



SHRI K. R. NARAYANAN
PRESIDENT OF INDIA

IN CONVERSATION WITH N. RAM
ON DOORDARSHAN AND ALL INDIA RADIO

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N. Ram: 50 years of Independence is a sufficient period for assessing the directions that national development has taken, for assessing the performance. And, Rashtrapatiji, I would like to place on record our great appreciation for this opportunity to have a conversation with our First Citizen. A conversation that is being shared with all the citizens of India here and abroad, thank you for this opportunity.

The President: Thank you. I am very happy to meet you and to talk with you today.

N. Ram: Shall we start at the beginning — the moment of Independence, because the arrival of independence must have been uplifting, heady moment for the people of India, notwithstanding the problems and difficulties that accompanied it. Could you recall for us that very moment, from your own experience?

The President: Yes. I can recall it. But unfortunately I was not in India in those days. I was a student in London and we the students, Indian students, celebrated the moment with great joy. I was exhilarated, no doubt, but the shadow of two events fell upon the jollifications. First, a sense of disappointment that the imperialist objective of dividing India has been achieved. And second, the communal carnage which took place in India cast another shadow on it.

N. Ram: Thank you. Shall we turn to the idea of India as ancient, multi-streamed, composite historical civilisation, about which much has been written about. But I have a quotation from E. P. Thompson, which the distinguished economist Amartya Sen has often cited when he discusses the idea of India. And may I read that out: All the convergent influences of the world run through this society, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, secular, Stalinist, liberal, Maoist, democratic, Socialist, Gandhian". Then, E. P. Thompson, the historian goes on to say, "There is not a thought that is being thought in

the East or West that is not active in some Indian mind". So how has this idea of India fared over 50 years?

The President: I think the idea still marches on. India has been a cauldron of dreams, ideas and aspirations of the humankind and this is a distinctive character of India, and India in that sense represents the world in miniature. If a system can succeed in India, it will indicate the possibility of such success in the world as a whole.

N. Ram: There have been many challenges to this idea of India, some asserting that it is this or that, and yet it goes on ...

The President: Yes. There is an over-informing force which ultimately brings all the ideas together, and does not allow one idea alone to run away with India. And, that has been demonstrated again and again in terms of conflicting ideologies, conflicting social systems, political systems, all these somehow have been contained in an overall framework.

N. Ram: And this will continue

The President: I think it will continue, I think it will continue because that vital force can be seen operating in India.

N. Ram: In his stirring or shall we say, definitional, address on the eve of Independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, describing the tasks ahead focussed on three areas. One was, practicing democracy and guaranteeing various freedoms to the citizens of India, the second was removing the social inequality and backwardness that characterised British India, and thirdly achieving economic independence and especially altering the conditions of the poor. May I quote from that stirring address: "Service to India means the ending of poverty, and ignorance, and inequality of opportunity." Looking over the half century, how has India fared in relation to these three big challenges?

The President: I believe that India has gone ahead in tackling these challenges, "not wholly and substantially", to quote from Nehru's own speech,

but, partially we have succeeded in all these three fields which you have mentioned. First of all, democracy. Democracy, I think, has established itself firmly and, there is no doubt that, it is one of the irremovable things which we have achieved. But it is facing problems at every stage. I don't think that we can rest on our oars in the maintenance of democracy. Critical times are facing us. There are, there will be, crises, that we will have to face. So constant adjustments of even democracy to changing times, is necessary. But one thing is clear. The idea of democracy and institutions of democracy that we have built up, have survived the test of critical situations.

N. Ram: The very fact that we have held free, and fair elections, largely free and fair elections almost without break and ...

The President: That is one basic achievement. We started with pure parliamentary democracy at the Centre and in the States. Now this has been extended to the grassroots, though not in the Gandhian way, but according to the dream of Gandhiji, along that line. We have extended democracy to the grassroots, in the panchayati raj experiment and I think that has given solid support to our parliamentary system. Our parliamentary system could not have survived, without this basic grassroot support. But all these can function only in an atmosphere of social and economic progress and greater equality. And that is where we come to the next two points ...

