



WORDLY WISE
TAXATION IS JUST A SOPHISTICATED WAY OF DEMANDING MONEY WITH MENACES.
— TERRY PRATCHETT

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

BETTER LATE

Government does well to end contentious issue of retrospective taxation. It must ensure swift closure of pending cases

AFTER FACING THE prospect of its foreign assets being seized by Cairn Energy to enforce an international arbitration award, the Union government, on Thursday, introduced a Bill in Parliament seeking to bury the infamous retrospective taxation amendment. The Bill proposes to amend the Income Tax Act so as to ensure that no new tax demand can be raised on the basis of the retrospective amendment if the transaction was carried out prior to May 28, 2012. In cases where a demand has already been raised — such tax demands have reportedly been raised in 17 cases — the order will be nullified, provided certain conditions such as the withdrawal of appeals, claims are met. This is the right thing to do — even if it comes seven years into this government's tenure, and after facing multiple setbacks in international arbitrations. The retrospective amendment inflicted great damage to the country's reputation for offering an attractive and predictable investment climate. It was long overdue that this amendment was given a burial.

The case dates back to 2012 when the Supreme Court had ruled in favour of Vodafone on grounds that "gains arising from indirect transfer of Indian assets are not taxable under the extant provisions of the Act". Thereafter, the government of the day introduced an amendment with retrospective effect, effectively nullifying the ruling. This opened the floodgates — tax demands were raised on several companies. While the current dispensation has done well to put this issue to rest, even though this is after it appealed against the international arbitration awards, an uncomfortable question remains. The Bill allows for the refund only of the principal amount in these cases, not the interest. However, considering that in some of these cases, the interest component is sizeable, will these companies avail the offer? While there is the possibility of a deal being struck, if the companies decide not to withdraw the cases, what will the stand of the Indian government be? Will the government continue to maintain its position regarding international arbitration awards? The retrospective amendment was bad enough. Not accepting the awards thereafter will further hurt the country's reputation.

Considering that in the run-up to the 2014 elections, the BJP had attacked the then UPA government for unleashing "tax terrorism" and "uncertainty" in the country, the fact that it continued with these unjust tax demands, even appealing against international arbitration awards, was inexplicable. Claims of improving the ease of doing business and creating a welcoming environment for investors ring hollow when the policy environment continues to be uncertain. Prolonging this issue has only taken the sheen off the country's projection of a business-friendly image, leading many to make unfavourable international comparisons. The government has done well to put this issue to rest, even if it was pushed into doing so.

AN UNEASY STANCE

RBI's position of prioritising growth over inflation-control is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain

ON FRIDAY, THE Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India unanimously decided to maintain status quo on the repo rate, which is a rate at which the RBI lends money to the banks. This made it the seventh straight policy review, which are bi-monthly events, where the MPC has favoured staying put on the benchmark interest rates. It represents the peculiar quandary for the RBI. On the one hand, repeated disruptions due to the pandemic have choked India's economic growth momentum, which was already losing steam before the outbreak. On the other, retail inflation, the key metric that the RBI is legally mandated to control, has been at the edge of its comfort zone since late 2019. The RBI has been of the view that it will do "whatever it takes" to support economic growth and has characterised the inflationary spike as a "transitory" phenomenon. But this stance of prioritising growth over inflation-control is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

An initial reflection of this unease can be seen in the lack of consensus among the six MPC members when it came to the RBI's overall stance. While five members voted to persist with the "accommodative" stance "as long as necessary to revive and sustain growth on a durable basis", one member — Jayanth R Varma — expressed reservations. At the heart of the matter is the inflation trajectory and how long it can be characterised as "transitory". In the policy statement, the RBI upped the inflation forecast for the current financial year from 5.1 per cent (as assessed in June) to 5.7 per cent — that is, just 30 basis points below the RBI's comfort zone. But perhaps the biggest worry comes from the fact that this year's high inflation is coming on the back of high inflation a year ago. Moreover, this spike in prices is happening when overall demand hasn't taken off as yet. Add to these the projection that global demand and commodity prices are expected to rise. All these factors raise the chances of inflation-control becoming much tougher in the future.

The trouble is, economic growth is far from exhibiting a sustained recovery. While the RBI's GDP growth forecast for 2021-22 is unchanged at 9.5 per cent, the fine print shows that it has dialled down the growth expectations for each of the coming three quarters. But if inflation does not come down, it is only a matter of time that the RBI raises interest rates.

