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**Stranger in the house**

Donald Trump’s emergence as the villain of the piece not only for the majority of his compatriots but for other capitalist democracies as well makes a lot of sense. Here is a man who as the head of the paterfamilias of capitalism tried to pull down two of the pillars on which the edifice of Western democracies rests.

Since 1945, the end of World War-II, the West has seen an era of tremendous – in the eyes of many, unparalleled – prosperity, progress and stability. No doubt, the West has had to cope with several challenges. The most potent of those was the rise of communism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. But such challenges were overcome.

The success of the West has been widely attributed to its governance model, which has two constituents – capitalism and democracy. Capitalism or free market enterprise allowed the economies in Western Europe and North America to grow at a fast pace, which in turn enabled the people to enjoy a high standard of living. As capital knows no geographic boundaries, open borders and open markets have been a key component of the governance model.

Although otherwise a stupendous success, the capitalist model has been susceptible to two chronic problems. One, economic growth has been cyclic. Periods of robust growth are often followed by an economic downturn in which incomes fall and unemployment rises. But Western nations have learnt how to handle such downswings. In the face of economic recession, the government steps up public expenditure, cuts taxes, or increases money supply in the economy.

Two, the benefits of economic development have not been evenly distributed. But that was never a goal. Nor did it box-in the political or economic progression. When the threat of communism was most serious, capitalism contrived the welfare state, which demonstrated that – contrary to the teachings of Karl Marx – workers need not own the means of production to be prosperous. In any case, the system’s inbuilt stabilizers and safety valves, such as unemployment allowance, social security payments, stipends for deserving students, and meritocracy, have made a highly skewed distribution of wealth bearable.

The freedom of enterprise in the economic sphere has been accompanied by the people’s incontestable right to choose who will govern them. Every citizen has the right to vote and run for public office. Just as the firm which is more efficient than its competitors will take away the larger slice of the market, the political party which wins the largest number of votes is entitled to form the government. As in case of the economy, the political system has inbuilt stabilizers and safety valves, such as parliamentary or Congressional oversight, the power of judicial review, and a vibrant media, which together keep a check on the executive.

Like the economic model, the West’s political model is far from perfect. Whether it’s a parliamentary or presidential system, wealth leads democratic institutions by the nose. The candidates to be able to set in motion their narratives or programmes must arrange the necessary funds. And one who pays the piper calls the tune. A few months ago, Americans saw arguably the priciest election campaign in the world.

Freedom of opinion, another cornerstone of democracy, involves generation of opinion, which needs money. The ownership of the press, or the electronic media, is also a pecuniary matter.

However, these limitations of capitalist democracy have not constituted too intractable a problem, mainly for the reason that the alternative – despotism – is too bad to be even fancied.

In all, capitalist democracies have enjoyed a virtually idyllic period. As in the case of a typical Indian TV soup, whenever tensions or contradictions arose, they were amicably resolved, as the adversaries seldom questioned the cardinal principles of the system. Changes in government have been orderly and as per the law and the constitution. The losing party or candidate generously accepts the outcome rather than question the electoral process.

Of course, even after the fall of the USSR it has not been a problem-free world for capitalist democracies, mainly because, in their book, they have to live among politically less mature and economically and culturally less advanced nations. Global terrorism, for instance, disturbs these countries from time to time: the 9/11 in the US, sporadic acts of terrorism in London and other European capitals, and the 2020 mosque attack in New Zealand – the country which is the closest thing to heaven on earth.

But thanks to their rich resources and institutional strengths, the governments in these countries have exhibited a remarkable capability to rise to the occasion and make sure their people continue to enjoy a high sense of security and standard of living. The biological and economic challenges arising out of the Covid-19 pandemic will also be effectively tackled by these countries.

While keeping their own house in order, these capitalist democracies have never shrunk from putting the less advanced nations through the hoop. However, for leaders and the intelligentsia in the advanced world, such intrusions are acceptable – at times even admirable – as they spring from a ‘noble’ cause. Hence, despite unleashing wars in the Middle East and North Africa and decisively contributing to the rise of the cataclysmic organization Daesh, Barack Obama was conferred the Nobel Peace Prize.

Come Donald Trump and from the word go he seems to be a stranger in the house. His victory in the presidential race was arguably the greatest upset in American history. Although himself a mega success story in a capitalist democracy, he questioned two of its key components, namely free trade and free movement of people. On his first day in the White House, he pulled his country out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership treaty. Subsequently, he made the WTO, capitalism’s multilateral face, virtually irrelevant, unleashed a trade war with other leading economies including European allies, tried to restrict immigration into the US, and started building a wall on the border with Mexico, thus upending the notion of open borders. He also told other members of Nato to evenly share the economic burden of running this cold-war arrangement.

Trump’s four years in the White House are generally regarded as chaotic, because of a peculiar strain in his personality. But to his credit, unlike his predecessors, he didn’t start a single war. Last year, an attack on Iran seemed imminent. But, setting aside the advice of his national security advisor, he pulled up the horse from the precipice.

Trump frequently claimed to have put in place the strongest ever economy in the US. The claim may be an exaggeration but the economy fared reasonably well in the first three years of his rule – much better than it did under Obama – until Covid-19 hit the world in 2020 and the US economy, like most other major economies, took a pounding. His handling of the pandemic also drew a lot of flak. By all accounts, the pandemic contributed significantly to his defeat. Be that as it may, Trump would have lost even in its absence. When the Wall Street, the mainstream media, and the mega ICT-based organizations (the famous big-tech) all are dead against a candidate, his/her victory is virtually out of the question.

Predictably Trump lost and predictably he cast aspersions on the credibility of the election and stubbornly refused to accept his defeat – thus turning on its head a cardinal norm of Western democracy, which has guaranteed smooth transfer of power. Not only that, he mobilized all resources to have the electoral outcome upended. It was evident that he was fighting a losing battle. And the inconceivable happened when his supporters forced their entry into the Capitol Hill at a time when Congress was considering certifying his opponent’s victory. That was the moment, when in the eyes of even his sympathetic party colleagues, he had crossed the red line and was a danger to democracy.

Trump may leave the White House with the ignominy of an impeachment. He may find himself in the dock after he has stepped down. Even in the world’s freest society, deviants are not looked upon with approval. When deviance amounts to questioning some of the fundamental norms of society, it becomes a vice. The East or the West, the ‘wicked’ need to be made an example of.

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