

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Crime and politics

SC anguish on parties' inaction on criminalisation is welcome — but may not be enough



S Y QURAISHI

PARLIAMENT LAMENT

Government only knows how to engage with Opposition as a poll enemy, doesn't have language to talk to it between elections

AS GOVERNMENT AND Opposition confront each other outside the House, after the Monsoon Session of Parliament was brought to an early end, there is an unedifying war of accusations. The allegations from both sides that thicken the air are grave — about “lies” and physical violence. The Opposition has alleged that “outsiders”, who were not part of Parliament security, were brought in to manhandle their leaders and MPs, who were protesting the government’s “authoritarian attitude” and “high-handedness”. The government brought out a battery of ministers to accuse the Opposition of “anarchy”, a premeditated bid to derail proceedings. The ministers drew attention to a video in which a woman marshal appears surrounded by Opposition MPs, they called for punitive action against errant MPs. An investigation of the melee may well sift through the claims and assign blame at a later date. For now, this uncivil crossfire of words and images should embarrass both government as well as Opposition.

Notwithstanding its strenuous attempts to mount the podium and declaim on the sanctity of parliament and democracy, this moment indicts the government much more. Because the abortive Monsoon Session was not just made of the unruly scenes that finally brought the curtain down on it. It was also about the government’s refusal to yield any space at all to the Opposition, and its brutish use of a majority to push through important bills without even a modicum of discussion, much less a reference to a parliamentary committee. The government refused to talk at all about the Pegasus revelations of its alleged use of Israeli spyware to potentially target political opponents, dissenters and others for snooping. It only allowed a discussion on the broad theme of agriculture after sanitising it of any reference to the Centre’s three farm laws that continue to stoke farmers’ protests. In this session, too, the government’s effort has been to paint the entire Opposition as a band of disruptors who are still unreconciled to Narendra Modi’s popularity and the BJP’s electoral victories, and when it is not doing that, to resort to whataboutery. What about the parliament days lost when the Congress ruled the Centre, what about the abbreviated sessions of legislatures in Congress-ruled states, goes the government’s best defence of its own continuing inability to run the House. The writing on the Parliament wall is clear: This government seems to know how to engage the Opposition only as the enemy in electoral battle, it does not appear to possess — nor is willing to learn — the language to acknowledge it and talk to it in between elections.

It would be taking a terribly denuded view of parliamentary democracy to see the floor of the House as a place to pass Bills alone. It is also a space from which the Opposition parties — and the people they represent — demand accountability from the executive, apply the check on its power. This is so even and especially when the executive has a large majority — when the Opposition does not have the numbers, it must depend on the rules of the game to make itself seen and heard. From Modi’s iconic 2014 genuflection at the gates of the “temple” of democracy to his imprimatur on a state-of-the-art Parliament building and a futuristic Central vista — the legislature is the pivot of this government’s, any government’s, legitimacy. Its letter and spirit stand violated when the government stonewalls the Opposition.

ON AUGUST 10, the Supreme Court made a new move in its bid to call into question the rising tide of criminalisation in Indian politics. The judgment came in response to a plea of contempt filed by advocate Brajesh Singh against political parties flouting its orders regarding disclosing criminal antecedents of candidates in the 2020 Bihar Assembly elections. “The nation continues to wait and is losing patience,” the apex court has gone on record to say.

The court has imposed fines of Rs 1 lakh on the BJP, the Congress and the JD(U), among others, for failing to comply with its orders regarding complete disclosure of their candidates’ criminal history. The CPI(M) and the Nationalist Congress Party were fined Rs 5 lakh for complete failure to comply with any of its mandates.

Growing criminalisation has been a constant theme of Indian politics. According to the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), 233 MPs in the current Lok Sabha are facing criminal charges, up from 187 in 2014, 162 in 2009 and 128 in 2004.

The current orders of the SC have put a new onus on the Election Commission to do something concrete, for example, create a phone app to display the detailed criminal history of any contesting candidate. This should be accompanied with a separate cell in the ECI to monitor the compliance of all the political parties regarding this; any breach should be brought to the attention of the SC without delay.

While seeking to add strength to the Election Commission to combat criminalisation is a welcome step, the Supreme Court remains sceptical about the legislature taking concrete steps to solve the problem. This scepticism is not unwarranted. Political parties in India have always been notoriously reluctant to introduce changes to combat criminalisation, and the excuses they have given for doing so have remained nearly unchanged since Independence.