MCCARTHY, UNVERIFIED

On social media, another reminder that there is no guarantee that people are who they claim to be

WHY WOULD A famously reclusive writer break the habit of a lifetime to suddenly pop up on social media and talk about kombucha, leaf blowers and the TV series *The Mandalorian*? American novelist Cormac McCarthy had literary Twitter users in a tizzy this week when he alleged that he was on "this infernal website" only at the behest of his publicist, because "engagement is down and so are metrics and something something who cares Are you happy now Terry" (no punctuation, just like in his books). Everyone laughed at the snark, Stephen King even replied to the tweet ("I don't know if Terry is, but I am") and Twitter rushed to anoint the legend with the only recognition that seems to matter these days — a blue verification badge.

As it turns out, that was not the real McCarthy. The handle @CormacMcCrthy (note the missing 'a') is a parody and, as his agent and publisher have both confirmed, the 88-year-old writer is definitely not on Twitter. And, by the way, this is not the first time we've been pranked by a fake McCarthy. In 2012, Jack Dorsey himself tweeted to welcome @CormacMcCarthy (note the extra 'c') on Twitter, as did Margaret Atwood. The account was soon suspended.

The new edition of the fictitious McCarthy has been around since 2018 and, with a commitment to the creative matched perhaps only by the real McCarthy, has been dedicatedly sending out grumpy tweets about pillow infomercials and frozen dinners, often retelling conversations with his "daughter" and "grand-daughter". All of this had gone largely unnoticed and unremarked upon until the Publicist Terry tweet went viral. Presumably, this is when Twitter decided to suspend the identification rules that it follows in the case of lesser mortals and, without any application being made by the parody account, anointed it as the real thing. Which only goes to show that when it comes to social media, no one — including those handing out "verified" badges — can tell the real from the fake.

The Parliament we deserve

An institution not held hostage to party diktat. A battleground of ideas, not a contest of cussedness



MANISH TEWARI

A VETERAN MEMBER of Parliament, not from the treasury benches, asked a pertinent and provocative question recently: Does India even need a Parliament?

The central and state legislatures over the decades have diminished themselves both by their conduct and the hara kiri that was committed in terms of legislating the onerous provisions of the 10th Schedule of the Indian Constitution colloquially known as the Anti-Defection Law.

There was a time, even till the early 1980s, when Parliament, notwithstanding the odd aberration, distinguished itself as a chamber for both profound debate and high eloquence on matters of national concern and beneficial legislation. An MP knew his vote mattered and therefore there was an incentive to participate in making better laws for the country or even holding his own government to account if the need arose. The best example of that was Feroze Gandhi, who was the Nehru government's greatest bete noire in the 1950s.

All that started changing with the passage of the Anti-Defection Law in 1985. The statement of objects and reasons of the said law eloquently avowed that "The evil of political defections has been a matter of political concern. If it is not combated it is likely to undermine the very foundations of our democracy and the principles that sustain it."

However, in the past 35 years of its existence, it has only ended up raising the bar of defection from retail to wholesale. Conceived as a legal fiat to enforce political morality, it has ended up completely sucking out the essence of democracy from our legislative institutions. It has turned them into halls of whip-driven tyranny where MPs and MLAs are precluded from exercising their wisdom in terms of their conscience, common sense and constituency interests.

Today the political party that gives any person a ticket to contest on its symbol exerts complete control over their mind and soul. The ordinary Indian who stood in the queue on a blistering midsummer morning to exercise her franchise and elect each and

every Member of Parliament becomes just an apparition.

Surely the founding fathers of the Indian Constitution, when they opted for universal adult suffrage, did not countenance a template whereby electoral preferences would be exercised by an individual elector but legislative power would reside in a political party? Beheld from this standpoint, the Tenth Schedule is an encroachment on the original canons of the Constitution if not the basic structure doctrine itself.

That is why at 2 pm in the afternoon when the House meets for government legislative business, on the days it is functioning, there is hardly any attendance, for every MP knows that legislation drafted by some joint secretary in the Government of India would be mechanically passed or opposed, depending on the whip issued. Hardly any bills get referred to the parliamentary standing committees. Even the parliamentary standing committees are being trampled underfoot by their own stakeholders. There is thus no motivation for MPs to make better laws for the country.

However, this is not the only problem. The conduct of Members of Parliament within the House has created a crisis of credibility for the institution. What was conceived as a battleground of ideas has been reduced to a contest of cussedness on part of the government and competing lung power on part of the Opposition now going back over three decades.

