

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A time for deep reform

Way forward lies in regulatory reforms in labour and land markets, large-scale low-tech manufacturing



AMARTYA LAHIRI

COUNTING IN

A caste census is long overdue. Accurate data will aid governments in targeting policies, help parties to focus political outreach

CONSTITUENTS OF THE NDA have called for a caste census in recent days, and during the passage of the 127th Constitution Amendment Bill, which restores the rights of state governments to make their own OBC lists, in Parliament. The Janata Dal (United), Apna Dal, and RPI (Athawale) have spoken in favour of conducting the exercise. Opposition parties such as the SP, RJD, DMK and TDP have also asked for a caste count. The UPA government held a Socio-Economic Caste Census in 2011, but the data was not released. In July this year, the Union Minister of State for Home Affairs told Parliament that "the Government of India has decided as a matter of policy not to enumerate caste-wise population other than SCs and STs in Census". This position is increasingly untenable. The architecture of India's affirmative programme is based on caste. Public policy must not be formulated on the basis of hazy projections and blurry extrapolations. Accurate data on the caste composition of the population is needed to maximise the gains of policies such as reservation in education and employment.

A caste census was last held in 1931 and discontinued thereafter. National parties such as the Congress and BJP opposed its reintroduction ostensibly on the ground that enumeration will lead to congealing and perpetuation of caste identities, defeating free India's aim of annihilation of the caste system. But the stark fact is that caste continues to be an influential determinant in public affairs and access to resources. In the absence of updated data, therefore, political parties and public institutions extrapolate from the 1931 Census and National Sample Survey to make claims, arrive at conclusions and even policies. The Mandalisation of the polity in the 1990s has failed to break political resistance to the caste census — it may even have strengthened it. By all accounts, despite the BJP's hectic social engineering on the ground, the Sangh Parivar's apprehension seems to be that a caste census will shine the light on fault-lines in Hindu society and undermine its grand project of creating a monolithic vote bank. The predominantly upper caste leaderships of major political parties are against generating caste numbers, probably because enumeration would expose the dominance and privilege certain castes have continued to enjoy in social, cultural, political and economic spheres — despite the rhetoric of equality, and promises of social justice and a level playing field.

Sanghamitra Maurya, the lead speaker for the BJP in the discussion on the OBC bill in Lok Sabha, claimed that the Narendra Modi government is in favour of a caste census — the party is yet to clarify its position on her statement. However, the BJP has been wooing OBC leaders by offering them posts in the party and administration. And the Modi government has been focussed on targeted delivery of public goods and services through initiatives such as JAM (Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and mobile). Accurate data on caste will help both party and government — the latter in plugging the gaps and leaks in its schemes, and the former in focusing its political outreach.

THE INDIAN ECONOMY is heading towards an uncertain but pivotal moment. It is coming off a historically poor run with the economy having shrunk by a post-Independence record 7.3 per cent in 2020-21. This contraction was also an order of magnitude greater than the 3.3 per cent contraction of the world economy in 2020. In other words, India did poorly with respect to both its own past and the rest of the world. The economy is now expected to return to its pre-pandemic level of GDP only in 2022. The pandemic will effectively have cost India two years of lost income growth.

This isn't the only bad news. The Covid contraction was preceded by almost 13 quarters of continuous decline in real GDP growth. This backdrop of declining growth and the precipitous Covid contraction is likely going to reverse decades of progress in lifting Indians out of poverty.

A little background on poverty in India is useful here. The percentage of Indians living below the poverty line (the Headcount Index) in 1985 was almost the same as in 1952. In effect, India made little progress in poverty reduction between 1952 and 1985. It is only after 1991-92 that India began to make significant progress in fighting poverty. A 2016 study by World Bank affiliated researchers Gaurav Dutt, Rinku Murgai and Martin Ravallion found that during the period 1992-2012, the Headcount Index declined by around 25 percentage points. On a cumulative basis, the post-reform period lifted over 200 million people out of poverty between 1992 and 2012.

The big difference between the pre and post-liberalisation phases was the doubling of India's GDP growth rate. The welfare dividends of this growth turn-around can also be found in measures of economic inequality. In a series of recent research papers, Viktoria Hnatkovska and I have found evidence of declining gaps in wages and household consumption between SC/STs and non-SC/STs during 1983-2012. There is similar evidence of decreasing gaps between rural and urban workers during this period. In short, the growth pick-up after 1991-92 lifted

the economic fortunes of many disparate socio-economic groups.

