

The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Why Opposition unity

For long, it has been a story of false starts. Changing the narrative will need clarity on what is at stake



SUHASH PALSHIKAR

HATE NEWS

CJI's anguish is spot on. Channels communalising news must be called out — but state is part of the problem, not the solution

CHIEF JUSTICE OF India NV Ramana is right — and has done the right thing — to flag the “problem” that “everything in this country is shown with a communal angle by a section of the media.” The country is going to get a bad name, he said. But the risk is not merely reputational. The CJI-led bench was hearing a batch of petitions that sought action against news channels for the ways in which their coverage of the Tablighi Jamaat meeting at the Nizamuddin Markaz last year was sensationalised. Indeed, the Tablighi Jamaat was demonised, and an attempt was made to manipulate the fears already stoked by a little known virus to deepen communal polarisation. The prime suspects were TV channels who have decided to play megaphones for those in power even if it means amplifying hate. In this context, however, the court’s lament about “no control on web portals” and platforms without “accountability”, may unfortunately be an instance of not framing the problem in its full complexity. In response, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, who speaks for the Centre, referred, as solution, to the controversial Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, that have been challenged. If the court articulated an incomplete question, the Centre has pointed to the wrong answer.

There are no easy solutions, no statist quick fixes, to the problem that has provoked the anguished reaction of the court. The communalisation of news is partly because of decisions taken in some newsrooms and boardrooms to do so. But arguing for controls by the state is to simply ignore the larger context and political eco-system, while risking the potential cramping of the constitutionally guaranteed fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression. The state is part of the problem here, not the solution. After all, those sections of the media that purvey the most vicious and divisive images and narratives, and must therefore be cast most squarely in the dock for communalisation, are those that also proudly fashion themselves as spokespersons of the establishment and allow themselves to be weaponised by it. This problem will not go away, then, if only the state tightens a law, or sharpens a rule. Contrary to the Centre’s defence of the new IT Rules, which attempts to draw a line between freedom of the press and the rights of the audience “who believe and act upon misleading news”, the truth is that the press and the audience are on the same side — in a democracy, the freedom of the press is an essential and inextricable part of the people’s right to know.

The CJI’s anguish, however, could yet serve a larger purpose, by starting a wider conversation. One which acknowledges the problem in its complexities. And one which does not hesitate to call out — and forthrightly address — all the complicities.

THE BIDEN DOCTRINE

His defence of withdrawal from Afghanistan mirrors larger American consensus, recalibration of engagement with world

RESIDENT JOE BIDEN’S unapologetic defence this week of his decision to withdraw from Afghanistan and the botched final days of the retreat is an inflection point in the evolution of US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War in 1991. Biden’s definitive call on walking away from Afghanistan is the culmination of a prolonged US domestic debate. It brings to a close the expansive American effort to remake other societies in the name of US global leadership. After three decades of spending American blood and treasure in fighting insurgents and terrorists in the Greater Middle East, Biden now wants America to focus on the larger and more demanding challenges presented by great power rivals — China and Russia.

Biden’s scepticism of the Afghan war is blunt but not new, and dates back to the years when he was the vice president to Barack Obama (2009-17). American frustration with the Afghan occupation has been gathering pace for more than a decade. President Obama was not enthusiastic about the wars of intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq launched by his predecessor George W Bush. Obama ended the war in Iraq in 2011. He was eager to wrap up the Afghan occupation by 2014, but left the final decision to his successor. President Donald Trump had even less ownership of the Afghan war. He pivoted to finding a political settlement with the Taliban that facilitated the safe withdrawal of US troops, but devalued the political legitimacy of the Kabul government. After a quick review of the Trump policy, Biden decided to uphold it. The continuity in the Trump and Biden approaches to Afghanistan points to the new consensus across the political divide on the futility of prolonged wars of intervention.

As Biden put it, the decision was “not just about Afghanistan”, but “ending an era of major military operations to remake other countries”. It is based on a new American political consensus on a narrower definition of US national interests. Trump called it putting “America First”. Biden is developing a “foreign policy that works for the American middle class”. There is also continuity between the Trump and Biden Administrations in assessing the nature of the Chinese threat, the urgency of dealing with it, and the importance of avoiding distractions like Afghanistan. Although the messy evacuation from Kabul has drawn many brickbats for Biden, there is much political support for the withdrawal itself and his promise to focus on emerging challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

CHINESE IDOL

Recent crackdown on reality shows in Middle Kingdom is more about politics of strongman leader than androgyny of celebrity

IT’S NOT QUITE the Cultural Revolution but Xi Jinping’s “National Rejuvenation” is certainly doing its best to catch up. The latest target for Chinese regulators is popular culture, particularly vote-in shows a la American Idol. The government, in an ostensible bid to reduce the irrational idolatry around celebrity, has told broadcasters to “resolutely put an end to sissy men and other abnormal aesthetics” and instead “vigorously promote excellent Chinese traditional culture, revolutionary culture and advanced socialist culture”.

