

## ht think!

## REFLECTIONS

## past &amp; present

RAMACHANDRA GUHA



## THE CLOSING OF THE HINDU MIND

One of my heroes is the Marathi writer and reformer Hamid Dalwai. Born in 1932 on the Konkan coast, Dalwai wrote some well-regarded short stories and novellas; then, appalled by the reactionary tendencies in his faith, he abandoned writing for activism. Through the 1960s and 1970s, he campaigned relentlessly against the stranglehold over the Muslim community exercised by a backward-looking clergy.

For all his commitment, Dalwai failed to shake the Muslim leadership out of their torpid orthodoxy. In 1971, he went to seek the counsel of an old freedom fighter named Anisur Rehman, a modernist who had worked with Jawaharlal Nehru. An eyewitness reported this exchange: Dalwai: 'In your opinion how can we put an end to the separatist tendencies that exist in Muslim politics? Please tell us how to put an end to separation [from the mainstream].'

Rehman: 'This is a very pertinent question. The fact is that the Muslims seem to have locked their sensibilities with a huge padlock and have thrown the key away. Now it has become difficult to open that lock. If you choose to break it open you are considered an enemy of Islam and an anti-Muslim person.'

Despite their vision and their fearlessness, modernisers like Dalwai did not command

much popular support within their community. On the other hand, through the 19th and 20th centuries, liberals and modernisers had a considerable impact on ridding Hinduism of regressive social practices. The roll call of these influential Hindu reformers is long: A partial listing would include the names of Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Swami Vivekananda, Mohandas K Gandhi, Swami Shradhanand, DK Karve, and Jawaharlal Nehru.

These individuals I have (so far) mentioned were all male, and all upper caste. Yet, to their enormous credit, they worked either for the emancipation of the so-called Untouchables, or for the rights of women, or for both. This process of reform from above was complemented and furthered by the process of reform from below, with women and lower castes sending forth their own leaders to fight for their rights, such as (among others) Tarabai Shinde, Pandita Ramabai, Savitribai Phule, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay; Jotiba Phule, Iyothee Thass, Narayana Guru, and BR Ambedkar.

Inspired by these reformers, many Hindus across India learned to orient their actions according to reason and justice, rather than a blind adherence to tradition or scripture. Had it not been for these remarkable men and women, India would never have adopted the progressive



ILLUSTRATION: SUDHIR SHETTY

Constitution that it did. On the ground, the progress was uneven; visible more in the cities than in the countryside, more marked in southern than in northern India. Nonetheless, taken as a whole, the country was moving slowly in the direction of gender and caste equality, and of individual freedom and liberty as well.

All that may now be in the past. Hindu liberalism, once so vigorous and on the ascendant, is increasingly besieged, as the leadership of the community passes into the hands of bigots and reactionaries. Having (to quote Gandhi) once lived in a house whose windows were kept open to let the breeze from outside come in freely, having once (to invoke Tagore) gloried in the illumination of a lamp lit anywhere in the world,

Hindu leaders are now turning inwards, looking backwards. And large sections of the community are following their lead. Thus ever larger numbers of Hindus 'seem to have locked their sensibilities with a huge padlock and have thrown the key away'. Besides, 'it has become difficult to open that lock. If you choose to break it open you are considered an enemy of Hinduism and an anti-Hindu person'.

The most emphatic evidence of the victory of Hindu bigotry over Hindu liberalism is the enormous importance given by the ruling party to the worship of the cow. The epidemic of gau gundagiri now sweeping UP, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Jharkhand is antithetical both to the rule of law and to the rights of individuals. To be

sure, for a particular person to show reverence for a particular animal is entirely reasonable. But for a community to use the power of the State to enforce this worship on society as a whole is deeply repugnant. As field studies have shown, the State's ban on cow slaughter and curbs on trade in cattle are having damaging consequences for the rural economy.

Gau gundagiri is directed outwards, at the minorities. Other forms of contemporary Hindu chauvinism are directed inwards. Hindu patriarchy believe that Hindu women cannot make their own choices; rather, they must be guided and protected by Hindu men. Ambedkar encouraged Dalits to educate, agitate and organise for their rights, but now (as an Indian Express report on the UP Chief Minister's visit to a Dalit village showed) they are given soap and shampoo to clean and purify themselves for presentation to Hindu leaders. The Constitution saw complete equality for women and Dalits as an absolute right; Hindutva ideologues see it as a discretionary favour, to be granted or withheld as they please.

Back in the 1960s, Dalwai wrote despairingly of the Indian Muslim leadership that 'when they find faults, the faults are invariably those of other people. They do not have the capacity to understand their own mistakes....' This description applies in toto to the Hindu leadership of today, which only finds faults in other people—whether Muslims, Christians, sickulars, liberals, or foreigners—while proclaiming that their own community is flawless, guiltless, and divinely ordained to lead the world. This would be funny, were its consequences not so tragic.

