

What India can show the world

BY GEORGE ANDERSON

India, the world's largest democracy and federation, was born in terrible circumstances: partition and the biggest mass movement of people in history, literacy around 12 per cent, the constant spectre of famine and a checkerboard of states and principalities that had not previously been governed together.

Against these enormous challenges, Indian democracy has survived and strengthened, while the country has increasingly prospered. This success ranks among the most important positive political developments of the post-war world. (In my view, the others are decolonization, European unity and the collapse of Soviet communism.)

Independent India's success is rooted in its founders' conception of a pluralist country, inclusive of all the many strands of its society – linguistic, regional, caste, gender and religious. Their vision was democratic and federal, secular and attentive to the rights of minorities. This was the vision of Gandhi, Nehru and others during the long struggle for independence. The Indians undertook the drafting of their Constitution with the greatest deliberation. A constituent assembly of 300 members met for 165 days over a three-year period. It was supported by innumerable committees as well as reports and careful study of the experience of a variety of democracies. While views differed on such key issues as the powers of the states, language provisions and religion, in the end the Constitution was a product of a broad and legitimate debate amongst Indians, not the parting gift of a retreating imperial power.

Since independence, India has coped with virtually every challenge known to politics: war, domestic insurgencies, strong communitarian demands from linguistic and religious groups, caste and class tensions, corruption and even a


break in normal democratic government. Inevitably, there have been some dark days, and India's performance in some areas has been disappointing. But the big story is one of remarkable success in maintaining the founding vision, and of consolidating democracy and positive social change.

India's founders and leaders have found inspiration not only in the great lessons of Indian history, but also in political experiences and thinking around the world. The world also has much to learn from India. Thus, it is appropriate that India will host the 4th International Conference on Federalism. Five hundred Indian and 500 international practitioners and experts on federalism will exchange experiences around the themes of diversity, fiscal federalism, local government and intergovernmental relations.

The Indians will surely show their habitual interest in lessons from others. But it will also be an occasion for others to bring a serious focus to India's experience and the lessons it can offer. For example, its dramatic reform of local government has brought 3 million citizens into elected office with a tremendous impact on local decision-making and the empowerment of women. India's experience is highly relevant to various fragile democracies in developing countries coping with deeply diverse and often conflictual societies. As well, with the world's second-largest Muslim population and other minorities, it is relevant for long-established democracies that are coming to terms with multiculturalism and significant religious minorities. Its scale and complexity exceeds in many ways that of Europe, whose project of creating a united community in an environment of huge diversity and historic tensions provides



interesting parallels and contrasts.

The conference will go to the heart of the Forum's mission of learning from comparative experience. It could be held in no better place than Delhi in India's jubilee year. 

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