

Reinventing the Civil Society

Saumitra Mohan*

*[*Saumitra Mohan is an Indian Administrative Service officer and presently working as Sub-Divisional Officer, Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal.*

He can be reached at: saumitra_mohan@hotmail.com.]

A society is known by its people and as it is said the people get what they deserve. And for any place and people, it is the middle class, which is said to be its torchbearer and conscience keeper. Despite all the negative submissions to the contrary, it is a fact that since our Independence many more have joined the middle class than those who have been ejected out of it meaning thereby that middle class in India is a sizable demographic entity in keeping with Marxian prediction to that effect. And it is this sizable entity of about 300 million people with considerable purchasing power, which becomes very tempting for the MNCs and foreign investors because they together constitute a huge consumer market. But it is not only in economy, it is in politics, culture and in all conceivable area of common concern that the middle class has to play a positive-constructive role and, in fact, it has not belied the hopes heaped on it. Be it the independence movement, be it anti-emergency uprising, or be the opposition to any such negative development, the 'Great Indian Middle Class', to use the celebrated phrase of Pawan K. Verma, has done commendably well but for certain rough patches here and there.

Today, the middle class backed by a vibrant and conscientised media is leading from the front giving us hopes that all is not bad, all is not lost and there is still a lot of hope for our society to surge ahead in the developmental rat race. It is indeed amazing that the overall pay-off stemming from the impact of the working of this not-so-monolithic and very diverse, pluralised middle class is still pretty positive despite its sundry constituents working at cross purposes. The reason therefore is not very difficult and remote. Actually, the evolution of the Indian society and the working of the developmental processes in the aftermath of our hard-won Independence have so proceeded as to give rise to innumerable interest groups and they are always multiplying. In fact, this is how a living society evolves and grows. These interest groups working in different areas of concern see to it that the other such groups or groups working in the same 'issue area' do not advance at their expense by-passing and riding

roughshod over the prescribed norms and rules of the game. So the in-built healthy competition or checks and balance ensuing ensures that every such interest group is in check and observes the rules of the game otherwise they may be caught, penalised or even turned out of the power-game/business sooner than later e.g. a group of people attempt to obtain a contract through unscrupulous means, there would always be an interest group which would try to expose it because of the loss it has suffered or would suffer due to that practice. In fact, that is why, today getting onto the gravy train is becoming increasingly difficult. Anyone trying to adopt corrupt practices in business, commerce or elsewhere is sure to be caught and turned out of business sooner or later. And that is why the celebrated business gurus have always opined that honesty and fair practices would not only be better rewarded but would also be the permanent norms for any long-term success than the other way round when the unscrupulous means may not only hinder such a journey but, in fact, may stop it for ever.

Now there is a catch. And the catch lies in the fact that these groups have found ingenious ways to skirt and overcome such glitches to their unhindered dabbling in such unhealthy practices by forming cartels or coalitions with similar groups where 'you scratch my back-I shall scratch yours' principle takes front seat whereby each one in the business benefits from some sort of give and take by shielding, screening, and supporting each others in times of crisis and that is why even though many of the ills, evils, or bad practices continue in society despite being known to all and sundry. But if Francis Fukuyama of 'End of History' fame is to be believed, then such an affair should more be seen as the sign of underdevelopment of a society, which would be overcome sooner than later. As Fukuyama would have said, such societies and states continue to be mired in history and history would take its own sweet time to eventuate itself as also because these societies have not yet resolved their ideological disputes like the West where end of history is an axiomatic truth today with the victory of liberalism over communism. The wisdom of Fukuyama thesis notwithstanding, the truth is that despite our societal-structural constraints and sometimes debilitating diversity, the Indian society has done reasonably well and continues to give high hopes for the future.

But definitely all is not so hunky dory with this class inhabiting the civilisational society, which Nehru discovered as India. Spurred by demonstration effect as experienced through the boom in the means of information and communication, there has taken place a revolution of rising expectations. And these expectations are from the state and society which often do not match the latter's capacity to fulfill the same and when they find these

expectations not being fulfilled, then certain negative excrudescences are experienced which are not much to the liking of the elite in different walks of life. And that is why, when a bandh, a strike, an arson, a sabotage, a strike or any such negative means of expressing protest is resorted to by the people led, of course, by a member from the middle class, then many look askance at it without realising or trying to comprehend the whys and wherefores of the same. Any such event or incident has its own dynamics, politics, economics, psychology or sociology attached to it and unless we fathom the same, we won't be going anywhere in our attempt to understand the same. A bandh or a strike is often led by people who are usually members of an interest group, often derisively termed vested interests, who have to keep their cadre mobilised, who have to keep re-asserting themselves from time to time, who immediately pounce upon any such issue with mobilisational value affecting a good number of people and when all such factors affecting interests of so many people converge, you have a recipe ready for such a bandh or a strike.

Now it is accepted without any doubt or scruple that as long as people are there, there would be such issues with mobilisational value up for grab. What is more important is to realise the continued usefulness or futility of the means adopted for the achievement of the goal thus set. While we definitely need a more informed and educated society with a strong-positive value system and strong institutions in the form of strong-principled executive, legislature, judiciary and media led by creditable people with strong leadership qualities and well-placed spinal chord, we also need a strong civil society and each should derive sustenance from each other, feeding forward and backward in a healthy atmosphere.

The civil society has to outgrow its cynicism and imbibe a sense of responsibility often expected of the members of a developed society. The national feeling has often been found wanting in our civil society which has got used to 'sab chalta hai' (read everything goes) attitude and has often been found putting self before service. After all, how can you justify the acts of sabotage or vandalism during a protest or a strike even if resorted to in support of very justified demands? We have to realise that what we are destroying are our own national property created out of our own hard-earned money given as tax and if destroyed, would again have to be rebuilt from the same money thereby preempting such money from going into new areas for our own welfare, for the creation of new public goods. There was a Gandhi in this country who always advised against such violence or vandalism. In fact, even his ways of non-violent satyagraha and civil disobedience have to be suitably modified to be creatively used in a changed time frame to be relevant today to our society. What one is

trying to suggest here is that we should find new, innovative ways to express dissent and make demands in keeping with the genius of time and place as Gandhi used to do or as Japanese are said to be doing. When Japanese go on strike, instead of stopping production and indulging in vandalism, they, in fact, increase production while tying a black badge on their arm as a mark of protest, which is not at all negative or destructive.

In fact, there is said to be a silent majority in this country, which not only remains muted about its own dissenting views but also remains silent about the negative roles of others. These people neither go out to vote nor participate in such acts of omissions and commissions. They, thus, tolerate the wanton waywardness of the assertive minority. Hence, you have a somewhat despairing situation of doom and gloom all around and it is rightly said, you get what you deserve. So, these members of our civil society should wake up from their slumber, come forward, and should register their presence in more constructive and positive ways unlike what has happened so far. When we would have done that, we would have achieved yet another milestone in our march to be a developed country as visualised by our present President.

The way the Indian civil society has conducted itself so far and responded to the crises like the Kargil War or a Gujarat earthquake or the way it has been reacting to myriad negative developments through the informed tools of cooperative and collaborative protest in sustained manner give ample hopes for the shape of things to come. The golden bird that India was would slowly but surely rise and spread its wings over the world firmament and regain its deserved place in the sun sooner than later.