The Age of Cretinism

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> IN AN ERA WHERE LANGUAGE HAS LOST ALL STABLE REFERENTS, it is difficult to find a word that describes the tenor of our times. But if, at the pain of gross simplification, one were to choose a word to characterise the times, 'cretinism' might not be a bad candidate. This is an age of both moral and political cretinism.

The term 'moral cretinism' was perhaps first used by Alan Bullock in his biography of Hitler. It referred to a peculiar immunity that fascists had to any moral considerations or motivations. Bullock was not entirely clear whether this was simply a deep incapacity, a pathological trait, or a willed condition. But what the term captured quite startlingly was the idea that one could imagine a politics which was increasingly immune to any of the normal moral sensibilities. It referred to a condition where our ordinary sense of compassion and decencies get immobilised. They get immobilised to the point where a total inversion of values becomes possible: those who lynch get more political support than those who are lynched; those who indulge in extraordinary brutal sexual violence are protected; the 'other' is demonised to the point where their basic humanity disappears from plain sight. The ordinary moral terms that should be positively valued—pity, compassion, sympathy, civility—become terms of contempt, supplanted by new virtues like pitilessness, indifference, antipathy and incivility.

In some ways, all societies have elements of moral cretinism built in. At various points, even the most morally progressive individuals can act like cretins: incapable or unwilling to be moved in the face of manifest moral demands. Radical inequality, where our fellow citizens almost seem like some other species, whose existence places no moral demands on us, can also produce a quotidian kind of cretinism. Collective identities can sometimes abstract our thoughts away from the humanity and individuality of others, and make us particularly prone to cretinism. We are immune to the moral values at stake beyond the fulfilment of our own collective narcissism. Our morality is defined by the need to seek new enemies. Nationalism can sometimes lead to a profound moral regression in just this sense. Caste identities can sometimes combine both of these features, making the privileged immune to any moral considerations. But what is distinctive about our times is that cretinism itself becomes a high moral standard. It is hard to imagine a time in recent history where political leaders openly support a culture of violence without compunction or any trace of self-consciousness, public discourse routinely carpet-bombs fine distinctions with a view to making any nuanced moral responses impossible, and sympathy is routinely so partitioned along partisan lines that the possibility of any human response to tragedy and atrocity seems like a distant gleam. There is an instrumentalism to every argument, such a relentless unmasking of motives that the very possibility of having a moral motive seems like an oxymoron, and the language of outrage is now so tired and wearied by being made to repeat itself that there is no language left to register the next moral horror: yet another lynching or a newer form of sexual violence. The danger is not the existence of cretinism; it is its routinisation and elevation: a stunting of our moral imagination and the supplanting of it with an aggressive coarseness.

Moral cretinism finds its match in a kind of political cretinism: a corresponding inability to imagine the means to bring about political progress. The term 'parliamentary cretinism' was coined by Marx to describe a condition in which political representatives acted under the illusion that they, as representatives of the people, were actually the drivers of politics. These representatives could bring

about a just society through political means. Political cretinism is a generalised version of the same illusion: a stunted political imagination that is consistently out of touch with reality. The ceremonies of politics go on, while its capacity to manage conflict and generate hope diminishes. It refers to a politics that is prone to illusion at multiple levels. Our priorities are out of whack—the fundamental challenges society faces often go unaddressed, as energies get dissipated in manufactured conflicts. Those in power are so besotted by their hubris that they become immune to knowledge; those not in power are too concerned with survival to even contemplate principles. Even with the BJP's bravado, it is difficult to describe the subtle diminution in expectations that now plagues our politics. Historical memory is short. But there was a time, in the mid-2000s, when India finally looked like it was turning a corner: a consistent 8 per cent annual growth rate, the moderation of social conflict, imperfect institutions but ones capable of self-renewal, a pride in India's pluralism, and a basic political civility all seemed within grasp. India's power could be the power of its example. That hope came crashing down, felled by a fatal combination of plutocracy and paralysis in India's ruling classes. But despite four years of the Modi Government and great faith in the Prime Minister, that hope has not really recovered. India's economic performance is middling at best, more comparable to what would have been 5 per cent growth under the old way of measuring it, social conflict across every cleavage seems to be intensifying, most institutions from the judiciary to the media are now gasping for survival, pluralism has been replaced by majoritarian domination, and political civility by an itch to fight. The dominant register of politics has moved from hope to fear. But the ultimate cretinism of the times is the kind of democracy we have become: we yearn for simplistic solutions that can promise deliverance from the complexities of democracy. We accept with docility the assault on our liberties and the decimation of institutions. We are willing to risk heightened social conflict under the illusion that it will come in such controlled doses—targeted largely against vulnerable minorities—that it will not singe us all. We are willing to live with a politics of illusion peddled with firm conviction rather than bear the burdens of truth.

