The Skeletons in India's Cupboard

Dr. Amartya Kumar Bhattacharya

BCE (Hons.) (Jadavpur), MTech (Civil) (IIT Kharagpur), PhD (Civil) (IIT Kharagpur), Cert.MTERM (AIT Bangkok), CEng(I), FIE, FACCE(I), FISH, FIWRS, FIPHE, FIAH, FAE, MIGS, MIGS – Kolkata Chapter, MIGS – Chennai Chapter, MISTE, MAHI, MISCA, MIAHS, MISTAM, MNSFMFP, MIIBE, MICI, MIEES, MCITP, MISRS, MISRMTT, MAGGS, MCSI, MIAENG, MMBSI, MBMSM

Chairman and Managing Director,

MultiSpectra Consultants,

23, Biplabi Ambika Chakraborty Sarani,

Kolkata – 700029,

West Bengal,

INDIA.

E-mail: dramartyakumar@gmail.com

What ails India today? Plenty. Most of us feel trapped in India now with no way out. Some elderly people even comment that British rule was better. Why is this so? Why does it have to be so? Let us dive deep into the problem that lies at the heart of India's arrested development.

When India was fighting to get independence from the British, there was no consensus as to the future of India after independence. Illiteracy being a cause of serious concern, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose actually favoured a period of benevolent dictatorship to uplift India before ushering in a Western style democracy. His main concern was that illiterate masses are not equipped to caste votes in an informed manner, let alone in a sagacious manner. If he and Japan had succeeded in their attempt to oust the British from India during World War II, indubitably that would have been the future of India. Gandhiji favoured a social revolution after India had obtained freedom from the British. Unfortunately, he was assassinated, the social revolution envisaged by him never took place and instead the 1950 Constitution was promulgated by the then rulers of India.

But what exactly is to be blamed for the dismal state of India today? What is our experience with India today? What do we feel about India today? Why do we feel that India is like a rudderless ship? Why is India not a developed nation decades after its independence? Why is India underperforming? Why do we feel that our Indian passport is a liability and not an asset in the community of nations? Why do we feel that we would have been better off had we been born in any country other than India?

To answer the questions posed in the above paragraph, let us see how India is moving, if it can be said to be moving at all. Let us start with some examples.

- I had to pay bribes to servants of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation to mutate my home from my father's name to my name.
- I had to pay bribes to servants and touts of CESC Limited to get an electricity connection for my home. Surprisingly, my father's electricity connection was not transferred to me as then

the servants and associates of CESC Limited would have had to settle for a lesser bribe than what they took from me. It may be mentioned that CESC Limited has a large network of touts who act as middlemen between electricity consumers and servants of CESC Limited in the matter of taking bribes.

- My mother's pension was released by the servants of the Government of West Bengal after four years and after hefty bribes were paid.
- My father's shares in different companies cannot be transferred to me because the existing law says that a certain document has to be signed by him now - it does not matter that he is deceased, he has to sign the document now!!!
- Of all the dangers facing India today, by far the severest is the presence of criminals in Government service. One does not have to look very far. Salil Haldar, Sujay Kumar Mukherjea, Basudeb Bhattacharyya and Koustuv Debnath, all of whom are employed as teachers at Indian Institute of Engineering Science and Technology, Shibpur, West Bengal, have criminal records. Even though they have First Information Reports pending against them, they are going romping about scot-free.
- Government hospitals do not treat patients and private hospitals fleece the families of patients to the greatest extent. I was myself fleeced by two well-known private hospitals of Kolkata - Apollo Gleneagles Hospital and Ruby Hospital - because my mother was very seriously sick and I had to get her treated. This is the general situation where every private hospital exploits the fact that when a patient is very seriously sick, his or her family members are ready to sell their houses to pay up whatever exorbitant amount the private hospital demands.
- I have to pay extortion money to local toughs at every Hindu festival even though I am a Buddhist. These local toughs belong to a slum within walking distance of my home. The underclass of Indian society, they once heckled my father because he refused to pay extortion money.
- In Kolkata, the Government of West Bengal is invisible - it has no activities - and the Government of India is lackadaisical and lethargic. In particular, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has left a disasterous legacy.
- In Delhi, the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises of the Government of India issues a certificate called Udyog Aadhaar. This ministry is located in a building called Udyog Bhawan. In the same building, the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, is administering the Startup India scheme. These two wings of the Government of India have no connection with each other and the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, refuses to recognise the Udyog Aadhaar certificate issued by the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises of the Government of India for the purpose of issuing its Recognised Startup certificate. So much for the concept of 'ease of doing business'!!!
- For inexplicable reasons, instead of making the passport the primary identity of a citizen, the Government of India has made a document called Aadhaar the primary identity of a citizen, thereby both underplaying a citizen's right to a passport and devaluing the value of the passport.
- The recent Goods and Services Tax regime promulgated by the Government of India has been used as an opportunity by even those vendors who do not fall under its purview to hike the prices of their wares.
- Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code remains in force even though it is very often blatantly misused.
- Bribes and extortion money have to be paid for almost everything in India, from release of pension to almost everything else.

