

A thought for today
*What I fear most is power with impunity.
I fear abuse of power, and the power to abuse*

ISABEL ALLENDE

Punish Rowdy Netas

TDP MP must fly by the same rules as us

Airlines did right to bar Telugu Desam Party MP JC Diwakar Reddy from flying, after he misbehaved with IndiGo airlines staff on Thursday. Reports say Reddy was abusive, aggressive and created a ruckus at the Visakhapatnam airport, after not being allowed to board a flight to Hyderabad because he arrived late. Union civil aviation minister and Reddy's party colleague Ashok Gajapathi Raju was also present at the airport. Reddy claimed Raju intervened to ensure he was finally allowed to board the flight, which obviously got delayed. An inquiry into the incident must take place without political interference, to drive home the message that no politician can willfully defy rules and demand preferential treatment at will.



In March it was Shiv Sena MP Ravindra Gaikwad who had been barred by airlines due to rowdy behaviour, after he assaulted Air India staff. Like Gaikwad, Reddy too seems to have a history of creating trouble. Last October the TDP MP had reportedly damaged the Air India office at Vijaywada airport, because he missed a flight. Instead of acting like public servants, our netas appear to be more equal than others. Despite deluxe perks like huge bungalows and a retinue of personal staff at taxpayers' expense, they are routinely uncivil to the very same taxpayers.

At a time when low-cost airlines are expanding their network in the ever-growing domestic aviation market, such VVIP abuses will only harm the industry. After the Gaikwad incident, the civil aviation ministry had drafted new regulations for a national no-fly list to deal with unruly passengers while ensuring safety and security of the remaining passengers and airline crew. This no-fly list must take off and VIP culture must be grounded.

Genius Has Gender?

Only in our minds

When Cambridge University advised its examiners to avoid words like 'genius' and 'brilliant' because they exclude women, many of us rolled our eyes and dismissed it as political correctness gone wild. But close your eyes - what's the first image that comes to your mind when you hear the word genius? Is it Albert Einstein? Stephen Hawking or Srinivasa Ramanujan, perhaps? Shakespeare or Premchand? Steve Jobs? Whether you're female or male, odds are your mind sees a man.

These associations affect our perceptions of others, which in turn affects their self-image and choices. Gender gap in the sciences, for instance, can be partly explained by the notion that these areas call for 'genius' or raw natural ability, which many women don't feel confident they possess. Reasons for that lack of confidence are also cultural; in the US a depressing piece of research found that even six-year-olds were likely to think of only boys as 'brilliant'. When professors are rated, it's men who're described as stars and visionaries, and the same qualities are overlooked or disparaged in women. Think of the routine putdown 'hysterical', which literally means a disorder caused by the womb.

The idea of a lone genius is a Romantic myth; hard work, collaboration and luck have as much to do with accomplishment as ability, and none of these traits are sexual characteristics. Thinking harder about how we fling around words like flair and brilliance might foster a better intellectual climate, all around.

Dangerous Nonsense

Once we put the Indian military above criticism we become Pakistan

Kanti Bajpai

Congress party statements that the military is above criticism are disappointing. Congress has now joined right-wing breast-beating over the sanctity of the military. It is not just nonsense but dangerous nonsense to say that the military is above challenge.

Let's be clear: no state institution and no political personality is above criticism in a democracy, not even the Constitution and President of the republic. Once we put the Indian military on a pedestal we become Pakistan - and look at where that unhappy country is.

Actually, the Pakistan parallel is somewhat unfair. There are courageous Pakistani writers who over the years have questioned their military. It would be difficult to find any Indian commentator who is as brave, even though the military here is subordinate to civil authority. Ayesha Siddiqi, the Pakistani analyst, for instance, has written a searing, detailed expose of the Pakistani military in her book, *Military Inc.* No one in India would have the courage to delve that closely into Indian military affairs.

Having said this, the Indian military is more open and tolerant of criticism than our politicians, media and civil society. I can attest to this personally. In 1998, after I had opposed India's nuclear tests, the only institution in India, apart from some sections of the media and a handful of colleges and universities, that invited me to share my views was the Indian military.

The Indian military is by no means perfect. It has its strengths and weaknesses, its blind spots and obstinacies. For instance, the Indian army is yet to forthrightly accept its mistakes in the 1962 war with China. It has instead allowed Jawaharlar Nehru and Krishna Menon to take the blame. Its stand on the Siachen glacier makes no strategic sense. It has bullied the political leadership into accepting a futile forward position on the glacier when there is no convincing case.

