



The boycott ban

Maharashtra's law criminalising social ostracism is a template for other States

Maharashtra's new law prohibiting the social boycott of individuals, families or any community by informal village councils is a step in the right direction, given the pervasive nature of the problem. The progressive legislation, which received Presidential assent recently and was gazetted earlier this month, targets the pernicious practice of informal caste panchayats or dominant sections using ostracism as a means of enforcing social conformity. The Maharashtra Protection of People from Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2016, may serve as a template for similar legislation in other States. The Act lists over a dozen types of actions that may amount to 'social boycott', which has been made a criminal offence punishable with imprisonment up to three years or a fine of ₹1 lakh or both. The practices it prohibits range from preventing the performance of a social or religious custom, denial of the right to perform funerals or marriages, cutting off someone's social or commercial ties to preventing access to educational or medical institutions or community halls and public facilities, or any form of social ostracism on any ground. The law recognises the human rights dimension to issues of social boycott, as well as the varied forms in which it occurs in a caste-based society. Its progressive sweep takes into account discrimination on the basis of morality, social acceptance, political inclination, sexuality, which it prohibits. It even makes it an offence to create cultural obstacles by forcing people to wear a particular type of clothing or use a particular language.

This is not the first law of its type. Bombay enacted a law against excommunication in 1949, but it was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1962 after the Dawoodi Bohra community successfully argued that it violated the community's constitutional right to manage its own religious affairs. One hopes the latest Act will not be vulnerable to legal challenge. Article 17 of the Constitution and the Protection of Civil Rights Act outlaw untouchability in all its forms, but these are legal protections intended for the Scheduled Castes. In reality, members of various castes and communities also require such protection from informal village councils and gatherings of elders who draw on their own notions of conformity, community discipline, morality and social mores to issue diktats to the village or the community to cut off ties with supposedly offending persons and families. The case of a mountaineer from Raigad is somewhat notorious. He had conquered Mt. Everest but could not escape a social boycott in his village because his wife wore jeans and did not wear a mangalsutra. It is not a proud moment for a country when special legislation is required to prohibit social discrimination, ostracism and practices repugnant to human dignity. Yet, given the prevailing circumstances, any legislative assault on abhorrent social practices ought to be welcomed.

Spanish steps

Madrid pulls out all the stops ahead of the secession vote in Catalonia

Ahead of the controversial October 1 referendum on secession in Catalonia, the Spanish government's awkward move of tightening the purse-strings could prove politically costly. There is cause for concern that Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's meddling with the financial priorities of Barcelona will play into the hands of the separatists. A veteran of many a crisis, Mr. Rajoy recently issued instructions to the regional government to ensure that not a single euro earmarked for development activities is diverted to the vote. The decision requiring weekly certification follows a judicial declaration that all expenditure towards the vote were unconstitutional. Recourse to such seemingly stringent measures has predictably drawn flak from Catalan leaders, who were already embittered that the province is being denied its due share of the overall tax revenues. Madrid's mainstream political parties are opposed to the long-standing demand of Catalonia for independent statehood. Riding on the overwhelming support in the national parliament, Mr. Rajoy's centre-right coalition is determined to block the proposed independence referendum. The government is even contemplating the invocation of Article 155 of the constitution to exercise direct authority over the north-eastern region in the event of a worst-case scenario. The country's constitutional court is widely expected to rule that any referendum, as well as secession from the union, is violative of the constitution.

But that is where legalese ends and politics inevitably takes over. After holding several symbolic independence votes across many municipalities over the past decade, Catalan nationalists sense that what once seemed a distant dream could one day be turned into reality. The economic and social upheaval following the bursting of the Spanish housing bubble after the 2007-8 financial crisis, local problems were deflected on to the national stage. The 2015 election of the regional government, with a known pro-independence bent, might have been a reflection of this shift in perception. A perception among Catalan youth that the national government is clamping down on democratic expression could only strain the already delicate equation between Madrid and Barcelona. Recent history casts a remarkably sobering light on how much politicians can count on rational arguments to hold sway over popular sentiment. Britain's vote to leave the European Union is just one example. Mr. Rajoy has earned a reputation for exercising caution to a fault during his premiership. His conciliatory tone, for instance, on Catalonia's fiscal autonomy, a demand he had rejected some years ago, may yet open a window. The call issued by the opposition socialist leader, Pedro Sánchez, for more federal powers could similarly soothe tensions. Madrid must look to expand this spirit of accommodation.

Taming inflationary expectations

Who'd have thought under the MPC, the first case of deviation of the inflation rate would undershoot the target?



AJIT RANADE

The official inflation rate dipped to 1.5% last month, the lowest in almost two decades. Inflation is a politically more sensitive challenge than joblessness for the simple reason that it affects everyone, whether you have a job or not.

