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CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

Owing to its immense diversity, the governance of India has never been easy. It has often been very difficult, and occasionally painful. The country is a great melting pot, *albeit* a queer amalgam, of religion, race, language, caste and ethnicity. Its ethno-racial diversity is perhaps the most complex to be found anywhere outside Africa. There are six main religions - Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, Buddhism and Jainism - subdivided into numerous, often conflicting, sects, hundreds of languages (including local dialects), scores of sub-national groups with distinct ethno-linguistic and cultural identity as well as countless tribal groups.

Historically, such a diversity served as a fertile ground for multifarious conflicts along horizontal as well as vertical lines within the society, on occasions shattering its very foundation. Therefore, one of the cardinal issues pertaining to the governance of India throughout the history has been the management and resolution of such conflicts with a view to minimizing their damaging effects on the social fabrics. The accumulated experience of Indian civilization amply demonstrates that tolerance, particularly on the part of those who govern, facilitates the resolution of social conflicts, or at least, let the conflicting parties learn to live with them when a solution is out of reach, and thus, makes the process of socio-economic and politico-cultural transformation smoother. In contrast, attempts to bring uniformity, particularly through the use of force, have never been fruitful. On the contrary, they often turned out to be counter-productive, and not seldom, catastrophic if they are judged in the

broader social context and historical perspective, despite their occasional temporary success.

Such an accumulated experience of long historical period, including that of the anti-colonial movement, coupled with the character of the elite and the mainstream leadership - Westernized in terms of education, mode of life and socio-political outlook - greatly influenced the choice of political system in independent India. Modern India, under its chief architect Jawaharlal Nehru, opted for a Constitution with provisions for Westminster model of parliamentary democracy, federal structure of state power and secularism in order to allow vast flexibility of response in the process of effective governance so as to preserve India's unity in its immense diversity and facilitate the nation-building process.

For a continuously long period, Indian political system based on democracy, federalism and secularism functioned relatively well despite enormous difficulties faced by the country in the process of socio-economic and politico-cultural transformation. In dealing with gigantic as well as highly complex problems of the country, the system proved to be flexible, effective and resilient, and enjoyed popular legitimacy.

By mid-1970s, however, Indian political system began to experience difficulties due to the problems accumulated in the process of its functioning and, more so, due to its abuse and distortion on the part of the ruling elite. These difficulties developed into a crisis following the declaration of a state of emergency on June 26, 1975 by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. One of the main features of the crisis was that the ruling regime by-passed and/or manipulated the Constitution, severely curtailed the democratic rights, crippled the judiciary, centralized power at the cost of constituent states, unduly relied on the use of force, and thus, eroded its popular legitimacy. Although, the crisis was resolved within the framework of the existing political system

through the election of 1977 and the subsequent smooth transfer of power, the system never fully recovered from the damage done to it during 1975-1977.

In the subsequent periods, conflicts along ethno-linguistic, religious, caste, regional and other parochial lines, and resultant crises in India, began to be more often, more violent and more sustained. Neither `strong and assertive' governments under Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi nor `liberal and accommodative' governments under Morarji Desai and V. P. Singh could resolve, or at least, properly manage the country's internecine conflicts among feuding ethnic and religious groups. Other short-lived governments even do not figure for consideration.

In the backdrop of the leadership vacuum created by V. P. Singh's fall from grace and the demise of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, an apparently mild, flexible and accommodative personality P. V. Narasimha Rao came to head the Congress government as the compromise choice of the central leadership of the party. Meanwhile, the country was facing grave situation both in the economic as well as political fronts. The focal point of India's intra-state conflicts became a violent one between the Hindus and the Muslims that centered round the Babri Masjid-Ram Janambhumi issue. Being persistently intensified, this conflict is spreading all over North India and beyond with large-scale loss of lives. Similarly, internecine conflict in Kashmir and the Punjab is claiming heavy toll of lives. The normal life in Kashmir remains totally paralysed while the Punjab has not yet recovered from a similar situation. These two states remain far from the national main stream. Violence among feuding ethno-linguistic and religious groups in the North East of the country is rampant, while the South is not quite peaceful. All these are taking place at a time when the country's economy is undergoing a difficult period of transition marked by uncertainties and potential social conflicts.

The gravity of the situation in India demanded sagacity and courage on the part of its leadership. Rao could hardly display these. The unwillingness as well as incapability of his regime to face the challenges resulted in the forfeiture of Congress initiative in Indian politics leaving it to the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatya Janata Party (BJP), the ultimate outcome of which was the demolition of Babri Masjid by the Hindu fundamentalists on December 6, 1992 and the subsequent orgy of communal violence.

The carnage in India is just the tip of an iceberg. Its current crisis is much more deep rooted, multi-dimensional and complex than the violent incidents and the government failure to deal with them. The central issue in this regard is the decay of the political system outright manifestation of which is its declining effectiveness and popular legitimacy. The gravity of the situation lies not only in the fact that the process of governance is facing mounting challenges, but also in the fact that the fundamental principles and the core values that the state adheres to came under considerable threat.

The main purpose of the present paper is to initiate some fresh discussions on the challenges of governance in India with prime focus on the future of its political system. It begins with a theoretical framework designed to facilitate subsequent discussions. Part II is an attempt to identify the roots and manifestation of the crisis that India is currently undergoing. Part III is designed to reveal the nature and magnitude of the challenges faced by Indian state in the process of governance and assess the ability of the ruling elite to deal with them. In this regard, the focal points for discussion would be the fundamental principles of the political system. Finally, an attempt would be made to indicate some possible directions that the country may be moving in.

II. CHALLENGES OF GOVERNANCE: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Governance in the context of a society would essentially mean the capability of the state to effectively exercise power i.e. device policy options and implement them through its organs with a view to achieving principal objectives of the concerned state itself. Among these objectives, defense of the system that the state adheres to and the fulfillment of its major socio-economic and political goals both in the domestic as well as international context are of prime importance. In the broader perspective, governance would mean the ability of the state to manage and give direction to the overall development of the nation.

While such an approach suggesting the paramount role of state in the process of governance may not be applicable as a universal proposition, it is certainly applicable to developing societies including India. Reasons are obvious. Unlike the developed societies, state in the developing societies is virtually omnipotent. Its power is hardly controlled or diluted by the effective functioning of a civil society. The state in the developing countries, including that in India, is also highly interventionist both by nature and by compulsion. It is also deeply involved in the management of economic life, down to the grass roots. It leads increasing number of researchers to treat state as "a robust social actor" while dealing with the problems of governance.[1]

A host of social and economic forces as well as institutions from outside the purview of state in the developing societies also play an important role in the process of governance. In the quest to assert the significance of state, there is no scope of underemphasizing the role of these forces. At times, their action, inaction and interaction exert even decisive influence on the

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1. See, for example, Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991), p.10.

societal development. Nonetheless, their activities and pattern of behavior are conditioned by the nature and role of state. In a situation like that in India, state not only is the agent of political order but also responsible for socio-economic development. It still controls and, by all indications, would continue to control a significant part of the economic resources in a very poor society. Access to the power of state is bitterly contested by diverse social groups, not only for the political ends of exercising power and influencing policy but also as a source of livelihood and rapid upward mobility. The struggle for state power in these circumstances becomes simultaneously struggle to influence people's life-chances.[2]

Such a situation has made the state an object of not only political, but also of intense economic competition among diverse interest groups. Being unable to influence the process of socio-economic development independently, social forces concentrate their efforts primarily on capturing state power or influencing the state and its organs. This, among others, also helps to sustain and further strengthen the role of state as the most dominant actor in the process of governance. Such a situation leads researchers to concentrate attention on the state, its nature, role and objectives, actors and factors determining and/or influencing its activities and their outcomes, and other related issues while studying the problems of governance and pertinent matters. In this regard, an enquiry into the highly complex interaction of state and social forces is an imperative for grappling squarely the unexplored theme of governance as the critical variable in the process of development.

"At the core of the governance of any society lies the political system which conditions the behavior of the government".[3] This

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2. See, *Ibid.*, p.20.

3. Rehman Sobhan, *Bangladesh: The Problems of Governance*, (University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1993), p.4.

may even be an under-statement. As a matter of fact, the political system conditions the behavior of all the organs of state as well as social, political, economic, religious and other institutions prevailing in a country. Therefore, the study of the challenges of governance would essentially lead to an academic meditation on the ills and evils of the political system and processes as well as their strong and healthy points.

The focal point in any study on the political system is, of course, the fundamental principles and core values that the state adheres to. They need to be analyzed both in theoretical as well as operational terms. Their influence on the political processes and the reverse are of crucial importance in understanding the intricacies associated with governance. Some researchers even examined the "problems of governance" in a given country as the problems concerned with "the functioning of the system of government" with particular attention to the core values that the state adheres to.[4] For reasons explained elsewhere, the current paper, also deals specifically with the functioning of the political system in India while its fundamental principles have been the focal point.

The political and socio-economic objectives of the state and the means of achieving them are of considerable importance to the researchers dealing with the problems of governance. The current study would deal specifically with the challenges faced by the state in India in the process of the formulation and implementation of policies designed to fulfill its declared objectives. In this regard, questions would be asked on whether such objectives of the state as well as the means to achieve them derive from the consent and needs of its citizens. Similarly, the majority community's perceptions of and practical policy towards

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4. See, for example, K. M. de Silva, *Sri Lanka: Problems of Governance*, (Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1993), p.xi-xii.

the ethno-linguistic, religious and other minority communities would receive proper attention. Effectiveness and popular legitimacy of the political system will also come under scrutiny. All these would lead us to proceed to the key question pertaining to governance: is state capable of giving benign, good and compassionate government unto the people? It is also the most intriguing question to all concerned with governance.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that the study of challenges of governance is, in essence, also a search for ways and means of managing the affairs of state, taking into account the obstacles inherent in the changes in a given country or group of countries. These accumulate from various acts of omission and commission on the part of the rulers, and also result from the increasing complexities of each political society and the international milieu in which these political societies function.[5]

III. THE ROOTS OF THE CRISIS

The causes leading to the current crisis of governance in India are multifarious, complex and contradictory, and rooted primarily in the socio-economic and politico-cultural develop-ment of the country itself, while a number of regional and international developments may also have aggravated it.

