

Item : 4 Address of the President of the Institute, Shri R. Venkataraman

ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT

“My esteemed friend, Dr. Venkatappiah, Vice-President of the IIPA, Professor Mathur, Director of the Institute, distinguished administrators and members of the Institute and friends !

“As usual, I have not committed myself to a written speech. I would like to give expression to thoughts as they come to me on some of the very important problems that face the administration in the country. I feel that it is appropriate on an occasion like this that I should speak extempore.

“The first thing that I would like to refer to is the success which our Institute has achieved in the programmes it has followed and the immense service it has been rendering to the administration in the country. I do not want to congratulate the Institute more lest it should be misunderstood as congratulating myself as the President of the Institute !

“India’s problems are complex. Many of them have been inherited over the centuries. Some of them are the result of the super-imposition of the administration over the village and communal setting within the country. An adjustment has therefore had to be made between the system that the administration represents and the old traditions of our society. We may pass any number of laws but unless the people respond to it, many of them will remain a dead letter on the Statute Book. In fact, the villager does not very much care to know what the laws of the country are. He goes on in his own way, and many of the laws which have been enacted for them have remained dead letters on the Statute Book. My friend, H.M. Patel, will endorse when I say that, for instance, the Gold Control Order has not been observed by anybody in the country. We administrators, think that the moment we pass a law, it will automatically be observed, irrespective of the response of the people to those laws that we pass. Very often, the rural community, living in a particular state of social development, ignores many of the laws which

we pass and continues to observe its own old traditions with the result that many of our laws remain unimplemented.

“I will cite another instance. We passed a large number of laws with regard to Land Ceilings. I wonder how many who are in the district administration will be able to say that the Land Ceilings Act has been observed. Many transferred these lands benami to other people and maintained their control over it. Very few people really surrendered the lands as surplus land to Government. Therefore, in legislation it is important to see what the public reactions are to the proposals and how much legislation can be implemented with the willing cooperation of the people. In fact, in democracy, the willing cooperation and obligatory observance of the laws is a condition precedent to its success. I will cite the instance of Switzerland. In Switzerland we find that the people observe the laws themselves. If they put up a notice that a particular road is closed for the purpose of repairs, then nobody will think of crossing it. There is not even a policeman present to enforce the restriction. But in India if you put up a notice that the road is closed, you will find half a dozen people sneaking through it. And if there is no policeman to enforce it, they will throw away the entire barricade and walk in.

“Therefore, we as administrators should like to know how much of the Government’s legislative proposals would be voluntarily accepted by the people. And unless we are able to transmit that information to the political executive in the country, we will not be able to observe or endorse those laws, and they will all remain only in the Statute Book. I am deriving to the point that at the level of the district administration it should be possible for the administrator to gauge the opinion of the people, the acceptance of the people to certain proposals which are emanating from either the State Headquarters or the Central Headquarters—a two-way traffic between the Centre and the district level—so that a communication may go from the Centre to the district and information and facts may be transmitted from the district to the Centre. Today, there is only one-way communication. The Centre or the State Headquarters sends its information. It is seldom that they wait or ask for the kind of reactions

to those proposals from the people at the district level.

“This leads me to the second point which I want to stress and that is a greater degree of decentralisation so that the administration at the District level may be able to dispose of many of the small and local problems which are facing the people at that level. Unfortunately, it is a habit of the mind of man to think that he is superior to his neighbour and in fact to everybody else. He would think that he can do better than any other. And the higher in office one goes, the higher does he feel that he is the only person who can do the right thing at the right time. This idea that a person in high office is the only person who can make right decisions should give place to the idea that the level of decision making should go lower and lower. That the other man is equally good, that the other man has equal competence, and that the other man could be trusted to perform the functions and duties entrusted to him, is a view that must be fostered. Let us develop that sense of acceptance of other people, their ideas, their ability and their competence to perform.

