

Nobody should be forced to sing Vande Mataram

SWAMINOMICS



SWAMINATHAN S ANKLESARIA AIYAR

Among the worst examples of judicial overreach was last week's declaration by the Madras High Court that the singing of Vande Mataram should be made compulsory in schools, colleges and both government and private offices, including, presumably, The Times of India. Let me stick my neck out and say I refuse to be coerced in this fashion. I have sung Vande Mataram on sundry social occasions, but am outraged by the decree that I must do so in my office to prove my patriotism. My own view of patriotism requires me to oppose this, and to urge others to do the same. The Supreme Court needs to nullify this judgment speedily.

The case before the high court was not about making the singing of any song mandatory. A government job applicant had, in his entrance exam, said in reply to a question that Vande Mataram was written in Bengali. The examiner said no, this was a Sanskrit song. The honourable court should have limited its verdict to this issue.

What certainly falls within judicial turf is the Constitutional freedom of speech. This must include the freedom of singing, as opposed to coerced singing. The Supreme Court has clarified that even though it has decreed that the national anthem, Jana Gana Mana, must be played in cinema theatres, the audience is not obliged to sing along. There is no reason to make singing mandatory for any other song.

If a BJP state or central government passes a law obliging all citizens to sing Vande Mataram, that can be challenged as unconstitutional. Only at that stage should the courts come into the picture. I would expect them to stand up for Constitutional freedoms.

The once-sharp line between judicial and executive authority has long become a grey area. In many cases, the government has so violated its own duties, has been so corrupt and callous, that the public interest has been served by judicial intrusion into areas that in other democracies would be viewed as executive territory. Swaminomics has in the past defended judicial activism in cases of gross government complicity in illegalities (such as unauthorised iron ore mining). But mandating the singing of Vande Mataram is certainly not such a case.

The Madras High Court justifies mandatory singing by saying the song was among those sung during the independence movement. So what? Did every community and every freedom fighter sing it? No. The song traces its



FALSE NOTE: National anthems and patriotic songs should be instruments to unify people, not divide them

ancestry to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's book, Anandamath, about a Hindu revolt against Muslim rulers. Was the song sung by millions of Muslims who participated in the independence movement? Absolutely not. Was it sung by Bhimrao Ambedkar and all Dalits? Or by Master Tara Singh and all his Sikh followers? No, and that is no measure at all of their patriotism.

When India gained independence, Vande Mataram was among the songs considered for the status of national anthem. But it was offensive to a large section of Muslims, and hence deemed inappropriate. National anthems and other patriotic songs should be instruments to unify citizens, not divide them (as Vande Mataram does). Were all the great leaders of the independence movement, including Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel, unpatriotic in rejecting Vande Mataram as the national anthem, and in opting against its singing in schools and offices? Did they not have the highest interests of the nation in their minds? But of course. How, then, is it the job of any court to overrule them on what constitutes patriotism?

Many other songs were associated with the independence movement, including Subhash Chandra Bose's Dilli Chalo Re, which was possibly sung more widely than Vande Mataram. The same is true of Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram, Gandhiji's hymn for religious harmony and unity. Also sung regularly at Gandhiji's prayer meetings was Abide With Me. His patriotism was inclusive enough to savour a hymn of the British conquerors. Because of this, Abide With Me is played every year by the armed forces band at the super-patriotic Beating Retreat ceremony after Republic Day in New Delhi. Vande Mataram does not figure.

It may be desirable to popularise all the songs associated with the independence movement. But why make their singing mandatory? Gandhiji would have said no. He thought ahimsa required him to persuade others, not force them, to do the right thing. The courts should heed his approach.

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PEOPLE TEND TO BE REALLY HONEST IN GOOGLE SEARCHES

In a new book, economist and data scientist **Seth Stephens-Davidowitz** tries to answer questions about human behaviour by looking at our search habits. For example, how racist are people actually? Or, do searches on committing violent crime translate into actual crime? In 'Everybody Lies — Big Data, New Data, and What the Internet Can Tell Us About Who We Really Are', he touches upon a central theme — people lie about themselves on social networks and in offline surveys, but are more honest in private online searches. He spoke to **Kim Arora** about data science, and why people lie



set of who we are and we can use this data to turn calming an angry mob into a science. It is something we haven't previously been able to do. We are going to learn so much more about how to lower racism, how to lower hate, how to calm anger, how to lower violence. These audacious goals make sense with all this data that now exists.

