

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

Keep coercion off the menu

Whether in UP or the North-East, the BJP should not dictate people's eating habits

The BJP's clarification that there would be no beef ban in the three northeastern states which go the polls next year if the party were to come to power is welcome but given what is happening on the meat issue in Uttar Pradesh where the it won handsomely, raises some questions. The assurance is based on the fact that the Christian majority in Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland eat beef but for the party to employ different yardsticks for different communities and different states is questionable. The Muslims too have no taboos about eating beef but this is not permitted in many states including UP where meat sellers are facing problems from overzealous vigilantes and the police. If the premise on the part of the Hindutva brigade is that the cow is sacred and, therefore, cannot be slaughtered, geographical location and eating habits should not make a difference. But the more reasonable thing to do for the party which is on the ascendant would be to leave it well alone when it comes to people's eating habits.

Across India, minorities and even some Hindus eat beef though many states do not permit cow slaughter. By and large, in the north, the beef consumed is that of the buffalo but that too is under attack today. India's vast tribes and communities have differing and eclectic eating habits and to try and impose a cookie cutter prototype on them would amount to depriving them of their fundamental rights. The northeastern states going to the polls will be keenly observing the problems that meat eaters and sellers are facing in UP where not just illegal abattoirs but legal ones too are facing problems leading to a protest from traders. The trade benefits both Hindus and Muslims and in states like the northeast, Kerala and Goa the Christians as well.

To focus on eating habits is to open the floodgates to vigilantes who want to impose their own codes on people. The fatal fallout of that was seen in Dadri where a man was beaten to death in his own home on suspicion of storing beef in his fridge. The issue of eating habits should not even feature in election campaigns and the party is not doing anyone a favour by saying that they would be allowed to eat whatever they want. What holds good for the northeastern states, irrespective of who they elect, should be so for other states as well. The sooner this issue of illegal abattoirs and meat consumption is resolved, the quicker both UP and other states can get on with the real and far more important task of development which is an article of faith with the prime minister.

Give life another chance

The new Mental Health Care Bill — which decriminalises attempt to suicide — is a reformist piece of legislation

It is a humane approach to giving to those who are pushed to the edge. The Lok Sabha has passed the Mental Healthcare Bill 2016 which decriminalises attempt to suicide and bans the use of electric shock therapy for treating children with mental illness. Significantly, the provisions of the IPC can't be invoked in attempts to suicide any longer. In India, suicide is the leading cause of death among young Indians between ages 15 and 29. Since a person undertakes such an extreme step under enormous stress — usually triggered by mental illness — to criminalise suicide will be a double blow to the victim. A person who is so depressed that he doesn't want to live, needs empathy and not incarceration.

The Mental Health Care Bill is a reformist piece of legislation in other ways too. It empowers those with mental health disorders to choose their mode of treatment, say no to institutionalisation, and also provides an opportunity to people to give advance directions on the kind of treatment they want in case they were diagnosed with a mental illness. In these ways, it makes a clean break from the Mental Health Act of 1987, which emphasised on institutionalised care, at times encouraging families of the mentally-ill to abandon them at 'asylums.'

An estimated 6%-7% of the country's population suffers from mental illnesses. Given that mental disorders can trigger suicidal thoughts, a patient-friendly legislation is not enough. We need to shed certain ingrained attitudes. People are known to lock away their loved ones rather than admit that someone in the family needs psychiatric treatment. Gradually, the stigma is giving way to acceptance for psychiatric counselling: even the prime minister is battling for it. This support can also come from a friend, colleague or a loved one, but it is best dealt with by professionals. Counsellors can pick up the danger signals that can help avert suicide. And suicide helplines can convince those gripped with anxiety to give life another chance.

@ghoshworld

BOBBY GHOSH

Getting real about Israel

Arab states accept the New Delhi-Tel Aviv friendship because many of them would like an accommodation with the Jewish State

When Narendra Modi visits Israel this year, it will be remarkable for two reasons: First, that it will be the first visit to the Israeli state by an Indian head of government; and second, that it will in all likelihood raise no eyebrows — never mind hackles — in the Arab world. The exact dates for the trip have not yet been announced, but it has been known for some weeks now that it will happen this summer. And yet, no Arab State has voiced any displeasure, not publicly, and not even through diplomatic back-channels.

This is nothing short of astonishing to anyone who, like your humble servant, grew up in the India of the 1970s and 80s, when it was routine for New Delhi to join the Arab chorus of condemnation for Israel at Tel Aviv's every turn. Whether it was because of India's need for Arab oil, or because there were so many Arab members of the benighted Non-Aligned Movement, or because the Jewish State was tied to the US while New Delhi was chummy with the USSR, or simply because so many in this country genuinely sympathised with the Palestinian cause, a succession of Indian governments avoided diplomatic relations with Israel.

