

A Contemporary History of India:

Ramblings and Reflections of a Reluctant Civil Servant

Alok Sheel

“FOR a country encompassing a fifth of humanity, and a nuclear bomb, India does not count for much in the world. Its trade accounts for a scant 0.7% of the world total; it gets about one-tenth the foreign direct investment that China attracts. It houses the majority of the world's poor and illiterate. Its infrastructure is a joke by world standards, and its politicians and bureaucrats are seen more as parasites than public servants. It has no permanent seat on the UN Security Council. When pundits talk about the geo-strategic chessboard of the future, India has figured more often as a bishop or a knight than as a queen. On this view, India is the world's biggest under-achiever.”

THE ECONOMIST, September 4, 1999.

At the turn of the twenty first century, the Indian economy was the fourth largest in the world measured in purchasing power parity, behind the United States, China and Japan; its economy was bigger than that of any European country, including Germany, France and Great Britain, its former colonial master, measured in terms of purchasing power parity. However, since the European Union operates as a unified economy, the Indian economy could be effectively considered as the fifth largest in the world. The equation changes vastly, however, when other parameters are considered, or when aggregates are distributed on a per capita basis: of the five biggest countries in the world, America has a disproportionate share of global income by a factor of 4, Brazil and Russia are more or less on par; China's share of global income is in deficit by a factor of two, whereas India's deficit is by a factor of four. In other words, India's share of global income is as disproportionately less as America's is more. India is moreover the most agrarian of the big five, and has the lowest life expectancy, adult literacy and per capita income.

Table of Contents

- [1. Preface](#)
- [2.The Historian and the Civil Servant](#)
- [3.The Lure of History](#)
- [4.Past, Present and Future](#)
- [5.Change and Causation](#)
- [6.Eye for Detail](#)
- [7.Contemporary Bias](#)
- [8.Historicism and Progress](#)
- [9.Natural Processes and Population](#)
- [10.Trade Technology and Empire](#)
- [11.Religion and Social Order](#)
- [12.Two Hypotheses](#)
- [13.Scientific Temper and Technology](#)
- [14.Hierarchy and Civil Society](#)
- [15.Democratization and Centralization](#)
- [16.The Ubiquitous State](#)
- [17.The Economy](#)
 - [17.1 Land, Agriculture and Migration](#)
 - [17.2 Artisan Production and Modern Industry](#)
 - [17.3 Infrastructure](#)
 - [17.4 Trade](#)
 - [17.5 The Economy Today](#)
- [18.Institution Building](#)
- [19.Concluding Remarks](#)