The process of socio-economic and politico-cultural development in India - like in any Third World country - was accompanied by scramble for scarce resources of the country among economically and politically dominating groups who fared well during the colonial rule. That, among others, generated uneven economic, socio-political and cultural development of different classes and social strata, ethnic and linguistic groups, religious communities and geographical regions. In other words,

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5. See, Foreword by V. A. Pai Panandiker in Mushahid Hussain and Akmal Hussain, *Pakistan: Problems of Governance*, (Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1993), p.vi.

certain sub-national groups established their domination in economic, politico-administrative and even cultural spheres depriving others of their legitimate share. In the circumstances, people who considered that they have a common heritage could not envision a common destiny for the future.

The deprived sections of the society responded by seeking the proximate sources for mobilizing militancy and political pressure: i.e. the assertion of ethnic, linguistic, religious or regional identities. The growing polarization of society along sub-national lines so charged the political atmosphere that in a number of cases relatively privileged sections also came to assert their ethnic or religious identity, and accordingly, mobilize militancy. Hindu militancy directed against the Muslims and Sikh militancy directed against the Hindus are the most illustrated examples to this.

For a considerable period, a participatory democracy, secularism and a federal system of government let the grievances be expressed largely within the constitutional framework. In cases, where violent conflicts emerged, the ruling elite was able either to resolve them or to live with them minimizing their damaging effects. Over the recent years, however, due to the increased complexity of the problems and mismanagement on the part of the ruling elite, India's multifarious intra-state conflicts have taken a highly violent turn with large-scale loss of life and property. For the ruling elite, it has been virtually impossible either to resolve the violent intra-state conflicts or to keep the cost of living with them to an acceptable limit. Moreover, the ruling elite was also failing to act within the perspective of strengthening the democratic institutions by decentralizing political and economic power, and to create an environment of freedom to practice religion and culture among diverse communities. Instead, it was either displaying lack of initiative and innovativeness or responding by strengthening and using the coercive power of the

state to preserve regime interests, and thus, undermining the effectiveness of the regime as well as the political system.

By the 1980s, it was clear that the strategic economic objectives of Indian nation with regard to prosperity and self-reliance remained unfulfilled. Moreover, the country's economy was not in a proper direction. The extent of the crisis that Indian economy was going through was most vividly reflected in the country's external payments imbalance. By the end of June 1991, the foreign exchange reserves had declined to a bare US$1.1 billion - sufficient to finance just two weeks' import requirements - from US$3.368 billion at the close of 1989-90. Forty seven tons of RBI gold had to be shipped to the Bank of England in July 1991 as security to raise another about US$400 million as a short term measure.[6] The gross fiscal deficit went up from Rs.88,870 million (6.5 percent of the GDP) in 1980-81 to Rs.446,500 million (8.4 percent of the GDP) in 1990-91. The total outstanding internal liabilities of the government increased from Rs.484,510 million (35.6 percent of the GDP) in 1980-81 to Rs.2,795,280 million (52.8 percent of the GDP) in 1990-91. The outstanding external debt for the same period went up from 9.9 percent of the GDP to 19.9 percent of the GDP.[7] Meanwhile inflation was running at 13 percent.[8] Unemployment was ever increasing. In 1992, India belonged to one of the twenty poorest nations of the world with a per capita GNP of US$310.[9] In terms of GNP per capita, it stands behind its South Asian neighbours like, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Pakistan.[10] India's per capita GDP in terms of Purchasing-Power Parity (PPP) is even lower than that of

6.   R. C. Ummat, "Liberalizing Indian Economy", *World Focus*, February 1992, p.6.

7.   *Ibid.*, p.7.

8.   *Dawn*, January 26, 1992.

9.   *World Development Report 1994*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1994), p.162.

10.   *Human Development Report 1994*, (United Nations Development Programme, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994), pp.132-34.

Bhutan and Bangladesh. Per capita GDP (PPP) of these three countries are US$1,250, US$1,290 and US$1,475 respectively.[11]

Thus, the dream about India as a prosperous, industrialized and self-reliant nation, nurtured by its founding fathers, Nehru in particular, fell far short of the expectations of its elite. One of the focal points in Mrs. Gandhi's socio-economic programme was commitment to poverty alleviation. Nonetheless, the impoverishment of mass population, particularly the peasantry, continued unabated. The poor were, in many cases, worse off than ever before. Thus, 'Garibi Hatao' - a slogan symbolizing Mrs. Gandhi's socio-economic programme - became a wry joke.

Meanwhile, the exposure to modernization and communication revolution generated great expectations among the people, particularly the elite, with regard to prosperity which the economy was unable to fulfil. Therefore, dissatisfaction with the poor performance of the economy was all-pervasive. Neither the elite nor the masses were prepared to live with such a state of affairs in the economy.

In terms of scientific and technological progress, economic prosperity as well as future prospects, India was lagging far behind a large number of Third World countries, Asia-Pacific nations in particular. Some of these countries, however, were behind India when the latter achieved independence in 1947. Such a state of affairs, and more so, such an alarming trend in Indian economy could not be allowed to persist any longer. The remedy was no less painful either. In order to bail itself out of the grim situation, India had to partially compromise its economic sovereignty to the International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank system which New Delhi has guarded so long and so zealously. Apart from causing enormous frustration among common Indians with regard

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11. See, *Asiaweek*, May 19, 1995, p.57.

to their economic well-being, it has also severely hurt the pride of the nation and caused considerable loss of self-respect. The feelings have been expressed by an Indian journalist who said, "In the eyes of the world we are a drastic failure and nobody pays us any attention.[12] This may be an exaggeration, but such a feeling came to prevail among a significant part of the Indians, particularly the elite.

Paradoxically, however, not only the failure of the system but its successes as well served as a root cause of the current crisis. India's achievements, while falling short of the current level of the expectations of its people, by no means are of insignificant consequences. Industrialization, spread of education, modernization, exposure to communication revolution, Western influence and others have brought a profound change in the life-style, family, socio-cultural and moral-spiritual values. Such a process of development was, however, highly uneven. While the elite was subject to the globalization of life-style and values, the vast majority of common Indians remained less affected by the process of modernization. For some, the modernization of life-style was not accompanied by that of family, socio-cultural and moral-spiritual values. For a large number of people, all these generated sort of an identity crisis. As seen by them, their century-old life-style and values came under grave threat which ultimately pushed them to traditional rituals, religious symbolism, and so on. This has contributed to the division of the society along ethnic, religious, caste, linguistic and other parochial lines and the rise of ethno-religious revivalist/chauvinist and separatist movements in the country making it further difficult to govern.

Another important reason is the politico-ideological vacuum created by the collapse of socialist states in East Europe. Being an atheist and proletarian internationalist doctrine, Marxism professes

12. *Sunday*, March 14-20, 1993, p.35.

the denial of religion and narrow ethnic loyalties any place in the process of nation-building. With the collapse of Marxist-Leninist states in East Europe, the very religious and ethnic loyalties have re-asserted themselves with a terrifying vigour and it did not remain confined to the erst-while socialist countries alone. In India, the decline of the communist and other leftist groups as an effective force in the political arena has certainly contributed to the rise of religious fundamentalism and narrow ethnic loyalties which lies at the core of the current crisis of governability.

In the current process of the readjustment of India's domestic and foreign policy, the country was compelled to reconsider non-alignment and socialism - two main pillars of its political beliefs. The essence of non-alignment was that India would not tilt towards either of the two super powers. With the demise of the Soviet Union, there was only one super power left - the United States. India had to tilt towards it.

By the early-1980s, it was clear that with the crisis in the socialist countries, Indian variety of socialism was in deep trouble. Hence a purposeful process of economic liberalization began which, as indicated earlier, gained tremendous strength during the subsequent period. Under Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh it was strong enough to bury Nehruvian socialism. The abandonment of Nehruvian socialism and the irrelevance of non-alignment made it logical to raise the question: why some other pillars of Indian political beliefs could not be reconsidered?

While the underlying reasons of the crisis are socio-economic and politico-cultural in nature, its manifestation is primarily political. At the national level, there is hardly any polarization on the socio-economic issues. As indicated earlier, egalitarian ideals have gone with the demise of communism in East Europe. V. P. Singh's quixotic policy with regard to the implementation of Mandal Commission's report ended in a fiasco. India has firmly

embarked upon a programme of economic reform ultimate goal of which is to do away with Nehruvian socialist legacy. The reform being implemented under its zealot Finance Minister Manmohan Singh includes such measures with far reaching consequences as to privatize India's loss-making public sector, make Indian Rupee convertible, drastically reduce import tariff barriers, substantially cut government expenditure, do away with large subsidies and make it easier for foreign companies to invest in India.

India was compelled to accept the reform programme. Yet, the elite, by and large, welcomed the reform programme. However, there have been a number of opposition voices, quite vociferous ones. One of these vociferous critics of economic reform has been former Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar who characterized the reform as being anti-people, i.e not serving the interests of the common man, and anti-national, i.e. serving the purpose of foreign business interests. He also asserted that "Poverty for the Indian people is not new; but we had national pride. Now even national pride has been compromised, if not wholly mortgaged."[13] While criticizing the economic reform, Chandra Shekhar-like old-fashioned nationalists and the leftists lacked both self-confidence as well as popular support. More important, they could not offer any viable alternative. As a consequence, during the initial period, they were far from offering any meaningful resistance to the process of reform despite raising occasional hue and cry over the issues like GATT and others.

