

Fundamentalism in Politics

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Abstract: Some understand fundamentalism (hereafter F for convenience) as orthodoxy, others as a form of puritanism, yet others as obscurantism or even fanaticism. We may thus refer to two types of Fundamentalism, one positive (F+) and one negative (F-), the former tolerant and the latter intolerant or even hostile. The author analyses fundamentalism from the perspective of Indian politics and suggests some positive steps to deal with it.

Keywords: Fundamentalism, politics, puritanism, Hindutva, civilisation

Fundamentalisms of various hues are looming on the landscape in our time. There is religious fundamentalism, cultural fundamentalism, economic fundamentalism as well as political fundamentalism. The last named concerns us here. Of course, the term fundamentalism is used with considerable elasticity in various contexts. Hence we need to clarify what meaning we attach to it for the purpose of the present discussion. Some understand fundamentalism (hereafter F for convenience) as orthodoxy, others as a form of puritanism, yet others as obscurantism or even fanaticism. Etymologically F is a mind-set that emphasizes fidelity and adherence to the foundations, whether of a creed, an ideology or an institution. As such one would not need to quarrel with it. It all depends on what that creed, ideology or institution is and what is the nature of fidelity and adherence to the same. There are creeds, ideologies and institutions with an in-built intolerance in them. Or even if there is no inherent intolerance, the attitude of the adherents may be intolerant. On the other hand, there are creeds etc. that are quite relaxed and laid back in their orientation and whose adherents, while sincere in their convictions, are not hyper about the same. We may thus refer to two types of F, one positive (F+) and one negative (F-), the former tolerant and the latter intolerant or even hostile.

F+ concerns itself with clarifying its basic position to its followers and animating them to adhere to it sincerely. It spells out the implications of this position for day- to- day conduct, policy-making and relationships. But it does not resort to coercion of any kind, nor does it strike a hostile posture towards non-adherents. Conversely, F- takes on a make-or-break attitude towards its life-situation and world-view and deals harshly with non-adherents. It does not rule out drastic measures and even extreme or “final” solutions to deal with non-conformists. But even here, one finds a broad spectrum of types of F- not all of which necessarily resort to extreme measures. In the field of religion, as also of culture, economics or politics, one finds both F+ and F- at work. While F+ is of a benevolent nature and can even contribute to the social weal within limits, F- tends to be disruptive and is not compatible with what one would normally understand by a liberal dispensation. The liberal world-view is a pluralistic one in which a core of minimum consensus co-exists with an array of diverse but mutually tolerant persuasions in various fields. Minimum consensus is required to bind society together while pluralism makes for variety, vitality and vibrancy within the total human community. General historical experience bears out that dull conformism leads to stagnation whereas Socratic questioning, even if often uncomfortable, can lead to interesting results for human welfare and social development. F- does not seem to share this perception.

Before coming to F in politics, we may briefly refer to manifestations of it in religion, culture and economics as these also impinge on the world of politics and are in turn affected by the latter. In religion, to take an example from Christianity, F+ would be seen in the mandate to love God with one’s whole heart and soul and strength, while loving one’s fellow humans as oneself. F- would be seen in the exclusivist claim that Christ alone is the Saviour of humankind and in the campaign to convert all of humanity to Christianity, on the plea that there can be no salvation outside the Church. In less liberal times, F- manifested itself in the Inquisition, the Crusades and generally in the wielding of the sword in aid of the cross. In Islam, F+ would express itself in the injunction to surrender oneself totally and unconditionally to Allah as the Supreme Being without a rival and to live in the spirit of brotherhood. F- would manifest

itself in the claim that the Koran is the final word on divine revelation and Mohammad the final Prophet. Non-believers are kafirs and therefore second class humans. Those who deviate from the fundamentals could attract harsh penalties such as amputation, stoning or decapitation, depending on the perceived seriousness of the deviation.