Recalcitrant legislators who have no interest in burning the midnight oil reading bills have an incentive in disrupting the House. Half an hour of screaming is a convenience if not easy way out. Once the House is adjourned, they go around handing out petitions to ministers till the next adjournment has to be obtained. They probably round up their day being dined by some businessperson looking for access to the central or state governments. This has been the norm and not the exception for the past over 30 years now both at the Centre and in the states. The state legislatures are worse. They barely meet

for less than a month in a year.

As a consequence, what an MP or MLA does in the legislature has no bearing on their prospects of re-election. Constituents also do not want to look at the merits of any laws for they know they have no role in their formulation. They perceive an MP or an MLA as a middleman between themselves and the executive to access public goods for the constituency. Others are just interested in recommendations for transfers and postings and yet others in utilising the influence of their MPs to swing contracts for local developmental works towards their favoured backers. Parliamentary performance is a non-sequitur.

The question that should be seriously asked is: Does India need such a Parliament, or even legislative assemblies? Thousands of crores are spent on election cycles every year — towards what end? India can very well function with a directly elected executive and a judiciary to exercise oversight. The legislature has completely failed to hold the government accountable, the latest example being that Parliament has been disrupted for the past three weeks now. The government is obdurate that it will not discuss the Pegasus issue and the combined Opposition is unrelenting. There is no common ground. Yet vital legislation that has a bearing on India's future is being cavalierly passed without any deliberation.

As a starting point to revitalise the legislative institutions, we need to relax the draconian provisions of the 10th Schedule. I moved a Private Member's Bill in 2010 and again in 2019 in the Lok Sabha, envisaging that only contravention of the party whip on confidence motions, no-confidence motions, adjournment motions, money bills or financial matters should result in an MP or MLA's disqualification. The rest of the legislative space must be freed up. Endemic disruptions need to be proscribed through a transparent rules-based procedure. Non-functional legislatures are of no use to the country.

The writer is a lawyer, MP, and former I&B Minister

OCEAN'S KEEPERS

India can urge UNSC to prioritise maritime domain for security, equitable growth



C UDAY BHASKAR

IN AN INNOVATIVE departure from normal practice, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will preside (in virtual mode) over an open debate at the global high-table, namely the UN Security Council, on Monday (August 9) when India holds the President's chair for one month. This will mark a diplomatic first for an Indian PM. This role has been performed in the past by a minister or a senior diplomat.

The subject to be deliberated upon by the UNSC members is "Enhancing maritime security: A case for international cooperation" under the larger umbrella of the "Maintenance of international peace and security". This would be an extension of Modi's advocacy of SAGAR (security and growth for all in the region) that he had unveiled in 2015 in relation to the Indian Ocean region (IOR).

Currently, global maritime security is roiled and the most recent incident that has caused considerable unease about the safety of merchant shipping is the suspected drone attack (July 29) on an Israeli-controlled tanker in the north Arabian Sea off Oman that killed two crew members. Piracy and non-traditional challenges at sea such as gun-running and smuggling are old chestnuts.

Concurrently, there is the simmering tension in the South China Sea over freedom of navigation (FON) rights in international waters and how China has laid claim to "territoriality" based on artificial structures (not natural islands). This formulation has not been accepted by the US that has exercised transit rights in these waters. Many ASEAN nations

and Quad members such as Japan, Australia and India subscribe to the principle of FON and do not buy the Chinese interpretation of the "nine-dash-line" but have not rocked the boat with Beijing. The most recent example of maritime reticence and bilateral prudence apropos China was evident in the Royal Navy sending a carrier task group to the region but opting not to transit within the 12-mile line off the Chinese built structures.

Earlier in the year, accidents onboard large crude carriers and cargo vessels in the IOR have added to the anxiety about marine pollution and its downstream consequences for the health of the oceans. Over the last few decades, global warming and carbon emissions have altered the chemistry of the oceans and a UN report has come up with grim statistics. This study notes that oceans have become more acidic as sea water absorbs more carbon dioxide and furthermore, the upper layers of the open ocean have lost between 0.5 per cent and 3.3 per cent of their oxygen since 1970 as temperatures have risen. In a worst-case scenario, the report cautions that left unchecked, greenhouse gases could prove to be catastrophic for the world. These gases could pile up in such a manner throughout the century resulting in "sea levels rising at a relentless pace for hundreds of years, potentially by 17 feet or more by 2300", and many islands and low-lying coastal areas along the global littoral would be swept underwater.

Thus maritime security has many strands and PM Modi would be well advised to look at the big picture while encouraging

the global high table to review the maritime domain holistically. Clearly, nettlesome strategic and security issues such as the South China Sea and FON would find little consensus in the UNSC where China is a permanent member and would stall any meaningful debate.