In course of time, however, opposition to reform grew stronger. Along with Left Front and National Front, anti-reform forces were joined by regional forces like Telegu Desam Party (TDP) of N. T. Rama Rao and others. An important factor, newly-

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13.   Chandra Shekhar, *Political Economy of India,* (Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1992), p.1.

formed Congress Party headed by N. D. Tiwari, Arjun Singh and others has also made its opposition to drastic reform quite clear. These factors coupled with the defeat of Congress in State Assembly elections in mid-1994 and early-1995 have put a restraint on the government. However, the reforms, as it appears, suffered only a minor set-back. What the Congress government headed by Narasimha Rao is trying to do is to find out remedies aimed at minimizing the side effects of reform and making the process of economic transition less painful to the common people. While by 1994-95, economic issues, particularly the reform and its broader consequences, came to figure in political debates, it did not lead to a polarization of political forces. Politics remained predominantly an arena of sharp struggle between and among diverse ethno-linguistic groups, religious communities and political streams with conflicting ideas and interests.

IV. CHALLENGES OF GOVERNANCE IN INDIA: THE NATURE AND MAGNITUDE

Over the last couple of decades, two distinct schools of thought with regard to governance dominated both Indian political thinking as well as the practical policy of successive governments with mandate to rule. While none of them challenged any of the basic principles of Indian political system, they differed with each other significantly both in style and substance on how to run the business of the state. First group preferred a strong central government under a charismatic leader with enormous personal power in the hands of the leader himself (or herself). While in power, for the sake of better, quick and effective governance, this group tended to curtail the autonomy of the constituent states, larger democratic rights of the people and even intra-party democracy, thus giving the central government, particularly the leader, maximum power within the framework of a democratic system. This school of thought domi-

nated main stream Congress politics since the emergence of Indira Gandhi as the sole leader of the Congress to the demise of Rajiv Gandhi. Even, the latter's mild personality and relatively accommodative approach did not help to change the situation.

The second school of thought advocated more autonomy to the constituent states, more democratic freedom and less personal power in the hands of the leader. While in power, they tended to rely less on the use of force, remain more tolerant to dissent and opposition voices, and encourage the decentralization of economic and political power. They seem to have opted for the doctrine which considers a government good one when it governs less. Most of the time, disgruntled dissident elements from within the Congress in association with diverse, often contradictory, anti-Congress elements appeared in the political arena as the proponent of this school of thought. Their liberal approach more often reflected the heterogeneous, loose and contradictory nature of coalitions formed to challenge the Congress than a genuine desire for and a purposeful policy aimed at further democratizing and liberalizing Indian polity and society. Two alliances - one under Morarji Desai and the other under V.P. Singh - which ruled India for two brief periods - belong to this school.

Over time, both the schools enjoyed popular support. Each has been seen as an alternative to the other and *vice versa*. In the backdrop of economic difficulties, political chaos, and particularly, fissiparous tendencies, a strong central government under a charismatic leader with enormous power within the realm of a democratic system - or as Mrs. Gandhi once used to say `a government that works'[14] - came to be considered as an effective instrument of compensating the under-development and short comings of political institutions and state organs. On the other

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14. K. N. Subrahmanya, *Development of Politics in India*, (Deep and Deep Publications, New Delhi, 1984), p.258.

hand, not seldom, a strong government under a charismatic leader has been considered as the single-most important cause for declining legitimacy and diminishing effectiveness of the political institutions and state organs, thus, justifying the necessity of a liberal government with decentralization of power.

Both the schools of thought and respective political streams have had their chances. Any assessment of their success and failure, and more so, any attempt to justify the relevance of either one to the present context of Indian politics would be highly controversial. Only suffice it to say that in view of the past experiences and the current magnitude of problems that India is facing with regard to governance neither option appears to be an attractive one. It is particularly true because of the fact that this time an apparently liberal Congress government headed by accommodative Rao is miserably failing to deal with multifarious conflicts within the polity. In addition, the actions and inactions of the government itself are being considered widely as further aggravating the situation. All these are indicative of the fact that Indian political system, its political institutions and core values have undergone decay, that is, they have become less able to respond creatively, or even adequately, to the challenges thrown by numerous social groups. Vivid manifestation of this decay has been the declining ability, and not seldom, failure of the ruling elite, the state and its organs, and political institutions to effectively mediate intra-state conflicts along religious, ethno-linguistic, regional and other possible parochial lines within the society.

The essence of the current challenges of governance is, however, the failure of the ruling elite not only to govern but also to evolve a consensus on how to govern. Following is an attempt to reveal the nature and magnitude of the challenges faced by Indian state in the process of governance and assess the ability of the ruling elite to deal with them. The focus would be three

cornerstones of Indian political system: federalism, secularism and democracy.

1. Federalism: A Victim of the Centralization of Power

India's immense diversity, as discussed above, made it inevitable for its founding fathers to opt for a federal system of government that would create multiple centres of power instead of a single one. The objective was not only to create an environment wherein diverse sub-national groups could flourish in an autonomous fashion, but also to create an environment wherein they could confidently participate in and intensify the process of national integration. In independent India, 'States' were recreated and/or their boundaries were re-drawn primarily on ethno-linguistic ground. Federalism was accepted as a corner-stone of the political system. In practice, it was aimed at creating a mechanism for the management and resolution of conflicts arising out of the interplay of a variety of centripetal and centrifugal forces.

Effective working of the Indian federation remains - as envisaged by its founding fathers and evolved through practical experiences - contingent on two main factors: a. functioning of the state organs and constitutional/legal provisions which condition the behavior of the formers; and b. activities of the political parties, both national and regional, who exert no less - on occasions, even decisive - influence on the really existing status of federalism. An attempt would be made below to discuss the challenges faced by Indian federalism with respect to these two factors.

a. Constitutional/legal provisions and the functioning of state organs: The prime concern of post-independent Indian leadership who framed the constitution was to create a common Indian identity out of diverse ethno-linguistic and religious loyalties. It

has deeply influenced their decision and the constitution was heavily biased in favour of the Centre. Although, this leadership harboured a genuine desire for allowing substantial autonomy to the constituent states, it has preferred to keep decisive power with the Centre as a safety valve. As explained by the architect of Indian constitution Dr. Ambedkar, the Indian Constitution has been designed to possess the necessary flexibility to function as a unitary government in moments of emergency.[15]

Having nation-wide support base and network of organization as well as powerful regional leaders, the Congress proved to be equipped with necessary competence to effectively mediate disputes between the Centre and the States as well as between and among the States. It tended to rely more on consensus building over the issues of discord, and only seldom, imposed solutions from the above. In the process, it has allowed substantial decentralization of power, and thus, giving the Indian federal system a more or less genuine character, particularly when it was judged in the context of Third World.

With the advent of Indira Gandhi to the apex of power, the situation changed drastically. One of the characteristic features of her rule was the centralization, and to a certain extent, personalization of state power unprecedented in India. A host of reasons contributed to this process. India was suffering from severe economic difficulties. Particularly painful was her shortage of food and other necessary commodities. Both traditional politics and economics were being blamed for the situation. In this backdrop, India witnessed a sudden rise of communist forces professing different schools of Marxist-Leninist as well as Maoist thoughts. A number of Maoist groups were engaged in armed

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15.   S. N. Mishra, "Some Reflections on the Peculiarities of Indian Polity", in S. A. H. Haqqi (ed.), *Democracy, Pluralism and Nation-Building*, (N.B.O. Publishers and Distributors, Delhi, 1984), p.460.

insurgency. Mrs. Gandhi's attempt to face the communist challenge by turning her party leftward faced severe opposition on the part of conservative senior leaders of the party. Economic difficulties, communist challenge, Maoist insurgency coupled with the sharp and well-publicized division within the Congress Party in the backdrop of the absence of any alternative to the Congress as a ruling party severely undermined the political stability of the country.

Meanwhile, the challenges faced by India in the field of foreign policy and defense were no less critical. Mrs. Gandhi's domestic and foreign policies were facing considerable opposition from the West, particularly the US. More disconcerting was the fact that India had to compromise, at least partially, its foreign policy positions in order to facilitate Western aid. The humiliating defeat in Sino-Indian war of 1962 was never forgotten and the memory of unsatisfactory performance of India's defense forces in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965 was too fresh to be forgotten. With less than correct relations with the US and persistent hostility with China and Pakistan, India developed a sense of being encircled by hostile countries.

In the circumstances, the nation as a whole was suffering from deep frustration and lack of self confidence. Peoples' urge for finding out quick and effective solution to the nation's economic problems, bringing political stability, and importantly, restoring national pride was ever increasing. Such a situation created fertile ground for the rise of a 'cult figure' capable of performing miracles. As judged by Mrs. Gandhi herself, the reorganization of political and economic institutions of the nation, including the state organs, with a view to centralizing power was inevitable for effectively dealing with the situation. In this regard, concentration of enormous power in her own hands was an important point. As seen through her eyes, the coalition of forces that her father presided over was neither vital nor even a viable one for ruling India

during the years to come. In her thinking, she was also influenced by the rising tide of radical anti-imperialist authoritarianism with egalitarian flavour in different parts of the Third World. Her alliance with the pro-Soviet communists at home and India's broadening cooperation with the former Soviet Union facilitated her moves. The most important factor, the new generation of Congressmen who, by and large, rallied around Mrs. Gandhi came to consider the centralization of power as indispensable for quick, better and effective governance. All these made it possible for her to concentrate enormous power in her own hands without facing considerable resistance from the larger section of Indian people. However paradoxical it may look now, Mrs. Gandhi's move in its early stage enjoyed popular support.

Centralization of power under Mrs. Gandhi, among others, deprived the states of the substantial part of both economic and political power erst-while enjoyed by them. She could do it without bringing any fundamental change to the Indian Constitution thanks to its flexible nature which has already given too much power to the Centre. According to one estimate, during eleven years of Mrs. Gandhi's rule since 1966 to 1977, the central government has taken over the states on approximately thirty occasions. By contrast, in the preceding sixteen years, emergency powers were used only ten times.[16] Such a trend has undermined the authority of the elected representatives and the democratic institutions as well as the tradition of consensus building. The trend set by Mrs. Gandhi continued despite tremendous opposition to it on the part of opposition and regional parties as well as attempts to correct it by some of her successors.

