

A VOICE FOR FREEDOM

A Reflection on Fang Lizhi

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IT IS A BAD, MAD AND SAD world, sadder with the passing away of Fang Lizhi, the icon of Chinese intellectuals' voice who tried to bring free speech and freer atmosphere for his country's youth, especially in the arena of scientific and technical education as coveted by Socialism. He had breathed his last in exile, at the age of 76, at Tucson, Arizona in the USA on April 6, 2012. The voice of democracy and economic reforms in China, has, for the moment died down.

Lizhi was born of a poor, lower middle class family of a father who was merely a postal clerk. But, he saw with trepidation and great expectations the Chinese Revolution unfurl its red banner of freedom shining with a great red star during his teens and probably was imbibed with the equivalent Chinese idea of a *Ramrajya*. Many believe and say that the 1980s saw him catapulted to a position of giving voice to the millions of Chinese youth. But that is not the whole truth.

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution shattered his dreams. He viewed it as a top-heavy movement, kicked off by the party brass without taking the people into confidence. Ultimately GPCR turned into a bottomless abyss for the masses. The dissenting voice was silenced by the party authority en masse. Braving all this, Fang grew up to be a brilliant student and an extraordinary scientist of international repute. And he was by then, already a member of the Chinese Communist Party. But as other scientists throughout the world he also wanted not party's diktat but greater freedom for scientific experimentation and exploration. And here began a story of personal and societal repression.

Basically, a man of free mindset Lizhi was even from his University days- from head to foot anti-authoritarian. He questioned the party's role in science and technical education. His dissent was taken care of by the party leadership and the state in the 1980s when Chinese doors were suddenly opened to the wider, especially the western, world. But much before that when he was a student of physics at the prestigious Beijing (then Peking) University he called upon his peers and students for more freedom for scientific learning and freer speech. In a meeting of the University's Communist Youth league he stormed into and called upon the students to think independently and not to go by party's dogma in the sphere of education and behaviour. Though Lizhi's stance incurred the displeasure of the authorities he was able to continue with his studies and research as it was taken as confined to a minor intra-group discussion. But the ball began to roll as the party bosses saw literally the red.

By the end of 1970s and beginning of 1980s discontent among student was simmering and assumed a conspicuous momentum. There began a series of protest movements from 1976 onwards when not only the students and pro-democracy youth participated but there was also a feel of popular dissent. The 1976 'April Fifth' movement at the funeral of Zhou Enlai, 'Xidan Democracy Wall Movement of 1978' witnessed public criticism through posters. The protest that affected, public officials and public policies came to a head with student demonstrations in the winter of 1986-87.

All these earlier movements were no doubt suppressed but with a difference. There was no brutal force applied and some little demands were met somewhere and most were forgotten. But the simmering discontent amongst the large section of students and youth was never dead. The discontent turned into peaceful explosion culminating in the Tiananmen demonstrations starting from April 16 and continuing till June 4 stunning the entire world and democrats all over by the brute force applied to suppress the same.

Already, due to Deng's relatively liberal attitude towards science and technical education that heralded exchange of ideas between those of China and mostly of the Western World opened new vistas for the scientists. Lizhi by then was recognized as a brilliant theoretical physicist. But the background at home was becoming uneasy, not yet turbulent. The turbulence was on the threshold.

Actually, this so-called liberalism emanated from Zhou Enlai. He was the leader who was instrumental in introducing four-pronged modernisation programme for the Chinese society. The onus of bringing those to fruition fell on Deng Xiaoping. The four pronged programme was directed towards development of agriculture, industry, science and technology and not the least, defence preparedness. But what had gone awry was the bureaucracy-Party Authority nexus and their lining with foreign, mostly the US investors. This was where the Chinese economy had gone askew.

Under the guise of (so-called) liberalism, bureaucrats and higher party echelons amassed fortunes. Profiteering and price rise was rampant alongside spiraling inflation. Not that the party officials were always directly involved in the business machinery but through their men on the spot or relations they had accumulated huge fortunes at the detriment of the common people. The divide between the rural and the urban people grew at an awesome pace. The resultant shortage of essential commodities gave rise to spiraling inflation. The students and youth rose against these anomalies of the society as also for freer speech. Their movement was peaceful and was directed against official corruption, profiteering and the party's authoritarianism.

In that very moment Fang Lizhi, the anti-authoritarian that he wrote an open letter to the Supremo Deng Xiaoping demanding release of all political prisoners. What happened as its sequel remains unknown but sensing an imminent crackdown he took, along with his family, shelter at the US Embassy in Beijing. Then followed a period of cold war between the USA and China for long 13 months. Lizhi family was ultimately allowed to leave for and seek asylum in the USA in 1990.

During his stay at Arizona as a professor at Tucson University he taught and researched on his favourite field of theoretical physics and turned his interests on cosmology too. Between 1990 and early 2012 he contributed about 200 papers on theoretical physics, cosmology and the origin of the Universe. He focused originally on wavelets in theoretical physics and explored the application wavelet transformation to correlation studies in turbulence.

Little wonder, a single letter became a spark for the entire student and youth community to rise to such heights as to occupy the Tiananmen Square of the country's capital for almost three months raising slogans for establishment of democracy in a totalitarian state till hundreds were executed by the police and military of a Socialist state in comparison to which Jaliwanalabag incident by the British Police seemed miniscule and for which Rabindranath Tagore relinquished his Knighthood.

Now that Fang Lizhi is no more one feels saddened that the voice of Democracy in China has died down for many decades to come. □□□