CRETINISM IS A STANCE that the nation can become powerful only by becoming morally small. It has a moral psychology behind it. The moral psychology is a critique of hypocrisy. It draws its sustenance from exposing the hypocrisy of anyone or any political force that would claim the moral high ground. Moral cretinism has a plausible starting point: that the existing custodians of power in any society are often full of hypocrisy and mendacity. But it takes the exposure of hypocrisy in an unexpected direction. Rather than seeking to close the gap between what we are and what we claim to be, it takes the prevalence of hypocrisy to be a licence for a new kind of moral nihilism. On this view, the exposure of hypocrisy does not just become a tool for psychic warfare (to use Judith Shklar's phrase) against opponents, it becomes a licence for anything goes. Cretinism exploits a moral asymmetry. Hypocrisy is, as the saying goes, the homage vice pays to virtue. It still operates within the realm of moral distinctions; and it is a charge that shames us precisely because it points out that we are not morally living up to our own standards. But the spreading of a belief that hypocrisy is everywhere has the effect of liberating us from answering to any morality at all. In such conditions, the immunity to moral argument itself begins to carry a new charm: 'Whatever else I may be, I am not a hypocrite' becomes an epitome of morality. But this is a stance easier to take for those immune to moral considerations in the first place. The politics of cretinism exploits a certain moral asymmetry: So when liberals are accused of hypocrisy, the charge sticks because liberals are expected to operate in the realm of moral distinctions. But when the BJP is accused of hypocrisy, the charge does not stick because the easiest way to protect oneself from hypocrisy is to remove moral considerations altogether. But a society where the entire focus of moral argument is on the motives and character of those making moral claims, rather than on the rightness or substance of the claims being made, is also a society that will at some point become deeply inured to any moral considerations. The relentless focus on hypocrisy creates a moral coarseness in its own right. In its will to relentlessly take off our masks, it ends up scratching most of our faces as well. It does enough damage to delegitimise the liberal centre or even the Left; but in turn, it paves the way for the pure

instrumentalism and power politics of the Right. Since we are all hypocrites, anything goes.

The Cultural Politics of Reaction

The persona of Narendra Modi looms so large over Indian politics in its commanding and ubiquitous presence, his will seems so superimposed upon the destiny of the nation, that it is tempting to place the entire burden of the ascendancy of moral cretinism on his persona. He certainly has a share of blame in the moral condition of the Republic. But there is a disquieting thought we need to confront. Is Modi a symptom or cause? Most likely, he is both: a product of the times who also exacerbates some of the worst tendencies within it. But does his triumph, and continuing political hold, signify an emerging new social order? Is the fate of this new social order tied solely to his electoral fortunes, or has it seeded something more enduring, something that will outlast his political fortunes? This question is sometimes too difficult to contemplate because it is hard to avoid the deep misanthropy it implies: it is easier to project our moral smallness on our leaders than it is to contemplate the possibility that our own moral norms and sensibilities may be shifting for the worse. In order to understand the reactionary character of the present moment, it is important to confront this uncomfortable question. But let us first outline the sense in which India is in the midst of a reactionary moment and the conditions that have made it possible.

There is no doubt that India is in a full-blown reactionary moment. It is hard to grasp the nature of this reaction because it wears the garb of deep democratic legitimacy; it is an admission of despair described as the politics of hope. All the attributes of a reactionary politics are now gathered in one coherent form. The question is which elements of this politics transcend political lines.

The first element is open majoritarian politics. Hindu nationalism was, first and foremost, as Vinay Sitapati has pointed out, the idea that Hindus, qua Hindus should never again lose political power in the Subcontinent. This combined two deeply modern impulses: a modern democratic obsession with a majority in numbers and the quest for a Hindu identity that could paper over all other differences of caste and region. The obsession with majoritarian power makes modern Hindu nationalism obsessed with demography in all its forms. Every single cause it champions has demography at the heart of it: conversion is an attempt to alter demography; marriage outside the religion is an attempt to alter demography; differential birth rates in communities are not symptoms of uneven development, but a vast conspiracy to alter demography. Any special rights given to minorities, no matter how slight the burden they impose, are a violation of the laws of demography. They suggest the giving of power to a community beyond what its numbers warrant. This was the intractable dilemma in the negotiations leading up to Independence, and the BJP has consistently peddled the charge that minorities are given a veto over domains of national life. The affront in this is not about the moral claims in the rights thus given; the affront is that these rights violate the demographic laws of politics. As BJP leaders are fond of saying: minorities had a veto, now we will make them irrelevant in all aspects, from political representation to cultural significance. The year 2014 was a watershed in this respect, for it showed that minorities could be made electorally irrelevant. While other political parties may not go so far, making minorities invisible will become the default mode, the common sense of Indian politics. This would not have been a bad thing if it had made for a political world in which the rights of citizenship and identities of citizens were not so closely allied. In other words, if it made the distinction between 'majority' and 'minority' irrelevant to the rights that individuals enjoy. Instead, this project seeks a different kind of invisibility: one that retains majority cultural privilege and naturalises its idea of the nation.

