



Exposing fault lines

There must be a thorough inquiry into the violence over Ram Navami processions

It has taken a voice of humanity to call out the manufactured nature of the political blame game around the communal clashes over Ram Navami processions in West Bengal and Bihar. In Asansol, the imam of a mosque who lost his teenage son to the clashes this week announced that should anyone carry out a retaliatory attack, he would leave town. At least four persons have died in the Raniganj-Asansol belt in West Bengal's Paschim Bardhaman district after a procession turned violent. The area remains tense, Internet services are limited and prohibitory orders are in place. It is a shame that a sitting Union Minister, Babul Supriyo, who represents Asansol in the Lok Sabha, not just tried to defy the local administration, but also uttered inflammatory comments. Accounts about what ignited the clashes vary, and it would be best to await the findings of the official inquiry. But it is a reason for disquiet that 'religious' processions are becoming a pretext to force communal polarisation in many States. In Rajasthan's Jodhpur district, a tableau was taken out on Ram Navami glorifying Shambhu Lal Raigar, currently in jail for hacking a man to death and videographing the violence along with an anti-Muslim rant. In Bhagalpur in Bihar this month, a religious procession organised by Sangh Parivar groups provoked communal clashes — there is an FIR against Arijit Shashwat, son of Union Minister Ashwini Choubey, for inciting violence. After Ram Navami, communal tension has spread to more areas of the State, including Aurangabad, Samastipur and Nawada.

In all such situations, the responsibility of isolating areas and causes of violence and tension is best assigned to the local administration, instead of State-level and national politicians weighing in. However, the violence suggests a pattern that is worrying. While the Raniganj-Asansol industrial belt is surprising territory for such clashes, the number of incidents of communal violence in West Bengal has increased sharply over the past three years. The violence in Bihar comes soon after the setback to the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance in the recent by-elections, with some party leaders giving the result a sectarian spin. Across swathes of north India, daily interactions between the majority and minority communities have been rendered fraught with the probability of violence. The majoritarian persuasion is carried out at the grassroots level, but the Sangh Parivar cannot plead plausible deniability. In this context, the increasingly assertive Ram Navami and other religious processions are drawing new fault lines. As the air gets politically charged in the lead-up to the 2019 general elections, the burden on the law and order machinery becomes that much more heavy — to pursue every incident of violence and incitement in order to limit its potential to be used for further polarisation.

Billed for change

Amendments to the National Medical Council Bill don't go far enough to address concerns

The Union Cabinet this week approved six out of the dozens of changes to the contentious National Medical Commission (NMC) Bill that were suggested by a Parliamentary Standing Committee earlier this month. These changes address some of the loudest criticisms of the Bill. Among them, the final year MBBS exam is now merged with an exit exam for doctors, and a contentious bridge course for AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Homeopathy) practitioners has been axed. Health-care experts had recommended other modifications, which the Cabinet ignored. For example, despite the Cabinet's amendments, the NMC, the regulatory body that will replace the Medical Council of India, will be heavily controlled by the government. Its members are to be picked by a search committee headed by the Cabinet Secretary, while the Central government is to be the appellate body for those aggrieved by the NMC's decisions. The parliamentary committee had batted for an independent appellate body. The amendments cleared by the Cabinet also increase State representation in the NMC from three part-time members to six, in what seems like a gesture to please the States. Contrast this with the parliamentary committee's recommendation to include 10 State representatives, given India's vastness. Another amendment that doesn't go far enough is the decision to raise the proportion of private college seats for which fees will be regulated from 40% to 50%. The fees for unregulated seats could then skyrocket, pushing poorer medical aspirants out of the system.

Despite these deficiencies, if passed by Parliament, the legislation will mark a new era for medical education in India. The next step will be to design rules and regulations that capture the intent of this law. This itself will be a massive challenge. How, for one, will the logistical difficulty of conducting a common final year MBBS examination across the country be overcome? Multiple-choice questions are easy to administer, but testing the range of theoretical knowledge and practical skills expected of medical graduates is more difficult. Throw in the enormous inter-State variations in medical education across India, and the challenge is obvious. Law-makers will have to tackle this gigantic task in a slow and phased manner. Another concern is that under the new amendments States now have the freedom to implement an AYUSH bridge course, even if no longer mandatory. How will the Centre ensure the quality of such courses to prevent a new set of poorly trained doctors from emerging? The coming days may see many more protests against the NMC Bill, perhaps delaying its passage and prompting further discussion. For a Bill that marks the first major reform in medical education since 1956, such an extended debate is not a bad thing.