India's long-term record in managing inflation has been very impressive when compared with most developing countries. We have never had the bouts of hyperinflation experienced in many Latin American economies or seen even in countries such as Israel. The relatively high double-digit inflation experienced between 2010 to 2013 was an aberration, which had a political consequence. There have been very few instances of such persistent, multi-year, high inflationary episodes in our history. The credit for this goes to the vigilance of the political system and also to effective monetary management. Inflation is after all a monetary phenomenon – more money chasing fewer goods. So, controlling money supply is part of the strategy for controlling inflation.

Food prices as indicator

But inflation is also an indicator of whether there is an excess demand or supply of goods. For instance, with a bumper crop of fruits and vegetables, prices plunge, even though money supply might be unchanged. Indeed, the recent drop in the inflation rate has been caused by a steep fall in the prices of vegetables (17%) and pulses (22%). Conversely, and rather ironically, unseasonal rains in the north



have destroyed a large part of the tomato crop causing prices to skyrocket. Food prices, especially of perishables, are notoriously volatile. High onion prices, even if temporary, have caused the downfall of governments in past elections. Food prices are a big component in the determinant of the overall inflation rate based on the consumer price index basket. Keeping them low and stable involves policies such as public procurement and a minimum support price regime. Inflation control thus involves a combination of monetary management along with measures to increase supply of goods (in the medium term) as also anti-hoarding measures or the release of stocks from government warehouses.

Even though price stability is an important goal of government policy, it is now an exclusive mandate given to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). Last year, in a landmark reform of monetary management, the government officially gave an inflation target to the RBI. Prior to this, the central bank had multiple objectives which included enhancing growth and reducing unemployment, although price stability was undoubtedly paramount. The new paradigm, called the "flexible inflation targeting" framework, aims for a numerical target given by

the government. The main tool to achieve it is by setting the benchmark interest rate. This decision is now taken by the six-member monetary policy committee (MPC), chaired by the Governor. The current inflation target is 4% plus or minus 2%. The MPC is deemed to have failed if for three consecutive quarters the inflation rate falls outside the band.

Low inflation pointer

Who would have imagined that in the new MPC regime, the first instance of deviation of the inflation rate would undershoot, not overshoot the target? Of course, technically, the MPC has not failed, for the June inflation rate of 1.5%, which is below 2%, may be transitory. However, there are strong indications and forecasts by many economists that point to low inflation in the coming months. Those numbers may be in the range of 2 to 4%.

How did we get to this low inflation scenario? Partly it must be because the money supply has been kept "dear", or tight. Thus, the benchmark rate (called the repo rate, or the rate at which the RBI gives money to banks) at 6.25% may be too high. Interest rates are the "price" of money, so if they are too high, money becomes scarce. If it is lowered, then there will be more

money in circulation, more loans given out. But low inflation is also because of a steep fall in prices of fruits, vegetables and pulses, none of which was caused by high interest rates. These steep falls are highly seasonal. We have also benefited from low and stable crude oil prices, which are a crucial determinant of transport and energy costs.

All eyes will now be on the MPC which meets again in less than two weeks. There is a strong feeling that high interest rates have deterred big industrial investments, or housing finance. High rates are crippling borrowers who try to come out of near-bankruptcy and are preventing a restructuring of stressed bank loans. India's real interest rates, i.e. net of inflation, are quite high even compared to other developing countries. Much of the developed world has ultra-low rates, with some countries such as Sweden, Switzerland and Japan even having negative interest rates. India needs much lower rates for higher GDP growth.

But the job of the MPC won't be easy. This is mainly because its task is to target future inflation, not the past. The future has some troubling portents. The short run impact of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) is bound to be inflationary. That's because a bulk of India's GDP is in services whose tax rate has moved from 15% to 18%. Besides, while sellers wait for their refund, i.e. input tax credit under the GST, their cost of capital locked up might go up. Many State governments have introduced additional levies to counter their apprehension of a loss of revenue under the GST. Besides the GST, there is the impact of the award of the Seventh Pay Commission to government employees. This effect will cascade to public sector organisations and State-level employees as well, and put pressure on prices. A third factor could

be the loan waivers announced in some States which can cause fiscal stress. High deficit spending is not compatible with lower interest rates. A fourth factor is the uptick in commodity prices worldwide as metals and food prices are looking up.

The last, and probably the most important, factor weighing on the MPC's mind would be inflation expectations. Household surveys conducted by the RBI indicate that people are expecting inflation to be close to 10%, not the 1.5% as is reported now. You may say that these expectations are irrational, but they do affect behaviour. In this season of salary increments, try giving someone a raise of 2%, as is common in the developed world. Workers will howl. Even their official dearness allowance is much higher. The real challenge is to slay this inflation expectations monster. In much of the western world, they are fighting disinflation if not outright deflation. But in India we are still struggling with inflationary conditions and expectations.

