

RTI Debate: Don't Scare Citizens

Duty to publish must be the government's goal

A controversy over the government's proposed rules and procedures for the Right to Information (RTI) Act overlooks the simple point that the goal right now should be to move on to a Duty to Publish rather than clean up the working of the RTI Act. The government says that the changes it has proposed were formulated by the previous UPA government and that it is merely taking forward the process started by its predecessor.

Certain of the proposed changes have caused alarm among RTI activists. The provision that an RTI query would lapse if the questioner passes away while the query is being processed certainly could have ominous implications. The surest way to prevent uncomfortable information surfacing on account of an RTI query from a pesky interlocutor would, indeed, be to bump him off. While this certainly could not have been the intent of either this or the previous government, the possibility cannot be dismissed out of hand, given the reality of repeated attacks and killings of RTI activists in different parts of the country. At the same time, the proposal to limit the size of the question and to raise the RTI fee to ₹50 do make sense, to make the process more efficacious and not a burden on the exchequer. But the real reform called for in relation to the citizens' right to know is to move forward on a conceptual rather than merely procedural plane. Once a government decision is taken, there is no reason why every file noting relating to it should not be placed in the public domain. Of course, information that might compromise national security and is thus outside the purview of RTI even now can continue to be kept confidential. But there is no reason why the government should sit on the details of public decision-making till someone puts in a query. It should proactively publish on its website all its paperwork on the matter in a way that is easily accessible.



Information on the working of the government is a powerful source of citizen empowerment. As India's democracy matures, citizens ought to have greater and easier access to that information.

What the University Rankings Tell Us

The 2017 rankings of universities and colleges, the second edition of this exercise, shows the top 100 colleges are clustered in Delhi (20), Tamil Nadu (37), Kerala (14) and Andhra Pradesh (11). The rest of the country gets the remaining 18. This is disquieting. The trend is likely to be reinforced by the observation of the human resource development minister that colleges that rank high would get even more resources. Since the budget outlay on higher education per se will remain constrained, allocating more funds to institutions that already do well will deprive less-fortunate institutions of funds and depress the chance of excellence spreading. This is not what India's dream of reaping a huge demographic dividend and being a knowledge economy calls for.



The institutions have been ranked on the basis of five composite parameters — teaching, learning & resources; research & professional practice; graduation outcome, outreach & inclusivity, perception. Rankings are not an end in themselves. It is an analysis that should help individual institutions and collectively the higher education sector identify strengths, weaknesses, and help chart a path for improvement. The rankings of 100 universities find that India's top ranking university, the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, is head and shoulders above its peers, scoring 20 points more than the next. Most universities have average scores in terms of research, with those with a science focus scoring relatively better. Multi-disciplinary or social science/humanities-oriented ones fare better on placement/higher studies/entrepreneurship, salaries.

Two takeaways: universities do not focus on research and knowledge creation, and pure sciences are not a draw on account of poor earning prospects. Both need to be remedied.

Can it be true that cats prefer human company over food, scent and toys?

Look What the Cat Brought Out!

A crucial aspect of the traditional allure of cats has been the belief that they consider themselves equal — if not superior — to their human interlocutors. Not for them the slavish, slobbering devotion of dogs, eager for even the slightest gesture of approval from their "masters". The perceived difference in classification of humans vis-à-vis their domesticated felines and canines has always been seen as significant. Cat cognition research revealing that they have highly evolved socio-cognitive and problem-solving abilities has only increased our admiration for them. So the news that a new study has found cats to prefer human company over food, scent and toys is nothing short of catastrophic. All the myths about their superciliousness, independence, equanimity and purring self-confidence stand shattered. After all, even the question of who domesticated whom had never been unanimously agreed upon when it comes to cats and humans.

Fans will say that the cats observed in the study deliberately manipulated the humans conducting the study — simply to show that they could — so the results cannot be taken as authentic. Which self-respecting cats would allow themselves to be second guessed by a bunch of mere human scientists anyway? Most of them, in fact, could probably foresee editorials being written doubting this so-called finding.

From being the world leader in surveys, India is now a country with a serious data problem

Scorched by a Data Drought

Abhijit V Banerjee, Pranab Bardhan, Rohini Somanathan & TN Srinivasan

in a developing country becoming a world leader in a large field of general interest.

Setting Standards

The National Sample Survey (NSS), when launched by the NSSO in 1949, was the most ambitious household survey in the world, covering over 1,800 villages and over 100,000 households across India. The methods used by the NSS became the standard for household surveys the world over.

For example, the use of interpenetrating samples — essentially, two independent samples drawn from the same population — to test the reliability of the survey results, was developed by Mahalanobis in a 1936 paper and remains a standard tool for survey design. The Living Standard Measurement Surveys the World Bank still carries out in many countries are a direct descendant of the NSS.

And yet, despite our almost unquenchable thirst for national distinction, almost no one in India today knows this proud history. To most of us the acronym ISI stands for a Pakistani organisation dedicated to mischief. And if anyone has heard of Mahalanobis, it is as the inspiration behind our supposedly failed planning experiment.