What may find support for a useful debate at the UNSC would be those areas that could be brought under the rubric of the "global good". For instance, the welfare of seafarers who are the sinews of the global merchant marine, which is the foundation of global trade, has received scant attention in this Covid-scarred period and the IMO (International Maritime Organisation) has been unable to effectively address such issues.

Over the decades, India highlighted the nuclear issue to the global high-table: Delhi brought nuclear disarmament into the global discourse, even though it demonstrated its own nuclear weapon capability in 1998. In a similar manner, the Modi legacy to the global policy basket could be advocacy for sustained focus on the maritime domain and the correlation with globalisation, the blue economy, the health of the ocean and the overall impact on human security. Security and equitable growth for all by husbanding the global ocean for future generations is a laudable goal and encouraging the UNSC to prioritise this issue is a worthy cause.

The writer is director, Society for Policy Studies, New Delhi



AUGUST 7, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

SANJAY CRASH PROBE

AN UNINTENTIONAL SPIN and delay in initiation of recovery action was the probable cause of the crash of the Pitts aircraft in which Sanjay Gandhi and his co-pilot died last year. This is the finding of the departmental inquiry by the inspector of accident, after a nearly a year-long investigation. An official announcement of the acceptance of the findings of the report and a summary of its findings was made on August 6. Lack of experience and confusion between the two copilots as to who would handle the situation caused by the entry of the aircraft "into an unintentional spin".

GOVERNOR ISSUE OVER

THE DEVELOPING CRISIS over the replacement of West Bengal Governor TN Singh between the Centre and the state's Left Front government has been defused following a meeting between Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the state chief minister Jyoti Basu. The PM reportedly told Basu that Singh's replacement had become necessary since he was keeping indifferent health.

SOVIET-PAK TALKS

THE SEARCH FOR a solution to the Afghan crisis took a new turn with the announce-

ment that the Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Nikolai Firyubin will visit Pakistan later this month. His visit would mark up stepped up contacts between Pakistan and Soviet Union. Pakistan Foreign Minister Agha Shahi said his country wanted cordial relations with the Soviet Union despite the tension in Afghanistan.

BHUPESH GUPTA DEAD

BHUPESH GUPTA, COMMUNIST leader and doyen of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, passed away in Moscow after a massive heart attack. Gupta was 66. The CPI leader was convalescing after an abdominal surgery.

Time to unlock the school

Physical attendance in schools with Covid-appropriate behaviour cannot be delayed. Health and educational departments must take parents, civil society into confidence



K SUJATHA RAO

THE EFFICACY OF total lockdowns as a public health measure is yet to be proven. But we seem to have allowed our imagination and thinking to get trapped into that logic, regardless of the social and economic costs to society. Countries that imposed lockdowns, including China, have seen a re-emergence of infections while Sweden that did not impose a lockdown has close to zero deaths today. However, it's apparent that localised restrictions on movements in high positivity areas for a limited period make sense.

The impact of lockdowns has undoubtedly been painful at both the macro and micro-levels. Amongst the worst affected are children, ironically the least vulnerable.