In English the verb for inflation is *inflate*. It refers to rising prices. But in most Indian languages, the equivalent word in usage is "*mehengai*", which refers to affordability and cost of living. Not all inflation is unwelcome. So if stock prices go up, that is good cheer. But "*mehengai*" is hated by all. A low and stable inflation rate is a prerequisite for sustained high economic growth. *Mehengai* is antithetical to it. In the medium term, the growth impact of the GST, the improving ease of doing business – and hence increasing supply of goods – and a strong domestic currency, will all help keep inflation low. But the short run challenge is to temper inflationary expectations and keep them tethered.

Ajit Ranade is an economist

Carrying forward a legacy

The M. Balamuralikrishna memorial music college must resist a defensive approach towards new ideas



GARIMELLA SUBRAMANIAM

The Andhra Pradesh government's decision to establish a music college in the memory of legendary composer Mangalam-palli Balamuralikrishna – to mark his 87th birth anniversary, on July 6 – was perhaps the most consequential highlight of the celebrations in different cities. Ironically, while it was proposed to honour him by setting up an educational institution, the man himself received no formal instruction in the modern sense of the term. This fact further underscores the extraordinary influence the multifaceted musician wielded in the cultural arena.

Torchbearer of innovation

Balamuralikrishna was fundamentally a philosopher musician who was impelled by an insatiable curiosity to delve into the scientific principles underlying India's unique melodic system. Therefore, he set store by his own emotional experience to understand and interpret the rich and varied musical

heritage he came across. The compositions he wrote in his early teens in each of the 72 foundational scales of the Carnatic system were foremost illustrations of his tenacious intellect and aesthetic sensitivities.

His audacious endeavours in subsequent decades, of formulating new scales deploying fewer than five notes, were to redefine the conventional contours of conceiving a raga. Similarly, the emphasis the maestro placed on setting his own individual tunes to works, where the authenticity of the originals were a matter of dispute, or giving musical form to the lyrics of men of artistic repute, were instances of his idiosyncrasies as a composer. These and many other characteristic qualities may have remained relatively obscure to the large mass of his fans, probably owing to the phenomenal symmetry he brought to bear between style and substance and simplicity and sophistication in his performances.

The core curriculum in the new seat of learning would place a premium on grounding students in the grand traditions of the classical Carnatic system. But the inculcation of these distinctive traits of individuality and originality would seem intrinsic to the mission of an institution conceived to propagate



this illustrious legacy. Such an enterprise presupposes that students who pass through its portals would be receptive to pursue, with equal enthusiasm, rigour and openness, the dynamics of other interrelated disciplines of music.

Moreover, the orientation would be to desist from a defensive approach towards new ideas, either in the guise of preserving convention or with the aim of creating specialists, without undermining new domains of specialised knowledge. In other words, nurturing capable and cultivated musicians with all-round abilities rather than equipping men and women merely with professional competencies ought to underpin the vision of the new centre of music learning.

These are admittedly ambitious objectives, whose accomplishment would be predicated upon a vibrant educational environment that is dedicated to the promotion of academic excellence. Fortunately, these are the same values that mainstream institutions are committed to instil in youngsters and which corporations profess to foster in the business environment. Therefore, no price would be too dear to realise these ends.

Going forward

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu may have got the sentiment and symbolism right when he declared in Vijayawada that the new college would be situated in the maestro's birthplace, Sankaraguptam village in the East Godavari region. To be sure, the choice of the location imparts a sense of history to this important project. But the composer's general perspective as regards past events and ages was more nuanced rather than nostalgic as he viewed history as an essential ingredient to enrich the present and enable a reasonable anticipation of the future. Such a pragmatic approach was a powerful influence throughout Balamuralikrishna's dynamic life – an aspect that perhaps ought not to be overlooked.

Similarly, his life was a treatise

on the mastery and transcendence of time-honoured traditions, without the trappings of triumphalism. He often extolled the technical sophistication and richness of the south Indian musical system. But he was equally wont to insist that the term "Carnataka" essentially implied any music that was pleasant to the ear.

The renditions of a few hundreds of the maestro's own compositions, digitally recorded during his lifetime, would undoubtedly serve as a major repository for teachers and learners to draw upon. But the many direct disciples the great guru has tutored at home and abroad have a special place in the dissemination of his musical ideas. Some of them are real ambassadors who have the sophistication to transmit the legend's essential spirit of simultaneously staying rooted and steering Indian classical music through the cross-currents of diverse cultural influences.

The three-member committee, headed by the Chief Minister's media adviser, Parakala Prabhakar, has the enviable task to ensure that the spirit of "Murali raval" reverberates across the Godavari river belt and beyond.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

At the receiving end

It is most uncharitable on the Union Finance Minister's part – on the subject of 'invisible' money in elections – to pass the buck to the Election Commission as though it is the EC in essence which regulates, oversees and monitors the flow of illegal money to the electoral arena ("EC failed to curb 'invisible money' in polls, says Jaitley", July 23). Until T.N. Seshan became Chief Election Commissioner, the EC itself was nearly invisible. The EC is just a cog in the giant wheel of democracy. Given the power structure of the various constitutional pillars of our democracy, the EC is at best a watchdog and not a bloodhound to go after law breakers. The recent case of an attempt to bribe the EC shows how effective the EC is in apprehending and punishing wrongdoers. In the Indian scheme of things, the politician is the one who always has the last laugh while the government functionary, however mighty his authority is,

plays second fiddle.

