

Darkness in the season of Light

Deepawali comes at an auspicious time, in the most pleasant and beautiful season of the year. The rains are just over. The earth, the air and the vegetation have been washed clean. The mud and slime generated by incessant rains have dried up. Numbers of insects and reptiles that come out during the rainy season have sulked back into their dark spaces with the first hint of cold. The abundant summer crops have been harvested and brought home. There is smell of freshness and plenty in the air. And then India, at least north India, begins her fortnight of remembrance of the ancestors, pays her dues and respects to them and gets ready to celebrate the season of worship and festivities, beginning with the *navaratri*s and going up to the *kartika poornima*, when the seriously cold weather sets in.

Ramacharitamanas offers a beautiful description of the season in Kishkindha Kand. The arrival of Sarada Ritu, following the rains, lifts the mood of Sri Ramachandra, left deeply despondent by Ravana's extraordinary blatant act, and He begins planning and preparing for avenging the evil. The season is thus a time of optimism, when the dark forces that dare to lurk out during the rainy season begin to cower and hide; and the forces of light and virtue once again establish their ascendancy. This is how India prefers to look at this season of Deepawali.

But there are times, when even this season of auspiciousness and cleanliness is unable to purge the evil, and the poison running through our body-politic is thrown up even during the festivities. Many of us must be still remembering one such event that happened eight years ago, in 2004. Deepawali that year, like this year, was somewhat late; it fell on November 12. On November 11, 2004, the Shankaracharya of Shri Kanchi Kamakoti Math, was arrested. It was an act of extraordinarily blatancy. It was an open declaration by the politico-bureaucratic establishment of the country that they cared nothing for the sentiments of the Hindus and the sanctity of their sacred institutions. Throughout the Deepwali day and for several days after that the television brought to our homes images of the callous policemen and equally callous media persons desecrating everything. They even dared to show images of the revered *acharya* being subjected to police interrogation while lying supine and half-conscious.

The auspicious season of Deepawali this year seems to be heading for a similarly blatant show of evil. For several weeks now we have been seeing the uncovering of the thievery and fraud that the politico-bureaucratic establishment has been perpetrating on the people and resources of India. The process of uncovering began sometime ago, when it became impossible to keep under wraps the open corruption associated with first the organisation of the Commonwealth Games and later the sale of telecom spectrum. The establishment then tried to assuage public anger by offering a few sacrificial goats.

The establishment reaction to the corruption that is being uncovered over the last few weeks is, however, quite different and extra-ordinarily blatant. It seems as if nearly the whole politico-bureaucratic establishment has come together to insist that what are being presented as corrupt practices are in fact normal governmental and business affairs; and that there is nothing wrong in individuals leveraging their political and bureaucratic positions and connections to corner scarce resources, to influence

government decisions and to make windfall gains. It is being claimed, perhaps truthfully, that all these seemingly dirty gains are being made within the established legal and administrative processes. That even though the transactions seem obviously immoral, there has been no legal or procedural violation. And if anyone feels that there has been some technical violation, he or she may approach the courts.

Such statements have been made by important leaders cutting across the whole political establishment. It is as if they are loudly proclaiming their right to make money in this manner. And from the swagger with which they are inviting people to seek formal enquiries and approach the courts, it seems that they are sure that the legal-administrative procedures have been stacked as to provide cover for what look like obvious corrupt practices. They seem to be declaring that they have the legislative and executive authority and competence to create a legal-administrative regime supportive of their activities. And, many of them say all this with a permanent smirk on their faces.

It is indeed a measure of the confidence and blatancy that the politico-bureaucratic establishment has acquired that ministers facing charges of both low and high corruption keep getting promoted to higher and more crucial positions, and those outside the government facing similar charges continue with their political and business activities without even flinching.

With the recent growth of Indian economy, the extent and measure of money-making has indeed changed. But what is more worrisome, and what is really spoiling this auspicious season, is the realisation that in the eyes of the perpetrators, such money-making is not a corrupt practice anymore. They even seem to believe that by “creating” such wealth, they are contributing to the “development” of the country; the more blatant among them even claim that these activities of theirs contribute to the “welfare” of the poor and downtrodden.

The history and theory of modern economics provide some support to these claims. According to such theories, a certain level of accumulation of capital is needed for an economy to take-off. In the early stages of economic development, such accumulation often takes place through unsavoury activities, and it is said that it is best to not look too carefully into the sources of capital. For England, much of such capital came from the exploitation of the colonies, and venerable English philosophers declared that moneys coming into England, in whatever corrupt and evil ways those might have been earned, contributed to the growth of the nation. In countries like the United States of America, such accumulation of wealth came through the cornering of the extensive lands and other natural resources that the white colonisers had come to acquire in that continent. The corruption and the corresponding large scale dispossession and oppression that occurred in the nineteenth century America are the stuff of not only the lore of economics but also of great literature.

So there is a thought that whatever is happening in India today is not unusual. That such leveraging of politico-bureaucratic power to dispossess many and favour a few with extraordinary riches is part of the game of economic development. All this is part of the rapid growth of economy that we need to rise as a great nation. And thus the corrupt are in fact performing sterling service to the nation by manifesting their “animal spirits”, a phrase that our economist prime-minister so aptly used recently.

But India in several ways is quite different from the world that was created through such cannibalistic enterprise. The animal spirits of Europe in the days of its early economic growth were let loose mainly on the people of the colonies, though their own people also did suffer. India has no colonies. The animal spirits of the robber barons of America of the nineteenth century were expressed in a land that had vast natural resources and few people. But India is thickly inhabited in every part. Here no lands can be obtained without dispossessing someone else. Even water for the industry here is obtained only by depriving the neighbouring residents of drinking water and cultivators of irrigation. India, therefore, may have to find some other path to economic growth than what has been followed by the western economies.

There is another significant way in which the Indian story differs from the usual lore of economics. The early entrepreneurs of the western countries that we have mentioned, and also the so-called crony-capitalists of the now emerging Asian nations, were animated not merely by animal spirits but also a high sense of national glory. There indeed was corruption and there was oppression, both in Europe and America, and perhaps in Asia now. But the establishments of these nations had a high sense of being engaged in a mission of building their nations, and deep commitment to that mission. It is doubtful whether those who are making moneys in India today are similarly motivated by a high national purpose, and whether they are investing the moneys thus made in national enterprise. It is generally known that much of the wealth that is being thus acquired is quickly spirited out of the country.

India differs from others in another aspect. Early growth of most other economies of the world was based in increased physical output, both in agriculture and manufacturing. The newly emergent Asian economies are also following the same path. The increased availability of physical goods makes for a certain spreading of economic growth across the society. But, Indian growth has been based either on exploitation of natural resources or on the expansion of services, the latter mainly for export. Both agriculture and manufacturing have seen little expansion. Such growth, without expansion of physical goods, naturally puts pressure on the prices and limits participation in economic prosperity. This makes the dispossession of large numbers of their meagre land and other resources even more difficult to bear.

On the happy occasion of the festival of lights, one would like to dwell upon the pleasant and good, and to say that the darkness shall soon be obliterated. But the direction the India story is now taking and the blatancy with which the establishment has begun to treat the nation offers little reason of hope. In such a situation, nations seek hope in individuals, groups or organisations that stand rigid on their idealistic and ideological ground, without being swayed by the muck and corruption spreading all around them. Unfortunately, in the name of expediency and political compulsion, all of us seem to have become participants at different levels in the game of corruption. There is no shining beacon of hope visible on the Indian horizon to brighten our Deepawali.

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