

The Statesman

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Apology adequate?

Since the apex court is yet to judicially determine if an expression of regret equates with an apology, and if either, or both, serve to assuage deeply-felt hurt sentiments, Rahul Gandhi could have used stronger language when taking Sam Pitroda to task for his insensitive comments on the killings of Sikhs in 1984. Merely stating the former whiz-kid should feel "ashamed" and publicly apologise will not suffice to remedy the *hua to hua* nonchalant air of the man who heads the overseas wing of the Congress party. The people of Punjab are unlikely to buy Pitroda's line that a lack of Hindi-speaking skills resulted in that comment kicking up such a storm, nor are they likely to accept Rahul's "admonition" of the family favourite. Pitroda has not been removed from office - at least Mani Shankar Aiyar was temporarily suspended from the party for his lowly diatribe against Mr Narendra Modi. A widespread view would be that Rahul was opting for limited damage-containment on the eve of polling in parts of Punjab. Thus adding to the difficult task Capt. Amarinder Singh is facing in thwarting a revival of Akali-BJP fortunes in the state which has not been enamoured of the Congress since the Bluestar fiasco in 1984. Pitroda frequently claims that he is a technocrat not a politician, so why he should have breached that subject is difficult to explain - unless the vicious rhetoric of the current election campaign has cluttered his thinking too. Certainly the BJP has gone to town - amateurs who dabble in politics do little good to their principals, yet Rahul has backed off from making Pitroda pay.

The larger question pertains to the value of apologies in politics. Yes, Indira Gandhi did apologise for the Emergency and Bluestar, but it cannot be concluded that doing so re-endered her to the affected sections of the people. Rajiv Gandhi remained tainted by his remark that the earth trembled when a big tree fell, and at least two (if not three) of the alleged lynch-pins of the consequent massacres were rewarded with ministerial berths. So Pitroda's observation may be embarrassing, but not devastating.

In this season of loose tongues, demands for apologies are made almost as frequently as the charges that politicians level against each other. Funny, everyone is lectured on why not to vote for somebody else, little argument is advanced about why votes should be cast in his/her favour for this has been an essentially negative campaign. And demands for apologies are not limited to the domestic sphere. Just a month ago emotions were running high in Punjab when the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, expressed regret - but declined to tender an official apology - for the slaughter at Jallianwalla Bagh. At least Rahul said Pitroda should feel ashamed and apologise - not that he seems to have done anything of the kind.

Bricks for Bharati!

Visuals of lungi-clad Trinamul stormtroopers pelting stones at BJP cadres in Keshpur - a segment of West Bengal's Ghatol Lok Sabha constituency - recalled the fearsome canker in the Kashmir Valley. In West Bengal, it ignited a conflagration on polling day and in a part of the state that is potentially on the boil. On closer reflection, neither the BJP candidate - Bharati Ghosh, the former SP of Jhargram - nor Bengal's ruling party activists can evade responsibility for Sunday's mayhem during the sixth phase of polling, that covered the volatile Janglemahal belt. The former IPS officer and once a trusted acolyte of Mamata Banerjee, had once referred to the Chief Minister as the "Mother of Janglemahal". It is quite another story that Mrs Ghosh and the Chief Minister had subsequently reached a narling of the ways, promoting the feisty officer to quit the IPS and join the BJP. Last Sunday, she was reduced to tears as she countenanced the fury of the rival party. As Trinamul cadres went berserk with bricks and stones when Mrs Ghosh tried to enter a booth with her polling agent, it was quite evident that the state's ruling party is infuriated with her recent remark that she would bring in thousands of BJP activists from Delhi and beat up the Trinamul cadres like dogs. Mrs Ghosh's language of hate has palpably ignited the violence, that prompted her to scale the walls of the station and seek refuge at the Keshpur police station.