SIVAMANI VASUDEVAN,
Chennai

■ Mr. Jaitley's statement, at the Delhi Economics Conclave, is amusing, a case of the pot calling the kettle black, and made at an inappropriate forum. Although it may be true to some extent that Election Commissioners before the arrival of T.N. Seshan were ineffective, it is successive governments thereafter which made the EC's role futile, resulting in "invisible money" flowing freely in elections. At least now Mr. Jaitley and his party would do well to implement electoral reforms suggested by the EC to help de-criminalise politics and also bring political parties under the ambit of the RTI.

B. HARISH,
Mangaluru

Terms of engagement

China's hardening stand on the Doklam plateau issue follows the line of its negotiating behaviour followed since the 1950s. The ultimate goal of insisting on the acceptance

of Chinese definitions and terms for a negotiation is to establish moral and psychological dominance over an adversary as a necessary corollary to the correct ordering of the negotiation. Classic Chinese texts such as the "Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance" (Zizhi Tongjian) contain several expedients to achieve these goals. Sun Tzu and the "Thirty-Six Stratagems" also provides considerable material. Another one is the tool box first described by its early practitioner, scholar and imperial adviser, Lou Jing. One hopes that China is aware that this may not fetch it results. The tough stand adopted by Indian troops on the Doklam plateau and Indonesia's recent move to rename the northern reaches of its exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea as the North Natuna are acts of growing resistance by Southeast Asian nations to China's territorial ambitions. It's high time that China stops playing mind games in the

South Asian region in its quest for a larger geopolitical role in Asia and the Indian Ocean area. Simultaneously, India should also realise that all important decisions related to the tri-services can't always be taken in the Prime Minister's Office or the service headquarters. As the issue shows, we do need a full-time Defence Minister.

B. MEENAKSHI SUNDARAM,
Chennai

Worth watching?

The Open Page article, "The willing suspension of disbelief" (July 23), has rightly taken a dig at the never-ending soap trail that has proliferated across South Indian TV channels and created thousands of couch potatoes. In most cases these soaps make little sense and are handicapped by poor scripts and the lacklustre performances of the cast. Another point is that there are definitely no scruples as far as morals and devious thinking are concerned. It would be no exaggeration to say that these listless soaps have no favourable impact on

audiences and are hardly entertaining.

C.V. ARAVIND,
Bengaluru

Snakes and rituals

As a wildlife researcher, I was shocked by the standalone PTI photograph, "The month of Shiva – Faith beckons: Devotees hold snakes during a procession in Samastipur in Bihar on Saturday on the eve of Sawan Amavasya" (Some editions, July 23). Most of these snakes are the Indian rat snake (*Ptyas mucosa*) and/or the Spectacled Cobra (*Naja naja*), which are listed in Schedule II of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, and in Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora Appendix II. Both species are regarded among the most

efficient controllers of rodents as they go right into rat burrows and eat the adults.

As the picture shows, the snakes are of a particular size and could not have been collected in a short time. In the case of the cobra, it is often subject to cruelty – its fangs may be removed or its mouth stitched. This leads to mouth rot disease and the snake dying of starvation. Many of these snakes can become emaciated and dehydrated in captivity. Harassing and displacing wildlife in the name of rituals is unacceptable. The local administration, NGOs and veterinarians should initiate awareness to curb this.

ABHIJIT DAS,
Dehradun, Uttarakhand

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the "Being" page interview with Eamonn Murphy, Director of UNAIDS Regional Support Team for Asia-Pacific (July 23, 2017), both in the reply to the first question and in the headline it has been erroneously stated that "India" has taken its foot off the pedal in the AIDS fight. Actually, the reference was to the Asia-Pacific region, and not just India.

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The Vice President's mien

The contest is between two ideas of India, between the politics of vision and that of power play

