By RAHUL SAGAR

BJP'S DHARMIC DUTY

The other side of Integral Humanism

DEENDAYAL UPADHYAYA; AMIT SHAH (RIGHT)

SAURABH SINGH

THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY'S (BJP) stupendous victory in the Lok Sabha election comes at a time when India finds itself at a crossroad. The growing expectations of its citizens and intensifying great power competition in Asia pose immense governance challenges.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has proven to be a resolute and capable decision-maker. His new Cabinet comprises skilled and public-spirited administrators. But a worry remains. Will these decision-makers be stymied by the BJP's philosophical commitments?

The BJP is committed to the ideal of Integral Humanism. Noble and sublime, this philosophy holds that the good life—the life that Indians should aspire to—is one that nurtures not only material but also social and spiritual needs. As a consequence, this philosophy is averse to free markets, which it sees as threatening social and spiritual well-being. It prefers instead state-led welfare programmes that guarantee a basic minimum.

The problem, however, is that free markets are essential for sustained and rapid economic growth and for wealth creation, which are in turn essential for national security. This is a time, then, for clear-headed thinking on the direction India should take. Otherwise, the BJP may find that the more potent threat to its hold on power is not its rivals but itself.

'Integral Humanism shall be the basic philosophy of the Party,' instructs Article III of the BJP's constitution. It is doubtful, however, that many of its functionaries or supporters can clearly explain what this philosophy amounts to. The summary on the BJP's website, for instance, features mystifying phrases like 'integration is present in completeness'. Such *faux* intellectual language is unfortunate because it obscures what is sublime and admirable in Integral Humanism. It also discourages a serious conversation as to whether Integral Humanism, which Modi has long described as his "guiding force", is adequate to meet the challenges India faces, particularly in terms of generating the kind of growth and development required to satisfy and secure the country.

Integral Humanism's most important exponent was Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya, the high-minded leader of the BJP's predecessor, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh. Upadhyaya set out to enunciate a vision for the Jan Sangh because of the circumstances in which it was born. As Upadhyaya noted in 1965, prior generations had focused on how to obtain independence, and had therefore thought relatively little about what to do once India was free. The political class of his time could not care less about the question either. The vast majority were "opportunists" willing to say or do whatever would bring them to power. Some—by which he meant the vestiges of the Hindu Mahasabha—wished to revive the past, to be guided by the precepts of ancient India. But this was a futile endeavor because circumstances had changed, and so, taking their inspiration from the Ganga, which does not lose its sacredness by flowing onwards, Hindus should adapt to, rather than loathe, the modern world.

So, what ought the Jan Sangh aim toward? Upadhyaya had no illusions about the challenge it confronted. "I realise", he readily conceded, "that all the 450 million people of Bharat cannot agree on all or even on a single question". Still, it was possible, he insisted, to identify at least an ethos or "longing" that every nation felt. If this "more or less common desire of the people" were made the "basis of our aims", he argued, "the common man" would feel that "the nation is moving in a proper direction, and that his own aspiration is reflected in the efforts of the nation".

What was, or ought to be, this 'common desire'? Was it to simply follow in the footsteps of the West, to equal their admittedly 'phenomenal progress'? Upadhyaya disagreed,

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and with good reason. Since the turn of the century, he noted, the West had championed three "good ideas"—nationalism, democracy, and socialism. But it had carried each ideal to an unhealthy extreme. Nationalism had prompted bloody wars, democracy had, in conjunction with capitalism, led to selfish individualism, while socialism had become a grave threat to individuality and human dignity. Worse still, because these ideals conflicted with each other, the West was divided, with the partisans of each camp unwilling to give quarter. In the ensuing political strife, the true purpose of governance—to

advance human well-being—had been the victim.

