

ht think!

REFLECTIONS

chanakya



HINDUISM IS IN NO NEED OF THESE DEFENDERS

It doesn't take too much to offend the cultural commissars these days. So when renowned hair stylist Jawed Habib's Kolkata salon put out an advertisement of goddess Durga relaxing on its premises with her children, the Right-wing got into a right regular lather vandalising a branch of the establishment in Uttar Pradesh. As always, they have discerned a terrible insult to the goddess by showing her engaged in human activity. Or could it be that their dander would not have been up quite so much had the owner not been a Muslim?

From time to time, we see this outrage from the self-styled custodians of Hinduism, far removed from you and me, getting into a flap over some perceived insult to the religion. Well, during the pujas, Durga is portrayed in many avatars, many of which are of very recent provenance. She is shown with make-up, different hairstyles, and in a variety of expressions. She is someone most Hindus relate to as part of their families, benign but can be given to great anger if provoked.

Unlike faiths of the book, Hindu gods do not lay down any line for people to follow; the scriptures are interpreted by people to suit themselves really in many ways. The culture of worship changes from place to place and in many they are irreverent and intimate. There are tem-

ples where the deity is offered liquor. In Kerala there are temples where the community takes out the idol of the goddess at the end of her menstrual cycle to bathe her in the nearby river. This is all part of a tradition in which the gods are part of the faithful, not some distant being who lays down the law.

The gods themselves are not perfect; they display all the emotions and weaknesses that people do. Many schools of thought consider Ram as weak for having forsaken his wife on mere suspicion and innuendo; others consider him the epitome of martial perfection. In many cultures, Ravan and his son Indrajit are considered the ultimate warriors, fearless and honourable even in defeat.

Many can easily relate to the angry Durga who will have her revenge come what may, to the playful god Ganesh whom the zealous have today transformed into an angry god with menacing tusks. The human emotions of love, betrayal, greed, passion, even adultery can be found in Hindu gods very much as they are in real life. This is what makes Hinduism in many ways a much more personal religion than others. I may be a Hindu and so may you but our forms of worship and our relationship with the gods will be entirely different.

Now and again, we see much anger against the depiction of a god or goddess on an item of



Illustration: SUDHIR SHETTY

clothing or footwear. It is usually particularly shrill if the offending item happens to be foreign made. But the point is that Hinduism is a religion that has survived the millennia and it simply is not diminished by the depiction of a god or goddess on some item of daily use. In fact, it should not even be an issue. I am not saying that sections of Hindus are alone in their outrage. We have seen what happens to many who have made irreverent references to the Prophet, Charlie Hebdo being the most awful.

But a religion like Hinduism which seems to expand effortlessly to accommodate all strands of thought should not have to be defended with violence by those who know little about it or its scriptures. The joy of Hinduism is in many ways

the ability of the devotee to connect with her god and develop a close relationship with the deity. You can tell the deity your problems, rage against injustices, even insult the deity with no blowbacks. But what the thought police have sought to do is to impose a code of conduct when it comes to the gods. They must be seen as beings who cannot have any human attributes, they must literally float above the fray.

If there is one reason Hinduism is so attractive to so many is that it is not preachy, there are literally no sacred cows, there are no straitjacketed forms of worship and there are no concrete guidelines.

By using the images of the gods in caricatures or other forms of mass communication, they are

being made more accessible. This will evoke curiosity about the religion and its fascinating array of gods and goddesses and their history. The Hindu zealots seem to have little to offer but to get offended by the slightest provocation. Remember how MF Husain was hounded out of India for depicting Hindu goddesses in what the commissars considered a vulgar manner. Fine, if it had offended anyone so much, take the artist to task through informed argument instead of taking to violence and vandalism, the last resort of the intellectually challenged.

I know of many cases in which a person chooses a personal god which is different from the family deity. This god or goddess is the one to whom the person relates her deepest fears and desires. It could even be a god from a different strand of Hinduism. The point I am making is that anything goes apart from the basic principles of good over evil which form the basis of all religions.

