

(Keynote speech - Amrta Ramani)
4414

Do We Need a New Public Philosophy ?

S.V.Raju

Before putting pen to paper, I asked myself, somewhat loudly, this question: "Do we need a new public philosophy ? A young friend in her 'thirties sitting nearby, overheard me talking to myself and shot back : " Sorry to butt in but are you suggesting we have a public philosophy in this country which needs replacement ?".

Was it a query born of ignorance or was it an expression of skepticism if not cynicism ?

Yes indeed we have a public philosophy gifted to us and to generations to come by our founding fathers' - the members of the Constituent Assembly in the form of the Constitution of India.

I refer in particular to the Constitution (as adopted in 1949) : The Preamble and the Chapter on Fundamental Rights.

The Preamble said:

"WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA,
having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a

SOVEREIGN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

and to secure to all its citizens :

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;
and to promote among them all

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JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual, and the unity of the Nation;

IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

this twenty-sixth day of November, 1949,

DO HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION

The Fundamental Rights in the Indian Constitution as adopted in November 1949 can be classified thus:

1. Right to equality
2. Right to freedom
3. Right against exploitation
4. Right to freedom of religion
5. Cultural and educational rights
6. Right to Property, and
7. Right to Constitutional Remedies.

This then was, in essence the Indian people's political faith the public philosophy we gave ourselves a little under fifty years ago. This public philosophy of the Indian people may have been fashioned by the members of the Constituent Assembly (among whom we are proud to count Mr. Minoo Masani the chairman of the Project for Economic Education) but the raw material for the finished product was many years in the making. It was born out of the freedom struggle, at numerous sessions of the Indian National Congress (the reference is to the organisation that led the freedom movement and not to the party that currently carries the name with the suffix (I)) and to the large number of thinkers, social reformers and statesmen who were concerned with a better life for the people of India after freedom - Gokhale, Ranade, Surendranath Banerjee, Dadabhai Naoroji, Sir Pherozeshah Mehta, Motilal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu.

In his book 'The Indian Constitution - Cornerstone of a Nation' written in 1964, Granville Austin wrote (in his concluding chapter:

"Those who argue that certain circumstances conspired to allow the Constitution to work well are referring to India's possession at independence of the three factors necessary for the stability of a new state: a charismatic leadership, a mass party, and a well-trained bureaucracy. Nehru and other leading figures, with their popularity and gifts of statesmanship, have given India direction, and have in themselves been a point of focus for the nation. The power and magnetism of the Congress high command, and the discipline it enforced, have, to date, assured the effective working of the federal system. The bureaucracy, both during the framing period and under the Constitution, has kept the machinery of government going; taxes were collected, railways ran.

"...The Indians' sense of their rich cultural heritage, their record of professional achievement in the arts and sciences of the modern world, their faith in their ability to govern themselves combined to give them a national maturity that allowed a reasoned approach to the creation and working of government. Equipped with the basic qualifications, attitudes, and experience for creating and working a democratic constitution, Indians did not default their trust with destiny."

Granville Austin, I repeat, wrote this in 1964. A year later Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru died. Ten years later his daughter imposed 'a state of emergency when her election to the Lok Sabha was set aside by the Allahabad High Court. The Preamble was amended to include the words 'socialism' and 'secularism' and then put into the deep freeze.

It required a massive movement launched by an ailing Jayaprakash to rescue Indian democracy. It is not necessary to recount all that happened thereafter - the short lived Janata Party government that JP put in place. The internal squabbles, the return of Mrs. Gandhi, her murder; the emergence of Rajiv Gandhi; his murder and the final burial of

one party dominance. But what became painfully obvious was the steep decline in public morality and character.

The Project for Economic Education began its programme for 1997 with a discussion on India's first fifty years. A copy of *Freedom First* which carries texts of the talks by the discussion leaders at the various sessions of that seminar in Bombay in April were sent to you alongwith the invitation to this seminar. I would draw your attention to the talk by Prof. Sadanand Varde, a freedom fighter, and an active campaigner in Jayaprakash Narayan's movement to restore democracy. He said :

We are now in a situation where we want freedom without responsibility, power without accountability, rights without duties, remuneration without work. In such a situation where there seems to be an attitude of total unconcern and a no-holds barred obsession to pursue sectional interests, the country is really facing a major crisis.

To reinforce his point Prof. Varde quoted from another great freedom fighter Achyut Patwardhan:

"Today the State has lost all moral authority. It is viewed as the creation of crooks by crooks for crooks. Nothing seems to work without the use of money, muscle power or influence. So even if we have achieved a little prosperity, people think it is 'inspite' and not 'because' of the State. Back in 1947, you could distinguish between 'bandits' and 'politicians', not now."

Almost thirty years ago on January 18, 1969, while delivering the Rajaji Birthday Lecture under the auspices of the Gokhale Institute of Public Affairs Bangalore Mr. Minoo Masani commented on the public scene as he saw it then:

"How does the picture of what we see today compare with what we had imagined twenty years of our independence would have given us ? What is the picture we see ? Would I be unfair if I say that, by and large, it is a picture of self-seeking all round,

petty parochialism, linguistic chauvinism, indiscipline starting with the Lok Sabha and ending with our colleges, widespread cynicism among the people, bureaucracy, corruption and economic stagnation...

