

Enthuse!

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

During the McCarthy era when Senator Joseph McCarthy saw Communists lurking under every rock and bush, with the nation embarked on a witch hunt of anyone suspected of even mild socialist leanings, a campaign crafted by J. Edgar Hoover, Director, FBI, the United States went through an extremely trying period in which all reason went out of the window and instead there was a Kafkaesque era of suspicion, denouncement and harrying of all liberal forces by the ultra conservatives. I remember a cartoon in the New York Times by Herblock, an American cartoonist who has been compared with Shankar and R.K. Laxman. There is this gentleman sitting in his office, in the waste paper basket is a sign reading, 'think', replaced on the wall by a plaque reading "enthuse". Nothing could have depicted more vividly the mindset in America of that period, in which rational thinking was abandoned and a near totalitarian state was attempted to be replicated. I give great credit to the citizens of the United States that they ultimately overcame even this mass hysteria and the nation returned to its liberal roots. However, the period was frightening, not so much because innocent Americans were hounded for their beliefs as for the fact that the democratic institutions in the United States came perilously close to becoming mute spectators to the havoc which McCarthyism was wreaking.

India is a very old civilization, but it is a young republic. This highly pluralistic nation tolerates everything from witchcraft to blind faith, from total liberty of religious discourse to extreme fundamentalism, from a democratic polity to one in which cultural and political uniformity is the aim of some groups. Whereas this diversity is our strength, there is an equal strain of what Herblock lampooned as "enthuse". This means that when anything out of the ordinary occurs, there is not only acceptance but even a lemming like convergence on this new thing, in which even normal questioning is abandoned. An Asaram Bapu presents himself as a sage and saviour and hordes of people enthusiastically follow him. An Anna Hazare strikes a chord with people and suddenly he becomes a political savant who is the darling of the press and the electronic media. A Jaiprakash Narain starts a Sampoorna Kranti Movement and lakhs of people follow him. The latest phenomenon is Arvind Kejriwal who has started the Aam Admi Party and suddenly he is the flavour of the month. Just as these eruptions ruffle the surface, just as easily do they subside and people await a new Messiah. I am not saying that political space should be denied to such people – in fact our democracy is richer precisely because it allows free expression even to cranks – but I do suggest a healthy spirit of scepticism which questions everything unusual and then accepts or rejects only after testing it. That is only possible in a society which retains on its walls the motto "think".

Religion has a strong cultural base in India and unlike a great deal of Western Europe where formal religion is weak, largely because of the French Revolution, in India religion plays a very important part in our lives. Religion itself has three distinct faces and I refer here to all religions and do not confine myself to Hinduism alone. The first face is acceptance, which means that dogma is taken as granted, no questions are raised and the basis of religion become that particular dogma. Acceptance of dogma can lead to religious fundamentalism, but if it is accompanied by a liberal mindset, then acceptance of dogma, whilst governing the life of the believer, does not create an environment of hostility against other religions. This is acceptable to

society because now a person's faith has a space of his own and does not impinge on the space of the followers of other faiths.

The second face of religion goes beyond accepting its basic tenets and moves into the world of blind faith, ritualism and even superstition. This face of religion makes it exclusive in the sense that blind faith works against reason and irrational faith cannot tolerate any other faith, belief or religion. The mind becomes narrow, the clergy becomes powerful and extremist in its interpretation of the faith and the communication of such interpretation to the followers, ritual overtakes the true religion and this, in turn, leads to such superstition that ritual itself replaces faith and divinity. This is dangerous for society and leads to extremism in the manner in which the religion is practised and the politics that it encourages.

