

A COUNTRY OF PARADOXES

On August 15, 1987, India celebrated 40 years of independence. To commemorate this event, York University is hosting the Festival of India on September 17-23. The festival features prominent personalities covering everything from the status of women to the Indian economy. Obviously it is impossible to do justice to such a mammoth topic in two pages. The following article offers a brief survey of India's history and development.

By SUJATA BERRY
To the West, India has always been a fable and a paradox. The name itself has conjured up visions that range from ceremonial elephants and exotic dress to the faces of teeming millions that inhabit some of the world's largest metropolises. This strange and volatile combination of old and new, tradition and technology, is hard to understand for those unfamiliar with India's history.

Forty years after gaining independence, India still abounds in contradictions. She is the 10th most industrialized nation and yet her income per capita ranks as one of the lowest in the world. India has nuclear power, automobiles, and satellite television. But her successes in these areas are offset by poverty, rampant corruption, an exploding population and tense regional conflicts. As Professor Douglas Verney of York University aptly stated, "India is not a third world country. India is a country that straddles all three worlds in a fascinating fashion." Clearly, one has to judge India's development within the Indian context.

India's pre-colonial history is a seemingly endless litany of conquest and infighting. Conquerors ranging from the Aryans (5000 BC) to the British (18th century) have followed the well beaten path through the fabled Khyber-Pass in the North-West Himalyan range and onwards through the fertile Gangetic Plain. Most conquerors were attracted by the riches they were sure to find. For example, Mohammed Ghaznavi, based in Afghanistan, undertook 17 such raids. But the conquerors who left their mark on India were the ones that stayed and became Indianized.

The most obvious example of this process of assimilation is that of the Moghuls. The early Moghuls came to loot and conquer, but were so impressed by the vast potential of the land both in riches and beauty that they stayed, bringing what was perhaps the most unified rule to India before the advent of the British. Indian music and culture are in a large measure a legacy of the Moghuls. The Emperor Akabar epitomized the Moghul spirit of assimilation. Despite being a Muslim, he sought to establish a consensus through a strong respect for secular, royal leadership. He commissioned leaders from the various faiths of the sub-continent to help him formulate a common faith that he named 'Din-i-Ilahi.'

Unfortunately, Muslim culture in India was to become predominant as Akabar's conciliatory efforts diminished after his death. Yet again, regional and religious differences would assert themselves, bringing about the fractious infighting that characterized the sub-continent when the colonial powers first "discovered" India. As Professor Thakkar, of York University, explained, "Only in certain periods of history India achieved some sense of political unification, and then only for brief periods under some mighty ruler. After the death (of such a ruler) India has disintegrated."

The colonial power that founded an imperium in India was the British. Attracted to India mainly for the spice trade, the British were lured into the hinterland from their coastal trading posts to secure the flow of goods necessary for their economic expansion. This penetration into the interior eventually resulted in the political domination of the British over a largely dis-united India. British rule was to provide India with a period of relatively long-lasting peace and stability during which patterns of trade and thought were developed with the rest of the western world.

Though this system of trade and government was envisaged and sustained for British interests, its benefits were also felt by the Indian elite. These Indians who acquired much of the education and ideology of the British used it to the advantage of the freedom movement. Leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru, to cite examples, went on to use their training for the emancipation of their fellow country-men. Constitutionalism rather than force was the sword of this battle that was won in a relatively non-violent fashion.

The freedom movement in India was to become the inspiration of all such movements in the Third World. August 15, 1947 was not only the fruition of India's hopes, but also a clarion call to all others hoping to attain a similar destiny. This achievement was only tarnished by the Partition of British India into the states of India and Pakistan. Even the movement toward freedom was not exempt from the cost of regional and religious differences.

Nevertheless, unlike most nations conceived during the post colonial era, India did not succumb to a totalitarian military

government system. Instead she set out to establish herself as the largest secular democracy in the world. A task which no doubt was easier said than done, considering the nation was still coming to terms with the partition, had no industrial base, and a largely illiterate, impoverished population.

Some people still venture to criticize the democratic process at work in India. However, for V.P. Singh, the Consul General of India, the proof of the democratic process lies within the existence of the "public court system" and a lively "free press." One of the best illustrations of Indian democracy in action occurred when almost 70% of the population participated in elections, ousting Indira Gandhi from power after she introduced a state of emergency rule.

At a national level, Indian politics is still dominated by the Congress (I) Party. The roots of the Congress lie in the struggle-

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for Independence and unfortunately a viable opposition has not yet developed. The only national opposition to the Congress was formed during the Emergency to oust Mrs. Gandhi from power. Called the Janata Party, the party of the people, it succeeded in its immediate aim, but was unable to sustain its momentum over the long run. In stark contrast to this situation, regional politics are dynamic as numerous parties seek to form the provincial government.