While such language has become par for the course in an astoundingly ugly election, a better choice of words was expected at least of a former member of the uniformed services. The decidedly uncivilized analogy was an echo of the ghastly incident that recently nursed Kolkata's NRS Hospital, where two trainee nurses beat up as many as 16 puppies to death. This appears to be at the core of Trinamul's counter-mobilisation, of a kind that has not been witnessed in the rest of the 41 constituencies. It has been palpable too that Mrs Ghosh was the lone target of the mob fury, provoking her CISF personnel to fire and injure a Trinamul activist.

On closer reflection, the mayhem at Keshpur was the outcome of unrestrained use of foul language both by certain candidates and their leaders. The inter-personal kerfuffle has somehow transcended the electoral battle. The use of bricks to counter the beating of dogs analogy has placed the trust with democracy on a powder keg. There will be no winners or losers in the contest for Ghatol. Democracy has degenerated as never before since 1952, when the first parliamentary election was held. Bharati Ghosh crossed the *Lakshman Rekha*. The 23rd may or may not bring us hope; it will certainly bring us relief from the spectacle of our leaders decimating democracy with foul rhetoric.

Return of Alternatives

The publication of previously unknown manuscripts in the German MEGA2 edition, along with innovative interpretations of his work, have opened up new research horizons and demonstrated more clearly than in the past his capacity to examine the contradictions of capitalist society on a global scale and in spheres beyond the conflict between capital and labour



The return to Marx following the economic crisis of 2008 has been distinct from the renewed interest in his critique of economics. Many authors, in a whole series of newspapers, journals, books and academic volumes, have observed how indispensable Marx's analysis has proved to be for an understanding of the contradictions and destructive mechanisms of capitalism. In the last few years, however, there has also been a reconsideration of Marx as a political figure and theorist.

The publication of previously unknown manuscripts in the German MEGA2 edition, along with innovative interpretations of his work, have opened up new research horizons and demonstrated more clearly than in the past his capacity to examine the contradictions of capitalist society on a global scale and in spheres beyond the conflict between capital and labour. It is no exaggeration to say that, of the great classics of political, economic and philosophical thought, Marx is the one whose profile has changed the most in the opening decades of the twenty-first century.

Recent research has refuted the various approaches that reduce Marx's conception of Communist society to superior development of the productive forces. In particular, it has shown the importance he attached to the ecological question: on repeated occasions, he denounced the fact that expansion of the capitalist mode of production increases not only the theft of workers' labour but also the pillage of natural resources. Another question in which Marx took close interest was migration.

He showed that the forced movement of labour generated

by capitalism was a major component of bourgeois exploitation and that the key to fighting this was class solidarity among workers, regardless of their origins or any distinction between local and imported labour.

Marx went deeply into many other issues which, though often underestimated, or even ignored, by students of his work, are acquiring crucial importance for the political agenda of our times. Among these are individual freedom in the economic and political sphere, gender emancipation, the critique of nationalism, and forms of collective ownership not controlled by the state.

Furthermore, Marx undertook thorough investigations of societies outside Europe and expressed himself unambiguously against the ravages of colonialism. It is a mistake to suggest otherwise. Marx criticized thinkers who, while highlighting the destructive consequences of colonialism, used categories peculiar to the European context in their analysis of peripheral areas of the globe. He warned a

number of times against those who failed to observe the necessary distinctions between phenomena, and especially after his theoretical advances in the 1870s he was highly wary of transferring interpretive categories across completely different historical or geographical fields. All this is now clear, despite the scepticism still fashionable in certain academic quarters. Thus, thirty years after the

fall of the Berlin Wall, it has become possible to read a Marx very unlike the dogmatic, economic and Eurocentric theorist who was paraded around for so long. Of course, one can find in Marx's massive literary bequest a number of statements suggesting that the development of the productive forces is leading to dissolution of the capitalist mode of production. But it would be wrong to attribute to him any idea that the advent of socialism is a historical inevitability. Indeed, for Marx the possibility of transforming society depended on the working class and its capacity, through struggle, to bring about social upheavals that led to the birth of an alternative economic and political system.

