

The four roots of authoritarianism

The Gadfly Column

✶V Ramani



Liberal democracy has seen many ups and downs since the Glorious Revolution of 1688, through the American War of Independence, the French Revolution and the first half of the twentieth century. Human society is no stranger to authoritarian domination, but its creeping engulfment of liberal democracies, one after another, over the past two decades threatens the values that inspired the numerous movements for self-determination over the last century.

The ferment engendered in societies worldwide over the past two and a half centuries for the establishment of the values of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity seemed to have enshrined the idea of liberal democracy and the rule of law as the guiding principles for nation states since the 1990s. The failure of most liberal democracies over the last two decades to tackle growing economic inequalities in their societies, coupled with a growing disillusionment with the governing elites in most countries, has deepened insecurities and led to a desperate desire for a strong man (no woman currently in sight) in countries across differ-

ent continents. The readiness of citizens of a nation to abdicate their responsibility to keep in check those who govern them is the first step towards the development of an authoritarian environment.

"The leader can do no wrong" is the mantra chanted by the glitterati and the chatterati, with enough support from sections of the electorate to see the leader and his party safely home. A messianic individual, organisation or ideology in whom they can repose blind faith is the path such people crave. However, this Faustian bargain of complete surrender of one's soul comes with the tag of unquestioned obedience and willingness to act according to the commands of the messiah and his organisation. We have witnessed, over the past century, millions of humans blindly obeying the dictates of autocrats, even if it meant the suppression of the basic rights of their fellow humans. That this is seen today in countries with a long history of liberal democratic practices indicates that basic human traits have undergone little change despite education and exposure to liberal, humanistic values.

Sections of society feel that they never got their due in a liberal environment. These could range from academics with a pronounced ideological orientation to disgruntled politicians in opposition parties to those in the permanent employment of government who are of the view that

their talents were not recognised. However, there are also many other individuals, in sectors ranging from the media to entertainment, academics and the bureaucracy, who smell the coffee in hitching their stars to an ideology that loathes liberal democratic ideals and places emphasis on adherence to nationalism, in its narrowest, exclusivist sense. Ambition rules the day: echoing the mantras of the ruling dispensation and providing unquestioning (and unthinking) "intellect-

the regime and indulging, repeatedly, in nauseous and fulsome praise of the thoughts and actions of the leader.

In the third category fall the apprehensive who, though not ambitious by nature or really sold on the vision of the leader and his party, fear the adverse consequences of not being seen as loyal to the regime. These could include bureaucrats who fear being sidelined or victimised or media tycoons who fear that action may be taken against their

cure position in society are all that matter to them. They are wary about being seen as supporting or approving actions that may be perceived as inimical to the interests of the ruling group. The Eichmanns of the world arise from this category: efficient execution of the job at hand is all that matters.

Abdication, ambition, apprehension and apathy, then, are the four roots that nourish the tree of authoritarianism. When individuals possessed with one or more of these four traits predominate in a society, the descent down the abyss of authoritarianism is fairly rapid. The consequences for liberal democracy can be disastrous as institutions charged with maintaining checks and balances on unbridled executive power are stripped of (or willingly forgo) their powers and a combination of persuasion and coercion is employed on civil society to ensure that no effective dissent remains to question the actions of the government of the day. The stage is then set for the executive to fashion laws and rules to meet its ends: the rule of law, as understood in a liberal democracy, ceases to operate. How people endowed with wisdom and foresight handle this existential threat to liberal democracy will determine its trajectory for the rest of this century and probably future centuries.

The blogs of the author, a retired IAS officer of the Maharashtra cadre, can be viewed at www.vramani.com

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al" and administrative support to the ideas propounded by the ruling dispensation enable these individuals to rise to and continue in positions of power and influence. But ambition, to be really successful, must be accompanied by a willingness, indeed a fanatical urge, to outdo other potential competitors in anticipating the wishes of the leader (what, in Nazi parlance, was termed working towards the Fuhrer). This includes blindly implementing harebrained schemes of the leader, unquestioningly harassing dissenters and opponents of

empires. This group includes many political leaders who, apprehending executive action against them, find it more convenient to join hands with the ruling party. It also covers those who participate in activities approved by the regime to avoid being perceived as not sympathetic to the ruling ideology.

