

M.N. Roy Memorial Lecture (1994)

Crisis of Ideology : Ideology of Crisis

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FOREWORD

An annual M.N. Roy Memorial Lecture, instituted by Indian Renaissance Institute, is delivered by a distinguished scholar every year on March 21 to commemorate the birth of M.N. Roy. Shri Dileep Padgaonkar was invited to deliver the Memorial Lecture this year. According to our tradition, the learned speaker decides the theme of his lecture and Shri Padgaonkar chose to speak on a theme under the title Crisis of Ideology : Ideology of Crisis.

In this concise, crisp and perceptive lecture Shri Padgaonkar deals with the causes that led to the collapse of the Communist regime and what kind of world the post cold war heralds for mankind at large and for India in particular. He concludes his lecture with the statement : "The creation of wealth and the pursuit of wisdom need not be antithetical ambitions."

This reminds us that in the late forties of this century M.N. Roy analysed the causes of the crisis of our times and arrived at the conclusion that ingenuity and wisdom of man would ultimately find a solution to the crisis of our civilisation through reorganisation of life on the basis of rational approach for securing freedom, prosperity, peace and happiness for all.

I take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks to Shri Padgaonkar for accepting our invitation and delivering this Memorial Lecture.

August 15, 1994.
New Delhi

Sunil Bhattacharya
Secretary
Indian Renaissance Institute

Crisis of Ideology : Ideology of Crisis

Dileep Padgaonkar

If the range, depth and speed of the changes culminating in the felling of the Berlin wall in November 1989 astonished students of world affairs, subsequent developments have left them in a state of dismay. Taken together, both the causes of the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe as well as in Yugoslavia and the chaotic symptoms of the emerging order have tried the minds of the most astute thinkers more severely than any other upheaval since the Second World War and arguably ever since the advent of the twentieth century. Like the rest of humankind we in India, too, have felt the impact of the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the post Cold War phase. But, again like the rest of humankind, we too have yet to come to terms with the seminal significance of the eclipse of the bipolar world. Nor are we equipped, conceptually and emotionally, to adjust to the shifting arrangements seeking to replace the old order. But this process of adjustment, however complex and painful, must be carried forward by those fired by the vision of a world in which fear, want, disease and ignorance are banished and in which peace, tolerance, harmony, freedom and justice reign to the

advantage of the good of the individual and the community. Such a vision alone must be at least a pretext, if not a basis, for determining how individuals, communities and nations can relate to one another outside the debilitating confines of brute power and dogma. If we do not undertake such an exercise, drawing on our deepest doubts about the human condition when required and on our noblest passion for self-fulfilment when necessary, we might soon find ourselves in a terrifying predicament: having come to terms with the crisis of ideology we might be expending our energies trying to cope with the stormy dictates of those armed with absolute certainties. We might, in plain words, be buffeted between the banker and the bigot, the manager and the mullah, the marketeer and the mahant, the media mogul and the god-man, the first kind promising heaven on earth and the second, salvation here and now and for eternity. Both, however, will demand a price : the subjugation of the mind. We are, therefore, called upon to craft alternative modes of thought and feeling, alternative patterns for community living, alternative forms of governance.

This is admittedly a tall order. But it is precisely such an order that the most imaginative minds of this century sought to confront. Among them is the man in whose memory I have the honour to speak to you today. The life of M.N. Roy is an inspiration to all those who believe in the primacy of ideas, in the adventure of the spirit, in the necessity of praxis. Throughout his life, Roy was driven by intellectual curiosity, by awe and fascination for creative achievement, by the yearning for freedom and justice. His career—marked by so much flamboyance, so many moments of revolutionary exhilaration, so many periods of disillusionment, so many devastating errors too—is a defence and illustration of man's ability to harness the resources of head and heart embedded within himself to dispel gloom and darkness.

Our first endeavour ought to be to understand the causes that led to the collapse of the Communist regime—a collapse that Roy had feared—and then to see what kind of world the post Cold War heralds for mankind at large and for India in particular.

