



UNDERSTANDING IDEOLOGY - THE PARADIGM OF POLITICS

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AS long as "lack of ideology" does not result in corruption it should not be a problem. In fact it is better not to have an ideology - as this allows the Governing bodies to operate in a logical way. Guiding principles (like those in the Constitution) are all that we need as ideology. Logical decision making is good always. Ideology is good after 2 pegs of whisky. - Suhas Nerurkar, B. Tech. IITK. (A reader commenting on the author's article "The Crisis of Ideology in Indian Politics")



Ideology makes it unnecessary for people to confront individual issues on their individual merits. One simply turns to the ideological vending machine, and out comes the prepared formulae. And when these beliefs are suffused by apocalyptic fervor, ideas become weapons, and with dreadful results. - Daniel Bell, The End of Ideology.

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Is ideology really a vending machine that one uses after imbibing two pegs of whisky? Should one move away from ideology to "logical decision making"? Is there a contradiction between the two? Is ideology-based decision-making necessarily illogical? One might even go to the other extreme and ask - can there be logical decision-making, which is truly ideology-less?

To attempt to answer the above questions, we need to understand the meaning of ideology in the context of political parties. In its most basic semantic meaning, "ideology" is the "study of ideas" in the same way that "psychology" can be defined as the "study of the psyche" or "biology" suggests the study of "bios," life. However, this usage of the word is rare and archaic.

Concise Oxford Dictionary defines ideology as "a system of ideas and ideals forming the basis of an economic or political theory. ►the set of beliefs characteristic of a social group or individual." Daniel Bell dubbed ideology 'an action-oriented system of beliefs'. Notwithstanding the crisp definitions, we can, based on our own perceptions, sum up key elements of ideology as follows:

ASSUMPTIONS

A few fundamental assumptions or presuppositions or premises that form the basis of a shared world-view, are essential building blocks for an ideology. These assumptions are accepted as prime truths by everyone in the group that professes faith in the ideology. For example, for a Catholic Christian, Bible as Divine Truth is a presupposition that forms the basis of all further discourse. Similarly, for a communist, writings of Marx and Engels may be interpreted in different ways but may never be questioned or pronounced untrue.



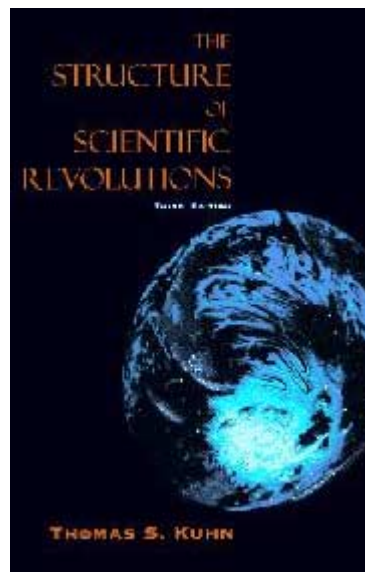
Some assumptions are tacit and are a part of the culture that a person has grown up in. Some other presuppositions are fashionable and hence everyone mouths them, while they are fashionable, even though deep within one may or may not believe in them. In modern world, it is fashionable to talk of equality of men. However, not many accept it at a personal level. In India, many brahmins (as well as many persons of other upper castes) believe that they are superior in one way or the other. On the other hand, persons of lower / backward castes believe that they deserve a special treatment because of historical reasons. Even on regional basis, almost every region believes in its superiority over the other. Faced with such deep-rooted biases, a party that declares equality of all men as its guiding principle will have a difficult task at hand. Often, a political party will have some lofty words as its ideology, even though most of the party members do not accept the same.

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To understand a party's ideology one must move beyond words and look at actions of the party, its leaders and its members. Constitutionally, all political parties in India have to declare their faith in socialism and secularism. The two magic words, however, mean different things to different parties. In each case, the key ideological presuppositions vary. A party like Bahujan Samaj Party, with its caste-based vision, has an entirely different view of socialism from the views of parties like Congress and BJP. Similarly, secularism for some means giving equal respect to all religions, while for some others it is rejection of all religious bigotry, and for a few others it is separation of church from state.

Once can say that an ideological framework provides meanings to politically relevant words. In this respect ideology is akin to paradigm, the word used by Thomas Kuhn in relation to development of sciences in his famous book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

Kuhn defines paradigms as " ... some accepted examples of actual scientific practice - examples which include law, theory, application and instrumentation together - provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research."