With this background on poverty alleviation in India, consider the following facts. A recent study by researchers at the Azim Premji University estimates that 230 million people may have fallen below a poverty measure of Rs 375/day in rural India and Rs 430/day in urban India between January and October 2020. In a separate study, the Pew Research Center estimates that the number of Indians living below a more conservative measure of \$2/day increased by 75 million in the space of a year since the pandemic struck. In other words, the economic contraction of 2020 has reversed a large part of the poverty reduction that was achieved over the past three decades. And, while absorbing these facts, note that these studies do not consider the ravages of the second wave and its effects on the financial health of households and firms.

The key lesson to take away from this history of poverty alleviation in India is that the most effective way of helping the poor is faster economic growth. Social welfare programmes that work through redistributive schemes can at best be complementary mechanisms that provide social insurance against bad luck in the labour market or in health. But, in the absence of growth, relying on redistribution to fight poverty only guarantees a lot of poor people.

So, what are India's growth prospects going forward? Unfortunately, both domestic and external conditions look fraught. On the external side, the most favourable aspect is the ongoing return of the advanced economies towards economic normalcy. The economic recovery in the advanced economies will create demand for products from the rest of the world, including India.

The external conditions however also have potentially severe headwinds.

First, there are signs of rising inflation in advanced economies which typically induces a monetary tightening cycle. Second, there is rising concern in advanced economies about the need to normalise the monetary policy stance by raising interest rates from their current near-zero levels. As growth and inflation

firm up in these economies, the pressure to raise rates will only grow. These forces will make foreign capital more expensive, which will put downward pressure on an already tepid investment rate as the cost of finance rises. Third, public debt levels in advanced economies have risen sharply during the pandemic as they responded to the crisis with debt-financed fiscal expansions. There will be belt-tightening which will likely temper demand. Fourth, the increase in global oil prices presents yet another external constraint.

Domestic economic conditions were already problematic leading into the pandemic, which was the reason for the swoon in growth rates since 2016. The NPA overhang in the banking sector has not been rationalised. The economic contraction of last year will have only worsened the situation. The uncertainty surrounding the economic environment had already induced an investment slowdown before 2020. None of that has dissipated. Rather, the botched vaccine policy has now created additional uncertainty regarding the state of public health going forward.

Given the acute lack of available fiscal resources, the most promising way forward for the government is to embrace regulatory reforms in labour and land markets which go beyond collecting different codes into one head and calling it a reform. India's salvation lies in the growth of large-scale low-tech manufacturing. This is the only sector that can employ the 10 million new workers joining the labour market annually at wages that reflect their aspirations. Without reforms that reduce the risks of hiring labour and acquiring land, this sector will not grow. And, public sector divestment has to be embraced on a war-footing.

The fiscal costs of deep reforms are low, but their economic returns are potentially high. Of course, meaningful reforms have potentially high though uncertain political costs. It is time to pay the piper.

The writer is Royal Bank Research Professor of Economics, University of British Columbia

DUE PROCESS FOR ALL

SC check on governments' power to withdraw cases against MPs-MLAs is welcome. Cleaner politics calls for far-reaching changes

IN AUGUST LAST year, the Karnataka government decided to drop charges in 61 criminal cases, several of which involved elected representatives and ministers, including the state's law minister. Four months later, the state high court restrained the state government from acting on that order. "Courts are duty bound to assess whether prima facie a case is made or not," it observed. The HC's insistence on due process being followed in criminal cases involving members of the political class was salutary. It now has the Supreme Court's imprimatur. "No prosecution against a sitting or former MP/MLA shall be withdrawn without the leave of the high court," a three-judge bench headed by CJIN V Ramana ruled on Tuesday. "While determining whether the withdrawal of the prosecution subserves the administration of justice, the court would be justified in scrutinising the nature and gravity of the offence", it said. This assertion of the primacy of public interest, often jettisoned by governments to favour members of ruling parties or alliances, is very welcome.