The breakdown of the Communist regimes was a signal of multiple deaths : of governments, regimes, mindsets and, above all, of a millenarian ideology which claimed to take forward the ideals of the Enlightenment but which in the end imposed on vast sections of humanity the very antithesis of the Enlightenment : ideals of individual freedom, egalitarianism, fraternity were replaced by ideals of race, gender, class. The end of this ideology in Europe was without doubt a revolution. As S.N. Eisenstaedt has pointed out, it bore a remarkable resemblance to the "great revolutions"—the English Civil War, the American, French, Russian and Chinese revolutions—but it differed from the latter also in significant ways. The common elements were as follows :

(a) The revolution was preceded by a combination of popular uprisings with open antagonisms between conservatives and reformists in the uppermost echelons of power.

(b) As in the other great revolutions, here too intellectuals played a powerful role. Havel comes to mind. But so does Solidarity in Poland and the Church in East Germany.

(c) The third feature in common was that the antagonism in the Communist regimes was not about wrong-doing by the

authorities. It was a principled protest against the bases on which the regimes rested and on the gulf that separated precept and practice.

(d) This latter awareness was made sharper still by economic decline and loss of standing in the international arena.

The differences, though not so obvious, are no less significant. They relate to the role of mass media, especially TV; to a protest not against an *ancient* regime (feudal) but against regimes known for their modernity; it is difficult to say whether this was a bourgeois or a proletarian revolution; to the fact that with the exception of Romania and of course Yugoslavia the change of regime has been peaceful.

Moreover, ethnic and nationalistic tensions erupted after the downfall of the regimes. The old rulers, again barring the exception of Romania, were subjected to the judicial process and not executed. Rulers simply abdicated while the middle and lower echelons of the armed forces rallied to the other side.

Finally, the most remarkable differences relate to the absence of an all-encompassing ideology. Freedom and the market economy were doubtless the main thrusts. But these did not have the holistic vigour of the earlier, utopian, millenarian ideologies. Freedom from totalitarian rule, the sanctity of private property, pragmatic approaches to the economy : these were some of the main concerns of those who ended Communist rule. Prof. Eisenstaedt argues that economic

stagnation, a general disillusionment with their way of life, the weakening legitimacy of the regime and loss of pride over their fading status abroad accounted for the implosion of the Soviet Union.

Everywhere the combination of the essential features of modernity with strong Jacobin, totalitarian politics and practices resulted in the breakdown of the system. In the case of the Soviet Union centre-periphery relations were of critical importance too. The high levels of social mobilization everywhere went hand in hand with bureaucratic control as well. The expansion of education and the establishment of professional bodies were all to the good. But there was no autonomy for civil society. The failure of the planned economy brought about stagnation. High military expenditure added to this process. This was ironical because Marxism-Leninism promised salvation first and foremost in the economic arena. The rise of the *nomenklatura* of the privileged elite spread cynicism and despair. So you had modernity at one level but at other level traditional elements—paternalistic, bureaucratic, ethno-centric—continued to prevail. This explains the distortions, dissonances, lapses, and crimes perpetrated in the name of ideology. What is equally ironical is that all this took place within the formal framework of a Constitution, a Parliament, elections and so forth.

The tensions and conflicts which erupted in the wake of the collapse of the Communist regimes go some way to explain our own problems in India. They expose as never before the crises inherent in any attempt to impose a holistic, all-encompassing, millenarian ideology from above on realities which are necessarily pluralistic, and not always amenable to rational choices (because primordial passions continue to simmer

under the surface). The existence of a large, all-pervading party-cum-government bureaucracy which such an attempt entails leads, as we have noticed, to economic stagnation, political decay, institutional atrophy, cultural impoverishment and, not least, to a spiritual vacuum.

What of the developments that followed this most dramatic crisis of ideology since the defeat of fascism—which was an ideology which gave rise to regimes displaying near-similar characteristics ? The transition from totalitarian rule to a democratic one, from a command economy to a market one has, as we know, been complex and painful. Abruptly the new regimes were faced with a critical problem : that of forging a consensus of what constitutes the common good. The absence of such a consensus has created a vacuum in which primordial passions and the dangerous nostalgia of the stable and secure "good old times" have a free regime. Demagogues thrive in this vacuum.