The Supreme Court has, however,

stopped short of drastic steps to combat this problem. It has rejected the suggestion of senior advocate and amicus curiae KV Viswanathan to direct the Election Commission to bar political parties that fail to comply with criminalisation protocols by using its authority derived from Clause 16A of the Election Symbols Order. This step, the SC reasons, would be going too far and infringing the domain of the legislature.

The legislature has been very slow in addressing this issue, and political parties remain extremely reluctant to change their ways, citing two major excuses. “Winnability” of candidates is the first reason. The logic of a candidate with criminal charges doing good for the people of a constituency is dubious at best. The winnability clause is an attempt by the party to absolve itself of all blame and put the onus of sending a criminally charged candidate to Parliament solely on the voter. This is unacceptable.

The other reason offered by political parties is summarised by the maxim of Indian law, which is that any accused is innocent until proven guilty. Most criminally accused candidates, Indian political party spokespeople maintain, are the victims of “vendetta politics”. While there is some merit to this argument, I have pointed out the fallacy of its application in this matter multiple times. There were 4.78 lakh prisoners (as of December 2019) of whom 3.30 lakh were under trial, i.e. not yet proven guilty. Yet, their fundamental rights — their right to liberty, freedom of movement, freedom of occupation and right to dignity — are curbed completely.

I have posed this question on various fora, where honourable judges and eminent jurists were present. Nobody has ever explained this paradox to me. Besides, the SC had annulled the appointment of a Central Vigilance Commissioner on the ground that a criminal case was pending against him. These blatant double standards are a clear

violation of Article 14, which guarantees to all citizens equality before the law. Even a peon cannot be appointed if even a minor criminal case is pending against him. But a person chargesheeted for murder or rape can become a legislator and even a minister.

To add insult to injury, an “innocent” undertrial cannot vote, but a man chargesheeted for murder can even contest election from jail.

The ECI has suggested some safeguards against vendetta politics. First, only offences that carry an imprisonment of at least 5 years are to be considered. The case against the candidate should have been filed at least six months before the scheduled elections for it to be considered. And finally, a competent court must have framed the charges.

An alternative solution would be to try cases against political candidates in fast-track courts. The Supreme Court had sent a directive to this effect as far back as 2014, directing that cases against political candidates must be completed within a year, failing which the matter should be reported to the Chief Justices of the respective High Court. This is a matter entirely in the judicial domain. We have heard nothing about the implementation of this order. Why has the apex court lost sight of it?

The Supreme Court’s anguish and limited pro-activeness, at least, provides a semblance of hope.

Your Lordships, in the face of your apparent helplessness to circumvent the maxim of “innocent till proven guilty”, may I humbly submit that the release of 3.30 lakh “innocent” undertrials be considered forthwith, to uphold Article 14 — equality of all before the law. Here, you don’t have to beg and plead with the legislature and the executive. This is entirely in your domain. Please admit it as my PIL.

The writer is former Chief Election Commissioner of India and a Distinguished Fellow at Ashoka University

SPREADING THE NET

Vaccination drive has made heartening gains. Local governments must build on them



PRAGYA AKHILESH

RECENT DATA ON Covid vaccinations in India suggests that vaccine hesitancy may be waning. Over 63 per cent of vaccinations in the past three weeks have taken place in rural areas, where hesitancy has been high. According to the latest data, vaccinations in rural India now average 29.66 lakh doses daily, up from an average of 17.81 lakh doses between May 1 and June 23. This turnaround is enormously heartening. About 65 per cent of India lives in villages, and this should help the government address the gaps and lags in Covid containment.

Vaccine hesitancy has crippled various government programmes even before the Covid outbreak, including for polio elimination. It has been more prevalent in rural areas for a variety of reasons, including the dearth of health education. In the case of Covid-19, the focus was initially on urban areas, which saw maximum vaccination numbers in the early days of the rollout. Rural India called for a nuanced strategy that involved engagement with, and participation of, multiple stakeholders and influencers. Since late June, with information about supply available in advance, district administrations have undertaken calibrated campaigns to reach out to the public. The next challenge for the government will be two-fold. First, it needs to speedily increase the coverage, as only 43 per cent of the estimated adult population has received the first dose. Second, the government needs to increase the percentage of fully vaccinated adults, which is just over 12 per cent.