Links between money and muscle power with politics continue to bedevil democracy, despite numerous interventions by the country's highest court. On Tuesday, while their brother judges were ruling on the government's power to withdraw criminal cases, Justices Rohinton Nariman and B R Gavai lamented that "this Court, time and again, has appealed to the law-makers of the country to... bring out necessary amendments... All these appeals have fallen on deaf ears". The bench was referring to the failure of the BJP, Congress, JD(U), RJD, IJP, CPM, CPI, RLSP and NCP to abide by the SC's 2020 directive that asked political parties to publicly disclose the criminal antecedents of candidates put up by them in elections to Parliament and state assemblies. The principle behind that directive, reiterated by the court on Tuesday, is "to enable voters to have all necessary information, so that they can exercise their right to franchise in an effective manner".

In a verdict last year, the Karnataka HC had said that public prosecutors had the right to disagree when governments invoked Article 21 of the CrPC to withdraw criminal cases. "A public prosecutor cannot act like a postbox or submit to the dictates of the executive," it said. The apex court has reaffirmed the public servant's autonomy and asserted that power to withdraw cases cannot be "used for political purposes". These are important steps, but as Justices Nariman and Gavai pointed out, rooting out the "malignancy of criminalisation of politics" requires "a major surgery". The ball is in the court of the executive.

KEEP CALM, CURRY ON

Indians don't need to worry, they have already had their culinary revenge on the rest of the world

AN INDIAN-AMERICAN FOOD blogger, Chaheti Bansal, put out a now-viral video calling on people to cancel the word "curry", apparently because it's a term invented by "white people who couldn't be bothered to learn the actual names of our dishes." On cue, the internet divided itself into pro-curry and anti-curry camps.

Many Indians and Indian-origin people have agreed with Bansal's argument that using one word to define all food from a country as diverse and complex as India smacks of racism and ignorance. It was, they point out, invented by the British and the fact that Indians still use it indicates a colonial hangover. Then there are those — especially Britons — who have taken umbrage, saying that the word "curry" describes a beloved British-Indian culinary tradition and that Indian English has anyway appropriated the word to describe a variety of Indian dishes (often gravy-based) for the sake of convenience. Not to mention the term's origin in the Tamil word, "kari", used to describe certain kinds of savoury preparations.

None of the above is entirely wrong. Yet the "curry is a bad word because it's a colonial invention" argument is as stale as last week's chicken tikka masala. Sure, there are those who use the word as a vague descriptor of anything remotely close to Indian flavours (what exactly do "curry-flavoured fries" taste of?) or, worse, as a racist slur. None of this is acceptable and must be countered whenever possible. But it's not as if Indians haven't got even with the rest of the world for insisting that all Indian food is bright orange and causes "Delhi belly". Because there is no other way of describing such creations as gobi manchurian, pasta in pink sauce, tandoori momo and paneer cannelloni which, unlike most other kinds of revenge, are best served hot.



SARABJIT ARJAN SINGH

GETTING BACK ON TRACK

Railways must give up control, reduce risk, to get private players to run trains

ON JULY 1, 2020, the Indian Railways launched the formal process of inviting private parties to run trains on the Indian railway system. Bids were finally opened last month. Hopes of a large participation were belied as there were no bids for nine clusters and only two bids for three clusters. Even for these three clusters, the only serious bid was by Indian Railways' (IR) own company IRCTC, which in effect negated the basic objectives of bringing in private capital.

What are the reasons for this failure? It is an outcome of the lack of alignment of the interests of IR and the concessioners. IR wants the capital and technology without giving up control, while the concessioner wants a far more equal relationship to be moderated by a regulator. IR has imposed constraints that prevent efficient decisions and adopted an organisational design that does not take into account the characteristics and associated risks that will determine outcomes and investment decisions.

What are these risks and constraints? The biggest dampener is the lumpiness of investment before a single passenger can be carried. Train sets have to be purchased without really knowing how much traffic the service will be able to attract in the face of rising competition from airlines. IR does not guarantee the investor that, in case the concession fails, it will acquire the train sets. The other big dampener is the absence of a regulator for resolving disputes. The proposed independent engineer is far from satisfac-

tory. There are other risks that put off investors that we will not go into. But suffice to say that the current model of inviting private players to run trains has failed. To take forward the initiative, a new model based on a new strategy is required.