The consequence of our present indifference is not merely a lost opportunity to take pride. It pervades our attitude to data, both as consumers and producers of evidence. We quibble about whether growth was 7.1% or 7.4%, ignoring the fact that our two main sources of official consumption data, the NSS and the GDP data produced by the Central Statistical Organisation (CSO), now tell entirely different stories.

If you believe the NSS, GDP co-



Leaving too many boxes empty

uld be just about half of what it is according to the CSO. There are occasional academic debates about which one is correct, which one in power pays any attention to. And yet, it is almost surely true that both estimates (and their growth rates) are off by a huge margin.

More worrying, this divergence has been known for nearly 50 years (though it has grown a lot). And though we are occasionally told that the NSS is understaffed, or that no one knows where the CSO got a particular number, there is absolutely no political interest in improving things. From being the world leader in surveys, we are now one of the countries with a serious data problem while people talk about the really good data you can get in Indonesia or Brazil or even Pakistan.

With the express intention of stirring up some action on this subject, we recently re-edited and updated a volume of essays, Poverty and Income Distribution in India, which Pranab Bardhan and TN Srinivasan had edited and the ISI published in the early 1970s. The goal was to showcase a remarkable body of work, now mostly sadly forgotten, on the nature of poverty and inequality in India, how to quantify it

and what to do about it based on that evidence.

Attention to Detail

What jumps out when one reads these papers is the fine-grained attention to the details of how data gets collected and assembled, and an interesting mixture of activism and scepticism, no doubt in part a result of their clear-sighted understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence.

Inequality and poverty are back in fashion both in economic research and the political discourse today. But the same sophistication about the underlying data that drives these conclusions is often missing. Even more than the essays themselves — and there are four new ones by the editors and one by Amartya Sen — the book's real value is as a reminder of a glorious (recent) past. And as an encouragement to turn our attention to an embarrassing present.

Banerjee, Bardhan, Somanathan and Srinivasan teach economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, University of California (Berkeley), Delhi School of Economics, and Yale University, respectively



Hanuman and Rama

CD VERMA

Hanuman, the monkey god, was an ardent devotee of Rama. His devotion took him wherever he was required to help Rama tide over difficulties. Most famously, Hanuman searched and found Rama's kidnapped consort Sita, brought vital healing herbs from the mountain to make a seriously wounded Lakshman well and acted as the commander of Rama's forces.

Hanuman, therefore, is popularly referred to as the sankat mochan, resolver of problems, easy to please. He was born on Chaitra Shukla Purnima, and there are many legends surrounding his birth. He is also known as Shankarsuvan, Kesari, Anjan, Pawansut — that is, son of Shankar, of Kesari and Anjan, and of Pawan, the god of the winds, respectively.

King Dashrath got four sons after he performed the putreshti yagya and propitiated Agnidevta. The god of fire offered Dashrath a bowl of charu which was divided among his three queens, Kausalya, Kaikeyi and Sumitra. When Kaikeyi was about to eat it, she vultured swooped down and snatched a part of it, and took flight. But she found it too hot to swallow and dropped it on top of a mountain, where Anjan was engrossed in penance. Anjan caught the prasad and ate it. The "vulture" regained her original form and flew to heaven. Anjan became pregnant. Like the three queens of Dashrath, and gave birth to Hanuman. So in a way, Rama and Hanuman are brothers, born of the effect of the same divine prasad.

We quibble about whether growth was 7.1% or 7.4%, ignoring the fact that our two main sources of official consumption data, NSS & CSO, now tell different stories

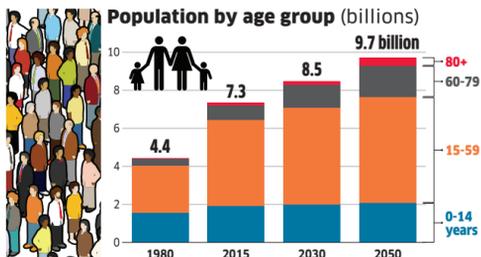
WIT & WISDOM

"Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are."

Michel Foucault
Philosopher

Population Profile

Changes in the age structure of human populations are taking place across the globe, though not at the same rate everywhere. Overall, the proportion of children (ages 0-14) and youth (ages 15-24) in the world is slowly declining while that of older persons (ages 65+) is rising...



Between 2015 and 2050, the population aged 65 or older in Europe will increase from 23% to 28%. In North America, the corresponding percentage will rise from 18% to 23%. By 2050, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Oceania will all have more than 18% of their populations at ages 65 and above.

CAMERADERIE



Just get the grip right, Sachin, the rest will follow.

INDIA-UK TRADE & BUSINESS

Shake Free to Do Business



Philip Hammond

As we begin preparing to set our own trade terms for the first time in 40 years, Britain is ready to breathe new life into its relationship with the rest of the world. In New Delhi yesterday, I spoke to finance minister Arun Jaitley about the triggering of Article 50 last week, which has set in motion the countdown for a revitalised Britain on the world stage, one that is ready to strengthen its relationships with its traditional friends and allies.

