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WHO

Jignesh Mevani, face of Dalits in Gujarat

Jignesh Mevani, a 36-year-old lawyer and activist, has been at the forefront of the Ambedkarite movement in Gujarat where Dalits comprise about 7% of the State's population. Last month, a year after a Dalit backlash at Una, Mr. Mevani organised an Azaadi Kooch (a march for freedom) from Mehsana to Dhanera in Banaskantha district. This march ended with four Dalits in Lavara village getting possession of 12 acres of land that was theirs on paper but until then was being controlled by a local dominant caste family. During the formal takeover of the land by its new Dalit owners, the police asked Mr. Mevani not to plant any flag on the reclaimed land, as it could spark caste tensions. Mr. Mevani read out the police's instructions to the crowd of assembled Dalits, and then defiantly planted the blue Ambedkarite flag featuring the words 'Jai Bhim', enacting a symbolic and literal retrieval of land and pride by Dalits.

What happened at Una?

He first shot to prominence in July 2016 when he became the face of the Dalit backlash after four Dalit youths at Una were tortured by vigilantes for allegedly skinning a dead cow.

As a member of the Una Dalit Atyachar Ladhai Samiti and the Rashtriya Dalit Adhikar Manch, he led a Dalit Asmita Yatra (a march for self-respect) from Ahmedabad to Una that mobilised thousands of Dalits across the State to come together and demand justice for the Una victims.

His campaign hit the national headlines for the first time when several hundred Dalits took a pledge to abandon the occupation of picking up cow carcasses, and in some districts, protesters dumped cow carcasses in front of government offices. This movement met with some success as most of the vigilantes involved in the Una assault were arrested by the police.

How did he broaden the fight?

Until the Una episode, Mr. Mevani's activism had channelled itself through court battles on behalf of Dalits. But Una marked an inflection point. Sensing an opportunity, he sought to utilise this moment of Dalit assertion to broaden the ambit of Dalit politics - from one largely focussed on atrocities and identity, to one that also raised material issues, such as land ownership. The idea animating Mr. Mevani's politics is a simple one: in large swathes of rural and semi-rural India, ownership of land is a major signifier of (caste) status. So the most direct route to equality for Dalits is through demanding land that is rightfully theirs, he argues. Mr. Mevani has built his politics around the demand that every landless Dalit should be given 5 acres of land. He has taken up – in courts as well as on the streets, through rasta roko and rail roko agitations – the cases of Dalits who have been allotted land on paper but not given physical possession of the land.

Is his land demand realistic?

His critics have pointed out two problems with his approach: one, that it is unrealistic to expect that every landless Dalit could be provided 5 acres of land, as the State doesn't have so much idle land at its disposal; and secondly, in an era of widespread farm distress, rendered more acute by fragmented land holdings, it is foolish to expect that Dalits could abandon their traditional occupations and support themselves by farming their 5 acres. Mr. Mevani has answered both charges with catchy slogans. To the first criticism, he responded with "Land to the tiller, not to the tycoon.' To the second, he said that even if farming the 5 acres is unviable, the mere coming into existence of masses of Dalits who own land would be a powerful blow against the caste hierarchy in villages.

What's the way ahead?

By late 2016, Mr. Mevani's land rights movement was successful in pressuring the Gujarat government to start the land mapping process for handing over 220 bighas to 115 Dalit families in Ahmedabad district's Saroda village. Following last month's success, Mr. Mevani plans to undertake land ownership campaigns in other parts of Gujarat later this year. His main challenge remains the same as it has been for every Dalit leader over the years: finding a way to unite the various Dalit sub-castes into a potent political force, and build a common platform with other marginalised groups. Toward this end, he has tried reaching out to Ambedkarite groups in other States. But those efforts are yet to bear fruit.

G. SAMPATH

WHAT

The lowdown on the Nifty bull run

WHAT IS IT? Nifty, which is the benchmark equity index of the National Stock Exchange (NSE), breached the 10,000 mark for the first time ever on July 25. It has managed to stay above the level since then, while touching an intra-day high of 10,137.85 on August 2.

It took the index close to 22 years to reach this level, rising from its base value of 1,000 in November 1995. Interestingly, the index took a little over nine years to move from 1,000 in November 1995 to 2,000 in December 2004. But it took less than five months to move from 9,000 on March 3 to 10,000 on July 25.