Big data has made randomised tests cheap and fast. Could it also make certain areas of research lazy?

It could be a problem. In general A/B testing, which is this fast, cheap way to do tests, is not really used in academic research. It is used in corporate research. I think it should be used a lot more in academic research. It may get to a point where it is so cheap and easy that people might forget that sometimes you need different, more comprehensive, expensive methods. But I think we are very far from that point. Right now, the basic issue is that A/B testing is not used enough in academic research. Academics tend to rely on slower, old-fashioned processes that are largely outdated.

Why do you say that the next Foucault/Freud/Marx is going to be a data scientist?

I think it's striking for someone who has been playing around with big datasets and has some experience in philosophy and psychology, that if you read a book by Foucault or Freud, you realise a lot of their claims are about data. But they don't analyse data. It will be increasingly difficult for one to have social science theories that are not based on data because so much data now exists.

In the Brexit referendum, we found that people really lied in the exit polls. How do journalists and pollsters protect against this?

I think in the future we are going to use a lot of Google searches and other net data sources to answer some of these questions. It's a little early for predicting elections in particular. We need some more elections to build our models. But in future we will rely less on polls and more on internet data to predict elections. And I think that is true for a lot of areas. Polls will be a part of the conversation, but they won't be the whole conversation.

FOR THE RECORD

Has the post-Snowden era led people to self-censor searches?

Someone did a study after the Edward Snowden leaks, and there was a reduction in searches on sensitive topics. It may be that some people determine they don't feel their data is safe and they change their search behaviour. But I think there is something in Google searches that makes people more honest on some topics than they otherwise would be, say, in surveys. One, you're alone, and two, you have an incentive to tell the truth.

How honest are searches in countries with repressive surveillance regimes?

I'm actually just studying that now, so we will see. One does see that in Iran or parts of Russia where there is a lot of anti-gay attitude, gay porn searches are as high as anywhere else. So it does seem like despite the anti-gay attitudes of the government, people still do search for gay porn on Google in the privacy of their own homes. If everybody saw each other's Google searches, they'd realise they all hate the regime. One of the reasons repressive regimes stay in power is that citizens tend not to know that other citizens feel the same way as they do. So it will be interesting if Google search-

es help people realise that everybody doesn't like this leader.

You found peculiar porn-viewing habits in India: an overwhelming number of people searched for how to breast-feed a husband. Was there any other data from the country that stood out?

Well, the big thing was the breastfeeding. Everyone I have talked to in India has been shocked by this. But a lot of the porn stuff is really more universal than I thought. Like, the interest in incest, women watching rape porn — that is true in every country in the world. That has nothing to do with attitudes towards women or anything. I had a study on pregnancy — the questions that pregnant women ask. In India, they search for how to have sex. American women wanted to get rid of stretch marks. So that was kind of interesting.

Your book has a case study on a speech by Barack Obama immediately after a terror attack. You saw how cues from the speech swung the volume of search terms from the negative "Muslim terrorists" to a positive "Muslim policemen". Do you think it is possible to use such data for containing hatred?

The internet has created this enormous data-

How Operation Bihar undercut the foundations of the anti-BJP alliance

RIGHT & WRONG



SWAPAN DASGUPTA

There was a time in the 1990s when the BJP leadership despaired of its own lack of a killer instinct in mounting political coups. No longer. Last week in Patna, the Narendra Modi-Amit Shah duo displayed an operational finesse that left both its friends and detractors awestruck. It took barely 36 hours for one of the biggest political U-turns to be taken to its successful conclusion. Operation Bihar was the political equivalent of Hitler's 1940 Blitzkrieg and Israel's success in the Six-Day War in 1967.