It has been suggested that true federalism may occur only if the various regional parties collaborate to form a viable opposition. One of the main reasons such an arrangement has not occurred is due to the regionalism that is inherent within the Indian system. There are several factors that have promoted regionalism in India. Each new wave of conquests brought with it new ideas and beliefs. Thus the Indian sub-continent contains several sub-cultures which have continued to develop separately, largely due to physical, regional and linguistic barriers. India continues to be composed of these volatile regional fragments held together by the myth of nationalism. India has approximately 15 official languages. Although Hindi is the recognized national language, it is still not the principle spoken language all over India.

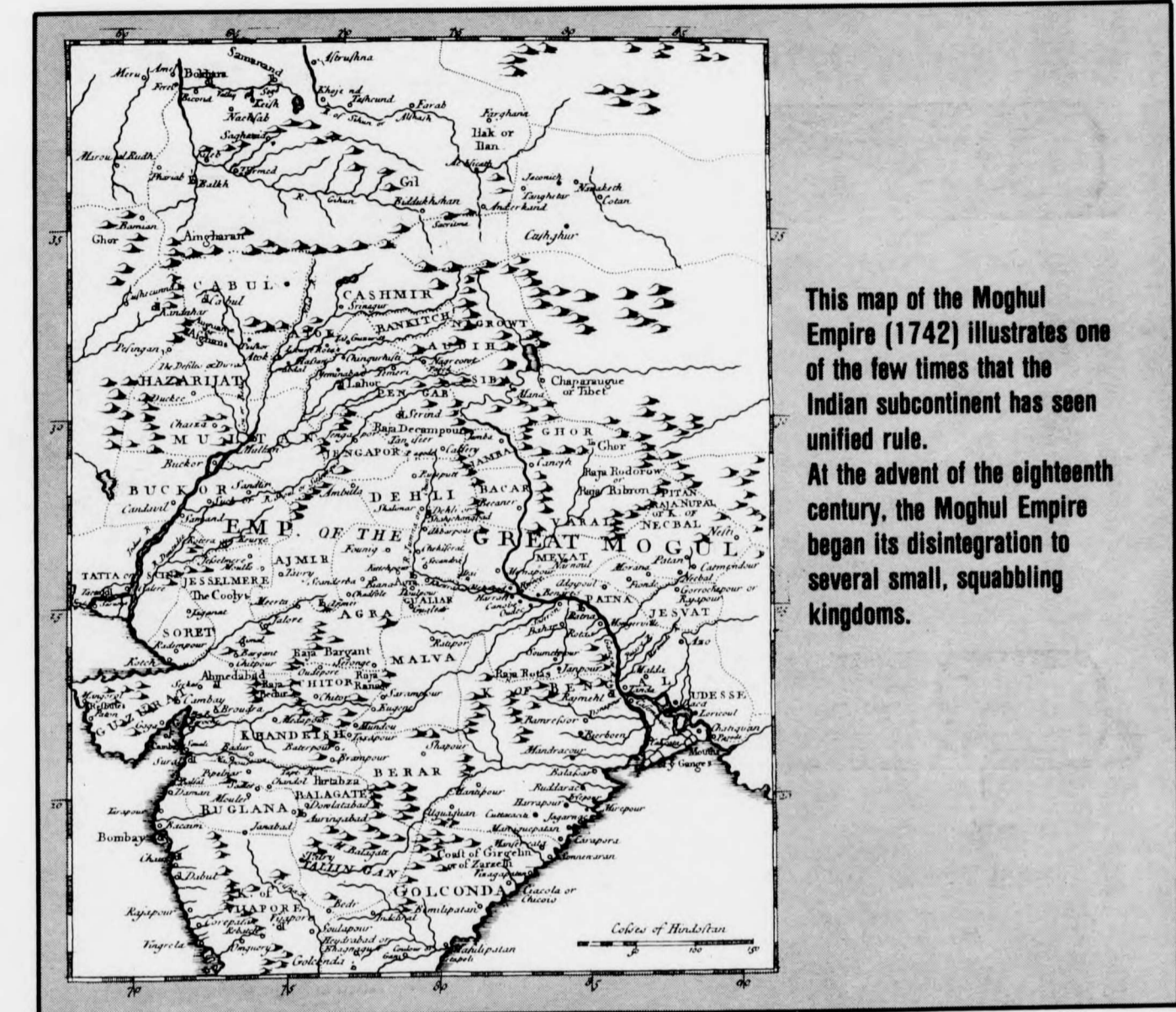
Furthermore, economic growth has not occurred uniformly in all regions. For example, "the production of fertilizer and agricultural technology took a long time and when it was developed, it developed in certain parts like Haryana and Punjab, not across the board," Verney said. Thus the various regions are always vying for a greater share of the economic pie.

