



Law, faith, unreason

Banning 'evil' practices by law is not enough: social reform must be more broad-based

More legislation is not enough to eradicate superstition from society, but laws do have the utility value of curbing the prevalence of inhuman rituals and practices. Seen in this light, the proposed Karnataka law targeting black magic and inhuman practices may be regarded as social reform. The Karnataka Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Bill, 2017 has been approved by the State Cabinet and is likely to be introduced soon in the Assembly. It is not accurate to characterise this as just an 'anti-superstition bill', as what it seeks to prohibit are actions that offend human dignity, result in the exploitation of gullible and vulnerable people or cause harm to them. Organising macabre rituals, offering magical cures and threatening people, under peril of incurring divine or supernatural displeasure, are covered by this law, even though these can be treated as offences under the Indian Penal Code too. Perhaps ironically, it exempts established religious practices and the propagation of spiritual learning and arts, besides astrology and *vaastu*. Overall, it tries to heed the line between religious traditions and superstitious practices. Maharashtra already has a law against black magic and other 'evil' practices. It is not clear if it has made much headway in eliminating blind faith, but it must strengthen the hands of people willing to take on social practices steeped in ignorance and unreason. The proposed law ought to be seen as a reasonable restriction on the right to practise and propagate one's religion under Article 25 of the Constitution. As long as these restrictions are in the interest of public order, morality and health, the law may withstand the test of constitutionality.

It is not uncommon to read reports of disturbing rituals. Among the rituals the Bill outlaws is the *urulu seve*, also known as *made snana*, in which devotees roll over food leftovers, the practice of walking on fire, branding children, and piercing one's tongue or cheeks. It is hard to make a case for retaining these practices. However, it is possible that some may ask whether everything that appears irrational to the less believing should be prohibited by law. When the state ventures to identify some practices – mostly prevailing among groups in the social periphery – as incompatible with 'civilised' norms, it must demonstrate that these are wholly inhuman, or exploitative. One must denounce acts that harm women in the name of exorcism, but is it possible to decry the very idea of devotees claiming to be "possessed" by god or the devil, except from the perspective of a rationalist? Ultimately, it is education and awareness that can truly liberate a society from superstition, blind faith and abominable practices in the name of faith. Until then, the law will have to continue to identify and punish acts that violate the people's right to life, health and dignity.

An artist of the world

The surprise winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature is an abundantly deserving one

By awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature to British-Japanese novelist Kazuo Ishiguro this year, the Swedish Academy has pulled itself back to more classical criteria in deciding who makes the cut. While announcing the name, it strove to make this evident, even at the risk of reducing an appraisal of a great writer such as Ishiguro to a trite high school essay. "If you mix Jane Austen and Franz Kafka then you have Kazuo Ishiguro in a nutshell, but you have to add a little bit of Marcel Proust into the mix," said Sara Danius, the permanent secretary of the Academy. "Then you stir, but not too much, then you have his writings." The Academy perhaps tried too hard given the criticism, and the awardee's snub, that came its way last year when the prize went to American singer-songwriter Bob Dylan; it had clearly been trying to push the envelope in capturing newer forms of narrative-telling, after bringing to the notice of a wider readership the brilliant Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich the year before for her oral histories dating back to the Soviet era. Ishiguro is more of a purist, repurposing the classical forms to, as the Academy said, produce novels of "great emotional force". It added that they "uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world". In a body of work that also includes critically acclaimed short fiction, Ishiguro has consistently evoked the loss of coordinates that individual characters sense with the uncertainties of memory as well as of space and time.

Ishiguro's credentials are impeccable. Strong, albeit strange and unreliable characters; spare prose, used to devastating effect; genres varying from science fiction to fantasy, with no book of his reading like the last. Born in Nagasaki in 1954, Ishiguro moved with his family to Britain when he was five. He was a part of the great burst of new fiction-writing in the country in the 1980s, as the talent of writers as diverse as Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan and Hilary Mantel came to the notice of a global readership. His earliest novels harked back to Japan, and they are still too little appreciated. But it was his third novel, *The Remains of the Day*, that stunned the literary world in 1989, also winning the Booker Prize. The story of an ageing butler, it evoked the difficulty of keeping one's bearings in a shifting matrix of class, culture and history. Most of his characters understand displacement, a theme he keeps returning to in his books in different ways. Thus, memory, time, past and present are important signposts in the Ishiguro landscape. The names of his novels often indicate as much. These include his second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, his most recent *The Buried Giant*, and his standout dystopian novel *Never Let Me Go* from 2005, about a community of clones raised only so that their organs may be harvested. In its moment of crisis, the Swedish Academy has pulled out a winner.