The central issue is how to align the three interests: India's need to be capable of designing and manufacturing state-of-the-art rolling stock, IR's need for private capital participation and private capital's necessity of earning a profit. They can be aligned provided the lumpiness of investment in train sets can be eliminated by establishing a company that leases rolling stock not only to concessioners but also to IR. This will also enable reducing the concession period from 35 years to a more reasonable 10-15 years, bringing in competition.

The rolling stock company, apart from leasing train sets, can also be the window for bringing in new technology, preferably by purchasing from those who manufacture in India in collaboration with one of IR's production units and are willing to transfer the technology. This will require IR to guarantee a minimum offtake, say for a period of 10 years, to the manufacturer. For starters, IRFC, which is already into leasing rolling stock, can be that company.

A word about bringing in new technology. It is essential that the opportunity opened up by inviting private players is used to move the rolling stock industry up the industrial value chain and bring about a struc-

tural change of the Indian economy. This can only be brought about by a vision that encourages long-term arrangements with rolling stock suppliers. An arrangement that gives access to IR's rolling stock market is the only way to compel global players to share technology and form joint ventures with Indian companies.

However, technology transfer is not simply a matter of manufacturing in India. It requires understanding the critical elements of the technology and absorbing them into the design-production process. This calls for the investment of large sums of money and the involvement of universities, research institutes and national laboratories. For example, for developing high-speed train technology, the Chinese involved 25 national first-class key universities, 11 first-class research institutes, and 51 national-level laboratories for research, development and production. India will also need to do something similar.

As far as drawing private players is concerned, all that is required is to reduce the risks for the concessioners, reduce the period of the concession to around 15 years, establish a regulator and moderate charges like the amount for the maintenance of tracks and stations. With these changes, the plan may still take off. However, the initiative will remain limited to just running trains if there is no long-term vision.

The writer is former general manager of Indian Railways



AUGUST 12, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

MORE RAIN WOES

THE GHAGRA AND the Rapti wrought havoc on more villages on August 11 as flood waters breached the tenuous remains of the Turtipar-Srinagar bund at a village in Ballia district. The fierce Ghagra had been eroding the bund for weeks. It cut a 50-metre wide breach in the bund at Chandpur village, said Murlu Shyam Manohar, the Uttar Pradesh relief commissioner in Lucknow. He told newsmen that no damage had been done so far because the flood waters gushing through the breach were being held by a retreating bund about 500 metres away from the main bund. According to the relief commissioner, at least

50 villagers are likely to be affected in case the retreating bund also gave away.

LIMAYE CHALLENGED

MADHU LIMAYE'S CLAIMS of a Lok Dal-Janata-Congress (U) consensus on merger into a united party was challenged by the members of Congress (U) and Janata Party. Though the Lok Dal president Charan Singh refused to comment on the subject, a section of his party was unhappy over what some of the party leaders described as "premature publicity to the merger plan". Janata Party President Chandrashekar said Limaye had "given a distorted picture and that did not

serve the cause of Opposition unity". Congress (U) general secretary K P Unnikrishnan was more forthright in denial.

IMF LOAN SOUGHT

FINANCE MINISTER R Venkataraman said in a radio interview that there was no need to be apprehensive about taking a big loan from the IMF. He said the "government will certainly not do anything derogatory to its self-respect and India has a very high reputation internationally as a borrower". He said the Government was negotiating for 5 billion SDRs (special drawing rights), a loan of Rs 5,000 crores.

THE IDEAS PAGE

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

The future that environmental scientists foresaw with alarm, when the IPCC produced its first report three decades ago, has arrived.

— THE GUARDIAN

China's guiding anxieties

To understand its approach towards India, it is important to grasp wider context of Beijing's foreign and security policy challenges across Asia, as well as Xi's domestic compulsions



C R Sasikumar

East China Seas, as well as the Taiwan Strait.

In particular, China is deeply worried by the re-emergence and strengthening of multilateral opposition to China, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or "Quad") between the US, Japan, Australia and India. This has been evidenced by shifting Chinese responses to the Quad, whose latest incarnation it initially dismissed in 2019 as self-contradictory and likely to dissolve, before then trying unsuccessfully to split it apart through a mix of carrots and sticks in 2020 and 2021.

