



## Divided we fall

The debate on the Finance Commission's terms of reference needs reshaping

Prime Minister Narendra Modi thinks vested interests are behind the "baseless" allegation that the terms of reference of the 15th Finance Commission are biased against certain States or a region. He did not name the region, but he was clearly responding to growing clamour from the southern States for a rethink on the parameters for the Commission to determine revenue-sharing between the Centre and the States. The southern States are concerned that the Commission is switching from the 1971 Census to the 2011 Census. This means States that have done relatively better to control population growth could see their allocations, as a fraction of the total resources, reduced. However, speaking in Chennai Mr. Modi said a State like Tamil Nadu would actually benefit from the Commission's mandate as the Centre has mooted incentives for those who have done well on population control. That the Prime Minister has had to wade in to try and manage a controversy, days after Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had termed it as 'needless', signals the Centre's concerns about the narrative turning against the BJP ahead of the Karnataka election.

One will have to wait till October 2019, when the Finance Commission's final recommendations come in, to assess the actual impact on States' cash flows, but framing the issue as a southern vs northern States debate is not constructive. The 14th Finance Commission had also given a 10% weightage for the 2011 Census in its calculations and there was no discernible impact on allocations to the more populous States such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Also, there are other States whose share of India's total population has declined between 1971 and 2011, including West Bengal, Goa, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab. Finally, it is misleading for State governments to assume that all positive changes in demographics are a result of their own actions or policies – there are a variety of factors at play when individuals make decisions about procreation. For the Commission, it is more critical to ensure that resources reach those who need them the most and that the genuinely needy are not deprived, wherever they may be. States may spend their energies better by seeking more clarity on the Commission's other terms of reference, especially the incentives proposed for shunning populism and the move to give the Centre a larger share of the resources to build the New India it envisions by 2022. Whether mid-day meals for children or employment schemes for the rural poor amount to populist pandering is an extremely subjective call. And the Centre's attempt to increase its share from the divisible pool of resources from the present 58% is something that should concern all States, whether populous or not.

## Preventing accidents

Fixing road design and enforcing safety protocols should be priorities

Bald data on Indians killed or injured in road accidents put out annually by the Centre obscure the human impact of the carnage on national and State highways, as well as urban and rural roads. Given the level of official indifference, it would be unsurprising if the deaths this week of at least 23 children and many others in a school bus crash in Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, or of the 18 labourers in a lorry accident in Maharashtra, or of nine people in a truck mishap in Uttar Pradesh are mere blips on the radar of administrators. Bringing sanity to the roads of a fast-motorising country seems to be nobody's responsibility. India as a whole is inured to the ghastly toll every year, although the Supreme Court has been trying to shake governments out of their apathy through the Committee on Road Safety it constituted in 2014 and several specific and time-bound directions. The response of the Centre and the States has been far from responsible. Take the issue of safety black spots on roads that were identified on the basis of fatal accidents between 2011 and 2014. The Union Road Transport Ministry stated in March this year that only 189 out of 789 such spots had been rectified, while funds had been sanctioned for another 256, and the rest were either under State jurisdiction or awaiting sanction. Incremental approaches such as this result in the shameful national record of about 150,000 dead and several hundred thousand injured annually.

The Kangra accident needs to be probed by qualified transport safety experts to determine the factors that caused it. There needs to be a report on the crash, to identify lapses, if any, and to take up remedial road engineering measures. The apex court has directed that the performance of district committees should be reviewed periodically. This should ideally follow mandatory public hearings every month for citizens to record road risk complaints. Forming the much-delayed National Road Safety and Traffic Management Board, with a provision for State governments to participate, has to be a top priority. Without expert help, executive agencies such as the Police and Public Works Departments are unable to conduct a technical investigation into an accident. Only a scientific system can stop the routine criminalising of all accidents. The present investigative machinery does not have the capability to determine faults, enabling officials responsible for bad road design and construction and lax traffic managers to escape liability. For accident victims, there is also the heavy burden of out-of-pocket expenditure on medical treatment. The government had promised to address this issue through a cashless facility, but it has not been able to do so as the requisite amendments to the Motor Vehicles Act have not yet been passed. Ultimately, road safety depends on enforcement of rules with zero tolerance to violations, and making officials accountable for safety. That can be ensured even today.