Symbols of a deeper stirring

The protests at Banaras Hindu University point to a new kind of gender assertion on access and rights



KRISHNA KUMAR

The old and historically important university at Varanasi is passing through a significant moment. Educational institutions seldom serve as precise mirrors of historical change because pedagogic and administrative rituals keep their inner life tightly under control. Banaras Hindu University (BHU) is no exception. Rather, like Visva-Bharati, established by Rabindranath Tagore, BHU has maintained a veneer of normalcy governed by sacred customs and rituals that have nicely preserved an empty shell of a special inherited identity. The architecture too conveys a sense of permanent normalcy, like that of a temple. The decline in its institutional pride and standards had begun in the 1960s. Barring brief episodes of precarious recovery, descent into the shared hollow of higher education in the Hindi belt has been consistent.

The recent sequence of events at BHU has an element of surprise because it points towards a new kind of assertion and attempt to claim institutional rights. The administration seems unprepared for this turn of events. Its reflexes constitute the time-tested moves to minimise, pacify and press forward. It does not seem to realise, and may not accept if it does, that it is faced with an unfamiliar kind of protester who refuses to be seen as a client. The young women who paid the price of mass protest by getting brutally assaulted and injured have



already become symbols of a deeper stirring than the officials of BHU have the wherewithal and imagination to gauge.

Different visions

BHU was the second university to be set up in the Hindi heartland, the first being Allahabad. The two institutions were quite different from the start. Allahabad University was created by the colonial government, initially as an examining institution like the other three set up in the mid-19th century. Only later did it acquire a unitary character. Once known as the Oxford of the East, the university's architecture and courses conveyed the British dream of creating a knowledge society after its own image in India. BHU, on the contrary, was intended to symbolise India's pride in its heritage of knowledge. Its financial independence from the colonial state and its residential character signified an assertion and a search. The colonial model of affiliating universities was essentially that of a bureaucratic mechanism to examine, certify and thereby maintain legitimacy of the

distribution of eligibility for government jobs.

Above all, BHU represented a vision – one of many competing visions in early 20th century – of what India's freedom might mean in the sphere of education. The monumental effort mooted and sustained by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya to set it up was part of an intellectual struggle that did not last long after Independence: the struggle to engage with colonial subjugation through education. The engagement covered basic issues and choices in language, knowledge, and the pedagogic ethos.

Allahabad signified no such exploration – although it was located in a city with pioneers in academic publishing and a literati that radically changed the dominant idiom of Hindi literature. BHU, on the other hand, provided an academic base where Hindi's development as a modern language would benefit from archival and analytical research.

Although student activism has an older history, its eruptions intensified in the mid-1960s, disturb-

The smoke signals from China

How to read the signs from the forthcoming Communist Party Congress



PALLAVI AIYAR

For China watchers, the popular TV series, 'Game of Thrones', is but an anaemic trifle when compared to the backroom intrigue and power play expected at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The Congress will begin on October 18, accompanied by platoons of analysts in paroxysms of tea leaf-reading, attempting to decipher which men – no woman has so far been appointed to the Party's highest body: the Politburo Standing Committee – will control the levers of power in the country that is increasingly shaping global affairs.

The one name every cup of tea is sure to reveal is that of reigning Party chief, Chinese President Xi Jinping. The million yuan question is whether Mr. Xi will further cement his power base, making him the most formidable national leader in the post-Mao era, or whether there will be a last minute stunner, as a rival faction fights back.

Party Congresses are held every five years. Mr. Xi took over the leadership of the CPC from his predecessor, Hu Jintao, at the 18th Congress in 2012. At the time the CPC Central Committee was packed with cadres handpicked by previous leaders, limiting Mr. Xi's freedom of manoeuvre. But much water has flowed down the Yangtze in

the half decade since, with the Chinese President rewriting the rules of institutional workings and bureaucratic promotions, as well as reshaping China's diplomacy and sense of self in the world.

Consolidating control

Since coming to power, Mr. Xi has strategically centralised control by collecting a smorgasbord of titles. He not only leads the Party and military but is also head of several newly instituted bodies such as the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms and the Central National Security Commission set up to combat terrorism and separatism. In January this year he took over as Chairman of the Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development, only a few months after being hailed by the CPC as a "core leader", an epithet that has thus far only been conferred on three leaders: Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin.

Until Mr. Xi's presidency, China had followed Deng's diktat of "*tao guang yang hui*", or keeping a low profile internationally, biding time while focussing on domestic economic growth. The leadership of the Party had also evolved into a collective practice, resembling a boardroom more than an imperial court, with Chinese politics increasingly tied to predictable procedures rather than ruler's caprice.

