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Look beyond the spectacle

A water crisis is upon south India and no amount of disaster relief can ease it

For the last three weeks, Jantar Mantar in central Delhi has been home to a demonstration that has been using “innovative” methods — in desperation, one may add — to grab the attention of the central government.

ourtake

Around 80 farmers from Tamil Nadu posed with skulls, rats and dead snakes to impress upon the Union government their plight due to the severe drought in their state. They managed to grab media attention but behind the spectacle is a warning, which resonates beyond the state: The deepening water crisis in south India. The farmers from Tamil Nadu were demanding that their loans from nationalised banks be waived, fair and just prices be set for their produce and to come up with realistic solutions to the water scarcity in the state. The farmers claimed that their loans from cooperative banks were written off, under former chief minister J Jayalithaa's directives. However, loans from nationalised banks require the central government's go-ahead.

The farmers have been reeling under the influence of what has been reportedly called the worst drought faced by the state in 140 years and the cyclone Vardah that hit the state in December last year. All the 32 districts of Tamil Nadu have been declared drought-affected. Former Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam on January 3 gave an insight into the gravity of the situation. If the average rainfall that Tamil Nadu receives from the north-east monsoon from October to December is around 440 millimetres (44 centimetres), it received only 16.83 cm in 2016. Karnataka is in the same boat as Tamil Nadu. The former is facing its second consecutive drought year as it has had over 50% deficient rainfall this year. The state has also been directed to release Cauvery water to Tamil Nadu despite an acute drinking water shortage that is expected to only get worse in the coming months. With both the southwest and northeast monsoons not making an appearance except for a few showers, Kerala too is facing its worst drought in 115 years.

Last week, the Centre released ₹1,712.10 crore and ₹1,235.52 crore for drought-hit Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. On Tuesday, the Madras High Court directed the state government to waive off farm loans. While emergency funds and loan waivers can ease the situation, they are at best cosmetic. Only a long-term water management policy can end the woes of farmers once and for all.

The colour of prejudice

It is hypocritical of New Delhi to say that the recent attacks on Africans in Greater Noida were not racist

African ambassadors to India have issued an unprecedented formal complaint criticising the weakness of New Delhi's response to the recent attacks on Africans in Greater Noida. While there is evidence the complaint did not represent the views of many African governments, there is nonetheless a message for Indians as a whole. The Indian government has been quick to insist that arrests have been made and, generally, the police have been active in most such cases — though this is often because of official prodding. It is also a fact that the Indian foreign minister normally speaks out against such incidents. What is questionable is Indian officialdom's insistence that such attacks are not racist. Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj, after a series of such incidents last year, had told the Rajya Sabha, these “were not any kind of racial attacks” but “spontaneous” and “criminal.”

New Delhi makes a specious argument that if such assaults are not pre-meditated and specifically motivated by an African's physical appearance, then such incidents are not racial. A minority of the Africans face violence because they are involved in criminal activities. But it is also clear that Indians use this as an excuse to go after anyone of African appearance, irrespective of whether they are involved in any crime. More importantly, racism is ultimately defined by the perception of the victim. Any person of black origin who lives in India faces a steady stream of petty racism whether in the form of verbal abuse, social ostracisation, and discrimination in such issues as housing. Inevitably, if they are attacked by a mob they will assume their skin colour is part of the reason.

The Aam Aadmi Party all but made African-bashing an electoral selling point. It is hypocritical that New Delhi is quick to declare attacks on people of Indian origin in the West as racist while steadfastly refusing to admit what happens on the home front.

When debate becomes futile

Both society and State have become cynical about liberal ideals like institutional autonomy and freedom to think, writes KRISHNA KUMAR

Many universities and colleges seem unable to stop ideological conflicts from degenerating into violence. Violence against oneself is also no longer uncommon, indicating despair among youth. Indifference towards opposing viewpoints is not new in our campuses, but it seems to have mutated into a general feeling that it is pointless to debate on certain matters with certain kinds of people. An atmosphere permeated by the futility of discussion does not augur well for the future of higher education. If this is a sign of crisis, it is surely neither new nor incidental.

Not many people recognise the magnitude of the damage that the system of higher education has suffered during the recent decades at the hands of successive governments. In official circles, there is no consensus whether it was damage at all. The general public also seems unaware of the damage although many older citizens can recognise — and they sometimes complain about — a decline in standards.

In any case, only a small proportion of the population is directly concerned with higher education. For most parents, higher education has importance because it gives eligibility for higher status jobs. They don't know that most colleges and universities are silently coping with a crisis caused by financial starvation, neglect and decay. As for the young themselves, their discontent does occasionally turn into protest, but their highly-politicised organisations turn every protest into an ideological conflict, thereby neutralising its potential for inspiring reform. The same can be said about teachers' organisations.