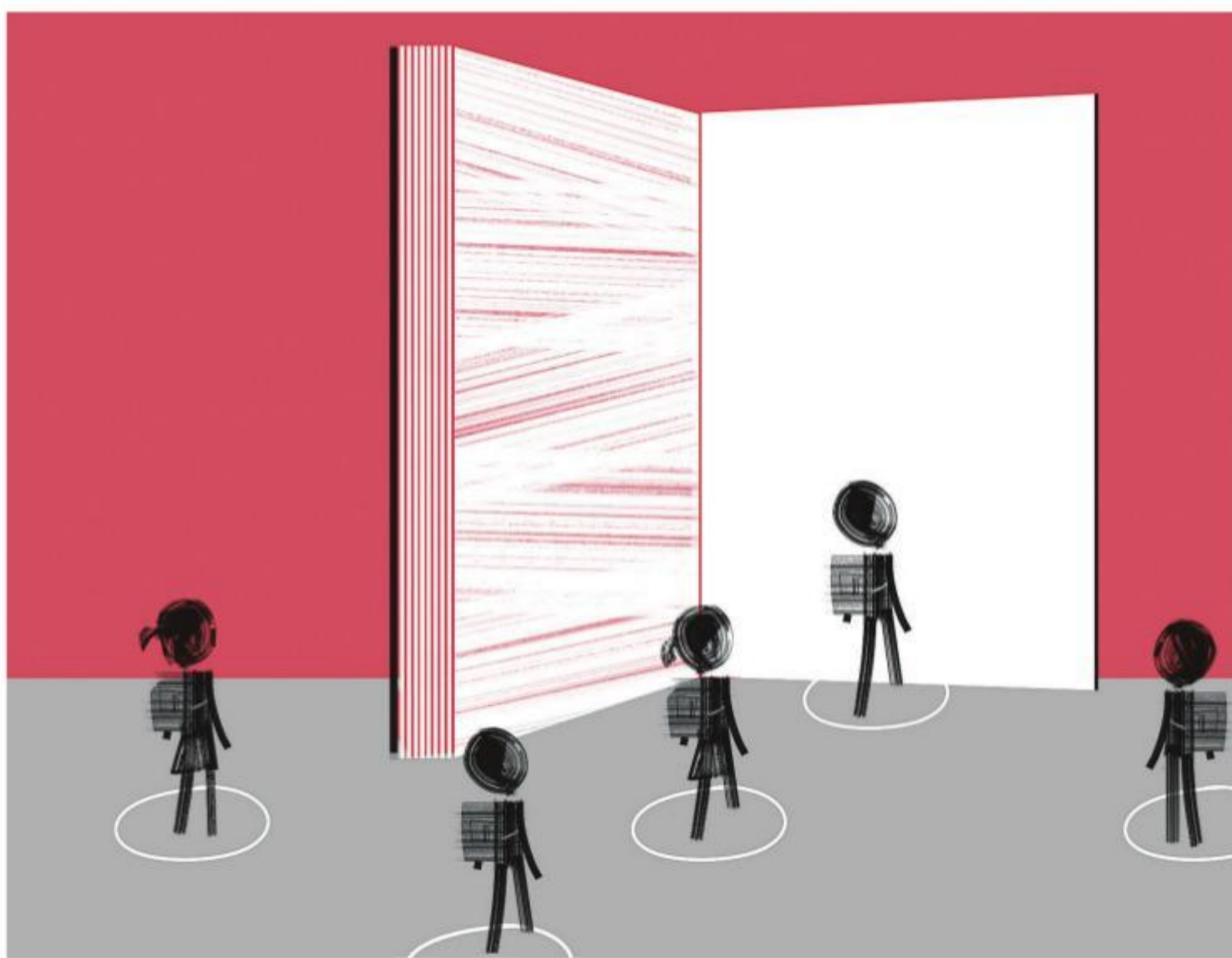
Morbidity and mortality among children have been comparatively lower. As per a recent UK study, deaths are two per million and hospitalisation under severe conditions about 1 in 50,000. Studies carried out in the US, Ireland, Norway, Germany and other parts of the world have shown very low to negligible transmission of infection in, and due to, schools, particularly where the discipline of wearing masks, physical distancing and personal hygiene has been enforced even moderately. In fact, most countries have persisted with in-person learning. Only a handful have shut down schools. India is one of them.

While we have no information regarding the cohort of children who have been hospitalised or have died due to Covid over the past 18 months, as in the case of adults, children with comorbidities such as diabetes or obesity are likely to be more vulnerable. Such data, along with seropositivity studies, need to be triangulated and analysed to enable evidence-based policy formulation instead of panic or speculation guiding decision making.

Available evidence seems to suggest that from a strictly epidemiological standpoint, there is weak justification for the stringent and prolonged lockdown of schools – particularly, primary schools. We do hear of online classes. But with less than a quarter of the country having internet access and the lackadaisical manner of the implementation of online learning by untrained teachers, the reach of such instruction to even urban students has been patchy. Students from rich families attending “good” schools may have benefited somewhat from online education, but they are only a minuscule section of the learners.

The impact of this policy is generational and has undone a lot of the gains in education. A large number of children are now joining the workforce, adolescent girls are being married off, instances of child abuse have increased, a majority of the poor, denied midday meals, are facing hunger and nutritional deficiencies, not to mention the loss of social interaction and self-confidence – they are missing out on the joys of learning. Most students have forgotten what they had learnt in their previous class. The losses could, in fact, be more severe than currently understood – loss of focus, memory and interest in learning.

In January, the Azim Premji Foundation undertook a study of 16,067 primary class children in 1,137 schools spread over 44 districts in five states. The purpose of the study was to assess the “forgetting/regression” kind of learning loss among children with regards



CR Sasikumar

to language and math. Since these are what are referred to as foundational abilities, loss could imply serious consequences for the future. The results of this study showed that 92 per cent and 82 per cent children lost one or more of the abilities that constitute language and math learning respectively. Put simply, they had forgotten how to speak or write, add or multiply.