Since the West was itself "unable to decide what is good", Upadhyaya went on to argue, India ought not to engage in "thoughtless imitation". Rather, it ought to have faith in its own civilisational legacy, which teaches that the good life is the "integrated life"—a life that fulfills the plurality of human needs and aspirations by balancing between our desire for individual freedom as well as communal belonging, our desire for prosperity as well as humane living conditions, our sense of patriotism as well as our recognition of human unity, and so on.

The genius of this ideal is that it deliberately avoids the two invariably tragic ways in which the West tries to take all affected interests into account. The first is pluralism. On this approach, famously championed by James Madison, the framer of the American constitution, interest groups are to engage in gladiatorial combat, and if all goes well, mutual exhaustion will compel compromise. This approach stymies majoritarianism, but only at the cost of vitiating public life, turning citizens against each other (rich versus poor, for example). Those repulsed by such internecine conflict head in the opposite direction. They arrive at the idea, famously championed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that there is in fact such a thing as the common good, which can be discerned if citizens only eschew self-interest. Since it is rare for a people to agree very much, much less be willing to sacrifice self-interest, this approach inevitably leads to the guillotine, that is, to the suppression of those who disagree with whoever is the strongest—the majority or, worse still, the demagogue.

Integral Humanism rejects both these approaches: it refuses to believe that the common good is to be found or served by factional warfare, and it refuses to believe that citizens have a common interest or perspective. Instead, it posits an account of human flourishing that—from the outset—seeks to accommodate and mediate between divergent interests. On this view, the correct way to think about income inequality, for instance, is not to pit the rich against the poor, to demean the one as greedy or the other as grasping, or to believe that only one side must be right, but rather to recognise the importance of giving people an incentive to invest and profit *as well* as sureties against gross suffering and indignity.

This philosophy, which eschews dogmatism, or the belief that one value or interest trumps all others, is a very profound one, then. It captures beautifully the distaste for extremism that comes so naturally to Indians (or at least to those outside Jawaharlal Nehru University). There are, nonetheless, two reasons why this philosophy endangers the BJP's continued appeal.

The first is that it is ambivalent about, even hostile toward, free markets, which it sees as eroding moral and social values. Consider this simple but quite profound story that Upadhyaya tells: 'The Editor of *Organiser*... had gone to the U.S.A. for a visit some time ago. Upon his return, he related an interesting instance. There is a factory which produces "Potato-peelers", a device for peeling potatoes. The production of this factory outstripped the demand for the device. The management of the firm faced the problem of finding some way by which people might be induced to buy more potato-peelers. They called a meeting of all the salesmen of the firm. Among the suggestions put forward, one was to make the colour of the handle similar to that of [a] potato peel, so that along with the peel, the peeler may also be dumped in the garbage, often by mistake. Thus, there may be greater demand.'

Such observations about the selfishness of private enterprise, and the rampant consumerism that it fosters, are the reason why Upadhyaya says, in vein with socialist utopians, that India must develop an economic system that preserves "our humane qualities" by limiting mechanisation, decentralising production, and adopting indigenous technology. Upadhyaya is, of course, quite right to be worried: capitalism certainly exacts a heavy toll. Its adverse consequences include, among other things, oligarchic excess, environmental destruction, disruptive technological change and soul-crushing workloads. But, if we live in an era that exalts material things, how can a democratically elected party hope to halt the wheels of the juggernaut? How long will such curbs be acceptable to voters, especially as their tastes and standards take their cue from the urban metropolises of the world? And if, with such material change comes new ideas and new aspirations, including about diet, clothing, and personal relationships, what can the Integral Humanist do but allow citizens their experiments in living? The alternative is to resort to vigilantism and browbeating, thereby sowing the seeds of strife.

The BJP has softened its tone on Swadeshi economics. But the fact remains that its philosophy naturally makes it deeply ambivalent about free markets and leads it to worry more about redistributing wealth rather than generating it through private enterprise. Can we image its advocates saying, like Deng Xiaoping famously did, that to get rich is glorious? It is impossible, because as per Integral Humanism, the relentless pursuit of wealth and prosperity constitutes an unacceptable imbalance.