For students of history, the Quad itself has come a long way since Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe first proposed that Australia, India, Japan and the US work together on disaster response in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The response in other capitals, though, was tentative at best. In Washington, President George W Bush worried that such cooperation would unhelpfully alienate China. In New Delhi, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh repeatedly ruled out any real security cooperation with the Quad while categorising ties with Beijing as his "imperative necessity". And in Canberra, the government of my conservative predecessor John Howard both worried about undermining economically beneficial ties with China and opposed expanding existing trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan by adding India; and in June 2007, Australia formally withdrew and announced the decision in Beijing soon after. After Abe, the driving force behind the Quad, unexpectedly resigned in September 2007, his successor Yasuo Fukuda formally resigned the Quad to the dustbin of history until its recent reincarnation.

That is why Beijing believed the Quad could easily be split apart again. But China's "carrots and sticks" approach to breaking up the current reincarnation hasn't worked so far, not least because of China's deep alienation of India since the critical events of June 2020. And as US multilateral cooperation with its partners has increased, Beijing has come to increasingly see itself as beset by threats on all sides — a predicament that China's culture is deeply attuned to, given that being "ambushed on 10 sides" is among the ultimate strategic dilemma recorded in China's canon of military classics. So far, however, the response from China's new class of "wolf warrior" diplomats to this emerging strategic challenge has been to only grow more assertive in rhetoric and behaviour. This may seem perplexing, given that it has served only to alienate other countries and isolate China further. Understanding it, therefore, requires a final piece in the puzzle: China's domestic politics.

In the fall of 2022, China's Communist Party

In practice, China's domestic politics in the lead up to the 20th Congress will mean that its leaders, diplomats and generals will be displaying maximum nationalistic fervour. This may well mean China taking political and policy decisions, which in a normal season they would not because doing so could compromise Beijing's longstanding diplomatic and strategic goals, including in dealings with India. Needless to say, this is potentially dangerous in all of China's external relationships where land or maritime boundaries are in dispute and where military or naval deployments are active.

will hold its 20th Party Congress, when new ranks of senior leadership will be elevated, and where Xi is likely to be confirmed in power for another term — and potentially for life. Until this occurs, all facts of political life in China will be shaped by Xi's need to display absolute strength and resolve on all matters — foreign and domestic. And for his subordinates to display absolute loyalty.

In practice, China's domestic politics in the lead up to the 20th Congress will mean that its leaders, diplomats and generals will be displaying maximum nationalistic fervour. This may well mean China taking political and policy decisions, which in a normal season they would not because doing so could compromise Beijing's longstanding diplomatic and strategic goals, including in dealings with India. Needless to say, this is potentially dangerous in all of China's external relationships where land or maritime boundaries are in dispute and where military or naval deployments are active. Overriding Chinese domestic imperatives are unlikely to be accommodating of normal diplomatic nuance.

With US Secretary of State Antony Blinken having just visited India to press for closer bilateral strategic cooperation, including a likely in-person meeting of the Quad leaders on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York in September, we should expect China's behaviour toward India to harden further in the coming months. But if President Xi instead decided that it was better domestic politics (against an internal critique of his predisposition for strategic overreach) to improve China's strategic position in Asia amid its competition with Washington, Beijing's diplomats may yet adopt a more moderate approach, including with India. If stability can be restored to the China-India strategic relationship, this could provide a window for Asia's two mega-economies to reopen their markets to each other, helping to stimulate growth as both seek a smoother recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Indeed, the choice between these two alternatives — an increasingly hardline nationalist response, as opposed to extending a temporary olive branch offered to, say, Europe, Japan and India — is likely to be on the discussion table this month as China's most senior leaders retire for their annual retreat to Beidaihe during August. By September, we are likely to see the first signs of which of these views has prevailed.

The writer is President of the Asia Society, which has a centre in Mumbai. He is also a former prime minister of Australia

How not to help discoms

Central government schemes to improve financial position of discoms have not worked. A new approach is needed



SOMIT DASGUPTA

RECENTLY, THE government launched a new scheme to improve the distribution infrastructure of the distribution companies (discoms) with the primary intention of improving their financial health. Under this scheme, the discoms will be offered financial assistance provided they meet certain laid down criteria. The total outlay for the scheme is around Rs 3.03 lakh crore, spread over five years. The objective of the scheme is to bring down commercial losses in the range of 12-15 per cent and also reduce the difference between the average cost of supply (ACS) and average revenue realised (ARR) to zero by 2024-25.

