EXCURSUS I

Peter L. Berger on
Good News From India?

A short while back, when Indira Gandhi put an end to India's experiment with democracy, an astute if melancholy friend of ours made a prediction: Give it a year or so, he suggested, and then the first favorable reports about India will begin to appear in the Western press. His prediction is being fulfilled pretty much on schedule.

As yet the good news from India is only a trickle, but it is starting to come in. We read about the new discipline in the government apparatus, about productivity going up in all sectors of the economy, about a new spirit of cooperation between management and labor, and about a resurgence of optimism and self-confidence in the country. This is all the more remarkable as the Indian regime has not had many admirers in the West. Our friend is no admirer either. His prediction was not that the situation in India would improve under the dictatorship; what would "improve," he said, is the information we receive about India, even if the situation remained unchanged or, for that matter, deteriorated.

Has anything really changed in India since the "emergency" went into effect? Everything we know about India makes this seem unlikely, but it cannot be excluded. Perhaps the repressive measures of the regime—relatively mild though they seem to be thus far, at least by Third World standards—have really begun to clean the Augean stables of government corruption and have injected a new spirit of economic dedication to national goals. Perhaps India has at long last been started on the road toward a modicum of prosperity. The point is not that this is impossible; the point is that we don't know. Neither do the Indians. Neither, perhaps, does Indira Gandhi herself. The first fruit of dictatorship is that everyone tells lies all the time—and this is especially true of the reports that go up the bureaucratic ladder to the center of national power.

What we do know is that there has been a big change in the flow of information out of and within India. Indian and foreign journalists, scholars, and other observers could once roam all over the country reporting what they saw. Many of them paid special attention to the worst features of the Indian situation, reporting in depressing detail about hunger, fear, and demoralization. Then the Indian Government frequently complained about the intrinsic unfairness in comparing data from a country with freedom of information with data from countries in which the authorities controlled all channels of information, as well as the movement of outside observers.

At the time, the complaint was justified. Starving beggars in Calcutta could be photographed, dissidents could be interviewed, police brutality even in remote regions was not immune from enterprising reporters. Then corrupt officials had at least a residual anxiety about being found out by the press. Thus a thoroughly negative image of India was built up in Western public opinion, while reports from other Asian countries with lesser opportunities for investigative journalism told glowing tales of happy peasants, smiling children, and selfless government officials. Today the India of Indira Gandhi no longer suffers from this particular disability. It is not surprising that a more favorable image of the country is beginning to emerge.

Possibly things really are getting better in India. It is even possible that, in view of the anguishing problems of India, there was an element of political necessity in the course Indira Gandhi took. The point of these reflections is not to pass judgment on her regime. A question does need to be raised, however, about a hypothesis that has been with us for some years (propagated, incidentally, both on the left and on the right of the ideological spectrum), to wit: The problems of Third World development can only be solved by dictatorships. The other side of the hypothesis is that the Third World cannot afford democracy.

The arguments for the hypothesis are well known: Only a dictatorship can take the harsh measures required for development—ending old structures of oppression and exploitation, mobilizing people for production, imposing discipline and collective will. The arguments are not without a certain plausibility. Yet it may be time for a counterhypothesis: Perhaps Third World dictatorships only appear to solve the problems of development because they control our information about these problems. Perhaps the Third World cannot afford *not* to have democracy—or, more precisely, it cannot afford to be without that centerpiece of democracy, that "bourgeois liberty" par excellence, the free flow of information. That too is only an hypothesis. It cannot be stated with certitude. But it may be worth thinking about.

Meanwhile, whether or not the situation in India changes, it is very likely that we will continue to receive good news about India. Who knows, after a while the "Indian model" may even begin to have fervent adherents among Western intellectuals (especially if the Indian Government learns the rather easy art of managed tourism). Other Third World dictatorships, it appears, are beginning to catch on. If the UNESCO-sponsored plan for a Third World news consortium is realized, we may soon have a veritable flood of good news about all these countries. This will be very helpful, of course, for the international reputation of a variety of despotic regimes. It will also be helpful for the uneasy conscience of humanity, especially that segment of humanity that lives in the affluent West and would like to remain undisturbed by images of hunger. After all, a starving beggar we do not know about is a starving beggar who does not exist.