The problem with those who try and sit in judgement on how gods and goddesses should be depicted is that they lack a sense of fun, found in abundance in gods like Krishna and Ganesh. They would like Hinduism to be a dour, monolithic theology in which one size fits all. It is not going to happen, thank the gods if you will.

The fact that our gods are able to take on male and female avatars at the same time, appear in different forms, assume superpowers when needed show that they are fluid, changing and eclectic. Habib has apologised for what is being described as his folly. But given our traditions, it is highly unlikely that some divine retribution awaits him. However, some wrath may fall upon those who try and cast the gods in their own none too flattering monochromatic likenesses.

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sundaysentiments



KARAN THAPAR

WE ARE ALL BOUND TOGETHER BY THE TOWEL

Have you observed how in government offices the back of the chair behind the desk is usually covered by a towel? You won't find it on any other chair but the one intended for the most important person. Rare is the office where this isn't the case.

I have to admit this is something I unfailingly notice and each time it raises the same question: What on earth is the towel doing there?

It's a very important person's office the towel will be freshly laundered, sparkling white and visibly clean. But as you progress down the office hierarchy its quality and condition changes depressingly. White turns to grey, beige and often brown. The towel looks well-used and often well-worn. And there are even occasions when you wonder if you've walked into an office or a bathroom! Few are the people who aren't sub-

jected to this tyranny of the office towel. I've seen it on ministers' chairs and also in the offices of their private secretaries. Indeed, it seems to be de rigueur in all babu offices. Even general managers and chief executive officers of public sector companies appear to be equally captive. And, of course, there are many who think the towel is an accepted part of office furniture. After all, that's all they've ever known.

Not, however, Siddharth Nath Singh. In one of his early press conferences as a minister in Uttar Pradesh — about the anti-Romeo squads, if my memory is correct — the first thing he did was remove the towel and hand it to an astonished attendant. More importantly, he did it instinctively. From this I conclude that he, at least, shares my befuddlement: Why on earth is there a towel here? Let me now try and answer that



Many think the towel is an accepted part of office furniture ARVIND YADAV/HT

question.

In the '90s, when I returned to India, I was told this was to ensure that you have your own clean towel. Because the one in the common bathroom is often soiled, this is a perk for the privileged.

However, it was when I discovered that ministers' chairs are similarly draped that I realised this answer was inadequate. They, after all, have their own bathrooms so why do they

need a towel on the back of their chair? This time I was told it was to ensure their pristine clothes are not spoiled by dusty or dirty chairs.

As explanations go this one was particularly odd. But, then, if the best Victorian homes could have antimacassars why should our dear ministers be denied the humble towel? Never mind if that raises awkward questions about cleanliness — theirs or the cleaners.

Over the years I've grown accustomed to this sight. But it never fails to bewilder a foreigner. Their look of puzzlement is a joy to see. Most are too polite to ask and, therefore, never find out why it's there. But I'm sure they have their own explanations and I doubt if they're complimentary. Fortunately what remains unspoken can't hurt or offend and thus our amour propre is unaffected.

The bizarre thing is you'll also find the ubiquitous towel in Pakistan. Indeed I'm prepared to bet it has an equally hallowed place in Bangladesh. So whatever else Partition may have done, it hasn't affected this strange habit! We may be split asunder by faith but we're bound together by the towel!

Now Keats, as you know, wrote an ode to a Grecian urn. I wonder if anyone will write a sonnet to the desi tolliya?

The views expressed are personal

engender



LALITA PANICKER

CHILDBEARING IS NOT A DUTY, IT'S A CHOICE

The production of children is a prized theme with many of our political worthies. The latest and most surprising person to suggest that more children be produced so that robots don't take over more jobs is the supposedly tech-savvy Andhra Pradesh chief minister N Chandrababu Naidu. A strange piece of advice if I've ever heard one. And an anti-woman one at that coming from Naidu who should surely know better.

