**Like the Cheshire cat`s grin**

BY J A W E D N AQ V I 2021-04-13

A JOURNALIST friend has written a whole new book to caution that a cultural revolution is underway in India led by Hindutva. Let`s reserve comment and ponder an alternative perspective instead about the country under Prime Minister Narendra Modi`s watch. Consider the compelling possibility that the cultural frenzy supposedly coursing through India`s rippling sinews since Modi`s ascent as a saffron mascot is really a well-orchestrated myth quite likely spun by powerful but very threatened political and business interests. Facts on the ground reveal Mr Modi`s exaggerated sense of political invincibility propagated by his cohorts and accepted by him without demur.

Sleight of hand should not be equated with an earthshaking moment like Mao`s Cultural Revolution. A truer imagery for what may be afoot in India can be more readily seen in an unremarkable phase in the last days of ancient Rome.

Emperor Commodus for the first time in Rome`s history went into the Coliseum as a gladiator. The idea was to win the people`s support after mishandling the economy, which had set off exploding bread riots.

The people fell for the illusion and believed the emperor was going to stake his life for the glory of Rome. And while Commodus won a series of bloody combats plunging the sword through his opponents` hearts, which sent the crowds into delirium, his ploy went unnoticed. His opponents comprised pliant slaves who were quietly forced to fight with a blunt wooden sword that could no more than scratch the skin of the emperor dressed as a gladiator.

Wearing a lion`s head instead of a crown as he entered the stadium, Commodus likened himself to the legendary Hercules, which involved erecting many gold statues of him in that image. In India`s case the blunt sword is the opiated and delusional opposition.

Blunt facts challenge the feared cultural upheaval. The 2019 elections threw up after a long time a single party that secured more than 50 per cent votes. The BJP did that in 13 states and union territories. However, in 1971, the Congress got more than 50pc votes in 12 states under Indira Gandhi by winning 352 of the Lok Sabha`s 518 seats.And she didn`t need to send air force bombers across the borders to win. In 1980, Mrs. Gandhi won 353 seats out of 542 with 13 states giving more than 50pc votes to the party. In 1984, the Congress won an unparalleled 404 seats and the party got more than 50pc votes in 17 states. Was there a cultural revolution or an ideological wave underway led by the Congress? And then it fizzled out.

Comparisons have been made, including by wellmeaning analysts, between Indians today and the German people in the 1930s who became Nazi supporters overnight. India has not come to that pass, not yet, and is not likely to in the foreseeable future.

History will bear this out. Did Hitler ever praise the gypsies in Romania or speak Hebrew in Poland? No,he didn`t whereas Mr Modi did in a manner of speaking. To canvass support in the state polls now underway, he underplayed and occasionally erased f rom his midst his preferred revivalist ideology.

Had there been a Hindutva wave would Mr Modi be seeking the blessings of modern India`s ace anti-bigotry public intellectual Rabindranath Tagore in West Bengal? Modi and the BJP did this, of ten to the pointed exclusion of the founder of the BJP in its avatar as Bharatiya Jan Sangh, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. Then again, the prime minister of Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan fame was found struggling with English while addressing the crowds in Tamil Nadu. He also attempted salutationsin Banglain rallies against Mamata Banerjee.

Ergo: no Hindi here.

Given the magic of the multicultural and multilingual country that India is, it`s hardly surprising that Hindutva ideologues are reduced to faffing about a mythical past that looks hard to connect to the present leave alone to the future. Indira Gandhiset up the vaccines` facility that are helping the country and others, not Baba Ramdev.

Moreover, in a country witnessing a Hindutva wave, would the BJP need the smash-and-grab seizure of opposition-run state governments through inducements to MLAs? If venality of politics passes for popularity, it is just that, not to be confused with social change, leave alone a cultural revolution. If anything, does the constant need to conjure street violence verbally and physically with chilling videos that are then circulated to terrorise the TV-addicted middle classes, indicate mass support or state support for street crime? There`s a significant difference between the two.

Add to the mix an unalloyed reliance on neartotal monopoly on media to purvey a ruler`s monologues. In most democracies, the media is constructed around social and political fault lines.

Media rivalries make for a debate, not necessarily reflecting the plurality of an entire canvas, but there`s a debate nevertheless.

In Modi`s India what passes for dominant media, and an extremely handy media at that, is revealed in the pusillanimity of journalists who play to the machinations of wilful rulers. This is not the first time the media has let down India`s democracy. BJP leader L.K. Advani records in his memoirs that Indira Gandhi asked the media to bend, and they crawled. That habit has evidently stayed. False praise or flattery cannot be coterminous with popularity.

Perhaps the most overwhelming evidence that Hindutva is shackled by its overreach in larger India comes from the realm of the beef debate. It`s easy to lynch Pehlu Khan and others in the government`s cow-saving spree in north Indian states. Is there popular support for this brutality? No. What then explains the obvious reluctance to impose a beef ban in BJP-ruled Tripura, Goa, Assam and other north-eastern states? Try pursuing it in the south, and the roaring cultural revolution will hang in the air momentarily like the Cheshire cat`s grin, before f ading into oblivion.  The writer is Dawn`s correspondent in Delhi.

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