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The second challenge confronting Integral Humanism is the pervasiveness of great power competition. A nation may wish to pursue higher pleasures rather than crass material goods, but it will not be able to meditate for long if its neighbours have very different ideas. This was the great warning that Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay gave his countrymen in *Dharmatattva*, the most important but least studied text in modern India. In a world where nations snatch morsels from one another—like dogs in the marketplace, Bankim memorably wrote—Dharma demands doing what is necessary to protect one's abode.

In our time, national defence ultimately depends on the capacity of a state to acquire or develop advanced technology, which in turn depends on economic heft. On this count, the previous Modi Government performed in a rather lacklustre way. Though it established some important welfare initiatives and undertook some modest bureaucratic reforms, there was nothing like transformative economic reform. When it comes to enterprise in particular, the heavy, invariably clumsy, hand of the State remains the decisive factor, with bureaucrats able to make and unmake winners in the public and private sector.

It has become commonplace to blame this statist welfarism—*Acche Din* with Indian characteristics—on India's political economy. Given that voters expect handouts, the explanation goes, it would be suicidal for politicians to give up the opportunities for patronage afforded by an intrusive State. However, this claim is not entirely persuasive. The point of statesmanship is to craft new narratives and open new vistas. If Modi could so successfully challenge the hitherto seemingly unshakeable hold of caste, then why not that of the Yojana? The answer may have more to do with moral economy than political economy—as noted above, Integral Humanism demands that markets serve rather than undermine traditional social and moral values, which is why the ascetics of Nagpur have more to say about cow sheds than stock markets.

But this will not do. If the proponents of Integral Humanism do not focus on rapidly growing and developing the economy, and thereby obtaining the means to defend India's interests, all their high ambitions and aspirations will be for naught. They will be like the proud residents of an ashram who diligently eat their vegetables, clean their surroundings, and praise their ancestors, only to be steamrolled one day mid-prayer by a greedy property developer who likes their patch of grass. When the time comes, screeds about the glories of indigenous technologies will not save their countrymen from humiliation. If myths were enough to save civilisations, the Greeks would rule—not rue—the world.

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The risk that the BJP runs is not trivial. India is at a historic juncture. For the century prior to Independence, Britain buffered India from great power competition: she thwarted invasions from Russia and Japan, and intervened in China, Persia, and Turkey to keep these regional behemoths off-balance. Subsequently, the Soviet Union's 'friendship', and China's self-destructive politics, allowed India to escape the Cold War relatively unscathed. But now, with China having found its feet, India's neighborhood is being permanently transformed. It is unclear whether the United States, jealous of rising powers, and Japan, emaciated by demographic decline, will prove durable partners. Perhaps the United States will succeed in kneecapping China, as some in India seem to hope it will. But no statesman, who comprehends what the Chinese have overcome in this past century, ought to discount the resilience of that civilisation. Besides, should India really look forward to a wounded China—a neighbour itching to avenge itself on a world that will not cede it its due? Having India bear the brunt of China's reaction to its humiliation will of course suit the United States only too well—allowing it to take down two birds with one stone. One way or another, then, the day of reckoning is approaching. Can India meet China as an equal? It must, for there is no other durable means by which to secure an honorable peace.

Much depends then on the proponents of Integral Humanism finding the courage to diverge from ideals that—well-intentioned and sublime though they are—are not entirely fitted to the day. They must shed their ambivalence toward markets and individual choice, and reconcile themselves to advancing moral and cultural values by example and advocacy rather than control and coercion. Otherwise, the victory they deservedly relish today will become the gruesome humiliation of tomorrow, as India's rapidly urbanising middle classes, that savour prosperity and security, balk at limited horizons. Let them remember Bankim's dictum: "that which protects people and contributes to human welfare is Dharma". ▯

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