We must now examine some of the theories which have been propounded about the post Cold War world. Two in particular merit attention. One is Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" theory and the other is Samuel P. Huntington's "Clash of Civilisations ?" theory. Fukuyama argues in substance : "A remarkable consensus concerning the legitimacy of liberal Government has emerged throughout the world for the past few years as it conquered rival ideologies like hereditary monarchy, fascism and, most recently, communism. Liberal democracy may constitute the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the final form of human government and as such constituted the end of history." Liberal democratic regimes, the author further argues, did not suffer from fundamental internal contradictions. The problems they faced emanated from the

incomplete implementation of the twin principles of liberty and equality on which democracy is founded rather than for flaws in the principles themselves.

Fukuyama elucidates this central proposition in a book which contains 418 pages. So the danger of caricaturing his arguments is real. Yet it is possible to refute the central proposition on the quite obvious grounds that liberal democracy as practised in the western world today is not wholly free of irrationalities either : racism, gender bias, fear of 'alien' cultures, not to mention the status accorded to economic and military might as currencies of power. Nor has liberal democracy and indeed the secular outlook which goes with it paid consistent heed to such "intangibles" as the yearning of individuals for spiritual fulfilment, of communities to foster through language, culture and religion a sense of belonging to better ward off the dangers of homogenization and of nations to preserve their integrity and to salvage whatever they can of their sovereignty. Fukuyama obviously does not take fully into account the contradictions that might develop with the development of the market economy or differences which might arise on such basic philosophical matters as notions of individual freedom. This much has been driven home forcefully by the Salman Rushdie affair.

The other theory, propounded by Huntington, deserves even closer scrutiny. In the Summer'93 issue of *Foreign Affairs* he advanced the theory that the fundamental source of conflict in the emerging world order will be not primarily ideological or economic but cultural. While nation states will continue to be the powerful actors in world affairs, the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The fault lines between civilisations will be the battle lines of the future.

In this context the world will be shaped by seven or eight major civilisations : Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilisation.

Conflicts between them, he argues, will erupt because each one of them has a unique view on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the State, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. Interactions between civilisations will exacerbate these differences. So will economic modernisation and social change. Western dominance in the economic, strategic, and cultural domains will further widen the gap between civilisations. Awareness of religious exclusiveness will add to incipient tensions.

One manifestation of the clash of civilisations is to be found in economic regionalism : the European Union, like the NAFTA in North America, are Christian. Japan is a special case but it will trade with its East Asian neighbours. Ten non-Arab Muslim countries have formed the Economic Cooperation of Organisation. Russia has yet to decide whether to look eastwards or westwards, while India, for obvious reasons, will have an even more difficult time to decide its own direction. Seductive as this thesis is, it is fraught with problems. This thesis does not address such issues as the governance of multi-cultural societies. It does not also make allowance for the very human yearning for stability and order, for the burgeoning distrust of "liberal" politics in Europe itself.

What I wish to say in conclusion is that the crisis of Marxism-Leninism as well as the shortcomings of the "liberal" ideology have much to tell us about our own predicament in India. The changes in the outside world have in effect coincided with a sharp questioning of the Nehru-Gandhi framework of governance. Parliamentary democracy threatens to be a sham if the criminalisation of politics goes unchecked. The "mixed economy" concept has come under pressure from the demands of globalisation. Religious fundamentalism has mounted a major attack on the secular organisation of public life. Finally, in the absence of a bipolar world, non-alignment appears to have lost its *raison d'être*. We will have to be on guard against the ideologues of the emerging world order quite simply because their prognostications spell danger for a vast and diverse country like India. But to rebut a Fukuyama or Huntington we need to emerge with our own model rooted in our history and traditions and in particular in the experiences we gained during the freedom struggle. Those experiences, as we know, were diverse as well. But this very diversity should enable us to make a distinction between principle and expediency. At the very least we should be able to ensure that the antagonism inherent in any attempt to simultaneously pursue stability and dissent, growth and social justice, a strong centre and decentralized governance is minimised. The creation of wealth and the pursuit of wisdom need not be antithetical ambitions.