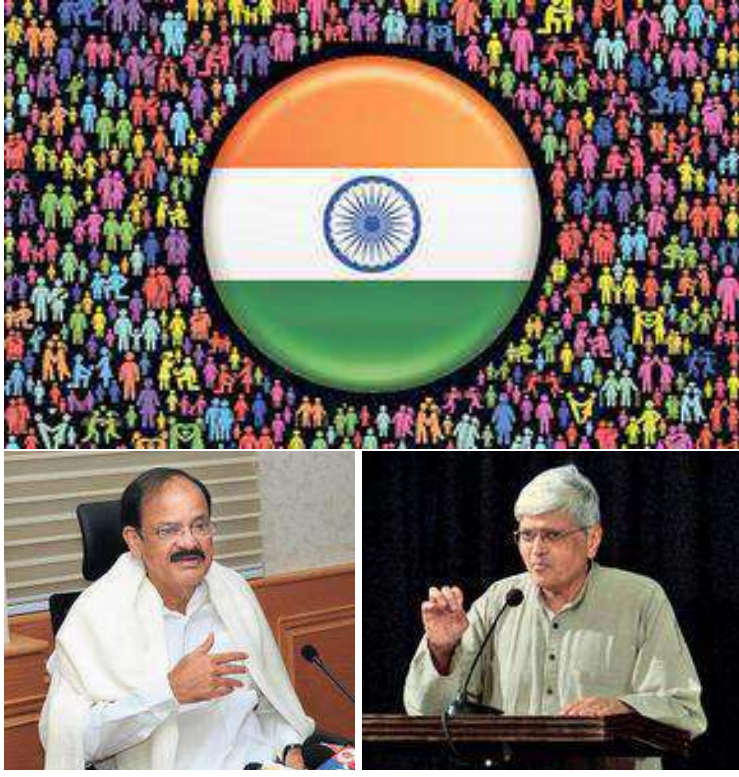


PETER RONALD DESOUZA

At this moment in India's history, the lesser between the presidential and the vice presidential contests has become the more important one. It is not just a contest between two persons, or between two political coalitions, or even between two ideologies. It is, in effect, a battle between two ideas of what India aspired to be during its struggle for freedom and what India should be. Much indeed is at stake. If the contest for the President was mere tokenism – your Dalit candidate versus mine – the vice presidential contest, in contrast, is substantial since the choice is actually one between a politics of vision and a politics of hard-headed power play.

When the Office of the Vice President has little ability to impact politics, except in the conduct of the proceedings of the Rajya Sabha or when there is a vacancy due to death of the President, why is the ruling dispensation so fearful of making a gesture towards that other important strand of Indian politics, the dharmic path of public life? Politics, we have learnt from early Greece, is more than just the exercise of power. It is also public ethics. So why is Prime Minister Narendra Modi so scared of finding a consensus candidate who is not a party person and who, when the moment requires, will remind the government of the dharmic path from which it has strayed? Why is the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) turning its back on this important Indian cultural trope, at a moment when it is strongest, and treating the idea of dharmic path as a foreign concept? Was not the first Vice President of India, S. Radhakrishnan, a philosopher of Indian religion and culture? Is not the current Vice President a man of letters? So why choose a party loyalist?

Ethics, pragmatics, symbolism
Most of us regard such political decisions as describing a political calculus, a zero-sum game where the winner takes all. This, unfortunately, is politics in its lowest form. From treatises offered in the *Arthashastra*, to the discourses on dharma in the *Mahabharata*, through the debates in



the Constituent Assembly, to the leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement and the global decolonisation process where we spoke of a new world order, the Indian state has regarded politics as more than just pragmatics. India reflected on and represented a richer model of politics where ethics, pragmatics, and symbolism (form instance, in the choice of the dharma chakra as our symbol) all combined, in their best moments, to give our politics a superior quality.

Mahatma Gandhi took on the might of the corrupt British Empire by combining such elements. He was the master-practitioner of the rich politics of ahimsa and *satyagraha*. That is why we got our *swaraj*. Jawaharlal Nehru, B.R. Ambedkar and the many others who dream of a new India also strove to practise such politics as they fought the deceptions of the British Raj. In this fight, their weapons were fashioned from the ethical, the pragmatic, and the symbolic. Take khadi. It is made up of all the three. Khadi represents the material, but also the cultural and the political. To therefore reduce politics to only one aspect, to its pragmatics alone, as the NDA regime is doing, is to reject what India has stood for across the ages. Why have we sunk so low?

But then it may be too much to expect

that those indoctrinated in the ideological camps of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) will be able to imagine an expansive India, one where power does not flow from the *danda* (stick) but from the *shabd* (words). Ethical options, unfortunately, are not on the menu of a *pracharak*. The mental training in a *shakha* does not prepare one to see and value the finer and softer, but more powerful, aspects of political rule.

Earlier in this article, I had said that the vice presidential contest this time is the more important of the two contests even though so little at stake. Let me elaborate. The VP cannot hold up a bill by delaying assent. Nor can he reprimand the government or dismiss Governors when they incur his displeasure. The Vice President is only a constitutional safeguard when the President dies, a twelfth man. And yet, the triumvirate of Bhagwat-Modi-Shah finds itself unable to transcend the petty mentality of party politics and choose the dharmic path to seek a candidate who enjoys bipartisan support, who can be the conscience of the polity. It is this partisanship that has led me to claim that the lesser contest is the more important one.

When little is at stake, especially in such a conceptually rich civilisation as India's, it becomes important for

those at the helm to think beyond the exercise of power, beyond state capture and the imposition of a one-sided political will.

