



The boycott ban

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

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

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

Spanish steps

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

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

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

Taming inflationary expectations

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



AJIT RANADE

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

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

Food prices as indicator

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



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

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

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

Low inflation pointer

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ajit Ranade is an economist

Carrying forward a legacy

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



GARIMELLA SUBRAMANIAM

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

Torchbearer of innovation

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

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

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

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



K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

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

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

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

Going forward

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

Similarly, his life was a treatise

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

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

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

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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At the receiving end

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

In the Indian scheme of things, the politician is the one who always has the last laugh while the government functionary, however mighty his authority is,

plays second fiddle.

SIVAMANI VASUDEVAN,
Chennai

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

B. HARISH,
Mangaluru

Terms of engagement

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

of Chinese definitions and terms for a negotiation is to establish moral and psychological dominance over an adversary as a necessary corollary to the correct ordering of the negotiation. Classic Chinese texts such as the "Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance" (Zizhi Tongjian) contain several expedients to achieve these goals. Sun Tzu and the "Thirty-Six Stratagems" also provides considerable material. Another one is the tool box first described by its early practitioner, scholar and imperial adviser, Lou Jing. One hopes that China is aware that this may not fetch it results.

The tough stand adopted by Indian troops on the Doklam plateau and Indonesia's recent move to rename the northern reaches of its exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea as the North Natuna are acts of growing resistance by Southeast Asian nations to China's territorial ambitions. It's high time that China stops playing mind games in the

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

B. MEENAKSHI SUNDARAM,
Chennai

Worth watching?

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

audiences and are hardly entertaining.

C.V. ARAVIND,
Bengaluru

Snakes and rituals

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

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

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

ABHIJIT DAS,
Dehradun, Uttarakhand

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

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