But what is the cause of this critical situation in which the very survival of India hangs on tenterhooks. Is it the people? Is it the ruling class? Is it the 1950 Constitution? Should Indians review the performance of the 1950 Constitution? Should Indians hold a referendum on the 1950 Constitution? Has the 1950 Constitution failed? Is India threatened with a meltdown? A revolution? If revolution, then by whom? Or was India simply better off under first Muslim and then British rule?

The malaise is deep-rooted in history. Buddhism, to which my ancestors adhered and to which I also adhere, was and still is primarily a religion of the intellectual elite in India. Unlike the situation in some other countries where Buddhism went and went on to become the dominant religion, in India, Buddhism remained confined to the intellectually awakened in India. Precisely because Indian Buddhists constituted the intelligentsia, Buddhism spread to other countries from India. Indian Buddhist scholars like Shantarakshita, Kamalashila, Atisha (all of whom went to Tibet, Shantarakshita and Atisha during the First Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet and Atisha during the Second Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet) and Bodhiruchi and others like him who went to China stand out in history. Indian Buddhism never reached the lower strata of society because the philosophy of Buddhism was too sublime for them.

I belong to a Buddhist family having my ancestry in the Chittagong region of East Bengal, now Bangladesh. My family has been (unwelcome?) guests of the Government of India since 1947.

To put matters in perspective, the Pala dynasty of Bengal was the last Buddhist Dynasty in India. Neither the Arab invasion of Sind nor the invasions of Mahmud of Ghazni had any effect on Bengal and the Pala dynasty ruled uninterruptedly until 1162 AD when they were overthrown by the Hindu Sena dynasty. Muhammad Ghori defeated Prithviraj Chauhan in 1192 AD. A few years later, one of Muhammad Ghori's generals swept across the plains of northern India and Lakshmana Sena, the last ruler of the Sena dynasty, fled without giving a fight on hearing the Muslim forces approaching. Bengal came under Muslim rule and remained so until the victory of the British at the Battle of Plassey in 1757 AD. By the time Muslim rule ended in Bengal in 1757 AD, most Bengalis had converted to Islam due to various reasons. Under Muslim rule, an influx of Arabic and Persian words into the Bengali language took place but, crucially, Bengali Muslims and Bengali non-Muslims continued to speak and write in a common Bengali language with an Indo-Aryan script except for a few words which are still different for Bengali Muslims and Bengali non-Muslims. The local dialect of Bengali in East Bengal is different from the local dialect of Bengali in West Bengal, but again this is not based on religious lines. For centuries, Bengali Muslims and Bengali non-Muslims lived side by side and in harmony, everyone practising his own religion. It is to be noted that my ancestors lived for centuries under Muslim rule.