Though this study had recommended “not to rush into promoting children to the next class,” Telangana has promoted the students to the next class by skipping the one they were to have attended but for the lockdown. It is unclear if the implications of this policy have been interwoven into the teaching schedules when schools do open. Teachers, for example, will need to conduct bridge courses for those promoted to Class 4 by having to cover the syllabus of Class 2 (to refresh memory), Class 3 (to teach what they have missed out) and then continue with Class 4. More importantly, teachers will have to be trained in pedagogy and assessment skills required for such remedial teaching of children with different and varied learning levels. More importantly, training materials and trainers will need to be organised. Peer educators and retired persons in the community will need to be roped in to volunteer to cope with the workload. A new organisational dynamic will need to be introduced that could require logging in more hours. It is a daunting situation, requiring visionary leadership.

There are enough choices for opening schools. There is enough scientific evidence that in open spaces, the infection does not spread so effectively. Rural areas are full of such spaces where classes can be held. Timings and school schedules can be staggered to avoid crowding or mixing. Schools need not be held for the whole day. It would suffice even if classes are held for two hours covering critical subjects, and on alternate days. It will require

Health departments will have to be more actively linked to schools and stay alert. Teachers and parents will have to be given high priority in vaccination by having vaccination camps at schools. Finally, this will also require involving the community and the civil society.

the staff to work harder and the administration to have more detailed plans. Health departments will have to be more actively linked to schools and stay alert. Teachers and parents will have to be given high priority in vaccination by having vaccination camps at schools. Finally, this will also require involving the community and civil society. It is impossible for governments to deliver on this grave situation without the active engagement of all stakeholders. Devising and enforcing new norms of behaviour and schedules would require intensive discussions with parents, school authorities, and civil society organisations. Governments have to give up their current anti-NGO/civil society stance and seek an all society-centred approach to safeguard our children's future.

We still cannot predict when the pandemic will become localised. It is essential we learn to live with an awareness of the presence of the virus around us by adopting Covid-appropriate behavior and keeping ourselves safe.

Politicians have adopted the easy solution of avoiding action and responsibility by saying parents are unwilling to send their children to schools. The fears of parents are legitimate. But let them be given a choice. There is also a need to see things in perspective: Every year in India, lakhs of children die due to diarrhoea, malnutrition and diseases of the upper respiratory tract and other illnesses caused by pollution. Fragile environments imply higher responsibility. But life has to move on. Children have suffered a lot. We have a responsibility for their future. It is time for parents to wake up and demand accountability from the government and political leaders. Or is it time for suo motu action from the Supreme Court?

The writer, a former health secretary, was also ex commissioner and secretary education in united Andhra Pradesh

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“The US is obviously carrying out a huge plot to frame China. CNN, citing several sources, said on Thursday that US intelligence agencies are digging through a treasure trove of genetic data that could be key to uncovering the origins of the coronavirus.” — GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

The majority in minority

Indian Muslims and Hindus have similar attitudes towards faith and tradition, but differ in their views on political culture



CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT

LATELY, IT HAS been argued that if one goes by the recent Pew Research Center survey, “Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation”, Muslims do not behave differently from the Hindus. This is true to some extent, with differences of degree. But in many domains, Muslims are not as willing as Hindus to “live separately”, and their attitudes are more similar to those of other minorities.

In an earlier article, ‘The lines that divide’ (IE, July 22), I had emphasised that the Pew survey suggests Hindus appear as unwilling to mix with others. Muslims are no different from certain standpoints: 78 per cent of them consider that “stopping inter-marriage is a high priority” (against 66 per cent on the Hindu side) and 89 per cent of them say that all or most of their friends come from their own community (against 86 per cent on the Hindu side). But only 16 per cent of them would not be willing to accept a Hindu as a neighbour, whereas 36 per cent of Hindus would not be willing to accept a Muslim as a neighbour.

Similarly, Muslims are imbued with Hindu religious notions: 77 per cent of them believe in karma, 27 per cent in reincarnation and 26 per cent in the Ganga’s power to purify. This is a clear legacy of what “unity in diversity” used to mean in India – a concept that was encapsulated in the old formula of “composite culture” or, in Hindustani, “mili juli/musharka/Ganga-Jamuni-teh-zib”. The resilience of this approach is not unrelated to the fact that in northern India, 37 per cent of Indian Muslims identify with Sufism. Incidentally, many Muslims do not identify to any “sect” – 36 per cent do not even know whether they are Sunni, or Shia or any other sect.