Modi's ability to spring surprises has now acquired legendary status — the demonisation exercise last November being a notable example. Yet, while noting the dejection and demoralisation in the anti-BJP camp after the Bihar coup

and speculation over its impact on the 2019 general election, it is important to understand the quantum of devastation.

West Bengal is a good case study. On July 21, just five days before Nitish Kumar announced both his resignation and staked a claim to form another government, chief minister Mamata Banerjee had told her massed supporters in Kolkata that a "gonda" was ruling in Delhi and that she would use the next fortnight to kick the BJP out of West Bengal. Since the Basirhat communal flare-up earlier this month, the Trinamool Congress had ensured a political climate in the state that was intolerable for the BJP. Apart from being dubbed communal monsters in the Bangla media, it was made out that the saffron party was inimical to everything Bengali culture stood for, including fish and Rabindranath Tagore. Moreover, Mamata suggested that her resistance to Modi was part of the larger pan-India anti-BJP consolidation in which the likes of Sonia Gandhi, Nitish Kumar, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Lalu

Yadav and even the CPM leadership were involved. The chief minister had herself taken the lead in ensuring a common candidate for the election of Vice President of India.

Politics, like many other activities, often operates in an echo chamber. Consequently, the devotees of Mamata can be forgiven for believing that India was veering towards a momentous political change that would see the ouster of a deeply unpopular Modi government by 2019 and the formation of a secular, grand alliance.

To these partisans, as well as others who are inclined to swim with the tide, the abrupt collapse of the Bihar mahagathbandhan that had decimated the BJP in 2015 was a shock. The shock was even more intense because Nitish Kumar chose to ally with the BJP rather than effect a compromise with Lalu Yadav. The question that arose from these twists and turns in Bihar was awkward. If the BJP was indeed as unpopular as Mamata had suggested, and the Modi government was approaching the end

of its natural life, why did a consummate politician such as Nitish Kumar choose to ally with it?

Dubbing the Bihar chief minister a crass opportunist was an insufficient explanation. If, as Mamata was fond of saying, all opposition politicians were being confronted with flimsy and manufactured charges of corruption, why did Nitish choose to rock the boat by making a big deal of the charges against Tejashwi Yadav? The behaviour of a man who didn't hesitate to break a stable alliance with the BJP in 2013 on the ground of Modi's dodgy secular credentials didn't quite add up in the context of Mamata's narrative.

The questions from the Bihar drama have disoriented the opposition. It is one thing to confront an electoral setback such as the Uttar Pradesh assembly outcome or even the NDA's resounding win in the presidential election. Nitish Kumar's reconciliation with Modi has undercut the foundations of the anti-BJP alliance. Apart from demonstrating that the political use of secu-

larism is eminently negotiable, it has shown that the basis of opposition unity is neither ideological nor programmatic but based on a touching faith in simple electoral arithmetic. Most important, the Bihar episode was a pointer that anti-BJP politics also rests on the happy indulgence of political corruption and family rule — facets of Indian democracy that are difficult to defend and yet claim the moral high ground.

It is facile to claim that the developments in Bihar have settled the outcome of the 2019 general election. Two years is a long time in politics. However, what Modi and Nitish have together done is to destroy the moral foundations on which the visceral hatred of the BJP was based. For the moment, the Prime Minister has won the political argument. The opposition will have to construct a different narrative in the next two years.

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Complacency kills: What Indian IT can learn from Japan, Korea

BY INVITATION



VIVEK WADHWA

Japan and Korea were at the top of the world in the '80s and '90s, rising from war-ravaged economies to the ranks of the "developed" nations. Their companies became global powerhouses, and corporate executives became confident and assertive. And then they were humbled by economic stagnation.

I have found the CEOs of Japanese and Korean companies today to be the most attentive and determined of any of the hundreds of executives I have taught all over the world. They are acutely aware of what the World Economic Forum calls the fourth industrial revolution, and are eager to learn about technologies that will enable them to leap into the future and rebuild their competitive advantage.

