

htthink!

REFLECTIONS

past & present

RAMACHANDRA GUHA



REMEMBERING A SIMPLE-MINDED SARDAR

Earlier this year, the Supreme Court threw out a petition demanding that jokes featuring Sikhs be banned. That such a petition had been entertained at all would have appalled the best known Sikh writer of modern India, Khushwant Singh. Khushwant was an astonishingly versatile man of letters; his oeuvre included scholarly works of history, romantic novels, translations of poetry, and collections of jokes. Apart from publishing numerous books he wrote a popular newspaper column for many years.

I have just finished reading a superbly curated selection of Khushwant Singh's writings. Entitled *Me, The Jokerman: Enthusiasms, Rants and Obsessions*, this posthumous collection has been put together by his daughter, Mala Dayal, a highly regarded editor herself. The book contains several essays on humour, with Khushwant writing that his best jokes were unprintable because they had to do with sex. Then he adds: 'My second best jokes are about my own community, the Sardars. At one time they had the confidence to laugh at themselves. No longer so. They have become as touchy as Tamil Brahmins who happily laugh at jokes about Marwaris, Chettiaris, Bengalis, Parsis and Mian-bhais; but you tell one joke about them and they are up in arms'.

In another essay, Khushwant comments: 'We Indians may have lost our sense of humour but we still have a rich laboratory of materials to work on. Every third Indian is a clown in his own right: self-esteem, immodesty, sanctimoniousness, name-dropping and verbosity make a golden treasury of the ridiculous. We could study all these aspects, channel them into stories and then grant degrees to the more laugh-producing dissertations. We could make a very spectacular start by awarding doctorates even before the courses in humour are launched by conferring on our politicians degrees of Ha Ha Honoris Causa!'

Khushwant Singh lived for several years in Bombay, that city of extremes, while editing the then widely circulated Illustrated Weekly of India. Here he met a businessman who, upset with the city's congestion, slept in his yacht offshore. 'If every Bombayman owned a yacht', reflected Khushwant, 'we could walk over the sea to Karachi'. Had he been around now, he might have added: 'If every Mumbaier could build a twenty-seven storey house for himself, we could put them on top of each other and reach Mars without the help of ISRO'.

This always readable anthology ranges widely over history, politics, religion, literature, and nature. Khushwant had in his head a vast storehouse of poetry in English, Urdu, Hindi, and



Illustration: MOHIT SUNEJA

Punjabi. The book also displays his knowledge of Christian, Hindu, Muslim and of course Sikh scriptures; there is a lovely piece on the Sikh mystic Bhai Vir Singh, of whom Khushwant writes: 'The sense of humility never left him and appears like a refrain in many of his verses'.

Although written decades ago, some essays in this book speak directly to India today. In 1969, after a wave of Hindu-Muslim riots, Khushwant commented: 'Distort your facts, inject a dollop of pride in your own race and religion, prejudice and contempt for that of others and you have witches' brew of hate which can easily be brought to boil'. He himself believed that 'it is both historically and morally unfair to cater to chauvinistic pride and prejudice. If you brainwash the younger generation with this venom-

ous mixture of distorted fact, fancy and specious argument, you will forever be the real authors of communal discord. You will be the real perpetrator of what has happened in recent weeks in many cities and towns of Gujarat—the murder of the spirit of Gandhi. If we fail to make ourselves into one nation, you will be the authors of that failure'.

An essay from the late 1970s observed that many states were ruled by 'zealous Hindu bigots sporting caste marks on their foreheads. Muslim friends advise me that if I mean to retain my image as a friend of the Muslims, I must not write anything critical pertaining to their Personal Law—including polygamy and the lesser status that their women (in comparison to others) have been relegated to.'

sundaysentiments

KARAN THAPAR



THE GOVERNMENT DIDN'T PUSH RAJAN OUT OF RBI

Most people consider me a critic or, at least, not a supporter of the Modi government. I wouldn't quarrel with either description. However, I also see myself as an objective and balanced journalist who is duty bound to be fair. In a moment, you'll understand why I have begun this way.

Two facts, which have come to my attention in recent days, could change the way the media and, indeed, the wider public have viewed the Modi government's handling of the governorship of the Reserve Bank of India. The prevailing perception is that the government was unfair and ungrateful in denying Raghuram Rajan a second term. Some have even argued he was pushed out. There are also a few who criticised the government for not offering the job to Rakesh Mohan, a former deputy governor, who many thought was the best candidate available.

I hardly need to stress how much flak the government has received for its alleged treatment of Raghuram Rajan. The alleged ignoring of Rakesh Mohan didn't receive the same level of attention but the cognoscenti were outspoken in their criticism. Well, it seems, on both counts the obloquy was unfair and wrong.

Unimpeachable sources have told me that Mr Rajan was offered a two-year extension. However, the problem was his inability to get a further extension of leave of absence from Chicago University without losing his valuable tenure. Mr Rajan could only stay on for eight additional months.

Quite understandably, the government decided this would be inadequate. It would only add to the uncertainty at the top of the Reserve Bank. It, therefore, opted to choose a new governor.