Even as vaccination is voluntary, it is critical to incentivise beneficiaries. In that direction, the Maharashtra government’s decision to only allow fully vaccinated people to travel in Mumbai local trains, will ensure more people come forward to get vaccinated. Local governments should frame similar district and block-level specific models. The gender disparity in Covid vaccinations also needs to be addressed — except in a few states like Kerala, men dominate the vaccinated population. A potential third wave may target hitherto unaffected sections of the population, and it is important to spread the net wider, and cover areas with limited health infrastructure and those more prone to vaccine hesitancy.

A HUMAN WARRIOR

Buried in a 1000-year-old grave, a message: Binary gender identities and hierarchies are the real aberration

SINCE 1968, WHEN it was first discovered in southern Finland, a 1,000-year-old grave drew a binary response from the scientific community. The occupant was clearly an individual of high status, dressed in clothing appropriate for women of that time. In addition, she (as they thought then) was buried with a sword and other accessories appropriate to warriors — thought to be mostly men — at the time. Till recently, researchers assumed that there were either two bodies — a man and woman — buried together or that the grave was evidence of female warriors in medieval Finland. Both assumptions were wrong.

Recently conducted DNA analysis of the contents of the grave, published in the *European Journal of Archaeology*, indicates that its occupant suffered from Klinefelter syndrome, a condition where a person has XXY chromosomes (instead of either XX or XY). And the high-status burial suggests that they were not just accepted, but respected. The message from the Finnish grave is a simple one. In terms of ossified gender identities, it is the contemporary world — or at least a large part of it — that is the aberration.

Conservatives chagrined about women in the armed forces or which toilet a transgender person will use often cite “human nature” and history as justification for their prejudice. But across societies — including in the subcontinent — gender and sexuality have existed across a spectrum, and been accepted as part and parcel of the diversity of the human species. A DNA analysis is not needed to show that human societies, even contemporary ones, are the most adept at creating differences and then assigning them an oppressive hierarchy. A thousand years ago, a person of composite biology and identity could be a warrior, perhaps even a noble. Perhaps it’s time human nature went back to its roots.



UNSEEN AND UNCOUNTED

Sanitation worker deaths are often not registered, pandemic or not

IN THE LAST 50 years, there have been over a million estimated uncounted deaths of sanitation workers in India. Many deaths occurred during the peak of the pandemic’s second wave, when sanitation workers handled dead bodies in semi-urban and rural areas and on the banks of the Ganga in cities like Buxar, Ballia, Kannauj, Allahabad, Unnao. In the last five years, more than 9,730 people have died from multiple chronic conditions emanating from their employment in the dehumanising practice of manual scavenging and cleaning insanitary latrines. Over 600 have died in the hazardous cleaning of sewer and septic tanks, with around 18-20 per cent unreported cases in both these categories.

Rather than expanding the categories of manual scavengers — from dry latrine workers, drain sweepers, septic tank cleaners and railway sanitation workers to sanitary toilet cleaners, open faecal sludge handlers, hospital sanitation workers, sanitation-waste intersection workers, bone scavengers etc. — the government has gone backwards, not realising that sub-castes of the Dalit community are largely engaged in all these unidentified categories of sanitation work, which also involve manual scavenging. Until now, the government has merely reached 5 per cent of the total population of manual scavengers and only 20 per cent of the total area of India in its identification-related surveys.

Not only does the number of deaths of sanitation workers (manual scavengers or other categories) need to be estimated, but the lapses in the implementation of the

Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation (PEMSR) Act and government interventions also need to be highlighted.

Many manual scavengers have appealed to both municipal authorities and panchayats for their identification in the last eight years. In this regard, what is true of the failure of the urban bodies is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the local rural bodies. This is the primary reason why states give responses like they have “no manual scavengers or no more manual scavengers left to rehabilitate”, let alone ensuring the elimination of insanitary latrines and hazardous cleaning in the sewer and septic tanks. District magistrates have also repeatedly failed to comply with the provisions of this Act and the appointed “inspectors” have failed in exhibiting appropriate lists of their examination of sanitation infrastructures.

When sanitation workers identify themselves as manual scavengers, they are often harassed with death threats by local authorities. It is important to note that if these prohibited activities continue to be carried out in secret by the principal employers hired by the local authorities, then there is no point in seizing records. In such cases, non-compliance is hardly ever penalised and compensation and promises of one-time case assistance are only provided in around 40 per cent of “all recorded cases”. Clauses like “power to remove difficulties and power to exempt” again fracture the very core of this Act.