"A paradigm is what the members of a particular community share, and, conversely a scientific community consists of men who share a paradigm" A paradigm provides a " ... 'disciplinary matrix': 'disciplinary' because it refers to the common possession of the practitioners of a particular discipline; 'matrix' because it is composed of ordered elements of various sorts, each requiring further specification." Constituents of the matrix include "symbolic generalizations", "shared commitments to beliefs", "values", "tacit knowledge" and "exemplars". In case of an ideology also, the disciplinary matrix includes similar constituents.

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An example from the field of medicine may illustrate the nature of paradigms. Essential premise of modern medicine used to be that diseases are caused by some microorganisms or pathogens, and the purpose of medicine is like that of a warrior – kill the enemy, in this case pathogen. Ayurveda, traditional Indian system of medicine, has a different premise. Ayurveda believes that a disturbance in the balance between three key parameters of *vat*, *pitt* and *cough* causes all diseases. Ayurvedic practitioners look at even heart trouble in relation to digestive disorders. A few years ago I developed a lump (ganglion) at the back of my hand. A surgeon operated and removed it. A few months later the lump had grown back. This time, I went to an ayurvedic practitioner who related the lump to my acidity problem. He cured acidity and flatulence. In due course, the lump disappeared. The surgeon and the ayurvedic doctor are following two different paradigms of medical science. Both paradigms are useful and also have their limitations. Modern research on many diseases is accepting the holistic approach of ayurveda to some extent. The ‘medicine-kills-pathogens’ model is found to be inadequate for many diseases. In this respect, it can be said that in these areas paradigm contours are blurred.

Just as members of a particular community of professionals share a paradigm, members of a political party share an ideology. In this way an ideology provides its adherents with a 'disciplinary matrix'. Of course, no political ideology is defined as sharply as a paradigm of a scientific discipline. Even in case of a scientific discipline, the paradigm parameters are often not very sharply defined, at least in areas where new researches are being carried out. One must add that the blurred contours in problem areas enable a paradigm to grow, as has been explained by Thomas Kuhn.

We shall discuss about blurred contours a bit later but before that let us look at derivatives. The word, “derivatives” denotes all that is derived from fundamental assumptions. In scientific disciplines, fundamental presuppositions are sacrosanct but derivatives may be changed based on logical reasoning. There may be differences about basic scientific assumptions, but once the basics are mutually agreed, the debate is orderly. In the muddle of politics, it is generally impossible to separate derivatives from postulates. The followers of an ideology tend to forget basics and remember only visible issues and statements. This makes it difficult to indulge in any meaningful dialogue.

The confusion between assumptions and derivatives in case of political ideologies, leads to much more blurred areas compared to a scientific discipline. Yet, a political ideology must have a core body of assumptions or presuppositions that remain acceptable to a major section of the adherents of the ideology and help the community solve a significant number of problems. This core and the blurred cloudy contours surrounding it are perpetually in a state of dynamic evolution. It may sometime, happen that a section of the community wants to bring about a significant change in the key presuppositions in a manner that challenges and contradicts the old set of assumptions. If this happens, evolution gives way to revolution and the community splits into two camps. In due course, one of the camps may emerge as the dominant one or the two grow to become two independent communities co-existing with each other. On the other hand, if the camps do not go separate ways and remain as one community, the contradictions create confusions that weaken the community. The disciplinary matrix that binds a community's thought ceases to exist and the community needs other bonds to keep it together.

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Most Indian political parties are seeing a collapse of their ideological disciplinary matrix. In the process, the parties have become intellectually bankrupt. Indian political parties have ceased to lead the country's minds. Country has individual thinkers but no body of thinkers. A body of thinkers would need pre-defined assumptions and presuppositions for logical discourse. Logic is a process of derivation from premises. In the absence of mutually agreed premises, there can be no logic.

Modern science and western world, with its strong insistence on rational thought, often ignores the role of assumptions and presuppositions. For example, practitioners of modern medicine refuse to accept that there may be other systems of medicine, which are radically different from theirs and yet have their own rational basis. It is not unusual to see allopathic doctors calling homeopathic doctors or ayurvedic doctors as quacks. The same way, communists pride themselves on being rational and scientific and treat all free market thinkers as hollow. Vice versa is equally true. They say – if at twenty you are not a communist, you do not have a heart; if at forty you are still a commie, you do not have a head. It may be a joke, but it reflects the way free market thinkers think about communists.

