

htthink!

REFLECTIONS

past & present

RAMACHANDRA GUHA



THE COACHES BEHIND THE CHAMPIONS

Forty years ago, a candidate presented himself at the cricket selection trials of St Stephen's College. St Stephen's then had the best college team in Delhi, and perhaps India. The new lad who came to the nets that day had two disadvantages: He was not articulate in English, and he was not to money or status born. Promising freshmen cricketers in St Stephen's announced themselves by their pedigree; they either came from elite boarding schools such as Mayo College.

This shy new boy came from an unknown school in West Delhi; and he said he had played for Sonnet Club. The Stephanians had not heard of that place either. The Delhi cricket clubs they knew of were Roshanara Club, Madras Club, and Rohtak Road Gymkhana. So amused were they by the background and demeanour of this freshman that the senior Stephanian cricketers derisively nicknamed him 'Bonnet'.

I speak here from intimate personal experience, since I was one of those condescending fellows myself. But later in the season our knowledge of Sonnet Club was to expand by leaps and bounds. Till then, our sole cricketing rival was Hindu College. We normally won the early rounds of the inter-college championship by an innings. Then came the main match of the year,

the gruelling, close-fought, five-day final against Hindu. However, the year the boy from Sonnet joined our nets, we were given the fright of our lives in the quarter-final by the previously unknown PGDAV College, whose opening batsman, Raman Lamba, and opening bowler, Randhir Singh, were far better than our own.

Both Lamba and Randhir came from Sonnet Club, where they were coached by Tarak Sinha, who had just taken over as the coach of PGDAV as well. They had given us elitists a wake-up call, and were soon to dethrone us, when within a few years PGDAV replaced St Stephen's as the best college cricket team in Delhi.

I was reminded of that early (and educative) cricketing experience when reading a profile of Rishabh Pant, the wicket-keeper batsman who has had an excellent domestic season. Pant narrowly missed selection for the Champions Trophy, but has already played for India in T20s, joining a long list of cricketers from Sonnet Club to be capped for the country, among them Aakash Chopra, Ashish Nehra, and India's player of the tournament in the Champions Trophy so far, Shikhar Dhawan.

The website of Sonnet lists its members who have played for India. Then it adds: 'As for the number of first-class players, they stopped counting a decade or so ago. Maybe a hundred?'



Illustration: SUDHIR SHETTY

One of those first-class cricketers from Sonnet was, in fact, the shy boy who arrived at the St Stephen's college nets 40 years ago and whom we mockingly called 'Bonnet'. His actual name was Deepak Sharma, and he went on to have a successful career with Haryana, scoring 199 in a Ranji final when his team beat Mumbai in a match decided in the last over of the last day.

The Sonnet website also has an interesting account of how Tarak Sinha took to coaching. I quote: 'It all started in 1969, when Sinha, then a budding wicketkeeper-batsman at the government-run Birla School in Kamla Nagar, failed to find a place in the final 16 of Delhi's CK Nayudu team — then led by Salman Khurshid, who is

now more famous as a Congress leader. That was when the idea of running a training centre where children from lower-middle-class families could learn the basics of the game, came to Sinha. "I realized that government school children did not have the basic coaching facilities to rise," he recalls. "I made a vow that I would strive to give the best playing facilities to cricketers from government schools."

The recent documentary on Sachin Tendulkar saw a cameo appearance by his own early mentor, Ramakant Achrekar. Because of his association with the greatest of all Indian cricketers, Achrekar has at least got some attention; most Indian cricket fans know his name. But

other coaches who are as remarkable remain little known outside their home town.

The contributions of these coaches to Indian cricket are both individual and institutional. They take gifted cricketers at hand at an early age; hone their skills and mould their personalities; recognise, develop, and fulfil their potentialities. But beyond the impact on particular individuals, these coaches have helped further the democratisation of cricket in India, both socially as well as geographically. They have made working-class and lower-middle-class kids into international players; and they have made Indian cricket itself many-centred and multi-polar.