Even if the government is using a loophole in the Manual Scavenging Act 2013, “that when a person is employed to clean

excreta with the help of such devices using protective gears then the person will not be deemed as a manual scavenger”, there remains the question of where these devices, promised under the Safaimitra Suraksha Challenge last year, are. Again, like all Covid deaths, it is difficult to tell exactly how many sanitation workers have died in the last 50 years, but with modelling based on recorded cases, surveys of families of the dead, the study of community health impact due to this occupation and symptoms in case of Covid-related deaths, it is possible to come up with a more accurate estimation. It’s not just during the pandemic that deaths have gone unregistered. While deaths remaining unregistered because of Covid-19 and the small scope of the surveys to determine the number of sanitation workers is one problem, non-compliance with the PEMSAR Act is another. In 2021, the government has no accurate record of the number of sanitation workers, let alone manual scavengers and their approximate death count.

The poor estimation of 58,098 manual scavengers and then its denial a week later, Union Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment, Ramdas Athawale’s inaccurate response about the number of manual scavenging deaths and the recent sewer deaths in Hyderabad — all these not only show the authorities’ lack of intention to solve this problem but also how, under the cloak of the Swachh Bharat Mission, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has failed the sanitation workers of India.

The writer is a trade unionist

AUGUST 13, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

YES TO N-POWER

PRIME MINISTER INDIRA Gandhi has said India will not give up its nuclear power generation programme on grounds of environmental hazards. She told journalists in Nairobi before leaving for India that unless there was an alternative and effective source of energy generation, nuclear programmes can’t be phased out. Mrs Gandhi said that she had her own views on the environmental effects, but had to be guided by national interest. Attempts at harnessing solar energy, bio-gas and the like for power generation had not yet opened up great commercial possibilities, she said.

PROHIBITION SCRAPPED

THE RAJASTHAN CABINET late on Tuesday night decided to scrap total prohibition in the state with immediate effect and revive the old Excise Act. The Cabinet further decided to implement the 12-point temperance programme as underlined by the Centre on the basis of the Tekchand Committee recommendations. An ordinance repealing the Prohibition Act and reviving the old Excise Act was immediately issued by the Governor to give effect to the Cabinet’s decision. Though the ordinance does not refer to the tight financial position of the state government as one of the reasons for scrapping

complete prohibition, there is, however, no denying the fact that this has played an important role in the revision of the policy.

AFGHAN TALKS

FAIRLY SERIOUS ATTEMPTS are being made to initiate a dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan before mid-October when the UN General Assembly is to take up the Afghanistan question. The outcome of these efforts will be known perhaps by the end of this month, depending on whether the Karmal regime in Afghanistan and General Zia ul Haq of Pakistan agree to give up the rigid positions they adopted in the past.

13 THE IDEAS PAGE

Who's afraid of a caste census?

The top of Indian society remains overwhelmingly upper caste. A caste census threatens to push this dimension into the open, making it impossible for the political class to continue to hide behind euphemism