People who talk of ideology-less rational thinking camouflage their ideology as the absolute ultimate truth. Their arrogance makes them insensitive to other systems of thoughts and cultures. By articulating one's ideological assumptions, one distinguishes oneself from others who may hold different views. This process of articulation and standing apart enables an ideology to acquire an identity of its own. It also enables the ideology, in due course, to examine its assumptions and presuppositions in light of the problems that cannot be solved adequately by the ideology. This paves the way for the growth and evolution of the ideology.

VALUES

Values, or notions of what is good and desirable on one hand and what is bad and despicable on the other, are second set of essential building blocks for any ideology. Even in case of a paradigm of a scientific discipline, values are essential constituents of the 'disciplinary matrix'. What is to be regarded as scientific and what is to be condemned as unscientific is dictated by the value system of the paradigm. However, moving from paradigms of science to political ideologies, the importance of values increases manifold.

Assumptions, premises or presuppositions help understand the world. They help in formation of a world-view. But a view of the world is not sufficient to inspire one to action. Ideology as 'an action-oriented system of beliefs' cannot take shape unless view of the world is backed by values.

Values define the direction of action for the individual as well as for the community believing in the ideology, and also for the society at large. It is not difficult to look around and find instances of values adopted by different political groupings. Many developed countries of Europe have political parties professing faith in Christian values. Such parties do not accept a theological state and are against interference in matters of state by any church. Yet, they call themselves Christian because they accept a Christian value system.

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Defining values of an ideology is an ongoing process. Marxist ideology, as propounded by Marx and Engels, lacked any ethical guidance for an individual. The ideology viewed individuals as insignificant in the historical process of dialectical materialism. Lenin and Stalin in Soviet Union and Mao Tse Tung in China had to fill this lacunae in Marxist ideology to some extent.



On the other hand, India's freedom movement from its genesis emphasized personal values and ideals and largely ignored economic and political issues. It may surprise some to know that 'Early to bed and early to rise' was a value propagated by India's freedom movement. During pre-independence India, '*prabhat pheri*' (early morning rally) was a common activity of the freedom movement activists. Such rallies were seen as wake-up calls for the society. The rallies used to often culminate in a small public meeting or prayer meeting. Even after independence, for many years '*prabhat pheris*' continued to be taken out as part of Independence Day and Republic Day celebrations. Even today, the main function in Delhi on the occasion of Independence Day or Republic Day begins at 8 a.m. As India moves away from the values and ideals of freedom movement, sooner or later there will be a demand to change to more convenient timings.

Waking up early was not the only value propagated by Indian freedom struggle's leaders. Their ideals covered almost every aspect of human life. One might wonder – what has freedom struggle got to do with, for example, sexual morality. Yet, when one looks at any major political movement anywhere in the world, one finds that the movement insisted on its members adopting some values and ideals or in other words – having a character or personality that, in due course, became the identity of the movement.

Many of these values and ideals are internal, but an ideology also needs some external symbols. Mussolini's brown shirted revolutionaries, Gandhi cap, blue jeans worn in sixties and seventies by flower children - are typical examples of use of dress code to build and strengthen the identity of an ideological movement.



Gandhi cap

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External symbols and internal values and ideals, also called character, play a very important role in the growth of an ideology. On one hand, they facilitate interaction between followers of the ideology. On the other hand, they foster a community feeling between the followers leading to building of personal bonds with each other and with the organization acting as the flag-bearer of the ideology. The facilitation of interaction is like two fax machines being able to communicate since both follow a common technical protocol. The ease of interaction between persons having faith in the same ideology takes place because there is mutual trust and understanding. Once the interaction starts the natural process of growth of bonding takes place. In due course the bonds and linkages acquire a life of their own.

राष्ट्रीय स्वयंसेवक संघ
Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh



Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is an example of an organization that, from its earliest days, understood the strength of bonds and linkages. An RSS *pracharak* (literally means one who spreads the ideology) concentrates on building bonds and linkages with as many people as possible. He (a *pracharak* is always male) also encourages RSS members and sympathizers to help each other in every possible way. He rarely indulges in any ideological discussion. RSS has always believed that intellectual discussion leads to strife and must be avoided; while emotive strength of human bonds and linkages is the prime force that can help build a voluntary organization.

RSS approach may sound strange to some. But in a way, this is typical of Indian political scenario where hearts rather than the heads rule. If the people think that a person is "good", they will pardon all his follies. It is impossible to critically analyze Gandhi in India because he was such a "good" man. Probably, it is the same all over the world. Lovable leaders can get away with anything, while the tough-looking ones have a hard time.