One of the worst outcomes of undue concentration of power at the Centre was the increased role of civil and police bureau-

16. S. Bhatnagar, "The Nehru Model of Nation-Building and Political Development", in S. A. H. Haqqi (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.73.

cracy and the excessive use of coercive power of the state in dealing with disputes and conflicts within the society. Recently, this phenomenon has assumed unprecedented proportions. Kashmir and the Punjab are the most striking cases in point. Only one example would suffice to indicate the extent of violence as being conducted in these two states by the law enforcing agencies and the insurgent forces. According to one estimate, during early-1990 and mid-1992, 7,500 people have been killed in Kashmir and the Punjab.[17] The use of force in the North East of the country is also highly excessive.

Ruthless police methods, shrewd political management and disenchantment of the Sikh population with violence have brought a temporary respite in violence in the Punjab. The Punjab issue, however, remains as a dormant volcano. At present, there is hardly any policy on Kashmir other than using crude force. The extent of violence as conducted by Indian forces in Kashmir leaves no doubt that, now, only guns rule the state. Peaceful option on Kashmir, as it appears, remains out of the consideration. No other issue, like Kashmir and the Punjab, brought to the surface the crisis suffered by Indian federalism. On the one hand, it demonstrates the inability of the central authority to display creativity and wisdom in devising peaceful policy options and implement them in order to bring these two states to the national mainstream. On the other hand, it demonstrates the existence of strong separatist movements in these states willing to challenge and capable of challenging the power of central authority militarily.

Besides, India is also full of disputes and conflicts between and among the constituent states. Dispute over the distribution of the waters of the river Jamuna among the riparian Indian states is an old one. After a decade-long negotiations among Haryana, Uttar

17. *Dawn*, January 26, 1992.

Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi and Rajastan, the proposed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) could not be signed because of Rajastan's refusal. Now, the Punjab has also staked its claim to the Jamuna water further complicating the issue. A similar dispute persists between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over the distribution of the waters of River Cauvery. Over the recent years, the dispute is taking a more serious turn. West Bengal remains at odds with Assam because of latter's attempts to drive its Bangali settlers out of the state.

Such disputes and conflicts in India are numerous and highly complex. While most of them - settled or unsettled - remain within the constitutional process, some are taking more and more violent turn shattering the integrity of Indian federation. In this regard, Kashmir and the Punjab are the worst cases in point. These demonstrate the extent of failure of the political system, and for that matter, the state to institutionalize federalism.

b. Activities of the political parties: Political parties - whether national or regional - are one of the most important instruments of articulating public opinion on the nature and the function of the state, organizing political forces, formulating policy options and implementing them. In India, they exerted tremendous influence on the functioning of, among others, Indian federalism. In this regard, the role of Indian National Congress is of paramount importance. Despite a constitution that is highly biased in favour of the Centre, Indian State functioned as a federation primarily thanks to the collective leadership and the de facto existence of a decentralized structure of the Congress Party. Important decision makers of the party were spread almost all over the country, like, Kamaraj in Madras, Y.B. Chavan in Maharashtra, P.S. Kairon in the Punjab, B.C. Roy in West Bengal, and so on. The strength of these leaders did not derive from their loyalty to the Supreme leader of the Party but from the popular

support they enjoyed in their own states. Therefore, they could display substantial autonomy in the process of policy making and implementation. In the circumstances, while implementing the policies of the Centre, it was not difficult for the regional Congress leadership to keep the Centre continuously abreast with the developments at the grass-roots. Having influence in both the Centre and their own states, the regional leaders could successfully act as bargaining agents between the Centre on the one hand, and the different aggrieved states, ethno-linguistic and religious groups on the other.

Federalization within the national political parties and the federalization of the government are interrelated and interdependent. Functioning or disfunctioning of the one influence the other in the similar direction. This happened in India during the first two decades of its independent existence. Congress ability to meet the challenges thrown by the issues like, Telangana, Naga and Mizo, language riots in Tamil Nadu, Punjabi-Suba and others, largely in the democratic course of consensus formation strengthened the federalism both within the Government as well as the party.

During the late-1960s and early-1970s, the same reasons which motivated Mrs. Gandhi to establish centralized control over the government machinery also led her to establish centralized control over the party. In the process of such centralization, collective leadership as represented by regional leaders ceased to exist and she concentrated enormous power at the centre, more precisely, in her own hands. It has allowed her to ease out of office powerful state leaders with popular base. In their place, she could nominate her loyal supporters who had insufficient or no local support base of their own. For obvious reasons, these leaders, while implementing the policies of the Centre in their respective states were often not in a position to either convey the local

grievances to the Centre or serve as a bargaining agent between the Centre and the peripheries. Thus, the central leadership of the Party lost its erst-while representative character. As a consequence, the central authority became less and less effective in responding to the aspirations of different states, ethno-linguistic and religious groups. The existence of such a situation over a continuously long period and without a solution in sight has given rise to a number of centrifugal forces and secessionist movements. Some of them, as we have discussed, are highly violent and causing enormous damage to the human and material resources of the country.

Congress could never recover from the losses suffered due to the destruction of its collective leadership as represented by powerful regional leaders with strong support base in their own constituencies. Post-Rajiv expectations with regard to the emergence of a collective leadership in the party did not materialize. What now exists is an amalgam of feuding personalities rather than a cohesive leadership capable of synthesizing federal and regional interests. No national alternative has emerged. In fact, it never existed. Two coalitions, one under Morarji Desai and the other under V.P. Singh, had rather been queer amalgam of political personalities and groups who had very little in common other than fierce opposition to the Congress, and therefore, could not survive. BJP even does not profess the type of federalism, secularism and democracy as envisaged by India's founding fathers.

In the backdrop of the failure of the Congress and absence of a national alternative capable of synthesizing diverse national as well as regional aspirations, Indian federalism is being crippled by two opposite trends: concentration of excessive and emergency power at the Centre on the one hand, and the rise of centrifugal and open secessionist movements on the other.

Thus, the basic challenge faced by Indian federalism is to resolve the raging disputes between the Centre and the states as

well as among the constituent states themselves to build a viable decentralized federation through which authoritarian trends in the Centre and centrifugal and chauvinistic trends at the peripheries could be contained. That, however, is not going to happen very soon because of the emergence of Hindu fundamentalism as a dominant force in Indian politics and the single-most dangerous threat to the Indian political system a discussion on which would follow.

2. Secularism: An Endangered Species

The partition of India on the basis of religion and the accompanying trauma - the communal holocaust, displacement of millions of people and so on - constituted a severe blow to secularism as professed by Congress. Nonetheless, this did not deter Congress leaders from adopting secularism as a corner-stone of India's future political system which they considered to be indispensable for accommodating the country's immense religious diversity. Within the Congress, however, there have been two schools of secularism with two different connotations. One was represented by Gandhi and the other by Nehru. Gandhi never believed in the principle of the separation of religion from politics as practiced by Western secular democracies. Those who believed in such separation, according to Gandhi, "understood neither religion nor politics."[18] To him secularism was a means of achieving communal harmony so badly needed by India. In practice, he sought to counter communal politics by being equally respectful to all religions and by incorporating symbols of all religions in his public prayers and other rituals. In other words, he sought the harmonious involvement of all religions in politics with a view to ensuring communal harmony. Being an agnostic, Nehru

18. Yogendra K. Malik and Dhirendra K. Vajpeyi, "The Rise of Hindu Militancy: India's Secular Democracy at Stake", *Asian Survey*, Vol.XXIX, No.3, March 1989, p.309.

was distressed by Gandhi's mixing of religion with politics. His "resolute nationalism and his commitment to 'scientific temper' in effect denied the relevance of religion to a national identity."[19] He advocated that the state should observe neutrality in regard to all religions.[20] While most of Indian political scientists as well as official documents would suggest that the Nehruvian views have overwhelmingly prevailed over the Gandhian ones, Indian reality would suggest that the official secularism in India is rather a combination of the two.

Despite Congress's declared commitment to secularism and India's religious minorities, particularly the Muslims, in the immediate post-independent period, Hindu nationalism and communalism were in the sharp rise both within and outside the Congress party. Hindu chauvinist/fundamentalist forces like the Rashtriya Swayansevak Sangh (RSS) even enjoyed tacit approval, if not support, from such powerful Congress leaders like Vallabbhai Patel. Hindu militancy directed single-mindedly against the Muslims continued to rise until the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by an RSS member Nathuram Vinayak Godse. This single act discredited the Hindu fundamentalist organizations to the extent that Indian middle class virtually abandoned them. Within a very short time following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, Hindu fundamentalist parties went out of fashion never to rise until the meteoric rise of BJP and the associates in the late 1980s.

It, however, does not mean that there was all quiet on India's communal front during the period in between the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and the rise of BJP. Hindu fundamentalist organizations continued their existence in the country. In places, they maintained visible presence, and occasionally, displayed

19.   *Ibid.*, p.310.
20.   Sankar Ghose, *Modern Indian Political Though*, (Allied Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 1984), p.298.

considerable militancy. The Congress Party itself absorbed significant part of communal forces. While secularism remained as a corner-stone of the political system, sporadic, or rather chronic, communal riots with large scale loss of life also continued to be a part of socio-political reality in India.

Paradoxically, first organized and powerful Hindu militancy of recent time took shape within the standard bearer of Indian secularism - Congress. It took place as a response to the rising tide of Sikh militancy under the leadership of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. The flirtation of Congress with Hindu chauvinist forces went to the extent that it led one of the patriarchs of Hindu fundamentalism, Atal Bihari Vajpeyi, to conclude that "The composite Indian nationalism that was once the Jana Sangh's monopoly is now an indispensable feature of the Congress (I) platform."[21] Following the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi by two of her Sikh bodyguards, Hindu militancy directed against the Sikhs reached its peak.

