

The Sin and the Error

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...it takes an error to father a sin.

— J. Robert Oppenheimer¹

Future historians of India may well describe the past year as a year of political sin. This was the year in which the man who had earlier presided over the *Gujarat Carnage* was awarded the ultimate prize. The year saw an election that touched a new low marked by shallowness, vulgarities and lies – in no small measure by the labors of the man himself. Equally appalling have been the exertions of a large class of literati and glitterati to portray philistinism and inanities spouted by the most powerful mouth as wisdom of a visionary leader.

An entire country seems to have gone blind – unable to see that the emperor has no clothes. In this age of incessant television it should be obvious to anyone that the supreme leader does not carry conviction even when enunciating relatively higher banalities. He is at his natural best only when he mocks someone as a *shehzada* or slanders and vilifies an entire community through phrases such as *ame paanch*, *amara pachees*. It is an irony of history that the republic which had Nehru as its first prime minister has one now for whom even common mythology is too cerebral. He must vulgarize *Pushpak Viman* and *Ganesha* and reduce them to quackeries of aviation and surgery.

Misfortune of the nation goes beyond the man. Forces of the diabolic housed in the hydra-headed *Parivaar* can now accomplish the impossible. They can now occupy the political center stage without leaving off the lunatic fringe. They can adopt Gandhi without renouncing Godse; erect world's tallest statue of a leader who had punished their forefathers for assassinating Gandhi; even co-opt Bhagat Singh without batting an eyelid about what he stood for and what he had to say about ideologies like theirs. They can further refine the art of doublespeak. Their “statesmen” can pave the way for corporate plunder and call it *sab ka vikas* (development for all). Their “ideologues” can advocate *sab ka saath* (inclusion of all) by exhorting Hindu women to give birth to a minimum of four children each, lest Hindus are reduced to a minority “in their own country”.

All second comings are farcical but none more so than the ones in which caricatures come alive. It would be a cliché to invoke Hitler's example while describing the megalomania of the current prime minister. But it would not be entirely wrong. He is larger than life because no one else – whether in the government or in the party – is allowed to be visible even as a pygmy. The Cabinet of Ministers seems to have been demoted lower than the back-room boys who formulate policies, write speeches and take sartorial decisions for the supreme leader. Even those stalwarts of yesterday, who brought the party to the center stage by unleashing havocs such as the *Ram Janma Bhoomi Movement*, have been consigned to the political dustbin. But, rather than a second coming of Hitler, this sordid episode appears more like Chaplin's *Great Dictator* coming to life. The prime minister's relentless globe-trotting

¹ As quoted in Ray Monk, *Inside the Centre: The Life of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, Vintage, London, 2013, p. 174

and hobnobbing with the rulers of the world without any significant diplomatic achievement or concrete gain for India so far – except, perhaps, getting the United Nations to declare June 21st as the International Day of Yoga – evokes memories of a scene in Chaplin’s movie where the dictator plays around with an inflated globe.

The prime minister’s telling the Japanese corporate honchos that he has money in his blood, his frequent recounting of uncountable things that India’s ancient wisdom can teach to the world, his recent observation that Indian grandmother’s recipes are enough to save humanity from environmental disasters and this makes India worthy of leading the global endeavor to save the planet, and other such gems that he scatters regularly across the globe, also bring to mind one of Kurosawa’s later movies, *Kagemusha*. In the movie a political decoy was deployed to impersonate a dying warlord who had kept his enemies in awe for long. The impersonator manages to get over his many temptations and actually learns to act like the warlord within the royal house as well as on the battle field.

That day may yet be far in this case. The body-language of the prime minister – while posing with a world leader or posing conspicuously to the camera when all other statesmen and diplomats around the table are busy with their papers – betrays the countenance of an imposter, even if anointed to the throne through a process every bit constitutional and politically legitimate. The acts and demeanor of the prime minister are constant reminders that Indian people have been tricked into committing a political sin. And the irony is that they have committed it against themselves.

One can go on and on with the *sin* part. But one must resist the temptation. After all, those who agree with what is being said do not get any wiser by descriptions of the obvious, and those who do not agree are unlikely to see it as anything but unwarranted provocation. It would be far more fruitful to move on to the *error* part. Experience shows that even those who may readily agree to the characterization of the previous year as the year of sin, would argue vehemently about the error that may have gone into fathering it.

Actually it has taken more than one error – indeed a whole bunch of them. One could start with the Congress Party. It gave an impression as if it was doing its best to rout itself and offer victory to the opponent on a platter. But I am not interested in Congress even if it was the fattest among the errors. Lessons which this party may or may not draw from its near decimation are unlikely to be of much use to those committed to transformative politics. Instead it may trigger a wholly unhelpful discussion about whether it was part of the error or part of the sin.