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Anyone familiar with the Indian military knows that for all its strengths, it is marked by professional incompetence, bitter rivalries at the top (as we have seen in one leadership succession after another), a feudal culture of officers and batmen (the army has one of the worst tail-to-teeth ratios of any military), and, yes, corruption. We pretend that it is a saintly organisation consisting of selfless heroes, but the military itself knows that this is not the case. It is a part of the wider political and social culture of India and not terribly exceptional.

The Indian military does not need hero worshipping and foolish mythmaking. It does a difficult job, which is to deploy force to protect us from internal disorder and external threat. At the limit, it must be prepared to take a bullet for the nation and to take another's life - neither of which is easy. To do its job properly, it knows it must not only get its share of credit but also take its share of criticism.

Those who have questioned the Indian army and Major Nitin Gogoi over the jeep incident in Kashmir are perfectly entitled to do so. Indeed, we all are obliged to think deeply and responsibly about whether his actions are justified in terms of military codes, the claims of natural justice and political wisdom. It is a fair bet that Gogoi himself continues to mull over his decision.

The army chief, General Bipin Rawat, was right to launch an inquiry into the incident, and he was wrongly to give Gogoi an award before the findings of the inquiry are known. Both decisions are properly open to debate, and no one should be stifled in the discussions over Gogoi and Rawat's actions. To his credit, Rawat has reacted to the debate with greater dignity and good sense than our politicians.

No one, the current government has reminded us, is above the law, not even the media. So also, no institution is above criticism.

Chatur Baniya And Chaturvarna

Caste slurs are hurtful but it's also true that caste stereotypes aren't unidimensional

Dipankar Gupta



Well before films glamorised movie stars as giant killers, almost every caste, in old-fashioned India, claimed some kind of martial status. The link between Kshatriyas, muscle tone and weaponry is well known, but it is not as if other castes don't claim a similar profile. For instance, the Baniyas are frequently presented as crafty, chatur, peace-seeking merchants, but many of their origin tales spin a different story. In these legends (or, jati puranas) Baniyas come through as heat-seeking warriors; brave and fearless, never dodgy peddlers.

This is actually to be expected, and had it been otherwise that would have been quite unusual. For some reason, humans everywhere want to be remembered as fighters. Like our Ranjits and Vishwajeets, some of the commonest European names, such as Vladimir, Ludwig, Louis and Richard mean conqueror, brave, vanquisher, and so forth. Once we factor that in, it becomes easier to accept the Baniya version of the self as ruler and warrior, prone, on occasions, to recklessness too.

As almost everybody aspires to be a warrior, king and conqueror, it is hardly surprising that there is no consensus in India's four caste model (or chaturvarna) on who is a true Kshatriya. From earthy Jats and Marathas, to princelings and their hangers on, such as the Rajputs and Thakurs, a wide range of castes call themselves 'Kshatriyas', but without a shred of mutual admiration. The chaturvarna model has cushion enough to absorb all this, but it begins to wobble once Baniyas reject the Kshatriya tag and yet claim battle readiness.

The Khandelvals and Maheshwaris, two major Rajasthani Baniya castes, notwithstanding their claimed Rajput ancestry, found the Kshatriya practice of animal sacrifice a real turn off. Their sensitivities were so repulsed that many of them went the distance and dumped Hinduism to become Jains. Yet, through all this they held on to their identity as



Uday Dub

rulers with high-order kingly qualities. In retrospect, they were probably the first to imagine non-violent leadership.

Many origin tales of North Indian Baniyas also assert that they were once kings, and that too of civilisational hubs like Ayodhya, Kaushambi and Mathura. The Agarwals have a similar origin myth. They trace their descent from King Agrasen, hence Agrawal. This view received a contemporary fillip when the famous 19th century poet Bharatendu Harishchandra endorsed it and by the fact that in the early 1800s Jaisalmer actually had a Baniya king.

The Subornobaniks of Bengal consider themselves to be more Aryans than the usual Brahmins or Kshatriyas, because they once walked over the fire with Goddess Anayaka. Burnished thus, their skin colour became way lighter than the darker people in the neighbourhood, inspiring their enmity and ill will. In the west, Khandoba, the principal God of the Marathas, is always represented on horseback with both his wives. Of the two, the one in front is more valourous,

Why, in the South Gujarat district of Sabarkantha, the term 'shahukar' does not signify a mean money lender but a large hearted, honest person ... Nor is it always a big deal to be a Brahmin either. From Punjab to Travancore, many communities consider this caste to be inauspicious

and she is a Baniya.