But a demographic imagination is, always, at its core, reactionary. It is no accident that it is fuelling a reactionary politics in America, Europe and India. For its concern is not with freedom and mobility, but with the political privilege of a community and the fixity of its identity. Its moral psychology is

the imagined or potential victimhood of the majority. In India, this politics often finds its hook in the obvious fact that liberal establishments often like to position themselves as noblesse oblige protectors of minorities—often at the risk of empowering the most reactionary amongst them. It tells you something about how reactionary Congress politics had become in relation to minorities that the BJP is able to run away with the social reform agenda when it comes to minorities. But the demographic anxiety is something that transcends debates over what rights people should have and how best to liberate individuals from the tyranny of compulsory identities. It shades over into the idea that particular communities are a threat by their very being, by simply being who they are. This sensibility has cast a dark shadow on Indian political and cultural life since Partition; it ebbs and flows. But the question is: has it now been given open legitimacy to the point where even other political parties will adapt to it?

The second element of a reactionary politics is an obsession with culture as a form of control. In their different ways early in the 20th century, both Nehru and Premchand had pointed out a curious feature of modern politics: the association of the politics of culture with reactionaries. As Nehru asked of Iqbal, "Why is it that whenever such so- called cultural and similar matters are pushed to the front, political reactionaries take the lead in them?" The short answer is that the reactionary take on culture is driven by two related fears: a fear of freedom and a cult of identity.

The relationship between culture and freedom in modern politics is a vexed one, but there is one particular space that makes propitious ground for reactionary politics: sexual morals and gender relations. It is an understatement to say that India has handled this transition badly. If gender is often the site of cultural reaction, the way a society handles the question of gender will be a key to the possibilities of reactionary politics. There is some good news here: some of the worst performing states like Rajasthan and Haryana are beginning to see a turnaround in sex ratios at birth; enrolments in higher education are up even though workforce participation remains low. But for the cultural politics of reaction, three things are important. First, the social order is often about channelling and restraining sexual energies, and perhaps more creatively sublimating it. But what happens in a society where not only is desire suddenly liberated but notions of self-esteem get bound in it in a new and insistent way? Eroticism rather than sublimation becomes the new mode of channelling. What does it do to the identities of young men whose social location is a toxic amalgam of traditional entitlement, modern liberation and a culture that manufactures new ideologies of pleasure? Second, there is the sheer fact of sexual violence—something always prevalent but now taking on new and brutal forms. And finally, there is the fact that modern freedom requires more discernment and responsibility rather than less. But what produces the forms of discernment that can lead to fulfilment rather than the chasing of chimeras? If it is 'good riddance' for traditional institutions, what are the new forms that will channel these sexual energies? In part, there is a susceptibility to the politics of reaction because of this triple crisis: the crisis of masculinity looking for an outlet to prove itself, the crisis of sexual violence, and the strange oscillation between a traditional politics of repression on one hand and an undiscerning freedom on the other. The anxiety over sex has become palpably central to our politics, and will provide a constant hook for the politics of reaction.

BUT THE POLITICS of culture is not about free minds inquiring into higher values; it is about playing out expected scripts that flow from identities. It's a form of culture where identity colonises all inquiry: what history we believe, for instance, is simply a function of what identity we have. All aesthetic modes of articulation are reduced to the identity of who produced them. Often even well-meaning defenders of pluralism fall into this trap where the significance of a piece of art or music or architecture is reduced simply to its political form: what is the identity of the person who produced it? Considerations of meaning beyond identity, the ability of art to produce forms of transcendence, or the principles of composition, or the values inherent in a book, for example, all get short shrift. In

this sense, a reactionary approach to culture where it is just about identity, not about meaning, has become a default common sense that transcends political lines. This paves the way for the majoritarian reactionary who simply says: ‘I don’t care about your culture.’ What makes this reactionary move possible is the view that what matters is whose culture it is, not that it is culture. In that sense, the question of culture in politics becomes a question of policing boundaries, not liberating thought.

