

# ht think!

REFLECTIONS

## past & present

RAMACHANDRA GUHA



### WHY THIS REVIVAL OF HINDI CHAUVINISM?

Some years ago, I was at a literary meeting in Bhubaneswar. Odia had just been declared the sixth classical language in India, after Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. My scholarly hosts were naturally delighted; one taking particular pleasure in imagining how President Pranab Mukherjee felt when he signed the relevant file, since his mother tongue, Bengali, would never remotely be considered a 'classical' language.

That conversation came back to me when, last week, the senior Cabinet minister, Venkaiash Naidu, said that Hindi was our 'rashtra bhasha', adding that it was impossible for India to progress without Hindi spreading. The remarks created a storm on social media, where among the most energetic participants was a senior journalist known to be a passionate BJP supporter. His tweets spoke of the 'total falsehoods of Hindi chauvinists', of their 'jingoistic chauvinism', of their having a 'sick, twisted, racist mind'. When someone contested his views, the journalist asked him to 'keep croaking in your fetid well'.

The language was entirely in character; what was surprising was whom it was aimed at. For the journalist was here unexpectedly criticising those on his side of the political spectrum, who

fetishize the Cult of the Great Leader and the Cult of the Perfect Nation, who regularly and routinely vilify Indians who are not Hindus. What had caused him to now break ranks was that his mother tongue was Bengali, which — notwithstanding its lack of antiquity vis-à-vis Odia — was possessed of a modern literary tradition that was unparalleled. A writer reared on Bankim, Tagore, and the like would surely be deeply offended at being asked to accept the supremacy of Hindi.

Notably, shortly after Naidu's remarks, Sushma Swaraj said that passports would henceforth be in Hindi as well as in English. Existing passports already print text in Hindi; did the external affairs minister mean that the personal details of the passport holder would now be printed in Hindi as well?

The BJP's predecessor, the Jan Sangh, held that a nation could be united and strong only when its citizens adhered to the same religion and spoke the same language. Ironically, the best — rather, worst — exemplar of this outdated model of nationalism is Pakistan, which the Jan Sangh hated and the BJP hates even more. The Jan Sangh's slogan of 'Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan' was a direct adaptation to Indian conditions of Jinnah's idea that only one who is a Muslim and speaks Urdu can be a true Pakistani. When, in the 1990s, the BJP sought to expand

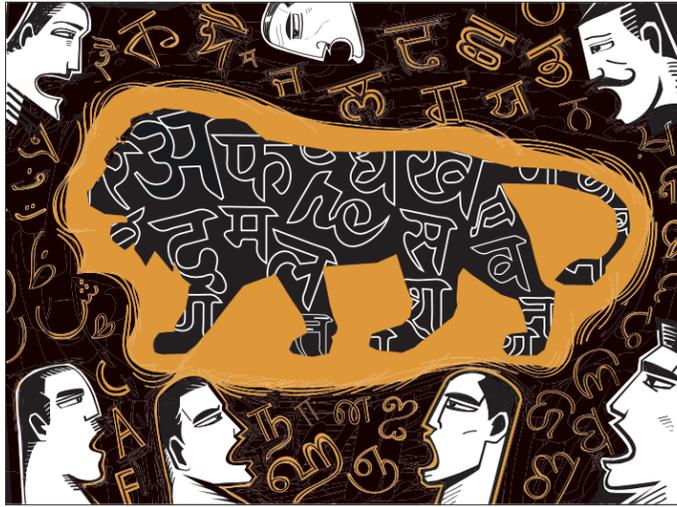


Illustration: MOHIT SUNEJA

its footprint in the south, it retained its religious majoritarianism while downplaying its Hindi chauvinism. The party now controls Parliament and controls many state governments as well. Why then have some BJP leaders chosen to revive the claim that Hindi is the glue that must bind the nation? Perhaps this is merely a return to origins. The man who made the RSS a national force, M S Golwalkar, wanted Sanskrit to be made the national language. But he knew that vision could not be realised immediately. So, he wrote that 'till the time Sanskrit takes that place, we shall have to give priority to Hindi on the score of convenience. Naturally we have to prefer that form of Hindi which, like all other Bharatiya languages, stems from Sanskrit and

gets sustenance from Sanskrit for its future growth in all fields of modern knowledge like science and technology'.