But under Mr. Xi, this settled topography has been upended. The Chinese President is a more charismatic and individualistic leader than his predecessors, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin. Moreover, under him, China has come to un-



abashedly project power abroad, and no longer makes any bones about its geostrategic ambitions.

Three strategies

Shin Kawashima, a China scholar at the University of Tokyo, points out that Mr. Xi has deployed three strategies to amplify his power: an anti-corruption blitzkrieg, a tightening of media control and a restructuring of the military.

The anti-corruption campaign has been a particularly useful tool, serving the dual purpose of toughening party discipline and purging inconvenient rivals. More than 200 officials, many of them in senior positions, have been removed in corruption probes, allowing Mr. Xi to place loyalists or associates of close allies in key positions.

A recent example is that of Sun Zhengcai, former party chief of Chongqing, considered by some to be a contender for future President and a shoo-in for the Politburo. In July, Mr. Sun was abruptly placed under investigation for disciplinary violations (a euphemism for corruption) and removed from his post. He was replaced by Xi protégé Chen Miner who is now a

ing the annual routine of life in many universities. The issues that triggered street processions and sit-ins were often localised, even trivial, but the restive spirit was real.

Many national and provincial leaders felt that campus disturbances indicated that the idealism of the freedom movement had waned. Some of them viewed youth discontent as a sign of deeper idealism. They were right in this estimation. To the generation born after Independence, just about everything had begun to look wrong. One of the first things to cause dismay was the calibre of people who became vice-chancellors. Those recruited to teach were the next major source of disillusionment and cynicism among the young.

Growth of access

Layers of disillusionment have sedimented. For the BHU Vice-Chancellor to attribute the recent turmoil to 'an incident of eve-teasing' is an insult to students. They belong to a new provincial ethos, subtly transformed by radical increase in access to school education over the last 25 years. It has changed the social composition of the campus population, imparting it far greater plurality than what prevails in the teaching faculty. Recruitment of teachers now provides reservation for the lower and middle castes, but the dominance of upper castes and competition among them continues to shape the campus ethos.

In this matter, BHU and Allahabad, despite their very different origins, have become identical. The same applies to male-centric ethos and policies. Young women are tired of homilies by university officials and political leaders who

talk like grandparents. Equally tiring to the current generation of female students is the supervised freedom offered to them as a favour.

Their public fight is currently directed against gender discrimination. There is plenty of it to fuel their struggle. It is there in hostels, in admission procedures, in classrooms and laboratories, and in life outside the campus. But their anger is also about the role of caste in the selection of faculty and positions carrying public responsibility. Both Allahabad and BHU are festering pools of caste politics. The colonial roots of the former have proved just as weak to withstand caste pressures in everyday functioning as the idealistic roots of BHU have.

As new arrivals in the arena of higher learning, BHU girls are noticing a stench that boys do not, accustomed as they are to the many advantages that upbringing in a patriarchal ethos offers. The city itself is steeped in caste-centric rituals; even the language of daily use, including its abusive variety, carries caste messages. The young women of BHU have studied courses on gender and its association with caste. Some of them cannot resist applying this knowledge to their personal lives and their supervised campus lives. Having been sent back home after facing a lathi charge, they will no doubt receive sobering counsel from their elders, many of whom may not have been to college. When they return after the semester break, they will notice how many more CCTVs have been installed to make them feel safer.

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contender for Mr. Sun's expected spot on the Politburo's, innermost, seven-member Standing Committee.

Party Congresses usually last between seven and 10 days. The length of October's meet will be closely watched. If it's shorter than usual, it will signal that Mr. Xi's rival factions found it tough going, while a longer summit would imply the opposite. About 2,300 delegates from different provinces and constituencies like state-owned enterprises and the military will attend the meeting and elect the 200-plus members of the Party Central Committee. The Central Committee will in turn vote for the CPC's most senior positions. At least 11 of the 25 members of the Politburo are expected to retire, unless an informal rule that requires members to step down at 68 is relaxed. Whether or not Wang Qishan, Mr. Xi's trusted anti-corruption honcho, stays on the Standing Committee, despite being 68, will be closely watched as an indication of the President's clout.

Leaving a mark

One likely outcome is the enshrining of Xi Jinping "thought," the crystallisation of the President's values and ideals, in the CPC's constitution. This is standard practice for China's top leaders. However, other than Mao and Deng, no other leader has had their name tagged on to their "thought". Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory are known as such. But Jiang Zemin's Three Represents and Hu Jintao's Scientific Outlook on Development do not have their names appended in the constitu-

tion. Whether or not Mr. Xi's name is added to his "thought" (which has not been given a formal title as yet) will consequently be another key indicator of his sway within the Party.