By far the largest segment of societies moving towards authoritarianism comprises those who choose to distance themselves from taking any ideological position (the apathetic category). Their material comforts and se-

Enthusiasm



LETTERS

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Little more than His (Her) Master's Voice?

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The drama of the actions of Governors in Opposition-ruled states seems to move, like a Shakespearean play, from one act to the next. The frosty relations between Tamil Nadu Governor RN Ravi and the State Government have been in the news for many months now. The Governor has not given his assent to a number of bills passed by the state legislature. Then he stirred a hornet's nest by his reference to Tamizhagam which, he has now clarified, is not intended to substitute for Tamil Nadu. His comments on years of regressive rule and the controversy over his Budget speech in the state Assembly have only brought matters to a head.

Nor is Mr Ravi's the lone case of Governor-Government confrontation in the last couple of years. Maharashtra Governor BS Koshyari was continually at loggerheads with the previous MVA Government in the state while Telangana Governor Tamsilal Soundararajan has repeatedly locked horns with the Bharat Rashtra Samiti Government. Add the differences between

Kerala Governor Arif Mohammad Khan and the LDF Government on the issue of Vice-Chancellors of Universities and you have flash-points in nearly all states south of the Vindhya.

What ought to concern us is not just the unseemly public wrangling between constitutional authorities, but also the way in which, again and again, the institution of the Governor has taken a beating. Governors have come (and gone) in all shapes, sizes and political hues, contributing more than their share of controversy to the wonder that is India. They have, since the emergence in the last 55 years of state governments ruled by parties of a political hue different from that of the party ruling at the Centre, taken an unhealthy interest in government formation in states (especially Opposition-ruled ones), apparently at the behest of the political masters who appointed them.

In the last decade, the dubious list includes Goa, Manipur, Meghalaya and Karnataka. The overnight machinations to install a BJP-led government in Maharashtra in November 2019 and the bizarre events in Arunachal Pradesh, with the death of one Chief Minister and the resignation of another, following gubernatorial actions are still fresh in our memory. Ditto for Uttarakhand, where it needed the Supreme Court to reestablish constitutional norms.

Any government coming to power at the Centre exercises its divine right to sack existing gubernatorial incumbents and appoint its favourites as Governors. Out-of-work or inconvenient politicians are generally the first choices, though the list often extends to retired bureaucrats, police officers and military officers who have established good equations with the ruling dispensation. Since there is nothing like a free lunch, especially in statecraft, favours have to be returned by the appointees, mostly through political meddling and (in

raashtra, I remember the quiet dignity of C Subramaniam, the political father of India's green revolution, and the commitment of PC Alexander to removing the developmental backlog of the Vidarbha, Marathwada and Konkan regions of the state. Despite being close to Indira Gandhi and being appointed Governor by a Congress government in 1993, Dr Alexander enjoyed a close rapport with the Shiv Sena-BJP Government in Maharashtra, proving that a Governor can endear himself to all shades of political opinion through a professional,

should be provided by the Union Government for the consideration of the committee. This would hopefully ensure that a political apparatus is not foisted on an unwilling state government. It also gives scope for a reasoned choice where a state faces major challenges like insurgency, political instability or law-and-order breakdown.

Nonpartisan choices of competent public figures for the post of Governor are the need of the hour in a scenario where the professional politician in power is increasingly pandering to the urges of the lowest common multiple in the electorate and concerned only with hanging on to power at all costs, consequences be damned. More disturbingly, political appointees who, as governors, act neither as per convention nor in accordance with the Constitution, damage the credibility of the democratic process. A misstep in a state like Tamil Nadu with a history of strong local sentiment could well have consequences that endanger the federal consensus that is the bulwark of a republican democracy. The sooner the political elite of post-Lutyens's Delhi realise this the better it will be for the health of Indian democracy.

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case of Opposition-ruled states) making life difficult for the government of the day. Rare, or nonexistent, would be the Governor who takes any decision of consequence without the prior nod of the political bosses in Delhi.

It would, of course, be unfair to tar all Governors with the same brush. There have been outstanding personalities like Surjit Singh Barnala and Gopalkrishna Gandhi, who not only displayed qualities of independence from the Delhi durbar but also rendered sage counsel to their state governments. In my own *karmabhumi* of Maha-

nonpartisan approach.