In contrast to the equation of Communism with "dictatorship of the proletariat", which many of the "real world socialists" espoused in their propaganda, it is necessary to look again at Marx's reflections on Communist society. He once defined it as "an association of free human beings". If Communism aims to be a higher form

of society, it must promote the conditions for "the full and free development of each individual". In *Capital*, Marx revealed the mendacious character of bourgeois ideology. Capitalism is not an organization of society in which human beings, protected by impartial legal norms capable of guaranteeing justice and equity, enjoy true freedom and live in an accomplished democracy. In reality, they are degraded into

mere objects, whose primary function is to produce commodities and profit for others.

To overturn this state of affairs, it is not enough to modify the distribution of consumption goods. What is needed is radical change at the level of the productive assets of society: "the producers can be free only when they are in possession of the means of production". Therefore, according to Marx, the objective of the workers' struggle should be to restore those assets to the community. Thanks to the emancipatory potential of technology, this would make it possible to achieve a basic aim of Communism - the reduction of necessary labour time and a resulting increase in the capacities, creative talents and pleasurable activities of individuals. The socialist model that Marx had in mind did not allow for a state of general poverty but looked to the achievement of greater collective wealth and greater satisfaction of needs.

Marx also remarked that, in the Communist mode of production, "private ownership of the planet by individuals will appear as absurd as the ownership of one human being by another". He directed his most radical criticism against the kind of destructive possession inherent in capitalism, pointing out that society does not own the environment but has "a duty to pass on the world in better conditions to future generations".

Today, of course, the Left cannot simply redefine its politics around what Marx wrote more than a century ago. But nor should it commit the error of forgetting the clarity of his analyses or fail to use the critical weapons he offered for fresh thinking about an alternative society to capitalism.



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Is civility dead?

SIR, Apropos the editorial, 'Propriety plummets', it bears recall that as Chief Election Commissioner, Mr TN Seshan had reaffirmed the power of the Election Commission. Chiefly, he had streamlined the system of voter identity and canvassing. The present Election Commission has demonstrated how pliant it can be. Be it in Parliament or the election campaign, it is distressing to reflect on the declining trend in propriety, courtesy and decorum. Humour and wit seem to have no place and one is inclined to ask whether civility is dead? As a senior citizen I look back with nostalgia to the days when parliamentarians like Pilo Mody or the former Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, would pepper their presentations with quotations, poetry and witticisms. In recent years, the quality of public discourse has declined alarmingly and even one's physical disability is fodder for uncharitable remarks. And such intemperate comments go viral through the new media such as Whatsapp and Twitter.

Rarely in course of discussions these days, whether on politics, religion, the economy, education is there a civilised exchange of ideas, let alone respect for the other side. Civility and decorum is an expression of a basic understanding and respect for the laws, rules, and norms that guide us to what is acceptable and what is unacceptable behaviour. For a

society to function, people must be willing to accept the guardrails. To an extent, debates and disagreements are natural. After all, there are major political parties that are vying to win the voters. We need to establish a climate for a healthy public discourse as befits the office one holds. It is distressing to see the erosion of democratic norms and civility towards fellow citizens. The political process will suffer enormously if there is a lack of tolerance, propriety, decorum and the important democratic tradition of respecting dissent. Civility is the lubricant that keeps our society running smoothly. Let us maintain certain standards of civility and decorum in public life and be the correct role-models for the next generation.

WHEN CONGRESS WAS IN POWER...

SIR, Your editorial, 'Stuck competition' (5 May), is brilliant. The attack on our financial capital (26 November 2008), on Parliament (December 2001) and several other outrages in different cities had occurred when the Congress-led UPA was in power. A powerless and remote-controlled Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, had no option but to keep mum as somebody else was then enjoying power and he was dancing to her tune. To that can be added the compulsions of coalition politics. Every attack by Pakistan-sponsored terrorists went unanswered either due to vote-bank politics or fears of a nuclear reprisal. The present government has responded in the language that the nation had demanded and the "agents of chaos" are on notice. This is not the time to judge who is ahead of the other; we need to remain united in the interests of the nation.

