

## ANTISCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM?

MYSTIC MANIA, Times of India, Oct.8, 1992.

In the past few years, events in what was the Soviet Union have jolted the world, much like the Ten Days that shook the world in 1917. The economy and the polity have undergone a transformation which was unthinkable a couple of years ago. What began with the policies of glasnost and perestroika, has now culminated in the vanishing of the Union itself! The Party has lost its paramount position in the political sphere; centrally planned economy has been replaced by the free market; food shortages, gang wars and ethnic conflicts are commonplace.

These changes have been in the spotlight and have caught the attention of outside observers ever since the process began. Amidst this chaos, there have been other very profound developments, but which have unfortunately not received wide press coverage. This is the enormous growth in the antiscientific attitudes amongst the people of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Whether it is astrology or levitation by meditation, Soviet society is witnessing a definite change in the attitude of the people. A society which was for seven decades self consciously trying to shape a rational and scientific human being is today deluged with mysticism, faith healing and other such mumbo-jumbo. Huge audiences listen in rapt attention as gurus and seers hold forth on the supernatural and mystical; regular meditation sessions are organized and are very well attended. ESP, UFOs, clairvoyance and such are no longer taboo subjects of discussion. Superstition is on the rise and faith healers are attracting many patients.

It can be argued that it is not so much that these attitudes have just emerged but that the policies of glasnost in the media have led to a wider reporting of these trends which may have always existed. But what is noteworthy is that the increase in the publication of mystical nonsense has led to a decrease in the number of popular science magazines and television programs. And not only is the number of scientific publications decreasing, they are also increasingly reporting on topics like faith healing, ESP and astrology. Even traditionally progressive magazines are nowadays running regular astrology columns and advising people on how and when to conduct their affairs! There is also an increase in the coverage given to such trends on television programs.

What are the causes of such a turnaround in public feelings? Why is it that a society where scientists and academics were accorded the highest social status (in fact even higher than most Party functionaries), is reverting back to medievalism? Writing in the Scientific American, Sergei Kapitza, a leading physicist of the CIS, suggests that the answer lies in the social crisis facing the country at the moment. Quoting examples from European history, he argues that whenever there is social unrest and frustration, there is an almost certain increase in the belief in the irrational. For example, in the 7th century, there was a decline in the authority of the church and the emergence of science (this was the time of Copernicus, Bacon, Descartes) alongwith the emergence of capitalism. During this cataclysmic period, superstition and mysticism flourished in Europe, as evidenced for example by the burning of thousands of so called witches.

What the erstwhile Soviet society is witnessing today is in a certain sense no less momentous than the changes in the 17th century. The older regime has crumbled and the economy is in shambles. There is a collapse of authority and centrifugal tendencies have led to the demolition of the Union itself. Unfortunately, though the ancien regime has collapsed, alternative structures have yet to emerge. The stranglehold of the Party on Soviet life has only been replaced by complete anarchy and a free for all. And sadly, the current events don't allow any optimism on this score either.

The possibility of genuine democratic institutions emerging seems small at the present moment. Fortunately, there is some resistance to these trends. With a growth in the articles which report on ESP, UFOs etc., there are also beginning to appear critical studies of these phenomena by Soviet scientists. They are not only writing in academic journals but also in newspapers and other popular magazines. But their reach is still limited and the efficacy of such debunking, of the fundamentally irrational using terms of rational discourse, remains unsure.

It is still too early to say whether these changes in attitudes are transient or are of a permanent nature. Hopefully with a return to a stable polity and economy, these will become ideas on the fringes of the society; much like the thousands of cults and other such groups in the West. If not, then the world will witness a rewriting of history where the land of the Sputnik will become the land of horoscopes and black magic.