N. Ram: Inequality, social inequality and backwardness that characterise ...

The President: Yes. Nehru's great passion was to change our society — the congealed society which we inherited from our own past, and from the static past of the British period. And, social change he connected with economic change. We could not change our society without changing our economic system and economic relations in society. His whole dream was that, his whole effort was in that direction. But the march of society, of social change has not been fast enough, nor fundamental enough so far. And, our inherited caste system remains with us, but it has been very badly battered. And, the conceptions behind the caste system have also been very

badly damaged by policies, by the march of technology and economics, all these things. To some extent while this progressive movement was taking place, there was also, concurrently, some sort of counter-revolution, resisting it. But the overwhelming force of the progressive movement has been winning by and large. But now we have to specifically deal with many of the social ills and backwardness.

N. Ram: And the third area, achieving economic progress, especially in the life and work of the working millions.

The President: We have to give a sense of economic liberation to the masses and for that, I think the basic thing we have done or we attempted to do, in the beginning, and we have not yet completed that process, is that of land reforms. I think some of the Indian states have been successful in bringing about land reforms but to get a sensation of economic empowerment in society, even a bit of land of their own, is necessary for the common people and it has been shown by Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, which have achieved remarkable economic successes, that land reform was one basic prior thing they did.

N. Ram: Imagine what economic progress we would have achieved had this been done at one go or in a comprehensive way.

The President: Yes, it would have been. It would have laid sure foundation of an economic miracle if we had done it.

N. Ram: Thank you. Now there is a success part of this story of fifty years of Independence. And may I list the following? Maintaining and strengthening political democracy at various levels which you have called attention to, it has moved to new levels. Conducting successive free and fair elections, evolving and developing institutions like a relatively independent press, functioning opposition parties offering role choice, an independent and high calibre judiciary, free public debate which sometimes comes under assault, defying freedom of expression and creativity and secularism as the basic feature of our constitutional and social well being. This, I suppose would be completing our nature of success. And yet I suppose, we should look also at the areas of conspicuous failure. Some of it we have already called attention to, a couple of

them. What Prof. Amartya Sen calls the “disastrous areas of social development”. May I start with our historic failure — what looks like historic failure — with respect to basic formal education, 50% of the population above the age of 7 is illiterate, they are all measurements and even in the age group 6-11, about 50% of children are out of school. Would it be right to characterise this, perhaps our biggest failure?

The President: Yes, I think it has been one of our failures. But you have to look at the, brighter side also. When we started in 1947, I think 18% or something was the literacy rate in India. Now it is 52%. It is not a disastrous performance but it is not sufficient, certainly. But some parts of India have done better, my own State of Kerala has done remarkably well. Tamil Nadu is achieving greater success in literacy, so is Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The State of Himachal, is more or less reaching 100% literacy. Some of the states of the North-East have full literacy today. So, the movement of literacy has been uneven, but progressive. But I agree that though Nehru talked about investment in man being the greatest force in society and in economic development, but it has not, did not actually take place. Another thing I would like to point out is that, the strength of our culture to some extent has compensated the lack of formal education. That is how people could vote wisely in these massive elections. After all, it was the ordinary, illiterate people who exercised the votes in the general elections we have had. And they seem to have voted with sufficient knowledge of affairs, of their interests, and this is remarkable indeed. But that is no substitute for education, and we have to have a full formal education for all our people and what I find sad is that it is an eminently practicable thing to do; in a matter of 5 years, India could be made literate.

N. Ram: Thank you. Another area of weakness it appears to me, is taking care of basic health: nutrition and access to food. And, according to the National Family Health Survey of 1992-93, which collected data for 24 States, it found that, 53% of children in the age group of 0-4 were under-nourished and 21% were severely under-nourished. There are other data which are like this. This is an area of conspicuous failure.

The President: What you say is right, but education and health are really inter-related. The Kerala example has shown that education is the key to health

and to social progress. The fact is that the average expectation of life of an Indian has doubled since Independence. In fact, it is 61 years now as against 28 or 30 years at the time of Independence.

N. Ram: Rashtrapatiji, you have already referred to the issue of land reforms. Had we done that a long ago it could have been different. I think the consequences of the failure to shift rural, social and political power from the hands of the rural rich land lords and rural gentry and into the hands of working peasantry and agricultural labourers...

The President: Well, we could not have done it in one go even if people thought of doing it. Because there was built-in resistance, by powerful sections of society, and now, the new class of landlords — they may not be landlords but practically they are — and therefore a new class of people have come up, powerful politically and socially, and it has become very difficult to implement any land reforms today, because of that.

N. Ram: On the issue of caste oppression. Apart from direct oppression and physical attack, the people of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and also of other disadvantaged castes are systematically worse off in respect of basic human development achievements than the rest of the population. How long can this go on?

