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# OPINION

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## THE PUBLIC VOICE

"I WONDER if Reddy realises the harm he has done to the country. No longer is there any credibility left in authority. Who can you trust, when even the President is a trickster?" asked the smart young lady secretary looking up from the paper she had been reading as she stood in the queue at the bus-terminus. "What pray is the occasion for this fresh animadversion against our highly-accomplished First Citizen? His tricks, of course, we all know, but they are now about two months old; so why this new spurt of indignation?" enquired the thin, bespectacled economic journalist, standing two places below her. "Has he been upto mischief again?" "I don't know if he has, but really it's because of the effect of his conduct on me, an ordinary, average resident of this country. I look at the paper, I see the election commissioner announcing the dates of the elections, and instead of saying, 'Well, that's settled', I find my mind oppressed by doubts and apprehensions. Will we really have elections, I ask myself. What if it doesn't suit Reddy's book? I know he has broadcast to the nation only a few days ago and emphasised that they will be held, but how much are his assurances worth? On past conduct, not even a few cowries. So I curse him. He shattered confidence, and so destroyed something of inestimable value."

"A valid point you make" said a middle-aged, pleasant-faced, lady political scientist, "And while I too do not feel a hundred per cent sure about the elections despite the announcement, still I think we may take them as practically certain, more especially as I do not see how Reddy would gain from their postponement now. Great as is his self-esteem, I don't think it extends to his seeing himself as the all-powerful dictator." "No, that vision is rightly only in the purview of the Lady, the one politician in India to whom dictatorship comes naturally, she who loves power excessively and believes power loves her equally. Count her out, and you need fear no dictators," said a luxuriously moustached, white-haired, khadi-clad old gentleman, leaning upon his battered old umbrella. "I have a theory, which I'll put to you. At this stage in the world's history, this soil is not favourable to dictators. If one happens at all, he or she is an aberration, not a natural growth, and soon perishes, giving place to popular rule. There are other countries in which dictatorship is normal, popular rule a rare exception. Why is this so? The difference is not due to economic circumstances, education or training. No, it is in the nature of the people, I think. We have two neighbours, one to the west, one to the south, both lands which breed strong men and attractive women. Dictatorship is endemic in one; popular rule in the

other. For the first, democracy is an aberration ; for the second dictatorship would be. On the whole, I think there is more human happiness in democracies than in dictatorships, so let us be grateful we are born in our own land, and not in the one to the West or the ones further West. This theory does not mean that we need make no effort to preserve our liberties. Already we have felt once the singeing flames of dictatorship, and it was only by a miracle that we managed to escape being totally burnt. No, the price of liberty is eternal vigilance and that applies even to lands naturally inimical to despotism, lands in which freedom has broadened down from century to century. How much more so to us with our thirty years' history, in which we have already experienced nearly two years of dictatorship ? That is what makes one so indignant when one hears so-and-so say he proposes to vote for the erstwhile dictator, or he has not made up his mind about her yet. God in heaven, would you, having escaped from slavery, go forward into it again? Such there be, alas, such there be, degraders of free India, along with their idol ! God's curses be upon them all ! There, see where I've got and all I started off to say was that on the whole, we may be fairly certain elections will take place this time. Age, ah age ! Once it gets into the saddle, there's no knowing where it'll stop. I really am sorry to have inflicted all this on you."

"I don't think any apologies are called for," said a handsome lady in a kaftan and embroidered slippers. "What you said was most interesting. Yes I've often wondered about the difference between us and our neighbour on the West. At Partition, our elites on both sides were practically indistinguishable, the same schools, the same training, the same general view of things, the same colleges and universities both at home and abroad, almost the same values, and yet how different the courses we've followed. Not that I can say I'm altogether surprised. Once Liaquat was murdered, I felt the violence in that air, and every time I've been there since, it's become more palpable, so that while liking one's friends and enjoying staying with them, I've been very glad to get home. No it's a lovely country and there are some lovely people in it, but . . . I agree entirely about the need for effort, continuous and sustained, to preserve liberty. It amuses me to read about voter's councils, suddenly being put up at this time for that purpose and to check on candidates and educate the public, all within two months of the election. Where were you all these years, oh sudden preachers, where at any rate since the Janata victory in early 1977 ? Beginning then at least was the time to educate the voters, watch your representatives, approve or disapprove their performance, warn or commend them. Now, go through the motions if you feel you must, but don't expect anything from them. So, too, the demands for good, clean men outside politics to stand for election. Certainly, and if they are lucky, well-backed by their party and are well-heeled, they may stand a chance ; otherwise, in any case, they will have gained experience. To a cousin who wanted to stand for a country town constituency, I said 'Good, start working now for the next election. Go and live in your constituency, make yourself part of its life ; look after

the grievances of the people, facilitate their contacts with the officials they have to deal with, be clean and honest in all your dealings, sympathetic and tactful but clear and to the point, let even the vicious among them learn to respect you, and I've no doubt you, with your natural charm and bonhomie, will get a big majority. But stand now and I'll be very surprised if you aren't beaten badly!"

"Yes, the magic mango-trick is what all want. Hey Presto, the tree! Abracadabra, the mango! M.P. without tears in fact," said the lady political scientist. "It happened in 1977 in some cases, but that was most exceptional, the Janata wave. This time what voters must think of for their candidates are opposition to dictatorship, i.e., Indira, and honesty. If they have these, they will do, and should be supported whole-heartedly. If they are doubtful about the first, drop them like a hot potato. They cannot in that case be the second, for no man knowing Indira's misdeeds during the emergency and after could possibly be doubtful about being against her, if he were honest. And it's no use repeating like a parrot, 'Oh, but the Janata didn't do anything; there must be government'. In fact, they did a great many things and their management in many matters was better than Indira's. But even if they didn't, is that any reason for having the tyrant back again? Remember, the old saying, 'For the ignorant, there is hope; the grace of God can bring knowledge and enlightenment; but when to ignorance are added stupidity, complacency, the desire not to learn and persistency in wrong courses, even the Grace of God is helpless'. Bind not the chains of slavery around your own necks by supporting her candidates or even candidates not quite definitely against her."

