**Are we failures?**

BY A . G. N O O R A N I 2021-02-27

`YOU praise the firm restraint with which they write / I`m with you there, of course: / They use the snaffle and the bit all right, / But where`s the b--horse?` Roy Campbell`s critique of `Some South African Novelists` makes one wonder if it was not true of the leaders of the f reedom movement as they began constructing their brand of the democratic state after they won independence for their countries.

They drank freely at the fount of democratic states and admired hugely the working of democracy in the European countries which had oppressed them. Unforgivable, however, is their donning the mantle of Caesar after their countries`independence.

The leaders of the Third World were not shining examples of democratic rule. They emulated their erstwhile oppressors.

A former foreign secretary of India who fanciedhimself asan`intellectual`delighted in asserting sweepingly that `decolonisation was a f ailure`. None shed any tears when the rank courtier was booted out of his post by Indira Gandhi.

It is not altogether correct to lay the blame on the inexperience of the people of the developing states. The conduct of the leaders of Hungary and Poland in recent years have not been shining examples of democratic leadership. The truth is that those two countries departed from democracy. So did Italy under Silvio Berlusconi but only to return to democratic functioning.

The Third World shared some common threads. Their leaders were deluded by the huge praise they received at home and abroad especially from the US. They knew perfectly well that they faced enormous challenges, not least in building a democracy. In this, those leaders of newly independent states failed. Obsessed with the trappings of power, they were content to have the skeletal framework of a democracy without the flesh and blood elections (though not always free and fair), prime ministers and the rest. Avid for power, they did not educate the people in the democratic system`s core lest their own power was curbed. Most did not shun corruption.

The wise C. Rajagopalachari, as early as the 1920s when he was languishing in prison, wrote in his diary: `Elections and their corruptions [sic], injustice and life power and tyranny of wealth, and inefficiency of administration will make a hell of life as soon as freedom is given to us. Men will look regretfully back to the old regime of comparative justice and efficient, peaceful, more or less honest administration. The only thing gained will be that as a race we will be saved from dishonour and subordination.

On Dec 19, 1930, the Liberal leader, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru wrote to a friend in Indiajust as he was about to leave London after attending the Round Table Conference: `I am coming back with an absolutely changed outlook, for while the Congress people may talk of independence and others may talk of dominion status, just to spite the British, I do not think that we have yet got the necessary mentality for democratic form of government. It may be a bitter confession to make to personal friends, but there it is.

The framer of India`s constitution, Dr B.R.

Ambedkar was acutely aware of those problems. He told the constitutional assembly of India on Nov 25, 1949, `...however good a constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad because those who are called to work it, happen to be a bad lot. However bad a constitution may be, it may turn out to be good if those who are to work it happen to be a good lot. ... The constitution can provide only the organs of state such as the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. The factors on which the working of those organs of the state depend are the people and the politicalparties they will set up as their instruments to carry out their wishes and their politics.

The real test was prevalence of `constitutional morality`.

But in India and elsewhere in the Third World there was another seriousproblem communal diversities, caste and tribal loyalties. The leaders profited by all these and perpetrated their hold on power.

It is necessary to be realistic but unwise to be despondent. The Third World does have achievements.

During Indira Gandhi`s emergency some in the UK were fond of chattering about the lack of democracy in the Third World. Prof W.H. Morris-Jones retorted in a letter to The Times in June 1976 that the `jibe about `exhibit A of the Westminster model abroad` misses the point that it had become a specifically Indian achievement; it only adds insult to the injury already suffered by Indian democrats. ... Are habits never modified? Had not growing numbers of Indians begun to make the habits of liberal democracy indigenous? Surely it is a `massive` loss when damage is done to a way of political life which in two decades had already converted into citizens so many who had subjects beyond the political pale.

Moral: Do not lose heart in the pursuit of reform. The writer is an author and a lawyer based in Mumbai.