During the subsequent period, particularly under Rajiv Gandhi and V.P. Singh, some radical changes took place in Indian communal politics. First of all, Congress failed to keep the militant Hindu nationalist forces under its fold. So did V.P. Singh. As a matter of fact, political parties like Congress and the Janata Dal, while can play communal politics to a certain extent, can not serve as a platform of religious fundamentalist/chauvinist forces primarily because of their commitment to liberal secular democracy and non-violent means of achieving political power. In course of time, BJP and allied socio-political and religious organizations like the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Virat Hindu Sammelan, the Hindu Samajotsav, the All India National Forum, Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal, Akhil Bharatiya Shiv Shakti Dal and others became the natural platforms of Hindu fundamentalism.

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21. Yogendra K. Malik and Dhirendra K. Vajpeyi, *op. cit.*, p.320.

Second important change is that, the Muslims came to be almost the sole target of the rising tide of Hindu chauvinism which was manifesting itself more and more violently. Finally, for the first time in independent India, the Hindu fundamentalists have embarked upon a strategy of capturing state power as well as replacing the political system by creating a 'Hindu Rastra'. Shortly before his death in 1964 Nehru warned, "The danger to India, mark you, is not communism. It is Hindu right-wing communalism."[22] The current situation in India has brought the prophecy made by Nehru to a sharp focus.

A crucial question remains why and how such a phenomenal growth of Hindu fundamentalism could take place in India so praised as the most successful liberal secular democracy in the Third World? Part of the answer is already given while discussing the underlying reasons behind the present political crisis in India. As indicated earlier, the achievements of Indian economy in terms of both prosperity and self-reliance fall far short of the current level of expectations of its elite as well as the mass. The system was being seen as failing to deliver.

History demonstrates that when a system is seen as failing to deliver, following things happen. First, popular appeal of the core values associated with the system and that of their proponents decline and a large number of people return to the ethnic, religious and other parochial loyalties that pre-dated the emergence of that system. That is precisely what happened in India. The rise of a host of revivalist/fundamentalist movements in the country are pointer to this. The second inevitable consequence is that a disaffected majority tends to look for scapegoats - for people who are responsible for the whole mess. For the Nazis in Germany that scapegoat were the Jews, and for the BJP in India, it is the Muslims. Third, the replacement or the rejuvenation of the

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22.　*Newsweek*, December 21, 1992, p.20.

core values associated with the system being the key-question in the political arena, the country becomes polarized. Fourth, the ruling elite, lacking enough authority, courage and sagacity to manage and resolve multifarious conflicts in the society, often displays either lack of initiative or undue reliance on force. That is precisely what happened in India with its existing political system and the ruling elite.

Partly, fundamentalism is also a reaction to the modernization, Westernization and globalization of life style and values. These phenomena - as seen by a common Hindu - threatened his century-old life-style, family, socio-cultural and moral-spiritual values resulting in a deep identity crisis which ultimately pushed him to traditional rituals and religious symbolism. BJP has exploited the spiritual vacuum created by the modernization both skillfully and cynically.

A host of reasons are being cited to justify the growing sense of insecurity amongst many Hindus *vis-a-vis* the Muslims and the rising tide of Hindu militancy directed against the Muslims. Let us review at least some of them.

First of all, the minorities, particularly the Muslims, are being continuously identified as occupying a privileged position in Indian society. It is far from truth. The Minority Commission's Report prepared by Gopal Singh revealed that in the late-1970s Muslims made up only 2 percent of the Indian Police Service (IPS), 2.86 percent of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and 3.3 percent of state Class I employees. Only 2 percent of engineers, 2.5 percent of doctors and 2.18 percent of bankers were Muslims. Even in private enterprises, they were grossly under-represented: the Muslims accounted for only 4.08 percent of the jobs.[23] As one can guess easily, over the last years, the

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23. *Sunday*, February 7-13, 1993, p.31.

situation has certainly deteriorated and it continues to deteriorate further.

In 1991, out of 507 seats in the Lok Sabha, 22 were occupied by the representatives from the Muslim community. In other words, while constituting 11-12 percent of total Indian population, they had only 4.33 percent of seats in the National Parliament.[24]

One of the often pronounced accusations against Indian Muslims is that they have a penchant for polygamy. A large number of Hindus seriously believe that the Muslims often have four wives. Only the 1961 census report contains data on the issue. It suggests that polygamous marriages were highest among the tribals, second highest among the Buddhists, followed by the Jains and Hindus. The Muslims figured last on the list.[25] Who would bother to dig into the census report? The propaganda is so powerful that even the Muslims themselves, by and large, believe that they were more polygamous than the Hindus.

Indian Supreme Court judgment on Shah Bano case,[26] subsequent opposition to it from Muslim religious and right-wing political leadership, and above all, Rajiv government's decision to reverse the court's verdict through **The Muslim Women's [Protection of Rights and Divorce] Act of 1986** have been used too unscrupulously to establish that the Muslims occupy a privileged position in Indian society and that the Indian government pursues a policy of the appeasement of the Muslims. Even a large number of neutral analysts cite the episode as one of the serious causes for the rise of Hindu fundamentalism.[27] In practice, however, the government decision on Shah Bano case has

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24.   *Ibid.,* p.28.

25.   *Ibid.,* p.26.

26.   For details see, Antony Copley, "Indian secularism reconsidered: from Gandhi to Ayodha", *Contemporary South Asia,* Vol.2, No.1, 1993, p.53.

27.   See, for example, Yogendra K. Malik and Dhirendra K. Vajpeyi, *op. cit.,* pp.318-19.

nothing to do with the broader Muslim interests in India. Contrary, it has successfully thwarted the prospects for any progressive judicial reform in India - as done in Bangladesh and Pakistan - that could ease the existing situation that is unbearable for Muslim women and children. The Congress policy on the issue has painfully demonstrated how it can sacrifice its broader commitment to social progress to narrow vote bank policy and its inability to face the challenges of time. It is also indicative of the fact that the Congress can not avoid partial responsibility for the rise of Hindu fundamentalism. According to the confession of veteran Congressman Vasant Shathe, the shift in party's emphasis from economic to religious issues, and its reliance on cast-based and vote bank policies caused the Hindu backlash.[28] He, however, attributes this policy to post- Indira period.

The role of parochial Muslim religious and political leadership as epitomized by the likes of Imam Bukhari, Syed Shahabuddin, Suleiman Sait and Salahuddin Owasi has misguided the larger section of the Muslim community, misled the Congress leadership and provided the Hindu fundamentalism with pretext for mobilizing militancy. These people and their associates have certainly contributed to the rise of Hindu fundamentalism by taking a fundamentalist position on a number of issues, including the Shah Bano case. The Shah Bano episode has also demonstrated the inability of secular Muslim leaders like, Arif Muhammad Khan, Gulam Nabi Azad and M.J. Akbar, to influence either government decision or the majority of socio-politically active Muslims. More than any thing else, the episode has demonstrated the devilish ability of Hindu fundamentalism to transform insignificant issues, or even non-issues, into vitally significant ones and derive enormous profit from them.

The BJP and fellow travellers have also used and continue to use relevant developments in the non-Hindu neighboring coun-

28.   *Sunday*, March 14-20, 1993, p.33.

tries for the purpose of fomenting Hindu chauvinism at home. These include such developments as the mass-exodus of Hindu-Sikh minorities from Pakistan during the post-1947 period, declaration of Pakistan as an Islamic Republic and the process of 'Islamisation' of the country under the military dictator Zia-ul Haque, declaration of Islam as a state religion in Bangladesh by the then autocratic regime in 1988, a highly violent conflict between Hindu Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, and a host of real or imaginary discrimination against the Hindus in these countries.

V. P. Singh with his intransigence on the implementation of the report of Mandal Commission which envisaged reserved quota for the representatives of the scheduled castes in the government service commensurate with their share of total population of the country did a great disservice to the Muslim community while doing no good to the scheduled castes as his policy ended with a debacle. For the upper caste Hindus who constitute the backbone of Indian middle class, Mandal came as a dire threat. They became afraid of losing their dominant and privileged position in Indian economy, politics and administration. BJP has exploited the situation with utmost cynicism. One of the main objectives of Advani's Ratha Yatra was to counter the consequences of Mandal. In the long run, V. P. Singh with his quixotic policy on Mandal Commission report has pushed the larger section of Hindu upper castes and the middle class decisively to the embrace of fundamentalism.

What does Hindu fundamentalism mean? Strictly speaking, Hinduism does not have 'fundamentals' as such. As Nehru observed, "Hinduism, as a faith, is vague, amorphous, many-sided, all things to all men. It is hardly possible to define it, or indeed to say definitely whether it is a religion or not, in the usual sense of the word. In its present form and even in the past, it embraces

many beliefs and practices, from the highest to the lowest, often opposed to or contradicting each other".[29] Hinduism "has no unifying creed or priesthood, no founder, no eclestical organization and no concept of heresy".[30] Therefore, it is not surprising that the concept of a *Hindu Rastra* as propagated by the BJP and the likes, and their promise of *Ram Rajya* are highly vague and confusing. What they seek is a reversal of history, a retreat into the glorious past of Indian, not exclusively Hindu but certainly pre-Muslim, civilization that they have mythified for political purposes. Their aim is the eradication of the present in the hope that the future will more closely resemble the real or imaginary glorious past - an irrational as well as impossible task.

