**Can`t be objective on fascism**

BY J A W E D N A Q V I 2020-11-17

`IT is not, I think, humanly possible for any reporter to be completely objective, for we are all to some degree prisoners of our education, travel, reading the sum total of our experience.` Thus spoke Edward Murrow, the legendary American journalist who narrated from the European battlefield the horrors of Hitler`s Germany for unprepared radio audiences back home.

The assignment over, he went on to fight the menace of McCarthyism dogging American democracy.

It was an object lesson in how not to balance the bigotry of states with the frailties of a beleaguered opposition, which journalists often seek to do.

In recent days, in the mould of Murrow, Robert Fisk and John Pilger, from UK and Australia respectively, have been the gold standard for discarding nationalist blinkers that journalists are so prone to donning. Both have shouldered the burden of combative reporting that has put Western democracies in the dock with evidence-based charges of shoring up war criminals, overthrowing secular governments and decimating proud civilisations around the world.

Fisk passed away recently, leaving a void in tracking the loot and plunder of the Middle East and Africa. Pilger`s probing journalism traversed a wider span, which he crowned with the important TV documentary The Coming War on China. The film provides compelling evidence of a bipartisan American military build-up in the Pacific, replete with dozens of fortified bases rippling with nuclear weapons. India is being lured to join the dangerous game. In the remaining days of Donald Trump, or even after he demits office, the world will be a fraught place. Joe Biden`s likely team is tipped to include warmongers. Susan Rice had advocated the destruction of Libya to the Obama administration.

Not all journalists come out unscathed from a pushback by their quarries. Mordechai Vanunu and Julian Assange continue to suffer for exposing the slimy backstage that runs the global show. Edward Snowden, in asylum in Moscow, is reportedly seeking Russian citizenship while keeping his American passport, if the option exists.

As neoliberal systems built on a mealy-mouthed promise of democracy flounder, we are least likely to hear of mea culpa. The spectacular promise ofthe free world has proved to be a myth as can be seen from the silence on the outrages being perpetrated in Palestine and Kashmir under the banner of democracy.

It is likely the West would blame the global mess on China and Russia. This portends tense prospects ahead. South Asia had an excellent chance of securing itself against the looming mayhem, but India has decided to hitch its wagon to the global chaos on the cards. The logic of India spurning China`s hand in the regional economic pact (RCEP), for example, is curious as countries like Japan and Australia suspended their deep differences with Beijing to bepart of an economic pact. It seems India`s aloofness springs from a need to use the tensions in Ladakh to beef up narrow nationalism at home.

The untranslatable Urdu metaphor for a very slight difference between two situations or things is `unnis-bees ka farq`, literally the difference between 19 and 20. Sitar wizard Vilayat Khan would advise his students to play at 19, if their preparedness was for 20. (`Unnis bajao, bees ki tayyari hai agar`.) A Pakistani human rights defender was visiting Delhi when I asked him to compare the threat to democracy in his country with India. Without demure, he said: `Unnis-ikkees ka farq hai.` (The approximate difference is of 19-21.` I asked him to explain the interesting departure from the metaphor. The visitor beamed and said: `If we describe the difference between the situations in India and Pakistan as very narrow unnis-bees ka farq our Indian friends would feel offended.

Indeed, both countries have been in and out of trouble with autocrats, initially, on account of Cold War battle lines but currently in their competition to woo support from the West. In the early days of independence, India`s anti-communist slant athome was shaped by Nehru`s proximity to the British Commonwealth, an idea promoted by London for post-colonial societies to keep a safe distance from Moscow, relic of Britain`s favourite bogeyman called Russophobia.

`Commonwealth ka daas hai Nehru, maar le saathi jaaney na paae,` thundered partisan poet Majrooh Sultanpuri. (Nehru is a slave of the Commonwealth, beat him up.) For his insouciance Majrooh was thrown in jail from where he continued to write his fabled movie songs for Mehboob Khan`s Andaz. Actor Balraj Sahni, also a member of the communist party, was granted bail to complete his pending movies.

In Pakistan, the crackdown on democracy was led by a military apparatus of which Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was a part before he crossed the street to become a populist leader, while still balancing the political left with the cultural right.

In India, support for and resistance to Indira Gandhi`s authoritarian rule was similarly structured along Cold War battle lines. Pro-Soviet communists supported the Emergency, while pro-China groups threw their weight behind the pro-American Hindutva leaders and socialists inspired by Willy Brandt. It was a curious mix of alignments in both countries with its inevitable outcome.

Mrs Gandhi defeated, the Indian left were handed a pacifier that kept them self-absorbed for almost three decades in Tripura and West Bengal.

They thus abandoned vast swathes for depredation by the right. Luckily, recent elections in Bihar have shown that the left has retrieved an older reliable script to shore up democratic alliances rather than seeking to lead them. The wafer-thin difference in votes between the right-wing victors and democratic opposition is a reminder that opposition parties can go beyond opportunistic electoralalliances toforge a grounded strategy to defeat fascism. The fractious opposition in Pakistan can also learn a tentative lesson from Bihar. The option to not fight the fight collectively doesn`t exist as Edward Murrow told us from the battleñeldsnearand afar.m The writer is Dawn`s correspondent in Delhi.

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