The President: Well, they are worse-off but they are, better-off also at the same time. I mean, considerable numbers of people from these classes have moved forward. In fact, if you can see one consistent tendency in India, one trend in India, from the time of the Buddha onwards, it is the slow, but steady movement of the lower classes along the scale of the class system. But it has been very very slow. It took 2000 years. But it is something which is going on, and something which is almost spectacular in certain sectors today- the assertion of the backward classes, of scheduled castes, of women.

N. Ram: Thank you, you referred to the certain awareness of women, of gender discrimination. This has many facets, characterised by social discrimination and also it is reflected in the female mortality ratio. Millions of “missing women” and more recently the failure of the political system to push

through and adopt this decision which they all paid lip-service to on the Women's Reservation Bill. How do you see this going?

The President: Well, inspite of this backward movement sometimes, the movement is going forward, essentially. And it's a very, very intricate problem. By some mysterious reason, there is no difficulty for a man in ill-treating a woman, and this is something amazing. Everybody loves his mother, sisters and relatives etc, but still, with all this there is this callous attitude and ill- treatment of women. So women's movements are necessary. One thing which is forgotten in India is the transformation of the attitude of men. It is in this field that active work has to be done. We all preach to women that they should assert themselves. But on the other hand we don't tell sufficient early, strongly, to the male that they should behave well, their attitude should change. I have no doubt that even the women's reservation question you mentioned, will be finally adopted.

N. Ram: Thank you. Rashtrapatiji. May we now move on to certain issues raised by the experience of economic liberalisation and globalisation, rather the stabilisation and structural adjustment policies pursued in India since '91 because the recent economic history of the less developed countries would seem to suggest that such policies take a toll, they put pressure on the sovereignty of the respective relevant countries, they have the effect of worsening the conditions of the life and work of the working people and the poor, and also the growth implications are questionable. So, how would you assess the experience of economic liberalisation in India at this juncture? You have spoken about these issues.

The President: Well, economic liberalisation is a world phenomenon. Socialist countries, capitalist countries, all of them, have to take to liberalisation. You know the liberalisation took place first in Britain, then in the United States under President Reagan, these were not liberalising from a socialist system. I think it is because of the stage of economy which the world has reached at present and the stage of technology. At every historical and technological and economic age there are policies which would be suitable for that period and countries. We have to adopt policies, dictated by the circumstances and the necessities of the time. We in India,

as a result of our planned economic development, not central planning, but mixed planning, mixed economy, we have experimented with, we have moved to a stage of partial maturity of the economy, when we needed new forms of management, new forms of, expression of the spirit of enterprise, so that the economy can move forward. The compulsion to liberalisation and globalisation arose from this. This is why we say that India's liberalisation is an irreversible process. Because it has arisen from the dictates of the needs of the economy, as it had developed. But there is no uniform pattern which the world can adopt. And, in a vast country, with millions of people and poverty, rampant, we cannot liberalise recklessly, in such a way that the balance of the society is upset and while some sections would flourish, make profits, the rest of the people would be left without employment and be helpless. Therefore, we have to have a balanced approach to liberalisation and also to globalisation. And the idea of sovereignty which you have mentioned, there are many serious political scientists who have argued that the age of sovereignty is over. They want a frontierless, borderless world, and that is a very dangerous philosophy which may suit the most developed and powerful countries of the world, and not those who are small and developing. That is why we are rather cautious in our liberalisation policy. We went ahead in certain sectors. We went rather slowly in other sectors. And, this has helped us.

N. Ram: Thank you. Rashtrapatiji, as a member of Parliament, you took a detailed interest in the issue of intellectual property rights and patents. Would you see this as a relatively vulnerable area for our economy? Today, what are we required to do in this respect?

The President: Yes, it is a vulnerable area. I think many in India fought against some of the ideas of changing our patent system. And we have signed the World Trade Organisation Treaty but still we have to safeguard ourselves because, many of the developed countries are, though they have signed the same WTO, but they are not practising it; anti-dumping measures they are adopting very liberally, as also tariff, non-tariff barriers. So we have to carefully argue within the WTO system our case.

N. Ram: The toll taken by communalism, as a political mobilisation strategy, has been very heavy, unfortunately, it appears as we go on. As Chairman of the Rajya Sabha you characterised the demolition of the Babri

Masjid as the greatest tragedy, India has faced since the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. So how, can we be reasonably confident that we can bring this phenomenon under control?