SATISH DESHPANDE

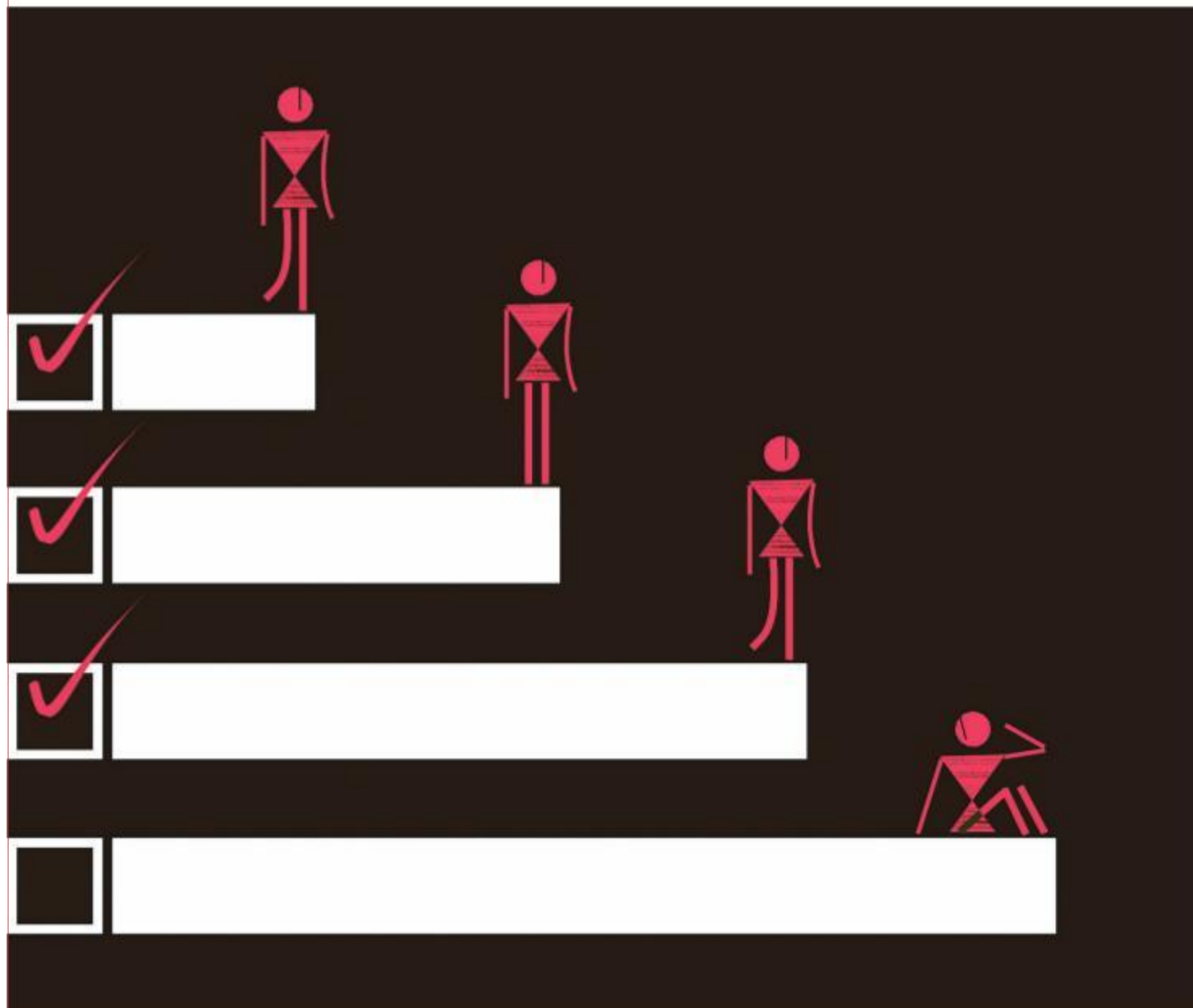
THE NOW-FAMILIAR FUSS around the question of counting caste in the national Census highlights something that the world is beginning to notice. The global pandemic of authoritarianism — more virulent though less widespread than the other pandemic we have struggled with — has overturned the popular maxim of the information age. Today, power is information, not the other way around; and the absence of information, too, is an effect of power. Gigantic data-gathering exercises like the Indian Census have always been controlled by those who count rather than those who are counted or those who do the counting.

Controlling one's own social visibility is one of the important perks of power. Those who are powerless can be made invisible and socially erased, or they can be marked or branded in different ways and made humiliatingly or sentimentally hyper-visible. Politics being a game, unexpected results are occasionally possible even when the playing field is far from level. But on the whole, the powerful get to choose whether and how they are visible to society. Counting caste in the Census threatens to make visible the only social group in independent India that has never been counted — the so-called "upper" castes.

Today, it is clearer than ever before that by far the most powerful and hence the most pampered minority in Indian society is composed largely of the upper castes. This fact remains unchanged across our many religions, numerous regions, and along the political spectrum from right to left. The minor localised exceptions merely prove the rule that, in India, the upper castes rule. While it is true that much has changed in the past three decades, these changes have been confined mostly to the middle. Moreover, differentiation within caste groups — segments of the upper castes are not privileged, and many members of the lower castes are now relatively privileged — is still far from transforming the overall composition of the social elite and the precarious underclass. Thus, as we enter the third decade of the 21st century, the top of Indian society remains overwhelmingly upper caste while its bottom has stayed almost entirely lower caste.

This is hardly a momentous discovery. Most Indians, especially those at the bottom and the top, have known this intuitively all along. But the dominant political language developed under the umbrella of Nehruvian naivete and the "Congress system" in the decades after Independence turned this into a public secret — something widely known but never acknowledged. The sentimental excesses of poverty as a political metaphor served to mask the corrosive caste dimension of our inequalities. A caste census threatens to push this dimension into the open, making it impossible for the political class to continue to hide behind euphemism and circumvention.