The illusion of participation

By promoting the culture of mass 'following', social media are shaking the foundations of democracy



KRISHNA KUMAR

The Canadian economist and philosopher Harold Innis comes to mind as an aid to reflect on Facebook's silent leap from being regarded as social media to having been proved a powerful political media. Its CEO Mark Zuckerberg has quickly apologised, but that cannot be of much use when the outcome of Facebook's involvement in elections has proved to be so vitally important as to help smuggle into the highest office in the U.S. a man like Donald Trump. Of course, we will never know what proportion of the credit for this achieving this can be given to Facebook or Cambridge Analytica. Perhaps we need not worry about fair distribution of credits in this case. Assessing the seismic jolt America's democracy has suffered is more important. And why worry only about American democracy? We too seem to have been rendered vulnerable, and our record of self-correction is not great. In its moment of embarrassment, Facebook has given the entire world a reason to pause and ponder.

Bias of communication

Innis is best known for his book, *The Bias of Communication*, first published in 1951. As the title indicates, he was interested in examining the nature of a medium or technology of communication as a factor of social order. He studied

the history of ancient empires and their decline by focussing on the technology of communication they used. Innis used 'space' and 'time' as basic sources of bias in different media of communication developed down the ages. Some, like rock inscriptions, manuscripts copied by hand, and orally stored epics were biased, in Innis's view, towards stability over long periods of time.

On the other hand, newspapers, radio and television were examples of space-bias technology. They reach out to vast territories, but the content or message does not last long. He studied different empires and concluded that the ones that developed a balance between space and time attained higher civilisational goals.

The Internet and the mobile phone seem heavily 'space-biased' in Innisian terms. Their reach is extraordinarily wide and fast, but the messages conveyed through them need relentless repetition, suggesting ephemeral value. This disbalance gets magnified in social media such as Facebook and Twitter. They provide huge followings to users, and, in the same mea-

sure, they create short-lived ripples that titillate and excite the public space on a constant basis. This duality explains the attraction they exercise despite the risk their users face of being manipulated.

The rise of these social media companies has coincided with major changes in the nature of the state and its duties towards citizens. Surveillance as a means of providing safety has gained acceptability — even legitimacy — in many parts of the world. In the industrially advanced bastions of liberal democracy, a sharp change in public willingness to put up with, even appreciate, the state's ominous presence in every sphere of life has come about. This accommodating public mood has prompted the tendency among political leaders to seek more and more authority and means to create a centralised system to wield it. Advances in communication technology have encouraged systems of governance to concentrate decision-making power at the higher rungs, leaving compliance and implementation to people placed at the lower rungs.

Innis would have seen this as a

sign of increase in space-bias. He would also have related this increase to the diminution of memory and continuity. Parallel and rapid growth of these two tendencies can be expected to cause significant amounts of disbalance, which might lead to the collapse of institutions that play a balancing role. Democracy is one such institution. It is based on the idea of participation of the largest number of people, even if that slows down decision-making. On the face of it, social media creates the illusion of maximal participation, but in reality it promotes the culture of mass 'following'. The millions who comprise the 'following' of leaders can hardly be called participants in decision-making.

This model of communication has smoothly pushed American democracy towards an unfamiliar wilderness. Its electoral process compromised by manipulation of voters' minds — by use of authentic data they have themselves provided — the U.S. faces a deep vulnerability, from within itself. Signs of political neurosis are all too obvious.

Centripetal energies

In our own case, the use of digital technology to give every citizen a unique identity number is creating new daily challenges for stemming the centralisation of authority. Whatever the highest court decides in the Aadhaar case, it can hardly avoid noticing the centripetal energies fast grabbing our democracy. Of course, these wider tendencies can't be attributed to Aadhaar. Long before Nandan Nilekani had gifted this shiny toy to the nation, ostensibly meant to improve the the state's capacity to

serve the poor, the problem of handling data about common people with integrity was quite familiar to the lower functionaries managing elections.

In all likelihood, both Facebook and American democracy will survive the rough weather they are facing. It is equally likely that they will learn little from this experience. This is because their financial investments in the new communication order are heavy and will not allow withdrawal or slow-down in use. An element of destiny has already crept in. As an institution, social media is in its infancy, but it has already acquired an ideological temper. It wields the power of crowds that are ready to lynch its critics. A substantial part of the population of youth across the world inhabits social media platforms, giving companies like Facebook and Twitter an amount of cultural power rather unique in corporate history. The use of these platforms by office-holding politicians adds to their mighty claim to neutrality.