Religious fundamentalism in any multi-religious society, certainly in those in South Asia, feeds primarily on religious chauvinism. It is particularly true when one talks about BJP and the associates. While their concept of *Hindu Rastra* is highly vague, their fierce hostility towards secularism that is aimed at accommodating minority religious communities and militant chauvinism directed against the Muslims are unmistakable. As L. K. Advani asserts, Indian nation has "a very distinct personality. In the name of secularism this country is asked to disown this personality".[31] As judged by him, Nehru's policies consolidated 15 percent minorities instead of consolidating 85 percent majorities.[32] RSS General Secretary Professor Rajendra Singh even has gone a step further in artificially fomenting a Hindu sense of deprivation. He asserted that "India is the only country in the world where a majority (Hindus) is ruled by a minority and no one can be considered the Defender of the Hindu faith".[33] Most

29.   J. Nehru, *Discovery of India*, (J. Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi, 1986), p.75.
30.   George Thomas Kurian, *Encyclopedia of the Third World, Vol.II*, (Manshell Publishing Ltd., London, 1982), p.781.
31.   *Sunday*, September 13-19, 1992, p.11.
32.   Yogendra K. Malik and Dhirendra K. Vajpeyi, *op. cit.*, p.318.
33.   *Ibid.*

of the young and militant leaders are even more candid in their chauvinistic pronouncements. Shiv Sena Supremo Bal Thackeray, for instance, always refers to the Muslims as 'green serpents' who should be back to Pakistan.[34] Following the recent victory of BJP-Shiv Sena alliance in State Assembly elections in Maharashtra, Thackeray has declared 42,000 of the Muslims living in the state as illegal immigrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh and vowed to throw them out of India.[35]

One of the worst outcomes of all these is the dramatic rise of communal violence in India over the last couple of years which has claimed a heavy toll of lives. During early-1990 and mid-1992, 2000 people have been killed in Hindu-Muslim riots.[36] The destruction of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992 and subsequent orgy of violence have claimed 2,000-3,000 casualties.[37] It is worth mentioning that close to 4000 people have been killed in the communal riots during the 1980s, that is almost four times the figure for the preceding decade.[38] In other words, the number of people killed in the Hindu-Muslim riots during the first two and half years of the current decade appears to be more than that during the preceding two decades. More ominous, in the past, India has proved resilient following the communal violence: life has returned to normal within weeks of the most awful slaughter. This time, it is different. Communal riots are becoming a part of every-day life.

The most bizarre outcome of the recent carnage of violence is that the atrocities have further increased the popularity of BJP. Opinion polls conducted after the Ayodha episode suggest that

34. *Sunday*, February 7-13, 1993, p.32.
35. See, *Sunday*, 26 March-1 April, 1995, p.35.
36. *Dawn*, January 26, 1992.
37. Assessment by the author based on current reading of the news papers.
38. Abul Kalam Azad, "Communalism in India: Issues and Outlook", *BIISS Journal*, Vol.9, No.3, 1988, p.302.

the BJP would win 170 seats in a fresh election, up from 119 in the 1991 elections and from just two in 1984.[39] Following the setback suffered by the BJP in November 1993 State Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajastan and Himachal Pradesh, the results of post-Ayodha opinion polls appeared to be of questionable validity. However, to the surprise of many, BJP and its allies have successfully recovered from this setback. BJP's achievements in the crucial State Assembly elections in mid-1994 in the South and in early-1995 in the North leaves no doubt that the Party has successfully projected itself as a national alternative to the Congress. Now anybody would have to take seriously Advani's view of the BJP "as the party governing the country in future".[40]

Over the past couple of years, some qualitative changes have taken place in Indian politics. They could be summarized as follows: First, BJP and its fellow fundamentalist organizations like, the VHP, RSS, Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal and others have finally consolidated their position in the historical Hindustan - the citadel of political power in India. In other parts of the country as well they have significantly strengthened their position. The destruction of Babri Masjid by them, their handling of post-Babri Masjid situation, the pattern of behavior as displayed by the Congress Party and its government and the results of recent State Assembly elections, all are ample indication of this.

Second, the same facts suggest that the Congress has been weakened significantly. It is increasingly loosing both capability and willingness to face challenges and defend its declared objectives, particularly its commitment to secularism and the minority Muslim community. It has lost - may be for the time being - initiative to the BJP. The Congress is mainly responding to

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39.   *The Economist*, January 16, 1993, p.23.
40.   *Sunday*, September 13-19, 1992, p.14.

BJP initiatives. Sometimes, it has even failed to respond and displayed passiveness *vis-a-vis* challenges thrown by the BJP, and thus, further exposed its weakness.

Third, the National Front - a secular and centrist alternative to Congress - despite regaining some of its lost grounds, remains far from being a counterweight to the BJP. This makes the BJP only alternative to the ruling Congress. In addition, the communists are also increasingly losing grounds. Their influence in Indian politics is decreasing. In view of the current trends world-wide, it is difficult to imagine how the communists could regain strength and serve as an effective counterweight to Hindu fundamentalism in Indian politics.

Fourth is the failure of the Muslim community to effectively respond to the challenge thrown by the rise of Hindu fundamentalism. The lack of leadership, reliable political platform, and more so, that of consensus on how to face the Hindu chauvinist menace continue to serve as the most stumbling blocks in the way of evolving a purposeful and effective policy for the Muslim community. The majority of the Muslims appear to have disassociated themselves from the Congress. They also can no more rely on Janata Party, National Front or any other secular alternative. No alternative Muslim leadership or organization has grownup. As recent trends show, the Muslims have also rejected the parochial religious and reactionary political leadership that has contributed to the rise of Hindu fundamentalism by taking a fundamentalist position on a number of issues. On the other hand, secular Muslim leaders - both within and outside the Congress - could hardly gain any politically meaningful influence over the Muslim masses.

The worst tragedy of Indian Muslims is the fact that the common people are totally abandoned by the elite and are being cynically exploited by the parochial religious and political

leadership. Despite being a tragic victim of the tyranny of history, common Muslims, by and large, remain an unconscious captive of historical memories. The vast majority is far from the modern world and modern way of life. They remain blind to the current socio-economic and political realities, and are incapable of looking at the future without prejudices. All these have left the Muslims without any viable programme, effective organization and leadership that could represent their interests in Indian politics. Leadership crisis within the Muslim community is so frustrating that M. J. Akbar has recently called Joyti Basu `the biggest leader of Indian Muslims' because 'more Muslims trust him compared to any Muslim leader' and, while in power, 'he addressed real Muslim issues'.[41] For understandable reasons, Joyti Basu can not provide the type of leadership that the Indian Muslims need to defend their long-standing interests in Indian politics and society. The prevailing situation could be assessed as one of utter frustration. It is unlikely to change for the better easily or within a short time.

These four factors as mentioned above **en bloc** have made the current Hindu fundamentalist threat to Indian political system a formidable one putting forward an old question with a pressing urgency: can India survive as a secular state or will it degenerate into a Hindu one? This, however, will continue to remain as an open question for quite some time to come.

3. Democracy: Under Severe Threat

India is the largest democracy in the world. The democratic system is in existence since the country's birth in 1947 without any interruption - a very rare case in the Third World. From the very inception, attempts were made by India's founding fathers to synthesize the pluralist ethos of Indian civilization and the norms

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41.   *The Daily Star*, July 10, 1993.

of modern Western democracy with considerable success. In terms of democratic freedom enjoyed by the media, academia and the political elite, independence of judiciary and fairness of electoral process, India emerged as a model of democracy in the Third World and its democratic system came to be considered as the most viable one in the context of the developing countries.

Democracy in India worked relatively well during the early decades of its independent existence despite inherent socio-economic, politico-cultural and institutional weaknesses as well as various difficulties faced by the country in the process of nation-building. The democratic institutions inherited from the colonial past were reformed, regenerated and recreated to make them suitable for an independent nation. India was able to nourish its nascent democracy with remarkable success.

All these were facilitated by a host of reasons. In terms of political participation and consciousness India was among the most advanced countries in the Third World. The nationalist movement was broad based with grass-root participation. It has nurtured a highly dedicated leadership and a large army of political activists at the grass-root level. The leadership which came to lead the nation enjoyed not only power but also commendable authority. The people were prepared to follow that leadership. National bourgeoisie was prepared to share power with the middle class and the professional groups. Civil and military bureaucracy accepted the supremacy of the political leadership. In the circumstances, democracy coupled with a federal system of government, from the very beginning, let the grievances of aggrieved sections be expressed, by and large, within the constitutional framework, and thus, made India easier to govern than most of foreign observers had anticipated. Even when Indian leadership was confronted by severe challenges, often in the form of intra-state conflicts along horizontal or vertical lines within the society capable of disturbing the basics of the system, it

tried to meet them in the normal course of consensus formation. Attempts of imposing solutions from the above by undermining the authority of or withdrawing powers from the lower level institutions remained within a reasonable limit. Only very seldom attempts were made to impose solutions by resorting to the use of or threat to use force.

The period wherein democratic institutions and practices could flourish lasted two plus decades. Subsequently, the development of democratic institutions stagnated and then began to suffer gradual decay: Such a process owes its origin to three sets of reasons: first, under-development and asymmetrical development of Indian society, polity and economy; second, accumulation of problems generated in the process of normal functioning of the system, and third, manipulation and abuse of the system by the ruling elite.

The process of socio-economic and politico-cultural development in India was highly asymmetrical. It was also far from doing away with the country's century-old backwardness. As a consequence, the Indian society was characterized by wide-spread social and economic disparities along horizontal as well as vertical lines, mass poverty, vast army of unemployed, illiteracy, low level of socio-political consciousness and ever increasing politico-economic power of small coteries with vested interests. The gap between the expectations of Indian people with regard to prosperity and freedom on the one hand, and the ability of the state to deliver them on the other was ever widening. All these have created fertile ground for bigotry, parochialism, social conflicts, political extremism, internecine warfare and authoritarianism. As a consequence, Indian political system, despite its relative stability, remained a Third World one with most of its typical vulnerabilities.