However, since such Governors are the exception rather than the rule, there is need, in a situation where the Centre and states are ruled by parties with different ideologies and political beliefs, for the governors of states to be selected by an independent process. I suggest that governors should be selected by a committee comprising the Vice-President of India, the Prime Minister, the Chief Justices of the Supreme Court and the state High Court concerned, and the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha. A list of three names

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The God That Failed: Yearning for a new messiah

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The God That Failed is a book that describes the association of six prominent Western intellectuals of the twentieth century, from Andre Gide to Arthur Koestler and Stephen Spender, with Communism, and their subsequent disillusionment with and repudiation of the Communist philosophy. The subject set me thinking on the very human need for a greater purpose to give meaning to human lives and how this has had earth-shaking effects on human life and conduct, especially in the last one hundred years or so.

As the old world order collapsed with the onset of the First World War, Communism entrenched itself, first in Soviet Russia and then, after the Second World War, in Eastern Europe and, most significantly, China. Not surprisingly, the infection also caught up with restless youth in countries like India, especially when the Nehruvian experiment started unravelling from the mid-1960s onwards. However, the senseless violence of the Naxalite movement and the severe state repression it invited led to rapid disenchantment with armed revolution, and idealistic youth were soon engaged in making their way up in middle-class India, in the bureaucracy, academia or journalism.

I entered Delhi University in the

fifth year of the 1970s when the pro-Naxalite movement in its elite colleges had run its course and those who had forsaken their college education to fight for the revolution were returning to the routine existence of university life. I now find many of those in the vanguard of Marxism in the 1970s ensconced in the camp of a staunchly nationalist party with a strong religious ideology. What could have occasioned this sea change in weltanschauung?

A cynical calculation of where one's interests lie and the desire for fame and social position may lead a person to make conscious choices in espousing an ideology which offers social and economic advancement. Such a person will switch sides with alacrity once s/he senses that the boat s/he is on is sinking; just study the recent instances of candidates for elections to the Indian Parliament and state legislatures nimbly party-hopping to secure their electoral futures. But I am more interested in those who blindly adhere to a specific ideology. What motivates such people and what implications does this have for the evolution of human society, given that this phenomenon pervades all countries and societies?

The basic urge for clinging to a specific belief is the individual's fear of loneliness. As social beings, humans seek to conform to accepted norms to acquire a sense of belonging. Established religions have shrewdly recognised this urge and created a culture of myths and legends to attract followers and hold them in thrall. Even today, followers of organised religions severely punish what they see as transgressions from



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traditional norms, sometimes with the overt/covert concurrence of the government of the day and often in flagrant breach of the rule of law. In India, religion has fed on a sense of lack of identity and a feeling of victimisation in the majority community, generating historical grievances which are apparently to be corrected in the present day.

In the current millennium, the Indian public seems to have latched on to a heady mixture of the desire for a strong man, coupled with a yearning for an idealised, mythical past. Central to this development is the loss of individual identity in an economy and society buffeted by the storms of globalisation and liberalisation.

Weak governance systems have failed to provide the citizen with the security that would be taken for granted in a developed country. At such times, there is inevitably the longing for a political messiah who, it is hoped, will cut through the slough of dependency and hopelessness and lead the nation to a brighter future.

And so, we move from the dominance of religion to the dominance of a dogma epitomised by a strong party/state and the omnipotent individual. But what is it that impels the individual to associate her/himself so totally with a dominant ideology, party, state or individual? It arises out of the sense of personal insignificance

of the individual and her/his fear of the finiteness of existence. Religion at least gave the individual solace that there was an afterlife, that wretchedness in this life would be compensated by rebirth, hopefully in happier surroundings. The rudderless individual, confronted by a world that s/he is unable to deal with, desperately seeks to merge her/his identity in a larger than life entity to get a feeling of security and belonging.

Where does all this leave us circa 2023? The continued existence of a democracy is crucially dependent on independent, sceptical individuals who are wedded to the concept of a liberal, open society. They are not against any person or political formation — rather, they recognise the truth of Lord Acton's dictum, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The inexorable operations of social and political systems invariably cause even leaders who start with noble intentions to adopt the path of curbing political freedoms to remain in power; ostensibly to attain their lofty goals. The need of the hour; not only in India but elsewhere as well, is for thinking individuals in society who critically examine trends in social and political life and ask searching questions of those in power. A vigilant citizenry in any democracy must always keep in mind the prescient words of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar "...in politics, Bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship."