In the area of culture, to take an example from India, F+ is seen in the portrayal of Indian civilization and culture as something of worldwide and perennial significance, something that requires to be nurtured and showcased to the rest of the world. This would require the values and wisdom accumulated over the ages to be preserved for the present and future generations. But when the Hindutvavadi zealots make exaggerated claims of the superiority of Hindu culture in its mainly brahminized version over other forms of culture, indigenous or foreign, they are illustrating what F- is all about. They would want to establish Hindu Dharma, as they interpret it, as the very foundation of the Indian Republic. They would want to relegate all non-Hindus to the status of second class citizens. Instances of cultural F can also be cited from China, Iran and other countries. In the field of ecology, too, F is to be found in both its positive and negative versions. When environmentalists advocate the judicious use of planetary resources in all human enterprises, they are four square in the realm of F+. When however they take their ecological concerns to such extremes that they resort to sabotage and violence as instruments of advocacy, they are displaying F-. In the process they may be stifling even legitimate forms of economic activity. While one can live with F+, an exaggerated version of the same can cause it to degenerate into F-, causing stresses and cleavages in society. Liberalism guards against such an eventuality.

Likewise in economics, sundry theories, ideologies and systems illustrate both F+ and F- in various guises. For instance, capitalism is on terra firma when it lays stress on the virtues of private initiative and enterprise. Open and healthy competition in the market under a fair regime of rules is not something to quarrel over. Thus far, capitalism exhibits F+. But when it makes a dogma of laissez-faire, in the sense that the state has little or no role to play in promoting an equitable society, and must only create the conditions for unbridled profit-making, then surely it shows itself up as F-. On

the other hand, socialism in its phase of F+ lays emphasis on the social dimension of economic production and the need to establish a just socio-economic order through the pro-active exercise of political power even if this means curbing the power of private capital. But when this concern goes to the extreme of stifling free enterprise and concentrating all power, both economic and political, in the hands of the state, then surely F- is at work here. Instances can also be cited from other paradigms such as mixed economy, dependency and so on. But we need not expatiate on these here.

The Political Arena

We may now turn our attention to the specific area of politics and examine how F is at work here. In politics, the core issue is the exercise of power in the public domain for the well ordering of society. There is a whole range of permutations and combinations involving ideologies and systems predicated on this exercise of power, resulting in a kaleidoscopic political pattern locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. Speaking in the broadest sense, there is a near universal consensus that orderly civil and social life requires the legitimate exercise of power in the public domain. Differences arise over the understanding of legitimacy and the extent of the public domain. Is legitimacy a function of divine right, of superior force, of class, of descent, or of consent of the governed? And where does the private domain end and the public domain begin? Depending on the answers to these questions there will arise different political persuasions and dispensations. Our general experience of power is that it is inherent in the human psyche, either actively or passively. It further has a tendency to expand its sphere of operations and perpetuate itself. This in itself need not be a bad thing. It only shows that the exercise of power in some form or other, whether direct or indirect, is inescapable in the very constitution of human society. It can be used as well as abused, as all things human. It can be directed to benevolent no less than malevolent ends. Power is the capacity to produce results and no progress is possible without this capacity. The will to utilize this capacity is indispensable for any enterprise, whether personal or societal. Absent this will, no decision-making or implementation is feasible. Thus there is a rider to Lord Acton's

dictum that all power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

A basic question arises as to how power is to be legitimized and safeguarded from abuse. How is the mandate for the exercise of power to be secured? What are its limitations? What are the ends to which it is to be directed in concrete terms? Under what conditions is the mandate forfeited? All these are vital considerations in discussing the manifestation of F in politics. We will, therefore, focus our attention on these four variables: the mandate, its limitations, its ends and its termination.

