

Wasted Decades — Time for Purposive Action

Starting this fortnight, the nation began to celebrate with great fanfare and nostalgia the birth centenary year of Loknayak JP. For a whole generation of youngsters, in whose lives the emergency period was a defining epoch, JP remains an authentic hero. Only those who lived through that period will understand the ecstasy and hope with which the fall of congress and the victory of the fledgeling Janata Party on March 21, 1977 were welcomed. Those were days of great expectation and genuine belief that a peaceful revolution had indeed begun.

But if we shed nostalgia and examine dispassionately, these past 24 years represent a wasted opportunity. Our leadership in 1977 had the rare opportunity to set the course for political and economic rejuvenation. The failure of state control of most aspects of economy was evident by then. That the state neglected its vital functions, and needlessly took upon itself business functions was clear to the discerning eye and objective mind. And yet our leadership did not articulate a new vision or set new goals. Even the goals set by JP in March 1975 when a million people marched in Delhi to present a People's Charter for political reform to the presiding officers of both the Houses of Parliament were not pursued with any vigour. By then, India became a passive supporter of the Soviet Union in foreign affairs. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan took place in 1978-79, sowing the seeds of the current global war against terrorism. Obviously India had a strategic interest in the future of Afghanistan. It was a glorious opportunity to shake ourselves out of the Russian orbit and pursue a new, more balanced and forward-looking foreign policy. And yet, ostrich-like, we continued merrily with our old ways even as the world around us was changing with breath-taking rapidity. Only liberation of Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union forced us out of our hibernation. Even now we do not seem to have found a national vision and will. Most often there is bluff and bluster in place of clarity and sense of purpose, and status quoism in place of vigorous change for the better. We muddle along and drift, and do not set the course or change pace.

A quarter of a century is a long time in modern era. The dramatic transformation of China began in 1978 during JP's lifetime, and when Janata was in power in India. After the demise of Mao Tse Tung and the fall of the Gang of Four, Deng Xiaoping articulated the vision of the Four Great Modernizations, which changed his nation's course and transformed China into a giant in the 21st century. Thanks to the last 23 years of successful modernization, China is the next superpower, with the capacity to rival the US economically and militarily. Even as the world reels under a spell of recession, Chinese economic growth continues apace.

Deng focused on four vital areas to rejuvenate the Chinese state — agriculture, industry, military and science and technology. In agriculture he boldly deviated from communist orthodoxy by dissolving the rural communes, allowing leasing of land by peasants, and permitting marketing of the produce. The results are astounding. China now produces over 450 million tonnes of food grains. In industry, he created Special Economic Zones in which labour laws are liberalized, and market forces are allowed to prevail. China recorded 8-10% growth rates over the past two decades consistently, and has emerged as the world's second largest economy in purchasing power terms. An estimated 100 million new jobs were created in the past two decades. Chinese global trade now is well in excess of \$500 billion. In military, Deng advocated scaling down of conventional forces and modernization using state-of-the-art technology. Happily, after the misadventure in Vietnam in 1979, the Chinese military strength has never been tested. But nobody seriously doubts Chinese military capability. Finally, Deng concentrated on development of science and technology, the key component of which was exposing Chinese students to Western education. Young Chinese practically invaded American and European universities, and their skills, knowledge and entrepreneurial talents are bringing extraordinary amounts of foreign and domestic investment, fuelling growth, creating jobs and promoting trade. Rarely in history has a vision been translated into reality with such success. What almost appeared as bureaucratism in 1978 has in retrospect become the most successful restructuring of the economy and society in the world's largest nation.

In stark contrast, India clearly wasted the last quarter century. Far too often the apologists for status quo argue that democracy has its price. The truth is democracy is not an impediment but is an engine of growth, for only democracy can ensure liberty and rule of law. Absence of both is a problem, not a stimulus for growth, in China. Nor do we need to diminish the state's role. As Swaminathan Aiyer argued in these columns this week, what we need is a more effective and enlarged state's role, but in the right direction.

We deserve a lot more than what we receive from the decrepit and corrupt state institutions. We need honest introspection and purposive governance to fulfil our potential, and not more shibboleths and pious homilies. We must force our political and bureaucratic dinosaurs to change and build a just, efficient and truly democratic state. Only then will we atone for the failures of the past 25 years.

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