My family has its ancestry in the Chittagong area of East Bengal and has been practising Buddhism since ancient times, probably from even before the birth of Jesus Christ. Since my family was in the extreme South-east of Bengal, near the border with Burma (now Myanmar), they have retained their Buddhist religion up to this day. My great great-grandfather Rai Bahadur Kumar Chandra Bhattacharya was a noted Buddhist scholar. He divided his time between Chittagong and Rangpur. He was renowned for his erudition of Pali and Sanskrit and also for his refinement and nobility. He wrote a commentary on the Dhammachakkappavattana Sutta. His speciality was the study of the Pali Tipitaka, the Sutta Pitaka, the Vinaya Pitaka and the Abhidhamma Pitaka. He was conservative to the core, reticent, ascetic, austere and puritan (like everyone in my family including myself he too was a non-smoker and non-drinker).

My great-grandfather was Diwan Bahadur Banga Chandra Bhattacharya. He was the Diwan of Tripura when Tripura was a princely state and was a close friend of Bengali poet and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindranath Tagore called him 'Diwan Bahadur ji' as a mark of

respect. My great-grandfather was the inspiration behind Rabindranath Tagore's writing the atmospheric novel 'Rajarshi' in which Rabindranath Tagore condemned the practice of many Hindus of sacrificing animals before wrathful deities. My great-grandfather was fluent in Sanskrit, Pali and Arabic, among other languages A very erudite person, he wrote and published several books on Buddhism. Among his books, 'Buddhist Civilisation in Asia' stands out. One of his pioneering thesis was that the Caspian Sea was named after Mahakashyapa, a direct disciple of Lord Buddha. Apart from the similarity in names, he based his thesis on the presence of Kalmyk Buddhists in Kalmykia, a part of Russia to the north-west of the Caspian Sea. After retiring from the Tripura Court, he settled in Chittagong where he built a huge Zamindari house.

My great-grandfather was an orthodox and puritan Buddhist. He was uncompromisingly opposed to idolatry. He believed that since the majority of Bengalis were Muslims, Bengali non-Muslims had their only future in living in harmony with Bengali Muslims. However, he was acutely aware of an abnormality in Hindu psychology. He used to say 'Hindus are afraid of Muslims and Hindus suffer from an inferiority complex. They constantly remember that Muslims defeated them. They say that one Muslim equals three Hindus.'

The attitude of my great-grandfather towards Hinduism bordered on the hostile. He famously refused to eat from the hands of any Hindu and employed a Muslim cook to cook his meals. He asked a Muslim gentleman to teach Arabic and Urdu to my grandfather and his siblings. As a result, my grandfather also became fluent in Arabic and Urdu.

Unfortunately for our family, he passed away before 1947. Were he alive, he would not have taken a decision to migrate to Kolkata on the spur of the moment. He was not a man to take rash decisions. Gifted with penetrating insight, an acute sense of justice, level-headedness and possessing an optimistic and inclusive outlook about the future of humanity, my great-grandfather could have foreseen that East Pakistan would last for only 24 years.

My grandfather, Jitendra Chandra Bhattacharya, was a freedom fighter who was imprisoned by the British before his Matriculation Examination. He wrote his examination in prison. He was tortured by the British every time he was imprisoned by them. Educated under Rabindranath Tagore at Shantiniketan, he came under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi whom he met several times. He took my father, a young boy at that time, to meet Mahatma Gandhi at Barrackpore in the northern suburbs of Kolkata when Mahatma Gandhi was residing there. My father recalled that when he bent down to pay his respects to Mahatma Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi put his hand on my father's head and said in Hindi 'Beta, sachcha patriot bano' which means 'Son, be a true patriot.'

However, my grandfather was deeply dismayed by the acrimony between Mahatma Gandhi and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. He agreed with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose that India, in its illiterate state, could not function as a true democracy and a period of benevolent dictatorship was needed after freedom from the British to uplift India after which India could transition to a democracy. He proposed to Mahatma Gandhi that there should be a social revolution to accompany the attainment of freedom from the British. My grandfather was greatly influenced by the French Revolution. Mahatma Gandhi told my grandfather that the social revolution would take place after India had obtained its freedom from the British. He said that he had already started the social revolution in a small way by calling untouchable Hindus 'Harijans' (at present Harijans are called 'Scheduled Castes'). As things transpired, after India became free from British colonial rule, the 1950 Constitution was promulgated and the social revolution never took place.