This kind of assistance programme for discoms is nothing new and has been going on since 2001, when the Accelerated Power Development Scheme was initiated. This was followed by various other schemes with some differences between them. But the overall principle remained the same — financial assistance will be offered in the form of grants and loans provided some pre-identified parameters move in a direction that would indicate better performance of discoms. Prior to the launching of this scheme, the government had launched the UDAY scheme in 2015. UDAY, however, did not involve any monetary assistance to the states, but only promised to help the states in reducing the cost of power through coal linkage rationalisation, etc.

The problem with all these schemes (including UDAY) is that they have not delivered and the financial position of the discoms has only worsened. The Power Finance Corporation reports that the aggregate loss of the discoms (after tax) was about Rs 49,600 crore in 2018-19. A recent report of Niti Aayog has assessed the losses to be about Rs 90,000 crore in 2020-21, though this figure is not strictly comparable to the PFC figure. Surprisingly, such schemes are being formulated, one after another, with outlays running into trillions of rupees knowing fully well that they are not effective and have not worked in the past. Reduction of commercial losses is not really about improving infrastructure, it is more of a managerial issue.

Though the average losses (inclusive of technical and commercial) is about 22 per cent today, several discoms have losses in excess of 40 per cent. It is common knowledge that it is possible to bring down losses from 40 per cent to about 15 per cent without any significant investments in infrastructure. Investments, however, would be required to bring down losses further to a single-digit level since all low-hanging fruits would have been consumed by then.

The governance of these reform-linked schemes is a complex issue because the performance of the discoms needs to be monitored quarterly to facilitate the release of funds to deserving discoms. The two most

popular parameters which are monitored are the loss levels and the difference between the ACS and ARR. There are inherent problems with these parameters since they keep fluctuating and it is very difficult to fathom their trend on a quarter-wise basis, rendering the release of funds to be tricky and cumbersome.

In the scheme now announced by the government, monitoring will be all the more complex since about 26 parameters will be taken into consideration and assigned a score, though here again, loss levels and the difference between ACS and ARR will have the highest weightage. Moreover, for some of the parameters, it may be difficult to assign a score across discoms which may lead to some amount of subjectivity. Some examples being — providing accurate energy accounts, tariff reforms initiated, consumer rights and grievance redressal handled. Some of the parameters are even questionable, for instance, liquidation of regulatory assets, since these are mandated by the regulatory commissions and therefore, the discoms have no role to play in them.

Due to all the problems associated with reform-linked assistance schemes, an alternate approach that could be considered by the Centre (in lieu of such assistance schemes) is providing only transitional financial support to all discoms, which are privatised under the private-public partnership mode. One would again like to cite the case of Delhi. A transitional support of Rs 3,450 crore spread over five years proved to be exceedingly beneficial since it allowed the privatised utilities some breathing time to bring down their losses. On the flip side, one can also mention the case of the first phase of privatisation of discoms in Odisha (late 1990s), which proved to be a failure and one of the reasons often cited was the lack of any transitional support.

Since in an earlier policy statement the government had mentioned that privatisation of discoms is to be promoted, it would make sense to consider this transitional support as a catalyst. The quantum of support can be worked out on some normative basis and the performance of the discom can be monitored over a five-year period. The onus would be on the privatised utility to use this support judiciously under the supervision of the regulatory commission. Targets of loss reduction can be laid down on a year-wise basis and if these targets are not met, the privatised utilities would have to bear the loss. Incentives could also be thought of in case there was over-achievement vis-à-vis the targets. This is exactly the approach followed in the case of Delhi. Adopting this approach will ensure that the central government moves away from the micro-management of discoms, which inevitably happens if the release of funds is linked to reform-linked parameters on a quarter-wise basis. It would also give an opportunity to try a new approach, different from what was done in the past which clearly has not paid dividends despite the huge quantum of money spent.