Third, a reactionary politics will use fear to underwrite technology and surveillance. It may be a ‘militant nostalgia’, as Mark Lilla observes in his book The Reactionary Mind, a longing for a return to an imagined world before the corruption of the present set in. A concern with culture in all its forms, aesthetic valuation and a sense of values that are higher and enduring, is healthy for any democracy. Indeed, it can be a necessary bulwark against an easy moral cretinism. But it is too simplistic to call this present moment reactionary in the sense of trading merely in nostalgia. That nostalgia is too intermittent and farcical to have any potency. What the language of nostalgia misses out is a feature of the present form of reaction that is quite distinctive and anti-nostalgic in some respects: the fascination with technology. The present moment is closer to what the historian Jeffrey Herf had once insightfully called a ‘reactionary modernism’, one that is able to combine an affirmative belief in technological progress with fuzzy dreams of the past. In fact, the characteristic danger of this kind of reactionary modernism is that it fetishises technology itself to the point of romanticism. Both culture and technology are elevated to means of social control. The appeal of technology is not just the efficiencies it brings: it is also its anti-political character. Technology itself is presented as a neutral political choice, simply a calculation of means and ends. The hope is laid out that technology can solve the problem of political division, social fear and accountability by cutting out all intermediaries. But technology is also presented as the cure of our fears. It is a commonplace observation that our societies are beset by fears: it is a measure of the deep breakdown of moral trust in our societies, and a reflection of our experience of violence, that we now look to technology as modes of disciplining one another. It is the pervasiveness of fear—always the sign of a reactionary age—that legitimises the idea that citizens be made totally transparent to the state and often to each other. All liberal democracies are struggling with this new technological age: our institutions of oversight, our legal vocabularies, our moral distinctions between what is public and what is private are struggling to come to terms with a new technological reality. These questions will require complex answers. But a characteristic of a reactionary age is an easy acceptance of state and sometimes corporate surveillance, the acceptance of new chains in the name of satisfying our own desires and satiating our own fears. Technology promises to liberate us from fear, but in doing so, it permanently institutionalises fear in our politics. We will soon reach a point where the only answer we can give to the challenge of any social evil will be more surveillance: the ultimate triumph of a reactionary modernism, in which we have surrendered all powers to the state.

The Institutional Politics of Reaction

There is good reason to think that the cultural grounds for reactionary politics will outlast this government. The task of moral repair will not be easy. But the politics of reaction also has other dimensions that will make it hard to roll back. First, the unexpected scale of the BJP victory in 2014 enshrined a new style of politics. That victory itself took place against an overwhelming concern with plutocracy. The tumult of the last four years may have dimmed memories, but in 2014, the fear of plutocracy was one of the dominant themes of Indian politics. Plutocracy presented such a disfiguring spectre, with almost a free-for-all where Congressmen were not only cheating the public but undermining their own party as well. It led to fears of economic paralysis and a crisis in the banking system from which we have not recovered. It was a plutocracy with a great sense of entitlement, so much so that it did not take criticism seriously. It was so insidious and spread across so many institutions, from the judiciary to the universities, that when the BJP arrived in power those

institutions were already hollowed out from within. An honest introspection requires us to concede that the Left was right in pointing out the destruction Modi could bring. But, equally, it must be conceded that India's ancien régime had also been so delegitimised that it was bound to collapse. Its refusal to embark on a course of self-correction only gave people the sense that it was a party that had lost the will to govern. The anti- corruption movement of the preceding years discredited the UPA Government, and the BJP stepped into the breach.

But the BJP's victory was accompanied by three elements of a politics of reaction. The first was a belief that India had become a plutocracy, with a government unwilling to take action against its own, in part because of weak leadership. It is precisely the fragmentation of institutions and the dispersal of political power that had produced the fatal combination of plutocracy and paralysis. Electoral victories are a combination of many different factors. But the yearning for institutional simplification, the idea that power needs to be concentrated for reform and quick decision-making, caught hold of the public imagination. This did three things to our institutional imagination. First, it made for a politics that was more inherently contemptuous of checks and balances. This theme has continued for much of the four years since. The idea of 'one nation, one election', for example, as a necessary condition for progress is just a rerun of this idea that politicians are held accountable too frequently, that the flow of power remains obstructed by a set of overlapping institutions. The Government also quickly realised that the range of 'independent' institutions—from the judiciary to the auditor general—needed to be reined in so as not to risk a repeat of what happened under the UPA, where unelected institutions became so large they could diminish the authority of an elected government. And other institutions of law enforcement, always working at the discretion of the Government, could be useful pawns in a game of political skullduggery against opponents. So the will to institutional simplification, that power is best concentrated, became the default common sense of Indian politics. Total institutional control is now thought of as a panacea, not as something we should fear. It gave the politics of reaction a decidedly authoritarian turn, one with great resonance in politics.