Democracy, like any political system, needs to correct, improve and develop itself constantly in the process of its functio-

ning in order to increase its efficiency in facing the challenges of time. The process of self-regeneration of Indian political system began to slow down in the early 1960s. A host of reasons could be held responsible for this. Political leadership of the country was in the verge of a transition from an old to a new generation which by itself created a period of uncertainty and confusion. Meanwhile, the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965 have decisively shifted the focus of attention from politics to security and from domestic affairs to foreign policy. These have thwarted any initiative that could be undertaken with a view to reforming and regenerating India's political system. Particularly, the sense of `being encircled by hostile states' has created a war psychosis which was not conducive to the broadening of democratic freedom. By mid-1960s, the symptoms of political stagnation had begun to surface while remaining less discussed due to foreign policy preoccupations.

Meanwhile, the emergence of Indira Gandhi on the centre-stage of Indian politics in 1966 was marked by high hopes that she would bring order to the economy, politics and foreign policy of the nation while following the democratic path. Mrs. Gandhi's rule, however, witnessed only a brief period of democratic regeneration following which she came into collusion with the collective leadership of the Congress Party (the Syndicate) and was successful in replacing the 'old guard' with mostly young people loyal to her. In the previous section of the paper, we have already discussed the general set of circumstances, underlying reasons and concrete motives which led Mrs. Gandhi to establish centralized control over the state and party organs. Within a relatively brief period she was able to concentrate as much power in her own hands as possible within the realm of a democratic system.

With her rise to the unchallenged leadership, the 'old guard' of dedicated Congressmen with wide vision and noble mission who

fought for independence, framed the Constitution and led the country during its early decades has been replaced by a new generation of politicians with narrow vision and unrestrained quest for power and pelf. Apparently forward looking and more familiar with the 'real politic' in the changed circumstances, this new generation of politicians was less respectful to democratic and moral-spiritual values hitherto prevailing in Indian politics.

As discussed earlier, Mrs. Gandhi's spectacular rise to un-challenged leadership in the Congress Party and the government during its early stage did enjoy popular support. Highly complex interaction of a set of divergent factors like, severe economic difficulties, communist challenge, Maoist insurgency, division within the Congress Party, the absence of any alternative to the Congress as a ruling party coupled with the Western, particularly the US opposition to Mrs Gandhi's domestic and foreign policies and, more so, a perceived sense of being encircled by hostile states created fertile ground for the rise of a 'cult figure' capable of performing miracles. Mrs. Gandhi's success in consolidating her power within the party and the government, bringing some kind of political stability in the country, increasing the food production and improving the overall economic situation further added popular legitimacy to her policies. In this regard, a crucial role was played by the strengthening of India's defence and its position in international arena under Mrs. Gandhi. On the part of Congress, persistent attempts were made to gain popular legitimacy by projecting the ideas and performance of its top leader - Mrs Gandhi. For all the achievements of Indian nation virtually she alone was being credited. Personality cult reached its peak following the crushing defeat of India's arch-rival Pakistan in 1971 and the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state. To many, Indira and India became synonymous.

The process of the concentration of power in Mrs Gandhi's hands continued further culminating in the declaration of the

'State of Emergency' on June 26, 1975. The Emergency and accompanying measures gave Mrs. Gandhi almost authoritarian control over the state and party organs. The concentration of power under Mrs. Gandhi, particularly during her emergency rule, caused enormous damages to India's democratic institutions and practices.

Political upheavals during the Emergency rule, the defeat of Congress in 1977 elections and the formation of a government under Morarji Desai generated high hopes with regard to the revitalization of democratic institutions and practices as well as the broadening of democratic freedom. While restrictions on democratic freedom imposed during the Emergency have been withdrawn, the Desai government ultimately created an environment of political chaos and uncertainty. In 1980, the government itself collapsed because of petty feuds and personal rivalries, thus, paving the way to the return of Mrs. Gandhi to power with a landslide victory in 1980 elections. Operating on the legal and institutional setup established during her first premiership, Mrs. Gandhi could rule the country in her own way rather easily.

The emergence of Rajiv Gandhi at the centre-stage of Indian politics was marked by cautious optimism with regard to the democratization of state and party organs. It is worth mentioning that the prevailing political situation in the country following the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi by two of her Sikh bodyguards was far from being conducive to the democratization of the polity. In the aftermath of the assassination, India virtually plunged into chaos due to the outburst of Hindu chauvinism directed against the Sikhs and resultant orgy of violence. This coupled with the unprecedented electoral victory achieved by the Congress party in the December 1984 elections - 49 percent of the votes and 79 percent of the seats in the Lok Sabha - and the absence of any credible opposition to the Congress at the Centre rather created an

environment conducive to the emergence of an authoritarian ruler. Nonetheless, the political situation was, as mentioned earlier, marked by optimism. It was primarily due to the personal qualities of Rajiv Gandhi or the qualities as attributed to him and the expectations of Indian elite from him. Rajiv Gandhi reluctantly entered politics with the image of a "Mr. Clean". His mild personality, Western outlook, liberal democratic values coupled with his initial performance particularly, accords in the troubled states of the Punjab and Assam, measures aimed at economic liberalization, commitment to democratize party and state organs created an impression as if India under Rajiv Gandhi was entering an era of political and economic regeneration.

Such expectations, were, however, short-lived. The Punjab and Assam accords were unfulfilled. The process of liberalization was half-hearted. Soon, mysterious "Bofors" scandal came to surface eroding Rajiv Gandhi's incorruptible image. Despite the fact that there was no evidence - neither then nor even today - which could implicate Rajiv Gandhi in the illegitimate deal, "Bofors" came to symbolize wide-spread corruption in his administration. Rajiv Gandhi, once the `darling of the press', was being increasingly portrayed by Indian press as immature, indecisive and inept. In the face of increasing criticism addressed to him, Rajiv withdrew deeper and deeper into a small coterie. Meanwhile, the Congress party was in a virtual disarray because of growing factionalism and dissidence as well as the erosion of its support base, particularly among the Muslims and the scheduled castes. As a consequence, Rajiv Gandhi lost the appeal he had in 1984. It was impossible for him to initiate any effective policy with a view to revitalizing India's democratic institutions.

The 1989 elections which resulted in the defeat of Congress Party is an important turning point in Indian history. The elections, for the first time in India, failed to produce a parlia-

mentary majority and that remains, till now, a feature of Indian politics. Since the 1989 elections, Indian politics came to be seen as following what might be called an Italian model, or less benignly, an Indian version of the French Fourth Republic - a situation in which no single party commands a parliamentary majority and governments are formed in a pattern of shifting coalitions.[42] Such a situation has further been strengthened by the outcome of the 1991 elections. Narasimha Rao came to head a minority government that was dependent for its survival, issue by issue, on at least tacit support from the members of diverse opposition parties, groups as well as the independents. He, however, subsequently managed to persuade a number of opposition MPs, notably a group headed by farm leader and former industries minister Ajit Singh, to join the Congress, and thus, secured a thin majority in the Lok Sabha. The recent split in the Congress and the formation of a new Congress Party headed by N. D. Tiwari, Arjun Singh and others have increased the danger to his government emanating from defection rather dramatically. The situation is further worsening with continuous press reports that the widow of Rajiv Gandhi, Sonia - a powerful catalyst in Congress or rather in Indian politics - is sympathetic towards Arjun-Tiwari group, or at least, severely annoyed with Narasimha Rao for his failure to maintain the unity of the party.[43]

One of the outcomes of all these is the fact that instability of government has become endemic. The political instability, or rather, unstable nature of government in India could neither be institutionalized - as it is in Italy - nor could it be reversed. The inherently unstable nature of governments formed in India since 1989 has remarkably complicated and further degenerated the

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42. Robert L. Hardgrave Jr., "After the Dynasty: Politics in India", *Current History*, March 1992, p.112.

43. See, *The Bangladesh Observer*, May 23 and 24, 1995.

political environment in the country. Governments are so busy keeping themselves in power that they have little time to pay attention to governance. Whenever a government comes to power after a general election costing a large amount of money and efforts, frequent attempts are made, either by opposition parties or fractions within the ruling party, to topple the government by fair means or foul. The ruling group tries to retaliate in various ways including offer of posts to defectors or dissidents and other undue benefits. To this was added the power of money and muscle in determining both overall strength of political parties, their influence on the political processes and their electoral fortunes. In the end, the country as a whole pays a very high price in terms of political stability, administrative and economic efficiency and, what is even more ominous, loss of faith among large sections of people in democracy itself.

Political institutions, including political parties, are increasingly becoming less and less effective in mediating and managing social conflicts and, ultimately, running the business of the state. Yet, the state is assuming more and more power and becoming increasingly coercive in dealing with multifarious intra-state conflicts. Coercive measures as conducted by the Indian state only seldom, if at all, derive from the consent of the people. They are largely being conducted in the face of passiveness or even opposition as displayed on the part of the majority of its citizens. Such a situation is gradually paralysing the efficacy of democratic institutions and undermining their popular legitimacy.

In this backdrop, the meteoric rise of Hindu fundamentalist forces as represented by BJP and associate socio-political and religious organizations constitute a severe threat to democracy in the country. It is primarily due to the fact that while traditional methods of revitalizing India's political system, democratic institutions and practices in particular, are yielding less-than-satisfactory

results, BJP came out with an alternative to liberal secular democracy as professed, and despite numerous shortcomings, also practiced by the country since its birth. An important point in this regard, fundamentalist parties like the BJP are not only anti-democratic, but also inherently totalitarian. Reasons are obvious. Unlike traditional political parties, the fundamentalists take politics unduly seriously. They do not consider politics to be a merely worldly affairs. To them, political activities constitute a divine mission aimed at achieving divine objectives. Therefore, their commitment to the political cause that they believe in is divine. When the commitment is divine it also becomes unequivocal and total. As seen through their eyes, the fundamentalists live, can die and also can kill for the cause they are married to. It creates the self-image of the fundamentalists as that of `holly warriors' and makes their hatred of political opponents pathological. For the same reasons, to them, the cult of violence becomes a divine virtue.