The third face of religion is the one in which human beings are encouraged to have an open mind, a questing mind and the freedom to ask questions on what the faith stands for. Amongst the Hindus it is virtually mandated that from time to time there will be a dharma sansad, or a religious parliament, a discussion in which learned people and lay people ask healthy questions about their own faith. In Islam the Quran itself has ordained that it was legitimate to have Ijtehad, or a discussion in which the knowledgeable ones, the Ullema, sit together and discuss issues pertaining to the religion, especially its practice. This congregation is called an Ijma. There has been no Ijma and no Ijtehad for several centuries now because Abdullah Al Wahab declared himself to be Mujtahid, or the one who needed no further enlightenment and ordained that there was no longer any need for an Ijma and Ijtehad in Islam. That is why Wahabi extremism plays such an important role in the Islamic world today. Going beyond mere Wahabism is the faith of the Salafists, who believe in such an extreme interpretation of the Quran that one can no longer recognise it as the highly reformist, liberal religion revealed by Allah through his Prophet, Mohammed, Salallah Walleh Salallam, to whom was gifted the Quran Sherif. Christianity, itself a revealed religion, came out of the mindset of exclusivity because of liberal western thought and because Protestantism was given space for expression, Christianity has remained intact despite the fact that different sects have other forms and religious practices than those advocated by the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, the Pope and prelates of the Roman Catholic Church have learnt to co-exist with the practices of non-catholic clergy and congregations without Christianity itself being weakened. Rituals in different forms of Christianity have changed, some forms do not recognise a hierarchical clergy, but the basic faith of a revealed religion, the Holy Trinity, the role of Jesus as the Saviour, the acceptance of the Bible in totality contains the essence of Christianity. This is a form of continuing religious debate or dharma sansad and this is what has enabled Christianity to encourage free thought without this leading to paganism or a rejection of religion.

The religions born out of the Sanatan Dharma, including Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism have an equally liberal approach to religion. For example, in Sikhism, the Tenth Guru, Govind Singh, went to the extent of saying that there would be no more gurus, that the Granth Sahib itself was the Guru and for resolution of any doubt any Sikh was welcome to read the Granth Sahib because it contains in itself the answer to every question and every doubt. There could be no better exhortation to the faithful to use their minds and think for themselves about what the religion means. In some ways Sikhism is the most liberal of all religions because apart from

certain basic personal identification requirements of the Khalsa, who themselves form only a part of the total Sikh community, every Sikh has the freedom to think for himself.

I have referred to the approach of different faiths because I want to highlight how even religion, which means a particular faith, allows and in fact encourages its followers to eschew blind faith and to think for themselves. The Asaram Bapus and some of the more eccentric Christian cults in the United States are aberrations, which flourish because their followers have abandoned thought and instead blindly accepted what is projected to them as the true faith. So long as this happens in the private lives of people, this need not necessarily concern society, unless the social equilibrium is being disturbed by blind faith, but when it comes to politics and governance it is an entirely different matter. Good government requires continuity, which does not preclude change but which prefers evolution to revolution. That is why it is paramount that in politics there should be freedom of choice between ideology, thoughts, plans and practices, which collectively reject a monolithic State and allow a democratic polity to flourish in which divergence of thought, dissent, new ideologies and programmes are all tolerated and even encouraged. That is why in a true democracy each set of ideological thoughts represents what a particular party stands for and it is expected that people at large will absorb the ideologies of all the parties and then arrive at a choice of the party which they will vote to power. In other words, the choice of the voter will be exercised rationally and to do this he will look at the ideologies, plans, programmes and practices of all the parties offering themselves for election.

It is the job of the media to provide a place for the parties to air their views and principles and to place them before people so that they can exercise a rational choice. This would be an ideal situation in a mature democracy. But does it happen that way in India? Let us look at the reality of Indian politics, which is that for quite some time it was only the Congress Party, viewed by the people as the vanguard of the freedom movement, which dominated the political scene. Mahatma Gandhi had understood very clearly the danger of a Congress which led the freedom movement and consisted of various elements, not necessarily in natural harmony, continuing to remain a single party after independence because now the cementing force of the freedom struggle would have gone and instead there would be a jockeying for power. He, therefore, had suggested that the Congress should dissolve itself and its constituents should then coalesce into different parties which had their own distinct ideologies. Nehru and other Congress leaders did not heed the Mahatma's advice, with the result that what could have happened in 1947 did not take place with the constituents of the Congress Party broken into separate parties with their own ideologies, which could have created a healthy competition between parties which had the common background of the freedom struggle and, therefore, a common interest in the country, whilst appealing to the voters for support on account of their ideologies, Indian politics would have been principled. Because the Congress did not heed the Mahatma's advice ultimately the hegemony of the Congress was broken, but either by regional parties which did not have a national perspective or by internal revolts which created parties whose sole objective was to capture power by fair means or foul. Thus 1967 became the year in which government by defection replaced government by election in many parts of the country and this had a very deleterious effect on good government in a democratic context. The people wanted good government, the politicians only wanted power and, therefore, we entered into a period of utter decline of principled politics.