There has been some concern about declining fertility rates in China, which is being cited as a reason for the crackdown on “sissy men”. More likely, though, is the fact that popular culture — despite strict government controls — has a tendency to take in elements from various sources. The androgynous aesthetic that has the party-state so worried is the hallmark of K-Pop and Japanese culture — two countries that the Chinese Communist Party is unlikely to want as soft power influences among the youth. And, as with other countries with strong leaders, including democracies, it is not the irrational worship of celebrities that has the Chinese authorities worried — it’s just celebrating the “wrong” kind of celebrity.

“Chinese traditional culture”, coupled with “revolutionary” and “advanced socialist culture” is nothing more than a summary of “Xi Jinping Thought”, recently incorporated in school and college syllabi in the Middle Kingdom. Too often, it is easy to forget that the political cults of personality — whether on the Left or Right — are among the most dangerous and irrational kinds of idol worship. Add to that an obsession with chest-thumping masculinity, and the real reason for the aversion to “idol shows” becomes clear. Leaders of a certain kind, eager to be the only objects of veneration, are just eliminating the competition. When it comes to the Chinese Idol, there can be only one.

AS THE REALITY of the (second) dominant party system begins to sink in, non-BJP parties have begun engaging in the language of Opposition unity. Given the experience of the past three decades, the obstacles to coalition-making are considerably less today because most parties have practised the art of alliances at some point. So, after her recent victory, Mamata Banerjee has repeatedly hinted at some mechanism of “Opposition unity”. Her attempts naturally focus on the perspective of state parties and federal power-sharing. There have also been attempts of bringing together non-Congress, non-BJP parties to avoid dealing with a party that continues to consider itself as the only all-India Opposition to the BJP. The Congress itself is aware that only astute alliances can keep it alive in the next round of elections. Therefore, it is also finding occasions to bring together other non-BJP parties.

These initiatives are natural, necessary and overdue. This, in spite of the cynicism about what such hasty anti-BJPism can achieve. While much of this cynicism is well founded, there come moments when genuine concerns about the shape of the future need to be balanced by equally genuine concerns about the darkness that might set in unless a robust Opposition emerges. Not only theoretically is an Opposition required in a democracy, in clear practical terms, it is high time that the new regime the BJP has established is tamed at least through a strong Opposition.

Democratic politics is at such a critical juncture that a “no alternative” argument can only be an apologia for the suspension of many democratic norms and aspirations. But in spite of this urgent need to build a democratic bulwark, non-BJP parties keep faltering and making false starts. Besides their emphasis on elections alone with complete exclusion of serious mass mobilisations, their failure to handle five issues results in a flip-flop of right initiatives and lazy follow-ups.

The first is the issue of leadership. Ever since Narendra Modi rose to prominence, the media has become enamoured of the leadership question. Whenever any discussion of Opposition synergy begins, the media dutifully highlights the ambitions of many Opposition leaders as if such ambition is a sin. The Opposition will have to avoid this trap.

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The second and more serious challenge is balancing criticism of ill governance of the current government with efforts at improving governance in states where the BJP is not in power. With more than 10 major states being run by non-BJP parties, the crisis of governance becomes a liability as much for them as for the BJP. Even in the case of the messing up of pandemic management, state governments cannot completely run away from responsibility and, therefore, the Opposition’s attack on the BJP and the Modi government will have to be accompanied by manifest and evident efforts at improving the record of the states. Otherwise, Opposition unity remains only a negative agenda. If Modi is accused of governance failure, states ruled by non-BJP parties need to be examples of better governance. In many cases, they are not.