To begin with the mandate of politics, there are political theorists and practitioners who are persuaded that there is something sacred or even mystical about political authority. For them power flows from on high as it were. In their view, there is a divine, quasi-divine, or at any rate preternatural origin to political power. Whether it was expressed as the Mandate of Heaven as in Imperial China, or as the Divine Right of Kings in early Western monarchies, or as theocratic rule under the Clergy as in contemporary Iran, the dominant paradigm is one of the innate right to rule of the anointed. In most of today's world this paradigm may no longer be accepted, though traits of it continue to be found among both the so-called elites and the masses. In an era when most members of a state, or at any rate its politically alert, vocal and active segments believed in the paradigm, it could be considered as fundamental to the polity. Deviations from this paradigm would attract sanctions of various kinds. Political F would be seen to be at work here. But whether it was F+ or F- would depend on whether the bulk of the polity viewed the results of this dispensation as positive or negative. How outsiders might rate this paradigm is a different proposition altogether. Liberals might equate it with F- whereas conservatives might view it as illustrative of F+. To the modern mind, which has largely outgrown the Divine Right paradigm, certain features of the latter may still hold some appeal. Even discounting the sacred origin of political authority, one can still appreciate the fact that authority is something that cannot be taken lightly. It is serious business with equally serious consequences for the whole of society. Our approach to it cannot be casual. Authority needs to be invested with a certain sanctity, if not exactly a

mystic aura. Hence the solemnity surrounding oath-taking and investiture ceremonies, even if the political actors concerned are professed atheists. To theists, at least in principle if not in practice, answerability before God would need to go hand in hand with accountability to the people for authority to be legitimized. Hence the dictum: *Vox Populi Vox Dei*. Within these bounds the Divine Right (DR) paradigm would seem to qualify as F+. Problems arise when DR exceeds its brief by acting as a law unto itself, demanding unquestioning conformity with its diktats. It then degenerates into F- and becomes dysfunctional politically. A countervailing movement would then have to be launched as a corrective.

The paradigm of Superior Force (SF) may seem too primitive and crude to merit consideration as a basis of political legitimacy. But it would be disingenuous and indeed dangerous to by-pass it, given the frequent recourse to it in practice at both national and international levels. It is a matter of common observation that coercive power is what holds the state together in the final instance. I say in the final instance because it is usually used only as a last resort when other instruments have failed. Force is no substitute for reason but it may unfortunately have to be pressed into service in aid of reason in times of crisis. This explains the universal existence of penal systems, police forces and standing armies. Elementary human psychology teaches us that human beings are not always motivated by reason and fellow-feeling. They need the stick at times no less than the carrot. Or else society is doomed to fall apart sooner or later. In this framework of reference, SF definitely has a role to play. But it must be borne in mind that brute force by itself cannot be a source of legitimacy unless we hold that might is right. SF slides into F- when resorted to arbitrarily and as a matter of course, to the exclusion of other more humane methods. Another version of SF is not based on military strength but on the sheer weight of numbers. Arithmetic becomes the basis of political legitimacy. The numerical majority has the right to rule and the minority must grin and bear it as best they may. To have voting as the practical method of arriving at political choices and decisions is one thing, and is to a great extent unavoidable. But to elevate majority rule to some kind of sacrosanct principle is quite another. In fact it would qualify as F-. Minorities and majorities are quirks of history or of circumstance and

are subject to flux. No special significance need be attached to them. Today's majorities may be tomorrow's minorities and vice versa.

We may now turn to another paradigm of political legitimization based on Class. In this perspective, the social class or classes that control the means of production in society also hold the levers of power in that society. Their ideas, norms and projects are those that dominate in that society. There is much truth in this formulation. To take the stand that all social classes need to share in the creation no less than in the consumption of national wealth would be an expression of F+. But to go to the extreme of overemphasizing the forces of economic production to the virtual exclusion of other factors, and to harp on the expropriation of one class in order to empower another is to display a form of F-. Class reductionism has been a stumbling block to Marxists the world over. This paradigm needs revising if it is to do justice to contemporary social developments and enhance its relevance.