HOW DID IT COME ABOUT? Liquidity, or money, in plain and simple terms. Institutional investors, both domestic and foreign, have been putting in huge amounts in the Indian equity markets pushing the benchmarks to hitherto unseen levels. Data from Bloomberg shows that foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have put in $8.84 billion in Indian shares in the current calendar year (CY17). Even Japan, which enjoys a distinct status among the leading Asian economies, lags behind with net foreign flows of $6.5 billion in CY17.

Incidentally, Life Insurance Corporation, the largest domestic institutional investor, has invested about ₹15,000 crore in the current financial year. The insurance behemoth had invested ₹43,800 crore in the previous financial year in the equity segment.

Only China and Taiwan have reported higher foreign flows than India in 2017, though Indian markets have fared better in terms of returns in the current year.

WHY DOES IT MATTER? It matters as many investors, especially retail, look at the performance of the benchmark indices - Sensex and Nifty - to decide on equity investments. In terms of calendar year returns, since 1996, the Nifty has gained more than 50% in four calendar years and more than 30% in seven calendar years. The index has fallen by over 20% only in two calendar years, giving positive returns in 15 out of 23 years.

The financial health of the biggest companies of India can be gauged from the performance of Nifty since it tracks the performance of a portfolio of the 50 largest and most liquid Indian securities.

The largest sectors in terms of weightage in the index are financial services, energy, information technology, consumer goods, automobiles and pharmaceuticals. The individual stocks that have the highest weightage are HDFC Bank, ITC and HDFC. In 1995, when the index was launched, State Bank of India, Hindustan Unilever and Reliance Industries accounted for the highest weightages.

WHAT NEXT? Valuations hold the key as a large section of market participants feel that the markets have become hot and investors need to be cautious in their stock selection. Most analysts are advising investors to stick to large companies with a proven track record rather than blindly putting in money in the mid-cap and small-cap arena with an aim of quick returns. In a recent note, UBS said that the "risk-reward fundamentally is clearly unfavourable but we acknowledge that local retail flow can keep markets elevated despite the absence of a near-term growth recovery."

The global financial major has end-2017 base case Nifty target of 9,000 with the downside and upside targets at 7,500 and 10,000 respectively.

Valuations are indeed a concern area. In terms of price-earnings (PE) - the most common barometer used to ascertain how expensive a market is - Nifty at 23.44 is above most other leading global indices. Asian indices like Nikkei (18.13), Hang Seng (14.37), Kospi (17.35), Shanghai Composite (17.54), Taiwan TAIEX (16.13) and Topix (15.43) all have a lower PE than Nifty. Only Jakarta Composite, Shenzhen Composite and Kosdaq of Korea have a higher PE than Nifty.

Further, most of the leading American and European indices, as well including Dow Jones, S&P 500, Euro Stoxx 50, CAC 40 and DAX have a lower PE than India's Nifty.

In terms of returns, Nifty, with its 23.44% gain in CY17, has outpaced all Asian indices, barring Hang Seng that has done marginally better at 25.28%. None of the leading American or European indices comes close to India's Nifty in terms of returns in 2017.

ASHISH RUKHAIYAR

WHY

is the U.K. thinking of anti-caste law?

Why a caste discrimination law?

■ In June 2009, the first World Conference on Untouchability took place in London. Delegates from across the world gathered to consider how to tackle pervasive and protracted discrimination based on caste or descent. The conference resulted in an ambitious statement aimed at strengthening grassroots movements aimed at eradicating such discrimination and trying to make national legislation more robust. The move, and subsequent testimonies of those who had suffered, caught the eye of U.K. legislators and the House of Lords, in particular, which was already debating issues around equality as the government sought to streamline and simplify Britain's legislation on equality into one act of Parliament.

Thanks to the efforts of a number of members of the House of Lords, including Lord Meghnad Desai, the government was forced to agree to amend the Equality Act. "A Minister of the Crown must by order amend this section so as to provide for caste to be an aspect of race," reads Section 9 of the Act.

So why the delay?

■ The government allowed for further research, and this has proved the decisive factor since. It has taken till 2017 for the government to begin a consultation, despite urgings from the U.N. High Commissioner on Human Rights for it to implement the legislation as soon as possible. The government said while there was "no place" for any form of prejudice and discrimination based on a person's origins, it wanted to be careful "not to create or entrench any notion of caste consciousness or caste-based practices into British society, which may prove counterproductive or divisive." A 2014 employment tribunal ruling concluded that caste discrimination could be found unlawful under current law. The government wants to determine whether caste law or legislation is the way ahead.

