

RAYMOND ARON ON TOTALITARIANISM AND THE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN REGIME

RAMJOT SODHI¹

¹Research Scholar Department of Political Science, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Punjab, INDIA.

ABSTRACT

The present-day Indian regime has repeatedly been accused of being totalitarian in its functioning. Such stamping has been done by various politicians belonging to different political parties, and sometimes intellectuals have also raised their voices against the fierce means used by the ruling party and its allied organizations for the certification of its ideology. In the discipline of political science, there is no such measuring rod available to know the scale of authoritarianism, but fortunately, Raymond Aron's five main elements on totalitarianism could assuredly see if any such tendencies are present, if not measuring its extent. These elements though put forward by analysing twentieth century regimes, still hold firm for the twenty-first century regimes and could definitely be used for examination. An analysis brings to the light that the regime does hold some proportions of all the five elements, though these might be considered insignificant by some.

KEY WORDS: Raymond Aron, Totalitarianism, Democracy, BJP.

INTRODUCTION

Raymond Claude Ferdinand Aron, also known as Raymond Aron (1905-1983) was a French philosopher and political scientist. He was an intellectual who had an immense stock of knowledge in philosophy, history, economics, sociology, and politics. (Shils, 1985) Aron produced his best known work, *The Opium of Intellectuals*, in 1955, in which he upended Karl Marx's claim that religion was the opium of masses and held that it was rather Marxism which was the opium of intellectuals in post-war France. He produced most of his works in French language, which acted as a limitation on his popularity in the western world. However, he was surely at the forefront of the twentieth century French intellectualism.

In his book *Democracy and Totalitarianism* (1965), Aron talked about totalitarianism in two regimes - of Nazi Party in Germany and of Soviet Communist Party in Russia, during the periods - 1934-38 and 1948-52 and gave five elements of totalitarianism. Aron concluded that these two regimes were highly totalitarian in nature. Totalitarianism, as per sociologydictionary.org, is a system of centralised government in which the State has total authority over society and manipulates all aspects of culture including the arts, in order to control the private lives and morality of its citizens.

Although Aron talked about a different sociocultural environment prevailing in (Germany and Soviet Russia) but the five main elements that he put forward, if considered being independent of time, sociocultural environment and the subsequent technological developments, could be used as a tool to analyse the 'tendencies of totalitarianism' in other regimes.

Though these elements are not a scale in itself to measure the extent of totalitarianism, but these could surely be used to analyse any tendencies, if present, towards totalitarianism.

The five main elements of totalitarianism are (Aron, 1968)

1. The totalitarian phenomenon occurs in a regime which gives to one party the monopoly of political activity.
2. The monopolistic party is animated or armed with an ideology on which it confers absolute authority and which consequently becomes official truth of the state.
3. To impose this official truth, the state reserves for itself in turn a double monopoly, the monopoly of the means of coercion and those of the means of persuasion. The means of communication, radio, television, press, are directed and commanded by the state and its representatives.
4. Most economic and professional activities are subject to the state and become, in a way, part of the state itself. As the state is inseparable from its ideology, most economic and professional activities are coloured by the official truth.
5. As all activity is state activity and subject to ideology an error in economic or professional activity is by the same token an ideological fault. Thus at the very root there is a politicization, an ideological transfiguration of all the possible crimes of individuals and in the police and ideological terrorism.

CONTEMPORARY INDIAN REGIME

In the past six years, the BJP government in India has been accused, of being totalitarian or moving towards becoming a totalitarian regime. Most of these accusations have been made

by the leaders in opposition, who have their own agenda. However, even some intelligentsia have also charged the government of being authoritarian.

Even so India has a freely elected government, but the elected governments could also turn to undemocratic means in their undertaking of fulfilment of their determined objectives. As Raymond Aron stated - 'In the twentieth century there are authoritarian regimes which are not one-party regimes and there are one-party regimes which do not become totalitarian, which do not develop an official ideology and which do not shape all their activities through ideology.' (Aron, 1968)

Although it is very difficult to set a threshold beyond which a government could be branded as totalitarian, but an effort could be made to make an analysis of the same. This article seeks to analyse whether there are any 'totalitarian proclivities' in the government and the ruling party at the helm of the country, by tracing some of the events happened and the moves made by the government.

ANALYSING THE FIVE ELEMENTS IN INDIAN CONTEXT

1. The totalitarian phenomenon occurs in a regime which gives to one party the monopoly of political activity –

India has an active multi-party system. There are eight 'recognised national' parties in the country (India(ECI)) - All India Trinamool Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Communist Party of India, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Indian National Congress, Nationalist Congress Party, National People's Party. Except for the All India Trinamool Congress and National People's Party, which have some influence in West Bengal and North-East Indian states respectively, all the other parties are on the margins of the national politics.

Although this might be due to the performance of these parties themselves but the sloganeering and effort of the ruling BJP to ensure a 'Congress-Mukt Bharat', at present the only party that could provide some direct challenge to it at the national level, does claim to its tendency of establishing a monopoly on the political activity. There is no official opposition party in the popularly elected chamber of the parliament (Sabha(LS)) and the ruling party has ensured to have its say on most of the issues, by hook or by crook.

The money power has become a highly decisive factor in politics. The ruling party has reduced transparency in the political funding of the parties by introducing electoral bonds. (Sahoo, 2019) The Election Commission of India has objected to the argument on enhancement in transparency in political funding via these bonds, as stated by the government, and filled an affidavit in the Supreme Court, appealing that these rather enhance opacity in the funding. And by all measures, it is the ruling party which has gained maximum benefits from this

move, pocketing over 64% funding in 2018-2019, and thus, has moved further towards ensuring its monopoly in the arena of politics. (ADR, 2020) So, there appears an attempt to ensure exclusivity on the political activity.