It will be a Global Britain that is confident, ambitious and tolerant, and a Britain that can make its own decisions, build new economic partnerships and work on a one-to-one basis with nations like India. The rhetoric of last year's Brexit referendum campaign was not a rhetoric of isolation. Quite the opposite: it was an insistence of bigger and better engagement with the world, not just with our European friends and neighbours, but with everyone beyond those borders too.

British Prime Minister Theresa May has emphasised constantly over the last nine months our continued support for free trade, open markets and an expanded engagement with the outside world. Nowhere is this more relevant than India, whose economic transformation has been nothing short of remarkable. This year, India is forecast to grow at 7.2% and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecast it to be the fastest-growing economy in the G20 next year as well, a credit to the reforms that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Jaitley have put in place.

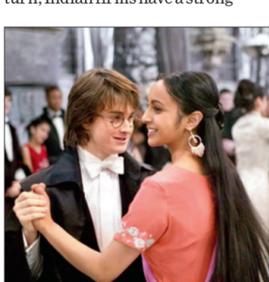
As well as our annual talks on economic and financial cooperation, I will also be laying the groundwork for the

record as investors in British industry, with perhaps the most high-profile being Tata's successful management of Jaguar Land Rover (JLR). But there are many more opportunities available.

On Tuesday, when I represented Britain at the 9th India-UK Economic and Financial Dialogue in Delhi, our world leading finance sector was in sharp focus. Britain is perfectly placed to be India's financial partner of choice, helping it to raise the finance needed for its continued rapid growth. My message is 'Make in India, finance in the UK'.

There have already been more than 37 masala bonds issued on the London Stock Exchange. Only last Friday, HDFC issued their largest masala bond, raising £400 million (about ₹32.40 billion). Yesterday, Jaitley and I confirmed a new partnership under the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund, in which we will work together to leverage City of London investment into India's rapidly growing energy and renewables market.

We believe that Britain's position as a global finance hub, our plans to build a truly Global Britain as we leave the EU, and India's own ambitious growth aspirations make an unbeatable combination to help us take our relationship to the next level.



It can get giddy

Britain is already the world's largest exporter of financial services and the leading centre for Fintech. There are enormous opportunities for Britain and India to collaborate in both areas, which is why I will be delighted to speak at the India-UK Fintech Conference in Mumbai, along with a delegation of British leaders in financial services and Fintech.

With us we bring this message: as the world's oldest democracy and the world's biggest democracy, who better to show the world the true benefits of free trade and open markets than Britain and India?

Citings

Keynesian Policy

JOHN KAY

When I was much younger and editing an economics journal, I published an article by a distinguished professor — more distinguished, perhaps, for his policy pronouncements than his scholarship. At a late stage I grew suspicious of some of the numbers in one of his tables and, on making my own calculations, found they were wrong. I rang him. Without apology, he suggested I insert the correct data. Did he, I tentatively enquired, wish to review the text and its conclusions in light of these corrections, or at least to see the amended table? No, he responded briskly.

The incident shocked me then. Opinions seem to be based more and more on what team you belong to and less and less on your assessment of facts. John Maynard Keynes is often quoted as saying: "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?" This seems a rather minimal standard of intellectual honesty, even if one no longer widely aspired to. As with many remarks attributed to the British economist, however, it does not appear to be what he actually said: the original source is Paul Samuelson (an American Nobel laureate, who cannot himself have heard it) and the reported remark is: "When my information changes, I alter my conclusions." There is a subtle, but important, difference between "the facts" and "my information". The former refers to some objective change that is, or should be, apparent to all: the latter to the speaker's knowledge of relevant facts.

Chat Room

Carmakers Must Follow Rules

This refers to 'Stand Firm on Good Governance Norms' (April 4). The government means business when it comes to enforcing laws on pollution. Vehicle manufacturers erred as they gave hefty discounts to offload inventories. They also sullied their image by giving an impression that their margins were abnormal. Many people bought vehicles, knowing fully well that engines were of inferior quality. People should not have bought these vehicles in the first place, and instead let inventories be scrapped. Any harm to public health is simply unacceptable.

ASHOK GOSWAMI
Chennai

Let's Have Large Banks

The merger of SBI's five associate banks with the parent from April 1 this year is a bold step. It will help in treasury operations becoming more efficient and lower operating costs. Bigger size would certainly allow SBI to fund large infrastructure projects and cross-border acquisitions with greater ease.

The gigantic merged entity will have many new challenges to confront, but having fewer number of bigger banks with the ability to bear risks, rather than many small banks, makes eminent sense. Consolidation will be beneficial for deposit growth.

SRINIVASAN UMASHANKAR
Nagpur

Don't Dilute RTI Act

Apopros 'RTI Case likely to be Closed after Applicant's Death' (April 3). The fear among RTI activists that government's move to notify new rules will be misused by the powers that be is not misplaced. Even today, some departments give evasive replies or refuse to provide vital information. Any further dilution will defeat the purpose of the law to empower citizens.

S KALYANASUNDARAM
Via Email

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From: Keynes was half right about the facts