When I was young, Indian cricket had but one power centre, Bombay. When Karnataka grew to match Bombay in cricketing strength, few recognised that behind the rise of their best players was a focused and absolutely selfless coach named Keki Tarapore. Likewise, if Delhi has come to equal Bombay and Karnataka, a great deal of credit must go to coaches like Tarak Sinha who groomed the cricketers who have since won their teams Ranji titles, Test matches, international one-day championships, and more.

Achrekar worked only in Bombay; Tarapore, only in Bangalore. After nurturing so many first-class cricketers in Delhi, Tarak Sinha then went on to coach Rajasthan to its first Ranji Trophy title. Still later, he helped make Jharkhand a considerable force in domestic cricket. The calculating selectors who denied Sinha a place in the Delhi under 16 side all those years ago are deservedly forgotten. But the boy they spurned has since become a real (if perhaps still somewhat unsung) hero of Indian cricket.

Ramachandra Guha's books include Gandhi Before India. The views expressed are personal.

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KARAN THAPAR



THE ARMY CANNOT BE ABOVE CRITICISM

Sandeep Dikshit made a terrible mistake but he's also paid for it with an embarrassing public apology. He was wrong to equate the Army chief with a sadak ka gunda. This wasn't just an insult to Gen Rawat but, more importantly, to the office he holds. The institution of the Army chief — although not necessarily the incumbent — must be treated with respect even whilst criticising it. Dikshit breached this critical rule. It hardly matters whether he did so inadvertently or deliberately.

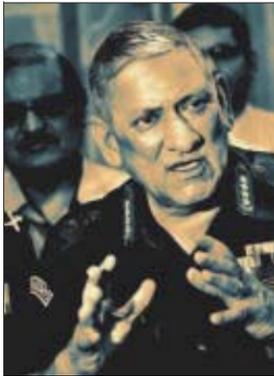
However, Dikshit has apologised, fully and unreservedly. If his offence was serious his apology is unequivocal and that is why it should bring the matter to an end. In a civilised society the offence must cease when an apology is delivered. That, after all, is a key rule of gentlemanly conduct.

However, Dikshit has raised a far wider and more important issue and

even if it was not his explicit intention to do so I, today, am deliberately choosing to elaborate this more significant point. The Army — and that very definitely includes the Army chief — is not above criticism and must not be protected from legitimate and sincere critique.

In a democracy every institution of the State must face criticism when it's justified and deserved. If that includes the prime minister — and it most certainly does — how can it possibly exclude the Army and its chief? This point is not just self-evident and obvious but, I would add, incontestable. I know of no credible democracy where this is not the case.

During World War I and, perhaps, more significantly World War II, whilst Britain's forces were suffering reverses, its army and generals were subjected to damaging but justified criticism. It was, in fact, a test of Brit-



In a democracy, every institution of the State must be open to scrutiny. PTI

ain's commitment to democracy and the principle of free speech, even in the face of a rampaging Adolf Hitler.

But why go so far back in time? After the worst reverses in the 1962 India-China War, Atal Bihari Vajpayee demanded a special session of Parliament to which Nehru readily agreed and the performance of the Indian Army was sharply, if undeservedly, criticised. This wasn't just painful but also self-inflicted yet the debate was justified and, even if the criticism mis-

taken, no one disputed the right of the critics to make it.

Unfortunately, that seems like not just another era but almost another country. Today, as Lt Gen HS Panag, a former Northern Army Commander, has written: "The army as an institution has been accorded a halo — that it can do nothing wrong and nobody should criticise it. This is the worst that could happen to an army. It prevents the army from undertaking reforms which are always necessary for the betterment of any organisation."

Not for a moment do I believe any army officer — and that includes Gen Rawat — would think differently. Our army has nothing to hide and almost everything to be proud of. This is why it would welcome questioning, including criticism even when its sharp and hurtful. And I write that as an Army son who knows what he's talking about.

Finally, a word of advice to the untiring soldiers of social media who, at the first hint of criticism, valorously rise to the Army's defence: cool it or, preferably, shut up! You don't know what you're talking about nor do you understand how you're indefensible behaviour diminishes our army. In fact, remember, the Army needs you like it needs a hole in the head.

The views expressed are personal

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LALITA PANICKER



WHO'LL CARE FOR THE WOMEN LEFT BEHIND?

