Velvet Revolution of 1989

Why in News?

November 17, 2019 marked the 30th anniversary of the then Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution of 1989.

What is Velvet Revolution?

- The Velvet Revolution (sametová revoluce) was a **non-violent transition of power** in what was then Czechoslovakia.
- It was organised by the Czech Civic Forum and the Slovak public against one of the last Soviet-orbit regimes.
- **Charter 77**, the Czechoslovak manifesto for human rights, issued in 1977 by Havel, Jan Patocka and Jiri Hájek, paved the way to the events of this revolution of November 17, 1989.
- It was marked by notions such as truth, conscience, responsibility and civility.
- The problem for Havel was to confront political power by inviting people to live in truth and justice, and for decency.

What was the Eastern European perspective?

- The Czech and Polish experiences of democracy have shown that democratisation in Eastern Europe took place less within the framework of the existing state systems than at the level of civil societies.
- When their rebels of the 1980s were struggling against their communist authoritarian regimes, they returned to the concept of civil society.
- What Eastern European intellectuals and civic actors understood by civil society was not just the 18th century concept of the rule of law.
- It was also the notion of horizontal self-organised groups and institutions in the public sphere that could limit the state's power by constructing a democratic space separate from state.
- Before 1989 and the rise of liberal values in Eastern Europe, many observers argued about the weakness of the civil societies in the region.

What did this perspective forgot?

- The sheer ruthlessness of communist regimes that refused civic dissent any

room to scheme: No free trade unions, no real opposition, no free press, no tolerance of even a hint of dissidence.
- The fact that the stubborn civil societies did persist in countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia even after decades of Stalinist rule, people continued their work and helped laying a ground for a democratic revolt.

What kind of civic pluralism this society had?

- The Czech experience showed us that even within a totalitarian society, a basis for civic pluralism can be created.
- This civic pluralism has roots in a philosophical reading of pluralism, in opposition to ideological monism.
- Although other forms of civility existed in East European societies, this civic pluralism offered a rich model for those dissidents seeking to make democratic change sustainable.
- The rebels in Poland and Czechoslovakia opened spaces for new civil and democratic politics in Eastern Europe.

What was the Gandhian influence this protest had?

- The Czech protestors of 1989 brought round the technique of "political jiu-jitsu", a gentle art of subtleness.
- It was which was first popularised by Gene Sharp, an American theorist of nonviolent activism, who was influenced by the Gandhian satyagraha.
- Regardless of whether Havel got this tactic from Sharp or directly from the Asian martial art, or invented it on his own, he was very creative in his use of a new grammar of politics.
- The strategies of non-violent resistance, dissent and non-cooperation suggested by Havel became successful in 1989 by echoing an ethical dimension of politics in all of Eastern Europe.
- 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 embraced the Gandhian ethics of responsibility and his commitment to human dignity.

Source: The Indian Express



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