

**THE NEEDLE'S EYE** Three warnings from history on the perils of popularity

# RIDING THE TIGER


**Chaitanya Kalbag**

In November 1937, an extraordinary essay titled, 'The Rashtrapati', appeared in a respected Calcutta journal. Written under the pseudonym Chanakya, it soon became known that the author was, in fact, Jawaharlal Nehru, who had just led the Congress to victory in elections in a majority of Indian provinces. Ten years before Independence, Nehru was already widely viewed as pre-eminent among leaders of the freedom movement; but he was clearly concerned about the implications of his popularity.

In the biting essay, reproduced in *Patriots, Poets and Prisoners: Selections from Ramananda Chatterjee's The Modern Review 1907-1947*, 'Rashtrapati Jawaharlal ji' accepts the adulation of the crowds he passes through with a practised smile that fades in private. "Jawaharlal cannot become a fascist. And yet he has all the makings of a dictator in him — a vast popularity, a strong will directed to a well-defined purpose, energy, pride, organisational capacity, ability, hardness, and, with all his love of the crowd, an intolerance of others and a certain contempt for the weak and the inefficient. His flashes of

temper are well known and even when they are controlled, the curling of the lips betrays him. His over-mastering desire to get things done, to sweep away what he dislikes and build anew, will hardly brook for long the slow processes of democracy."

'Chanakya' says he who rides a tiger cannot dismount, but the people can try and prevent him from going astray. "We have a right to expect good work from him in the future. Let us not spoil that and spoil him by too much adulation and praise. His conceit is already formidable. It must be checked. We want no Caesars."

## From Hero to Dictator

Thence we travel 12 years into time, to November 25, 1949, the day before the Constituent Assembly approved our new Constitution, when there was a spirited debate on democracy and B R Ambedkar, the chairman of the Drafting Committee, made a long and passionate valedictory speech. I quoted from it in a 2014 ET column ('Who's Afraid of Narendra Modi?' bit.do/eSrAM), but here's a more complete citation:

"The second thing we must do is to observe the caution which John Stuart Mill has given to all who are interested in the maintenance of democracy, namely, not 'to lay their liberties at the feet of even a great man, or to trust him with powers which enable him to subvert their institutions'," Ambedkar said. "There is nothing wrong in being grateful to great men who have rendered lifelong services to the country. But there are limits to gratefulness. As has been well said


**Such fearful asymmetry**

by the Irish patriot Daniel O'Connell, no man can be grateful at the cost of his honour; no woman can be grateful at the cost of her chastity and no nation can be grateful at the cost of its liberty. This caution is far more necessary in the case of India than in the case of any other country. For in India, Bhakti or what may be called the path of devotion or hero-worship, plays a part in its politics unequalled in magnitude by the part it plays in the politics of any other country in the world. Bhakti in religion may be a road to the salvation of the soul. But in politics, Bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship."

And finally, we move on to October 14, 1976, when Lord Hailsham, twice Britain's lord chancellor and a leading Conservative, delivered the David Dimbleby lecture on BBC One, arguing for a written Constitution and curbs on unbridled parliamentary power. Britain had been rocked by years of militant worker unrest. "The time has come to take stock," Hail-

sham said, "and to recognise how far this nation, supposedly dedicated to freedom under the law, has moved towards a totalitarianism." Elections were being won on a small minority of votes. (Britain has the same first-past-the-post system as India.)

"It follows that the majority in the House of Commons is then free to impose on the country a series of relatively unpopular measures not related to current needs, using the whole powers of the elective dictatorship to carry them through," Lord Hailsham said. In 1978, he published a book, *The Dilemma of Democracy*, predicting, as Phil Tinline noted in a recent documentary on Radio 4 (bit.do/eSrB3), "a siege economy, a curbed and subservient judiciary, and a regulated press. Elective dictatorship, (Hailsham) said, would impose uniformity on the whole nation, in the interests of what it claims to be social justice".

## The D-Day is Here

Those turbulent times led to Margaret Thatcher's sweeping victory in the 1979 British election at the head of a resurgent Conservative Party, to 11 years of her iron-fisted rule, marked by rising unemployment, falling inflation, the privatisation of industries and utilities, and the crushing of the coal miners' strike in 1984-85.

Here in India, we are living through a curious conflation of Britain's 1970s socialism and Thatcher's 1980s free-market reforms. Whoever wins the 2019 election, we have an economy marked by rising rural distress and unemployment but low inflation, a discredited judiciary and a prostrate press. Will we have five years of 'elective dictatorship' with low vote margins and total control of the Lok Sabha, or of coalition chaos that cannot tame our economic drift? We will know next week.

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