My grandfather founded the House of Labour in East Bengal to encourage youths towards business and enterprise. Being a businessman, my grandfather travelled extensively to all parts of undivided India on business. He stayed at Lahore for two years. He also visited Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Quetta,

Sialkot, Karachi and Hyderabad in Sind. My father recalled that, as a young boy, my grandfather took him to Jammu via Sialkot, the normal route in those times. It could not have escaped my grandfather's notice that the language divide between Bengali Muslims and non-Bengali Muslims was too great to be bridged as Bengali Muslims considered Bengali to be their mother tongue and non-Bengali Muslims considered Urdu to be their mother tongue. This very fact would lead to the break-up of Pakistan, with an Indian victory, in 1971.

Surprisingly, my grandfather failed to factor the language difference between Bengali Muslims and non-Bengali Muslims in his prediction of the future of the Indian sub-continent. He failed to realise that any alliance between Bengali Muslims and non-Bengali Muslims was bound to be temporary in nature and that a split was inevitable sooner or later. For a man to travel all over India and not to develop an incisive judgement of the situation was truly extraordinary. Acting impulsively, in 1947 he took a decision to abandon East Bengal and come to Kolkata leaving all his property in East Bengal behind. He came to Kolkata as a refugee and as a pauper. This caused my family great hardship at the time. Surely, the ephemeral nature of East Pakistan should have been obvious to any discerning observer.

Soon after defecting to Kolkata in 1947, my grandfather realised that he had been chasing a mirage. Strongly disillusioned, he severed all ties with politics and with the Indian National Congress. Dissatisfied with the way independent India was going, he used to repeatedly say 'I committed a historic blunder by defecting from East Bengal. This is not the independence I fought for.' My grandfather was deeply disillusioned with Nehru and his policies and with India's deteriorating relations with China. He said 'India must not forget that Chinese monks Faxian, Xuanxang and Yijing are considered to be great Acharyas by us. India must cultivate good relations with China. Otherwise, it will be defeated in war.' In 1962, India was trounced in a war by China who won a decisive victory.

In 1953, my grandfather could garner enough money to build a house in south Kolkata but his money was exhausted before he could finish the building. It was left to me to finish the construction of our home, my father and paternal uncles having added nothing to what my grandfather had done. Realising and recognising that Independence was a pyrrhic victory for him, he developed an ailment of the heart. He passed away in 1959 deeply regretting his hasty decision to migrate to Kolkata. East Pakistan would last for just 12 more years after his death giving birth to Bangladesh.

In hindsight, it is abundantly clear that it was not a correct decision for my grandfather to migrate to Kolkata. He not only discarded the material inheritance of his property in Chittagong but also the intellectual inheritance of the legacy of my great-grandfather.

My father, Arun Chandra Bhattacharya, now deceased, had much the same kind of career as I am having. Possessing several degrees, professional memberships, and a connoisseur of fine arts and literature, he travelled extensively throughout the world. Amongst his several achievements, the development of a management institute stands out. A Rotarian till his demise, he promoted fine arts by making several donations to deserving organisations. Though my father fully shared my grandfather's views as regards the state of India, it was too late for him to reverse my grandfather's mistake.