The third difficulty is about the BJP’s key arsenal — Hindutva. As political competition heats up, the shouts of Hindutva will only grow louder. The trouble is that emotive appeals can easily contaminate public reason and no amount of sensible argument can easily counter or remove their effect. The Opposition may duck the issue, but, in that case, the appeal of the BJP remains intact; if, on the other hand, the Opposition acquiesces into that mode of thinking, it will have conceded a major victory for the BJP in the long run. What we need is probably a reinvigorated effort at redefining nationalism; replacing the current surge of pseudo-nationalism; creating popular interest in an argument that equates nation with people rather than geography or history alone. The empirical and lived reality of belonging needs to be translated into a new nationalism both through party and trans-party platforms. But non-BJP parties seem to be intellectually incapable and politically disinterested in this tortuous route which they should have taken seven years ago, or 30 years ago.

Then comes the fourth and trickiest challenge: Undeniably, the Modi government is on a weak wicket as far as the economy is concerned. The Opposition may tactically find it most convenient to trap the BJP on this issue — it could well do so. But ironically, while the management of the economy and its outcomes are indeed disastrous, are we also not witness to an implicit consensus among most parties on the basic direction of economic policy? So, will the non-BJP parties not be criticising outcomes of policies which they do not fundamentally disagree with? To overcome this problem, they would need to systematically distinguish their policies within the broader rubric of what might be described as “liberalisation”. This will require a far more nuanced vision, much careful thinking and a lot of imagination.

Finally, voters will be wondering why the non-BJP parties want to come together. If it is only to replace the BJP because they want power, then voters will have only limited interest and almost no sympathy in that project. More than that, for the non-BJP parties to have self-belief, it is necessary that they understand why they are coming together. In other words, the realisation and its articulation that something fundamental is at stake constitutes the core justification and legitimacy of all the shabby-looking efforts of Opposition unity. To project the dangers only in terms of threats to Muslims and constraints on intellectual freedom of expression will be a self-limiting exercise. Unless the non-BJP parties realise that besides the marginalisation of Muslims, beyond constraints on intelligence and their own existence, something bigger is at stake, they would be unable to make the case, much less convince the public, that India’s selfhood and routine democratic politics are at stake.

Not astute strategies, nor contingent political opportunities, but the ability to comprehend and handle these challenges will determine whether initiatives of Opposition unity will gather momentum or wither away.

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SURVEILLANCE STATE

There is need for caution, not celebration of Delhi government’s CCTV programme



APAR GUPTA AND ANUSHKA JAIN

LAST WEEK, THE Delhi government celebrated an act of mass surveillance, issuing a self-congratulatory press release, as reported in Delhi ahead of NY, London in terms of CCTV cameras installed per sq. mile’ (IE, August 26). The press release marks the CCTV installation as a competitive metric based on a study by the consumer research website Comparitech. It notes that Delhi has 1,826 CCTVs per square mile, ranking it above 150 global cities. This statistic and the press release are symbolic of the populist messaging that comes at the cost of accountable governance.

Public safety is given as the reason for the mass installation of CCTVs in Delhi. There is little doubt that there is a high incidence of violent crime against women and children. Here, the Delhi government has a limited mandate as the police and law and order fall within the purview of the Union government as per the Supreme Court decision in *Government of NCT of Delhi v. Union of India*. Working within a restricted jurisdiction, several projects for public safety have been announced by the Delhi government, including CCTV installations.

Are Delhi’s women safe even after being under such high surveillance? No. There are no feasibility reports or any evidence-based research to support such a massive deployment. The metric to be measured is not the CCTV as a physical artefact, but its impact in reducing crime. There exists no public data on how CCTVs contribute to a reduction in violent crimes or make policing more efficient.

It is damning that any correlation between CCTVs and crimes against women points in the opposite direction or towards negligible impact. As per data published by the Delhi Police on August 15, in 8 months of the preceding year, there were 5,095 cases of crimes against women compared to 8,106 during the corresponding period in 2021. While this could be because of restrictions on public movement due to the pandemic, the Comparitech study itself notes that “a higher number of cameras just barely correlates with a lower crime index.” Given the dubious utility of CCTVs, it is necessary to reconsider the project expenditure of Rs 1,184.73 crore. This is far from a fixed one-time cost and will include replacement, repairs, maintenance, provision of internet and electricity. As noted in an audit by the CAG, of the 3,870 CCTVs installed by the Delhi Police from 2008 to 2015, feeds are available only for 22-48 per cent.

CCTVs are likely to imperil the intended beneficiaries — children and women. There is no underlying legal framework for their use. All that exists is a one-page standard operating procedure (SOP), issued by the Public Works Department of the Delhi Government on August 27, 2018, which permits the installation of CCTVs and makes feeds available to RWA representatives, Market Associations, the Public Works Department and the local police. They are provided passwords to log in and access the feeds after approval from the local MLA. However, the SOP does not contain

any data protection principles or security practices. What happens if passwords are shared or if copies of the feed are made? Are there any security audits? Can any penalties be imposed in the absence of a legal framework?