Great leaders build into their rule space for intellectuals, ethicists, poets, and artists. Dissenters are regarded as a vital element of good governance, for they speak what others are loath to utter. Akbar had Birbal, a Hindu, as his adviser. Nehru laughed along with the cartoonist Shankar at the cartoons that lampooned the Prime Minister.

No consensus candidate

However, today, the leaders find themselves unable to choose a consensus candidate who will embody the virtues that a polity requires, who will be seen by the people as non-partisan, who will represent the India that needs healing. Such gestures of genuflection towards a higher purpose produce in those watching a sense of that very purpose. Every polity requires such gestures and such acknowledgement, for a polity cannot survive on power alone. It will soon degenerate into tyranny and paranoia.

By its decision to reject the idea of a consensus candidate, the NDA has announced that the contest for the Vice President's office is politically important. There are three possible reasons for such obstinacy. The first concerns the habit element: use this opportunity to show the Opposition that they will be not listened to.

The second is narrow-mindedness. Years of *shaka* training debilitate the mind. People are seen as either friends or enemies and hence the issue is not one of the nation but that of party politics. It is impossible to imagine a larger goal for which both parties will willingly accept a compromise.

However, it the third reason that is the most disquieting. Is this being seen as an opportunity to, once and for all, belittle the place of the Mahatma in our national imaginary? Does this in mark a second Savarkar-Gandhi face-off? Savarkar lost round one at Independence. We now have a situation where the 57 MPs from Tamil Nadu and 37 MPs from Gujarat have to decide on a candidate who is the grandson of both Rajaji and Gandhiji. From their choice we will know the present status of the face-off.

Peter Ronald deSouza is professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. Views are personal.

The importance of being earnest

The institutionalised feedback mechanism has helped to address readers' concerns in a measured manner



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

The irony was stark yet illuminating. On July 22, 2017, when we were having our fifth Open House, the first one in Delhi, there was a report by Jackie Spinner titled "Public editors disappear as media distrust grows" in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. When I shifted from being a journalist to an ombudsman, my immersive induction to the job came from the United States's experience. A decade ago, the U.S. had about 40 news ombudsmen and today the number has dwindled to four by most estimates. U.S. publishers seem to believe that an ombudsman is redundant in this era of user-generated content that floods the digital space.

Human intervention

Every Open House we held since 2013 reaffirmed our belief that there is a need for human intervention to retain trust and credibility in this age of anonymous communication. While it is easy to talk about the rules and the codes, the ethics and the laws, and the values and principles that govern journalism among the practitioners, it is difficult to explain the full import of these terms to general readers. The idea of self-regulation is to embed media literacy as an integral part of news. Readers are informed about the changing information landscape like they are informed about the polity, economy and society, a task that cannot be performed by random tweets or passionate posts in cyberspace. While cyberspace may have given an opportunity to many to express themselves, the question that remains unanswered is whether their voices are heard?

What are the requisites of the institution of an independent news ombudsman? It is a four-way covenant that involves the reader, editor, management and the ombudsman, where each agrees to hand over some of powers in exchange for a fair and credible mechanism that ensures accountability. There are fine lines that should be respected and not breached, even inadvertently, for this mechanism to succeed. The toughest part of the job is to draw the line between the polyphony of multiple voices and the cacophony of concurrent monologues.

Some of the frequently asked questions are: how do you process inputs from the readers? What are the responses of the edit-

ors and the journalists of *The Hindu* to the suggestions from the readers? How effective has this system been for the newspaper? It would be extremely presumptuous to assume that the 139-year-old newspaper began listening to its readers only over the last decade once this office came to existence.

However, there is a difference between the earlier feedback mechanism and the current one. Here we try to inform readers when their suggestions could not be implemented for various reasons. For instance, one reader wanted the newspaper to have a daily fact-check column that looks at each statement of politicians, bureaucrats and diplomats. He also wanted us to alert the general public about the trending fake news on social media on a real-time basis. It is a worthwhile suggestion but it needs enormous human and financial resources. Indian

English newspapers, with a highly subsidised cover price and facing pressure from digital freebies, can move into this segment only if we have a fair pricing policy.

Another issue that comes up often during the Open House is regarding the ideal content mix for a particular edition. How much of the hyper-local and local news should there be in each edition? What should be the share of national news? Is it possible for a multi-edition newspaper to produce completely different newspapers for various cities? What should be the space for "good news" amidst our daily dose of "bad news"? One of the readers said that the amount of bad news in the newspaper increased his blood pressure and wanted an equal dose of good news.

The institutionalised feedback mechanism has helped to address these concerns in a measured manner. The editorial team, while retaining the core characteristics of *The Hindu*, has worked out the details to have regional and sub-regional variants to fulfil the requirements of a specific readership in a geographical segment. It is a process where continuity and change are in consonance with each other, where the introduction of a new segment does not subsume the importance of the existing segments. These unobtrusive shifts in emphasis in some of the sections of the newspaper are based on the feedback we have received from the readers.