Yet another paradigm that we may refer to here is the Ethnic Paradigm (EP), predicated on variables such as dynasty, race, tribe or caste. In this perspective, political power is intrinsically linked, as by some kind of divine pre-destination, to a particular royal family, tribe, race or caste. In virtue of this linkage, the royal family, tribe, race or caste concerned is specially endowed to exercise political control over a particular society. This perspective is in vogue in largely traditional societies with a hoary history of domination by a particular dynasty, tribe, race or caste. But even supposedly modern societies have not fully shrugged off this notion either in theory or in practice. Notions of the *Urbemensch* (the Super Man), the White Man's Burden, Manifest Destiny, Co-Prosperity Sphere, Civilizing Mission and so on have profoundly influenced political developments world-wide in modern times, even as notions such as the Mandate of Heaven being entrusted to the Middle Kingdom (in Imperial China) or the Hindu myth of the allegedly superior Brahmin caste emerging from the head of Brahman (the Supreme Being) in contrast to the lowest caste emerging from his feet, prevailed in earlier times. Many of these notions or myths may not command explicit theoretical respectability today but one should not underestimate their implicit subconscious hold on considerable sections of contemporary society

in many parts of the globe, not excluding the supposedly advanced societies. If the EP restricts itself to a de facto depiction of the relative political strengths of various ethnic formations within scientifically determined parameters and with respect to a certain period of time, it may still pass muster as F+. But if it presses its case too far and claims a de jure status of perennial political supremacy on behalf of any ethnic entity, it will qualify as F-. We may choose to delude ourselves into believing that we have finally discarded ethnic parochialism in favour of cosmopolitanism in our political beliefs and practices. But the fact of the matter is that in ever so many instances – whether at local, regional, national or international levels – we are caught off-guard in our ethnically biased policies and actions. Ethnic fundamentalism is alive and kicking in many parts of the world. Much blood has flowed and destruction been wrought by its depredations. The horrors of ethnic cleansing, whether in erstwhile Yugoslavia, in Burundi or in Gujarat, to name only a few of a long list of ethnic trouble spots, have their own tale to tell. On the other hand, empowerment of Blacks in the United States and in South Africa, as also of the Dalits in India, notwithstanding frequent backlashes, augurs well for more positive and hopeful political developments in other parts of the world as well, so that ethnic fundamentalism does not have the last word.

We may now turn our attention to the paradigm of Liberal Democracy (LD) which is premised on the principle of consent of the governed as the source of political legitimacy. Fundamental to LD is the belief that power over the people properly flows or should flow from the people themselves. To put it simplistically, numerous individual wills merge into a collective will that finally holds sway over the body politic. In this sense the people rule themselves. But the actual situation is much more complex. The purportedly collective will often turns out to be that of the dominant sections of a given society. And these sections may actually represent a minority of the whole society. But their will and interests masquerade as that of the entire society. The challenge of true LD is how to balance the interests and rights of various sections of the political community in such wise that the weaker sections are not driven to the wall. Less organized sections of a national society find it hard to make their voice

heard and stake their claim to a share in the decision-making process. LD must make space for them and give scope even to dissenting views and non-conformism within reasonable limits. Else rule-by-the-people will end up as a charade. Even in LD one can find F at work. One version of it is majoritarianism which is a crude rule-of-thumb for rough and ready democracy. The majority is always right and the minority must always meekly submit to majority rule. There is no fine-tuning of majority rule here. The quantitative element supersedes the qualitative element of true democracy. Here is F- at work. As we have already touched on this aspect earlier in the discussion we need not dwell on it further. Another form of F- is a constant pandering to the whims and fancies of the hoi polloi even when this is detrimental to the long-term interests of society whether in the areas of health, economy or environment. Weak democratic leaderships with no strategic vision are prone to indulge in populism in lieu of sound and vigorous political management. And this is usually done with an eye on electoral gains.

Boundaries of the Political Mandate

It is not only the nature of the mandate of politics but also the extent of its operation that needs clarification. Issues of the public versus private domain, of ends and means and of the termination of the mandate must be addressed under this heading.