Surveillance deployment can easily be used by RWA representatives to police the travel, work and social lives of female residents. In a study by Nayantara Ranganathan from the Internet Democracy Project, interviews with female garment workers in Bengaluru revealed that CCTV footage had not helped in even a single case of sexual harassment. On the contrary, such footage was used to identify “troublemakers” to prevent workers from organising and demanding labour protections. These are the harsh consequences of the erosion of privacy as a concept of individual autonomy as articulated by the Supreme Court in the *Puttaswamy* judgment.

Delhi is not alone in the global surveillance race. Other Indian cities, notably, Chennai (3rd) and Mumbai (18th) also feature in the report. Our nearest national competitor is China which uses digital surveillance for behavioural modification, with each person being assigned a social credit score. We must be cautious and not celebrate the Delhi government’s CCTV programme, which undermines women’s safety, fiscal prudence and civil liberties.

Gupta is executive director and Jain is an Associate counsel at Internet Freedom Foundation



SEPTEMBER 4, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

DEBATE ON SICK FIRMS

FINANCE MINISTER R Venkataraman has indicated that the government might reverse the policy of taking over sick units. He could not understand the philosophy of letting the private sector pocket all profits while the going was good and the government stepping in to take their units when they became sick, the minister told the Lok Sabha. The 250-minute debate, though thinly attended, was one of the calmest in recent days. Speakers were heard in rapt attention and, barring a few, everybody spoke economics rather than politics. The crux of the Opposition’s charge was that the minister was finding refuge be-

hind the maze of statistics, and unless the ruling party changed its basic policy it would not be able to control the spiraling prices.

REPRIEVE FOR CMS

THE ANTULAY SCANDAL has come to the aid of at least three Congress (I) chief ministers in distress, though only for the time being. According to informed sources, the high command is sooccupied in finding ways to contain the storm raised by the Maharashtra Chief Minister Abdul Rahman Antulay’s fund-raising operations that it has temporarily shelved its plans to set its house in order in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat.

IRAN VIOLENCE

IRAN’S PARLIAMENT INSTALLED a new government with a view to halt the violence that has led to the assassination of national figures. But anti-government assassins struck again and gun battles flared in the streets of Tehran between Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards and the secular leftist guerrillas. Tehran Radio said seven Mujahideen Khalq Guerillas were killed in an eight-hour shootout with revolutionary guardsmen who stormed a secret hideout of the most powerful Opposition group. It said a big arms cache and partially-burnt of government offices were seized.

THE IDEAS PAGE

The idea of a teacher

A teacher is not an automaton, but someone who carries the lamp of truth, and walks with her students to make sense of the world they live in, and free it from what belittles man



AVIJIT PATHAK

Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. — Kahlil Gibran

IS IT POSSIBLE for a society obsessed with brute power, stimulant nationalism and market-driven instrumental rationality to appreciate and nurture the vocation of teaching — its deep vision and creative surplus? Or, for that matter, is it possible for a society that tends to equate education primarily with the acquisition of some sort of knowledge capsules for material success to acknowledge the fact that teachers are not supposed to sell education as a "product"? When coaching centres "gurus" occupy the mental landscape of our youngsters and their anxiety-ridden parents, and the cancerous growth of fancy education shops promotes the crude discourse of utilitarian education, is it possible to see teachers as healers, communicators and wanderers? Even though on special occasions like Teacher's Day we say all sorts of noble words about the vocation of teaching, and some teachers are awarded by the State, the fact is that as a society we are not very serious about the role of teachers as the messengers of emancipatory education.

To begin with, let us dare to be "impractical" and imagine what the vocation of teaching ought to be. Well, we might find amid ourselves a spectrum of "knowledgeable" people — experts and specialists. But then, a teacher is not just a subject expert. She teaches not merely quantum physics or medieval history; she does something more. She walks with her students as a co-traveller; she touches their souls; and as a catalyst, she helps the young learner to understand his/her uniqueness and innate possibilities. She is not a machine that merely repeats the dictates of the official curriculum; nor is she an agent of surveillance — disciplining, punishing, hierarchising and normalising her students through the ritualisation of examinations and grading. Instead, she is creative and reflexive; and it is through the nuanced art of relatedness that she activates the learner's faith that he is unique, he need not be like someone else, he must look at the process of his inner flowering, and the artificially constructed binary of "success" and "failure" must be abandoned.