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SINGLE FILE

All for one, one for all?

If not designed right, well-meaning policies do not necessarily change lives

PRASHANTH PERUMAL



"One of the great mistakes is to judge policies and programmes by their intentions rather than their results," said legendary American economist Milton Friedman in a television interview in 1975. Friedman was pointing out to the precious fact that policies that

look fair and just at first sight often end up hurting the very people they were supposed to help.

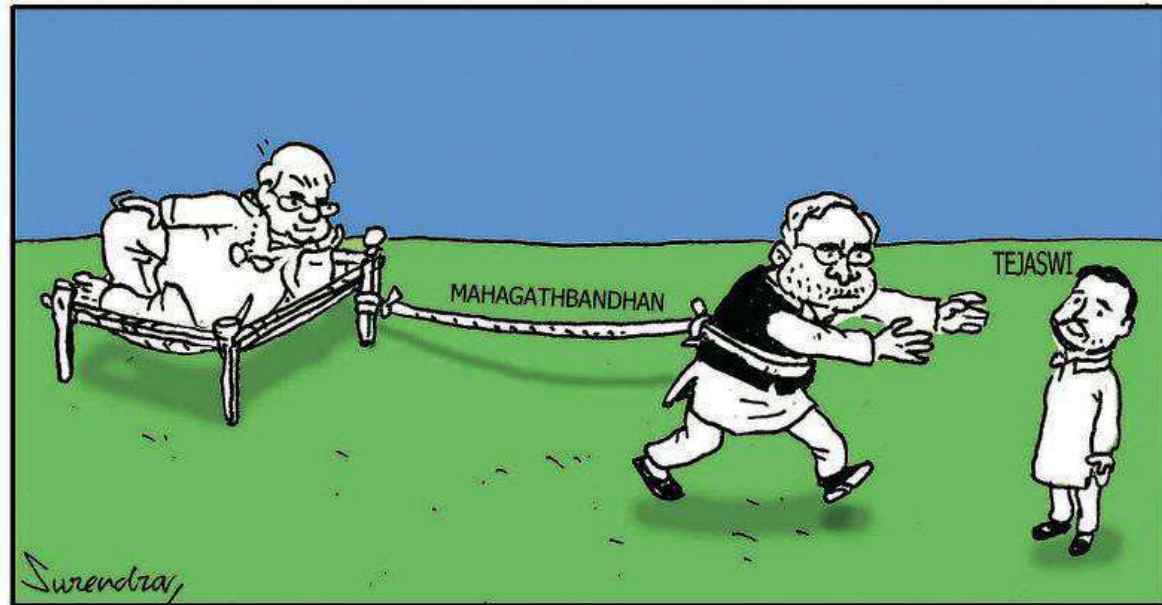
Today, his words of wisdom can help Kerala in dealing with its discontented nurses. Nurses in the southern State called off their indefinite strike recently after the State government agreed to their demand for a minimum wage of at least ₹20,000 per month.

Supporters of the higher minimum wage promised by the government believe that nurse wages are presently set too low by private hospitals arbitrarily. So, they say, it is justified that the government intervenes to protect the rights of nurses. As much as the argument of these do-gooders sounds convincing, the higher minimum wage will not benefit the nurses. If properly implemented, a higher minimum wage can indeed force private hospitals to pay higher wages for nurses. But it will do little to prevent hospitals from reducing the number of nurses that they employ, or take other steps to adjust to the reality of higher nurse wages. This is because, contrary to what many believe, wages are not determined arbitrarily by private hospitals.

Availability of labour

Instead, nurse wages simply reflect the relative scarcity of labour, a fact that hospitals need to take into account when they decide to employ nurses. So, a relatively large supply of nurses causes their wages to drop and allows hospitals to employ more nurses. Conversely, when the supply of nurses is relatively small, it results in higher wages that push hospitals to employ fewer nurses. A minimum wage set by the government, in other words, will do very little to change the underlying reality of the supply of nurses in India far outstripping demand – which explains their low wages. Instead, as mentioned, the minimum wage will only prevent hospitals from fully absorbing the available supply of nurses – except in very rare, unrealistic cases. The newly proposed minimum wage of ₹20,000, in fact, is far above the prevailing market rate for nurses. So it is only a matter of time before hospitals retrench their nursing staff, lower their working hours, or, if possible, automate their roles.

If the nurse unions resist such cost-saving measures by hospitals, hospitals will look to accommodate them under political pressure. This can, of course, prop up the wages of nurses belonging to unions by artificially restricting the supply of nursing services. But it won't come without any cost. Non-unionised nurses willing to work for cheaper wages will be stopped from competing against the unions, and instead forced to look for other jobs that pay lower. So, while the minimum wage looks like a tool to empower all nurses, in reality, it works against the interests of the weaker ones who lack political voice.