It would have been farcical if it had not been in the backdrop of such an appalling tragedy. The chief minister of Madhya Pradesh could think of nothing more constructive than a fast for peace to calm agitating farmers after the police killed six of them. Not once did he think of saying a word about the families of the dead men beyond an offer of money. No, he sought to make the most of the photographs by announcing a grand deprivation on his own part. But then this is par for the course. I won't go into how many farmers have killed themselves this past decade. The number will have gone up before this goes to print.

But how little we hear about the women they leave behind, and how they do or do not patch together their shattered lives. In the first place, becoming a widow comes with huge psychological baggage and an immediate lowering of social status. Now that she has lost her husband and source of income, her value is diminished. The debt the dead man leaves behind goes to the woman who has no means of income and no skills to earn one. She or her relatives have to prove that the death was indeed due to debt. If she does succeed then she may or may not get the Rs 1 lakh compensation, though when the cases get press attention the amount goes up. She has to prove that there are no other claimants to the land that her husband left behind.

If she is fortunate enough to get the money, she then has to deal with hostile in-laws and money lenders and the cycle of pain and suffering goes on for her. And we are not even looking at how she will provide for her children.

The government ought to be looking at schemes to enable these widows to stand on their own feet. Farming is not an option and maybe not desirable in a place where she is vulnerable to predatory relatives and money lenders. The plight of these widows is mentioned in

the national policy for women but much of it remains on paper. I wonder, has anyone of any significance from the government, gone and asked even 100 widows what it can do for them. Giving them a paltry amount of money is simply not the answer. Could it not, for example, use the vast battery of lawyers at its disposal to ensure that the deeds of the land left behind are registered in their names.

This would be more useful than hot-footing it to the site of farmers' agitations and announcing fasts. Give them a home, however modest and a fixed sum to educate their children. How hypocritical it is to come on television, tears in your eyes and talk about the sacrifices of the doxy farmer who puts food on your table when you couldn't be bothered to spare a thought for the widow and her children who have to live lives of deprivation.

Here and there, I hear positive news that some widows with the aid of NGOs have organised themselves into self-help groups. Suicides are so commonplace now that a policy to help widows of dead farmers has to be put in place. It can no longer be part of a larger programme or scheme because the needs of these women are specific. Today, widows of farmers are also killing themselves, leaving behind orphaned children. But it would seem that the political utility of the symbol of the farmer ends with his death. The state feels no compulsion to look after his destitute family. This might have been prevented if the many steps to improve farm output, increase market access and prices and improve technology had been undertaken. But to sound utterly cruel, in the absence of all this, the deaths will continue. We cannot pretend otherwise. The government has to come up with a plan to deal with its tragic outcome on the women left behind.

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deepcut

RAJESH MAHAPATRA



BURDEN OF FARMING OUTWEIGHS REWARDS

On March 14, 2007, when 14 farmers died in a clash between villagers and police forces in Nandigram of West Bengal over acquisition of land for an industrial project, few had imagined it would mark a turning point in the state's politics. Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee of the then ruling Left Front in West Bengal had just stormed to power on the promise of reviving the industrial glory of the state, but Nandigram proved to be his nemesis. Overnight, farmers across the state turned hostile; the Opposition closed ranks; the intelligentsia distanced itself from the "bhadralok" chief minister and eventually, the Left lost the plot in a state it had ruled for 34 years.

Cut to 2017, the nation is perhaps staring at another Nandigram moment. The killing of six farmers in a police crackdown in Mandsaur in Madhya Pradesh earlier this month has put the spotlight on India's worsening

farm crisis. The farmers' unrest that has since spread to other parts of Madhya Pradesh and elsewhere in India is a wake-up call. For it is a result of years of neglect of agriculture, something that still provides livelihood to two-thirds of the India's 1.3 billion people.

At the core of the problem lies a growing mismatch between what it takes to grow food and what a farmer fetches for his produce in the marketplace. Economists explain this using the phrase 'terms of trade for agriculture', which improved for a brief period in the 1990s before turning unfavourable for most part of the new millennium.