But the second implication of the desire for institutional control is a politics centred on personality. For, in an era impatient with institutions, salvation had to be found in charismatic individuals who could stamp their destiny on the nation. Here Narendra Modi had, and despite the sheen wearing off, continues to have a decisive advantage. In an age where the collapse of partisanship and analysis is so complete, opponents have always underestimated his political appeal. To even suggest that it is foolish to deny Modi's political appeal is to risk being complicit in what he does with his political power. But one cannot understand the power of reactionary politics if one does not bring the sheer distinctiveness of Modi into the picture. He shook up Indian politics by appearing to empower new constituencies, converting a parliamentary election into a presidential one, and promising to destroy an ancien régime that was imploding. The first element he displayed, like all authoritarian characters, was the sheer will to power. He came across as effective for the sheer energy and single-mindedness he put into his political pursuits. Confronted with opponents who had, it seems, almost lost the will to pursue power, his Will stood out. The second was his ability to produce affective identification. He managed to portray himself as India's success story, the everyman who could fight adversity and rise to the top on his own effort. He had a visceral dislike of the Gandhi dynasty, but in the critique of dynastic politics, he positioned himself against a corrupt and entitled order. The more moral and intellectual contempt that was heaped on him, the easier that identification became. Third, he positioned himself as a moral paragon—in whom self-interest was not even possible. In India, it is very common for kinship relations to override any conception of public and private. But paradoxically, it makes the appeal of someone who stands apart from kinship—and who thereby claims to have no self-interest, only a concern for the general good—all the more resonant. This is not simply the virtue of the allegedly celibate pracharak, it is the virtue of a leader who did not inherit a family mantle and will not leave one. Fourth, this was a speaker for

whom identification was created by his perlocutionary campaign. The truth is made through the act of speaking; it is not an independent test of veracity. The very thing that commentators find a weakness, the refusal to answer questions or seriously face a press conference, was the very thing that shored up his power. To acknowledge someone else's questions is to cede possibility to the idea that someone else might have the truth. The fusion of truth and conviction is the hallmark of reactionary politics: the perfect antidote to liberals who cannot take their own side in an argument. And finally, there was at least in 2014 the ability to cleverly craft messages, the ability to tell different audiences that he was speaking to them. He made himself the Representative of the Nation, with all his contradictions enfolded within him. His followers made him the ultimate apotheosis of the Indian nation.

SEVEN MONTHS IS a long time in Indian politics. But in effect, 2019 will be a test of two things. First, is India ready to put up with a messy—but perhaps safe—dispersal of power? Can it overcome its own will to political simplification? Second, is the sheen beginning to wear off Modi's persona as a representative individual who transcends our petty contradictions, lifts us out of our banal ambitions, and has the power of communication to even make a lamp-post win in Uttar Pradesh? There is some reason to be optimistic on the second score. While the extent of personal identification with Modi remains high, and he has been given an unusually long leash by the electorate, the mystical identification of him as the Saviour of the Nation is wearing thin. But it is still an important political factor. On the first score, however, there is some reason to be a little cautious. Of course, much depends on alliances, whether the opposition can actually form a front that, if not coherent, at least displays a minimal ability to work together in ways that overcome the spectre of paralysis. In the two states that matter most, UP and Bihar, there is a possibility that this could happen. So, Indian politics looks a lot more competitive than before. But it would be premature to conclude that the fear of fragmentation and the personality cult that drive the politics of reaction have been entirely overcome.

It is the third dimension of the institutional politics of reaction that will have the most far-reaching effects. Modi is one of the few leaders who have managed to combine centralisation and a personality cult with a veritable social movement. To some extent, a shake-up of India's power structure—the media, intellectual class, organisational street power—was inevitable with the change of regime. But the scale of Modi's victory, his willingness to commandeer civil society till it came to heel has meant that India is witnessing the closest alignment of the state and civil society in a long time.

There are three key institutions in this alignment: the institutions of propaganda, the foot soldiers of violence, and the ideological apparatus of education. Much has been written about the third: the state's desire to make the education system, particularly public education, an appendage of the state. But this does not elicit much comment, in part because that has, alas, been the default DNA of the Indian State when it comes to education. The old cabals had so delegitimised themselves that the wholescale destruction of the freedom of public universities is passed over in silence. The politics of education in the reactionary imagination would require a whole essay in its own right. But what is new is that private capital has been enlisted in a project of aligning the media with the ideological purposes of the state. It often has to mobilise its resources in alignment with state goals and policies. But most importantly, can you think of any liberal democracy where so much private capital has been enlisted in not just supporting the Government, but also its whole ideological agenda? The state-capital nexus is not so much a matter of secret deals, hidden money trails or transactional bargains. It is hidden in plain sight in the Indian media, where corporatisation and privatisation have not brought more variety or competition. Nor have they particularly brought a concern for intelligent thinking about markets. There are some exceptions. But a shockingly large section of the private media is now the ideological vanguard of the state, its rhetorical storm-troopers in a politics

of communalism, polarisation, distraction, anti-intellectualism, mendacity and hate. This, the enlistment of private capital in an attempt to totally capture public discourse, is a new dimension of state-capital relations that a future historian will have to unpack. In an extraordinary inversion, the state has shown that the private media is, in some senses, more effectively manipulated, cajoled and coerced than even the state media.