2. The monopolistic party is animated or armed with an ideology on which it confers absolute authority and which consequently becomes official truth of the state –

The ruling party is armed with an ideology that it considers to be supreme. (Ahmed, 2015) In the last six years, the agenda of Hindutva has brought a kind of transmutation to the social fabric of the country (Dhillon). It has brought a sense of fear (whether real or imaginary) among the minorities, and the silence of the Prime Minister on the incidents of mob lynching and riots have acted as a validation of putting the ideology into action. At the same time, the saffronisation of education (Huffpost, 2016) and public places (Ahmad, 2018) is a reality in the country.

If the statements of the leaders of the ruling party are to be believed (ANI, 2018), then the goal of establishing India as a 'Hindu Rashtra' is the ultimate resolve that the ruling party aims to materialize. And if this is what the party is up to, then they are heading towards making it the official truth of the state. Although several countries in the world have a state religion, be it Christianity, Islam or Hinduism, but it is the monopoly on interpretation of the religious belief (or ideological belief) for 'us' (believers) and the segregation and selective targeting of 'them' (non-believers), is what distinguishes a totalitarian regime from others.

3. To impose this official truth, the state reserves for itself in turn a double monopoly, the monopoly of the means of coercion and those of the means of persuasion. The means of communication, radio, television, press, are directed and commanded by the state and its representatives –

There is a politics-media nexus in India, news channels which favour a particular political party have expanded over the years, playing a role in shaping the narrative and influencing the opinions of masses. A political scientist and an international journalist, Aman Madan states, 'The government has not created an official state run news service, but instead relies on independent news organizations to peddle its economic narrative, chastise a Muslim minority, and prey on Hindu anxieties in the country'. (Madan, 2019)

'The social media accounts are being tracked by the organs of the state (Shrivastava, 2018) and a narrative is being created in favour of the ruling party, by channelling the political discourse. (Rao, 2019) A phenomenon of naming and shaming the elements hostile to the ideology and the actions of the government and the party in power is also in play.

Despite the above, it is also a reality that apart from influencing the dialogue and regulating the channels of

communication, there is no complete clamp-down or control of the government on the means of communication.

Regarding the means of coercion, the state forces and the militant wings of the allied organizations have played a role in operationalizing the ideology, be it cow vigilantism or selectively backing-off (role of police during riots, as recently happened in case of Delhi) to target 'them'. (HRW, 2019)

4. Most economic and professional activities are subject to the state and become, in a way, part of the state itself. As the state is inseparable from its ideology, most economic and professional activities are coloured by the official truth –

In India, although political parties get a great deal of their funding from corporates, who seek to alter the government policies in their favour to exert more influence in the market and make higher profits. Yet, there exists a comparatively free market in the country in which the forces of demand and supply ensure the value of the commodities and the market-forces - the rules of the game, and above this, the state does the regulation to ensure greater good of the populace (whether real or perceived).

And rather than centralisation of control on economic and professional activities, there is an inclination towards privatisation of the public owned assets in the name of enhanced efficiency. The approval for running privately owned trains like the Tejas Express (Ministry of Railways, 2020) and allowing corporates to 'Adopt a Heritage'; restoring historical monuments are cases in point. (Borpujari, 2018)

At the same time, the government has clamped down on the slaughterhouses as they stand in opposition to the ideology of the party and have subsequently impacted the economic activities of the section belonging mainly to the 'them' (non-believers). In this limited fashion, there is a sense of colouring of economic activities by the official truth of the state. (Mumbai, 2015)

5. As all activity is state activity and subject to ideology an error in economic or professional activity is by the same token an ideological fault. Thus at the very root there is a politicization, an ideological transfiguration of all the possible crimes of individuals and in the police and ideological terrorism –

There is a semblance of ideological terror being perpetrated in the country, if this is what it takes, by physical attacks, by singling out on social media or by using legal provisions against the 'them'. Anyhow, a large-scale perception has definitely been created (whether natural or manufactured), regarding the spreading of terror at the level of ideas in the country.

The soldiers of the ruling-party have been engaged in spreading hatred in one form or the other. As held by author

Humra Quraishi, 'The Hindutva rulers who insist on heaping provocative, threatening, communal and abusive taunts are part and parcel of the political machinery!' (Quraishi, 2020) Similarly, the assaults on intellectuals and students are a part of a chain of events which point towards the presence of ideological terrorism. Though the degree of its presence might be disputed, but its presence is firmly established. (Peer, 2017)

CONCLUSION

Raymond Aron analysed the Soviet Russian and German states and societies in the twentieth century and presented the true face of these regimes, which being gravely brutal, utilised force extensively on the oppositional elements. They ferociously put their ideology into practice to achieve their objectives.

In regard to the contemporary India, the above analysis of the Aron's five elements brings us to a conclusion that there is a presence of some 'totalitarianism tendencies' as all the five elements are present, though the proportion and form is definitely different and nowhere close to what was witnessed in the twentieth century, but the question of its presence cannot be negated. There is an attempt to impose a particular ideology on the society and various means are being used to ensure its fulfilment.

But it should also be acknowledged that the people of the country have seen some of these phenomena under different governments in the past. And it is important to mention that notwithstanding the nature of the regime, the Indian society has a lot of resilience to get over such episodes, as they did in the second half of the twentieth century (during Emergency era) and restores democracy with all the rights and freedoms. The Indian masses have the maturity to decide for their own welfare and for the good of the nation. Though, they are the ones who have twice voted the BJP government to power, as they believe in giving opportunities to the ones claiming of having solutions to the nation's problems, but they also have the habit of learning from their own mistakes and amend them in the future.

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