"...We know the state of our parliamentary democracy. There is indiscipline and, as I sit in Parliament, I find an increasing irrelevance in the discussions to what is really of concern to this country."

We have a Constitution which despite the many amendments most of which have "defaced and defiled" can still be considered among the best in the world. But the fact of the matter is that we are a civil society in decay. Public morality and character have long since disappeared from the scene. In fact they are considered anachronisms by many 'practical people'. There is widespread cynicism and defeatism all round and the sense of disillusionment is all pervasive. Hardly surprising. Consider the following:

The bizarre arrangement in UP between two parties that the chief ministership would rotate half-yearly between two coalition partners. That it broke down when the first half-yearly chief minister stepped down and had the coalition annulled. *is hardly surprising*

The attitude of a self-proclaimed nationalist party encouraging a split in one party and making everyone from the defecting party a minister. The UP government has the largest ministry in India - perhaps in the world.

The rowdy scenes in the UP Vidhan Sabha in which every available item be it a chair or a microphone was used as a missile by elected legislators who are supposed to be law givers

The Congress party led by Kesri is suddenly keen on further changes to the defection law making it unlawful to change parties be it singly or in herds. Why? Because they desperately need to discourage further defections. In other words the only way to keep their legislators' loyalty is to frighten them with the possibility of losing their seat.

The near uniform reluctance of all political parties to accept the Election Commission's proposal to prevent those accused of criminal charges from contesting elections

And so we return to the topic of this session "Do we need a new public philosophy?"

he need to ^{remove} the one in the deep freeze

The answer is clearly in the negative. As the well known columnist and political commentator Walter Lipmann wrote in his book 'The Public Philosophy':

"When the continuity of the traditions of civility is ruptured, the community is threatened; unless the rupture is repaired, the community will break down into factional, class, racial and regional wars."

And this is precisely what is happening to our society and polity.

Who is responsible for this state of affairs ?

Opinion was a little 8 page journal that (the late) Mr. A.D. Gorwala edited many years ago. In 1968 the movie Camelot was showing at theatres in Bombay. Parodying a song in that movie "What do the simple folk do ?" in the movie Mr. Gorwala wrote in his *Opinion*.

"They are not happy, they are not content, they are not hopeful. Their lives are brutish and drab, their hearts are sad; the present to them is disgusting, their future depressing. After twenty years of independence and three Plans, many find conditions more unbearable than even before independence. Money is ^{no} worth very much, inflation, with which this government ⁹ just do not want to seem to cope, has destroyed their savings and reduced the real value of their earnings. Quite a number have been made to feel desperate. This good land of ours unfortunately not being Camelot, their gloom does not get dissipated by the easy methods rife there. Not by whistling, not by the singing can they get rid of it and it is resistant even to the final antidote of love-making. It persists, alas, nor can they find any wisp of glory in our past decades to reconcile them to their lot. What then do the multitudes do ? They curse, they shrug, they carry on without spirit or joy"

Who is responsible for this state of affairs ? It is no use blaming politicians. Who put them there, we the people did by our vote. Also let us not forget that if we are still a democracy it is because of our politicians. Their competing ambitions is the guarantee of

our democracy. It used to be said at one time that the only time the Congress party presents a united front was when its power was threatened. Take the emergency. Most politicians other than those belonging to the CPI supported JP's movement and even went to the extent of dissolving their parties to form the Janata Party. ^{But} ~~That~~ once Mrs. Gandhi was removed from power the leaders of the coalescing parties went back to their bad old ways is another matter. The fact is that bad as they are we need to be grateful that their hunger for power makes a plural polity possible.

Having said that let us not evade our responsibility to restore a sense of purpose and direction in our national life.

The younger generation is not very much interested in public affairs. They are disgusted with the state of affairs with the lying, cheating, influence peddling, that surrounded them from the time they can remember. They view people who talk about values and principles as hypocrites who have an axe to grind. Politicians and political parties have lost all credibility. It is a minor miracle that our citizens go and vote at all. Thank God they do so because if they didn't civil society would have ended years ago. But survival is not a virtue in itself. We need to make our civil society meaningful. And it needs a public faith, a philosophical ballast.

And this can, in the present situation, be provided not by the state ^{alone} but by the people themselves through grassroots democracy. Hundreds of voluntary organisations working for causes, to fight various evils. Each one of us has the obligation to participate in one or the other of them. To be passive is to be an enemy of freedom. Unless the common people assert themselves this country be destroyed. It is for common people to bring back sanity in public life, to make the politician and bureaucrat accountable and to ensure that we have a strong government that keeps to its proper task. We need a strong government not big government like the one we now have in UP. A strong government a purposeful government which confines itself to the proper sphere of government - defence, law and order, justice and the infrastructure education, primary health. So on the one hand it is cutting government down to size and on the other to make it more virile. Mr. Masani compared this to men and women who are too obese going to naturapaths on the one

hand to slim and on the other hand to become more vital and healthy. This means government must concentrate on its own obligations.

Modern technology has developed communications to such an extent that people's participation is enabled as never before. And a first priority, not only for the state but of voluntary organisations ought to be to educate the people of our country the basic liberal values for which we stand - and as a prelude to the launching of a massive campaign to strengthen grassroots democracy .