

8 EDITORIAL



Star turn

Rajinikanth is seeking votes as a repository of people's trust, as MGR and Jayalalithaa did

For more than 22 years, Tamil film star Rajinikanth fed the expectation of his entry into politics without fulfilling it. In 1995, when he spoke up against AIADMK leader Jayalalithaa, his statement had a resonance not only among his fans but also the wider public. But then he made his peace with Jayalalithaa and humoured leaders from across the political spectrum. With Jayalalithaa's death, however, his political ambition found a new life; he held a series of meetings with his fans as if to test his support base. On New Year's Eve, when he announced his decision to enter politics, he took care to appear as if he were stepping in to fill a political vacuum in the interest of the people of Tamil Nadu, and not to further his own ambition. With the AIADMK in disarray and DMK patriarch M. Karunanidhi politically inactive on account of age-related ill-health, the political scene in the State seems set for a churn. Actor Kamal Haasan too had spoken of his intention to start a party. With neither the BJP nor the Congress being in a position to challenge the two Dravidian parties, Mr. Rajinikanth could have seen this as an opportune moment to cash in on his fan base after his failure to take advantage of the public sentiment in 1996.

There is no denying Mr. Rajinikanth's mass appeal, but as in the case of AIADMK founder M.G. Ramachandran and Jayalalithaa, he doesn't seem to have a clearly defined ideological position or political programme. Other than saying that his politics will be "spiritual" and neither religious nor casteist, he has not yet articulated a comprehensive political vision. But in a State in which political corruption has been a major issue, resulting in strong electoral verdicts against both major Dravidian parties, his success in politics is likely to be determined by whether he can project himself as a person people can trust and as an agent of the kind of political change that Tamil Nadu really desires. This ties in with his attempt to project himself as all things to all people, a messiah of sorts. Thus, his assurance that he will resign three years after he is voted to power if he is unable to fulfil his yet-to-be-made promises. Mr. Rajinikanth would like to rule as a repository of people's trust rather than as their direct representative. Even when he created a platform to interact with his fans and supporters, he did not solicit their views or attempt to come to grips with their grievances. By all accounts, Mr. Rajinikanth is preparing to be guided by his own sense of destiny. Other than his movies, and a few stray political comments, people have little to go by. But Mr. Rajinikanth must be aware that charisma is a powerful force in Tamil Nadu politics, enough to catapult others before him to power. With his eye seemingly fixed on the next State Assembly election, policies and programmes can wait.

The money trail

There is a need for more investor awareness on cryptocurrencies

The Finance Ministry's warning to potential investors in bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies has come at a time when a new, seemingly attractive investment area has opened up that few have enough information about. The price of bitcoin, the most popular of all cryptocurrencies, not only shot up by well over 1000% over the course of the last year but also fluctuated wildly. One of the main reasons for this volatility is speculation and the entry into the market of a large number of people lured by the prospect of quick and easy profits. The government's caution comes on top of three warnings issued by the Reserve Bank of India since 2013. Investment in bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies increased tremendously in India over the past year, but most new users know close to nothing of the technology, or how to verify the genuineness of a particular cryptocurrency. A number of investors, daunted by the high price of bitcoin, have put their money into less well-established and often spurious cryptocurrencies, only to lose it all. Even some private cryptocurrency operators in India have gone on record saying that as many as 90% of the currencies are scams.

The use value of cryptocurrencies – both as a medium of exchange and as a store of value – is still being explored. Global tech firms such as IBM are developing their own cryptocurrency platforms to speed up cross-border transactions in a secure and transparent manner. At the same time, countries like South Korea and the U.S. are intensifying regulatory scrutiny of the market. South Korea, where bitcoin became something of a craze, recently proposed legislation to either heavily regulate exchanges or ban them. In the U.S., in November, a court ordered a popular cryptocurrency platform to hand over information related to 14,000 accounts to the Internal Revenue Service, undermining the anonymity the digital currencies offer. In all this, India must be careful to differentiate between cryptocurrencies and the blockchain technology they are based on. Cryptocurrencies may or may not emerge as a useful tool, especially since the government may not want to encourage the proliferation of anonymous, non-fiat currencies as its anti-black money fight intensifies. But blockchains, basically digital ledgers of financial transactions that are immutable and instantly updated across the world, are worth looking at as aids to ease doing business. They have the potential to greatly streamline payment mechanisms and make them transparent. As Ajay Tyagi, Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Board of India, said, blockchain technology is useful and should not as yet have regulatory oversight. The inter-ministerial panel on cryptocurrencies will take a call on their future. Meanwhile, the government is correct in underscoring the 'caveat' in *caveat emptor*.