This erosion of sectarian identification has probably something to do with the sentiment that Muslims form a minority. This sentiment is fostered by discriminations: One fifth of Muslims say that they have “personally faced religious discrimination recently” (40 per cent in North India) and 24 per cent – 35 per cent in North India – say “there is a lot of discrimination against Muslims in India today”. Sixty five per cent of them – like among Hindus – consider that communal violence is “a major issue”.

A remarkable finding of the Pew survey pertains to the manner in which minorities – including Muslims – identify with the Indian nation. Asked whether to

be a member of their community is only a question of religion or only a matter of ancestry and culture or whether both things matter, Muslims’ responses are 38, 22 and 38 per cent respectively, and those of Christians 29, 34 and 27 per cent. These figures show that though historical roots of their religion is often emphasised – Islam and Christianity were not born in the country – their followers in India see themselves as Indian Muslims and Indian Christians. This is partly because of historical roots and the “Indianness” of their culture. Similarly, 91 per cent of Muslims and 89 per cent of Christians consider that “respecting India is very important to what being a member of their religious group means to them”.

It was found that 49 per cent of Hindus think that one can be a part of their community without believing in God whereas 64 per cent and 59 per cent think that being Hindu and Hindi-speaking are very important for being “truly” Indian. This ethno-religious definition of the nation is making progress among the minorities as well: 27 per cent of Muslims, 20 per cent of Christians, 31 per cent of Sikhs and 30 per cent of Buddhists think that “being Hindu is important to be ‘truly’ Indian”, and 47, 28, 27 and 43 per cent respectively think that “to be able to speak Hindi is important to be ‘truly’ Indian”. These percentages suggest that languages like Urdu and Punjabi are not seen as good Indian language as Hindi and that some minorities are internalising the majoritarian view of the nation and its implications – the creation of second class citizens.

However, minorities are completely different from the Hindus in matters related to political culture. While the percentage of Hindus who consider that “the country should rely on a leader with a strong hand to solve the country’s problem” is higher than those who think the country should rely on a “democratic form of government” (50 per cent against 45 per cent), among the minorities those believing in democracy outnumber those believing in the strong man theory.

Last but not least, Muslims are equally attached to some traditions as Hindus: 72 per cent of them say that “it is crucial to stop inter-caste marriages” (against 63.5 per cent on the Hindu side) and 74 per cent of them are eager “to go to their own religious courts to solve family disputes”. But 56 per cent of them consider that “Muslim men should not be able to divorce their wives by saying ‘talaq’ three times”, an indication of socio-religious reformism that used to prevail in all communities but has now receded to the background.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SAFEGUARD FREEDOM

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘A for aggressive, B for bully’ (IE, August 6). It is not difficult to conclude that it is the words “scientific temperament” in the topic of the international seminar, “Cultural and linguistic hurdles in the achievement of scientific temperament” that must have cut the ABVP to the quick to compel the university in Madhya Pradesh to withdraw from it. But such insidious happenings have become a new normal with the all-powerful BJP backing sectarian forces. In this overbearing situation, it is up to us either to lock horns with such entities or look the other way at the cost of letting young India slide into primitive India.

Tarsem Singh, *Mahilpur*

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘A for aggressive, B for bully’ (IE, August 6). The compliance of the Sagar University to ABVP’s demands raises fresh doubts about academic freedom in Indian universities. Furthermore, alleged police backing to these threats has created a climate of fear and self-censorship. Of late, hurt sentiments and “anti-national” thoughts have become bywords to suppress dissent and deflect uncomfortable questions. Universities being the bastions of free thought, must be safeguarded from such threats.

Ila Railkar, *Mumbai*

CASTEIST SILENCE

THIS REFERS TO the report, ‘I held, case lodged after “caste slur” outside hockey player’s house’ (IE, August 6). When the nation is celebrating the performance and achievements of its’ Olympic players, caste abuse against Vandana Katariya’s family is a manifestation of the

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deeper malice of caste hierarchy. The accused may get punished for the crime under the Constitution, but their conscience would remain clear by drawing justification from the scriptures like Manusmriti. The silence of their caste members and leaders is a deafening testimony to that.

LR Murmu, *Delhi*

HISTORIC VICTORY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Golden Bronze’ (IE, August 6). The epoch-making 5-4 victory over a plucky Germany gave the Indian hockey team their 12th hockey medal. The eight-time former gold-winners, who battled a heartbreaking slump in the last four decades, made the resurgence of the last couple of years count in the best way possible. Determined to clinch a medal, the team made one of the most memorable comebacks in the history of the game, fighting back from a two-goal deficit to turn the match in their favour.