My father was in Times Square in New York when news broke out that Lee Harvey Oswald had assassinated President John F. Kennedy in Dallas. He recalls the dazed appearance on the faces of New Yorkers on receiving the news. ‘A successful democracy needs a literate society – illiterate people cannot make informed and considered choices while voting’ said my father later. ‘Eradicating illiteracy should be India’s prime concern. Side by side, corruption, bribery, criminality and malpractices, particularly in government offices, should be rooted out. Why should one have to

pay bribes to multiple people in order to get a new electricity connection for his newly-constructed house? There is enough for man's needs but not enough for man's greed. What matters is not what one has but what one is.' Though my father was a staunch Buddhist, he had to pay extortion money during Hindu festivals to slum-dwellers who still live near our house. Though my house is a posh area of south Kolkata, there is a big slum close to it. It is a sad commentary on the state of affairs that Kolkata is littered with similar slums everywhere. The slum-dwellers are mostly illiterate and unemployed and are, naturally, full of vices. The government has failed to uplift these people and eradicate the slums even though decades have passed since independence.

Uncle Aziz was a very close friend of my father. He and my father met in the United States. He had his ancestry in Comilla. He settled in Dhaka where he built a house in the Bonani area. He visited our home in Kolkata several times. He used to visit India often for professional purposes and never failed to drop in on us. I also visited Dhaka to present a paper at an International Conference and visited his home. On that occasion, I travelled throughout the length and breadth of Dhaka and saw everything that Dhaka has to offer. The friendship between my father and Uncle Aziz percolated to our extended families. My grandmother, Premlata Bhattacharya, looked upon Uncle Aziz as her own son. My paternal uncles and their families also became close friends of Uncle Aziz and his family and extended family, particularly one of Uncle Aziz's brothers, who was a doctor of international repute. Uncle Aziz's brother and his family also visited our house in Kolkata.

On one particular occasion, during dinner at our home, Uncle Aziz told my father and my paternal uncles 'Why did your father come to Kolkata in 1947? Our country is poorer because of your leaving it. Many of us in Bangladesh feel this way.'

My father took great care to see that I had exposure to all religions. When I was five years old, he got me admitted to Don Bosco School in Kolkata run by Roman Catholic missionaries where I got to study the Bible. During the twelve years that I studied in that school, certain aspects of Christianity like its monotheism and its opposition to idolatry left a deep, vivid, lasting and permanent impression on my mind. When I was nine years of age, my father took me to Murshidabad, an event that is engraved in my mind. At Murshidabad, he took me to a mosque built hundreds of years ago. He showed me all the details; the minarets, the calligraphy and so on. It was a memorable visit for me.

At Don Bosco School and during my higher education, I was following in the footsteps of my ancestors, picking up an excellent education and all the other things needed to be a complete man.

Later on, in my professional career, in the midst of my travels in various countries of the world spanning almost the entire globe, I have seen the unity of man. Memories stand out, sometimes instilling a sense of déjà vu in me; the view of the Pacific in Singapore and of the mountains and moraines from the top of Mount Säntis in Switzerland, the flight over Iran slicing between Tehran to the north and Qom to the south and over Saudi Arabia and Turkey, Bangkok's wats, Ahsan Manzil in Dhaka, Dubai, Jordan's northwest, sunset at Hardwar, Bremen and Berlin in Germany, Dilli Haat in Delhi and the Marina Beach in Chennai.

It is an inconvenient truth that independent India has let down its own freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi and my grandfather. Most people in India now seem to have a perverted view of being avant-garde. Sacrificing the values and traditions held dear by our ancestors, our glorious inheritance is thrown to the winds. Parvenus cannot be expected to appreciate the truism of Ich Dien. Ersatz culture proliferates with the concept of life avec plaisir. The scramble for lebensraum degenerates people to fall prey to rampant greed. Having achieved its independence way back in 1947, India has failed to become a developed country. India is still a developing country and an emerging market. India is rampant with corruption, bribery, criminality and malpractices. In India,

the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. The government has failed to give even the basic necessities to all Indians. If the dictum, 'justice delayed is justice denied' is to be held as valid, my mother, Sheila Bhattacharya, who is a retired Head of the Department of English of a college affiliated to the University of Calcutta, was denied justice as she received her retirement dues four years after she had retired. Of the many countries that I have visited in the world, India is the only country I know of where a government employee has been threatened with death by a colleague (who is also a government employee) and has been forced to resign and the government has not done anything whatsoever for the victim. Steeped in bribery, the immediate bosses of the victim (all of whom are government employees) have supported and are continuing to support the criminal who happens to have considerable money-power. The victim is yet to receive a single paisa of even his own money kept in the custody of the government during his years in government service. This very recent incident presents a shameful picture of India in front of the civilised world.