And what about Indian executives? If they were my students, I would call them "duffers". This is not because of their intelligence and skill — they are amongst the smartest in the world — but because of their overconfidence and insularity. Indian industry achieved extraordinary success in the past three decades as the economy opened up and markets grew. But its business leaders are about to have the rug pulled away from under their feet by changes in the global economy as the Japanese and Koreans did in the 2000s.

This is so because a wide range of technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), computing, genomics, robotics, and sensors, are advancing at exponential rates and converging. They are making it possible to build robots that assemble circuit boards; to create AI that can drive cars; to edit genes to eliminate hereditary diseases and create drought-resistant plants; and to replace fossil fuels with inexpensive clean energy. Never before has such a broad range of technologies moved at such a pace — and made it possible to disrupt entire industries.

Take the example of Amazon, which started as an online bookstore. It now rakes in 43% of all online retail sales in the US. With its acquisition of Whole Foods, it is expanding beyond the digital realm, into brick and mortar. Having gained permission to enter the Indian grocery market, it could also become a dominant player in India. Amazon has also staked claims on cloud services, AI bots and other electronics goods, home goods, and small-business lending. It will disrupt several industries on a global scale.

Such disruptions are happening everywhere now, and incumbents are being caught off-guard. The taxi industry was, with the arrival of Uber and Ola. The entertainment industry was, by Netflix and Apple (which makes billions through music distribution). And a single technology company, Tesla, is shaking up the automobile industry with its electric cars and the energy industry with its batteries and solar panels. I'm sure Google and Microsoft never imagined that an online retailer, Amazon, would dominate the cloud services market and become their strongest competitor. This ability of a company in one industry to dominate another industry is the nature of the new threat.

The problem for the incumbent market leaders is that they are not ready for this disruption; many are in denial. Look at the shockwaves that the retrenchments in the Indian IT industry are generating. The writing has been on the wall for several years to indicate that the Western markets are changing and that large IT outsourcing contracts are disappearing along with the mainframe computers they supported; yet IT executives failed to turn their ships around. They are now in a state of panic because they wasted years in transforming their companies.

Corporate executives tend to believe that their past successes mean they can succeed in the future; that old business models can support new products. Large companies are usually organised into divisions and functional silos, each with its own product development, sales, marketing, customer-support, and finance functions. Each division acts in self-interest and focuses on its own success; it is a fortress that protects its ideas, and it has its own leadership and culture. Too often, the divisions of a company consider their competitors to be other divisions; they can't envisage new industries or see the threat that may be im-



DISRUPTORS: Insular and overconfident Indian executives are about to have the rug pulled from under their feet

minent from other industries.

This is why the majority of today's leading companies are likely to go the way of Blockbuster, Motorola, and Kodak, all of which were at the top of their game until their markets were disrupted, sending them toward oblivion.

With disruption comes opportunity. The advancing technologies are creating opportunities in everything from improving decision-making with AI, to using sensors to create smart cities and medical devices, to creating robotic manufacturing plants, to fine-tuning agriculture with data and sensors. If Indian executives were to start pursuing these opportunities, they could create new billion-dollar industries and lead the world. I worry that they are instead remaining as complacent as the Japanese and Koreans were at their peak.

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RHYME & REASON
AMIT VARMA

SPIN AND TURN

Ashwin and Jadeja felt the burn. Ash said, "Amit, I feel great concern. We could be in the bin. Modi's so good at spin, and Nitish is a master of turn."

SHARAAFAT

Nauaz Sharif is out of the game. I asked, "Tell me bro, who is to blame?" He said, "Amit, don't poke. It's all a cosmic joke. See the damn irony in my name!"

INBOX

Missed opportunity

Aakar Patel's diatribe against the RSS and BJP, and his unsolicited advice to Congress has come too late in the day ('Vaghela's exit an opportunity for Congress...', July 23). Congress's fate was decided when it failed to field a competent all-India leader to take on Narendra Modi before the 2014 general election. The only option for the Congress in 2019 is to lead a mahagathbandhan of leaders of proven talent with a positive programme.