The President: I think, we can bring it under control. In retrospect, I feel that we could have brought the earlier tragedy also under control. But communal mobilisation in the long run will not succeed in India because Indian society cannot be mobilised communally. Even the last elections have shown that communities, religious communities, castes did not vote solidly for one party.

N. Ram: Yes. That is clear...

The President: Yes, that is clear. The Hindu vote, the upper class Hindu vote was divided. The backward class vote was divided. The scheduled castes votes were divided. So in fact though there has been some mobilisation on caste and communal basis, this was not successful even in the past. And as time goes on, it will become less and less appealing to the people. This is the trend as I see it.

N. Ram: Yes. Let us hope that we can bring that under control. May I move on to another area? Taking our due place in Asia and the world. This was a vital part of the founding vision of independent India. It is developing an Asian persona, an independent, non-aligned, non-inward-looking role for India, which is constructive, which is committed to peace and development. This is the Nehruian world view which is very eloquently set out. How has independent India's foreign policy, and engagement with our own region and the world, fared when the performance, the actual performance is measured against these high goals?

The President: Well, it has been a mixed experience. Because, basically, we have achieved successes but we are not the only leaders in Asia today. Because when we became independent and Nehru spelt out his vision, we appeared to be the leader, we are the only country which articulated the aspirations of Asia as a whole for the first time. Then other countries, small countries, big countries have come up asserting themselves, and, but still we are, because

of our economic development, everybody knows that India is geographically a big central chunk of Asia and that it is an expanding economy. It is a technologically progressing society and in every field it is making a mark. And everybody recognises this role of India, but I think we have to articulate our position in Asia, in a new way, in a new set of circumstances that would appeal to everybody. First of all, that would arouse the Indian public, the Indian public — the 960 million Indians, are weighed down by their problems, and becoming rather insular in their outlook because of their preoccupation with their own problems. We have to rouse them and make them conscious that we can progress only as a part of the world and as a part of Asia. In other words, as Pandit Nehru had interpreted his foreign policy in domestic terms, he was constantly telling Indian people how our involvement in foreign policy and in Asian and world affairs is frightfully important for the progress and development of India. He integrally connected the two together. And don't forget that there are forces working against the emergence of India as a big factor in Asia. We have to face that problem also.

N. Ram: Now, India's commitment to good neighbourliness, international stability and peace, has been an important aspect of our policy. And you yourself had considerable experience — distinguished experience — in normalising, in fact initiating the process of normalising relations with China and as a big neighbour. What do you think can be done in this area, where certain problems have appeared recently?

The President: I feel that these problems are temporary. These problems are the result of misunderstanding of India and Indian objectives in this region. There has been no change in India's need for living in harmony and in cooperation with all our neighbours, including Pakistan and of course our big neighbour China, and others. This is India's need, if I may say so, and India's policy also has been in that direction. And I feel that there is mutuality of interest between India and China in being friends, cooperating with each other fully. Of course, there are problems between us and these problems can be solved and we have been attempting to solve it, both countries, and that process will, I think, go on. Even with Pakistan, I don't despair, in regard to our friendly relations.

N. Ram: Thank you. Now on this matter of the Pokhran explosions and nuclear weaponisation to which I as a citizen and as journalist am firmly opposed. But do you, think India has lost the high moral and political ground in world affairs after this, because we, we seem to have a lot of difficulty at the present, in responding to the post-Pokhran situation?

The President: Well, difficulties there are, but I don't think we have lost the moral high ground as you say. I think India has to be looked at as any other country. We cannot and we should not claim to occupy a higher moral ground than any other country. Certainly, we have had a tradition of high philosophy and great moral principles. So had Europe. Christ preached all these principles. But still they develop nuclear weapons and pile up such weapons. But nobody tells them they have fallen from the high moral ground. I don't think that nuclear weapons are necessary for the world, they should be abolished. But as a pragmatist, I would say that they can be abolished not in parts but wholly, because the weapons in the hands of any one country alone or a group of countries could be dangerous for the world as a whole and for the rest of humanity. Hitherto, for the last 10-15 years the world seems to have forgotten that these vast arsenals of nuclear weapons exist among the five great powers. World seems to have forgotten because they are quiet about it, and but when we, when we conducted the tests, then suddenly everybody has woken up and feel that there is such a threat. From that point of view it gave a very salutary shock to the complacency of the great powers and the world opinion, which was moulded by them and I believe that we exploded the bomb not with the intention of using them. In fact, I am one who believes that nuclear weapons are useful only when they are not used. In fact they are useful, in any sense only when they are not used. But they may be a deterrent power in the hands of a nation. And even though people are talking about the nuclear danger between India and Pakistan, I think, in time, both countries will settle down to the fact of their having nuclear weapons. India and Pakistan, I think, now that both countries have these weapons, it would drive home to both, the inescapable need to settle the differences between them peacefully and through negotiations.