If you'd told me then that an Indian prime minister would one day be making an official visit there, I'd have laughed you out of the room. But that prospect is no longer surprising: The two countries began building close ties in the 1990s, and are now locked in a tight embrace of economic, defence and security interests.

What is astonishing, though, is the absence of even a murmur of protest from India's friends in the Arab world. West Asian diplomats quizzed by my colleagues at Hindustan Times have shrugged off the idea of Modi's visit as a matter of realpolitik. One expressed the mild hope that the PM might also visit the West Bank, to show some solidarity with the Palestinians, but acknowledged that this is unlikely.

IF MODI DOES HEAR FROM ARAB RULERS BEFORE HIS VISIT TO ISRAEL, IT MAY BE IN THE FORM OF REQUESTS TO CONVEY FELICITATIONS. AND IT'S JUST CONCEIVABLE THAT NETANYAHU WILL WANT MODI TO CARRY A MESSAGE FOR SAUDI KING SALMAN

One reason for the Arab pocrantism over deepening Indo-Israeli relations is a resigned acceptance that the two countries have much in common, including their enemies, in the shape of Islamist terrorism. Another is a profound sense of Palestine fatigue in Arab capitals, whether on account of the interminable and intractable nature of the problem, or because other Arab peoples — Syrians, for one — are making a more pressing case for sympathy.

Yet another reason for the lack of concern among Arab governments for India's friendship with Israel is that many of them would themselves like an accommodation with the Jewish State. Countries like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have for some time now reportedly been making quiet, behind-the-scenes contact with the government of Prime Minister Binyamin "Bibi" Netanyahu, and the frequency has grown since January 2016, when the US and other major powers signed a nuclear treaty with Iran.

Arab leaders have determined that Shia-ruled Iran represents an existential threat to their Sunni-dominated regimes, and recognise that, in this, they have a common cause with Israel. Netanyahu's trenchant tirades against the theocracy in Tehran have an enthusiastic audience in Arab palaces.

This is especially true in Riyadh and Manama, where the threat of Iran is felt most keenly. The Saudis are terrified that Iran will stir up trouble in its eastern province, where there is a large Shia population — and where a great deal of the country's oil lies below the ground. Spooked by



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Israeli counterpart Binyamin Netanyahu, New York, September 28, 2014

Tehran's encouragement of the Houthi militia that controls much of Yemen, the Saudis have led a Sunni-Arab coalition in a protracted military misadventure in the heel of the Arabian Peninsula. (The Houthis are nominally Shia.) Bahrain's Sunni rulers, meanwhile, feel Iran's breath on their shoulder as they continue to suppress their Shia-majority population.

The Sunni states had long banked on the US to forestall the threat from Tehran, but the nuclear deal — Iran agreed to scrap its nuclear ambitions in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions — have left them scrambling for succor elsewhere. Russia, the most obvious alternative, is seen as being on Iran's side, with Moscow offering Tehran billions of dollars' worth of military hardware. China has said it would like the Israeli-Palestinian issue resolved, but has shown no interest in playing umpire between the Shia and the Sunnis. That leaves Israel, which is not only hostile to Iran, but has its own arsenal of nuclear weapons with which to menace the mullahs in Tehran.

But Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and most other Arab states have no formal relations with Israel: Most of them don't even acknowledge Israel's right to exist. For six decades, their propaganda machines have portrayed the Jewish State as an abomination, and have normalised anti-Semitism among their citizenry. The rulers of these states cannot now afford to be seen breaking bread with Israel, and so can only play a form of diplomatic footsie — or rely on sympathetic intermediaries to ferry little notes between them.

So, if Modi does hear from Arab rulers before his visit to Israel, it may very well be in the form of requests to convey cautious felicitations. And it's just conceivable that Netanyahu will want Modi to carry a message for Saudi King Salman, who is expected to visit New Delhi later in the year.

letters@hindustantimes.com

newsmaker

KAPIL SIBAL FORMER HRD MINISTER

IT REALLY SURPRISES ME THAT AS SOMEONE WHO WAXES ELOQUENT ABOUT TRANSPARENCY AND BLACK MONEY, THIS GOVERNMENT HAS DONE AWAY WITH THE CAP [ON POLITICAL FUNDING BY COMPANIES]... THIS IS THE SUREST WAY TO ENSURE THAT THE POLITICAL PARTY IN POWER GETS ALL THE FUNDING THAT IT NEEDS.