Who are the main players?

■ It has proved a highly divisive issue for Britain's substantial Indian community – covering not just the Hindu communities but Sikh, Christian and other groups too. Those in favour of the legislation, such as Caste Watch UK, the Dalit Solidarity Network and the National Secular Society, are deeply sceptical of the government, believing that a 2010 study commissioned by the government already provided the necessary proof of caste discrimination. They believe bringing in the legislation would not only impact the substantial numbers of people – whose testimony they have heard – who had faced either discrimination or abuse in their schools, work places and beyond (the legislation, however, does not cover the private sphere) but will also help rid the South Asian community of prejudice more widely in the longer term.

Why are Hindus against it?

■ Those opposing the legislation, such as the National Council of Hindu Temples and the Hindu Forum of Britain, argue that caste isn't an entrenched part of Indian society but a product of colonialism and any move to recognise it in legislation would entrench divisions, and deepen prejudice towards Indian communities. It would also lead to unnecessary interference and a bureaucratic nightmare, they argue.

What do the political parties say?

■ So emotive is the issue that the political parties by and large avoided it at the recent general election. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was previously the chair of the Dalit Solidarity Network but the party didn't include mention of caste discrimination in its election manifesto (one Hindu group was embroiled in controversy after attempting to persuade the Indian community to vote against Labour during the 2015 election based on this issue). Only the Liberal Democrats have committed to introducing the legislation, though it had opposed it earlier.

Where do things head from here?

■ The consultation runs until September, with both camps making a concerted attempt to engage communities across the country in a highly-technical online consultation. While there are fears the consultation and attempts to push the legislation through could get lost in all the Brexit-related political debate, campaigners for it are determined to continue chasing the government, with some prepared to take it to court if need be.

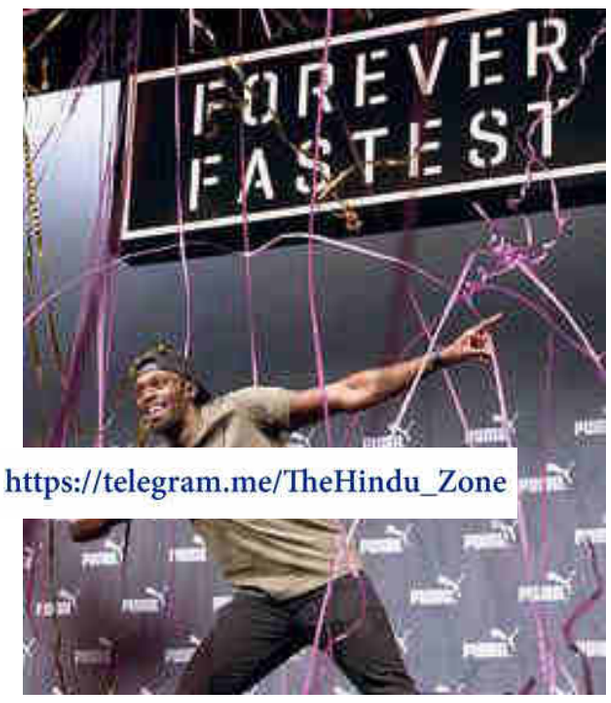
VIDYA RAM

WHEN

12 August 2017

Fastest, forever? Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt, who has won eight Olympic golds, is set to run the last race of his glittering career next Saturday if he qualifies for the 4x100m relay at the World Championships in London. In the run-up to his key 100m event on August 5, he clocked 9.95 seconds at the Monaco meet in July. Bolt holds the world record for the 100m (9.58 seconds), the 200m (19.19 seconds) and the 4x100m relay (36.84 seconds). At the Rio Olympics in 2016, Bolt won the 100m in 9.81 seconds, his winning time clearly slowing down. Speaking ahead of his retirement, Bolt said he would like to go out at the pinnacle of his sport when he was "unbeatable, unstoppable." He joked that he was still waiting for a call from Manchester United to play football. What comes next for athletics after Bolt? The world will be watching American Christian Cole, who has run fast this year (9.82 seconds), and Canada's Andre de Grasse but Bolt's are very big shoes to fill.

■ AFP, GETTY IMAGES



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WHERE

In Karnataka, low rain drying up Cauvery

A severe deficit in rainfall in the Cauvery catchment areas of Karnataka could now lead to another crisis year for farmers in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

What is the problem?