As time passes the decline of political morality continues. Instead of arresting such decline the political parties have resorted to competitive populism which is highly dependent on the people of India reverting to blind faith. All those who encourage and prosper by blind faith and superstition always offer miracles which are aimed at attracting more and more followers. Miracles cannot be done by human beings because if there are miracles they would be in the domain of divinity, a status for which no human being can aspire. The political parties who are practitioners of competitive populism also offer miracles, such as free water, subsidised electricity, subsidised bus fares, unaffordable doles, free food, etc. The political parties are quite aware of the fact that either they cannot deliver or if they deliver, then this would beggar the State in short order. Ultimately if the State becomes bankrupt even the few services it provides will be beyond it and, therefore, for the short term pleasure of a free commodity the people will then have to do without it for years to come till a more sensible government comes to power. Gujarat does not give free electric power to anyone and, therefore, it is able to supply power for twenty-four hours to everyone. Maharashtra has been giving free power to the agriculturists and today in large parts of Maharashtra people are deprived for hours on end of any power supply. Which State has benefitted people more, Gujarat, because it is pragmatic, or Maharashtra, because it is populist?

This essay is not on good government versus populism. It is an essay on the question of whether we shall think about issues or we shall blindly enthuse about them. The Indian media has an unfortunate tendency to swing to extremes. When Modi was not considered a front runner for power his name was anathema and large sections of the press and the electronic media used every opportunity to revile him. They never stopped to think about what was negative in Modi and what was positive because their perception was that they should stop thinking, start enthusing and attack Modi as a demon. Now that he is a serious contender for power the press and media are sharply divided into the pro and anti Modi camps. The pro camps can see nothing wrong with Modi, the anti camp can see nothing right in Modi and the end result is that objectivity is lost when assessing Modi. This really reminds one of the life of Napoleon Bonaparte after he had escaped from Elba and started his progression towards Paris. A French newspaper stated in headlines, "The Monster has escaped from Elba". A few days later the headlines read, "Napoleon Bonaparte has landed at Marseilles" A few days later the same newspaper reported "His Majesty the Emperor has entered Paris in triumph". That is where an environment in which one is supposed to enthuse rather than think always leads to.

The political scene in India is such today that people in many places are fed up with misgovernment. That is why in Delhi even a completely new party such as Aam Admi Party has been able to make deep inroads into the Congress vote banks. For the media today it is Aam Admi Party and nothing but Aam Admi Party, including a projection of the party as a serious contender for the general elections. Not to be considered pro Kejriwal is almost equated with being anti progressive. In this, reason has no place, past experience is not to be recalled, the fate of other movements is not to be recounted because the need to enthuse mandates the need to eulogise Kejriwal. Jaiprakash Narain's Sampoorna Kranti Movement was not confined to a city because it swept the whole country. It even caused the downfall of Indira Gandhi and the coming to power of the Janata Government. The very sycophants who prostrated themselves before Indira Gandhi now spared no effort to revile her. No one even asked the question whether it is Jaiprakash who brought the Janata Party to power, or was it in fact the gross error made by

Indira Gandhi by declaring a State of Emergency, which temporarily created an environment which ultimately resulted in Indira's ouster. Three years later she was back in power. When that period is looked at in hindsight perhaps it is a negative vote against Indira Gandhi which resulted in her being thrown out of power, but when the Congress Party was able to nullify the negative effect and instead the bickering within the Janata Party created a negative effect against that government, which so quickly brought Indira back to power. In the success of the Aam Admi Party to win twenty-eight seats and to form a minority government in Delhi the negative impact of government by the Congress Party in Delhi has been lost sight of and Kejriwal is being virtually projected as a saviour who has brought a completely new paradigm of government to the people of Delhi. But what is new about doles? When the Chief Executive of the Delhi Jal Board pointed out to Kejriwal that there was consequences of giving free water, instead of overruling her Kejriwal promptly transferred her. This was the act of a person who having been terrorised by a goonda in the street goes home and beats up his wife. What Kejriwal has achieved is that no officer in Delhi will dare to give him either information or advice and many of them, to ensure their own personal safety, will just stop working. Is there any difference between this government and that of Mulayam Singh Yadav or Mayawati? I do not know the answer but certainly know that the question is not even being asked. This is a McCarthy like situation, which we refuse to recognise as such.

I refuse to pronounce judgement on a government whose working needs to be observed for the next few months. But I do think that people who are trying to jump on to the Aam Admi Party bandwagon should certainly ask those awkward questions which will distinguish them from those who merely enthuse and bring them to the category of those who think.