Illustration: SIDDHANT JUMDE

THINK IT OVER »

KEEP YOUR FACE TO THE SUNSHINE AND YOU CANNOT SEE A SHADOW
HELLEN KELLER

JNU can become a 'world class' institution

The UGC's one-size-fits-all regulations must not be allowed to destroy the university's potential to become one

Gulshan Sachdeva

For some time, the Narendra Modi government has been talking about facilitating 20 'world class' academic institutions in India. Last year, the University Grant Commission came out with draft guidelines on World Class Institution. Recently the University Grant Commission has approved these guidelines with changes (including renaming them as institutes of eminence) for cabinet approval.

Draft guidelines and various reports have indicated that the core difference between the so-called World Class Institution and normal universities in India will be that these 20 institutions will enjoy much more autonomy than existing universities and academic institutions. They will be free to fix their own fees for foreign students (which could be up to 30% of the total strength), salary of foreign faculty as well as freedom to choose admission procedure, course structure, course duration etc. Any public university seeking this tag also must be among the top 25 in the National Institution Ranking Framework (NIRF).

As per draft guidelines, the potential World Class Institution will have to be a multidisciplinary institution, focusing on teaching and research; a good proportion of foreign or foreign-educated faculty; focusing on development concerns, merit based admissions, faculty-student ratio of 1:10, good infrastructure and large owned campus, international collaborations, good publication record etc.

The basic philosophy behind this move has been that the existing regulatory structure from the institutions likes the University Grant Commission, All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), etc. do not allow fully autonomous environment for many Indian universities to become 'world class'.

With the highest National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) score, best central university award by the President, and number three ranking in the NIRF, the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) definitely has the potential to become 'world class'. But even with the



The JNU students' union holds a referendum on the university administration's plan to make interviews the main 'test' for selecting research students and reduce the number of scholars a teacher can supervise

VIPIK KUMAR/HT PHOTO

government's own philosophy, this will only happen if institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University are given greater autonomy in their admission and other procedures.

The government is correctly planning to create World Class Institution with minimal State institutional interference. This broadly fits within the Modi government's philosophy of 'minimum government and maximum governance'.

However, existing institutions like the University Grant Commission, whose own future is uncertain, are keeping issuing one-size-fits-all regulations. The current M.Phil/PhD admission guidelines have practically stopped all new research admissions in Jawaharlal Nehru University for the next few years, particularly in social sciences, international studies, languages (including Sanskrit), law and governance, biotechnology etc.

In Jawaharlal Nehru University, with the existing faculty strength of 565 and about 5,000 research scholars, this means

each faculty on an average is guiding close to nine researchers. For a mainly research-oriented university, this is not a terribly bad situation.

There may be some professors with more than average numbers, which can be taken care of with the existing 300 vacancies. But we must understand that research supervisors are allocated on the basis of specialisation rather than academic hierarchies as the University Grant Commission guidelines dictate.

As per the University Grant Commission, a young assistant professor can only guide half the number of students than a professor even if she/he has a specialisation in an exciting new research area.

These are the regulations, which the government must do away with, if there is any plan to make Indian academic institutions 'world class'.

Gulshan Sachdeva is Jean Monnet chair and professor at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University
The views expressed are personal

innervoice

You must have faith in your karmic balance sheet

Shiv Dhawan

Every morning while driving down to my office at Sansad Marg, I take a turn towards Bhikaji Cama Street from RK Puram. For the last four years, I have been seeing a beggar — disfigured due to leprosy — daily at the crossing. He has a beautiful habit: Every day he comes to my car with a radiant and somewhat lopsided cheeky smile and asks me how my previous day has been. I often give him some money and he chuckles and raises his stub of a hand in salute and says: "God bless!"

Lately, thanks to some problems at work, I have been very upset and angry. I am so upset that it is showing on my face. Some days ago, the beggar wished me 'Happy Holi', and asked me why I looked so upset. I could not control myself: I parked the car on one side of the road, gave him two packets of glucose biscuits and started talking to him. I asked him: "You are poor, your limbs have withered away...you have no family or friends...but how do you always have that grin on your face?"

He chuckled and said, patting his forehead and chest with a stub of right hand: "Andhereh se nahi ghabrane ka...happiness can be found even in the darkest of times if only one remembers to turn on the light".

I learnt a valuable lesson that day: Have faith in your karmic balance sheet and everything will be alright.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers. The views expressed are personal).

innervoice@hindustantimes.com