The secular condition

To fully understand what secularism in the Indian context means, we must read the Constitution in its entirety



SUHRITH PARTHASARATHY

There was a point of time, perhaps, when we might have taken the idea of a secular, pluralistic India, tolerant of all sects and religions, as a position set in stone. But, incidents, especially since the early 1990s, have radically altered both reality and our imagination. That certain groups, including many within the political party presently in power at the Centre and in many States, actively believe in a different kind of India is today intensely palpable. Against this backdrop, statements made on December 24, in a public address, by the Minister of State for Employment and Skill Development, Anantkumar Hegde, scarcely come as a surprise.

Secularism and us

"Secular people," he declared, "do not have an identity of their parental blood." "We (the BJP)," he added, "are here to change the Constitution," making it quite clear that in his, and his party's, belief secularism was a model unworthy of constitutional status. Since then, the ruling government has sought to distance itself from these comments, and Mr. Hegde himself has, without explicitly retracting his statements, pledged his allegiance to the Constitution and its superiority. But the message, as it were, is already out, and its discourse is anything but opposed to the present regime's larger ideology. Indeed, Mr. Hegde's comments even mirror those made on several occasions by people belonging to the top brass of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, who have repeatedly stressed on what they view as their ultimate aim: the re-

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cognition of India as a Hindu state, in which secularism lies not at the Constitution's bedrock, but entirely outside the document's aims and purposes.

The reactions to Mr. Hegde's speech have been manifold. Some have welcomed it, as a call for debate, while others have viewed it as the ringing of a veritable alarm bell. Those on the far right in particular, though, have embraced the message, and have gone as far as to suggest that India has never been a secular state, that the Constitution, as it was originally adopted, did not contain the word "secular", which was inserted into the Preamble only through the 42nd amendment introduced by Indira Gandhi's government during the height of Emergency rule. They also point to B.R. Ambedkar's pointed rejection of proposals during the Constitution's drafting to have the word "secular" included in the Preamble. Given that the Constitution is mutable, these facts, in their belief, only buttress arguments against the inclusion of secularism as a constitutional ideal.

But what statements such as those made by Mr. Hegde don't quite grasp is that our Constitution doesn't acquire its secular character merely from the words in the Preamble, but from a collective reading of many of its provisions, particularly the various fundamental rights that it guarantees. Any move, therefore, to amend



the Constitution, to remove the word "secular" from the Preamble, before we consider whether such a change will survive judicial review, will have to remain purely symbolic. Yet, Mr. Hegde's statements nonetheless bear significance, for they exemplify the confidence that he has in the broader project that is already underway. The endeavour here is to steadily strike at the secular values that the Constitution espouses, to defeat it not so much from within, but first from outside. Negating this mission requires sustained effort, not only in thwarting any efforts to amend the Constitution, if indeed they do fructify, but, even more critically, by working towards building a contrary public opinion, not through rhetoric, but through facts, by reaffirming our faith in constitutionalism, and in the hallowed values of plurality and tolerance that our democracy must embody.

Inbuilt freedoms

Now, it is certainly true that the Constituent Assembly explicitly rejected a motion moved by Brajeshwar Prasad from Bihar to have the words "secular" and "socialist" included in the Preamble. But this was not on account of any scepticism that the drafters might have had on the values of secularism. Quite to the contrary, despite what some might want us to believe today, the assembly virtually took for granted India's sec-

The ethics of excellence

Improving academic research needs to be a wide-ranging project



SUNIL MUKHI

Many will agree that academic research in India needs to be internationally competitive and our institutions feature in rankings lists. Global research and competition are now increasingly diverse and in this scenario, India rightfully wants to be an important player. In pedagogy too, we face a situation of enhanced expectations. There has been a rapid expansion with the setting up of more Central and State universities which includes more focussed institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Indian Institutes of Management and National Institutes of Technology, enhancing the opportunities for high-quality teaching. Despite the impressive job being done, there is considerable room for improvement.

Excellence as ethics

But what is still holding our nation back from achieving large-scale global academic excellence which is commensurate with our intellectual heritage and calibre? Beyond

blaming the government and the bureaucracy, the usual suspects, it is important to look inward and ask whether our academics display an adequate ethical commitment to excellence.

It is rarely appreciated that excellence is an ethical issue. We think of it as something arising from people of calibre coupled with sufficient resources. But how do successful nations spot such people and resources and enable them to achieve their potential? The answer: there is a sincere and stated commitment to cultivating excellence as a goal. Contrasting this with the academic ethos in India raises uncomfortable questions.

Consider this advertisement put out by Stanford University recently: "We seek exceptional individuals who can develop a world-class program of research, and have a strong commitment to teaching at both the graduate and undergraduate levels." In such institutions, once an excellent candidate is identified, the institution does everything to convince her/him to accept the offer. Loss of the candidate to a rival institution is considered a serious failure, as excellence is seen to be a precious commodity, with the heads of such institutions held accountable.

In India, in contrast, excellence is at best one of multiple criteria in faculty hiring. Though never



openly stated, extraneous considerations abound. It is an open secret that these considerations define a large fraction of hiring across India, and often precede considerations of merit. In some places, excellence can actually go against the candidate.