At a deficit of 34% compared to "normal monsoon" rainfall, Indian Meteorological Department data show that the south interior Karnataka region, which encompasses the Cauvery catchment, is currently witnessing the worst monsoon in the country. In Tamil Nadu, the shortfall is 20%; and there's a 30% deficit in Kerala. Earlier this week, four major reservoirs in the Karnataka side of the Cauvery basin had a storage of just 43.18 tmcft (thousand million cubic feet). This is barely 40% of total capacity, and is even lesser than the 51 tmcft recorded last year (a drought year).

In Mettur dam in Tamil Nadu, the biggest reservoir along the river, water storage was 10.35 tmcft or barely 10% of total capacity.

Experts say the same conditions which saw record rainfall in Gujarat and Rajasthan in July caused the Cauvery deficit. Off-shore troughs or depressions (areas of low pressure) in the southern Arabian Sea or the southern Bay of Bengal allow for accumulation of south-west monsoon clouds in south India. This year, however, the depressions were off the coast of Maharashtra and Gujarat, and rain-bearing monsoon too migrated there.

Locally, other factors may have played a role in reducing reservoir levels. According to environmentalists, large-scale deforestation in the Western Ghats, continued sand mining and the inability to revive tributaries have led to declining health of the catchment area and river capacity. Adding to this is the heavy dependence on the Cauvery for water-intensive crops such as sugarcane and paddy, which dominate the agrarian landscape, and the proliferation of borewells, which have had an impact on surface run-off.

What is the fallout?

Any deficit in the Cauvery's source has a cascading effect through the basin, leading to agrarian distress. The crisis has deepened as the region is still reeling from three consecutive years of drought. There has been a spate of farmer suicides, assurances of loan waivers, and protests including those by Tamil Nadu farmers in Delhi.

This year, Karnataka has already stated that water will not be released for Kharif crop sowing. Instead, preference has been given to drinking water needs, estimated to be 30 tmcft (more than half of it for Bengaluru city alone) till the next monsoon. With lower water release from Karnataka, the main samba crop in Tamil Nadu will be under threat. Last year, Tamil Nadu, which is in the grip of an unprecedented drought, had witnessed a 41% dip in sowing area.

What next?

Preparations for drought have started, with the Karnataka government drawing up a contentious ₹30 crore plan for cloud seeding (spraying clouds with silver iodide to amass rain-bearing clouds).

However, many experts say this will do little to alleviate the situation.

For now, all eyes are on the Supreme Court which is hearing appeals by Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala challenging the 2007 Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal award. The share of Cauvery had been determined as 270 tmcft to Karnataka and 419 tmcft to Tamil Nadu, among others.

This year, conflict over water-sharing is bound to rise again. In June and July, Karnataka was to release 44 tmcft to abide by the award. So far, just 7 tmcft has been released.

With elections looming in the State, water release is a politically-sensitive issue. Last year, Tamil Nadu-registered vehicles were set on fire in Bengaluru and one person was killed after the Supreme Court order to release water.

Moreover, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah hails from the Cauvery belt and it is here that the Congress has to perform well if it hopes to return to power in the State; the BJP is in a bind as the NDA-led Centre cannot be seen as favouring either of the States.

MOHIT M. RAO

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Where is the opposition in India?

The BJP's ideology is reasonably clear, in both its extreme and moderate forms. But the opposition lacks a coherent and consistent platform

THE CONTROVERSIAL INDIAN

TABISH KHAIR
is an Indian novelist and academic who teaches in Denmark

My friends who are opposed to the Bharatiya Janata Party – and I have friends who support it too – often despair at the politics of the party ruling at the Centre and in various States. But sometimes I feel that they should despair more at the national opposition – and the parties in opposition to the BJP in many States.