Higher education is called “higher” because it has an intellectual role to play in social life. It provides and manages the space where common curiosity can lead to specialised inquiry and ideas can be debated imaginatively and freely. Accommodating divergent positions and permitting dissent from the dominant view are important functions that institutions of higher education are supposed to play.

But many universities and colleges have little capacity left in them to perform this role today. They are unable to provide and nurture an intellectually stimulating environment, even inside the classroom. Young people who feel frustrated or bewildered by this situation need to learn about the past few decades during which the intellectual functions of higher education gradually diminished.

Comparison with the past is seldom valid, but it is useful because it gives us a perspective. By today's standards, India's higher education system in the 1960s was rather small and socially quite narrow. Teaching was the focus of university life; research was perceived as a professional achievement, not a requirement for academic employment or promotion. Nurturing an open, reflective mind was not a conscious agenda. Many teachers promoted it, struggling with the constant pressure of an entrenched exam culture. Administrators knew that they were in charge of an oasis, and some of them actively protected its privileges as a liberal space.

By comparison, universities today serve a socially-diverse clientele even though their ethos is not exactly inclusive. Few administrators perceive their institution as a liberal space. Change in the social and political milieu has eroded the university's confidence in its role and relevance.

The State's perception of its financial responsibility towards higher education has radically changed. Government grants now constitute a small proportion of the budget in a vast number of state universities. Most of them are clueless about ways and means to fulfil their basic needs with dignity.

Explaining the loss of institutional autonomy and teachers' intellectual dignity is not difficult. Forced reforms have played a crucial role, and a new financial regime has facilitated them. Imposition of the semester system was resisted across the country, but State authorities interpreted the resistance as an assertion of inertia. Undoubtedly, international pressure to follow the global trend was strong enough

comment



Students from Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University raise slogans as they participate in a rally held to protest violence on the campus, New Delhi, March 4. No debate today can proceed far without falling victim to personalised acrimony

to drown any reference to local conditions and essential needs.

Nowhere in the world does the semester system work with centralised exams, but this contradiction was ignored. The stick of diminishing budgets forced one university after another to capitulate. Combined with brutal cuts in library resources, semester-wise exams pushed both teachers and students to forget about engagement with knowledge. The policy of withholding regular recruitment further injured the dignity of teaching and institutional efficiency. As if all this was not enough, Delhi University pioneered the enforcement of a four-year undergraduate course under widespread criticism and demand for caution, but no one listened. The experiment ultimately collapsed when it faced the loss of political patronage.

This brief history might help college youth to form a realistic estimate of what they must expect to cope with. The atmosphere surrounding them is charged with artificial polarities and a culture of fast reaction. No debate can proceed far without falling victim to personalised accusations and acrimony. Tools of communication are indiscriminately honing the edge of every conceivable argument. Depletion of memory and patience make reflection virtually impossible.

Both society and State have adopted a cynical attitude towards liberal ideals like institutional autonomy and freedom to think. Colleges and universities are no longer perceived as communities based on knowledge and learning. No one seems to believe that such a community has relevance or a role to play. In this situation, we are tempted to isolate the violence that erupted in a college in Delhi or the gagging of opinion that occurred in another. These incidents should remind us that institutional recovery is not a matter of fixing a few wrongs.

Krishna Kumar is former director NCERT, and professor of education, Delhi University
The views expressed are personal

newsmaker

VENKAI AH NAIDU, Union Information and Broadcasting minister

FOOD IS A PERSONAL CHOICE, BUT AT THE SAME TIME THERE ARE CERTAIN RESTRICTIONS IN THE CONSTITUTION...WHAT IS PROHIBITED AS PER CONSTITUTION IN STATES...ONE SHOULD FOLLOW THAT. I AM A STAUNCH NON-VEGETARIAN AND WILL CONTINUE TO BE SO, AND THERE IS NO RESTRICTION.

Illustration: SIDDHANT JUMDE



THINK IT OVER »

YOUTH IS HAPPY BECAUSE IT HAS THE ABILITY TO SEE BEAUTY. ANYONE WHO KEEPS THE ABILITY TO SEE BEAUTY NEVER GROWS OLD.

FRANZ KAFKA

Twitter seeks to #StopHindiChauvinism

Vidya Subramanian

On Friday, MK Stalin of the DMK, noticed that signage on the Chittoor-Vellore Highway and National Highway 77 in Tamil Nadu was written in Hindi and Tamil, and the English names had vanished. He accused the BJP of disrespecting the Tamils and of trying to bring in a “Hindi hegemony through the backdoor” into Tamil Nadu. Parties such as the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) and Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) threatened an agitation if such changes on the milestones continued. Since then, on Twitter at least, the question of language has become important again.