Yours, etc., Aranya Sanyal, Siliguri, 6 May.

I am reminded of a comment attributed to the late Adlai Stevenson, a US Senator - "If the Republicans stop telling lies about us, we will stop telling the truth about them". How true in the context of the current high decibel election

season as it continues to ramp up. Yours, etc., HN Ramakrishna, Bengaluru, 6 May.

RAMZAN TRUCE?

SIR, The former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister and PDP presi-

dent, Ms Mehbooba Mufti's call for a ceasefire with separatist militants during the month of Ramzan doesn't merit consideration.

Last year, Ms Mehbooba was in power and the Centre halted military operations to help Muslims observe Ramzan in a peaceful manner. During the truce, both the Prime Minister and the Home Minister visited the Kashmir Valley with an appeal to shun violence.

The government also expressed its willingness for talks with the Hurriyat Conference. However, the militants failed to reciprocate the government's goodwill gesture. While the security personnel displayed exemplary restraint during this period, terrorists continued their attacks on civilians and armed forces.

As a result, the 31-day Ramzan truce witnessed a sharp rise in terror-related incidents in the Kashmir Valley as Pakistan-sponsored terrorists tried to sabotage the ceasefire with the killing of nine security personnel and five civilians. On 14 June, the veteran scribe, Shujaat Bukhari, was shot dead.

The Rashtriya Rifles jawan, Auranzeb, was kidnapped and killed by militants when he was going home to celebrate Id. This time, Mehbooba has expressed the hope that militants will stop their activities. But within hours, terrorists gunned down the BJP leader, Ghulam Muhammad Mir, at his home in Verinag in Kashmir.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 11 May.

A MEMBER OF THE ASIAN VOICES

Wiser Is winner

Smart use of credit cards brings multiple benefits to users. Credit card: two words the mention of which may many into full-blown cynics. While it is undeniable that anyone who has a credit card risks running up too much debt - a milestone that might take several years and lots of sacrifice to get rid of - if used wisely the benefits can outweigh the downsides.

One such wise use would be getting all members of one's family supplementary cards issued under the head of the family's card. Kamran Ahmed, a businessman, had figured it out a while back. He has a Visa Signature credit card from Standard Chartered Bank that came with two free supplementary cards, which he gave to his son, a university student, and his wife, a homemaker.

The family of three uses the credit card for all expenses that can be made with plastic money, and in so doing, Ahmed knows exactly how much was spent every month and where the money went, which made budgeting easier. As the primary cardholder, Ahmed could set spending limits on the supplementary cards, so the possibility of his son and wife overspending is eliminated.

But what is of greater relief to him, being the busy businessman that he is, thus he does not have to worry about handing out monthly allowances to his wife and son; they simply use their credit cards and he pays the bill in one go every month.

He can also use the card to pay for his household's utility, mobile internet and club bills every month through the Auto Bills pay feature. Every month, the bills are automati-

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cally debited from his Visa Signature Card - without his doing anything. The combined spending of the three cards almost always exceeds the ceiling set for enjoying cashbacks and he racks up lovely points each month. The points later come in handy when the time comes to pay the Tk 10,000 annual fee for the credit card.

"The card was a lifesaver the other day. My friends came over to watch a cricket match and they wanted munchies and the household was away. I ordered pizza and I paid for it with the card," his son told The Daily Star. His son, who requested not to be named, says he prefers not carrying cash with him.

"I don't have to worry about change. It is just more convenient," he added. His wife also has an equally positive experience. "I can buy whatever I like without having to worry if I have enough cash on me," said his wife Roushan Ahmed. With the credit card the items can be purchased on equated monthly instalments, meaning, instead of dropping a huge sum in one-go to acquire the product, its cost can be spread over a six-, 12-, 24- or even 36-month period, so the purchase would not be taxing on one's pocket in the end. She has availed this facility to replace many of her household appliances, without troubling her husband.

