

## **Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta**

President of the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi

Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta is the president of the Centre for Policy Research, an independent, non-partisan research institute and think tank in New Delhi. Educated at Princeton and Oxford, he has taught at Harvard and Jawaharlal Nehru University. He has done extensive public policy work and has published widely in the fields of political theory, intellectual history, constitutional law, politics and society in India and international politics. His most recent publications include, 'The Burden of Democracy' and an edited volume 'India's Public Institutions'. His forthcoming work includes a book on Constitutionalism in Modern India and a book on India's Great Transformation. He is also co-editor of the Oxford Companion to Politics in India.

He gave two insightful talks on Meritocracy and its Discontents and the Future of Democracy in India.

### **Meritocracy and its Discontents**

27<sup>th</sup> January 2010

*'Emerson once famously said that the only thing that one person can receive from another is provocation and not instruction'*, these were the opening lines of the lecture on meritocracy. The purpose of the talk was to provoke the audience to think about the theme of meritocracy in democratic life, something that we often talk about but whose implications we do not frontally confront.

Contrary to the expectations of many the entire talk focused on the complexities associated with the system of meritocracy rather than the arguments for or against the meritocratic system. It was highly impressive to hear Dr. Mehta unravel the myths associated with the idea of meritocracy and put forth a clear and in depth analysis of the system which is the need of the hour.

What makes the idea of meritocracy so attractive are the principles of non-discrimination, equality and justice associated with it. We consider it as a system where jobs, opportunities and responsibilities are allocated on the basis of merit. A meritocratic society rewards those who show their talent and competence ensuring equality and justice. But these principles hold true only partially.

He quoted several examples drawing the attention of the audience towards the unintended consequences of the ideology of meritocracy that we don't often realize. Like the Singaporean society that has become the meritocracy of exams rather than that of talent. This proves that the criteria to choose merit must be broader than the conventional notion of exams. The biggest challenge for a meritocratic society is to create a structure that ensures equal opportunities to the relevant pool of candidates to compete in and reservations is a way of doing so.

He ended his talk by stressing the fact that even though this concept gets legitimized and a lot of people move up the ladder there will still be no structural transformations and with increasing structural inequalities in a society how can enough support be garnered for meritocracy?

## **Future of Democracy in India**

28<sup>th</sup> January 2010

We take a lot of pride in saying that India is a democratic country, an emerging power, but underneath this democracy lie several serious issues that need the undivided attention of the government. In fact what is alarming is not the number or the seriousness of these issues but the approach of the government towards them. Perhaps this is the reason that Arundhati Roy has called Democracy 'Demon-crazy' in her latest collection of essays: 'Listening to Grasshoppers'. Therefore, the most debatable question today is, what is the Future of Indian Democracy - vibrant or bleak?

Dr. Mehta began his talk with a famous Sufi saying 'Those who speak about the future are lying even when they speak the truth'. Rather than predicting the future of democracy he uncovered some of its interesting tendencies and its composition.

At present India is witnessing the best of times with extraordinary economic growth. Compared to 1900-1947 when the per capita GDP growth was -0.1 Indian economy today is booming at 7.2%. And due to this unprecedented growth it is for the very first time in modern Indian history that people are beginning to see the possibility of change. Though it doesn't give the whole picture this growth has certainly changed the intellectual and mental horizons of the people. Dr. Mehta showed how the lifestyle and the aspirations of even the most impoverished people in India have undergone a drastic change.

He agreed that this democracy has several shortcomings, for instance, the issues of naxalism, poor higher education, corruption and poverty that paint a grim picture of Indian democracy. But one must think of it in a comparative perspective. Democracy has emerged stronger in the past 10 - 15 yrs. The government's expenditure is increasing, welfare schemes like NREGAs of the order of 100,000 crores are being doled out. Bihar alone has given contracts for 17,000 kms of roads in the month of December, 2009 which is astonishing.

But, yes, state governments have failed to invest in their capacities and the biggest challenge that we face today is at which levels of government what decisions should be taken. Therefore, we must look towards multilevel governance and devolving powers to new institutes.