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Underage marriage in Assam – the danda won't work

The Gadfly Column

✦ V Ramani



Almost half a century separates 1976 and 2023, yet the French saying “The more things change, the more they stay the same” seems so relevant. The heyday of the Emergency saw the forced sterilisation programme that was one of the reasons for the ejection of the Congress from power in 1977. Recent events in Assam point to the continued use of coercion in family-related issues. Ostensibly concerned with high rates of underage marriages and its implications for maternal and child health, the Government of Assam has decided to arrest those who participate in the marriage of girls under 18, whether they be husbands, fathers or fathers-in-law. Unfortunately, the government has gone in for a remedy that is worse than the disease.

For the first 50 years after independence, India's population policy suffered from a myopic fixation with directly controlling reproduction through sterilisation. It is only in recent years that realisation has dawned on our policy makers that human development is the best contraceptive. More specifically, it is now acknowledged that promoting women's

agency and enabling them to control vital life decisions are the best methods to limit population growth while also bringing maternal and infant/child mortality rates in line with those in developed countries.

Assam has the highest maternal mortality rate in the country of 215 deaths per 1,00,000 live births, almost twice the Indian average. While institutional deliveries have shown a rise from 71% to 84% between 2016 and 2019, only 51% of pregnant women availed of at least four antenatal care visits in 2019. Only 45.3% of currently married women in the 15-49 age group use any modern family planning method. Poverty and poor educational levels are clearly the driving factors behind early marriage of girls — 32% of women in Assam are married before reaching the age of 18, increasing the chances of infant mortality in children born to mothers in the teenage group as compared to children born to women in the 20-29 age group. Five districts of western Assam are among the top seven districts registering underage female marriages of over 40% — Barpeta, Dhubri, Goalpara, Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon. These are also the areas where the government appears to have focused its crackdown on underage female marriages.

In a society which is still traditional and patriarchal in its attitude to women, lack of access to education and formal schooling for girls has serious implications for women's empowerment. Less

than 30% of females in Assam have completed ten or more years of schooling. The 2011 Census shows female literacy rates for Dhubri and Barpeta districts in Western Assam at 50% and 56% respectively. The latest figures for 2023 show that total literacy percentages for many districts in Western Assam are still between 58% and 67%; obviously female literacy percentages are likely to be lower. The lack of women's education has serious consequences for the next generation. The

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NFHS5 Report for Assam bluntly states that children whose mothers have no schooling are twice as likely to die before their first birthday as compared to children whose mothers have completed ten or more years of schooling.

There is every likelihood that the resort to police action could have very adverse repercussions where women are concerned. The rise in institutional deliveries over the years has been heartening. Now there is a distinct possibility that families will resort to home deliveries or resort to unregistered doctors/quacks to avoid state action, as evidenced by

the recent report of a young woman in Bongaigaon district bleeding to death because of unskilled delivery at her home. Equally disturbing is the likelihood that teenage pregnancies will not be reported to the health authorities, denying these pregnant women access to professional antenatal care. Out of pocket expenses on deliveries would put an increasing burden on the straitened finances of poor families. Further strains on family finances would arise from the ar-

rest of male family members, who are in most cases the sole breadwinners for the family. The result could well be increased mortality and morbidity in the mother-child dyad.

In fact, this knee-jerk reaction of the Assam government to the problem of teenage pregnancies could well have been avoided. Pregnancies in women under 20 years of age could hardly be the sole reason for the high maternal mortality rate in Assam. Other factors like poor nutrition and health care access (especially during pregnancy) on account of poverty, and lack of spacing be-

tween deliveries are also contributory factors. Social behaviours are slow to change in the absence of rising standards of living, better education and improvements in the socio-economic status of women.

The Assam government should take heart from the statistics in the latest NFHS5 survey, which show significant step up in institutional deliveries, substantial reductions in infant and child mortality and levels of child undernutrition that are comparable with those of more developed states. ASHAs and other frontline health and ICDS workers, as well as community workers, have gradually earned the confidence of local communities. Community education on the dangers of early marriage and pregnancy, and promoting the use of effective family planning measures to delay pregnancies till the age of 21 and above, are measures that need to be pursued patiently and systematically. The state government should encourage civil society activists and government workers to deal with communities while pursuing policy measures that emphasise girls' education, state-sponsored nutrition for pregnant women and lactating mothers and employment creation.

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