much lower than most other countries due to its burgeoning population. **Dr. Sanghamitra Bandyopadhyay, Lecturer at the London School of Economics** pointed to neighbouring China as a success story in population control and poverty reduction while India's record had been abysmal. There were the 'tiger' economies of Punjab, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Haryana on the one hand while on the other, Rajasthan, Bihar, Orissa, UP, and the North Eastern states lagged far behind. She argued that there was an increasing polarisation historically, arising from the agricultural sector continuing to be the backbone of India's economic growth, a polarisation that was being exacerbated by the role of varying forms of infrastructure invested in the states that had had a significant effect on inter-state imbalances in growth.

A warm 'thank you' to Michael Marland who did a splendid job as Chairman, and panellists Richard Gombrich and Kusum Vadgoma for their valuable insights and analyses

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