# Ambedkar's Dhamma, Gandhi's Swaraj

Perhaps we need to turn to art to understand the inner conflict of the Indian political tradition



ANANYA VAJPEYI

Recent work by the Mumbai-based artist and curator, one of the founders of the Kochi Biennale, Riyas Komu interrogates our relationship with both the symbols of the state and the values that they are meant to enshrine and invoke. "Holy Shiver", a series of works including sculptures in metal, wood and terracotta, videos, oil portraits, woodcuts, installations and archival prints, refers to the instinctive response of the body, whether animal or human, when it senses danger and enters a 'fight or flight' mode. Horrification (the hair on the back of the neck standing on end), the trembling of the extremities, the tensing of muscles – these primordial physical reactions to a perceived external threat Komu uses as an allegory for how the body politic responds when confronted with the 'other', whoever is identified as an enemy of the 'self'.

The instinctual biological 'shiver' of the title of Komu's show, that was on view in New Delhi in February and March, captures the aggression encoded deep within the nation-state, which sometimes erupts to split apart the surface of meaning and fracture the coherence of the historical narratives we have fabricated about India. Komu's work, powerful, engaged and original, literally leaves one shaken.

### Symbols of the state

Here we encounter the pages of the Constitution of India, on the one hand painstakingly illuminated like the manuscript of a holy book in medieval times, and on the other hand made illegible by having the letters inverted in a photographic negative. The charter document of the Republic is lit



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

up and ornate in one rendition, dark and obscure in the other. Both are presented side-by-side, to mirror our contradictory political experience, whereby the Constitutional framework is simultaneously extolled and subverted.

Further along we find the Indian state seal, the Sarnath Lion Capital, twisted and hung up, fired and singed, burnt and blackened, forged and shattered, the invisible fourth lion imagined and materialised even as the visible three are rearranged and interrogated. The words of the state motto "Satyameva Jayate" appear again and again, as though haunting and dogging us with a question about the fate of truth in our political life, regardless of the lofty ideals we may profess. Does truth really prevail in our polity?

Sheer sovereign power, embodied in the massive crouching figure of a gigantic lion, lurks menacingly in a thicket of dried grass, poised directly below the pages of the Constitution and obscuring them to some extent. The odd juxtaposition between the modern text and the ancient beast suggests perhaps the mutually incompatible genealogies of sovereignty – one liberal and the other authoritarian – enfolded within our conception of India.

### Irreconcilable pasts

The blades and clumps of grass planted in what might well be fire altars, remind one of Vedic civilisation that flourished in the Indo-Gangetic plain. In another room,

the so-called "dancing girl" from Mohenjodaro – whose very nomenclature has been brilliantly deconstructed by the art critic Sadanand Menon – posits a difference, insistently alternative civilisation of the Indus Valley that we have difficulty integrating into our national history ever since Partition.

She stands tall and insouciant, her hand on her hip and her posture defiant, frontally challenging the throne or seat of power stamped with the Dhamma Chakra, the Ashoka wheel of Dharma that is inscribed at the centre of the national flag and studded at the cardinal directions in the circular plinth of the Sarnath Lion Capital. A dynamic feminine figure – indeed a mere girl, if nationalist archaeologists are to be believed – talks back to the entrenched and established patriarchal state, and, incredibly, dwarfs it, cuts it down to size.

A bulbous sensuous polished wooden lotus is of course the "national flower", aesthetically pristine, the very blossoming of the Indic world of classical antiquity. But unfortunately today, it is the symbol of the Bharatiya Janata Party, its form hijacked for a majoritarian agenda that sullies the beauty associated with it in countless literary texts, religious traditions and artistic works going back to pre-modern times. Every symbol is hard fought, and continually contested. We simply cannot afford to be sanguine about our complex political inheritances or our di-

verse cultural riches.

Our multiple pasts jostle for primacy in the national narrative of selfhood and sovereignty. As Indians we have no choice but to be aware of the contradictions written into the stories we like to tell about who we are and where we come from. Everywhere, elaborate human constructs of the imagination and fundamental pre-human reflexes of the body clash with one another. Norms and morals are confronted with fear and loathing.

### Intimate enemies

But for Komu, the central dialectic of his work is the close encounter and terminal estrangement of Gandhi and Ambedkar, the Mahatma's swaraj and Babasaheb's dhamma, the two founding fathers dominating the show and providing the entwined double-helix of modern India's political DNA.

In one large sculptural work of wood and bronze, two Ambedkars, one on a slightly higher plane than the other, stand with their backs to one another, their arms thrust out in opposite directions. Which way should India go? Which way is forward? The great man, bespectacled and clad in a suit, is energetic but Janus faced. Stairs go up, or come down, from the two levels where he stands. It's not clear that we are simply ascending upwards to an enlightened and egalitarian social order, a new threshold of equality and justice. In fact, the staircase on which he is trapped and bifurcated suggests the staggered social hierarchy of the caste system that Ambedkar struggled unsuccessfully to annihilate.