The faults within

One might be tempted to solely blame failed institutions/departments on the calibre of leadership, and, ultimately, the government that appoints such leaders. But the problem persists even in those institutions led by respected academics. The reasons need to be examined. While academics freely criticise personality cults in the political sphere, they are happy to cultivate those of their own. A few individuals, possibly achievers in their younger days, grow into collectors of awards and fellowships and dominate organisations and

committees. Factions grow around them. These people, administratively overburdened out of their own choice, make serious judgments without adequate information. Conflict of interest is another, rarely highlighted, problem. For example, within an institution, the leader may provide partisan support for their own subject of expertise and restrain the progress of rivals.

The problem is not just confined to leaders. In many Indian institutions, there is increasing democratic participation of junior academics in hiring and promotions. One hopes that this would propel excellence to the top of the desirable attributes. Unfortunately even in this set-up, research areas that are of global importance are often, out of sheer ignorance, treated with disdain. This is a key point. In the ethics of excellence, ignorance cannot be an excuse. When making decisions affecting the future of one's institution, it is an ethical imperative to educate oneself on all the relevant facts.

Study in contrast

Why do we in India accept extraneous considerations that militate against excellence? Of course our political culture is deeply implicated, which makes it ironic when our politicians ask why Indian scientists do not win Nobel prizes. But a part of the responsibility and the power to change lies within

the academic community itself. The problem is our collective failure to articulate the goal of excellence and to exert firm pressure on anyone, however important, who blocks the path. The old tale that Indians instinctively behave like crabs, pulling others down, still has well-deserved traction in academia.

This is not to suggest that even developed countries are free of academic politics or these faults. Rather, there are correctives applied from two directions. One is the rank and file of academia which tends to be more professional than ours. Personality cults are met with a sharp push back and conflicts of interest are openly challenged. Even when disputes take place, excellence does not take a back seat. The other corrective comes from the top; institution leaders are evaluated by their funding and accreditation agencies, and made aware that their future leadership opportunities are diminished by every petty action and slipshod committee work. Ultimately, the system is accountable because it is committed to an ethical standard – the standard of excellence.

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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.

A yes from Rajinikanth

By announcing his entry into politics, but without floating a party, Tamil film superstar Rajinikanth has released only "a trailer" ("Rajinikanth takes the plunge finally", January 1). How the picture will fare at the political box office, only time can tell. The fact that he will float a party much later shows that he is playing the waiting game. He seems to have taken a great risk, as if things go wrong, they could dent his image and the adulation he has so assiduously created over the decades. Objectively speaking, his plunge into the cesspool of politics is more due to the pressure from his fans and at the constant urging of so-called intellectuals. His call for

"spiritual politics" may be deemed as promoting the Hindutva agenda in disguise and may not go down well with the minorities. It is always a misconception that one can serve the public only through politics. Mr. Rajinikanth can help people through social initiatives. We have not forgotten how he was a factor in the fall of the Jayalalithaa government in 1996, which he could do without entering politics. There is a need for change in Tamil Nadu, but it is doubtful whether he is the answer.

V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

Celluloid-based politics continues to cast its giant shadow on Tamil Nadu.

However, there is now a new formula to this – the presence of money and muscle power. His 'saintly advice' on following a 'spiritual path' sounds rather strange in the prevailing political atmosphere. The only redeeming feature of his political entry is his timing and his patience to wait further and build a stronger political base through his fans. The impact of this new wave is quite unpredictable, since the forces which might counter his entry cannot be underestimated (Some editions, "Present perfect but future tense", January 1).

B. GURUMURTHY, Madurai

Overshadowed by bias

The article, "On another New Year's Day" (January 1), ends

with an avoidable reference to the "new found right" of the Opposition to question the Centre, after the Gujarat election result. The writer, Gopalkrishna Gandhi, unfortunately, dwarfs himself in every outstanding article of his by betraying his prejudices against the BJP. Most people hold no animus against the BJP, as he wants readers to believe. One's leanings and preferences should not overshadow one's brilliant nationalist spirit, merit and mettle.

SIVAMANI VASUDEVAN, Chennai

It may not work

One of the suggestions, in the Editorial, "For a wider pool" (January 1), on clinical trials, to encourage a "wider cross-section of society to participate in research", may

not work. In a country where even the simple act of blood donation has not caught on due to various factors, how can we expect society at large to realise the value of clinical trials? It is inevitable, therefore, that the burden of clinical trials will largely fall on the financially needy. As such, there is a need to strengthen the system of selecting human subjects, in which informed consent and volunteering for trials are cardinal principles. Clinical

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

Wrestler Sushil Kumar – who qualified for the next Commonwealth Games in Gold Coast, Australia – was erroneously referred to as a *double Olympic gold medallist* in the report, "Sushil qualifies for CWG amidst brawl" (Dec. 30, 2017, Sports page). The description should have been *double Olympic medallist*.

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