Shreekrishna Phadnis, Mumbai

Bovine love

I am so happy that someone has finally spoken out on behalf of the cow (Shobha De's 'Confessions of a desi cow', July 23). The cow is an essential part of our ecosystem and we need to respect and accept her, whether we pray to her or not. There is absolutely no need for conflict or differences — but there is a need to provide better living conditions for cows, which is not being done even by people who worship them.

Ali Khwaja, Bengaluru

Email the editor at sunday.times@timesgroup.com with 'Sunday Mailbox' in the subject line. Please mention your name and city

Nitish keeps kursi, but will be a loser in the long run

BY INVITATION



SABA NAQVI

If someone were to hold a gun to my head and say you have three choices: vote for Narendra Modi, Nitish Kumar or a bullet between your eyes, I'd definitely choose to live and in my current frame of mind maybe choose Modi over Nitish. For I would at least know what I am getting. Whatever he is, Narendra Modi is no hypocrite. Nitish, alas, must go down as being the most slippery politician of our times, who tried to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds and then fell between two stools. The grand alliance is now history but in the grand contest that Nitish Kumar himself set up with Narendra Modi, it's Game, Set and Match to Modi. Nitish may retain the chair of CM of Bihar for a while, but it's only a matter of time before the BJP encircles him, chews him up and if he is not required as the mukhauta (mask) for their Patna dispensation, make no mistake, they will spit him out. It's unlikely that the state unit of the BJP would trust him while it's very likely that Modi and Amit Shah would never forget the insults he once heaped on them.

More damaging for Nitish, there's no good reason why people should trust him as he has in effect gone against the campaign line of 2015. It's possible that they may stick with him since the opposition is in bad shape: Lalu Yadav and family may end up in jail (or at least protracted legal battles) and the Congress is in a position where there appears to be nothing left to lose. All the same, credibility is one of the intangibles that matter in public life and Nitish has lost it. The presentation of jumping ship as a moral choice does not wash even in Patna where people reel off names of the many dons Nitish Kumar has, at different points in his history, given party tickets to.

Indeed, the entire morality play of Nitish being holier than thou was meant for the audience of intellectual pundits outside Bihar and necessary only as long as the CM had national ambitions. Clearly they are over and he has metaphorically fallen at the feet of Modi and thanked him for tweeting in his support.

There's a bit of a mystery as to why Nitish has walked into a coup so clearly masterminded by the BJP. True, he has worked harmoniously with the BJP for decades. I was in fact present at the modest ceremony in the courtyard of Rashtrapati Bhavan when the process began as Nitish was sworn in as a minister in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government of 1998.

Subsequently, it was the BJP that actually enabled his growth in terms of money and resources and helped position him as an alternative

to Lalu, when the latter ran out of the social justice steam and got embroiled in the fodder scam. In campaign after campaign it would be junior partner BJP that would pick up the logistical costs such as paying for hired helicopters used for electioneering. Nitish finally got his chance in 2005 and excellent administrator that he is, in alliance with the BJP, ran the state for two terms.

But the BJP of that era gave great room and respect to allies as it never imagined the party could get a simple majority on its own. Vajpayee was an amiable sort of individual, lacking in ruthlessness, while L K Advani, the real strategist, believed in the process of incremental growth with the help of crutches in the form of allies in the states.

The BJP today is vastly different. It holds every constitutional office, determines the mainstream media narrative and it does not lean on allies but gradually takes over their space, as has happened with the AGP in Assam and is happen-



ALLIES AGAIN: A reversal in power equations means Nitish may not be in a position to dictate terms

ing with the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra.

From 2005 to 2013, Nitish kept his ally in check and determined the narrative of the state where he did indeed improve the law and order situation. Now there's a reversal in the power equation: Nitish is at the mercy of a resurgent BJP and is not in a position to dictate terms to them. The BJP will unleash cadres and engage in social mobilisations that enhance their voter base that also overlaps with the JD (U) base.

It, therefore, suits the BJP to diminish Nitish and they will work towards that end. They can bring him down when they want or continue till 2020 when the term of the current assembly ends. It's all touch and go for Nitish but now he has nowhere to go without the BJP. He would therefore be hoping that Narendra Modi has mercy on him. Maybe another tweet will lift his morale.

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