“Unfortunately, the people who talk of devolution are themselves very keen that in the process, they should get the power. When it comes to a devolution of power to authorities lower than themselves, they refuse to part with power. I am reminded of an instance when I was a Minister in Madras. I was incharge of Transport, one of those subjects which always gets Ministers into trouble. The Secretary to the Department and the Transport Commissioner said: Sir, there must be devolution of power; you must delegate authority to the Transport Commissioner. I said, I agree, as I never thought that my intelligence is superior to that of my Commissioner. And I told him to prepare a scheme by which the authority of the Minister would be delegated to the Transport Commissioner, but, at the same time, the authority to issue INTRA-district route permits would be delegated to the District Collector and Inter-district route permits to the concerned District Collectors, the Commissioner interfering only when there was a difference. Only in respect of the Inter-State routes covering more than two States, I said, should the Commissioner have the power. Seven times the file came back to me saying that this will

not work ! I am giving this as an instance to show that the more we plead for delegation of authority, particularly at the higher levels saying that the Secretary wants delegation, the less we are prepared to delegate authority to the district level officers. And it is because we are not doing this that we find that people in the higher echelons do not want to part with authority. Without delegation of authority to the district level, it will not be possible to satisfy the aspiration of the people. Today's Government is no longer to be the former Government in which it maintained only law and order. Today the Administrator at the district and lower level, and the top level has to know a lot more of the functions of development than he had ever imagined would be the case. And yet, we do not delegate the powers to people at the block level, the district levels with the result that, firstly, there is delay ; secondly there is lack of information in respect of the conditions in that particular village; and thirdly, we begin to apply a rule of uniformity applicable to all the districts so that the net result is, the object gets frustrated. Therefore, it is very necessary that in order that democracy succeeds, we should go in for greater devolution and delegation of power and authority, not merely from the Minister to the Secretary, which is all done, but from the Secretary down to the district level, and from the district level to the block level. It is only then that we can make development a success.

“Let us take some of the developmental programmes that we have : the NREP, the IRDP, loans which are issued by the banks. All these are intended for people at the lowest level, at the village level, at the town level. And yet the powers which are necessary for the block development officer or to the local manager are not given. Furthermore, at the level of the block, there is no coordination between the various agencies. The bank manager comes and gives loans to somebody, the another agency offers the IRDP scheme to someone else, the NREP scheme will be given to yet another. In the absence of such coordination, what happens is that many of the schemes which have been formulated for the benefit of the people go very largely to the undeserving, to those who can move the authorities and so on. So the

Institute must now think of ways and means in which a proper delegation and devolution of authority can worked out—right from the top, at the Centre and from the State, down to the block level.

“I will take only two-three more minutes to deal with one other aspect. In the Directive principles of the State Policy, a certain emphasis has been laid on Panchayati Raj. Right or wrong, any decision taken by the local people is likely to be far better than the best decision that is made by the person at the top. The local man knows the local conditions, the local people, the local needs and he generally also knows who is the deserving person in the locality. If he is not invested with authority and the authority is vested in the higher level, to that extent the man in the rural area suffers. Even if there is some mistake made by the Panchayat, it is likely to be corrected by the people because in the Panchayat system, the man has to go and stand for elections next time and if he has been errant, he is not likely to be returned. What has happened to our Panchayat Institutes? In a recent survey made by the Planning Commission, it was found that where Panchayati Raj existed, 25 to 30 per cent of the benefits went to the deserving people, but where there was no panchayat raj and there was a bureaucratic administration, hardly 15 per cent really went to the poorest of the poor for whom it was intended. This is the finding of the Planning Commission. Therefore, it is that we must make panchayats the sheet-anchor of our administration.

“I will plead on this occasion that the Constitution be amended to make elections to the Panchayats as compulsory as they are to the State legislatures and to Parliament. Today, a majority of the States do not have Panchayats. They have been superseded and this has gone on for ten years or twelve years or more. Just as our Constitution provides that six months cannot elapse without a meeting of the legislation, the Parliament or State Assembly, similar legislation should be extended to Panchayats making it obligatory for them to have the Panchayat elected. And it is only by investing with the Panchayats the rights which are legitimately theirs that we can carry all the benefits to the

rural population, to the poorest people, to the weaker sections and so on. I am not unaware that there are Panchayats which have misused the power but that cannot be an excuse for abolishing the system. You cannot do away with the head because you have headache ! Therefore, it is that we have to lay emphasis on this system and see that the Panchayats are constituted and they are made to work, so that the benefits which are long intended for the poorest of the poor to the common people, to the masses, is sustained. It is far better that the Panchayats fail than the bureaucrat at the State Headquarters 'succeeds' because it is a contradiction in terms that the bureaucrat at the State Headquarters will be able to succeed if the schemes for the benefit of the people have not reached them.

"I have great pleasure in wishing you all success and wishing you another year of great endeavour in every direction. Thank you very much."