He now joins a long and illustrious line of "have more children" proponents most of whom are Right-wing rabble-rousers. Sakshi Maharaj and the VHP's Pravin Togadia have advocated that Hindu women have as many as 10 children to counter the Muslim growth rate in its tracks. One such leader said that Krishna had 16,108 wives with each of whom he had 10 children. We have no scriptural evidence of this but since when does that matter all that much.

What is galling is this easy advice to women to produce children as though this were a painless rite of passage and the duty of women. And this is what is wrong with the whole approach to population stabilisation. It is all up to the woman who incidentally has little say in her family size. Women, who are deprived of many rights, are supposed to fight for Hindu dominance when it comes of the imaginary crunch, with their child bearing weapons.

This is intrusive and reprehensible to say the least. Can any of these people assure women that these vast numbers of children they are to produce will be given the right inputs for a healthy life? Or will the woman be given the support she needs to take care of these children in the form of monetary assistance and healthcare? No, no one talks about that. I find this most anti-woman attitude on the part of politicians and 'spiritual leaders' so uninformed, especially when they bandy these concepts of mass reproduction around so casually.

In fact, we're a nation obsessed with childbearing. In the conservative parts of India, which are considerable, if a woman does not produce children within months of marriage, she is considered inferior and subject to taunts and threats. I remember facing a few caustic remarks from those in my own "progressive" family when I did not have children for over two years after marriage. The kindest of these would be "Is everything all right, don't hesitate if you need a good doctor, I can give you some numbers." It never occurred to anyone that this might be my choice.

Women who produce more children are seen as those who are more fulfilled, the epitome of femininity and grace. A man in a relationship is rarely blamed for a couple's inability to have children. The woman who is unable to bear children is often also subject to abuse as good for nothing as compared to other women in the family who have fulfilled their role as proud mothers to children, especially sons. One common refrain is that the childless couple will have no one to look after them in old age though we know well that children are no guarantee of old age security.

To come back to these calls for producing more children, the same politicians are also those who prescribe strong family planning measures, again aimed at the women in the form of sterilisation with approving nods to China's earlier coercive and cruel programme. So, the message is that while a smaller family is a desirable option, when it comes to numerically outstripping other communities, the Hindu woman must mindlessly produce children. In Naidu's case, we can only assume that he simply doesn't know what he is talking about.

Either way, it is staggering in its absurdity. Childbearing is not a woman's duty — it's her choice, and certainly we don't need some politician or spiritual leader to make those for us.

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deepcut



RAJESH MAHAPATRA

WIDENING CURRENT A/C DEFICIT IS A NEW WORRY

In April, a top commerce ministry official told a group of financial journalists "not to be alarmist" over rising gold imports. The reporters wanted to know if the government was planning any action in the wake of a sudden and sharp spike in gold imports in March. The official assured them that the government was keeping a watch and would take action, if needed, at an "appropriate time." Looking back, it appears the authorities may not have been as alert as they ought to have been, or that they erred in reading the situation.

Data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday showed India's current account deficit (CAD) rose sharply to a four-year high of \$14.3 billion, or 2.4% of GDP, in the April-June quarter. It was \$3.4 billion, or 0.6% of GDP, in the preceding quarter. Current Account Deficit is the difference between the value of goods and services a country exports and

imports. A higher CAD is not necessarily bad if the bulk of it is on account of such imports that help exports and growth and is financed through higher inflow of foreign direct investment. Historically, in the Indian context, a CAD below 3% of GDP is considered sustainable. On the face of it, therefore, a CAD of 2.4% in April-June may not appear worrisome. But a scrutiny of why and how the deficit widened so fast will call for remedial steps that must be taken without losing time.

The CAD has widened because imports have grown much faster than exports. Imports have risen faster because of a surge in gold imports and, to some extent, a higher cost of crude oil in the global markets.