The Government of India has to do the following cleaning-up on a war-footing. The Government of India has to

1. Root out government servants having a criminal record. To start with, the government should dismiss and try Salil Haldar, Sujay Kumar Mukherjea, Basudeb Bhattacharyya and Koustuv Debnath, all of whom are employed as teachers at Indian Institute of Engineering Science and Technology, Shibpur, West Bengal, and all of whom have criminal records.

2. Root out bribery and corruption in government offices. Only a very small fraction of government servants are honest.

3. Demolish the conception, prevalent among most Indians, that government service implies the right to take bribes. While punishing the guilty, the government should laud the very small minority of government servants who are honest.

4. Make an earnest effort to uplift the suffering villagers of India.

5. Make sincere efforts to remove slums and ghettos in Indian cities and towns.

6. Build a government based on trust, not suspicion. At least four identity documents are prevalent in India today - Passport, Aadhaar Card, PAN Card and Voter's Identity Card. Since, excepting a Passport, an Indian does not really need the rest, the government should abolish the unnecessary documents. Different sets of government servants are currently issuing different identity documents and taking bribes for issuing the same.

7. Recognise that widespread rigging takes place in Indian elections and make sincere efforts to root-out the same. In view of the widespread rigging prevalent now with local toughs ruling polling booths, Indian election results are devoid of any relation to the will of the people.

8. Ensure that a son inherits his father's property. This usually does not happen now unless the son pays hefty bribes to government servants. The government must do some soul-searching and feel ashamed that a son currently finds great difficulty in inheriting his father's shares and electricity connection - just to cite two examples.

9. Eradicate the current habit of government servants taking bribes to, for example, sanction a building plan, mutate a landed property and provide an electricity connection.

10. Simplify the procedure for getting Indian Passports. The government servants at the Regional Passport Offices must be courteous and helpful and not harass citizens as is the case today.

11. Ensure that retirement benefits are released immediately after retirement and not after four or five years. Many people get their retirement benefits between four and six years after retirement. My mother received her retirement benefits four years after her retirement. The government must punish government servants who withhold retirement benefits of retired citizens.

12. Eliminate feudalism. Corrupt government servants have taken the place of erstwhile zamindars in rural areas.

13. Eliminate the current 'trickle-down' economy. The government must ensure that the lower strata of Indian society is also a beneficiary of economic progress and is not left behind.

14. Remove the criminal-government servant-politician nexus. This is extremely important if India is to progress.

15. Remove the difference between 'the rulers' and 'the ruled'. The government must ensure that democracy does not remain a sham and that government is truly 'of the people, for the people and by the people'.

16. Place a greater value on human life. The government must not think that, simply because India is a populous country, a few lives lost in an accident, for example, a bridge collapse - such as the one that happened in Howrah some time back - does not matter. The government must acknowledge that every single human life is valuable.

17. Eliminate tokenism.

18. Eliminate window-dressing before a politician visits an area. The government must be sincere in its development efforts and ensure that not a single development project announced turns out to be an eyewash designed to fool the population.

19. Ensure internet access and continuous power supply in rural areas. Internet access outside of the metropolises is pitiful and power outages are common. Yesterday evening, there was a power outage at my office in Kolkata.

20. Be sensitive to the suffering of the people. The length and breadth of Kolkata is flooded during the monsoon season and no regime has done anything about it.

21. Understand that slogans like 'Bekari hatao' and 'Roti, kapra aur makaan' are useless if they remain mere slogans without any attempt to implement them. The government must ensure that the fundamental needs of the people are fulfilled.

This article has perhaps raised more questions than answers. But one thing is for sure. If my grandfather had foreseen that India would come to this, then he would not have fought the British for India's independence.

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