The nature of religio-political mission of the fundamentalists, ultimate objectives of this mission, and no less important, means of achieving these objectives make it imperative for them to create a highly disciplined and militant political party which even leave very little room for dissenting voices within its own fold not to speak about opposition voices. The toleration of, and more so, compromise with the opposition religio-political streams are usually considered by the fundamentalist as being tantamount to the betrayal of their divine cause.

Thus, the belief system of the fundamentalists, their ultimate goal, the nature of their organizations and their *modus operandi* not only do not leave any room for democracy, but also are aimed at establishing sort of a totalitarian control over the society at large. While this remains their strategic objective, Hindu funda-mentalists are also quite capable of displaying tactical flexibility

or even playing the role of liberal democrats. BJP's predecessor, Jana Sangh, while was a part of the coalition government headed by Morarji Desai, played a well-publicized role of a liberal democrat. This was aimed at winning over the anti-Congress support base of the coalition. The policy paid a rich dividend. Even now, most of the top ranking BJP leaders in their public statements remain rather equivocal and vague on democracy. They usually put emphasis on the need to change the existing system keeping their ultimate goals less clear. Such an approach is motivated by the fact that along with violent means, they also intend to take the full advantage of democratic rights prevailing in the country. More militant fundamentalist leaders as epitomized by Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray and the likes, however, oppose democracy as practiced in India even in their public statements quite vociferously. As Thackeray states, "Democracy never existed in India. There has only been autocracy right from the days of Jawaharlal Nehru. My idea of democracy is what prevailed in Maharashtra 400 years ago, during the rule of Shivaji".[44] Such demagogic revivalist statements aimed at discrediting the democracy as practiced in India are very common and quite popular among the fundamentalists.

The question is: what is being concealed by the fundamentalist forces under the cover of vague, and at the same time, highly demagogic slogans of creating *Hindu Rastra, Ram Rajya* and the democracy as prevailed `during the rule of Shivaji'? If such slogans are taken into account in the backdrop of the fascist-type organizations nurtured by Hindu-fundamentalist forces, militant chauvinism as displayed by them in relation to the Muslims and other minority religious communities, their hostile attitude towards the lower castes and the degree of intolerance and violence as displayed by them in dealing with political opponents, the impre-

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44.   *Sunday,* 27 September-3 October, 1992, p.24.

ssion one gets is that a prospective Hindu fundamentalist regime in India is likely to be an authoritarian/dictatorial one. However, the strength of BJP and allied forces still remains far from establishing such a regime. Nonetheless, they would continue to pose a threat to prevailing democratic institutions and practices in the country even from outside the power.

Threats to democracy in India come not only from the fundamentalists and other traditional anti-democratic forces. Over the years, degeneration of democratic institutions and processes, misgovernence, chronic political instability and the phenomenal growth of violence have also frustrated the country's entrepreneur and professional classes so much that they are increasingly losing their trust on democracy. A significant part of them is already suggesting the use of force as an alternative to democratic measures. On January 10, 1993, for instance, a group of Bombay businessmen, headed by J.R.D. Tata, the patriarch of India's biggest industrial organization, declared that democratic measures have failed and that "the government should declare a state of emergency in Bombay to give the army a free hand to restore order".[45] One of the group was eminent lawyer and a champion of civil rights, Nani Palkhivala. His participation "spoke volumes for the despair that has among India's liberalism in the recent time".[46]

Some of the representatives of the entrepreneur class are growing impatient with the prevailing state of affairs in Indian economy and politics, and are openly advocating the replacement of democracy with an authoritarian/dictatorial regime. Very recently, Gaurav Dalmia, an influential member of India's one of the most celebrated business families, in an article directed fierce but well-articulated attack on Indian democracy. The central point

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45. *The Economist*, January 16, 1993, p. 23.
46. *Ibid.*

in his article was the assertion that democracy is inimical to rapid economic growth. According to him, in democracies, legislatures are hostage to the pressures of the constituencies and interest groups that they represent. The result is that national energy is often spent on dividing the pie rather than on increasing its size. On the other hand, governments that do not rely on the vote are better placed to make difficult economic choices. To substantiate his argument he has compared the poor economic performance of India under democratic rule as against the miraculous economic performance of Asia-Pacific nations under authoritarian/dictatorial rule.[47] On this issue, Gaurav Dalmia still represents a minority, may be an insignificant one. However, if the situation in Indian politics and economy continue to deteriorate further, and as a consequence, if the entrepreneur class of the country comes to share Dalmia's view point *en mass* then it would pose the gravest threat to democracy. Because, the very nature of state in India would ensure that the collective will of national bourgeoisie gets precedence over all other views.

As evident from our preceding discussions, democracy in India is facing multiple threats, quite severe ones, from diverse corners. The failure of the ruling elite to resolve the issues generated by the normal functioning of the democratic system and also to rejuvenate and revitalize democratic institutions and practices in the light of changed socio-economic and political realities lies at the core of the problem. Furthermore, the manipulation and abuse of the democratic system by the elite have significantly aggravated the situation. More ominous, a significant part of the proponents of democracy, particularly among the country's influential entrepreneur and professional classes, is being increasingly frustrated with the declining effectiveness and

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47. Gaurav Dalmia, "The Price of Liberty", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 3, 1994, p.25.

popular legitimacy of democratic institutions as well as the degeneration of political processes. They are gradually losing faith in democracy. Some of them are even advocating the replacement of democracy by an authoritarian/dictatorial regime. All these have created an environment wherein a host of ideas and forces hostile to democracy could emerge, prosper and ultimately challenge the very survival of democracy in the country.

V. CONCLUSION

The foundations of any political system rest on the assumption that its people agree on the fundamentals of governance. When India became independent, those fundamentals included unequivocal commitment to democracy, federalism and secularism. These have provided the country with enormous flexibility of response in dealing with its numerous intra-state conflicts along ethno-linguistic, religious and other parochial lines. In the process of governance, democratic institutions and a federal form of government coupled with secularism also let India create a more or less effective mechanism of conflict management and resolution. It has immensely facilitated the nation-building process in India that was being conducted in a highly pluralistic setting and was aimed at preserving the country's infinite variety, and at the same time, its unity in that variety. In the process of governance, while facing conflicts within the society and polity, India used to opt for a policy of `finding out solutions where it is possible and learning to live with the rest'. In this regard, her success is obvious. Indian state, despite endemic crises, has demonstrated tremendous ability to live with the problems.

Over the years, however, the cost of both resolving the problems as well as living with them is increasing progressively, and very recently, it has reached a point which can no more be considered as acceptable price. As a matter of fact, the Indian state

is now besieged with a dilemma. Attempts to bring solution to the problems result in the excessive use of coercive machine of the state setting a chain reaction. While coercive measures often fall far short of resolving the problems, they make the society further violent. Kashmir and the Punjab are cases in point. On the other hand, attempts to live with the problems by displaying caution and flexibility are resulting in the forfeiture of initiative on the part of the state leaving it to the conflicting parties. In practice, it leaves the weaker party at the whim of the stronger one. The destruction of the Babri Masjid by the Hindu fundamentalists and the accompanying orgy of violence is the worst outcome of such a policy.

The failure to resolve this dilemma has considerably decreased the ability of political institutions, including political parties, to resolve or even mediate numerous social conflicts generated by the on-going turbulent process of socio-economic and politico-cultural transformation in the country. It has also undermined the confidence of the people on the political system as well as the self-confidence of the system itself and that of its proponents. It is in this backdrop that a host of ideas and forces hostile to the existing political system could emerge, prosper and ultimately challenge the legitimacy as well as the viability of the system. Thus, India became not only difficult to govern but the fundamentals of governance which the foundation of its pluralist political system rests on also came under threat.

Relying on the long experience of Indian civilization, including that of the modern period, it could be safely pointed out that without allowing pluralism and displaying tolerance it would be virtually impossible even to manage the nation-building process in a country like India with its immense diversity in race, ethnicity, language, religion, caste, social strata, the level of socio-economic and politico-cultural development, not to speak about

giving the country a good governance. Pluralism has been and still remains an imperative for governing India without which the country's immense diversity may explode like a cluster bomb. The ruling elite in the country, as it appears, is aware of the imminent danger but it is yet to arrive at a firm consensus as to what is to be done and how.

The situation, however, is not frustrating altogether. Intra-state conflicts in India are so many and manifest that its unifying resilience is some time overlooked. Starting from the trauma of 1947 partition, India has gone through recurrent crises. Some of them have been quite severe. On many occasions, India has slipped towards the brink of a catastrophe then stepped back, thus, keeping itself always on the safe side of the brink. Such experiences would certainly serve as an asset in dealing with the current and future crises.

A significant part of Indian elite is quite aware of the fact that federalism, secularism and democracy keep the country on the safe side of the brink. This part of the elite also realizes that to have a respectable place in the community of nations being remade economically and geo-politically, India must stick to its pluralist ethos and neutralize fundamentalist and authoritarian trends within the polity. Even at the popular level, notwithstanding the growing cult of violence, to many Indians, non-violence and pluralism still remain the supreme value.

The ruling Congress Party, while remains significantly weakened and painfully lacks unity in its ranks, has not yet exhausted its strength totally. A forward-looking and well-articulated policy aimed at revitalizing the country's democratic institutions and practices combined with unity in its ranks and firm commitment on the part of its leadership may allow the Congress to regain some of the lost grounds. In this regard, the fundamentalist menace itself may help the party to strengthen its

unity and widen its support base. The Congress may also count on the support of centrist and leftist parties outside the power on the issues of common concern. No less important factor, the environment in contemporary international politics is favorable to India and it is more so to the forces championing liberal democratic values. However, the prospects for good governance in India based on a liberal secular democratic order would ultimately depend on the Indians themselves, particularly on the ability of its ruling elite to display sagacity and courage in facing the challenges of time.