CONCEPTUAL

Pygmalion effect

PSYCHOLOGY

A psychological phenomenon where higher expectations from individuals lead to an improvement in their actual performance. In contrast, lower expectations can lead to decreased performance levels. The Pygmalion effect is commonly cited in the field of management studies, where it is believed that managers can significantly improve the performance of workers under them by expecting more out of them and treating them as individuals with high potential. The idea was first proposed by American business professor J. Sterling Livingston in a 1969 article named "Pygmalion in Management".

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SHELF HELP

Speaking truth with numbers

Data visualisation has made journalism more objective

SRINIVASAN RAMANI

"A picture is worth a thousand words" is a well-repeated cliché. But it is not any more in journalism, where the increasing use of data visualisation to tell stories has revolutionised the field, making journalism more objective, more interpretative and bringing authenticity to storytelling.

The workflow in data journalism has three separate processes. The first is data sourcing and preparation. This can be done in various ways – either through direct sourcing from public documents, or from surveys or indirectly through methods such as "web scraping" and creation of data sets from digital resources. Web scraping requires a lot of refining and cleaning up of data from various sources like PDF documents, HTML pages and text files. There are several free tools available for this job. At an advanced level, a working knowledge of the python programming language and various libraries

which aid in HTML scraping is useful.

Some document caches from which data is to be created are so large that it is difficult to parse or prepare useful tables out of them without the help of a much larger team than what newspapers typically have. Simon Rogers (who was formerly *The Guardian's* data editor), in his book on data journalism, *Facts are Sacred* writes how *The Guardian* used techniques such as crowdsourcing to obtain big data used to come up with stories, like the MP expenses scandal in the United Kingdom. Mr. Rogers rightly points out in his book that data journalism is "80% perspiration, 10% great idea and 10% output".

The next step in data journalism is analysing the data and looking for patterns, rules, exceptions, in order to tell a coherent story. For non-coders – most data journalists come under this category – this typically involves a lot of work with spreadsheets, pivoting tables, simple

statistical analyses and so on. Analysing data for journalistic purposes does not require one to be a trained statistician but one needs to be at least familiar with simple statistical concepts (for example, correlation does not amount to causation). If one requires a crash course in basic econometrics, D.N. Gujarati's book (of the same name) is a good place to start.

The third part in data journalism is data visualisation, the most exciting feature. The journalist needs an intuitive feel of how to present a data graphic that explains the story in an effective manner. Various software tools – like fusion tables, chart wrappers and the D3 (dynamic document design) javascript library – are freely available but to get a familiarity with graphic design, statistician and political scientist Edward Tufte's books *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* and *Envisioning Information* are very useful guides.

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 24, 1967

Tremors rock Turkey

More tremors rocked devastated western Turkey to-day [July 23] after last night's [July 22] death-dealing earthquake, but Government officials hoped the final death toll would not be more than 100. Provisional figures prepared for Premier Suleyman Demirel put the number of people killed at around 70. The official death toll in this city of about 40,000 – the centre of the devastation – is 28 dead and about 200 injured, but no news has come in from surrounding villages. Yesterday's [July 22] shocks rumbled across one third of Turkey and were felt in 21 provinces. Unofficial sources said 10,000 houses were damaged. The Turkish Meteorological Department said the tremors were expected to last for 10 days. Provisional figures put the number of people killed at around 70.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 24, 1917

Indian reforms.

The Bishop of Bombay in a long letter to the "Indian Social Reformer" [July 23] on the Indian situation says: "In the present time of excitement, the greatest lack in India is the deliberate expression of representative British opinion. The Government of India utter no word and it does not lie with that Government to give constitutional changes to India. It is with the British Parliament and with the British Democracy which it represents that India has ultimately to deal with." The Democracy of Great Britain and Democracies of self-governing dominions, says the Bishop, can have only one ideal for the future of India and that is that India should eventually attain self-government. The Bishop urges on Indian politicians to consider the temperament of the British Democracy to take such action as will commend them to it and to avoid such action as will irritate it. The immediate object of Great Britain is to win the war. The British democracy will therefore think them an abominable nuisance for presenting a feverish agitation during the war.

DATA POINT

Doctor shortage

In terms of the doctor-patient ratio (number of doctors available for every 1,000 people), India ranks low compared to developed countries, select BRICS countries and those in South Asia, according to figures provided by the World Health Organisation (WHO)

Country	Doctor availability per 1,000 people	Year*
Germany	4.125	2014
Australia	3.374	2013
Russia	3.306	2014
France	3.227	2015
USA	2.554	2013
Japan	2.297	2012
Brazil	1.852	2013
China	1.49	2011
Pakistan	0.806	2014
India	0.629	2017
Bangladesh	0.389	2012
Afghanistan	0.304	2014
Bhutan	0.258	2014

*Year for which data is available (WHO)

SOURCE: LOK SABHA QUESTIONS; MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND FAMILY WELFARE; MEDICAL COUNCIL OF INDIA