The silence around caste in national-level politics was finally breached during the Mandal moment. The 1990s were a decisive watershed for our collective understanding of caste, and one of its direct outcomes was



CR Sasikumar

the gathering of momentum around the demand for a caste census. The 2001 Census saw the first battles, but the opposing forces won relatively easily. The 2011 Census witnessed a more even fight, ultimately forcing the UPA government into a backdoor escape via the Socio-Economic and Caste Census, a project designed to fail. In an early demonstration of the maxim that power is information, even the sketchy data collected in that exercise was kept secret.

The discordant responses of the ruling party (or at least some sections) and the government indicate that the stakes may be even higher in 2021. No great insight is needed to see that the combined effects of the market and the pandemic have widened disparities in the recent past. In fact, this is what is so different about this century compared to the previous one. Until the 1970s, it was broadly true to say that the overall ethos of Indian economic and social policy was that of sharing poverty. In the neoliberal era, India has done better than most developed countries in producing dollar billionaires, while its performance in poverty alleviation has been fair but far from spectacular. In a newly mediated social sphere, inequalities generate more discontent than they did in a kinder, gentler past. Moreover, there is the possibility that this discontent may fracture the largest vote bank the world has ever seen.

In sum, the main reason for not counting caste has been political, and strong enough to produce (so far) broadly similar responses from both the UPA and the NDA. Interestingly, the perennial Nehruvian argument offered for not

The main reason for not counting caste has been political, and produced broadly similar responses from both the UPA and the NDA. The perennial Nehruvian argument offered for not counting caste was also moral-political, namely that doing so would strengthen caste identities, contradicting the official goal of erasing them. There is more than a little truth to this argument, but its dishonesty is in its implied corollary, or the claim that not counting it would weaken caste. Of course, this did not happen — how could it, given the way our society works?

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The technical-practical reasons for opposing caste enumeration — namely, that it is impossible to count something as complex and varied as caste — were always more or less fake. In the 2001 and 2011 censuses, the people of India said that they professed around 1,700 religions and spoke around 19,500 languages, not to speak of the thousands of occupations they practised. If our census could, with diligent effort, make sense of this enormously complicated data, then caste cannot be too hard to handle, especially with the immense advantages of digital data gathering.

The data-for-development arguments for a caste census are important, but they have never won because the opposition to it has been fundamentally political. The irony here is that if and when it happens, a caste census would not really be something to be proud of — it would merely be another device for making our society more legible. But every thinking Indian ought to be embarrassed by the fact that our rulers have lacked the political courage and the moral conviction to make it happen.

The writer teaches sociology at Delhi University. Views expressed here are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The whole culture of surveillance, if we look at history, leads to the stifling of expression and creativity, leading to disastrous consequences for society as a whole. It has never led to democracy or to an advanced society."

— THE DAILY STAR

In the dark, light persists

Amid rising intolerance, threats to citizens' rights and privacy, stories of courage and truth-telling



RAJMOHAN GANDHI

AS WE approach another Independence Day, here's a reflection. When the powerful bully the vulnerable, we're revolted, not impressed. When the weak stand up to the mighty, we're stirred.

Near the head of sickening developments has been the frequent pursuit by our police, after a mob has attacked a helpless individual (often a Dalit or a Muslim), not of the attackers but of the victim's relatives named, by the mob. Arrests of journalists as they strive to report murders and rapes fall into this category. Likewise, the continuing incarceration without trial of thousands, and deaths in detention, usually unreported.

Father Stan Swamy's death pierced the wall of silence, but that was an exception. We've been repelled also by election-time raids on the homes and offices of opposition politicians. As for the government's stonewalling over Pegasus and the demolition of privacy, that has created rage more than shame.

The drive to control the customs, eating habits, and movement of the 70,000 or so men, women and children who live in the Lakshadweep chain of islands should be listed in the top bracket of actions that disgrace India's democracy. In the eyes of the government and its supporters, the Lakshadweep population's great if unspoken flaw is its Muslim faith. Why should India tolerate a Muslim-majority unit within its limits? That is the plain if unuttered question.

To which the answer is that units where a minority is the majority are sources of pride. India is not a Hindu rashtira. In our country, citizens of different faiths or no faith are, or at least supposed to be, equal in the rights they enjoy. Including the right to exist. The non-Hindu majorities of states or UTs like Lakshadweep, Punjab, Kashmir, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, as also the Hindu majorities elsewhere, and minorities everywhere, should have this and other rights.