The Left Front too has been on a path of self-destruction. Its precipitous decline has been a major cause behind the troubling emergence of the current political scenario. One can safely ignore claims of its constituents about being a communist party of one kind or another. Whether they truly have revolution lodged deeply in their hearts or only pay occasional lip service to it, is not relevant for analyzing their role in the recent political developments. Their role needs to be evaluated principally on the criterion of being a force for the good within the arena of bourgeois parliamentary politics. And they have failed miserably on this count.

Roots of this failure are not easy to unearth. It has become all too common for all shades of political commentators to heap ridicule on the Left. Post-leftists and other varieties of ex-leftists are especially vituperative in this regard. As if they know better. It takes a reflective attitude and a certain sense of history to realize that Left's woes do not arise solely from its own mistakes. At a deeper level they arise from a tectonic shift underneath the surface of history. Existing Left is a product of the early twentieth century. Someone said – past is a foreign country. But it depends. For someone made by the past and caught in it, present may be a foreign country. This predicament is not peculiar to Left alone. Every major political force passes through it at one time or another, although different forces pass through it at different times.

In any case, these comments are not meant to explore the subterranean. At the surface level of day-to-day politics, Left Front committed a historic blunder when it walked out of the UPA-1 citing Indo-US Nuclear Deal as the main reason. Arguably this one was far more damaging than the previous one (disallowing Jyoti Basu to become the Prime Minister) in the pecking order of Left's historic blunders. It was disastrous as a political judgment and ridiculous as an ideological argument. There are times in politics when one misstep can lead to an avalanche. This is what Left Front has suffered and it does not yet know how to recover. More importantly, the entire political scenario would have been very different if Left had managed to avoid this blunder.

The third component of the *error* leading to the *sin* has been far more spectacular. Like a rapidly burning comet it suddenly lit up the Indian political sky filling innumerable hearts and minds with awe, admiration, hope and confusion. It started with the anti-corruption movement spearheaded by *India against Corruption* and currently it is passing through a phase where it is visible more through the internal fireworks of the *Aam Aadmi Party* (AAP). This phenomenon has played a much larger role in conjuring the current political scenario than its actual size and scope would indicate. Despite its sensational victory in the Delhi assembly elections, its actual impact cannot be measured by electoral arithmetic. It mystified the people on a far wider scale and helped generate a political mood that ultimately helped BJP and the Sangh Parivaar in their anti-Congress crusade. If one looks at all that has happened in the political arena during the last decade or so, the significance of Left's blunder pales in comparison to the damage done by the sudden rise of the AAP.

There are many reasons why such a reading of the situation remains counter-intuitive, if not totally unacceptable, for a large number of people. It may be fruitful to engage with two broad ones among them applicable respectively to two different sets of people. One set comprises of activists, politicians and ideologues which some of these ideologues themselves describe as *post-ideological*. The other set is of those who remain committed to the transformative and emancipatory politics of the good old days but are desperately looking for new movements which this politics can ride.

The first set would like to believe that it has rescued *populism* from the netherworld of dictators and demagogues and elevated it to a lofty principle. There is a priesthood of high theory that can read bird-signs in the post-ideological political sky. In each little movement –

if it is spontaneous, has no well-defined goal, espouses no ideology and has no organized leadership – it hears intimations of the much awaited deluge of insurrections by little men. Bird-signs, however, are never a reliable tool for forging political strategies. The Laclaus, the Negris, and all the tenured radicals of exalted academies cannot put together the shattered high hopes that were raised by World Social Forums, Occupy Movements, or even the Arab Spring. Prophets of the plebian irruptions would be hard put to explain why such a movement either results in the rise of a new dictator, a new demagogue, a religious-fascist regime, or a military junta, or else it simply fizzles out leaving a residuum of a few professors along with fewer students pouring over pamphlets in Zuccoti Park and occasionally walking around the park with placards to the amusement of indifferent bystanders.

Such questions unfailingly invite the wrath of the post-ideological ideologue which appears in the form of launching yet another attack on the Left. The assumption is that such questions can be asked only by an incorrigibly dogmatic and sectarian leftist. The lethal weapons used in this attack are rather well known – announce to the imagined adversary that Berlin Wall has fallen, Soviet Union has collapsed, China has gone capitalist and CPM has lost West Bengal. Remind him that Marxism is beyond its date of expiry and socialism exists only as a daydream of the die-hard. Curiously, such ideologues are ever so convinced that Left is a spent force and yet the loftiest historical task they can assign themselves is to continue flogging it. When they declare 1989 as the biggest watershed in history and do not tire of celebrating the fall of the Wall, they do not care to cast a side glance at the rest of the festive assembly and take notice of who the other revelers are.