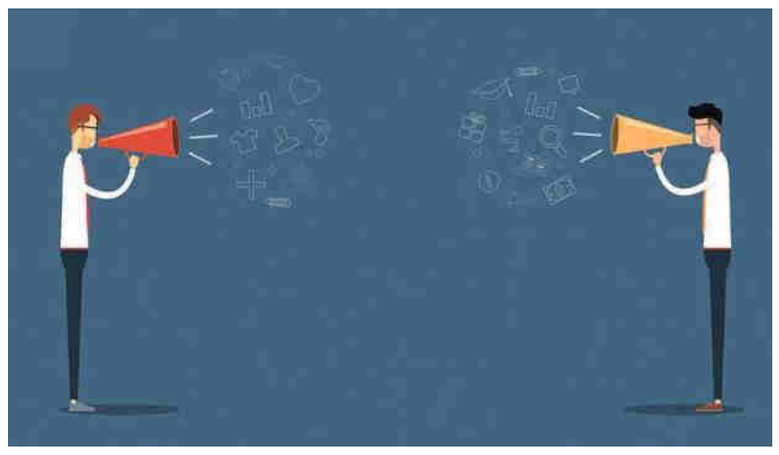
Because the BJP, for better or for worse, is there. You can count its warts or confer a halo on it, but you cannot miss noticing it. But I wonder if we have any real opposition left in India – both at the national level and in many States.

This came through most recently in my home State, Bihar, where Chief Minister Nitish Kumar easily switched from his 'grand alliance' with Lalu Prasad to staying the Chief Minister with the support of the party (BJP) that he had rebuffed just three years ago. Now, I am not convinced that Mr. Kumar's move was necessarily opportunistic – though things like his inability to induct more than one woman in a cabinet of 27, given his loud commitment to women's emancipation, were definitely disappointing. Still, he had to choose between a family increasingly seen as tainted with nepotism and a party sadly dominated by those whose vision of the future seems to be based on virulent hatreds inherited from the past.

The disappearing opposition

So, that is not the main issue for me. It is this: that once Mr. Kumar made the switch, the opposition to the BJP was revealed as basically ineffective and non-existent. This seemed to follow the pattern at the Centre and in some other States. This is also far more worrying, because the BJP does exist as the ruling party today, but the opposition seems to exist less and less with each year.

There are various reasons for it. These include the inability of the Congress to abandon its ruling family, compounded by the fact that Rahul Gandhi, as decent a person as any in politics, nevertheless lacks the type of political charisma that is required to lead a party



GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

to victory in India today. This is partly because the times have changed: the taluk classes call the political shots in India, and they cannot easily trust a very metropolitan person like Mr. Gandhi. I know; I come from those taluk classes, and I have difficulty trusting Mr. Gandhi's equivalents in the literary world! But even without the times changing, compare the political acumen and sheer rhetorical presence of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi with Rahul Gandhi's performance, and you will spot a difference.

The communists have long been split between a highly intellectual urban circle, which can get across only to people with university degrees, and a very parochial rural movement, which addresses genuine problems (for instance, the exploitation of aborigines at the hands of all governments), but in the very process limits its appeal to small regions. Even if you are a communist, it is impossible to imagine the supposedly revolutionary activities of Maoist groups finding any purchase outside remote parts of the hinterland.

As for the rest, well, they seem to comprise parties led by powerful regional leaders, and often run by specific families. Sometimes the words come up – secularism, democracy, human rights, etc. – but they seldom seem to be anything other than rhetoric used by a certain group to obtain fleeting electoral support. In short, it is worrying: there is no substantial and coherent opposition left in India right now. Some people might argue that it exists at the grassroots. This is a deceptive argument: first, because it cannot be documented with numbers; and second, because in a working democracy any grassroots opposition needs to wear the face of at least some political party.

The great Indian tragedy

Some of my BJP friends – not in the lunatic fringe, thankfully, but belonging to the old ideological core – smirk at this. They exult in the fact that the Indian opposition is either in disarray or divided up by narrow domestic walls. This worries me (also because the lack of a real opposition seems to be a spreading global problem, undergirded by the corporate logic of neoliberal capitalism and its enmeshment with nationalism).

Any democracy needs a thriving and coherent opposition. The great tragedy of India does not seem to be the BJP, with which one can agree or disagree; the great tragedy of India is the lack of a real and issue-based opposition. The BJP's ideology is reasonably clear, in both its extreme and moderate forms. But the opposition seems to lack a coherent and consistent platform. It largely fails to provide alternative views of government and it seldom responds cohesively to the BJP's moves, leaving it to afflicted politicians to react singly.

Alas, it is not just a nation that needs an opposition. So do human beings, as Kabir knew:

"Neendak niyare raakhiye aangan kuti chhawaye;
Bin saabun paani bina nirmal karat subhaye."

Roughly translated:

"Your critic keep beside you, his hut on your house should lean:
Without water or soap, he'll keep your nature clean."