Pakistan broke up and Sri Lanka experienced civil war because its leaders sought to impose a single language on the nation's citizens. On the other hand, enabling each major language group to have its own province safeguarded the unity of India. Golwalkar, however, was totally opposed to the creation of linguistic states, which he saw as a barrier to the spread of Hindi. 'We have', he insisted, 'to take to Hindi in the interests of national unity and self-respect and not allow ourselves to be swept off our feet by slogans like "Hindi imperialism" or "domination of the North", etc.'

The BJP's leaders consider themselves Golwalkar's devotees; Narendra Modi himself once wrote an entirely adulatory book on him. So is this promotion of Hindi an act of Golwalkar-worship, or is it rather a calculated move to further polarise the citizenry, and consolidate the core vote-bank of the BJP? Like the invocation of the National Flag, the ban on beef and the ban on trade in cattle, this talk of Hindi being necessary to our national advance may be designed to produce outrage among liberals, which in turn will produce greater and more politically productive outrage among Hindus who love the cow, love Hindi, love the Flag and love the Leader, and who will vote for the BJP as a result.

Back in the 1950s, when Golwalkar was demanding that all Indians learn Sanskritised Hindi, that wisest of Indians, C Rajagopalachari, termed the 'greatest fallacy of all' the 'notion that unity is brought about by the adoption of Hindi as the official language of the Union. What is brought about is protest, dissatisfaction and discord, not unity'.

The next decade, Rajaji's fellow Tamils protested successfully against Hindi being made the sole official language. Surely some BJP leaders know something about this history. Surely they appreciate that many other Indian languages have a far richer literary heritage than Hindi, and that the hundreds of millions of Indians who speak, read, and write in those languages are extremely proud of that history. It will be interesting to see whether these remarks of Naidu, Swaraj, et al are merely straws in the wind, or whether they presage a wider assertion of Hindi chauvinism by the ruling party.

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

## sundaysentiments

KARAN THAPAR



### CRY MY BELOVED COUNTRY - OR NOT?

I'm not just confused, I'm also shaken and upset. To be honest, I cannot understand what's happening around us. I know the depressing details and I'm aware of the apprehensions they've aroused, but I remain uncertain of what to make of it all. So, today, I intend to explain my conflicted emotions and ask if you share them.

For all our limitations, contradictions and faults, I've always believed we're a tolerant people. We may have our differences and quarrels but for generations multiple castes, creeds and cultures have lived comfortably together. Ethnicities, religions, languages and cuisines may distinguish and separate us but we've found ways of bridging the divide. This unity in heterogeneity is the silken bond that, unsung and often unrecognised, yet gently but usually firmly, binds us together.

That, after all, is what I was taught at school. This was how, with pride, I spoke of India during my years abroad. Seen in terms of our communities and cultures or our languages and regions we may be different people but, hovering above this, there is an emotion, an affinity, a spirit that renders us one.

These days, it seems, that invisible binding thread is coming loose. The sense of being one — though we are different in look and language, faith and fortune — is weakening. The feeling of being united is fracturing as the assertion of different identities seems more important.

Or else how do you explain the murder of a 15-year-old boy on a suburban train because his fellow passengers were provoked by his Muslim appearance? Or the lynching of a local police officer on the most holy night of Ramadan by a mob compris-



Mohammed Naeem, a cattle trader, was beaten to death in Jharkhand on May 19

ing his own kith and kin? Or repeated vicious attacks on men lawfully transporting cattle on the unverified suspicion they could slaughter them? Or decisions that people who won't say 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' or choose to applaud a Pakistani cricket victory are guilty of sedition? I could go on but I'm sure you've got my point. These developments don't just contradict our self-image

but betray and undermine it. If it was only one or two occurrences, and only few and far between, you could explain them away or call them aberrations. But they're not. They're happening every day and all over. Now do you see my concern? What does all of this add up to? What does it suggest of our country? Of what's happening to it and what, as a result, it's becoming? These are troubling questions and I don't have the answers. Nor do I want to accept the quick and easy ones that are sometimes offered. They point to an approaching darkness and they hint at the triumph of our inner demons and, perhaps even, the transmutation of ourselves that I passionately do not want to see.

So, am I in denial? Or am I exaggerating my fears? I just don't know. Of course, I have my suspicions but can they — should they? — determine my outlook? My view of my own country? And of my fellow countrymen? Again, I don't know.

Yet of one thing I'm sure. At the moment this is not the country I thought it was. The India I love and will always be proud of appears to have receded. I hope this is because a light bulb is flickering and my vision has blurred. In fact, I'm still waiting for the power supply to steady itself. But am I waiting in vain?

The views expressed are personal

## deepcut

RAJESH MAHAPATRA



### TO SUCCEED, GST MUST BE A WIN-WIN FOR ALL

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime is finally here, with a mixed bag of optimism and apprehensions. The rollout has rekindled hope that India's reform programme is regaining momentum and the broader economy can only get better from here. On the other hand, there remain fears of disruption, rooted in what's seen as a hurried transition that might not serve the interests of a majority of India's 1.3 billion consumers.

Whether hope will triumph over scepticism will be determined by how well Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government fares in making the GST a "good and simple tax". The rationale behind replacing the complex maze of local tax systems across 29 states and seven Union Territories with a unified tax regime has been that it will be a win-win for all. Producers and sellers will benefit from transparent rules, fewer tax filings

and less-cumbersome book keeping; consumers will pay less for goods and services; and the government will earn more in revenues as leakages are plugged and the economy grows faster on the back of better-off producers and consumers.

A bold beginning has been made with the GST rollout at a midnight mega show in Parliament's central hall, but its current form and shape remains far from making it a "win-win for all".

Let's start with the consumer, who will now pay tax at a higher rate for most of the services she consumes. A majority of daily consumption goods now attracts a higher or the same tax rate. A higher tax rate doesn't necessarily mean the consumer spends more on the goods and services bought, as finance minister Arun Jaitley rightly argued. She could even spend less, provided the producer is willing to pass on the benefits

### THE NEW SYSTEM OF TAXATION CAN AND WILL EVOLVE AS WE GO ALONG. IT IS FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO SEE HOW TO MAKE AMENDS, AND MAKE THEM FAST

from lower input costs and improved productivity. But our past experience suggests, fewer producers actually do that. And when they do, they rarely pass on the benefits in cost reduction fully to the consumer.

Moreover, the GST implementation comes with a cost of compliance. In today's context, it appears to be high and prohibitive for most small scale producers and traders, which is why they are protesting. They will be forced to price their goods even higher, let alone extract any benefit from the new system or pass it on to consumers. That is also the reason why large-scale manufacturers and retailers are not complaining. They stand to benefit — because, given their scale the cost compliance is more than offset by productivity gains. Also, they get an edge in all such segments of the market where they are competing with small and medium-sized enterprises. There were expectations that the GST would not only mean lower tax rates, but also fewer tax slabs. All

such countries where the GST has helped reform the economy, there are either two or three rates — one mean rate, a lower rate for essential (merit) goods and a higher rate for luxury (demerit) goods. We still have five slabs, within which there could be as many as three rates — a central rate, a state rate and an integrated rate. Over and above these, there is a cess levied. The fear of revenue loss has kept the government from making on lower or fewer rates. Had the economy been doing well, the story would have been different.

That said, the new system can and will evolve as we go along. It is for the government to see how to make amendments, and make them fast.

On priority, the government needs to address capability building among the lesser-endowed stakeholders, such as small scale producers and retailers. The finance minister must find ways to lower the cost of compliance. He must keep in mind lessons learnt from demonetisation and not let his ministry officials resort to ad-hocism while making rules. The GST council will have to meet more frequently to review rules and rates so that India's taxation system comes on par with those in the developed world.

And most importantly, carry the Opposition and the states along.

Rajesh.Mahapatra@hindustantimes.com

### THE SOFT POWER OF YOGA HAS NOT BEEN FULLY TESTED



RACHEL DWYER

On International Yoga Day, I attended a conference on soft power, cinema and the BRICS, at the University of Leeds. We discussed Joseph Nye's formulation of soft power, or 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than through coercion', as something which is cultural, hard to measure and assess, and supplements public diplomacy.

In 2014 India elected a government which has pushed a new cultural agenda in an anti-Nehruvian sweep. Its underlying ideology of Hindu nationalism and anti-secularism is reshaping the idea of Hinduism/Hindu/Indian.

While a positive view of India's economic growth has taken root abroad, India has been burdened by a new set of negative images focussing on its treatment of minorities and for a 'rape culture' made notorious by the 2012 Delhi gang rape and murder. Soft power would be an ideal way to counteract such negative messages, to present India's importance on the world stage.

Bollywood, while having achieved industry recognition, receives no direct government support, being a mostly private business. The government has supported a different kind of cinema through the NFDC. This 'festival' cinema has had occasional success overseas such as *The Lunchbox*.

Commentators often contend that Bollywood is a major source of soft power, one that the government neglects. It has been popular overseas since the silent period and continues to find audiences across Asia, as the success of *Dangal* confirms. However, Bollywood has not penetrated the lucrative markets of western Europe and the Americas beyond the diaspora.

Hindi films have been concerned with Indianness since their origin. Raj Kapoor's Nehruvian hero sings 'Phir

bhi dil hai Hindustani' while the diasporic characters of the 1990s show their Indianness, and in today's blockbusters by Rajkumar Hirani, the youth struggle with their own desires in the context of the family and the nation. Hindi films also embrace the idea of the 'Overseas Indian Citizen' as a citizen and India remains somehow home.

Bollywood's unrealistic melodramas promote ideas of Indianness, whether in the heritage drama of *Bajirao Mastani*, or the human values of *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*. The two films of *Baahubali* have been massively successful in India but all four films have evinced little interest beyond the diaspora, so cannot be considered part of India's soft power outreach.

So why hasn't the BJP embraced Bollywood for soft power projection? Is it because it expends more energy in an almost obsessive zeal to tame it, especially where depictions of the nation and Muslims are concerned?

Perhaps the most successful form of soft power for the government has been 'Yoga Day'. Skirting definitions of what yoga is, how much current ideas of yoga are Indian or foreign, of whether yoga is an aspect of Hinduism that is unacceptable to Christian and Muslim theology, the government has determined that it now symbolises the Indian nation. A discipline of mind and body which connects ancient India to the modern nation, it offers endless opportunities for exploitation as a subtle form of soft power. But has yoga's soft power efficacy been tested with overseas consumers, or is it more about mobilising domestic Indian opinion, strengthening national unity, with soft power merely a spin-off?

Although India does not rank in *Portland Communications Top 30 Global Soft Power* impact nations, this may reflect this government's instinctive autarky and disinterest in what outsiders think of its social and economic programme. Yet yoga effortlessly engages the world, inviting everyone to perform a suryanamaskar.

(Read the full article at: <http://read.ht/ElmU>)  
Rachel Dwyer is professor of Indian Cultures and Cinema, SOAS, University of London  
The views expressed are personal

## sundayletters

### MODI'S WISHES FOR RAHUL GANDHI WERE GENUINE

Apropos What Modi meant when he wished Rahul (Sunday sentiments, June 25) by Karan Thapar, the Congress is restricting its leadership options by projecting Rahul Gandhi as its main leader. The young Gandhi has his heart in the right place and this comes across when he talks on social issues but it seems like he is an "unwilling politician". To be successful in politics, one has to be sincerely tuned in to all the aspects of a nation's growth, even when the party is in Opposition. In Modi's birthday wishes there was no ill-will, but only goodwill.

SUBHASH VAID VIA EMAIL

### Hindu hierarchy is patriarchal

Lalita Panicker in *Sadhvis* as vehicles for anti-women views (Engender, June 25) makes a pertinent point that has not been highlighted earlier by authors who specialise in gender and religion. Her views on how a deeply patriarchal Hindu hierarchy uses *sadhvis* and *sanyasins* to further their agenda need to be highlighted to all who, especially women, who see hope in these god women.

VEENA SHUKLA DELHI

### Too early to write off Naveen

In Odisha: BJP's hard work begins to pay off (Deep Cut, June 25) Rajesh Mahapatra correctly observes that Naveen Patnaik still has the stomach for a political fight, even against the mighty BJP, which seems to be unstoppable across India. I feel that if health is on his side, in 2019 he will create history by winning for the fifth time.

RAJDEEP BISWAS CUTTACK

Write to us at: [letters@hindustantimes.com](mailto:letters@hindustantimes.com)

## thisweekthatera

### PICTURE OF THE WEEK

JULY 4: President Zakir Hussain speaking to newsmen on his return from Canada. (Also seen in the photograph is Prime Minister Indira Gandhi).



July 2-July 8, 1967 >>FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

### NEWS OF THE WEEK

#### INDIA

#### TWO DIE IN NAXALBARI GUN FIGHT

JULY 3: There was a gun fight today (July 2) between a village resistance group and a 500-strong mob of *Adivasis* led by the extremist elements when the latter attacked Banglagach village under Phansidewa police station, in the Naxalbari area.

#### WORLD

#### CLASHES CONTINUE IN SINAI AREA

JULY 3: A renewed duel of mortar and automatic fire between Israeli and UAR forces was reported across the Suez Canal in the Quantara area this afternoon (July 2). It was the third reported skirmish this weekend.