

Review: India in 2000, with Ifs and Buts

Reviewed Work(s): India in Perspective: Development Issues by D. N. Basu, A. Lahiri and R. Nagarajan

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The choice of politics as a profession seems to have been in most of these cases influenced by mere habit and tradition, and not out of any deep convictions. This is not to suggest that they did not bring to bear on their chosen profession all their intelligence and even passion; and at some point in their careers, they perhaps even began to believe in their own rationalisations. They also succeeded in earning the goodwill and affection of the mass of people, not because they succeeded in ameliorating their miserable conditions, but because they highlighted this wretchedness with a view to using the disaffection as a weapon to fight their own battles.

The arrangement worked in the relatively civilised battles that these stalwarts of the freedom struggle in undivided India waged against their imperial masters — struggles in which the leaders themselves suffered few personal privations even as they further exhorted the mass of their followers to make the utmost sacrifices. But the arrangement could not last under altogether altered circumstances, when fresh battles had to be joined against native rivals and opponents, broadly belonging to the same classes.

A notable feature of this testament is the fairly numerous references to India and its politics. It is clear that Bhutto, like so many among the Muslim elite of the sub-continent, was both fascinated and repelled by 'Hindu India'. The feeling of repulsion is understandable, and Bhutto is unrelenting even in this last testament about his determination to keep Pakistan on a 'separate and equal' keel. But this obsessive desire to 'show' India that Pakistan is more than a match to her barely conceals a wistful admiration for this country's political culture. This is perhaps not very surprising; for Bhutto could have risen to great heights as a politician even, perhaps especially, in India. Certainly, his credentials were much better than that of many 'nationalist Muslims' who were merely suffered by the Congress leadership; and he had greater talents and political intelligence to take him far in Indian politics.

The question whether Bhutto's refusal to 'bend' before the martial law authorities and plead for his life was due to his hopeless belief that they would never dare touch him, or whether it was due to his conviction that he had indeed come to the end of the road and would not bear further humiliations, will never be resolved. Being an intelligent man, Bhutto probably saw the logic of the military coup and the inevitable course it had to take; but a

sense of incomprehension — that the martial law authorities, in every sense his own creatures, could be actually planning to murder him — is also evident. The defiance that is in evidence throughout this testament

was due not as much to a legitimate pride that as a civilian and duly elected leader he would not plead for his life with an army man, as to a different kind of pride born out of his awareness of his own position in 'History'.

India in 2000, with Ifs and Buts

Thomas Timberg

India in Perspective : Development Issues, Volumes I and II; Volume I by D N Basu, Volume II by A Lahiri and R Nagarajan; Arnold-Heinemann, New Delhi; Volume I pp 263, Rs 50 and Volume II pp 307, Rs 50.

THE books under review represent projections by various sorts of simulation and iteration of India's use of resources and development over the next few decades, done professionally and competently. The attempt highlights the differing results that will follow from varying policy inputs and outcomes and highlights the policy choices presented.

One is, needless to say, happy to inform the reader that the future is medium bright. Under the worst of four scenarios — high population and low economic growth — the total size of the GNP will treble and per capita income a little less than double by the year 2000. Under the most optimistic scenario the total GNP will increase more than four times and per capita income almost triple. Under the best of scenarios, only 2 per cent of the population will find themselves under the absolute poverty line (Rs 27 a month in this case) in 2000 and under the worst still only 30 per cent will be in absolute poverty. These figures contrast with the figures in the "World Development Report, 1978" which, in talking about low income countries as a whole, gives a "base" scenario showing 27 per cent in poverty by 2000 and a happier "alternative" one in which 13 per cent are in absolute poverty. Even in the optimistic version sufficient foodgrains will be available, presuming the most minimal of technological improvement, and surpluses are considered highly probable. Sufficient supplies of aluminium and iron will be available and coal for fuel, though, unless prospecting turns out to be successful, large quantities of oil and smaller amounts of certain metal may have to be imported. The conclusion here reflects one of the limitations of the basically input-output nature of the matrix, since it excludes the sufficient development of alternative solar or nuclear or even fibre-based fuels to permit their economic substitution for oil — and these possibili-

ties are explicitly disavowed on page 223 of Volume II. There is also an assumption that energy saving technologies will not change radically the industrial patterns of energy use.

We should note that the results of this effort by a team of researchers for the Operations Research Group in Baroda Parallel in general terms those contained in the Second India project (albeit probably most optimistically) and to some extent the work of J Kapur in Delhi as it has been described to me. More broadly, this is of the genre of projections we have been deluged with since Forrester and the Club of Rome predicted global doom and suffers from the shortcomings of the genre. The Russians have a saying that "if it weren't for the ifs and the buts he would have been a general a long time ago"; in the same vein these surveys are no better, and sometimes worse, than their underlying assumptions.

These projections most typically exclude revolutions, technological and social, of a sort that one can expect in a three-decade span. They presume constant technology and social structure. In addition, in this case the worst alternative seems over-optimistic. To start with, it presumes that the present obstacles to growth will remain roughly the same — incremental capital output ratios will rise slightly, by 10 per cent, and only after 1986, and marginal propensity to save will rise and stabilise at 13-14 per cent. The population growth rate will actually decline. One disappointing feature of the study is that ORG which runs one of the country's best market surveys was unable to draw on that body of data to get some sense of the likely direction of change in consumption and living patterns and relied instead on the National Sample Survey.

In any case, despite the shortcomings, this is an essential book for those interested in charting India's future, tentative possible paths.