Speaking of the boundaries of politics, there are two extremes of the ideological spectrum, with various intermediate positions. One extreme is the maximalist position which would give the largest scope to political activity in any society. The other is the minimalist position which would restrict the scope of politics to the bare minimum. In the latter view that government is best which governs least, since government is at best a necessary evil, politics being the 'last refuge of scoundrels'. For the maximalist, politics is the life-blood of any community. It arises from the very constitution of society which requires a regulatory mechanism for it to hold together and move forward to any civilizational or developmental goal. The logic of this position is that there can be no human progress without law and order. And there can be no law and order without authority. Further, there can be no authority without political power and the ability to

enforce its writ. This is what politics is all about. Remove politics and society falls into anarchy. Hence politics is not a necessary evil but an essential good. It binds society together and energizes it to work towards its goals. The reason why politics becomes all-pervasive is not some unbridled ambition (though ambition does feature here) but the apex role it plays in coordinating and harmonizing the power drives at work in all areas and at all levels of society. This apex role necessarily has to be an over-riding one since it affects the public domain of civil society as a whole. Hence it has the maximum visibility and impact for better or worse. It is this function of the exercise of power that the term 'politics' refers to, though power is at work in other areas too, whether it be in the family, in professional bodies, religious groups or elsewhere. But since the latter exercise of power takes place in the private domain of civil society, the term 'politics' does not properly apply to it, though we do speak of domestic politics, boardroom politics, ecclesiastical politics and so on. It is at the point where the private exercise of power impinges on the wider civil society that the private domain ends and the public domain begins. At this point the public exercise of power, viz. the explicitly political one, asserts itself on behalf of the wider community. Thus politics gets involved, at least indirectly, with almost any and every activity, however apolitical, in society. In this sense it becomes all-pervasive in an enabling sense and not in the sense of hijacking any or all of the other forms of societal activity. Problems arise when politics is apotheosized and given a veto over the latter, which happens not infrequently, illustrating an obnoxious type of political fundamentalism.

The opposite minimalist viewpoint would limit politics to the task of checking crime, providing defence against external enemies and creating conditions for free enterprise. Any further mandate entrusted to politics would shrink the space of private enterprise and civil liberties. The State would loom as a Leviathan over the lives of its members, demoting them from citizens to subjects. While the point that politics needs to be constantly monitored and provided with due checks and balances, given its tendency to exceed its brief and encroach on areas outside its proper jurisdiction, is well taken, any exaggerated attempt to emasculate its role in the public domain would be counterproductive. It would mean that the political estab-

lishment would have to wash its hands off any obligation to play a proactive role in promoting an egalitarian society. A skewed socio-economic order might very likely be the result of this political escapism, with its attendant tensions and social cleavages. This scenario is indicative of another type of political F from the other end of the spectrum. It can have a destabilizing effect on the whole of society in the long term. Thus avoiding either the maximalist or minimalist extremes and evolving a suitable balance between the private and public domains in a manner that suits time, place and circumstance seems to be the best safeguard against F- in any given society.

The question of ends and means is also of vital import for any political set-up. Here too the realist and idealist ends of the ideological spectrum generate their respective forms of F-. For the political realist politics is a down-to-earth, no-nonsense business. When power has to be exercised it must be done effectively and not through half measures. If results are to be achieved certain steps must be taken and should not be permitted to be challenged. Else the credibility of political authority is at stake. Given the human propensity to take short cuts so as to circumvent obligation, political authority has to have demonstrative value in order to secure compliance. Thus a certain ruthlessness is called for on occasion. In this view, whatever means are necessary to achieve desirable ends are in order. But there is a danger lurking here. Where does one draw the line in following a course of political action? Is any and every method that can produce results permissible? If so where is the room for ethics? These basic questions cannot be brushed aside lightly. The institutions and conventions of liberal democracy, particularly constitutional provisions like fundamental rights, universal franchise, free media and judicial review, have been put in place precisely to guard against the F- of a runaway political realism. Idealism on the other hand, while stressing the ethical component of political authority, often takes a purist approach that leads to scruple, vacillation and impracticality. The results on the ground are often disastrous despite the best of motives on the part of leaders of undoubted integrity. Thus here too a balance has to be struck between the perspectives of realism and idealism. This may sound platitudinous but there seems to be no other way of keeping F- at bay.