It is roughly the same in South India too. The Kaikkoolars (also known as Segunthar Mudaliyar), who are otherwise identified as merchants and weavers, see themselves as creations of Shiva, with Murugan as their specific God. Legend has it that from the anklet of Parvati (Shiva's consort) nine jewels broke free out of which came the original nine Kaikkoolar warriors. They were blessed with such

powers that even Shiva depended on them to tune out his arch rival Suurubatman. Incidentally, Murugan, the Kaikkoolar chief deity, was a reputed hunter, lived dangerously in the hills and possessed the 'rajasik', or Kshatriya, trait, of keeping a large retinue of women.

From all of this it is very obvious that Baniyas find the chaturvarna classification unacceptable as it places them after the Kshatriyas and Brahmins. But subscribe to the Vedic hierarchy and the association of merchants with 'cunning' is as commonplace as lentils and rice. On the other hand, if we were to seriously consider how Baniyas view themselves, then a completely different set of qualities will have to be served up. Why, in the South Gujarat district of Sabarkantha, the term 'shahukar' does not signify a mean money lender (another caricature), but a large hearted, honest person.

Nor is it always a big deal to be a Brahmin either. From Punjab to Travancore, many communities consider this caste to be inauspicious. For example, Kurichans, of West Kerala, had an established protocol to ward off evil should a Brahmin ever enter their homes. In Punjab, even minor misfortunes, like a tractor engine seizure, spontaneously leads one to a memory check. Was there a Brahmin somewhere along the way to the farm? The Anavils of Gujarat believe that their ancestor was Chanakya, the instructor-in-chief of Kshatriyas, and this places them well above the garden variety priests, who often pretend to be superior.

We should take serious offence when caste stereotypes degrade Dalits, but that ought to alert us to many other forms of community slurs that are routinely in circulation. This is why any reference to the chaturvarna system is bound to put off somebody. Imagine coming out of the barber's chair with short hair standing up everywhere and there is nothing you can do about it - caste jokes hurt much more.

At the end of the day, consider this: was Gandhi, the Baniya, a crafty merchant or a noble ruler? Does the answer lie in some sacred text or should a person's life be an open book?

Does debt waiver improve living conditions of poor farmers? Data for the 2008 scheme paints a very bleak picture

Mrinal Mishra, Venkatesh Upamanyu, Prasanna Tantri and Nagaraju Thota

We seem to be headed for a season of competitive debt waivers. Voices demanding debt relief to farmers are gaining strength across the country, especially in states such as Madhya Pradesh. But a debt waiver does not improve loan performance. On the contrary it curtails the flow of formal bank credit in the post waiver period.

In a recent research paper, we investigate the impact of debt waiver on the consumption and savings of beneficiary farmers. Using detailed household level National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data, we show that the 2008 national level debt waiver announced by the UPA-1 government did not lead to any material increase in the overall consumption level of farming households. We detect a significant decrease in spending on critical items such as health and education. Anticipating difficult times ahead, households increase investment in precautionary savings.

NSSO conducts regular national level consumption surveys. We use data from the

64th, 66th and 68th round of NSSO surveys. Incidentally, 64th round was conducted just before the waiver, 66th round was conducted within 12-24 months after the waiver and 68th round was conducted within 36-48 months after the waiver.

In these surveys, randomly selected households are asked about the amount of money spent on items of day to day consumption as well as on one time purchases such as jewellery. Also recorded is data regarding landholding of the household

We find that expenditure of the full waiver beneficiaries on education and health is lowered by 34%

as well as the principal occupation of its members.

As per the 2008 waiver scheme, defaulting agricultural borrowers having landholding of less than or equal to two hectares were eligible for full waiver. Other defaulting borrowers were eligible only for a partial waiver of 25% of the outstanding loan. We used this feature to divide our sample into 'control' and 'treatment' groups.

Our treated group consists



of farmers having landholding just below two hectares and the control group consists of farmers having landholding just above two hectares. We make a reasonable assumption that, in a large sample, those who are to the immediate right and left of this arbitrary barrier of two hectares are likely to be similar on average.

Crucially however, as noted before, they differ with respect to the way they are treated by the waiver scheme: those to the left of two hectares got full waiver and those to the right received only 25%. We examine the difference in outcomes between these two groups immediately after the waiver.

