

Forty years after the Iranian revolution

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"A political change beckons which will not be easy but it is as certain as the overthrow of the Shah."

Friedrich Nietzsche prophesised with remarkable accuracy that the 20th century would be marked by great wars fought in the name of philosophical ideas. But what Nietzsche could not have anticipated was that towards the end of the 20th century there would be a revolution in the name of god, establishing a Shi'ite theocracy. The Iranian revolution of 1978-1979 (picture) was a momentous development in the modern history of Islam. And it had a huge impact on all movements across the globe, especially those that were using Islamic frames of reference for political activism.

Some, like the French thinker Michel Foucault, enthusiastically declared the Iranian revolution as the spirit of a world without spirit. Foucault wrote: "One bears on Iran and its peculiar destiny. At the dawn of history, Persia invented the state and conferred its models on Islam. Its administrators staffed the caliphate. But from this same Islam, it derived a religion that gave to its people infinite resources to resist state power. In this will for an 'Islamic government', should one see a reconciliation, a contradiction, or the threshold of something new?" Following Foucault, we can say that from the very beginning, the Iranian Revolution remained a significant social and political transformation full of paradoxes and unpredictable twists.



Clerical rule

The Iranian revolution was surprising not because it caused a monarch to collapse, but because of the way in which people organised themselves and participated in massive demonstrations. Like many other revolutions, it united several groups, classes and parties who, despite different ideologies, were all against the old regime.

Also, in the Iranian revolution as in the French and later the Russian revolutions, the coalition did not last very long and the Iranian clerics ended up having a leading role. But, the interesting point is that most non-clerics who were in the opposition against the Shah of Iran underestimated the probability of clerical rule, despite the presence of the clergy in all major political events in Iran since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Moreover, for too many observers inside and outside Iran today, events leading up to the revolution in 1979 took a mystifying and seemingly irrational course. But, unfortunately, those who try to explain hastily and emotionally the causes of the Iranian revolution and the Shah's collapse generally only tend to focus on one or another specific issue such as the alleged corruption of the regime, the undemocratic ways of its rule, the effect of repression, or the economic gap between the rich and the poor.

Social tensions

If we consider the Iranian revolution not only as a political event but also as a psychological watershed, exactly as it was the case with the rise of Hitler to power in 1933 in Germany, we can understand why many Iranians believed back in 1978 that there was a messianic nature to Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership. In truth, Khomeini's success in the Iranian revolution had certainly nothing to do with divine providence, but given that the Iranian population believed for centuries in the divine right of kings, it should have come as little surprise that the people were receptive to such ideas rather than having an acute sense of political pragmatism. Khomeini's leadership, followed by the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, therefore, can be understood in patrimonial terms, assisted by periodic doses of charisma. The immediate consequence of this socio-religious attitude was to institutionalise Khomeini's role as the leader of the revolution.

But there is also a political side to the story: Khomeini was not only popular among common Iranians for his uncompromising attitude to the Shah and his anti-imperialist and populist rhetoric since 1963, but also because he and his followers were fully ready and organised for the establishment of an Islamic regime in Iran. As a result, defying all the myths of secular modernisation and shattering all the political ideologies of modernity, the Islamic Republic became the first theocratic state in the modern world to have institutionalised the Shi'ite idea of Velayat-e-Faqih, or the "rule of the jurist". However, the institutionalisation of Khomeini's role as the "faqih" did not manage the implicit tensions which continue to exist between tradition and modernity.

Despite total Islamisation and the reign of terror unleashed on political groups, there were advancements of Iranian civil society due to demographic changes, the rise of literacy and the magic fluidity of Iranian society. The insertion of cultural politics into the everyday lives of young Iranians in the name of Islamic purity created the reverse attitude and a sentiment of confrontation with the Islamic regime.

Looking at Iran today, one can say that the 'growing generational gap between the Islamic state and the Iranian youth, particularly young women, has never been wider. The question to ask would be: if the participants in the Iranian revolution wanted more than anything to be seen and to be heard, why, then, did the revolution degenerate into such violence and tyranny which still plague Iran? Why did people power collapse in on itself, engendering repression, stifling thought and action'?

These questions remain unanswered, but if one thing is certain, it is that Iran is going towards a political change. This political change is not going to be an easy and a quick one, but it will happen with the same certainty that the revolution happened.

Iranian Revolution

Why in the discussion?

- Recently, Iran has successfully tested the new Hovitz cruise missile on the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution that has a target range of more than 1,350 kilometers .
- It took about one and a half decades for this revolution to be successful.
- Iran has limited the capability of its missiles to 2,000 kilometers in the wake of the attacks from the Isreal and western parts of the Middle East, but Washington and its allies have accused Tehran of being involved in an arms race, due to which Europe is also darger.

Main points

- The Islamic Revolution of Iran happen in 1979, which overthrew Shah Mohammed Raza Pahlavi of Iran and established a popular religious republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.
- Shah was in power since 1941 but he had to face opposition from religious leaders.
- To deal with this, Shah took several steps to reduce the role of Islam, to count the achievements of the

Iranian civilization before Islam, and to make Iran a modern nation, that annoyed mullah and they started calling him storge of America.

□ Ayatollah Khomeini was also against Shah's reforms. Only then were they arrested and exiled from the country.

□ Meanwhile dissatisfaction grew, as well as the suppressing of the Shah. But when the official press printed an objectionable story against Ayatollah, people were upset.

□ In December 1978 some 200 million people gathered in Shahyad Chowk to show displeasure against Shah. But this time the army refused to take action on them.

□ Then on the demand of Prime Minister Dr. Shapoor Bakhtiyar, Shah and his wife left Iran on January 6, 1979. The Prime Minister released all the political prisoners and asked Khomeini to visit Iran.

□ The Prime Minister wanted to take the election but Khomeini did not let one of them run and himself formed an interim government.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements regarding the Hoveizeh cruise missile-

1. Recently, Hoviezeh cruise missile has been tested by Iran.
2. Iran tested it on the anniversary of Islamic revolution of 1979.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1
- (b) Only 2
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

Q. How changing views of the youths in Iran regarding the religious rules will helpful in political change? Discuss.

(250 Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 8 Feb. is 1(c)