Can the mandate of politics be terminated? If so, under what circumstances? Some may argue that politics is a permanent function in society. Hence there will be politics as long as there is society. Thus the mandate of politics is perennial. The Social Contract theorists exemplified by Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau hold that politics is exercised in the nature of a trust, following a contract entered into between the people and the government. Locke in particular lays great stress on Natural Law which for him is the basis of legitimate political authority. If the trust is betrayed, the mandate to rule is forfeited to the people who will determine to whom the mandate is to be given subsequently. The sole purpose of the mandate is the promotion of the security, dignity, rights and interests of the people. Thus we see two elements at work here. One is the admittedly permanent function of political authority and the other the transient and contingent nature of the trustees and their tenure. One should not be confused with the other. There was a time when Louis XIV could boast “L’etat c’est moi” or “I am the State”. In more recent times, D.K. Borua claimed that India was Indira and Indira was India. Sycophants and self-anointed political messiahs have not been wanting in earlier or modern times. Certain political parties and regimes consider themselves permanently destined to rule. In this regard they are political fundamentalists par excellence. They visualize themselves as endowed with some extraordinary worldview and prerogatives to rule over lesser mortals. This posture would be amusing if it were not so dangerous. History down to our own times is replete with instances of autocracies that have functioned on this understanding, with disastrous consequences. Limited tenure and circulation of so-called political elites is a sure bet against such fundamentalism.

Conclusions

In light of the foregoing discussion certain broad conclusions emerge in respect of political fundamentalism. F turns out to be a coat of many colours. It emerges from both ends of the political spectrum and affects all manner of ideologies, parties, systems and regimes. It is a function of various factors such as beliefs, ideals, values, interests and drives. No section of society seems to be fully immune to it. While certain types of F are not in themselves dangerous insofar as they do not press their case aggressively, other types

definitely are, as they tend to treat non-adherents and non-conformists with suspicion and even hostility. Such F is what we have termed F- as it has negative social results and can lead to civil strife and even international conflicts in extreme cases. The problem even with F+ is that it can degenerate into F- with relative ease and needs constant safeguarding against such a contingency.

In India numerous instances of F + and F- can be cited from across the political spectrum. The Indian National Congress, which spearheaded the freedom struggle, held sway over most of the country for much of the post-Independence period. While in the early years it could claim with some justification that it represented the core national consensus and had the mandate of the people, it developed a vested interest in power over the years and behaved as though it had a fundamental and permanent right to rule. Its complacency and lackadaisical performance cost it dearly at the hustings. Its F+ had soured into F-. Today's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) displays its own version of F+ and F-. The former is seen in its forthright stand on India's cultural heritage and on the need to nurture it and preserve its perennial values. Nobody would quarrel with that. But F- creeps in when the BJP pushes its agenda of so-called cultural nationalism aggressively, giving it a predominantly Hindu slant with the result that minority groups feel intimidated and relegated to second class citizenship. The Marxist parties and various leftist formations and splinter groups, in their turn, have not lagged behind in their own brands of F+ and F-. While F+ is seen in their advocacy of the marginalized and subaltern sections of the polity, their F- takes the form of extreme measures such as violence and terrorism resorted to by certain radical groups on the one hand, and a contrived rationalization of typically bourgeois middle class positions masquerading as progressive proletarian measures on the part of established mainstream Marxist ruling parties on the other. Examples of F+ and F- can be cited also from various regional parties and movements and in respect of public policies and issues, whether regarding Kashmir, affirmative action (the policy of reservations), mixed economy, liberalization, privatization, globalization, non-alignment and so on. But it is not necessary to go into the details of these at this point. We have already discussed the topic of F at length and the corollaries can flow. On the global scene, a brash type of F- has announced

itself with the campaign to impose Pax Americana on far flung parts of planet earth. It is to be hoped that both nationally and internationally, moderation and good sense prevails all around so that all sections of the world community can enjoy a lasting peace dividend.

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