While it began with Tamil Nadu, many people, not just from the south of India,

seemed to agree. Twitter users across the country have been vocal in pointing this out, using the hashtag #StopHindiChauvinism. The spectre of Hindi chauvinism had also raised its head when the new ₹500 and ₹2,000 currency notes were introduced. These notes have the number written in Hindu-Arabic numerals as well as in Devanagari. It is a departure from the Munshi-Ayyangar formula, devised during the Constituent Assembly debates in which it was decided that India would have no national language and that states in which Hindi was not spoken could maintain international numerals.

In a country as diverse as India, where many people who are not from the Hindi-speaking belt have had to face discrimination in cities like Delhi, the alarm over Hindi

hegemony is not entirely unfounded. People from the northeast being asked if they are Chinese; people from all states in the south being labelled ‘Madras’ are stereotypes that non-Hindi-speakers face every day.

With the rise of the right wing, whose rallying cry in the past has included the chauvinism of language along with that of religion, the fear of Hindi hegemony has been resurrected.

While the immediate impetus for the social media outcry may have been markers on Tamil Nadu milestones, voices from around the country are joining in. Perhaps it's time to renew the idea of syncretism that India has always stood for, where uniformity is not a prerequisite for unity.

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lookingglass

A phoenix moment for liberal parties

A carefully crafted class conflict obscured by a cynically chosen common enemy cannot last indefinitely

Salman Khurshid

In a democracy there is no such thing as permanence. It is, therefore, surprising that the media reads the emergence of the BJP across India as a reassertion, the return of legitimacy and the rejection of pretenders.

Attempts to draw validation of that from the election of Donald Trump, the Brexit result, and the sweep of the Right in most parts of Europe are misplaced, because though defeated in the polls, the Liberals are far from vanquished. The street protests in the US and Scotland's rebuttal to London are examples of limits to the march of the Right.

Admittedly we have yet to see a similar response from ‘Liberal India’. Samajwadi Party leader and former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Akhilesh Yadav lost the election and we lost India despite impressive records of development. Ours was obfuscated by foisting a shadow of corruption and Yadav was burdened with an exaggerated allegation of messy law and

order. Yet no voter seems to have cared to question the unwarranted misery of demonetisation and Swachh Bharat Abhiyan continued to be mocked by mounds of garbage all around us.

The visionary manifesto of the Congress was of no interest to anyone. Our record of citizen-centric schemes such as the RTE, RTI, MGNREGS, farm loan waiver, to name but a few, was not even mentioned.

Truthfully the talk of development was a smokescreen for two frightening dimensions of public policy: To rewrite our past; and to redesign our future. Ironically, the social justice movement, that only a few years ago, under the banner of Mandal looked invincible, has crumbled in the face of “sab ka saath, sab ka vikas”.

If the EVM issue is not to be taken seriously, the support for the BJP across castes and classes is unprecedented, upsetting the cosy caste havens of the SP and BSP. But this could this be a blessing in disguise and the beginning of serious maturing of democratic attitudes in UP?

Or will there be a similar backlash a few years on that will bring back the forces of social justice with a vengeance?

Carefully crafted class conflict obscured by a cynically chosen common enemy cannot last indefinitely; nor can the impact of doling out everything to everyone. Beware the wrath of the citizen who feels betrayed, particularly when alibis of failure run out.

All this does not mean that the Congress and other centrist-to-Left parties need to do nothing but wait. This is the phoenix moment to work not just for political revival but a renaissance in our society. Those who foolishly believe that the India we know has no concern for this freedom, do not know India, no matter they call it Bharat or Hindustan. There will indeed be a new India but the narrative will be authored by the inheritors of freedom and freedom fighters of tomorrow.

Let the battle be joined in right earnest. Salman Khurshid is a Congress leader and former Union minister
The views expressed are personal

innervoice

No one remembers the struggle, it's the score that counts

Ajit Bishnoi

Picture this: two top football teams are playing in the Champion's League — the top tournament for European clubs. In the first leg, PSG wins by a margin of 4-0 over the formidable BFC. The second leg is full of drama. BFC manages three goals. Now the score line stands at 4-3. PSG scores near half-time, and now BFC must score three more goals to win. They accomplish this in the final seven minutes and manage to win the match against all odds. The final score stands at BFC-6 and PSG-5.

In debates, what counts is the final score. In elections, as the votes are counted, the lead keeps on varying, but only the one who finally wins is cheered for and remembered.

Similarly, in life, success or failure is measured by whether one is finally able to accomplish one's goals. As they say, all's well that ends well. One can be successful in life by subscribing to this philosophy. We must never quit, no matter what difficulties we may have to face. However, extreme care must be taken to ensure that our aims and goals are properly chosen keeping in mind our resources and abilities. When I say resources, they include time, money, intelligence, health, nature, habits.

Tolerance is also a trait one must inculcate to succeed. The results will come; only one has to have faith in God and one's abilities.

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