CRYPTOS OF THE MIND THAT NEW INDIA NO LONGER ACCEPTS

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues relating to Growth & Development - Public Finance, Taxation & Black Money incl. Government Budgeting

Western ideas of freedom that once had currency have lost influence and are being challenged

India is a village. Bitcoin is a hippie city. So, I wonder why India took so long to express its contempt for cryptocurrencies. Whatever be the cause of delay, very soon it will pass a diktat in its grand panchayat that cryptos will be banned from entering the village unless it wears more modest clothes.

Cryptos represent the sort of absolute freedom that emerges now and then from the West. Specifically from a Western system that converts thought experiments into human rights. Cryptos are encrypted digital currencies that users can exchange among themselves with no need for a government, a king, a central bank or commercial banks, or even courts and law enforcement. Why must the Indian government diminish itself by allowing a competing currency? The only anarchy India permits are protests and driving.

Cryptos have sophisticated technological foundations, like blockchain, which creates an eternal record of a given process that is extremely difficult to tamper. India wants to adopt such technologies, and some people tell me that it may even accept some cryptos as legitimate investments, but can't permit an alternate usable currency, that too one which lends anonymity to users. India does not see all absolute freedoms as human rights.

Like cryptos, there are many freedoms that emerge from Western politics, thought experiments, melancholia, and often common sense. I like to call these freedoms cryptomorals. They are not only freedoms, but freedoms that challenge the state, or aim for some utopia that takes the logic of democracy to absurd ends. In any case, they are all inventions that became religions. Here are some of the most popular cryptomorals: cryptocurrencies, of course; electoral democracy; direct democracy; privacy; freedom of expression; feminism, free trade; globalization; secularism; climate activism, human-rights activism; borderless internet; net neutrality; the right to be forgotten.

Once, the West's ability to transmit ideas was so strong and influential Indians were so in awe of the West that India adopted some of these abstractions as unquestionable ideals. But now, as the nature of influence in India has changed and the village takes back control from cultural orphans, modern India has relegated cryptomorals to the status of mere ideas, some of them even bad ones.

At the time of freedom, India had no choice but to accept the wisdom of democracy, which remains the most influential cryptomoral to come from the West. Even today, outside China, an overwhelming majority of people consider democracy the only moral form of government. Not the most moral, but the only moral form.

India does not seriously challenge the goodness of democracy. But our nation is not a proper democracy. We are a good electoral democracy, if you do not believe the lament about faulty voting machines. But India has rejected many other subsidiary cryptomorals of democracy. For instance, in India freedom of expression is conditional. Your right to be hurt by just about anything is greater than someone's right to tell a joke. India is a paradise for the offended.

Typically, our lower courts deny you freedom and higher courts express grand ideals in poor English.

Whatever freedom of speech that exists in India emerged not from any Nehruvian magnanimity; rather, it emerges from the practicality of India's rustic electoral democracy where politicians trash-talk their rivals and the news media reports their campaigns.

India does not take seriously the cryptomoral of direct democracy, which requires referendums on major legislative moves. The main argument of direct democracy is that parliaments are obsolete intermediaries, an invention of a time when there was no way people in Madras could be heard in a building in Delhi where laws are made. Today, anyone anywhere can be heard. Blockchain technology can be used to make voting so secure that no one can allege fraud. But India, like many nations, feels that just because something is easy, it does not mean it is better.

The US evangelical mechanism once succeeded in making free trade and globalization sacred ideas in India. Any politician or intellectual who questioned these risked being portrayed as a socialist simpleton. But modern India challenges all these concepts now in its search for its best interests. The cryptomoral of secularism, too, was sacred until Hindu nationalism showed it up as a useless word for atheism. In India, secularism does not mean a godless state; it means all gods have equal rights to torment you.

The idea of privacy is a relatively recent invention. It is not hard to see the connection between privacy and dignity; but the self-importance and paranoia that accompanies all talk of it today is a part of contemporary urban megalomania. Privacy is a cryptomoral that India's government wants others to respect even as it spies on its citizens with no consequences for those who enable this.

The internet came to India as an unstoppable borderless force that "was designed to survive a world war". But India now regulates the internet and controls its gateways. Net neutrality was a major cryptomoral just a few years ago. According to it, a service provider should be barred by law from giving faster or cheaper user access to software applications willing to pay more. But today this neutrality is violated routinely and few seem to care.

In some parts of the world, many of these freedoms grew so popular that it was difficult for governments to deny them to people. This happened with the internet across the world. Even so, many beautiful things begin as freedoms and end up heavily regulated. In the new world, freedom is never taken, it is granted.

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