Both BJP supporters and BJP opponents need to worry about this lack of a coherent opposition – for the sake of India, and perhaps also for the sake of human nature.

All true patriots will welcome the Army tank in JNU

But should we not respect the Air Force and Navy too?

ALLEGEDLY

G. SAMPATH
is Social Affairs Editor, The Hindu

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As a true patriot, I welcome the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) vice chancellor's (VC) proposal to install a tank in the university campus. Here, finally, is a VC who loves his students so much that he cannot rest until he's made sure all of them love the country as much as he does.

Even a patriot with an IQ of 56 would commend this man's commitment and endorse his brilliant idea. But sadly, the left-liberal mafia that dominates the media, the academia, the sky, the earth, and the four corners of the galaxy has been fulminating against this nationalistic proposal.

Needless to say, I am repulsed by the very idea of engaging with these hypocritical elitist traitors spouting anti-national bile from seditious drawing rooms cooled by foreign-made air conditioners that release foul global warming gases into the air that you and I breathe and that our soldiers on the border die to protect.

But as a true patriot, I shall do my duty.

Objections and suggestions

The first objection raised by these full-time anti-nationals is that it is not the VC's job to instil nationalism in students. Really? Whose job is it then – the cook in Ganga Dhaba?

The second objection is that a battle tank on campus would initiate a pervasive militarisation that would wipe out the poisonous culture of critical thinking, dissent, and authority-questioning, all of which are banned in the military and will soon be banned in the entire country but continue to flourish in JNU. I leave it to the reader to decide if this objection is even worth responding to.

I'd rather use this opportunity to make some constructive suggestions that build on the VC's fabulous idea.

First, it is my humble submission that in order to instil a fully rounded, 360-degree patriotism in students, we must have representative hardware from all the three wings of the armed forces, since not just the Army, but the Air Force and Navy also make great sacrifices for the country. So the VC should also request for a fighter jet and an aircraft carrier to be put on display along with the tank.

I agree that the JNU campus at present does not have a waterbody large enough to accommodate an aircraft carrier. But if we demolish the School of Social Sciences and the School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, dig up the ground where they stood and fill it with seawater, we should be able to create an artificial lake big enough to support a small but functional aircraft carrier.

As the VC put it, the purpose of the display is to "constantly remind students of the great sacrifices and valour of the Indian Army". Please note that the key word here is "constantly". There should not be a single moment when a JNU student is not reminded of the great sacrifices – and this is where the fighter jet comes in.

It is a well-established fact that girls in JNU do nothing but engage in free sex and use up 3,000 condoms a day, as BJP MLA Kailash Chaudhary reminded us, something a developing country can ill-afford. So if we demolish the girls' hostels and convert them into hangars, every time a boy feels the urge to visit a girl's hostel he will recall the fighter jet in the hangar and immediately remember the great sacrifices of the defence forces. The jets could also do hourly sorties over the campus so that the mnemonic objectives are constantly achieved.

Actually, it is the JNU faculty, even more than the students, who are the hardcore anti-nationals in dire need of patriotic shock therapy. I therefore recommend demolishing their quarters on campus. The esteemed professors, who will doubtless appreciate the joys of simple living and high thinking, can all be housed in one-room tenements made of cow dung in a small enclosure behind the main gate.

Given that even the Army is set to build bunkers out of cow dung, as suggested last week by a leading intellectual luminary, living in a house made of bovine building materials would serve to constantly remind JNU faculty of the Army's great sacrifices.

Classroom nationalism

That leaves us with one last space still untouched by nationalistic visual stimuli: classrooms. It may not be practical to put a tank or a fighter jet or an aircraft carrier inside the classroom, for if we do, where will the students sit?

I suggest we keep a man-portable air-defence system (MANPADS), as shoulder-launched missiles are called, in every university classroom across the country. While I personally prefer the Russian SA-7 Grail, I'm fine with the U.S.-made Stinger too.

One problem is that India has far too many educational institutions while our defence budget is limited. But thankfully, we still have an education budget, and it is just about adequate to purchase a tank for every campus and a missile for every classroom.

A prince, a saint and a fairy palace

In Srinagar's once-famed Akhund Shah masjid and the peaceful Pari Mahal

WHERE STONES SPEAK

RANA SAFVI
is a historian, author and blogger documenting India's syncretic culture

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

A prince was in search of a Sufi master to help him on his mystical journey into the world of *tassawuf* (mysticism). He finally found one in Mian Mir (1550-1635), the Qadriya saint, someone who had impressed his grandfather Emperor Jahangir. The young prince, Dara Shukoh (1615-1659), came in touch with Mian Mir, but before he could become his disciple the saint passed away.