There is another important thing a teacher ought to take care of. She must realise that there are limits to teaching and sermonising; and she is not supposed to fill the mind of the learner with a heavy baggage of bookish knowledge. Instead, her primary task is to help the learner to sharpen the power of observation, the ability to think and reflect, the aesthetic sensibility, and above all, the spiritual urge to experience the glimpses of the Infinite. In other words, once these faculties are developed, one becomes a life-long learner — beyond degrees and diplomas. In fact, teaching as an act of communion, and studentship as a project of the integral development of the physical, vital, intellectual and psychic states of being, can create the ground for emancipatory education. And emancipatory education is not a mere act of "skill learning"; nor is it pure in-



CR Sasikumar

tellectualism with academic specialisation.

As a matter of fact, emancipatory education is the willingness to live meaningfully, creatively and gracefully. It is the ability to identify and debunk diverse ideologies and practices of domination and seduction — say, the cult of narcissistic personalities that reduces democracy to a ritualistic act of "electing" one's masters, the doctrine of militaristic nationalism that manufactures the mass psychology of fear and hatred, or the neoliberal idea that to be "smart" is to be a hyper-competitive consumer driven by the promises of instant gratification through the ceaseless consumption of all sorts of material and symbolic goods. And a teacher ought to be seen as the carrier of this sort of emancipatory education that inspires the young learner to question sexism, racism, casteism, ecologically destructive developmentalism, hollow consumerism, and the life-killing practice of "productivity" that transforms potentially creative beings into mere "resources", or spiritually impoverished and alienated robotic performers.

Yet, the irony is that we do not desire to create an environment that promotes emancipatory education, and nurtures the true spirit of the vocation of teaching. Look at the state of an average school in the country. With rote learning, poor teacher-taught ratio, pathetic infrastructure, chaotic classrooms and demotivated teachers, it is not possible to expect even the slightest trace of intellectually stimulating and ethically churning education. It is sad that ours is a society that refuses to acknowledge the worth of good schoolteachers.

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Moreover, because of nepotism, corruption and trivialisation of BEd degrees, there is massive devaluation of the vocation. Likewise, while the triumphant political class has caused severe damage to some of our leading public universities, and fancy institutes of technology and management see education primarily as a training for supplying the workforce for the techno-corporate empire, teachers are becoming mere "service providers" or docile conformists. Here is a society hypnotised by the power of bureaucracy, the assertion of techno-managers and the glitz of celebrities. Not surprisingly then, it fails to realise that a society that has lost its teachers is dead.

However, those who love the vocation of teaching and continue to see its immense possibilities should not give up. After all, ours is also a society that saw the likes of Gijubhai Badheka, Rabindranath Tagore and Jiddu Krishnamurti who inspired us, and made us believe that a teacher, far from being a cog in the bureaucratic machine, carries the lamp of truth, and walks with her students as wanderers and seekers to make sense of the world they live in, and free it from what belittles man. We must celebrate this pedagogy of hope.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Controversial but universally respected for the refinement of his personality and dedication to his mission, Geelani was anathema to India because of the clarity of his views." — DAWN, PAKISTAN

Illusion of social justice

Caste census would provide up-to-date data to calibrate reservation. For the same reason, it may not see light of day



PRANNV DHAWAN AND CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT

IN THE RECENTLY concluded Monsoon Session, the Indian Parliament passed the 127th Constitution Amendment Bill, 2021, which overrides the Supreme Court's interpretation of the 102nd Constitutional Amendment. The Court's judgment in the Maratha case had concluded that the 102nd Amendment curtailed the state government's power to identify backward classes. The Union government's course correction allowed the ruling BJP to congratulate itself for its record on OBC rights. But two challenges risk rendering this proclaimed progress redundant.

First, the 50 per cent limit on caste-based quotas, propounded by the judiciary, imposes a serious limitation on states' power to expand the composition of backward class beneficiaries. In most states, the existing quotas for SC, ST, OBC and SBC already breach this benchmark. The government's inertia regarding the expansion of quotas raises questions about its pro-OBC credentials. OBC reservations remain under-implemented in central services (below 22 per cent in 2016), and unimplemented in many central universities (47 per cent of the posts reserved for OBCs were vacant in 2017).