These rights flow from the law of humanity and also from our Constitution. Pride in territories we "possess" but resentment that "others" live there are the marks of colonialism at its most primitive. Also sickening, at an entirely different level, is the continuing character assassination of Rahul Gandhi and of his forebears. Rahul is an outspoken man whose father, a prime minister of the land, was killed in cold blood. As was, earlier, his grandmother, also a prime minister. And what have they not said, year after year, about her father, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who was not only India's jewel but also the nation's unflinching servant? And about Jawaharlal's father, Motilal?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NUMBERS THAT COUNT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial 'Counting in' (IE, Aug 12). Notwithstanding the political compulsions of all parties to garner OBC votes, the BJP's hesitancy, despite demand from within the party for a caste census, reflects its unpreparedness in deviating from the Sangh Parivar's core upper-caste constituency. Its pet project of "subcategorisation of OBCs", suggested even by the Justice Rohini commission, necessitates that their numbers be available. Hence, the Modi government has no reason for not doing a caste census.

LR Murmu, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial 'Counting in' (IE, Aug 12). The 127th Amendment Bill has been greeted warmly by all the political parties. But the government has not touched upon the issue of sub-categorisation of OBCs, as recommended by the Justice Rohini commission. The entire discussion in the Parliament on the Bill was marked by the absence of PM Modi in the House. Ample time should be devoted to discussing bills rather than judging "productivity" of the House by the number of bills passed in a session.

Vinay Saroha, New Delhi

NDA'S ARROGANCE

THIS REFERS TO the report 'Early session end: Naidu breaks down. Birla expresses anguish' (IE, August 12). What happened in both Houses shows the obduracy and arrogance of the NDA government. The opposition leaders had no alternative but to react, maybe this time a bit more strongly, to its stonewalling

Sharma is the CEO of National Health Authority and Singh is a former member of the Postal Services Board. Views are personal

Slanders of this sort are spread in other lands too. But when America's social media turned Barack Obama into a Muslim, his Republican opponent, John McCain, publicly rebuked the lie. Such corrections are never offered from India's high places, even though perpetual, direct communication from these high places to the Indian citizen has become the norm.

This is appalling, but not shocking. When stabbing to death a helpless boy on a train is not swiftly or roundly reprimanded, why would mere character-murder be condemned?

Fortunately, we've also been inspired by some things. Most of all, perhaps, by the exertions of the humble Indian, including in finding oxygen for a gasping Covid patient or wood for cremating a victim. By the unseen toil of helpers who almost always leave their own loved ones with someone else while assisting more fortunate patriots.

At another level, we were thrilled by the raw courage of a single woman, a daughter of Bengal, who with her plastered foot shoved aside a gargantuan juggernaut. And thereby breathed new life into what almost looked like a sinking democracy. We loved, too, the woman celebrated as a Dadi, who became a symbol of the successful nationwide movement against threats to the citizenship of Muslim Indians.

And weren't we uplifted by the fearless advocate who was ready to be punished by powerful judges but not prepared to swallow his conscience? More recently, and most hearteningly, we have heard strong pronouncements in favour of liberty and equality from judges of the Supreme Court, including the Chief Justice.

Most encouraging of all, however, is another sound. I don't quite know how to describe it. It is the sound of pens, pencils, keyboards, texting fingers and cameras in tens of thousands of Indian hands. Of journalists, students, citizens and citizen-journalists in small towns and interior villages who share with fellow Indians their stories and images of coercion or courage.

Their words sometimes find their way into brave online journals, sometimes even onto pages of established newspapers. Or songs, jokes, cartoons, and even videos result from their words, and are swiftly circulated. Thanks to these active citizens, the possibility of change seems to show up on the horizon. Happily, we also have a few really brave persons even on mainline TV and in the press. Their voices sustain our morale.

"For I can see that in the midst of death, life persists; in the midst of untruth, truth persists; in the midst of darkness, light persists."

The learned will know that these were words that Gandhi wrote in *Young India* long ago, on October 11, 1928. It was what he believed, but also what he saw around him. Do we see today what he saw?

The writer is research professor at the Centre for South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign

An e-RUPI in hand

New digital pay option can make welfare schemes efficient, transparent



R S SHARMA AND ASHOK PAL SINGH

RECENTLY LAUNCHED by the Prime Minister, e-RUPI is a digital prepaid, purpose- and person-specific payment utility. It brings the ease and simplicity of UPI to the social security platform of DBT, two pioneering fintech offerings of India.