But one development with the more far-reaching effect will be the empowering of new and institutionalised forms of violence. In the 70s and 80s, towns and cities used to have what Paul Brass had termed 'institutionalised riot systems', structures that were activated to foment politically useful violence. These structures often had state support. It is hard to quantify the extent to which its modern equivalent, controlled vigilantism designed to teach minorities a lesson and polarise politics, has now taken institutional roots. But the sheer geographic spread of new forms of violence—lynchings across at least nine states, artists threatened, journalists murdered—suggests a new machinery waiting to be deployed. There is a diabolical political imagination in how this violence is used. It is mindful of the fact that a large-scale riot may recoil on the governance record of the Government. It wants to be able to plead a statistical innocence ('Oh, the numbers are not bad'). So this violence is like a burner in a kitchen, slowly turned up when needed to send multiple messages. The first is to emphasise that the cultural norms of majoritarianism are inviolable; the second is to create a fear that shock troops are available in case anyone steps out of line; and the third is to convince the base that the mission of an ideological takeover of civil society is on, with violence if necessary. But this form of violence does not just happen: it is now routinely legitimised by the highest functionaries of the state, by omission or commission. It's a form of violence in which cretinism is on full display: the victim is guilty, the Government's heart bleeds for the perpetrator, and the argument of culture immobilises all human sympathies. It should worry us how easily this—and so many other forms of violence—are available. But the question is: has this form of violence now penetrated Indian society deeply enough that it can even survive a BJP electoral defeat? To be sure, other political formations like the Left and Trinamool in West Bengal have also produced their share of political violence. But the endurance of those institutionalised systems should not be a pretext for whataboutery: they are a salutary lesson in how difficult it is to dislodge entrenched violence. These foot soldiers of political violence are not easy to decommission. Now that they have tasted the elixir of political legitimacy, the genie will not go back into the bottle. In that sense, the triumph of reactionary politics should not be measured only by its electoral victories or entrenchment in the state. It should be measured by the fact that wherever it has gone, it is breaking apart whatever modest social capital India had. What Wittgenstein once said of tradition applies equally to social institutions: Once they are broken, the task of reviving them is akin to repairing a spider's web with one's own hands. The biggest threat of reactionary politics is that it does not understand the central insight of conservatism: societies are fragile and interconnected web.

The Economics of Reaction

Surely, it could be argued, the underlying malaise that facilitates the politics of reaction is economic in character. Surely, it was the fear of an economic slowdown that created the conditions that propelled the rise of Modi. If faith in technology was one aspect of reactionary modernism, the promise of economic deliverance was another. But here is the dilemma for Indian politics. Modi has neither turned out to be the Saviour he presented himself as, nor is he such a disaster that economics alone can defeat him. In many ways, in economics he represents more continuity than change. Most Indian governments since the first NDA Government have tried to avoid too much macroeconomic volatility; they do a couple of big things right, do a couple of welfare schemes, progress incrementally on a few others, and pray that the things they leave undone do not come to haunt them. The UPA-II, especially during Pranab Mukherjee's disastrous stint as Finance Minister,

was an exception in being wilfully irresponsible, and it paid the price for it. This is not a place to go into a detailed assessment of Modi's economic performance, but it is worth focusing on a couple of things that matter to the politics of reaction.

WHEN MODI CAME TO power, state-capital relations were the central pivot around which his economic agenda revolved. The relationship between state and capital is an important capillary of power in a modern democracy. This relationship is governed by many contradictory impulses. In a democracy, politicians need capital for elections and for sustaining politics as a career choice. But politics also has to be responsive to the demands of social legitimation. There is a second issue: there is often a tension between seeking policies that favour particular businesses and policies that favour a level-playing field based on principles that produce growth. The third tension is between the imperatives of looking business-friendly on one hand, and incorporating genuine public goods into regulation on the other—like environmental and human rights. These tensions are perennial in any democracy.

The UPA badly mismanaged these tensions. Corruption had reached a point where the demands of social legitimation had become nearly impossible to meet. This spawned not just an anti-corruption movement that delegitimised the Congress at the time, it led to a whole series of hit-and-miss judicial interventions. The inability to meet the demands of legitimation produced a policy paralysis of sorts. The second tension was manifest largely in the way the Government doled out credit. The exercise of discretionary power in this area brought the banking system to its knees. It produced a protracted crisis that still continues: private investment is still tepid. And third, on labour and the environment, the Government doled out symbolic protections, but by and large, capital always had the upper hand.