The pièce de résistance of Komu's show is "Dhamma Swaraj", a triptych of imposing and disturbing oil paintings on canvas, in which the faces of Gandhi and Ambedkar are superimposed, one on the other, both slightly shaken and out of focus, as though the camera were jolted while taking a photograph. The result is three hybrid portraits of the two, uncanny and

distorted, like human reality seen through the optic apparatuses of sci-fi aliens. The spectacles, ears, chins, noses, foreheads and necks of the two subjects are somehow blurred and merged, a *trompe l'oeil*, a perceptual trick, cognitive dissonance visualised.

This is the central confusion of contemporary Indian political consciousness, the merger and mixture of these two categories, Ambedkar's dhamma and Gandhi's swaraj, their impossible superimposition, their confounding overlay and their hidden harmony. We can hardly make sense of it. But there is no freedom without justice and no justice without equality.

### Forms in dialogue

The artist boldly pushes the monumental and distorted faces of Babasaheb and Bapu, not separately but together, in our face. Familiar portraits of both, that we have all seen hundreds of times in public spaces, become absolutely weird and frightening. What is missing is the point of view that could keep both in our vision at once, distinct, separate and whole, fraternal twins rather than a monstrous mutant hybrid, radically alienated from itself and unable to integrate and harmonise self and other.

As statues of Gandhi and Ambedkar are being vandalised, desecrated, decapitated and broken all over India in the regime of the Hindu Right; as artworks are damaged, attacked and censored in a climate of illiberalism and intolerance; as communal hatred, majoritarian aggression and sexual violence target Muslims, Dalits, women and children, Komu's work is an urgent meditation on the basic issues that are still at stake for Indian democracy. It reminds us of how much there is to lose, and how serious the danger posed by the Hindu Rashtra to the Republic of India is.

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## The enigma of arrival

Filling in the gaps in B.R Ambedkar's educational journey



A.R. VENKATACHALAPATHY

B.R. Ambedkar's educational journey began in impossibly challenging conditions. With the help of a modest scholarship granted by the Maharaja of Baroda, he joined Columbia University, New York, in July 1913. After completing his M.A., he went on to write a thesis that ultimately led to the conferment of a PhD degree. In mid-1916, he was admitted to Grays' Inn in London to appear for the bar. When his scholarship ended in 1917, he was forced to return to India.

### Some answers

All this has been well documented by his biographer Dhananjay Keer. But several details remain incomplete. What was the exact date on which he left India? When did he arrive in America? How did he travel to London? Based on documents newly accessed in the British Library, we can now fill in the gaps.

The First World War which was raging at the time forms the backdrop for the paper trail. On May 17, 1916, Ambedkar addressed two let-

ters to the British Consul in New York, from Livingston Hall, Columbia University. He wanted a passport to go to London. Apparently, he had made enquiries at the British consulate, through a friend, regarding the requirements. New war-time regulations were in force and a passport could not be issued without permission from the India Office in London. Ambedkar indicated that he intended to leave America on June 3, 1917 by S.S. St. Paul. This gave him barely two weeks time to complete the formalities. He was in a hurry because he wanted "to meet certain professors of the English Universities before they disperse[d] for the summer vacation". To this letter he added a postscript: if the time was too short for processing his application he was willing to pay for a cabled reply from London.

Ambedkar appended a letter of application giving "the required personal information": "My full name is Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, son of Ramji Maloji Ambedkar." This statement was followed by the touching sentence, "I am sorry I do not know either the date or place of birth of my father." He was "born at Mahow (Malwa, India) on the 14th April 1891" but "had lived and been educated in the city of Bombay". Stating that he had come to America on a scholarship from the State of Baroda, he provided details of his first tra-



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vels overseas. Ambedkar had taken S.S. Sardinia on the Rubattino Line from Bombay on June 15, 1913. At Naples he had boarded S.S. Ancona and arrived at New York on July 22, 1913. Ambedkar further stated that he had been a post-graduate student at Columbia University and that he would be finishing "all requirements for the Ph.D. degree except my thesis which is a very essential part thereof" by the end of June 1916. He had to visit the British Museum and other libraries in England "as the source materials for the completion of [his] thesis were to be found only in England", and added that the Baroda State had provided him both the means and permission to study in London for a year.

This letter, written in a steady hand and in the impeccable English that we have come to associate with Ambedkar, may probably be the earliest surviving autobiographical note penned by

him. At the time of writing these letters he was barely 25.

How these letters came to the British Library is happenstance.

