

"Velvet Revolution embraced Gandhian ethics of responsibility, commitment to human dignity."

November 17 marked the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution organised by the Czech Civic Forum and the Slovak public against one of the last Soviet-orbit regimes. The Velvet Revolution (sametová revoluce) was a non-violent transition of power in what was then Czechoslovakia. The Czech and Polish experiences of democracy have shown that democratisation in Eastern Europe took place less within the framework of the existing state systems than at the level of civil societies. When the Czech and Polish dissidents of the 1980s were struggling against their communist authoritarian regimes, they returned to the concept of civil society. What Eastern European intellectuals and civic actors understood by civil society was not just the 18th century concept of the rule of law, but also the notion of horizontal self-organised groups and institutions in the public sphere that could limit the power of the state by constructing a democratic space separate from state and its ideological institutions.

Before 1989 and the rise of liberal values in Eastern Europe, many observers argued about the weakness of the civil societies in the region. This perspective forgot two things. First, the sheer ruthlessness of communist regimes that refused civic dissent any room to manoeuvre. No free trade unions, no real opposition, no free press, no tolerance of even a hint of dissidence. Second, the miracle that stubborn civil societies did persist in countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia — even after decades of Stalinist rule, students, intellectuals and artists continued their work and helped to lay the ground for the democratic revolt.

Moreover, the Czech experience showed us that even within a totalitarian society, a basis for “civic pluralism” can be created. Although other forms of civility existed in East European societies, this civic pluralism — with roots in a philosophical reading of pluralism, in opposition to ideological “monism” — offered a rich model for those dissidents seeking to make democratic change sustainable. Not surprisingly, dissidents like Adam Michnik in Poland and Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia opened spaces for new civil and democratic politics in Eastern Europe. Charter 77, the Czechoslovak manifesto for human rights, issued in January 1977 by Havel, Jan Patocka and Jiri Hájek, paved the way to the events of the “Velvet Revolution” of November 17, 1989. Havel’s political philosophy was marked by notions such as “truth”, “conscience”, “responsibility” and “civility”. His emphasis on the acknowledgment of truth as an essential value arose from his concern with what he called “living in truth” in a post-totalitarian state. Havel insisted in his writings that, “Individuals. need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it.” So, the problem for Havel was to confront political power by inviting people to live in truth and justice, and for decency. As such, Havel showed brilliantly how the system successfully captures the lived experience of individuals in a post-

totalitarian state by giving them the illusion of being part of a silent contract. That is why, for Havel, not becoming a player in the game of a post-totalitarian state was an embryonic act of dissent. What was important was defending one's dignity and regaining one's sense of responsibility. This was clearly a moral act, which was defined by Havel as "living within truth". Havel analysed the essence of living within truth while examining the various dimensions of what he called "the power of the powerless". He affirmed: "When I speak of living within truth, I naturally do not have in mind only products of conceptual thought, such as a protest or a letter written by a group of intellectuals. It can be any means by which a person or a group revolts against manipulation: Anything from a letter by intellectuals to a workers' strike, from a rock concert to a student demonstration, from refusing to vote in the farcical elections, to making an open speech at some official congress, or even a hunger strike."

In thinking about the Velvet Revolution of 1989, one wonders whether existing paradigms are even adequate, or if new ones are required to make sense of this landmark event. Thirty years later, we still need to ask about the nature of its vision and the scope of its demands. Was it reformist or revolutionary, or perhaps "refolutionary" as Timothy Garton Ash had suggested. The truth is that Havel and all those involved in the movement of 1989 did not aim to neutralise communist power with a new autocratic power but absorbed the violence of the regime, and then redirected that energy against it.

The Czech protestors of 1989 resuscitated the technique of "political jiu-jitsu", a gentle art of subtleness, which was first popularised by Gene Sharp, an American theorist of nonviolent activism, who was influenced by the Gandhian satyagraha. Regardless of whether Havel got this tactic from Sharp or directly from the Asian martial art, or invented it on his own, he was very creative in his use of a new grammar of politics.

Let us not forget that the strategies of non-violent resistance, dissent and non-cooperation suggested by Havel were presented by him as different ontological modes of living within truth. They became successful in 1989 by echoing an ethical dimension of politics in all of Eastern Europe. Havel's call to concepts such as conscience and civility, attributed a more ethical foundation to the civic humanist movement of 1989. Though very European in essence, it is undeniable that the democratic movement envisaged by Havel and the members of Charter 77 was born out of a Gandhian grammar of "ethicalisation of politics".

The Velvet Revolution of 1989 embraced the Gandhian ethics of responsibility and his commitment to human dignity, while insisting on the inherent fragility of human existence and the frailty of the human political condition. Therein lies the originality of the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the work of its moral leaders, both in confronting the realism of political power and speaking the truth beyond the national and the cultural frontiers by picking the right moral and political alternative.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. **With reference to the Velvet revolution, consider the following statements:**

1. Velvet revolution was violent power conversion in Czechoslovakia.
2. It was a struggle by the Czech and Polish people against communist authoritarian rule.
3. Its 30th anniversary has been celebrated on 17 November 2019.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 (b) Only 1
(c) 2 and 3 (d) 1, 2 and 3

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

Q. **What is the historical significance of the Velvet Revolution in 1989? Discuss how this revolution used Gandhian ethics as a big weapon versus violence. (250words)**

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 26 Nov., is 1 (c)

Committed To