N. Ram: Thank you. Rashtrapatiji, as we near the end of this conversation, may I shift the focus to the Rashtrapati Bhavan itself because on the whole,

Independent India appears to have been very well served by its Presidents. Not that the institution has been free, entirely free from controversies, we had controversies during the passage of the Hindu Code Bill, during the promulgation of Emergency and also at a time when there was talk, atleast in public, about the impending dismissal of a particular Prime Minister by a particular President. Despite that, this is an institution that seems to have worked very well. Could you give us your view of the role of a President in the Indian Constitution, in the Indian scheme of things? Shall we say a “non- hands-on” President?

The President: (Laughs) Well, I think the President has a constitutional role to play. My image of a President before I came here, and before I had any hope of coming here, was that of a rubber-stamp President, to be frank. This is the image I got. But having come here, I find that the image is not quite correct. I thought, I will have lot of time, leisure for reading, writing, waking etc. But somehow I find I can't get it now. So, my image of a President is of a working President, not an executive President, but a working President, and working within the four corners of the Constitution. It gives very little direct power or influence to him to interfere in matters or affect the course of events, but there is a subtle influence of the office of the President on the executive and the other arms of the government and on the public as a whole. It is a position which has to be used with the, what I should say, with a philosophy of indirect approach. There are one or two things, which you can directly do in very critical times. But otherwise, this indirect influence that you can exercise on the affairs of the State is the most important role he can play. And, he can play it successfully only if he is, his ideas and his nature of functioning are seen by the public in tune with their standards.

N. Ram: A citizen President

The President: I think the President has to be a citizen and there must be some equation between the people and the President, and if some advice or something is to be given to the executive, it would be received with grace, it would be sometimes accepted, if it is known that the public opinion is on the side of the kind of advice the President is giving. Otherwise, he cannot exercise much influence. You can call it moral authority, I don't want to elevate it to such a position as to call it a moral authority. It is to be in tune with the popular expectations.

N. Ram: Thank you. May I now ask you a question that must be on the minds of hundreds of thousands of Indian citizens and others. Because early on during your Presidency, the country saw and I think very largely acclaimed, the President's action of returning the Union Cabinet's recommendation for the proclamation of central rule in Uttar Pradesh. Could you tell us something about your Constitutional understanding, of the constitutional understanding, that brought you to this unprecedented action because it was never done before. And how you felt the system responded?

The President: My constitutional understanding was that imposition of the Article 356 can be done only if it can be conclusively proved that in a State the constitutional machinery has broken down. And in my judgment, it had not broken down in U.P. This was one consideration. And then there was the dissolution of the Assembly question. On this there are, there were legal opinions pronounced by the Supreme Court which have become the law of the land. On these two grounds, I returned it. And I think the government was very understanding. I think that this is another thing, one has to say. The President has the power to return a matter but the government while reconsidering this will have to agree with him, if they don't agree, then, it is difficult for him to see that through. Therefore, cooperation between the President and the government takes place in this. And a cooperation in the context of the larger public opinion. This is why I said even though constitutionally this freedom is allowed to the President to return it, to be successful, he should be in tune with the people. People's conception of what is right and that is what made easier for the government not to return that thing.

N. Ram: Thank you. And, finally, could I request you to look ahead, not fifty years because that might be too speculative, but, let us say, twenty or twenty five years, in the background of these issues we have talked about, do you think the Nehruvian dream of "the ending of poverty and ignorance and inequality of opportunity" and the rest of it, is within reach?

The President: Well, the Nehruvian dream today has become a pungent necessity, inescapable necessity. In 1947, one could say that it was a dream, it was Gandhi's dream also. But now it has become an inescapable necessity

for us to translate that dream into practice. And I think that dream cannot be abandoned. We have to pursue it and pursue it in realistic terms. I see that India can do it. And India must do it.

N. Ram: Rashtrapatiji, on behalf of all the citizens of India here and abroad, may I thank you sincerely for sharing with us these thoughts on an important occasion when we are celebrating, or marking the celebration of 50 years of Independence.

The President: Thank you very much.