Finally, the Congress will be scrutinised for any moves that might enable Mr. Xi to stay in a top leadership capacity even after his second term as CPC General Secretary and Chinese President ends in 2022. For example, he might delay the designation of a successor.

Mr. Kawashima hastens to point out that Mr. Xi is still far from all-powerful. Some push back from sidelined groupings will almost certainly occur. But all Mr. Xi needs to steamroll his vision is the support of four out of seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee.

The composition of this group will determine China's attitude towards global hot spots such as North Korea and border disputes with neighbours like India. A stronger Xi Jinping will likely see an even bolder and more aggressive China regionally and globally.

Domestically, although western Sinologists tend to see the centralisation of authority under Mr. Xi as having a potentially narrowing effect on economic reform, many analysts within the country see his moves as stemming from the need to ride roughshod over vested interests in order to push through difficult reforms. Only time, and perhaps the tea leaves, will tell.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Growth slowdown

India's economic expansion has slowed to its lowest level in three years. Small businesses are struggling, or even shutting down, after a major overhaul of both the country's currency and sales tax system. Policymakers need to act now to 'craft an effective economic stimulus package that spurs growth and job creation'. Without a stimulus of a sufficient magnitude, the Indian economy is likely to see a decline in growth or even a formal recession, leading to higher unemployment, declining or stagnant wages, and a host of other economic problems'. Combined with a 'broader unravelling of credit markets, we can expect to see continued spillovers into other areas of the economy, most importantly the labour market'. Given

the tremendous damage that a recession does to employment, income and the health of millions of Indians, Parliament should act quickly to keep the economy from stalling. Whether the government will act on sage advice is yet to be seen ("Growth has fallen, but govt. can reverse trend, says PM", October 5).

K.M.K. MURTHY,
Secunderabad

■ The economy appears to be in a shambles and despite the gloomy forecasts for the future, leaders in the government are failing to recognise the pessimism and act judiciously to bring the economy back on track. Instead, what has been noticeable in recent days is a commentary of polemics from the men who matter in the government who are trying to convey that all

economic woes will be got around in the long run ('Business' page - "Jobs cut worry Mittal, Goyal unfazed", October 6). The Prime Minister has spoken about all the "virtuous" economic initiatives that his government has undertaken but has failed to articulate any measures to stimulate the economy. This narrative neither offers solace to citizens hamstrung by economic inactivity nor gives the Sensex and Nifty indices an opportunity to rise. Clearly, the government is not prepared or lacks the wherewithal to address issues of prime economic importance. The start-up ecosystem cannot progress in a disturbed business cycle. The government must also take public criticism in their stride.

BIBHUTI DAS,
New Delhi

State of the Left

A party which once had 44 Members of Parliament and was a formidable political force to reckon with in controlling UPA-I and -II has now become weak and meek in political influence and stature (Editorial - "Theory and practice, October 6). The eroding base of the CPI(M) in West Bengal is making its leaders think of desperate measures. Nonetheless, the situation in Kerala is quite different. The party is in a convincingly solid position in Kerala and an alliance will undoubtedly undermine its credibility as a strong political force. Moreover, such a decision will not find favour with the cadres. It is an undeniable fact that there are two factions in the CPI(M) right now. The need of the hour for the CPI(M) is to consolidate its base in the hinterlands. Limiting itself

to campus communism will further shrink it in politics.

RAVI MANNETHU,
Pullad, Kerala

Part of the wheel

T.P. Sreenivasan's article ("States in Indian diplomacy", October 6) does not include the first significant State "interference" in external relations. In 1962, the Ministry of External Affairs, through G. Parthasarathi, suggested to Nehru that air power could be used to stop Chinese supply lines but this was vetoed by then Chief Minister of West Bengal, B.C. Roy. There was enough intelligence to believe that India had greater air superiority *vis-à-vis* the Chinese. There is an indirect reference to this in a book by former Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit.

M.V. SUNDARARAMAN,
Chennai

Think 'Bullet'

We have to always think ahead about the future and plan for it ('Left, Right, Centre' - "Does India need a bullet train?" October 6). Rapid urbanisation and an increasing middle class population will need the rapid mass movement of people. After a decade or so, aviation fuel prices are bound to be very high which would make flying unaffordable. Hence a bullet train would be required. It would also give a boost to infrastructure development, technological achievements and create huge employment opportunities. It could be a milestone in our transition from a developing to a developed country.

BADAL JAIN,
Bhopal

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