The BJP therefore had the task of re-managing these tensions. The jury is still out on whether India is less plutocratic than before. But the BJP has sought to manage the tensions by three devices. The first lesson it learnt from the Congress debacle was this. Under Congress rule, individual Congressmen were benefitting from the use of state power, but the party was losing. This was double jeopardy for the Congress. On one hand, it meant lots of Congress leaders were exercising their individual channels of influence without the benefit accruing to the party. The result was individual Congressmen are rich but the party is poor. This still haunts it. On the other hand, the system created a free-for-all which magnified popular perceptions of corruption. The BJP has the advantage that its state-capital dealings are more centralised, so while benefits accrue to the party and its centralised leadership, it also has the advantage of reducing the appearance of transactional corruption—since, if the party has an efficient resource mobilisation strategy, it can often afford to rein in transactional corruption by individual leaders. The second device was to create new instruments like electoral bonds that are opaque to the public but provide a new channel of funding. Third, it tried to occupy the space of anti-plutocratic politics with decidedly mixed results. Demonetisation was one element of this gambit. There have also been a slew of measures that empower governments to go after economic offenders (attaching properties, making bribe giving as much an offence as receiving it). But the results are yet to accrue.

WHENEVER INDIVIDUAL businesses extract too much from the state, there is a logjam. Arguably, the 1991 liberalisation was a result of pro-business policies of the previous decade having reached a dead end. So liberalisation involved a shake-out of existing players that was needed. For the sake of growth, the economy needed to create new players or have old players play a different game. The recent investment crisis, produced in part by the mess in the banking sector, could result in exactly such a shake-up, one that is arguably needed. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Bill and new regulators of real estate markets are potential instruments of such a shake-up: getting rid of some crony firms and allowing for a re-allocation of capital. But this process has a long way to go before

its credibility is established. Meanwhile, just like the shake-up of 1991 initially led to a slowdown, the process of cleaning up banks will also dampen private investment. This shake-up is meaningful, but like the 1991 process, it is not, in principle, incompatible with centralised corruption. In short, the pivot the BJP brings about is to try and increase the allocative efficiency of capital and also ensure that big capital stays at its command.

With private investment tepid, the Modi Government decided to go for signalling. It created a new obsession with analytically dubious indices like 'Ease of Doing Business'. To overcome the appearance of policy paralysis, it seems to show no urgency in creating sensible regulatory protections for public goods like the environment (except where it can be turned into a business proposition in its own right). This government is not unique. The tragedy in Tuticorin—where companies can literally poison the earth and water, get away with it, and then demand protection from labour unrest—is a stark reminder of just how much capital still rules the roost. But the biggest irony in India is that even after a long stretch of pro-business policies, where the state bent over backwards to accommodate business, India today has to rely on public investment or foreign capital, not domestic private investment, to keep the economy on an even keel. Indian modernism still has to be state-led.

The second pivotal relationship, one that may prove to be more consequential politically, is the relationship to farmers. In the imagination of reactionary modernism, farmers were, in the first instance, relics of past regimes exulting in poverty. The neglect of rural India in the first couple years of this regime began to extract its political costs, and the Government pivoted around to a policy of prioritising farmer incomes. But like governments in the past, India does not have a coherent agricultural policy and we seem destined to live from one political crisis to another, one humanitarian crisis to another in this area. But what is striking about this government is that the three biggest gambits it has made—demonetisation, GST implementation and Aadhaar—as a way of shoring up state capacity had this in common: a fascination with state power to produce revolution. Demonetisation began with the language of virtue, calling upon citizens to sacrifice, so that the scourge of black money can be expunged. On that score, it proved to be a hoax. But what it left was a trace of force-fed formalisation of the economy, no matter what the cost. The GST was a good idea whose effect was somewhat blunted by multi-party complicity in making the tax more complex. But like demonetisation, it also demanded a language of sacrifice from small and medium enterprises. And Aadhaar, a tool that could have been judiciously used, has become an epitome of reactionary modernism: high technology to make citizens legible to the state while the state itself remains unaccountable in so many areas. The net result is that state power looms larger in our lives.

Conclusion

The reactionary modernism of this moment is a matter of projecting a moral persona in politics: a persona of deliberate cretinism. It is a way to place culture and identity at the centre of politics to secure a majoritarian nationalism and tap into the anxieties that modern freedom generates. It is an institutional style that foments hostility to fragmentation of power, shifts the locus to a politics of strong leadership and virtue, and revels in the use of violence to secure its agenda. It does not have any startlingly original economic ideas, except the elevation of technology and surveillance to an explicit ideology rather than a tool. Can this ideology be defeated?