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When state is the patriarch

It insists parents police their daughters, or stay silent in face of violence

ent", a "good" parent. The Goa CM's comments in regard to the teens being on the beach all night suggested that the parents of these girls had failed not just to "protect" their wards but also failed at controlling them adequately. The parents here are charged with the responsibility of being the "guardians" of their daughters' virtue by way of restricting their bodies to spaces where they might be controlled. It is this virtue that is tied to ideas of reputations of families, communities and, indeed, of a homogeneously defined Indian culture. Children, especially girl children, have few rights. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act (2012) raised the age of consent from 16 to 18, giving the state the right to decide that young people between the ages of 16 and 18 do not have rights over their own bodies in sexual contexts. The state often tends to arrogate to itself the status of the parent, with its citizens often seen as recalcitrant children, but equally when it chooses, as in this case, it arrogates the right back to the citizen-parents of minors, relinquishing its role as state-patriarch. In this case, the state represented here by the Goa CM asserts the right of parents over their children as disciplinarians and guardians of their virtue and morality. These anxieties are particularly

located in the bodies of Hindu upper caste women and it is their parents who are recognised as having rights over the bodies of their children.

This is reflected in the anxieties articulated in regard to the bogey of love jihad and the anti-Romeo squads instituted in Uttar Pradesh to ensure that "good" Hindu girls are not "ensnared by the wiles" of Muslim men. They reflect the zealous way in which upper-caste Hindu families are required to control their daughters, over whom they have ownership rights. However, the state is never entirely convinced that parents can indeed control their wayward daughters and, therefore, they continue to exercise their own controls. In an increasingly majoritarian communalised context, the state is uncertain, for instance, whether parents will satisfactorily regulate the romantic choices their children make and feels the need to step in. The Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance 2020 must be read in the light of these observations. From the perspective of the communalised state-patriarch, then, women themselves are commodities either of little consequence if they are Dalit or Muslim or of relevance only as objects of patriarchy if they are Hindu and upper caste.

Many women, across caste and religion, refuse to be mute spectators to this travesty. The Pinjra Tod movement against hostel curfews and others like it grew out of such restrictions on women's mobility, often supported by parents eager to endorse the surveillance of their daughter's choices and especially their sexuality. Young women subvert and resist the tactics of their parents and the institutions to restrain them in a variety of ways, often becoming deeply politicised in the process. Such young women are a source of fear, and that they are feared by the state-patriarch can be seen from the pattern of arrests of young women, many of them Muslim and Dalit, in the last 10 months, especially in the wake of the anti-CAA protests.

What happens, then, when the state-patriarch gets anxious? It responds by becoming increasingly authoritarian, demanding that the citizen-parent either stay silent in the face of increasing violence from the powers that be or aid the agendas of the state in controlling not just their daughters, but also its unruly populations.

Shilpa Phadke is a sociologist and co-author of Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

HARDLY REFORMIST

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Retro tax out, reform in' (IE, August 11). Calling the repeal of the 2012 retrospective income tax law by the BJP led-NDA government its reformist agenda is hyperbolic. One swallow does not make a summer. Our economic, social, and educational sectors need imaginative reforms. But unfortunately, the powers that be undertake them only if they benefit them electorally.

Tarsem Singh, Mahipalpur

GLUE NEEDED

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Food for thought" (IE, August 11). While it may be possible for the emerging opposition-coalition to adopt a common agenda, it will also have to declare its Prime Ministerial candidate to lead in the next Lok Sabha elections. This is a must to dislodge Narendra Modi — voters opted for Modi rather than his party in the 2019 election.

YG Chouksey, Pune

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Food for thought" (IE, August 11). Political alliances, in order to be able to truly work for people's welfare, should be based upon the ideological coherence of the parties coming together rather than the lust for power. There should be a long-term vision. An alliance of parties with conflicting ideologies is far too busy manoeuvring to save its government, to deliver upon the

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promises made during elections. Vinay Saroha, Delhi

INDIA UNDERMINED

THIS REFERS TO the report, "Delhi 'hate speech': Accused have history; BJP ex-spokesman, 5 held" (IE, Aug 11). The report does not reveal under which sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) they are charged. Not long ago, at the same place, there was an incident of burning the copy of the Constitution along with derogatory slogans against Ambedkar and Dalits. No information as to the fate of the case and culprits. These criminal acts are undermining the very foundation of the Republic of India.

LR Murmu, Delhi