## CONVERSATIONS

*Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta shares his thoughts on the functioning of Indian democracy, problems associated with it and the state of higher education in India in a candid interview with Reema Mittal.*

**We take a lot of pride in saying that Indian democracy is one of the best models of democracy in the world but what we tend to overlook are the serious issues brewing underneath this democracy. What is alarming is not the number or the seriousness of these issues but the approach of the government towards them, and this makes one sit up and ponder over where our democracy is headed? Wouldn't it be right to say that the future of Indian democracy is bleak?**

When faced with such questions the most important thing one needs to keep in mind is the historical perspective. For instance anybody who knew India in the 1980s would disagree with the assessment that it is going down. I agree there are challenges but in the past 15 - 20 years democracy has become stronger. The next important thing is to be analytical and careful in breaking down individual problems to their root causes and sources. One of the most frustrating things in debates over democracy is that a lot gets loaded onto the term democracy. If we think of 6-7 serious problems India is facing today like poverty, corruption, naxalism, all of these are an indictment of democracy. Each of these problems has different root causes and needs to be discussed individually. We can get a democracy that makes wrong policy choices.

**Let's take up naxalism. Naxalites blame the government and the government blames them for hampering development activities in the states. So it is a vicious cycle. On the other hand, we have people like Dr. Binayak Sen and Sri Himanshu Kumar who are working for tribal people and can serve as a useful link between them and the government. But instead of working with these people the government is distancing itself from them. What do you think has gone wrong and what can be a possible solution to this problem?**

Well, you are absolutely right that the naxal problem is not only just a military problem. Two different sets of issues are involved here. First, adivasis and STs have received a raw deal at the hands of the Indian democracy. Now the question is why. The answer turns out to be a lot more uncomfortable. One is the social distance - privileged people do not care about these people. The difficult question is either to think of them on a development trajectory like the rest of India or you have a development model that preserves their community. But the difficulty is that we have never been able to decide their future trajectory. We haven't invested in their education, skills, languages, etc. so they cannot participate in the development process. They are the tragic victims of democracy and it is difficult to craft a policy for them.

The second element is that huge money is at stake in these areas because of mining, forests. Wherever money is involved the stakes are very high. Certain states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand have never invested in themselves. So whenever problems arise they allow them to fester and ultimately respond with brutality. **Like Salwa Judum where the state outsourced its security, a step which is outrageous and in violation of national and international laws.** West Bengal is a different story where political parties have acquired a stake in political violence. Bihar again is an ebb and flow of naxals. There was another form of violence in Bihar i.e. the Ranbir Sena but no one has heard of it in the last 5 - 6 years. Reason: earlier the state had an interest in keeping it alive. The question you asked about Binayak Sen, yes, I completely agree that the way the government has reacted against Binayak Sen and Himanshu is outrageous. Recently, there is the case of Nandini Sunder, an anthropologist from Delhi University, single handedly and bravely documenting the Bastar region. The state has become thuggish in Chattisgarh and there are no two ways about it.

**Let's take up the education scenario in India. India has the largest pool of young people and that should have turned it into a global education hub but that is not happening. As you said there aren't any good public institutions left. So where are the loopholes?**

Well, there are 3 - 4 important elements. First, any system that places its premium on centralization and homogeneity of institutions is bound to produce the lowest common denominator. Second, decisions are generally made by people who have no clue about the problem. In fact this is the root cause of most of the problems India is facing today. In the late 70s, merit promotion schemes were introduced in educational institutions which have now turned into automatic promotion schemes. Today, you find more Professors than Assistant Professors. It has resulted in some problems. First, it reduced incentive tools. Second, it reduced geographical mobility amongst academicians. Earlier all our great regional Universities had a national character but today Aligarh, Allahabad, Rajasthan most of these universities are inbred save Delhi University and 2 or 3 more exceptions. Third, when you raise, through promotion schemes, people who have achieved less to positions that demand more responsibility you get an insecure academic structure. 1<sup>st</sup> rate people appoint 1<sup>st</sup> rate and 2<sup>nd</sup> rate people appoint 3<sup>rd</sup> rate.

**Do you think the setting up of more IITs and IIMs will help? In my view rather than going for new universities the old ones need to be uplifted.**

Well, due to pressures of demand we need to expand the system but new IITs and IIMs wouldn't be like the existing ones. What we need is a proper strategy and not a formula created by bureaucrats. Right now, the biggest problem is the acute deficit of faculty even in the existing ones. So we need to address that issue. The focus should be on high quality PhD programs that can produce good academicians who in turn are available for hiring. We need to create a critical number of PhD programs.

**What do you have to say about HRD minister Kapil Sibal's move of bringing foreign universities to India and going for collaborations?**

Well, the best universities won't come. Only the second and third tier institutions will come to India, but while we are creating new institutes we are losing the old ones. Moreover, you cannot have regulatory systems in place because if you liberalize for foreign institutes you will have to liberalize for domestic institutes as well and I don't think the government is ready for it.

Complete Interview can be accessed at: <http://www.iitk.ac.in/drpg/anreport.htm>