

CHAPTER 1

The genie of aspiration

When the Tunisian vegetable vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, immolated himself, people thought it was an act of helplessness and rose in revolt against the oppressive regime. They were right. Bouazizi was frustrated with a system that was thwarting his aspiration to earn a decent living through the right means.

He was angry with a system which was forcing him to participate in corruption by handing his hard-earned money in exchange for security. This security was to be provided by the police against so-called street gangs. It was something which they were paid to do, but they were still heckling vendors for money. Bouazizi too was forced to indulge in petty corruption despite not wanting to.

His self-immolation was an extreme way of expressing his rejection of anything that hindered the fulfilment of his justified aspirations. He preferred to die rather than endure even a moment of oppression. If death was a deliverance from the vice-like grip of a corrupt state, he thought, so be it.

The surprising fact is not his suicide but what followed it. A huge section of society was out on the streets, voicing the same anguish

and resentment that Bouazizi had so gruesomely expressed. They braved an oppressive regime, police brutality and flying bullets to finally oust a dictator.

Their struggle in the face of imminent death was an affirmation that a large chunk of society's aspirations were being stifled and had reached a point where just a trigger was needed for them to explode into a revolution.

What started in Tunisia was followed in Egypt, Libya and Yemen. In all three countries, the rulers had been at the helm for many decades and had failed to create an atmosphere where people could grow and prosper. In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak was president since 1981 after the assassination of Anwar Sadat. His rule was characterised by an iron grip on the media and social organisations and the rise of crony capitalism. A handful of Egyptians under his rule rose to amass fortunes while the majority of citizens remained mired in poverty, earning not more than \$2 per day.

The case was more or less similar in Libya and Yemen. The vast majority was disillusioned and was waiting for a moment to express its anger. During the Arab Spring and later, the media and intellectuals around the world were divided on the reasons that led to the uprising. While many blamed internal causes, there

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were others who pointed their fingers to external influences, raising the bogey of the usual suspects like the US and Europe for supporting the movement.

It is true that the US and Britain played a part in ousting Gaddafi and were also instrumental in asking Mubarak to step down. They are also helping the rebels in Syria. But it has been said that no outsider can breach the walls of a fort if there is a unity of purpose within. These nations had developed into hotbeds of discontent over the decades because people were finding it increasingly tough to negotiate their lives. And it is this seething anger and latent disaffection that was exploited by outsiders.

The Western powers, especially the US, tried to dethrone Fidel Castro for 50-odd years without success. But they succeeded in dismembering a much more powerful entity - the Soviet Union. We all know that Cuba is not a patch on the Soviet Union or the US when it comes to military power. But the moral influence or the ideological construct that Castro presented still rings true for a large majority of people in his country, and so they are not persuaded by any external bait to rise up against their leadership. Cuba's detractors insist that Castro's safety is ensured by a brutal internal security apparatus. But the Soviets and East Germans had a far more sinister and pervasive system than anywhere else in the world. Yet they collapsed. What was it that differentiated Castro's Cuba from the Soviet Union and East Germany? It was faith in the system.

When a leader assumes the reins of a nation or a society, he cements his position with the help of a dream and an ideology. Initially, an overwhelming majority shares the ideology and the ruler has complete control over the citizens. In the next stage,

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a group of thinkers and others grow disenchanted and start to murmur their dissent. This dissent grows but remains manageable as a critical mass of citizens still backs the revolution, leader and ideology. But when that critical mass deserts the ruler, he becomes a sitting duck. It is now easy to dethrone him.

The reason why leaders become weak is that they get trapped in a time warp and do not evolve. They may be good at fulfilling people's basic needs and also creating affluence, but are often ill-equipped for the third stage of a society's evolution – self-expression.

All societies forge themselves and then prosper on exactly the same lines. Initially, they witness a fight for survival. Those who can ensure others' survival are respected and admired, and people naturally gravitate towards them for their own security.

Once a society graduates from this stage, it gets down to the business of living. Administrators, businessmen or employment creators now rule the roost, and society defers to them as they hold out opportunities for decent jobs and living conditions. However, once questions of surviving and thriving are taken care of, a large section of the society graduates to a third level. This is the level of self-expression.

In a recent television interview, Syria's beleaguered leader Bashar Al-Assad said with chilling calm that his family had prepared for such an uprising all their life, and that he would therefore fight rather than give in. It is a telling commentary on a style of leadership that developed in the 20th century. If leaders were so forward-looking that they could see rising discontent, then instead of making elaborate preparations to quell it they should have tried to address it.

Leaders should understand that the 21st century presents a very different society. This society is bursting at its seams due to the mounting pressure of rising aspirations. Every age has had its share of aspirations but never before did they reach the critical mass they have now achieved since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Aided by mass media and better education, this aspiration is finding avenues on a scale and regularity never witnessed in history.

The question arises as to why there has been such an explosion of aspirations. The answer is rooted in the industrial and political revolutions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The industrial revolution and its impact in most parts of the world gave rise to the middle class, a phenomenon which was hitherto unknown in agrarian society.

Till the early 19th century, every society had a rich aristocracy built around kings, landlords and their satraps, and the rest of the people were small farmers, artisans and odd job workers. But the rise of the middle class, a segment that was economically and educationally more advanced than farmers and artisans but lower in status and income than the upper class, changed many

equations. This class challenged the status quo in society. For the first time, it became possible to rise in the social hierarchy and attain a lifestyle which was not given to an individual at birth. The middle class was at the epicentre of many social and political movements during the 20th century.

This middle class grew from just being a phenomenon of the new and developed worlds, and became a global fact. As countries emerged from colonial control, they experienced a surge in their economic and social activities. Education expanded and so did manufacturing and business, leading to a new middle class in every country.

From around 1960, the spread of the services sector led to an exponential increase in the middle class. In many countries, they became an important segment of society and their numbers grew big enough to tilt the balance of power in their favour.

This power was visible for the first time in late 1980s, when people in Eastern European nations who were under Communist rule rose up against their respective governments. In a span of months, years of Communist rule was toppled by people who did not even fire a bullet. The Berlin Wall that had stood for decades also came down without any violence.

It was the beginning of the end of the Communist movement and later led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself, which had propagated and supported the regimes in these countries.

What happened in Eastern Europe was symptomatic of people's movements around the world at different times during the last

150 years. Uprisings happen because people think their goals are within their grasp, and once collective aspiration feels it is within striking distance of its destination, it fights doggedly and viciously.

The curve follows a path of natural human tendencies as mentioned earlier. It moves from survival, to growth and expansion, and then to self-expression.

The need for self-expression exists not just in terms of creative pursuits but also manifests as very basic wishes – the wish to be heard, speak one’s mind, pursue one’s vocation and lead a chosen life without fear of reprisal.

It is at this level that most of the leadership around the world is failing. The failure is compounded by technological advancements such as the internet and mobile telephone communications.