Have we moved away from ideology? No, not at all! Ideology, unlike paradigms of science, remains an intensely human subject. Assumptions, presuppositions, postulates, premise, logic, rational analysis etc. do build the essential skeleton of an ideology. But the lifeblood of an ideology is its character or in other words its values and ideals. It is this lifeblood that sustains the ideology's adherents, who may well be called its flesh.

THE PEOPLE

All those who believe in an ideology, who help the ideology grow in its scope and popularity constitute the third essential building block of the ideology. For a philosophical system to qualify for the label of ideology, it must acquire a committed set of believers.

They are called by many names – believers, followers, adherents, ideologues, leaders, party workers, volunteers. They are the visible face of any ideology. They are the ones who attract or force others to join in. This may sound strange, but more people have turned believers by force than by power of persuasion. Was it Mao Tse Tung who said, Power comes from the barrel of a gun?

Any ideology goes through a first phase when it acquires a few committed followers by persuasion and argument. This first band, often, collects the resources to get the implements of power (guns, votes, money etc.). The ideology then enters the second phase when it starts getting new converts either due to the benefits of power that it is able to give away or due to the glamour of success or simply due to fear of death. Managing the new converts now becomes a critical challenge and future progress is determined by the success in this.

New converts, generally, have a lower level of understanding and commitment towards the ideology and its flag-bearers. On one hand, they bring new ideas, attitudes, approaches and resources to the party. On the other hand, they might dilute the ideology so much that it loses its identity completely. The original lot tries to resist the changes that the new group believes. If the old group is very successful, the party runs the risk of becoming dead and fossilized, out of sync with the changing times. Striking a balance between the risks of ideology dilution and becoming fossilized is indeed tough.

By and large political parties across the world have faced these risks. However, there is another problem, which a party faces when admitting new converts after it has reached position of power. In fact, even business organizations face this problem when recruiting. The recruiter, generally, tries to select someone inferior to him to ensure that his own position remains safe. In business organizations, there are pressures to perform and deliver results so there is a cap on this tendency. In political organizations it is not unusual to see leaders promote sycophants who are otherwise good for nothing, while simultaneously closing the doors on competent people, to ensure their own continued survival. This weakens the organization and in turn leads to downfall of the ideology.

As far as people are concerned, the journey of an ideology is drastically different from that of a scientific paradigm. But, students of political ideologies can learn a lot by studying the way religions like Christianity and Islam have for centuries handled people-related problems that plague political organizations. Of course, a religion has recourse to divine intervention that no political party can lay claim to.

RELIGION AND IDEOLOGY

Every religion is a political ideology, though every political ideology is not a religion. A political ideology becomes a religion when it has a concept of divine interwoven in its fundamental postulates. Probably, the only religion in the world not recognizing the concept of God is Jainism. However, even Jainism has its own concept of divine. The divine power is defined in different ways by different religions. But in all cases, the divine power acts in a mysterious way incomprehensible to ordinary mortals.

Religion as political ideology may shock some and may even stir up a hornet's nest. But we must understand that politics as we know it today is just a couple of centuries old. For thousands of years lives of human beings were controlled, regulated, motivated and enriched by various religions.

Since times immemorial, religions have provided the intellectual framework of assumptions, presuppositions and postulates along with the necessary values and ideals necessary for human existence. Today, when we claim to live in so-called rational age, we rarely realize the extent of influence of religion on our lives. Yet, a large portion of our day-to-day decisions is influenced by our religious upbringing.

The problem with religions arose when they lost their dynamism and ability to change with times. Most religions became fossilized. The difference between essential presuppositions and superfluous practices was lost. Rituals and hierarchy in religious organizations replaced presuppositions, values and ideals. Debate and discussion gave way to chanting of hymns and preaching. When that happened religion ceased to fully satisfy the needs of its followers.

Political ideologies emerged just when across the world there was a reduction of faith in religions. In a way they were the new religions that man invented during the past two centuries.

The sad part is that political ideologies have been corrupted much faster than religions were. Almost all political ideologies face a grim situation. Their skeleton (the logical framework of assumptions and presuppositions) is weakening and crumbling at a fast pace due to gross misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Their lifeblood (values and ideals) is threatened with cancerous growth of selfish, individualistic, materialistic influences. And to top it all the flesh is rotting in luxury with excessive fat and very little muscle.

This terrible state of ideologies across the world has prompted writers like Daniell Bell to write the book, "The End of Ideology" and has made others comment that ideology is good after two pegs of whisky.

Religion and ideology coexist in the modern world. At the beginning of twentieth century, it appeared that religion was falling into a bottomless pit. Philosophers and thinkers were writing obituaries of religion. New ideologies were being propounded and intellectual debates in universities across the world had enlivened the atmosphere.