Ramachandra Guha's books include *Gandhi Before India*

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The views expressed are personal

## sundaysentiments

KARAN THAPAR



## A SOLDIER KILLED IN ACTION ISN'T A MARTYR

I have a problem with calling soldiers killed in action martyrs. I know it's meant as respect and I'm well aware it's intended as an honour, but that still doesn't address my key concern which is that the term is singularly inappropriate. I'm not sure I can convince you but I'd like you to think carefully about my argument.

First of all, the term martyr has clear and undisputed religious overtones. Traditionally and historically it's used for those who are killed defending their faith. Each of the great faiths has its own list of honoured martyrs. In each case it was refusal to renounce their faith that led to the sacrifice of their lives.

This unavoidable religious association is, I believe, inappropriate for a man in uniform and, particularly, for an Indian Army soldier. Remember ours is a military force that defends a

secular State. Its cause is constitutional not religious. And secularism is one of the key principles of our Constitution and, therefore, of our nationally accepted political identity.

However, this is only my lesser concern. The bigger one has to do with the way martyrs traditionally approach and accept death. I'd like you to follow this part of the argument with particular attention.

A martyr seeks to die. You could even say he wants to die because he's deliberately chosen a path that will lead inevitably and irrevocably to death. This is not simple suicide but the defiant embrace of death in defence of the faith he values more than life. And this seeking of death is intrinsic to martyrdom. It defines the martyr.

In contrast, soldiers do not want to die. They don't seek death. That is not their intention. Their aim is to van-



The objective of soldiers is to vanquish the enemy and come out alive

quish the enemy but emerge victorious and alive.

A soldier may lay down his life in defence of his country but that wasn't what he wanted. It certainly wasn't what he sought. He has a wife and children he wanted to return to. A mother and father he wished to see again. A life he hoped to live to the full. At no point was he seeking death.

Now don't misunderstand me. I'm not devaluing soldiers or their commitment. I'm just correcting a misun-

derstanding. In fact, I would go one step further. I would say that because soldiers want to live, their commitment to the cause they're fighting for and their determination to prevail is even greater.

So let me reiterate in simple terms: A soldier may be prepared to die to secure victory but that doesn't mean he wants to. He wants to live to enjoy his success. That's what sets him apart from a martyr.

This is not a small difference. It's not one of interpretation or use of language. It's not etymological. It has to do with understanding the role and thinking of a soldier. You could, therefore, call it philosophical. That's why it's important. Finally, if it's misleading and, therefore, wrong to call soldiers killed in action martyrs what term do we have that fits better and still honours the sacrifice they've made? Because there's no doubt they've made an enormous sacrifice. The biggest any human being can.

I'm afraid I don't have an answer. Instead, what comes to my mind is the epitaph on the Kohima War Memorial, derived from the words of the English poet John Edmonds: "When you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow we gave our today."

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## incidentally

GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI



## THE HEADY RISE OF INSPIRATION TECH

Is there someone, anyone, anyone at all, we can look up to in India today? Someone we can draw inspiration from?

There are those who have their heroes and heroines—living figures—in politics. Our Prime Minister inspires many. The Yogi of Gorakhpur appeals to his voters' political as well as religious imagination. If wall posters are any indication, many politicians in Tamil Nadu are seen as semi-divine deliverers of Tamil identity, Tamil pride. 'Deivame' (my God-incarnate), 'Idayame' (my very heart).

The many devoted to one or other guru in India will take no time coming up with the name of an inspirational figure. The worlds of the cinema and sport have their icons. Throbbing hearts are I suppose inspired hearts.

But behind many of these inspirational stories a transaction takes place, a certain commerce. It comes as the toolkit of the inspiration-fixer, the image mixer. It comes as the stock-in-trade of projection, of gift-wrapping, of adroit marketing. A make-over is afoot that goes beyond simple air-brushing. What is attempted, with great success, is a Botox of the subject's personality. The amount of time some of these inspirational figures spend with the image fixer or spend in front of a mirror, of a camera lens, says it all. The pictures we see on giant hoardings, posters or in repetitive on-line pop ups are not as-is what-is pictures. They are very carefully planned, rehearsed, with many a re-take. The arms are crossed just right, the smile must not be so wide as to become a grin, not so thin as to look un-friendingly. The serious face must look sincere but not look grave. There should be some compassion in the face, but no weakness, courage but no arrogance.

Strategy makes up for stature, style for substance.

And it makes inspiration a technology. InsTech is our new IT. We see that

InsTech at work and how! The post-independence innocents who had roads, airports, colleges, townships, parks, lakes and canals named after their heroes or parents or themselves, were in the high school of inspiration-making. The British raj that gave us hill stations named Wellington and Dalhousie, townships like Forbesganj and Daltonganj were in InsTech's pre-school. And the pre-Mughals and Mughals who named places like Tughlakabad, Shahjehabad, Aurangabad, Ahmedabad after themselves in InsTech's very nursery.

Every street, every open wall space is, of course, InsTech's seamless canvas. InsTech works multi-mode miracles. It can also work to provoke the opposite.

Very often the gambit flops. To cite Tamil Nadu, again, inspiration-making is highly interactive. No sooner is a poster up that deft fingers work on it. And they go, invariably, for the eye.