Sample this: In 1992, a typical farmer in Punjab paid ₹6 per litre for diesel to keep his generator sets running, bought a sack of diammonium phosphate (DAP) for ₹200 and hired labour at a daily wage of ₹40-50. Twenty-five years on, diesel costs 10 times more, DAP prices have increased more than

LOAN WAIVERS OR MSP REVISIONS CAN AT BEST OFFER TEMPORARY SUCCOUR. AT WORST, THEY DEFLECT ATTENTION FROM THE REAL ISSUES BEHIND THE CRISIS

five times and farm wages are 10 times higher. In contrast, the minimum support price (MSP) of wheat, which is what most of Punjab grows, has increased only five-fold in this period — ₹330 per quintal to ₹1,625 per quintal.

In other words, the burden of farming has grown much faster than the rewards it brings. Demonetisation made it worse. As my journalist colleague Harish Damodaran wrote, "We've entered deflation territory in farm produce, whose proximate trigger clearly has been demonetisation." Much of the trade in farm goods is cash-based and financed through a chain of intermediaries — wholesale buyers, processors and retailers. Demonetisation crippled this network of informal credit, causing a free fall in the prices of farm goods across the board.

A five-part series that will appear in this newspaper, starting tomorrow, brings out the depth of the despair that is sweeping farmlands across India.

The imbalance between input costs and remunerative prices, however, is

just one explanation for the growing farmers' unrest. From sluggish infrastructure to lack of research breakthroughs, India's farm sector faces many challenges. For most crops, yield per acre grew at a slower pace over the past one-and-a-half decades compared to the 1980s and 1990s. So did the expansion of the irrigation network. Successive governments have paid little attention to building research and institutional support to the farming community. As we speak the most premiere agricultural research institution, IARI, is into its third year without a full-time director.

Public investment in agriculture has been stagnant for nearly a decade, while private capital flows have not picked up enough to provide the stimulus that the sector needs. As a result, growth in agriculture has decelerated from an annual pace of 2.8% in 1990s to 2.4% through the decade of 2001-10 and to 2.1% in the first half of the current decade.

All of these need a holistic policy response. Interventions such as loan waivers or MSP revisions can at best offer temporary succour. At worst, they deflect attention from the real issues behind the crisis that has been in the making for long — India is reaping what it sowed as it scripted a story of economic transformation that left the farmers out.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

JUNE 22: President Zakir Husain with Dr Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin Saheb, head of the Dawoodi Bohra community, when he called on him in New Delhi



NEWS OF THE WEEK

INDIA

MOB TEARGASSED IN OLD DELHI

JUNE 22: Police fired several tear-gas shells in Chawri Bazar and Matia Mahal after a lathi-charge failed to disperse a mob which turned violent and set fire to a police van. About 30 people, including 20 policemen, were injured.

WORLD

CHINA EXPLODES FIRST HYDROGEN BOMB

JUNE 18: China said it "successfully exploded its first hydrogen bomb," today (June 17). The official New China News Agency said this success "represents a leap in the development of China's nuclear weapons."

JUNE 18-JUNE 24, 1967 >>> FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

sundayletters

STRENGTHEN EXISTING LAW AND ORDER MECHANISMS

The point of Chanakya's column "Stop this new low form of corruption" (Chanakya, June 11) is well taken. The new so-called anti-Romeo squads and gau rakshak groups are nothing but extra judicial vigilante squads that are trying to take the law into their own hands. And it is not shocking that they would indulge in the same sort of corruption that their legal counterparts have also been accused of. The real solutions to social problems is to strengthen the existing police force and other law and order mechanisms.

SIDDHARTH KUMAR GURUGRAM

Art and culture need attention

Reading Mark Tully's article ("Why Modi must listen to SPICMACAY's beats", June 11) reminded me of my time in Delhi, where I was a student. It was at one of SPICMACAY's concerts that I first fell in love with classical music. I hope that Tully's article can help this and other organisations that work in the fields of art and culture gain the attention and funding that they richly deserve.

JAYATI NATH VIA EMAIL

Conventional energy not yet

It is alarming, as Rajesh Mahapatra has pointed out in his column "Dark clouds over power surplus India" (Deep Cut, June 11), that no one wants to invest in India's conventional energy sector. A lot of attention is being given to renewable energy, but the fact remains that it will be a very long time before India can rely on renewables alone.

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