As a one-to-many payments facilitator, it will help the government sharpen targeted welfare programmes. The private sector will find it helpful to disburse non-cash benefits to employees and support focussed CSR programmes. Later, individuals could use it for gifting.

Its immediate and first-use case is to facilitate cashless service at paid Covid vaccination centres (CVCs). For instance, corporates and philanthropies can buy services in bulk to vaccinate employees and those in need. The intended beneficiaries will receive an SMS or QR code on their feature/smartphone, redeemable for cashless vaccination at participating centres. A single-source MIS gets created effortlessly at the back end.

Built on the UPI platform, e-RUPI is easy to scale by the issuer. At the point of presence, the verification code received by the beneficiary is shared with the service provider to authenticate and authorise the transaction: Contactless, real-time payment and online settlement of funds into the service provider's bank account. Fourteen leading banks have already integrated it with their systems.

The deployment of e-RUPI for vaccinations is a forerunner to myriad applications, some of which can help mitigate hitherto intractable

problems of delivering cash subsidies and ensuring their end-use.

Policymakers have debated whether direct cash transfers deliver benefits more efficiently than in-kind transfers like the Public Distribution System (PDS) and fertilisers. The Covid-19 pandemic has revived interest in Universal Basic Income (UBI). A school voucher programme has its votaries. The contrary argument is that cash transfers are no magic bullet, given the widespread failure of markets in serving the poor. The utility of cash transfers to guarantee food security or generate sustainable livelihoods compared to PDS or MGNREGA, for instance, is considered suspect. e-RUPI could break the policy logjam by making cash transfers purpose- and person-specific, freeing them from dependence on bank accounts and providing visibility from the time of issue until redemption.

e-RUPI could make the PDS programme more efficient. The inefficiency of the programme is rooted in high overhead costs, leakages, exclusion and inefficiencies. A food-specific e-RUPI voucher will allow beneficiaries to buy rations from an outlet of their choice. The value addition beyond the One Nation, One Ration Card will come from removing price distortion and the redemption of the voucher at market price by merchants within and outside the PDS network.

It could also be used to streamline fertiliser subsidies to farmers. e-RUPI will enable farmers to buy fertiliser at nominal prices with direct credit of the subsidy amount into the account of the authorised dealers. As far back as

2011, a task force on direct transfer of subsidies on kerosene, LPG and fertilisers headed by Nandan Nilekani had suggested a roadmap for direct cash transfer of fertiliser subsidies in a phased manner. Its recommendations on the LPG subsidy got implemented with desired results. The ones relating to fertilisers have not happened. The e-RUPI will allay apprehensions about creating an IT infrastructure, managing nearly 3,00,000 fertiliser sale points, the collapse of dealer network due to liquidity squeeze in the event of subsidy payments getting delayed and a complex system of timely credit of subsidy into an estimated 129 million Aadhaar-linked bank accounts of farm households.

e-RUPI is almost custom-designed for school voucher programmes. The efficacy of these programmes is well established in many countries. Identified students receive vouchers to pay school fees and expenses at empanelled institutions of their choice, public and private, which compete to get full fee-paying students: The resultant option and competition benefits students and schools while enhancing transparency and accountability.

Another application is in basic income support. The lockdowns to contain the pandemic exposed the poor to acute distress, due to loss of means of livelihood. e-RUPI can mitigate their stress by rapidly distributing food and cash vouchers at scale.

A similar application of e-RUPI can be envisaged for the Ayushman Bharat healthcare initiative. Beneficiaries will receive e-RUPI

vouchers of designated value tenable at empanelled healthcare facilities, providing them portability and facility choice. The service provider will benefit from the immediate payment.

Corporate applications of e-RUPI include scrupulous disbursement and easy compliance of providing employee benefits with tax implications such as meals, education, travel and health.

The adoption of e-RUPI in various government programmes will enhance business efficiency, simplicity, transparency, and accountability in these programmes.

The Aadhaar experience suggests ownership must vest with a specific agency. Without the UIDAI nurturing its applications within the government and the private sector, the widespread adoption of Aadhaar would not have been possible. Making the distribution and acceptance of e-RUPI incentive-compatible is recommended, as demonstrated by the popularisation of prepaid telephony by the telecom industry.

Light regulation and the opening of e-RUPI to competition will spur innovation and adoption. All banks, small and big, NBFCs, non-bank PPI issuers, and telcos may be allowed to issue it later. e-RUPI opens up a world of opportunities to the government, people, and businesses to provide, avail and pay for services seamlessly.

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