SS Paul, *Nadia*

An expression of self

‘Sarpatta Parambarai’ is a subtle, subversive exploration of Dalit subjectivity



N KALYAN RAMAN

THE SETTING IS North Madras, specifically the harbour area and its hinterland of a few square kilometres. Residents of the area are mostly from the labouring classes, an uncommon mix of diverse castes and religions living together. The period is the mid-to-late Seventies, a time of great political upheaval in Tamil Nadu and the country. The context is a set of boxing clans (or parambarais) competing among themselves for glory in the sport.

Sarpatta Parambarai, director Pa Ranjith’s fifth feature film in Tamil, opened on July 25 to near-unanimous acclaim by critics and viewers alike. The film captivates the audience through its presentation of not only boxing, a sport of high energy and drama, but also the complex relationship of a community with its past and present, sustained through its engagement with boxing.

Boxing came to the Dalits of North Madras through their British masters. Just as Brahmins and the upper castes derived their education, privileges, and power in modern India through their association with the British, the Dalits of North Madras inherited boxing. In *Sarpatta Parambarai*, boxing is a source of pride for the community as well as a space that is autonomous from the social order. The film’s pulsing energy in every frame derives from this deep investment in the sport by boxers, coaches, sponsors, clan members, and most of all, the teeming crowd of spectators.

It is fascinating that the Dalits who learnt boxing from the British helped spread the sport among the diverse communities of North Madras, including fishermen, Anglo-Indians, and caste Hindus. Equally remarkable was the formation of boxing clans that transcended family and caste loyalties. The pursuit of glory for one’s clan, the pivot of the film, becomes a secular pursuit through a secular means – excellence in the boxing ring.

On the plane of human subjectivity, contention is a thread that runs through all the characters in the film, especially its two main protagonists. Rangan, a legendary boxer in his day who is now the head coach of the Sarpatta clan, is constantly in danger of being marginalised, slighted, betrayed, and humiliated. Yet, he keeps striving at every turn, his sense of dignity and exemplary code of honour intact.

Kabilan, a naturally gifted boxer who becomes Rangan’s protégé, persists with the sport only to restore the glory of the Sarpatta clan and his beloved mentor. He must literally fight to win the respect of the community every step of the way, until victory is snatched away from him through unfair means. After the inevitable collapse, Kabilan recovers himself through the coaching efforts of an old fisherman recommended to him by his mother.

The matrix of conflict within the film’s narrative is set up through grievances from the past, real or imagined, and apprehensions

about the future. The director does not diminish or judge any of these conflicts, allowing them to play out in the most supreme of all arenas, the boxing ring. The genius of *Sarpatta Parambarai* is to showcase the many layers of Dalit subjectivity, from the intimate to the socio-political, through the symbol and metaphor of boxing.

Caste is never explicitly mentioned in the film, but the frequent references to beef indicate that Rangan and Kabilan are from a Dalit community. During an acrimonious exchange with Kabilan and his people, Thanigai talks of sending word to them when a cow dies in his house, an unmistakable casteist slur.

After Ranjith’s *Attakathi* (2012) and *Madras* (2014), two more films – *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) and *Karnan* (2021), directed by Mari Selvaraj – explored Dalit subjectivities in new and important ways. *Sarpatta Parambarai* pushes the envelope in this genre while being an outstanding cinematic achievement in its own right.

As with most other realms of modern life, caste has been a barrier to the entry of depressed communities into the world of modern art forms. It was only in the early Eighties that Dalit subjectivity began to find a place in Tamil modernist literature with Poomani’s classic novels, *Piraku* (1979) and *Vekki* (1984). In Tamil cinema, it happened with Ranjith’s first feature film, *Attakathi* (2012).

It inaugurated a new genre of Tamil cinema of which *Sarpatta Parambarai* is the latest example.

Our public discourse on caste has focused on the exclusion of subaltern communities from the so-called classical art forms, monopolised hitherto by the upper castes. “Progressive” intellectuals have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to “democratise” these art forms by adapting them to subaltern expressions. However, these attempts run counter to the very nature of art, which functions best as “the primitive expression of the collective”. It is by this logic that communities evolve their own art forms and expressions, out of their socio-historical conditions and the subjectivities arising therefrom. Blues, jazz, reggae and hip-hop are some examples of such art forms in the western world.

Neelam Panpaattu Maiyam, a cultural institution founded by Ranjith, is engaged in the development and promotion of such artistic expressions by Dalit communities. It is time we shifted our focus from the subjectivities of guilty oppressors to the expressions of those who present a new and subversive vision of the world in the fullness of their humanity. *Sarpatta Parambarai* presents a most eloquent and magnificent argument for this shift.

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