One might think that the economic disappointments of the Modi Government would provide a political opening. It has certainly made the political space more competitive. But, as suggested earlier, the sense of disappointment is not yet deep enough to produce a counter-movement. Instead, we are settling into an equilibrium of measured expectations on the theory that it will take more than five years to clean up the mess this government inherited.

Can India's traditional social cleavages of caste and region provide an antidote to the concentration of power? The answer is that there is potential. But it depends on a very delicate balance. It is true that there is a lot of social disquiet amongst Dalits, whom the BJP had incorporated into its agenda. But this disquiet is matched by two countertrends. The first, as so many elections have shown, is a division amongst Dalits as their experiment with more alternatives has grown. As one activist recently put it, there is a division between 'mombatti Dalits' (of candles) and 'agarbatti Dalits' (of incense sticks, those who have made peace with the BJP).

This may be too simplistic, but it is a sign of how politically complex social identities have become that one should not presume simplistic oppositions between social identities and projects like Hindu Nationalism. One of the lessons other parties need to learn from reactionary modernism is that identities can be recast in a new political language by leaders. There is no direct line from social identity to political behaviour, except in the minds of those in the grip of wishful thinking. But the second countertrend is that a modicum of clarity over leadership will matter in national elections. And here, there are tensions to manage. Opposition leaders with a social base like Mayawati are still to transcend their regions and bases and achieve a national profile (and there is reason to think that there is enough casteism that makes such transcendence difficult). Modi assiduously built one up for years before 2014. On the other hand, for the Congress to cede space to regional forces is to open the spectre of a coalition without a centre. The alignment of social engineering and a national perspective will not be easy to pull off, necessary though it is. The BJP did it in its own way, but with years of preparation, organisation and messaging.

Third, there is the striking fact that there is really no ideological opposition to reactionary modernism. The cretinism of the BJP is an important but low bar to beat. Given the poison it represents, it may still be a relief to get rid of it. But there is not a single issue on which any of the opposition is breaking new ground. Let us not forget that the Congress just lost Karnataka and was saved by the BJP's hubris. The regional arithmetic is far from settled. The opposition is preoccupied instead with not appearing anti- Hindu. But it has not learnt a new language that can effectively speak of individual rights and dignity. It is not signing onto a new charter of individual freedom, or speaking the language of institutional regeneration. In some ways, it wants to play on Modi's wicket: on the level of personal virtue. This is a tricky wicket for any opposition leader to bat on. It is a bit early in the game, but mostly the opposition seems to be banking on the idea that disgust with the BJP's politics will rise to a level where the nature of the alternative becomes an irrelevant question. This is a strategy based on a hope and prayer. Suspicion that 'the best lack all conviction', in Yeats' words, still remains.

Fourth, there is the distinct possibility of multiple forms of polarisation getting exacerbated between now and the General Election of 2019. One should not underestimate how many Congress failures on national building—in Assam and Kashmir, for example—are coming back to haunt the party and make it speak a language similar to that of the BJP. It is striking the degree to which the counter to the BJP does not represent a new politics, but a throwback to the 1980s: the potential of violence in border states, like Kashmir, Assam and now possibly Bengal; the proliferation of dominant OBC victimhood amongst Marathas, Jats and Rajputs; and Dalits still searching for a party that promises genuine empowerment. But the question is that if politics looks like returning to the status quo ante, will the fear of disorder help the BJP rather than help bring it down?

Finally, there is the international context. International norms have changed. As hypocritical as the liberal world order was, it at least acknowledged a more helpful set of norms. Now ethnic cleansing, closure of borders and attacks on the free press to shore up powers of the state will not just be tragic occurrences, they are going to be the new normal. Also gone is the easy optimism that the world will not be consumed by zero- sum conflicts, that China will be incorporated into the existing

system without much disruption, that global trade will continue to expand in a way that benefits India. But most importantly, there are now no limits to how democracies present themselves to the rest of the world. Empowering moral cretins has no international penalty; it may now be the form modernity takes for some time to come. In short, the international conditions for a reactionary modernism have never been more ripe.

It is not clear what form the opposition to reactionary modernism will take. Even if it is electorally defeated, it is not clear whether this will be enough to defeat it as a social current, unless the political defeat is emphatic. In India, it is possible that the protest may not even take a political form: it will get reflected more in social anomie and pathology, and will give up the hope of political redemption. It is also likely that the ultimate form of political cretinism, the fascination with a politics of illusion that detaches the process from the fundamental realities that shape us, will continue. Modi was a master illusionist, presenting reaction as a form of regeneration, offering unity as an antidote to division, and projecting personal virtue as a substitute for institutions and principles. He spoke of India's destiny while destiny seems to be passing India by. But this politics also provides psychic comfort, especially if you turn an eye away from its cruelties. The question is how long India will avoid looking itself in the mirror. There is a long dark night ahead.

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