We are unable to reject the hypothesis that the regular monthly expenditure on con-

sumption in the post waiver period is no different on both sides of the discontinuity. In other words, despite getting their loans fully waived off, the waiver beneficiaries do not experience any improvement in their living conditions.

We then look at the disaggregated consumption data. Here we find that expenditure of the full waiver beneficiaries on education and health is lower by 34%; on clothing, bedding and footwear is lower by 10.2%; and on transportation is lower by 34%. Expenditure on most other items of consumption remains unchanged.

Interestingly, investment on jewellery, which is also used by the poor as precautionary savings, increases by 21%. Note that our sample period

precedes the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojna. Most of the poor did not even have a bank account and hence faced savings constraints. The poor, in such a situation, were forced to save for rainy days using real assets rather than financial assets.

Why would the poor anticipate difficult times after a waiver and resort to precautionary savings? The answer lies in the expected tightening of bank credit after the waiver. In fact, using loan level data that we obtained from a bank, we show that the supply of credit to waiver beneficiaries fell by almost 50% in the post waiver period. Faced with the expected credit shock, it appears that waiver beneficiaries cut down on consumption and increase precautionary savings.

It is unreasonable to believe that the waivers granted now will lead to any different consequences. It is quite possible that the protesters will be back on street in a couple of years demanding another waiver. Waivers do no good to farmers even in the medium term.

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What Is Meant By 'Exceeding Excellence'

Swami Swaroopananda

Excellence has been defined as "the quality of being outstanding or extremely good". When we put forth efforts and attempt to do the best - at all times - we attain excellence. It is not about being the best because somebody will always be better than us at some time or the other. When a singer's performance is extolled or an artist's painting is admired, it is due to something ethereal and grand in that incredible action or achievement. On the one hand, it gives an immeasurable sense of fulfillment to the artiste, and on the other, the beholder is awestruck and captivated by the brilliance.

To gain excellence, first, we must have the essential talent, and second, we need to work sincerely, practice diligently and have the right attitude. Arjuna achieved excellence in the field of warfare and archery. But when it came to dealing with his own emotions, he collapsed on the

battlefield. If excellence is not developed in all aspects of our life, somewhere or the other we will falter. To such an Arjuna, Krishna gave knowledge - not the knowledge of becoming excellent, but exceeding it in all aspects of life.

At the individual level, when we combine all internal resources and pour them together; when the body, mind and intellect are integrated; a certain amount of efficiency arises. Whenever we put love into an action, that skilfully executed work becomes beautiful. It may not necessarily be perfect, but there is a magical quality present.

When we bring people together and each one does his best, each one strives to contribute to a common goal from which everyone derives success and benefit, it is acting in a spirit of yajna. It is this attitude that generates excellence.

But how do we exceed excellence? When we perform actions out of love, dedication, and gratitude, the ego dissolves; we obtain Divine blessings and grace. Grace is strange and unfathomable. It makes you go beyond your present talent, skill and capacity towards excellence ... some mysterious synergy occurs.

Gratitude indicates giving back for what has been received, not out of feelings of debt, but out of thankfulness, as an offering to the universe. It is being able to see divinity everywhere, at all times, in everything.

The Vedas are an excellent means of knowledge about the Supreme Truth. Is it possible to improve upon them? Veda Vyasa did not rewrite the mantras of the Vedas, but gathered the scattered knowledge, and compiled it into four volumes. He formulated the profound wisdom in such

a way that it could be passed on to a yuga where people would neither have the mental capacity to understand nor remember. Thereby, he exceeded excellence.

Could anybody enhance Sage Valmiki's Sanskrit Ramayana? But Goswami Tulsidas did it by bringing this exceptional epic, in the language of the common man, immersing it in rhythm, poetry, knowledge and depth.

Rama was an embodiment of excellence in all respects. In every field, in every role, in every relationship including as husband, whether you may agree or not, he was the best.

But, how did Hanuman, a mere vaanar (monkey), exceed excellence to such an extent that he was praised by the Lord?

It is when we serve with humility, the one who is excellent, then, by the sheer grace of the excellent, we exceed excellence. (The writer is global head, Chinmaya Mission.)

Sacredspace

Past Karma

Attachment and aversion are the root cause of karma ... Karma is the root cause of birth and death, and these are said to be the source of misery. None can escape the effect of past karma.

Mahavira