

Studies that have focused attention on the nature and dynamics of the Indian State have, in recent times, attempted a multi-track analysis—from diverse ideological perspectives—of the subject. The book, *Character of the Indian State: A Non-Marxist View*, by J.D. Sethi, is a significant addition to the scholarly studies on this vital theme. The above publication is an elaboration of the Silver Jubilee Lectures delivered by Professor Sethi at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in 1991 and 1992.

At the outset it must be stressed that the author defines his study in essentially negative terms—as a non-Marxist perspective. In his introductory remarks he asserts that the Indian State, which in 1949 was modelled on the lines of a strong State, has today become a soft and corrupt one. The weakness of the Indian State is demonstrated in its incapacity 'to translate its power into authority' as a result of 'criminalization, casteization, lumpenization, violent conflictualization and corruption' (p.1). Elaborating on this theme, the author opines that the deinstitutionalization of the Congress Party and of State structures—a process initiated by Indira Gandhi—coupled with the frequent and flagrant violation of the Constitution have contributed in their own way to the weakness of the State. Further, the 'increasing levels of political mobilization' resulting in the articulation of 'hard-to-fulfil demands' and an overload of expectations have virtually paralysed the State. Such a mobilization, often on caste or class lines, has heightened the competition for scarce resources. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, new innovative means (not necessarily legitimate) have today been devised by each of these competing groups to ensure that it secures for itself what it considers a proper and rightful share in the allocation of resources. The emergence of a new religious fundamentalism that

## The Imperial Bureaucratic State: A Critique

Sandeep Shastri\*

### CHARACTER OF THE INDIAN STATE: A NON-MARXIST VIEW

J.D. Sethi

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has made the accommodation of interests even more difficult has, in the author's view, contributed to the further weakening of the State. Finally, the development strategies sponsored by the powers that have benefited only a 'small section of the people', are contributing further to the crisis of legitimacy of the State.

After a preliminary survey of the Marxist, liberal and Gandhian theories of State, the author examines in depth what he considers is the authentic character of the Indian State — the Imperial Bureaucratic State (IBS). The IBS incorporates the characteristics of all the other theories of State. In the IBS, the bureaucracy is the 'linchpin of the State'. The IBS has, the author opines, all the trappings of a typical imperial State: imperial constitution, imperial capital city, imperial language, imperial coercive power and imperial dynasty. An Imperial Bureaucratic State is symbolic of authoritarianism and negates the very essence of democracy. In the context of his analysis of Africa's experience with democratic governance, Bangura has rightly stressed that the authoritarian trend in democratic processes is directly linked to the particular forms of accumulation and social structures.

The political conditions and structures that were created in independent India were ideal for the establishment of the IBS. As part of its passionate commitment to the principle of unity in diversity, the framers of the Constitution created a highly

centralized polity. Professor Sethi opines that the members of the Constituent Assembly, in spite of being legal celebrities, had a 'poor sociological imagination' and thus formulated a constitution which was largely non-empirical and created 'an abstract state which refused to go through the deconstruction of the colonial state' (p. 77). Further, the centralized State system as envisaged by the Constitution was clearly reflected in the nature of the federal system wherein the role of Panchayati Raj institutions was consciously ignored. The IBS was additionally strengthened by the 'control raj' — a by-product of the Nehru-Mahalanobis Model.

The author emphatically asserts that Nehru was the legitimizer of the IBS. He was responsible for transforming the Congress into a right-wing party and making it a natural ally of the IBS. Over a period of time, 'in every inter-elite and intra-elite conflict, it was the bureaucratic elite which came out more powerful' (p.32). Gradually, in the IBS, the bureaucracy emerged as the 'official caste'. The Marxists, the author states, wrongly believed that the bureaucracy was the instrument of the dominant class and failed to grasp the fact that 'as a part of the ruling class itself, it rules first for itself' (p.35). However, the author's contention in no way negates the fundamental principle of Marxian analysis, that the bureaucracy is the appendage of the dominant class.

In the author's perception the IBS rests on the bureaucratic mode of

production, which is defined in terms of the 'agencies exercising control over means as well as institutions of economic and political decision-making' (p.40). Thus, the 'permit-livelihood-quota raj' system further strengthened the role and position of the bureaucracy.

In the post-Independence period the leadership came to acknowledge only two theories of State: the Marxist and the Liberal. While the Marxist theory spoke of the ultimate withering away of the State, the liberal theories underscored the importance of limiting the role of the State. In the author's view both the theories have 'been made short shrift [sic] by history'. The reality in the Indian context is the emergence of a paralysing statelessness triggered off by the presence of 'enormous state power matched by equal powerlessness' wherein 'everything is reduced to something personal' (p.80). In the IBS, Professor Sethi concludes, there has emerged a new 'coalition of compradores' — the politicians, the businessmen, the bureaucrats and the intellectuals — who, to use Sartori's expression, are prompted to arrogate privileges to themselves that at the same time mean disadvantage to others.

While the author develops a masterly critique of what ails the Indian State, he stops short of offering the much-needed solution. How best can the civilizational character of the Indian State be protected? What are the strategies that need to be adopted to challenge the domination of the new compradores? Should the focus be on expanding the democratic space? Can structural changes be the answer to the crisis? These questions remain unanswered and the quest for a more just State remains elusive.

\* Dr Sandeep Shastri teaches political science at Bangalore University.