Velvet Revolution and Gandhian Ethics

Why in news?

30th Anniversary of Velvet revolution was celebrated in Czechoslovakia.

What is the brief history of Czechoslovakia?

- Czechoslovakia, was a sovereign state in Central Europe, in 1918 it declared its independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.
- From 1939 to 1945, following its forced division and partial incorporation into Nazi Germany, the state did not de facto exist but its government-in-exile continued to operate.
- From 1948 to 1990, Czechoslovakia was part of the Eastern Bloc with a command economy.
- Its economic status was formalized in membership of Comecon from 1949 and its defense status in the Warsaw Pact of May 1955.
- A period of political liberalization in 1968, known as the Prague Spring, was forcibly ended when the Soviet Union, assisted by several other Warsaw Pact countries, invaded Czechoslovakia.
- In 1989, as Marxist–Leninist governments and socialism were ending all over Europe, Czechoslovaks peacefully deposed their government in the Velvet Revolution; state price controls were removed after a period of preparation.
- In 1993, Czechoslovakia split into the two sovereign states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

What is Velvet Revolution?

- The Velvet Revolution was organized by the Czech Civic Forum and the Slovak public against one of the last Soviet-orbit regimes.
- The Czech and Polish experiences of democracy have shown that democratization in Eastern Europe took place less within the framework of the existing state systems than at the level of civil societies.
- Before 1989 and the rise of liberal values in Eastern Europe, many observers argued about the weakness of the civil societies in the region.
- This perspective forgot two things.

1. The sheer ruthlessness of communist regimes that refused civic dissent any room to manoeuvre - No free trade unions, no real opposition, no free press, no tolerance of even a hint of dissidence.
2. The miracle that stubborn civil societies did persist in countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia — even after decades of Stalinist rule, students, intellectuals and artists continued their work and helped to lay the ground for the democratic revolt.

- Moreover, the Czech experience proved even within a totalitarian society, a basis for "civic pluralism" can be created.
- Charter 77, the Czechoslovak manifesto for human rights, issued in January 1977 by Vaclav Havel , Jan Patocka and Jiri Hájek, paved the way to the events of the "Velvet Revolution" of November 17, 1989.
- When the Czech and Polish dissidents of the 1980s were struggling against their communist authoritarian regimes, they returned to the concept of civil society.

How Gandhian ideals influenced Velvet Revolution?

- What Eastern European intellectuals and civic actors understood by civil society was not just the 18th century concept of the rule of law, but also the notion of horizontal self-organized groups and institutions in the public sphere that could limit the power of the state by constructing a democratic space separate from state and its ideological institutions.
- Václav Havel was a Czech statesman his, political philosophy was marked by notions such as "truth", "conscience", "responsibility" and "civility".
- His emphasis on the acknowledgment of truth as an essential value arose from his concern with what he called "living in truth" in a post-totalitarian state.
- So, the problem for Havel was to confront political power by inviting people to live in truth and justice, and for decency.
- Havel analysed the essence of living within truth while examining the various dimensions of what he called "the power of the powerless".
- In thinking about the Velvet Revolution of 1989, the truth is that Havel and all those involved in the movement of 1989 did not aim to neutralize communist power with a new autocratic power but absorbed the violence of the regime, and then redirected that energy against it.
- The Czech protestors of 1989 resuscitated the technique of "political jiu-jitsu", a gentle art of subtleness, which was first popularized by Gene Sharp, an American theorist of nonviolent activism, who was influenced by

the Gandhian satyagraha.

- Let us not forget that the strategies of non-violent resistance, dissent and non-cooperation suggested by Havel were presented by him as different ontological modes of living within truth.
- They became successful in 1989 by echoing an ethical dimension of politics in all of Eastern Europe.

What were the outcomes?

- Havel's call to concepts such as conscience and civility, attributed a more ethical foundation to the civic humanist movement of 1989.
- Though very European in essence, it is undeniable that the democratic movement envisaged by Havel and the members of Charter 77 was born out of a Gandhian grammar of "ethicalisation of politics".
- The Velvet Revolution of 1989 embraced the Gandhian ethics of responsibility and his commitment to human dignity, while insisting on the inherent fragility of human existence and the frailty of the human political condition.
- Therein lies the originality of the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the work of its moral leaders, both in confronting the realism of political power and speaking the truth beyond the national and the cultural frontiers by picking the right moral and political alternative.

Source: Indian Express

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