Why the eye?

For eyeless, the person looks particularly helpless, hopeless. And since everything else about the person's face on the poster is air-blown chic, forehead cleaned of wrinkles, cheeks of stubble, chins of down, noses of blackheads, nostrils of cilia, teeth of plaque, that face, bereft of eyes, looks like a caricature. Blinding used to be a medieval punishment, followed by other forms of torture, ending invariably in execution. When the person being projected by inspiration technology is disliked, the reactive public turns to that medieval torture. It activates the public's talents at de-constructing strategy by vicarious satire.

InsTech can succeed up to a point. Beyond that point, the human need for inspiration will turn to the organics of the 'real thing' and behind the artifice, find it.

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## deepcut

RAJESH MAHAPATRA



## INDIAN ECONOMY: THE WORST IS NOT OVER, YET

Finally, we have the numbers we have been waiting for. The latest GDP estimates are out, showing how the Indian economy steadily decelerated through the past year—a slide that got only worse with demonetisation. For the full year ended March 31, economic growth slowed to 7.1% from 8% a year earlier, and slipped sharply to 6.1% in the January-March quarter—the slowest in 13 quarters. The numbers vindicate what critics of demonetisation had predicted. These also deflate the government's claim that the economic pain from its November 8 decision to scrap high-value currency notes would be temporary, with limited impact. Yet, most policy makers continue to be in denial.

Sample this: The government's chief statistician, TCA Anant, refused to link the slowdown through the third and fourth quarter to demonetisation that brought widespread eco-

nomical disruptions and sharply depressed both consumption and investment demand, with sectors such as construction and retail sales being the worst hit. Arvind Subramanian, the government's chief economic adviser, said he thinks the worst is over. Finance minister Arun Jaitley argued what happened over the last two quarters of 2016-17 was more of an extension of the deceleration that had already set in from July.

I sincerely hope they do not believe in what they have said—that they have been forced by their occupational hazards to make these comments. Because, a closer scrutiny of the estimates points to a scenario that is more worrying than what the headline numbers would suggest.

The growth in gross value added (GVA), which factors out indirect taxes from estimating the value of GDP and is seen as a more appropriate measure of economic expansion, was

## THE CONTRACTION IN INVESTMENT DEMAND UNDERSCORES FAST ERODING INVESTOR CONFIDENCE AND SHRINKING OPPORTUNITIES TO DEPLOY NEW CAPITAL

5.6% in the fourth quarter. The frequent revisions in excise duties on fuel and fuel products, which we saw through 2016-17, explain why GDP growth in the quarter turned out to be a half-percentage point higher than the growth in GVA.

Further, if the impact of government spending and agriculture is factored out, the growth of GVA for the rest of the economy turns out to be just 3.8% in the January-March period. The corresponding figure in the same quarter a year ago was 10.7%. In other words, the deceleration in the sectors that the economy leans on for jobs and sustainable growth was much sharper than what we see in the headline GDP numbers. The construction sector, hardest hit by the note-ban decision, contracted; financial services grew just 2.2% and growth in mining slowed sharply.

All of these explain why the news of unemployment has returned to make headlines. Ironically, many of the victims continue to support demonetisation, with the hope that it would weed

out corruption, destroy black money and help script a better future for them. The numbers we have now do not present a rosy outlook for the immediate future, however.

The most worrying pointer from the latest GDP data relates to investment demand. It slipped sharply through the year to end with a 2.1% contraction in the last quarter, underscoring an environment of fast-eroding business confidence and shrinking opportunities to find and deploy new capital.

To say that the worst is over would not only be naive, but disastrous, in its consequences. Make no mistake, even the sustained rally in the stock market should not be construed as evidence of either improving sentiments or the fundamentals getting better.

The Sensex has been rising because of expectations that the Reserve Bank of India would cut interest rates on the back of moderating inflation, that the monsoon will be good enough to spur demand and that the government will finally resolve the long-pending problem of bad loans. It is also hoped that the goods and service tax (GST) will be a game-changer.

As of now, these are hopes and expectations, and just that. There is little on the ground to suggest things will turn around soon. If anything, come July 1, we might see yet another disruption, when GST rolls out.

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## thisweekthatera

## PICTURE OF THE WEEK

JUNE 6: A tense moment inside the UAR Embassy on Monday evening (June 5). Arab students, embassy staff and news writers listening to a radio broadcast from Cairo.



JUNE 4-JUNE 10, 1967 >>FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

## NEWS OF THE WEEK

## INDIA

## POLICE CAN INTERVENE IN GHERAOS

JUNE 4: The West Bengal Government today decided to keep in abeyance its order of March 27 directing the police not to intervene in cases of Gheraos without the prior approval of the State Labour Minister or the Labour Directorate.

## WORLD

## FIERCE FIGHTING IN WEST ASIA

JUNE 6: Arab nations were today (June 5) waging a full-scale war against Israel on four fronts—Gaza, Sinai, Jordan and Syria—after simultaneous Israeli air raids on all UAR airfields early today (June 5).