"You know," said the smart secretary, "I'm not quite sure about some of the details regarding polling. You have your booths, one for every thousand voters, polling finishes at four or four-thirty, you are counting the votes booth-wise, then why do you have to wait from the 3rd to the 7th for counting? Why not 15 minutes after the polling is over, open the box, finish counting in an hour or at most two, and have done with the whole business? Then there is not the tedious task of looking after the voting-papers for days, and the consequent danger of their being tampered with. Also if this were done, since polling in nine states would be over on the third and also in half the remaining states, at least two-thirds of the results would be available on the third evening or at latest on the fourth morning. This wouldn't endanger the remaining one-third results from the polling of the sixth, which too would be available by the same method on the sixth evening. Why not touch your left ear with your right hand naturally and easily instead of going through all kinds of contortions to achieve the same result, with the consequent danger of distorting your neck?" "Dear lady, you do not know well enough the governmental mind of these times. One of its favourite maxims is 'The more you complicate the simple, obfuscate the plain, make ununderstandable the clear, the abler you appear.' Ah, well, there's the bus, said the economic journalist. Pulling up with a jerk at the terminus, the bus discharged the passengers it had brought, and took on the new

lot, while the driver and conductor stood at ease for a while, waiting the starter's whistle to summon them back to work.

### VIEW

**Gauri Deshpande:** I wish to answer Mr. Patwardhan only in order to set the record straight about one or two matters. I am not going to argue with him, for I can see that his views on the RSS are, to him a matter of faith, and who can argue with faith? If he believes that the RSS is a democratic organisation; that its purpose of uniting all Hindus under a centralised authority is not nefarious; that such an organised people, persuaded to bow to one kind of authority unquestioningly will not become easy prey to any authoritarian rule; that excessive admiration for an epoch, a person, a mode of behaviour does not and will not lead to emulation; and that such emulation in turn can be restricted only to the good—if he believes all these things, then of course he is welcome to his belief, for, as a good Hindu, I was always taught to live and let live.

So now I only want to point out that what I had said in my original "view" about our past is this. One's past is a whole and therefore must be accepted or rejected as a *whole*. One must not lay claim to that part of it only which is admirable. He says that the RSS while admiring this past is aware of the blemishes. This is like saying that one admires the "Godfather" while acknowledging a few blemishes on his character! I have no quarrel with those who privately sit and admire their own pasts, national or personal; it is only when convenient parts of that past begin to make their appearance on political platforms that I feel a need to point out the inconvenient parts of it too. My main point is, I can hardly be called upon to admire the glorious past of the Hindus, if it consisted in making my past a misery. That will be tantamount to inviting the blacks of America to admire the courage and enterprise of the captains of the slaving-ships. All countries have pasts that are both glorious and shameful. All tend to highlight the glory and to slur over the shame. But if the highlighting of the glory involves emphasising the wrong done to a number of a country's citizens, it is best to leave the glory alone until such a time as memories of injustices are healed.

The other point of Mr. Patwardhan's requiring an answer is that of political activity. He certainly and without any doubt has the right to vote for whoever he chooses and also to advocate the political party to which he is sympathetic. No one can take such a right away from a citizen of India. However, if he, or to take the example he cites, a group of his colleagues, decides to work for a political party of their choice, then surely they cannot object to being called, as a group, a political body. But, when he asks, if therefore, the entire organisation for which he and his colleagues' work is to be termed a political body, he is employing a synecdoche. I, as an individual, am sympathetic to the Janata Party and help in its electoral effort. I must, therefore be said to belong to that party (though I may not be a registered member of it; just as I can be a communist without being a card-holding member of that party).

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OPNIOIN, October 30, 1979

However, for that reason I cannot include the members of my family or the office staff of my publisher into that membership. It would be ridiculous to claim that any institution harbouring a politically motivated member is a political body. At that rate, there would be left no apolitical bodies anywhere. But Mr. Patwardhan will agree that when a group of people come together with the view of propagating a political idea, they must be termed a political body, whether outside of that group the members of it be teachers, tailors, diggers or cooks.

And one word about the united Hindus. I have always held that the real strength of Hinduism lies in its diversity, lack of a rigid religious code, elasticity and individuality. When many a received religion is hard put to it to survive, Hinduism successfully meets the challenge of invasion, conversion, schism and scientific advance precisely because it is not bound to one set of rules, one uniting and arbitrating body, one book or one prophet. I can call myself a Hindu whether I am an atheist, eat or drink what I please, support 'women's lib', marry a non-Hindu. Given a code of Hinduism under which all the Hindus are to be united, as a Hindu Rashtra, how long would it be before such a person were asked (democratically no doubt) to conform or to quit?

And last, regarding the opinions of Gokhale, Mr. Patwardhan, who is an authority, must be allowed to know much more than I do, but I only ask him to read the preamble to the constitution of the Servants of India Society (from his own *Select Gokhale*), and to ask himself if the aims of the RSS are commensurate with 'promoting relations of cordial goodwill and co-operation among different communities' or with 'regarding all Indians as brothers and working for the advancement of all without distinction of class or creed'? It is of course possible that he will answer yes, in which case I am left entirely without argument and leave the field to him.

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