Looking for sanity

However, their disbalancing force is equally strong and harder to hide than it was earlier. Therefore, it is reasonable to hope that revelations of the kind made recently about misuse of personal data by Facebook and Cambridge Analytica will continue to rock the established systems of public communication, on one hand, and, on the other, the exercise of command by those in authority. An eventual opportunity for a new equilibrium and sanity to prevail is imminent.

Krishna Kumar is a former director of NCERT

Rivers, floodplains, cities and farmers

Preservation of the river and floodplains must be informed by the 'conserve and use' standard



ADITI VEENA & VIKRAM SONI

Floodplains of rivers can provide a new source of water. They are a local, non-polluting, perennial and non-invasive source of water for urban centres. Our work and research on the Pala floodplain scheme which was launched by the Delhi Jal Board in 2016 is a tangible realisation of this idea. The scheme (on a 25 km stretch of the Yamuna) is currently running at half its potential and providing water to about one million people in the city — of a daily requirement of 150 litres per person.

Conserve and use plan

Floodplains are formed over millions of years by the flooding of rivers and deposition of sand on riverbanks. These sandy floodplains are exceptional aquifers where any withdrawal is compensated by gravity flow from a large surrounding area. Some floodplains such as those of Himalayan rivers contain up to 20 times more water than the virgin flow in rivers in a year. Since recharge is by rainfall and

during late floods, the water quality is good. If we conserve and use the floodplain, it can be a self-sustaining aquifer wherein every year, the river and floodplain are preserved in the same healthy condition as the year before. The 'conserve and use' principle demands that no more than is recharged by rain and floods each year can be withdrawn from this aquifer. This ensures that the groundwater level in the floodplains remains steadily above that in the river in the lean non-monsoon months when the river is often polluted. Drawing out any more water than is recharged can contaminate and eventually finish off this precious resource.

Rivers today are facing problems of abysmally low flows due to an indiscriminate extraction of water for use in cities, industries and agriculture. They are also highly polluted because sewage and effluents are being released into them. But a floodplains 'conserve and use' scheme, which is a socio-economic-environmental scheme, can provide water to urban centres along rivers; it can also engage farmers by providing them an assured income and restore rivers to a healthy condition.

The Tamirabarani

Let us take the example of the Tamirabarani river in Tamil Nadu



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which flows for 100 km through two urban settlements, Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi. For the population of close to a million people in these two cities, the water requirement of both towns combined is less than 54 million cubic metres (MCM) per year, when calculated at 150 litres a day per person. Leaving out the area of the river banks that is built over, we are left with 75 km of river length which is agricultural land; 1 km of this stretch on both sides of the river can be preserved as a water sanctuary and used to provide water to towns.

This floodplain (75 km) absorbs about 50% of the rainfall (about 100 cm/year) and saturates during floods late in the monsoon. Flooding can cause an approximately 4 metre rise in the water level which allows us to dewater

about 3 metre depth of floodplain. The specific yield of this aquifer is about 15-20% of its volume and hence we can draw about 75-90 MCM of water from the floodplains in a year.

Floodplains have more water than the needs of cities. Half the water can be drawn and provided to meet the needs of cities by developing a grid of about 120 wells, each of which operate at 0.3 million gallons a day. If priced at the domestic Delhi Jal Board tariff of ₹30 per kilo litre, we can sell the water for ₹162 crore a year.

Engaging farmers

Preserving the floodplain in its entirety is critical for this scheme to work. This can be done by engaging farmers whose land will have to be leased for such an effort. Farmers today have an erratic income and this scheme can be realised through a public-private partnership, where farmers on this land tract of 1 km on either side of the river can be provided an assured and steady income of ₹30,000 an acre which would amount to ₹12 crore a year for the first 10 years for the entire river length (75 km) that is not encroached. In addition, farmers can grow a food forest, fruit orchards or nut trees but not water-intensive crops on this land. It would guarantee not only a good farming

income but also great earnings from the water for the farmers without taking the ownership of the land away from them. The capital cost for building such a scheme would be minimal (a few hundred crores) and the revenue generated would be able to pay for the costs and for farmers' income without any subsidy. It would also generate substantial revenue for the cities.