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A century later, the world is a changed place. Ideology has fallen into disrepute. Large sections of societies in various countries are veering towards religion. Rise of Islamic fundamentalism across the world is a sign of the growing disillusionment with modern ideologies. George W Bush flaunts his Christian leanings more than his ideology. In almost every part of the world, there is a discernible shift from ideology to religion, even though organized religion has nothing new to offer.

Intellectuals

One key difference between ideology and religion is regarding the role of intellectuals or academicians. Organized religions like Islam and Christianity believe that their holy books have the ultimate truth and ceaseless critical questioning by probing minds of intellectuals is an unnecessary disturbance. The only role that any one-book-based religion is willing to grant to wise men is as carriers of knowledge. Academicians, according to such religions, should work like coolies carrying theological knowledge from one generation to the other. At the most they might seek to find analogies between the past and the present. In Muslim jurisprudence, wise men routinely look for instances in the Holy Prophet's life that can provide a guidance to the modern man. Similarly, officers of Catholic Church keep looking for concealed morsels of wisdom in the Bible and in the lives of all saints.

Hinduism is the only major religion that does not accord the status of ultimate truth to any one book. Vedas are sacred but, centuries ago, Hindu seers wrote Puranas that transcended the Vedas and even contradicted them in parts. Hinduism is probably the only religion that gave a place of authority to intellectuals. Universities, and not kings, were the lawmakers in India till West Asian invaders destroyed Indian universities after 1000 A.D. This is history. In modern India, RSS and its offshoot Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), who claim to represent Hindus, detest intellectuals just the same way as Church or Islam does. RSS and VHP would also like intellectuals to only study ancient texts and dig out wisdom for the present and future generations. To their chagrin, Indian academic community continues to research based on reality as seen today and not as seen through ancient texts.

The progress of science and development in the past two centuries has taken place only because scientists and intellectuals have been able to look at reality without being bogged down by historical baggage. Spectacular progress made by science and technology forced religious bigotry to take a back seat. Science and technology inspired new hopes. Coupled with transfer of resources from colonies, industrial revolution has brought about a sea change in the lifestyle of Europe and North America. The prosperity of the colonial masters inspired hopes and raised expectations across the world. Colonial powers and their intellectuals have been prescribing the model that brought them prosperity to the countries that were impoverished by their looting, little realizing non-sustainability of the model. Democracy and capitalism were supposed to be twin magic keys to prosperity; but have failed to deliver the promised kingdom of heaven on earth for the poor. Communism has failed even more with every communist country degenerating into a morass of inefficiency and ineptitude.

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When neither democracy nor capitalism nor communism inspires any hopes, it is just natural for the poor to turn towards religions who continue to promise a kingdom of heaven (if not in this life, then after death). Reaction of intellectual class to the shift towards religion is either of exasperation or of condemnation. The class no longer sees its own role as that of a solution-provider. Academicians are busy churning out papers, which no one except others of their type read. Papers are judged by the number of references at the end rather than by their content or style. The criterion of judging papers is no longer good of mankind but simply to give away promotions, increments and awards.

The intellectual class has failed to recognize their own failure in keeping the skeleton and lifeblood of different ideologies in a healthy state. Communists treated their intellectuals in the same fashion as Catholic Church did – using them as coolies of knowledge. In democratic countries, there has been a tendency to eulogize democracy to such heights that a critical evaluation of democracy has been well nigh impossible. Is it not surprising that in the past one and a half centuries there has been no fundamental development in the notion of democracy? Modern intellectuals face a challenge of combining the advantages of a notion of divine with a political ideology. No, they do not seem to have even tried to face this challenge.

One must also blame the political class, who are flesh and visible face of ideologies, for treating the intellectual class in a most shabby manner. The political class believes that they can create political parties with just leaders and followers. No wonder, the parties have faces, but no bones and no blood. Not surprisingly, they disintegrate at a quick pace.

As political disintegration becomes the order of the day, intellectuals add to the collapse of ideologies by advocating ideology-less politics.



The modern wise men hope that people will maintain character even when they are driven neither by ideology nor by religion, but by two pegs of whisky. It is no mean feat to keep hoping, even though history has repeatedly belied such wise men.

Instead of living on false hopes, the intellectual class should exert towards building a new ideology. Of course, they will also need to get new faces to propagate the new ideology. Is that a tall order? Are we hoping for something that can only be achieved by divine intervention?

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