Observers are optimistic that regionalism in India may begin to decline. There have been several developments to support this claim. With the coming of mass communication, India will experience a "greater sense of oneness," Thakkar said. The age of new technology will help break down the barriers of physical isolation and language that have helped perpetuate regionalism in

India. Thakkar added that "the middle class has inflated in the last 40 years... it (middle class) has become very prosperous... (There has also been) strengthening of the private sector. Thus economic prosperity is an achievable goal."

In foreign affairs, India has tried to maintain a policy of "non-alignment." However, India's success at being true to this platform is questionable. In the past, one has seen a trend towards closer relations with Russia, than with the West. For Singh, this outcome is the result of a lack of understanding from the West. "We take decisions on every issue on its merits, not on (the basis) of belonging to one bloc or another... Russia has been more sympathetic to our problems." This view is one that Rajesh Kumar Barnala, an Indian Citizen, also supports. On a visit to Canada, Barnala expressed his disappointment with the United States. "The United States always took an obliging attitude, that whatever we are doing for you, we are doing as a favour. Instead of a friendly gesture, it was alms given to India."

Verney believes that closer ties with the USSR were inevitable when analyzing the situation "in terms of real politik in international affairs... (Of the) five powers involved, USA, China and Pakistan are allied. As much as one may regret it, from the point of view of a democratic system it makes a lot of sense that there should be that balance of power." However, Verney cautions that India has "tried in recent years to escape from control by the Soviet Union by diversifying her weapons procurement."



This map of the Moghul Empire (1742) illustrates one of the few times that the Indian subcontinent has seen unified rule. At the advent of the eighteenth century, the Moghul Empire began its disintegration to several small, squabbling kingdoms.

On the other hand, the figures of comparison with China show that India is not all that inferior to China."

India certainly has come a long way since her Independence. Her economy has grown two hundred fold. While most third world economies have collapsed under the strains of the inflationary debt crisis, India has an impressive debt service ratio (i.e. the amount of debt compared to production and income). In 1985, the debt service ratio needed to pay off for India was 1.4% of GNP and 12.7% of exports. (Compared with Brazil at 4.9% of GNP and 34.8% of exports.) She is self-sufficient in the production of food, and poverty has been reduced to 36% from 50% in 1947, and literacy has risen by 20% to 36%.

For all of its achievements, India is still held within the confines of the Third World. Perhaps the single most important

reason for this has been the explosive growth of the population which has more than doubled since Independence. Unfortunately, the population is expected to continue to expand before it will level off.

The impact of this overpopulation has consistently tended to overshadow all of the Indian achievements. Most people may not know about India's nuclear capabilities but they do know of the approximately 300 million people that live under the poverty line set at \$120 per year in 1983.

"Corruption is almost routine in India," said Rajesh Barnwall, President of the International Students Society at the University of Windsor. Barnwall is also a former president of that university's Indian Student Organization. To illustrate his point Barnwall used a simple illustration. He said, "Consider a tree with 100 apples and under that tree there are only ten people. Nobody will fight with another person... there is no impartial way of distribution. No matter what you do, one class is always dissatisfied... People in positions of power to redistribute, abuse their powers." As with most Indians, Barnwall expressed disappointment with the lack of political action in order to eliminate corruption.

Singh, on the other hand, claims that measures have been taken to deal with the corruption. One is forced to question the effectiveness of the half-hearted measures in light of the recent scandals that have rocked the government of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Accusations of protecting corrupt officials, bribes and payoffs have left Indians feeling both alienated and abandoned by their political leadership.

India's past has left her uniquely qualified to face the future. Her present may seem rocked by scandals of corruption and separatist conflicts, but it seems clear that India, unlike other post-colonial nations, is fairly confident in her stability. The myth of nationality may not have pervaded to all levels, but it is a common interest that binds most Indians together. It is also apparent that in modern India, many of the conflicts, though overtly religious or regional, etc. have an undercurrent of economic concerns. Therefore, squaring the circle of poverty and the distribution of wealth remains India's greatest challenge in the years to come. This cannot be done without population control, the implementation of which occupies Indian planners incessantly. In spite of these problems, the Republic of India, has come a long way, maintaining and even enhancing perceptions of its democracy, world position and wealth. It has become not only a regional leader, but also a power to be reckoned with globally. Whatever route it chooses to take, there is no doubt that its stature in the world will not diminish for a long time.