It was the war that occasioned such correspondence in the first place. The British Consul General, after making enquiries with the embassy in Washington, had promptly forwarded Ambedkar's application to the Foreign Office in London on May 22. It went with a copy of his certificate of identity issued at the time of Ambedkar's departure to America, by the British Resident at Baroda on June 4, 1913. The certificate gave his name as "Bhimrao alias Brimvran Ambedkar" and other details that we are familiar with now.

Evidently, the consular office did not cable London, as requested by Ambedkar. Therefore, it was not until June 8 that the Under Secretary of State of the Foreign Office in turn forwarded it to the India Office in London. On June 11, the India Office was still deliberating whether there was "any objection to the Consul giving him a passport endorsed for the journey to England" or if only an emergency certificate could be issued. By this time, however, it had come to the notice of another official that "this man sailed from New York by SS New York on 11/6" and he asked to "keep these papers pending till I find out from him how he got his passport." Even by the first week

of July the India Office was still wondering how Ambedkar had arrived in England "when his case was still under discussion here."

### Where it ends

Whatever the circumstances, Ambedkar had arrived at Liverpool where he had been instructed to call at Scotland Yard to collect his papers. As of June 24, he had still not done that. The paper trail ends here with a final note in the file: "I am directed to inform you that the Indian in question has since arrived in England and no action in the matter appears now to be called for."

When the Consul General in New York had forwarded Ambedkar's application and in turn the Foreign Office had forwarded it to the India Office, a specific request had been made for the "eventual return" of the originals. Given how his application had been processed, the papers were never sent back. If they had, Ambedkar's letters are not likely to have survived, for consular offices do not preserve passport applications for long. After Independence, the India Office was abolished and all its records were transferred to the British Library, now located adjacent to St. Pancras railway station in the heart of London.

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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.

### India shamed

The horrendous incidents of crimes against women, as the cases in Kathua and Unnao show, raise a simple question: Does a change in government make any difference to law and order? The answer is both a yes and a no. The fact is that laws are not strictly implemented, the police force, by and large, lack integrity, and justice is most often delayed. So when the system fails, there is hardly any fear of punishment. In both cases, no one would have ever imagined that ministers would be involved in some way or the other. When the BJP swept to power in 2014, many of us believed that it would mark the beginning of a

new era – of development, the rule of law and prosperity. Unfortunately, it has become an era where there is an environment of constant fear and where humanity is at its lowest level, largely as a result of actions by the ruling party. In the Kathua incident, it is hard to believe that there are some who are trying to communalise the inhuman act and protests being carried out to protect the accused. These are clear signs that we are heading towards darkness (Editorial page, "No place for young girls", April 13).

NISHA YADAV, Dahina, Rewari, Haryana

■ The very disturbing incidents are a sad

commentary on the state of public institutions in India. They only strengthen the perception that there is very little hope of the police in India acting firmly and independently without political interference. The nexus between the political class and the administration needs to be broken so that the common man is not deprived of justice (Editorial – "Crime in Kathua", April 13).

M. NIKHILESH, Hyderabad

■ It is high time the government sheds its blinkered vision and looks around to see what is happening under its governance. The safety of girls and

women is far more important than its right-wing ideology. Girls are girls irrespective of whether they are Hindu or Muslim. Their dignity, well-being and self-respect have nothing to do with their caste, community, religion or race.

PRATIBHA SHAKYA, Naubasta, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh

■ A criminal is a criminal irrespective of his political affiliation. While all of us will share Brinda Karat's concerns (Editorial page, April 13), she also needs to explain why she maintains a stoic silence when deeply inhuman acts are committed by her own partymen in other parts of the country.

K.R. SUBBARAYAN, Coimbatore

### Culture of anger

The climate of intolerance prevalent in many parts of the country is, I feel, the result of many factors. We have multiplied our States but reduced our values. We appear to embrace hate too often. We celebrate success in the number of agitations and not on what the outcome is. We aim for bifurcations in quantity, demand more independence and propagate our prejudices. We propose many schemes and

introduce an element of politics in almost every field. This being the case, I wonder how these issues will ever be sorted out. With a calm head, vision and dedication, we can work towards solving our problems with our neighbouring States and different groups (Tamil Nadu editions, "[Chennai] City awash with black balloons, flags", April 13).

A.J. RANGARAJAN, Chennai

MORE LETTERS ONLINE: www.hindu.com/opinion/letters/

### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The report headlined "Foreign firms hope to make a mark in Indian defence sector" (April 13, 2018) said Airbus sourced a number of parts, equipment from India with its business totalling more than half a million dollars in India. It should have been half a billion dollars.

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