India is the world's second largest gold consumer, where demand for the yellow metal usually peaks in the second-half of the year — especially during the festive season of Diwali and Dussehra. But according to the World

A SLOWING ECONOMY AND A GROWING CAD MAKE A LETHAL COMBINATION. WHILE THE FORMER WOULD TEND TO DISCOURAGE FDI, THE LATTER WOULD IMPACT INFLATION

Gold Council, demand for gold in the first-half rose 30% from a year ago to 298 tonnes. Imports grew even faster and more than doubled to 518.6 tonnes. This is puzzling and begs investigation.

Worse, gold imports continued to surge through July and August, thanks to a loophole in the newly introduced goods and services tax (GST). The government charges a 10% import duty on gold, but this does not apply to countries with which it has free trade agreements, such as South Korea. However, to prevent duty-free imports from those countries, it had previously levied a 12.5% countervailing duty, which got inadvertently scrapped when GST was introduced on July 1. Gold importers took advantage of this and placed huge orders with exporters in South Korea without paying any tax.

The government stopped this on August 25, but gold imports for the month had already jumped three-fold, the impact of which will show when data on CAD for the July-September

period becomes available. As petroleum minister Dharmendra Pradhan indicated last week, India's crude oil import cost could rise more than 10% through this quarter. That will add to the deficit, given that exports have not yet gained momentum.

A slowing economy and a growing CAD make a lethal combination. While the former would tend to discourage foreign capital inflows, the latter would have a cascading impact on inflation and competitiveness of Indian exports. Ignoring these warnings could lead to a repeat of what the economy witnessed in the terminal years of the UPA government, when the CAD peaked to an all-time high of 4.5% of GDP, precipitating a crisis for the broader economy.

The imperative in the immediate term would be to identify all such imports that do not aid growth or investment and bring measures to curb them — gold, obviously, should top that list. In the short to medium term, however, the focus must be on exports — identifying sectoral issues and bottlenecks and addressing them on a war footing. On the brighter side, India's record level of foreign exchange reserves offer enough cushion to maintain orderly conditions in currency trading even if the CAD deficit gets out of hand for a couple of quarters. But that should not make the government and the RBI complacent.

Interact with the author @rajeshmahapatra

thisweekthatera

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

SEPT 22: President Zakir Husain, who inaugurated the premiere of Upkar, in New Delhi on Thursday, is presented with a bouquet by Manoj Kumar, actor, director and writer of the film

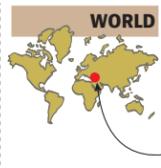


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NEWS OF THE WEEK



INDIA
CUSTOMS ALMOST MISSED THE HAUL
SEPT 17: Delhi's biggest gold haul of 32-1/2 maunds, valued at Rs 2 crores, which was seized by the Customs this morning from a BOAC plane was booked as separate consignments by two different firms in London and Toronto for delivery in Macao and Okinawa



WORLD
39 KILLED IN SOCCER RIOT
SEPT 18: Thirty-nine people were killed and hundreds injured when a riot broke out during a Turkish second division football match today (Sept 17) at Kayseri, Central Turkey. Troops were called in to halt the pitched battle

It helps to admit your mistake

Kudos to Karan Thapar for bringing out new facts in Sorry Raghuram Rangan, I got it wrong (Sunday Sentiments, September 10). A lot of confusion was created by the government, and adding to that was Rajan's silence. This confusion has definitely affected how the people view the public institutions involved. The media has also taken a beating in the entire process. Given this, Thapar has done the right thing in correcting a mistake.
MURARI CHATURVEDI VIA EMAIL

Follow the 80:20 principle

This refers to Rajesh Mahapatra's Rewrite IT law if you must, but not in haste (Deep Cut, September 10). The threshold income for taxing should follow the 80:20 principle: The starting point of taxable income should target the rich 20% who account for 80% of tax revenue. This will focus administrative action on tax evasion.
YG CHOUKSEY PUNE

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