And yet questions must be asked and prophets of populism must be challenged. It is important for actual politics on ground, more so in the prevailing political atmosphere. One could have safely ignored the matter had it been confined to esoteric discourses on *Populist Reason*. It should also not be assumed that these questions arise necessarily from dogmatism and sectarianism. Contrary to the stereotypical image, mourning the Wall or the Soviet Union does not define a leftist. To redefine a leftist when times have changed is no disgrace but that would take us to another discussion.

For the issue at hand it may be necessary to point to the obvious yet again. The kind of movement much admired by the post-ideological types and joined in mass by naïve idealists and other indiscriminating worshippers of mass movements has once again given rise to a narcissistic and dictatorial demagogue. It is remarkable how indulgent certain ideologues and many practitioners have been regarding such an outcome that they would have decried in every other instance. It is understandable if political careerists and power-hungry opportunists hang on to the coattails of Kejriwal because only he, not Yadavs and Bhushans, can win elections. But it is a sin without pleasure when ideologues deploy their scholarly flourish and theoretical playfulness in praise of the new megalomaniac on the block.

Indians do not need theory to be convinced about charms of populism. In their love for demagogues they can be surpassed by none, except, perhaps, by the Non-Resident Indians. (Remember the rock-star reception of Modi at Madison Square Garden in New York when thousands of New Jersey Indians lapped up every indelicacy that came out of his mouth, but

also do not forget the euphoria that Kejriwal has created across a wide spectrum of NRIs.) If popular support were to be taken as sole proof of good politics then Modi would be far more saintly a politician than Kejriwal. Popular acceptability is a must for good politics to come alive and become effective, but that does not mean the former defines the latter.

Modi's politics is well-defined in its own right. It is crafted with interwoven threads of Hindu supremacist fascism and servitude to the corporate capital. The fact that it has wide popular support does not make it any less anti-people. As simple a truth as this one is forgotten when Kejriwal's politics is evaluated by many who might have in their hearts noble desires of shaking up systems and cleansing politics. Stating a goal that is incurably nebulous and which can be interpreted conveniently and variously by a wide spectrum of political forces hardly suffices when it comes to defining one's politics. The legendary Hindi poet, *Muktibodh*, used to ask, "What is your politics, partner?" This question would never be old-fashioned nor would it ever be outdated.

Kejriwal says that he is neither left nor right and he is beyond ideology (an assertion that gladdens the hearts of the post-ideologists). He goes to FICCI and CII to put on display his credentials for good governance and to play Maggie Thatcher to them ("it is not the business of the government to do business"). To the Aam Aadmi he promises *Bijli, Paani and Swaraj*, and puts on their table his charisma, honesty and a no-nonsense authoritarianism as a guarantee for achieving these objectives. His concrete plans for eradicating corruption finally come down to people being ready with their mobile phones for sting operations. And he never forgets to remind them of the sacrifices he has made, such as resigning from a government job or sitting on a hunger strike or going to jail for a few days. Facts are such that merely counting them may make one appear sarcastic, but that is not the aim here. The real point is that all this adds up to a politics of mass depoliticization. And, in the end, this kind of politics invariably serves the rightwing.

The other set of people who thought they had found in AAP that long sought vehicle which emancipatory and transformative politics could ride, had their own reasons to consider any criticism of the phenomenon unacceptable. Chief among them was an assessment that such a criticism comes from a purist and elitist version of radicalism that has no chance of gaining popular support. In the aftermath of a messy split in the Party they may not be as dismissive of such criticisms. But there are no significant indications that they are learning the right lessons from this expected debacle. They continue to mouth the same platitudes about shaking up the system and cleansing the politics without adding one bit of clarity or detail about how indeed are they going to accomplish that.

The fact that they can now see Kejriwal in his true colors can hardly be a solace. He is gone as far as they are concerned, but more importantly he has taken much of the popular support with him. The desperate revolutionaries, who are in a hurry to notch a few victories in political arena by any means, are unlikely to win elections on the basis of their purer hearts, better educated minds, and nobler goals. They have lost that very vehicle for which they brought their revolutionary politics down to the level of populism. If they manage to have any

significant level of electoral success, they will discover that they have done so by turning themselves into clones of Kejriwal.

The trouble with seeing things as they are is that the description may at times read like the song of the cynic. This is because one is describing only a part of the entire political arena. It is a misfortune that in the present times this is the larger part. But it does not mean that other processes are not at play and other political actors are altogether absent. Telling the story of the *sin* and the *error* does not mean that virtue has altogether disappeared and there is no one left to do the right thing. That account, however, will have to be kept for another time.

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