Meeting the spiritual master

In 1639, the young prince set off on a journey to Kashmir, where Mian Mir's successor Shah Muhammad, popularly known as Mullah Shah Badakshi or Akhund Shah, lived. Mullah Shah was known for his secular approach and that must have influenced Dara. Though earlier Mullah Shah only spent summers in Kashmir after Mian Mir's death, he settled in Srinagar, residing in a small cell in the mountain famous as Hari Parbat or Koh-e-Maran. His meditation was in darkness.

It was here that Dara visited him one night. Professor Fatima Zehra Bilgrami writes in *History of the Qadiri Order in India* that when Mullah Shah saw the prince he asked for a lamp to be lit and recited the following verse:

Nai Chiragheist Darin Khana-i Virana-i Ma
Roshan az Aatish-i Ishq-i Tu-Shudah Khana-i Ma
(In this desolate cell of ours we do not have a candle
As the fire of your Love illuminates our abode.)

Dara requested Mullah Shah that "they want to come to his *halqa* (circle), and they helped him in all possible ways and built a *khanqah* and a house for him," writes Prof. Bilgrami. His sister Princess Jahanara Begum, who was following him, also became Mullah Shah's disciple.

Dara built a mosque known today as Akhund Shah's masjid on a scarp in Hari Parbat. I recently visited this once-famed mosque, now in a partially ruinous condition. From Makhdoom Sahib's dargah on a higher spot on Hari Parbat, I could see the remnants of a few petals of the lotus finial, which is supposed to be the only one on a mosque in Kashmir. Fortunately, I could see that repairs are currently under way by the Archaeological Survey of India.

It's in a large rectangular enclosure with a tank for ablutions, surrounded by apartments for devotees and servants. The mosque itself is a simple and elegant building of grey granite slabs over brickwork, much of which is now exposed. On the entrance of the mosque, I found these lines which have been translated by Ajmal Siddiqi from Persian.

Waman dakhalahu kaana aamina
whoever enters it shall be safe

(These lines are from the Koran for Ka'ba in Mecca)

The second line reads:

wallahu mufattihul abwaab

(Allah is the opener of doors)

While Mullah Shah remained safe from the wrath of Aurangzeb and died a natural death in 1661 in Lahore, Dara was executed by Aurangzeb after the latter won the war of succession.

This mosque must have been quite a huge complex, as seen from the ruins of the cells for devotees and visitors, the remnants of the hammam, and the stones. But in its time it must have been beautiful with two fountains: Chashma-i-Shahiyah and Chashma-i-Sahibiyah. The latter was named by Mullah Shah in honour of Jahanara, the Begum Sahiba of the Mughal court.

Inside Pari Mahal

The prince was not content with the mosque complex for his spiritual master alone and constructed a beautiful six-level building dedicated to Mullah Shah, on the ruins of a Buddhist monastery high up on the Zabarwan hills. It was named "Koh-i-Tilwan", but became famous as Pari Mahal, after Dara's wife Pari Begum, notes Prof. Bilgrami. While some call it a *madarsa* and *khanqah*, many feel it was a school devoted to the study of astronomy.

Unlike the famous Mughal gardens in Srinagar, this garden did not have running water streams and cascades of bubbling water and spouting chutes. Instead, the tanks in it were fed by underground water pipes, perhaps to signify inner resourcefulness and outward calm so necessary for a man with spiritual inclinations.

An ideal time to be at the Pari Mahal is when the sun is setting on the Dal lake. There is an outstanding view of Srinagar from there and the Pari Mahal, brightly lit and visible from the city, twinkles like a fairy palace when seen from the city.

For me there was a sense of peace there, but it wasn't shared by Walter Roper Lawrence, who, in *The Valley of Kashmir,* wrote: "Strange tales are told of the Pari Mahal, of the wicked magician who spirited away kings' daughters in their sleep, how an Indian princess by the order of her father brought away a chenar leaf to indicate the abode of her seducer, and how all the outraged kings of India seized the magician."