Ecologically, a water sanctuary would prevent erosion, heal the river ecosystem, and restore the ecological balance in floodplains. Even after withdrawal, floodplains would have enough water to slowly release back into the river in a lean season. This scheme would help curb illegal extraction of water, stop pollution by local agencies and industries and also encourage cities to be more responsible in their waste management.

This scheme will also help improve the quality of rivers, quality of life for citizens, and at the same time guarantee farmers a healthy fixed income. This is a new scheme of living. This is the philosophy of "conserve and use".

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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.

Questions and answers

Question paper leaks are the result of a rampant commercialisation of the education system and undue importance being given to marks/ranks/grades with the least or no emphasis being given to knowledge. The mushrooming of unscrupulous private institutions and coaching centres is the result. In addition to paper leaks, this has also resulted in malpractices, mainly in northern India. The government needs to overhaul the system by seeking advice from reputed organisations that conduct mass examinations. An online system of examination can be thought of (Editorial - "Testing exam", March 30).

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO, Hyderabad

The frivolousness with which bureaucrats and Ministers have responded to the issue has only ended up angering students even further.

The examination board should realise that the act of compromising the examinations not only ends up shattering the dreams of younger students but also impacts the future of the country.

A re-examination is another gamble. It can either help those who did not fare well earlier or affect those who did well. It is the responsibility of the government to conduct examinations in a fool-proof manner.

K. KANNAPPAN, Sivagangai, Tamil Nadu

The paper leak fails to inspire confidence in the system. Perhaps tests should be carried out in an incremental manner. So, even if a student does not have a good day during an annual examination, it does not become a 'make or break' situation for him or her.

In an era of digitisation, the CBSE should also look for digital options and multiple versions of question papers that can be printed a few

hours before the examination.

VARAD SESHADRI, Sunnyvale CA, U.S.

As a Class 10 student, this is my first brush with the dark underbelly of the examination system. It is unfortunate that young students have had to suffer in one of the major milestones in their life. Who is going to restore their faith in the system? Why are the CBSE and the government in denial mode? It appears as though no one has the courage to apologise to us with sincerity for the anguish caused. Why is it that those who were giving sermons to us on stress management before the exams have now gone into hibernation when they should be offering us words of solace? And how is the CBSE geared to handle the challenges of malpractices in this age of technology? One wonders what magic wand the HRD Minister needs to put in place a foolproof system.

AMODHINI KARWANI, New Delhi

It is strange that we continue to believe that paper leaks can be prevented even when the examinations are so centralised and involve lakhs of students across the length and breadth of the country. It is a miracle that papers in an examination conducted on such a scale are not leaked every year. Instead of trying to find a "leak-proof system" for an examination on such a scale, it is best to decentralise the conduct of examinations.

G.S.R. KRISHNAN, Bengaluru

Supporting the farmer

The agriculture sector needs government support but loan waivers are not the solution ("Opposition unites to support farmers' Bills", March 30). On the contrary, 'expenditure on loan waivers will eventually leave less fiscal space for public expenditure in agriculture. India needs massive investment in areas such as irrigation, water conservation, better storage facilities, market

connectivity, and ensuring minimum support prices for crops and agricultural research'. The problems in Indian agriculture are structural and need long-term solutions. Loan waivers will only end up complicating the problem. The Indian economy has suffered a lot due to competitive populism in the past. It's time parties and governments addressed the real issues.

K.M.K. MURTHY, Secunderabad

Political vision

Notwithstanding the higher vote share and pan-India political presence enjoyed by the Congress party, its new president, a dynast, does not appear to be conversant with the ethos of ground-level Indian realities. He does not appear to be equipped to impart a new narrative to Indian politics. Elections are not a short-term question of facing Assembly elections or a Lok Sabha poll. What is at stake here is a long-term political legacy for the next

generation ("Editorial page — "All that's been left unsaid", March 30).

MAHENDRA. B. JAIN, Belagavi, Karnataka

Any political party that wants to counter the BJP needs to have a vision and strategy instead of mere tactics. As far as the Congress is concerned, apart from its frivolous castigation of the government, it lacks a clear cut vision and strategy. The salient feature of Indian democracy is its secular, plural and liberal ethos, which is now being taken apart. The so-called secular parties including the Congress appear to have learnt precious little and lack the vision that is essential to oust the BJP. If the BJP, a party that won only 2 seats in 1984, could muster an absolute majority in 2014, it is because the Congress has failed to uphold the needs and aspirations of the people.

SUKUMARAN C.V., Palakkad, Kerala

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