Seen in this light, it's clear Mr Rajan



Raghuram Rajan was offered a two-year extension by the NDA. REUTERS

was not badly treated and the criticism the government faced on this count was mistaken and unfair. Furthermore, these details were known to a few people but never fully reported, although they were clearly hinted at in an interview Mr Rajan gave the New York Times last September. As the paper put it: 'He said that his departure was based on his inability to reach an agreement with the government on serving longer but not serving another full 3 year term.'

Let's now come to Rakesh Mohan. I've very reliably learnt he was approached for the governorship and the government was extremely keen that he accept. Unfortunately, a personal and poignant problem prevented him from responding positively. It would be improper to go into further details but what I can confirm is that he requested the government not to be considered even though this meant a post he would have regarded as the culmination of his career had to be gracefully declined.

However, what I can add is that the government tried its best to find ways of enabling Mr Mohan to accept. Sadly, that wasn't possible. So, once again, criticism that Mr Mohan was overlooked is both mistaken and unfair. I've recounted these facts both because they reveal the government in a very different light to what many have so far assumed and because I was one of the many critics of its handling of Messrs Rajan and Mohan.

Today I've lightened my conscience by sharing these details. However, there's a lot that this government has done and said that I remain critical of. There's no U-turn in my overall attitude. But fairness requires I give the government its due. In these two instances its critics and opponents were wrong. I'm making no comment about anything else.

The views expressed are personal

SHOULD THERE BE LATERAL ENTRY INTO CIVIL SERVICES?



SHAILAJA CHANDRA

The induction of non-career civil servants may soon become a reality in the government. Although the suggestion was categorically denied only last year, clearly the shortage of officers at the middle level in central ministries and departments has necessitated a U-turn.

The idea of lateral induction is not new. It was recommended by the 2nd Administrative Reform Commission, committees and a plethora of think tanks. Newsworthy is the fact that now the department of personnel has been directed to set the stage for making selections. At present, the numbers to be inducted are relatively small—around 40. That may help tide over the current deficit of middle level officers in the central government but does not address a much bigger problem—the overall 20% shortfall of IAS cadre officers alone in 24 state cadres. The Baswan Committee (2016) has shown how large states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan have a deficit of 75 to over 100 officers and their unwillingness to sponsor officers to go to the Centre on deputation is understandable. Lateral induction is, therefore, a step towards essential housekeeping in central government staffing.

But joint secretaries are not merely performing jobs which can be filled by seeking applications. Officers at this level are not recruited to market products or generating higher profits. They are expected to present well-researched and sourced information to help the political executive understand, weigh and consider options before making equitable and effective policy choices. The capacity to do this requires a different order of acumen and enormous caution has to be exercised while making recruitment. The processes themselves must pass the highest standards of probity and must be legally unassailable.

Once an in-house bureaucratic process is set in motion, it will become a precedent for all time and may be well cited and manipulated by future governments. Different state governments have been known to induct and promote malleable officers as a reward. Others have entrusted policymaking to people with no knowledge of fiscal prudence or administrative propriety—leave aside the finer nuances of the Constitution or the law, to steer the ship of State. Once the Centre opens the doors to lateral induction through its own machinery, it can lead to a deluge of inductions in the states and at the Centre too in times to come. Entrusting the job of selection to a body supervised by the Union Public Service Commission would be the only alternative to ensure that merit is the sole criteria.

Comparisons with other countries may be relevant in theory but is not so in practice. One has to bear in mind the difference between a career-based system—India, France, Italy, Japan, Korea and Spain are examples thereof—and position-based systems which function in countries like Australia, New Zealand, Britain and in the US. In the career-based system the advantage is a commonality of a working culture and effective networks which facilitate speed of communication and understanding. The well-known shortcomings are the spread of complacency, an adherence to the status quo which kill new ideas. A position-based system is firstly political in nature and often transitory. It cannot be merged into a career based system without taking care to imbue the induction system itself with the highest degree of transparency and independence.

First inductions through competitive examinations must expand incrementally. Second, only UPSC has the mandate to make recruitment to civil service jobs under the Constitution and the civil service statutes. Looking outside the UPSC will destroy the tenets of parliamentary democracy, which is inescapably linked to placing reliance on a merit based, politically neutral civil service.

Shailaja Chandra is former chief secretary, Delhi. The views expressed are personal

deepcut

RAJESH MAHAPATRA



THE POLITICS-ECONOMICS DISCONNECT IN INDIA

A suicide is always a crushing tragedy. It is legally considered to be extreme and irrational, as we all believe that human life is our most precious triumph. Ironically, the suicide note always argues the opposite: That there are rational motives which compel people to end their lives. Such is what we learn from the 25-year-old IT engineer Gopikrishna Durgaprasad, who jumped off the fourth floor of a Pune hotel because "in IT there is no job security. I'm worried a lot about my family".

There are statistics that can now back the claim that jobs in India's once most dynamic service sector are not only drying up but that a range of new (automation) technologies are rapidly eliminating or rendering redundant thousands of existing positions. But is it not the case that India could also be the most happening place for a 25-year-old IT professional to turn a 'self-employed risk-taking entrepreneur'?

Why did this not occur to the aspiring Durgaprasad? How troubling, we should ask, have problems of rationality and reason become in India today?

Take demonetisation, for instance. To a rational economist, 'notebandi' appeared irrational. Politically, however, for vast swathes of the Indian underclass and for those who were left out of India's economic growth story over the past two decades, the sudden elimination of high-value currency notes—which they never had in plenty—appeared like a real and rational way of ending corruption and ill-gotten wealth. No amount of haranguing about economic theory, it seems, could unsettle good old fashioned common sense conviction.

For the stock market in India, on the other hand, its moment of 'irrational exuberance' is being widely celebrated. This past week, both the 30-share Sensex and the broader Nifty index touched a new high after a strong

MUCH LIKE THE COMMON SENSE AGAINST THE RICH IN THE CASE OF NOTEBANDI, THE IRRATIONAL EXUBERANCE FOR THE GET-RICH FANTASY IS HARD TO ARGUE AGAINST

weeks-long rally in stock prices. The Sensex, which on Thursday crossed the 32,000-mark for the first time, has risen more than 3,000 points, or 10%, over the past 12 weeks, a period that broadly overlaps with the first quarter of the current financial year.

This turnaround in market sentiments has, in fact, no connect with the real economy. Manufacturing growth slipped sharply from 2.6% in April to 1.2% in May; exports fell from \$246 billion in April to \$240 billion in May and \$235 billion in June, while a demonetisation-induced deflation in food prices threatens to undermine rural demand and a speedier economic recovery. Add to it the supply-chain disruptions following the implementation of the Goods and Services tax, which has yet to come good on its claim of being independent India's biggest tax reform.

In the weeks to follow, most companies are expected to report weaker quarterly earnings with a subdued outlook for the rest of the year. Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) opened the calendar, reporting a 10% year-on-year

drop in net profit and a net decline in its workforce for the first time since 2010. TCS, India's biggest employer of software engineers, also announced it would shut down its Lucknow centre and "relocate" the 2,000-odd staff working there. That's just one sign—more will follow—of how the job market and the economy on the whole might be going from bad to worse. Global investors know it. That's why they have not been buying much in Indian equities—FIIs have been net sellers so far in July. Their growing disillusionment perhaps manifests in how publications such as The Economist and The New York Times have chosen to report the India story in recent times.

Yet, just like the underclass and notebandi, a spectrum of domestic investors from the middle to upper classes want to sustain the irrational belief that the stock market need not have anything to do with the real economy. And very much like the common sense against the rich in the case of demonetisation, the irrational exuberance for the get-rich fantasy is hard to argue against.

Clearly, there seems to be a visceral disconnect in India between the economic real and the political unreal, between economic belief and political reason. One wonders, if Durgaprasad's suicide squares these circles?

For a longer version of this column, visit <http://read.ht/B004>. Follow the author on Twitter @rajeshmahapatra

thisweekthatera

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

JULY 20: An armed police patrol unit, on the lookout for Maoist rebels, walks through the villages, closely combing the Kharibari area in Naxalbari in West Bengal.



July 16-22, 1967 >> FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

NEWS OF THE WEEK

INDIA

GOVT PLAN READY FOR REGIONAL LANGUAGE
JULY 18: The Union Education Ministry has finalized the proposal to make regional languages the media of instruction at all levels of education, including the university. The Union Cabinet is likely to approve the proposal this week.

WORLD

HONG KONG REDS BURN CARS, ATTACK BUILDINGS
JULY 20: Communists staged bomb attacks on Government buildings and burned cars last night as police and military forces combined to strike at leftist strongholds to stamp out the wave of terrorism that has lasted more than a week.

sundayletters

INDIA MUST NOT BLINK FIRST IN THIS CONFRONTATION

This refers to 'Doklam: Why China is angry with India' (Chanakya, July 9). India while asserting itself has been giving indications that it can no longer be taken for granted. China has been rubbing the wrong way by India's loud objections to the CPEC and its reservations on OBOR. So China is trying its old intimidating tactics on the borders to subdue India. Diplomatic channels should be urgently explored for a peaceful resolution of the Doklam standoff. But till then India must not blink first in this eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation.

VIPUL PANDE NAINITAL

Teaching needs an overhaul

Rote learning is a result of excessive importance given to examinations and marks ('India Needs A War On Rote Learning', Deep Cut, July 9). Moreover, when men take to teaching as a last resort and women see it as a safe option to supplement income, what can be expected from the teaching-learning process? An imaginative and innovative approach to school education is required to rid our school children of the 'rote learning' mentality.

VIJAI PANT VIA EMAIL

A fearless and frank journalist

Apropos Karan Thapar's column (It's been a momentous two decades indeed', Sunday Sentiments, July 9). Thapar is a fearless and frank journalist, and a master at penetrating the subject to dig out the information that people want. Upholding journalistic ethics and sticking tenaciously to the job is always in the public interest.

SUBHASH VAID VIA EMAIL

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