

INDIA: DEMOCRACY OR DICTATORSHIP?

In this program we take a brief look at the historical context of recent unrest in India and the subsequent declaration of the "state of emergency" on June 28, 1975.

After two hundred years of British rule and decades of struggle against it in which millions of Indians with differing ideologies took part, India attained "independence" in 1947. For many the dawn of "freedom" meant that finally India could plough its own course to solve complex social, economic and political problems.

Inheriting the reins of power, the Congress Party, under the leadership of the late Jawaharlal Nehru, the father of Mrs. Gandhi, embraced a parliamentary form of government. The constitution assured the people liberty and justice. On the economic front, a system of mixed economy with private and public sectors co-existing side by side was instituted.

In 1951, India inaugurated its First Five-Year Plan; today, the country is passing through its Fifth Plan. At its inception, the central objectives of the plan were to "initiate a process of development which will raise living standards and open out to the people new opportunities for a richer and more varied life."

However, in the recent past the government has started to avoid tackling the issues of equality and good life. The reasons are obvious. The government has failed in improving the standard of living for the majority. The task of energizing the community for adequate output and better production has not been fulfilled.

During the last twenty-five years India has made some strides in alleviating the socio-economic ills of the society. Industrialization has proceeded at the average annual rate of about 6%. In the agricultural sector, some mechanisation has occurred. A limited amount of land has been redistributed to some of the landless tillers. Because of these kinds of headways and because of the introduction of new technology, annual per capita cereal grains production between 1950 to 1974 has climbed by 48%.

In a sense, this is an impressive accomplishment when weighed against the background of a population explosion, which in the same period increased from 350 million to 575 million. Gains have also been scored in the fields of literacy and health. Part of the infrastructure, that is railroads, roads, canals, and various forms of communications, so essential for the developmental process has also been modernized.

These accomplishments by themselves do not tell us very much unless we ask the following two questions:

- 1.) Given the fact that India is relatively richly endowed with natural resources, has the pace of economic progress kept up with the minimum requirements of Indian society?
- 2.) Who has or which sections of the population have shouldered the main burden of economic construction, and who has benefited most from it?

In response to both of these questions, even the pro-Congress Party economists concur with their critics that the overall performance of the Indian economy has been disappointing. On the stratification question, they also agree that not only has the gap between the haves and have-nots within India compounded at an undesirable rate, but the gap between India and advanced nations has also increased. The real producers of wealth have not proportionally shared in the fruits of production. Based on the past trends, it may be conjectured that India's future prospects under the leadership of the Congress Party do not look very promising. India has yet to generate sufficient capital to make even small dents on mass poverty.

For instance, the per capita income which increased from \$50 in 1948-49 to \$97 in 1973, amounting to less than \$2 a year increase, is so inadequate that in no way can it deal with the problems of feeding, clothing and sheltering the vast majority of Indian people. It may be interesting to note that this slow pace of economic development has now placed India in the category of what some economists call the Fourth World. India is not even among the first hundred countries ranked by income per head.

The problems of social and economic development are further compounded by the fact that the distribution of national income is lopsided. How can you have meaningful progress when about 200 million people, almost equal to the entire population of the United States, earn less than \$5 a month. Instead of mobilizing and encouraging these people to get involved, Mrs. Gandhi now is telling them not to exercise their fundamental civil rights.

Population can be a source of strength if productively put to work. But, in the case of India, millions cannot find work. The number of unemployed and underemployed roaming the cities and countryside stands at 37 million. A developing economy needs skilled people and yet the Indian economy cannot absorb 100,000 Indians with scientific, engineering and medical qualifications. This un-utilized labor represents an investment in human resources with zero dividends to society.

Q: Could you tell us what the situation is in regard to land reform?

As is well known, India is a country where 80% of the people reside in villages and depend upon the land for their livelihood. Since the supply of arable land is limited, it becomes imperative that monopoly of big landlords be broken and the surplus land be distributed among those poor who till it. In the face of public pressures, the government of India has for long, in theory, supported the idea of land reforms, but not much has come out of it. To quote two well-known Indian economists, Dandekar and Rath: "Beginning with the First Five-Year Plan, suggestions have been made that a ceiling be placed on how much land an individual may hold, and that the excess land be distributed to those who have no land or have very little land. Effective action along these lines has been rather meager to date." In India 1% of the people control 20% of the land. Another set of figures point out that the top 5% of households claim as much as 40% of the rural land, while the bottom 80% account for only 35% of the land. If nothing radical has been done to restructure the land arrangements, it is because Mrs. Gandhi's political strength greatly rests with the well-to-do landlords who have continuously discouraged and resisted reformist measures.

Over the last 25 years the workers and peasants have periodically organized themselves and have, through strikes and other movements, agitated against economic injustices, corruption of the officials and the mismanagement of the economy.

At times, they have succeeded in extracting concessions from the government, and at other times their demands have been met with increased repression.