Constitutional or party-political secularism?

https://telegram.me/TheHindu_Zone

Instead of respecting the best in religious groups, political parties hobnob with those least deserving of respect

THE PUBLIC EYE

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Few countries in the world exist where secularism is more bitterly contested and perhaps even fewer countries than India where the term has been persistently misused and abused. No other term in India has been continuously battered and evacuated of meaning or significance. The cacophony that surrounds secularism may well be the price that secularism has to pay for becoming an integral part of our country's public and political discourse.

A couple of decades ago, Indian secularism was unfairly charged by its opponents for being anti-religious. It was subsequently labelled as a pro-minority doctrine. In recent times, we have been advised to choose between secularism and development, as if secularism was an anti-development ideology. And last month we saw the bizarre spectacle in Bihar where secularism and corruption were viewed as blood brothers; the champions of secularism, mired in corruption, are arresting the growth of an economy perched to take off and soar high, it was claimed.

How has secularism come to such a pass? This is a complex story, which I cannot even begin to narrate here. But I speak of a small, but important, conceptual episode within this tale: the degeneration of constitutional political secularism to what, for want of a better term, I call party-political secularism.

European and Indian secularisms

What are these two secularisms? To understand India's constitutional secularism, it is best to contrast it with European conceptions. The break-up of Latin Christendom in Europe generated religious wars. Elimination and expulsion of religious dissenters produced predominantly single-religion societies. Each European state closely aligned itself with one or the other dominant church in society. Thus, England became Anglican, Scandinavia became Lutheran, Spain and Italy became Catholic, Denmark became Calvinist, and so on. Over time, however, the church was seen to become too politically meddlesome and socially oppressive. A movement for 'un-churching', or curtailing the power of the church, was set in motion. A battle ensued between the state and the church in which, by and large, European states prevailed. European states separated themselves from the dominant church. Thus, the separation of state and church became the defining feature of European and later American secularisms.

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In India, the situation till at least the 20th century was completely different because, here, there has been no attempt to liquidate religious diversity. The state has always found ways of dealing with all religious groups. Hardly any state existed that did not patronise all existing religions. Under modern conditions, this practice developed into a defence of religious pluralism. The state had to respect all religions, treat them non-preferentially. Respecting religions often entailed the necessity of the state to keep off all religions. On other occasions, it meant that the state positively contributed to enhancing the quality of religious life, for instance, by giving subsidies to schools run by religious communities. At the same time, quasi-religious institutions such as caste continue to be oppressive, particularly to Dalits and women. This demanded that the state intervene wherever religion was hierarchical and coercive. Hence the ban on untouchability and the reform of gender-discriminatory personal laws.

India's constitutional secularism requires that the Indian state be neither wholly respectful nor disrespectful to religions. Critical respect for all religions is the hallmark of Indian secularism.

Furthermore, it enjoins the state to keep a value-based or principled distance from all religions: to interfere or refrain from interfering in religions depending entirely on which of these strategies best promotes freedom, equality and fraternity.

The growth of opportunism

But in the last 40 years or so, we have developed another secularism, what I call 'party-political secularism', an odd, nefarious 'doctrine' practised by political parties, particularly the so-called "secular forces". This secularism has dispelled principles from the core idea and replaced them with opportunism; opportunistic distance from all religious communities is its slogan. It has removed 'critical' from critical respect and reduced the idea of respect to making deals with the loudest, most fanatical, aggressive sections of every religious group. Thus political parties keep off religion or intervene as and when it best suits their party or electoral interests. This has led to the banning of *The Satanic Verses*, the unlocking of the Babri Masjid/Ram Janmabhoomi temple, the curtailing of women's rights in the Shah Bano case, and to deals with the likes of Bukhari. Instead of respecting the best in religious groups, political parties hobnob with those least deserving of respect. Party-political secularism means that political institutions like the state and political party keep an opportunist distance from the notorious and highly politicised sections of all religious groups. This is also a fertile ground for majoritarian Hinduism whose spokespersons can question all the deal-making and opportunism of "secularists" without self-examining their own equally unethical practices.

Alas, electoral politics has sidelined or corrupted our constitutional secularism. To be fair, electoral politics breeds opportunism. If one's only aim is to win, to do so by any means is always tempting. But it is here that we need the courts, a free press, an alert citizenry, and civil society activists to move in, to show a mirror to these so-called 'secular' parties and tell them what they can and cannot do. I am not blaming political parties alone. This is a collective failure. It is on all of us to stop the proliferation of the misuse and abuse of a secularism that was fashioned collectively by Mahatma Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel.