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Indian Liberals and Colour Pictures

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Earlier this week, I spent two days at [a fascinating colloquium](#) on Indian liberalism in the outskirts of Bangalore. At night we slept in airconditioned tents, and in the day, gathered in a conference room and discussed weighty matters like the definition, relevance and scope of Indian liberalism. I was awed by the intellectual firepower that I was privileged to be in the company of -- but, at the same time, there hung in the air a whiff of the same kind of dissonance that the airconditioned tents evoked.

To begin with, what is 'Indian liberalism'? The term 'liberal' has been [so debased](#) and so variedly used as to have practically no meaning left in it. I consider myself a classical liberal, believing in individual freedom, [negative rights](#) and a free society, which is how liberals in continental Europe would see themselves. Yet, in the US, the term means practically the opposite, as American liberals from the Left are opposed to free markets, which makes their appropriation of the term oxymoronic. (Some of my friends would remove the 'oxy' from that judgment.)

In India, the term is used in a woolly way, and one can never quite be sure what it's meant to mean. Ramachandra Guha, in his essay '[The Absent Liberal](#)', referred to PC Mahalanobis as a liberal, and in a talk he gave us before the conference, to Jawaharlal Nehru as one. Labeling people is a complex matter, especially when they are politicians and contain multitudes of multitudes, and such a label is often both true and false, depending on perspective, as with Nehru. (His institution building and commitment to democracy and secularism mark him out as a great liberal; his economic policies, which so ravaged India, do not.)

Almost all of us at the conference were classical liberals, at siege in a world where the values we believe in have either not been accepted or are being questioned. The broad theme of the conference was how to spread liberal ideas, and the task seems hard for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the classic truths of liberalism are all counter-intuitive, such as the non-zero-sumness involved in progress, the concept of spontaneous order, and the fallibility of all human beings -- the last especially important in the context of the blind faith we have in government, which is always [a collection of flawed human beings](#), often with perverse incentives.

Secondly, economic liberalism is under increasing attack from people who point to the economic crisis in the US as a failure of free markets, or

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wonder why India has so many inequalities despite being supposedly liberalized. These kinds of attacks deserve a serious and respectful response, but I don't see much of that in the media around me. In next week's column, I will attempt a partial response, and share my views on why neither the financial crisis nor India's inequalities represent a failure of free markets. But for now, let's get back to the subject of the colloquium, and this column: how can we spread classical liberal ideas in India?

Some of my fellow participants referred to the [Swatantra Party](#), and were exploring whether a classical liberal party of that sort could build a following in politics. More power to those who try, though I believe that such a political party is a pipe dream, and a waste of time. ([I didn't always hold this view.](#)) A political party might start out liberal, but the many necessary compromises of politics will soon dilute any ideological stance it takes, till it ends up indistinguishable from the parties around it, slave to the imperatives of the political marketplace, where niches are formed more on the basis of identity than ideology.

Instead, I think classical liberals need to ask themselves the question, *Why are we liberals?* For me, the answer is not just that liberalism gives me an intellectual framework with which I can make sense of the world, but also that I believe that it has solutions to most of the political and economic problems that the world, and modern India, faces: from farmer suicides in Vidarbha to rising prices to deepening inequality. If this is the case, and my liberalism follows from the practical utility that it provides, then what I need to promote is not liberalism itself, but these immediate solutions to the urgent, pressing problems of our times, whose merit lies not in their being liberal but in their being both right and practical. Then I can avoid labels and focus purely on solving real-world problems with all the real-world constraints that a utopian vision of the world does not always taking into account.

This being the case, we do not need a separate liberal political party to spread liberal ideas. Instead, if we offer practical ways to make the world a better place, our ideas can spread through osmosis into every political party. Liberalism can then triumph in the political battlefield by winning in the marketplace of ideas -- perhaps without the label attached, for ideological labels often hinder the spread of good ideas.

* * * *

One example of such real-world problem solving comes in the work of Parth Shah, the founder of the [Center for Civil Society in India](#), and the moderator of the sessions at the colloquium. For years now, Parth and his team have been promoting the concept of school vouchers. Many dogmatic classical liberals would be opposed to this idea, for it assumes state spending on education. But India is a poor country, education is key to our progress, and it is a given that the government will spend money to make this happen. The problem here is that our government, over the last 63 years, has achieved very little in this space. How can it spend its money more efficiently?

School vouchers, first championed by Milton Friedman, enable competition and the free market to lift the standards of education. The quality of government schools is abysmal, teacher absenteeism is a constant problem, and the incentives are all skewed. There's one way to change these incentives, and to bring accountability into the system: fund the students, not the schools. If the students are given school vouchers, which they can take to whichever school serves them best, whether it is public or private, schools are forced to lift their standards in order to survive. The power shifts to students and their parents, and the quality of education necessarily rises.

Instead of writing op-eds and policy briefs about school vouchers from an armchair somewhere, Parth and the CCS gang have spent years talking to politicians and bureaucrats across the country to make it happen, offering real-world models of implementation, alongside studies of how low-cost private schools are already transforming education for the poor. To see the

pilot projects that are already in place, and the difference they are beginning to make, check out [their website](#). (Also, here are my earlier articles on this: [1](#), [2](#).)

* * * *

Another of the participants at the colloquium, Raj Cherubal, offered me his prescription for how liberals can drive change: 'colour pictures.'

Cherubal works as a coordinator at '[Chennai City Connect](#)', and holds the view that politicians and bureaucrats, sometimes caricatured as the villains in the piece by dogmatic liberals, are often on our side, and agree with us about the nature of the problems. But giving them abstract ideas about what to do is pointless, for they don't have the bandwidth to take them further. The only effective approach is two-pronged: One, show them case studies to demonstrate that our solutions have worked elegantly elsewhere; Two, give them a detailed road-map of how to implement the solution.

Raj offered an example of this from the domain of urban planning. His team went to the Chennai city authorities with a proposal to modernise LB Road. The babus were skeptical, and threw up various objections to this, such as how there wasn't enough space to get the job done, what would happen to the hawkers, and so on. Cherubal and his team then walked the streets, measured every inch of space available for themselves, and drew up elegant redesigns and colour charts ('red for footpath') that showed exactly how the street would look when redesigned, how much space was currently being wasted, and the precise actions that could be undertaken to transform that space, right down to costs and so on. The project was approved, and is now underway. What made it happen? "Colour pictures," said Raj.

In a similar proposal about transforming the T Nagar neighbourhood, Raj's team showed the Chennai authorities detailed photographs of identical streets in Bogota and Manhattan as an example of how these Chennai streets, with identical space, could be transformed. (T Nagar's Panagal Park can be just like Manhattan's Union Square, Raj tells me.) Again, the colour pictures made all the difference.

Raj uses the term 'colour pictures' as a metaphor and a proxy: what he actually showed these men in power was "a vision for a better future". He made it compelling and tangible, with no vague head-in-the-clouds talk about grand ideas. These examples are not examples of liberal ideas per se, but this is exactly the approach that classical liberals in India should take: Eschew the grand talk, get down to brass tacks, bring out the colour pictures.

An aside: The airconditioning in those tents actually worked wonderfully well. Who woulda thunk it?

Amit Varma, the winner of the 2007 Bastiat Prize for Journalism, is the author of the bestselling novel My Friend Sancho. He writes the popular blog, [India Uncut](#). You can follow him on Twitter [here](#).

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