The erosion of the public sector has resulted in a steady decrease in the jobs occupied by Dalits in the reservations framework. For instance, the number of civil service candidates shortlisted by the UPSC dropped by almost 40 per cent between 2014 and 2018, from 1,236 to 759. This evolution was primarily due to old trends like the rise of vacancies and the privatisation of PSUs. As a result, between 2011-12 and 2017-18, due to a fall in employment of 2.2 lakh jobs in Central Public Sector Enterprises, the reduction in employment of SCs amounted to 33,000 jobs.

Finally, the introduction of a 10 per cent quota in 2019 for economically weaker sections (EWS) has altered the standard definition of backwardness to include upper castes who were not necessarily socially and educationally backward. By setting an income limit of Rs 8,00,000 per annum, below which households are classified under EWS, the government made this quota accessible to about 99 per cent of the upper castes — not just the poor. For Ashwini Deshpande and Rajesh Ramachandran, it "completely overruled" the original logic of reservations on its head. They write: "By stipulating a quota for non-SC-ST-OBC families earning Rs 8,00,000 or less, the government is effectively creating a quota exclusively for Hindu upper castes who are not in the top one per cent of the income distribution. This means that despite being presented as a quota on economic criteria and not caste, the reality is that this is very much a caste-based quota, targeted towards castes that do not suffer any social discrimination." While the aim of the 127th Constitution Amendment may be to balance these trends, it is bound to be frustrated if states are not empowered to breach the 50 per cent limit.

Secondly, this anxiety is compounded by the BJP's reluctance to enumerate OBCs in the caste census despite the overwhelming support for the same amongst its own OBC members and opposition parties. This reluctance will exacerbate the post-colonial contradiction between caste-blind socio-economic demographic analysis and a caste-conscious compensatory discrimination regime. The political rise of the backward classes represented a moment of history. However, their claims to a fair share of state power have been mired in various challenges. The Backward Class Commissions made recommendations in a context where their access to credible and up-to-date caste census data was not ensured.

The census data would provide up-to-date evidence that would help analyse the accomplishments as well as the limitations of reservation policies. It would showcase the magnitude of the gap between economic and social capital acquisition within and between the general category as well as the reserved sections. The census would also be instrumental in revising the benchmark for social, economic and educational backwardness. The absence of information about the general category's material attainments and accumulation does not permit a measure of social disadvantage. This is particularly problematic in today's India where social progress, achievement and mobility are determined more than before by access to corporate capital and English proficiency. These benchmarks, presently focused on the analysis of a group's social indicators relative to SCs, need to be calibrated to measure relative backwardness in comparison to the "general category".

The caste census would also provide much-needed rigour to the findings and recommendations of Union and state-level backward caste commissions. This is imperative because their recommendations are often declared "unreasonable" and "arbitrary" by the judiciary — like in the case of Justice Gaikwad Commission that proposed granting of SEBC quota to the Maratha community. The Commission's findings on the lack of educational attainments amongst Marathas were clouded by the fact that Marathas were socially dominant. This decadal data can illuminate the precise dynamics of social and market-driven processes of converting caste-based social capital to economic and in turn, educational and professional progress.

Finally, a caste census would also facilitate compliance with recent court decisions. The Supreme Court, in *Chebroli L Prasad v State of AP* (2020), directed the Centre to periodically revise the list of reservation beneficiaries based on sound sociological evidence. However, the National and State Backward Class Commissions lack access to universalised data and field research on various dimensions of backwardness. Another 2020 decision, *Davinder Singh v State of Punjab* has opened the question of sub-classification within the SC category, thus raising the need for credible data on internal differentiation.

It is precisely because there is so much at stake that the caste census may not see the light of the day under a government in which elite groups are over-represented.

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Not the same force

Once known for its excellence, Mumbai's police is now in the dock



D SIVANANDHAN

A RECENT NEWS report about a Mumbai Police head constable has gone viral and raised eyebrows. As per the report, Jitendra Shinde, the head constable who was Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan's bodyguard, earned an annual income of a whopping Rs 1.5 crore — several times the salary of the Mumbai Police Commissioner, currently a DGP rank officer.

It is but natural therefore that questions are being raised. One will have to wait for the outcome of an inquiry initiated against Shinde by the police chief. If the details mentioned in the report are true, Shinde will have to provide details of how he managed to earn so much money, because as per the service rule, a government official is not allowed to have a dual source of income while in service.

Shinde has reportedly said that the income in question was from a company run by his wife that provides private security guards to film stars. This is the subject of the inquiry and best not commented on at this moment.

The reports also indicate that Shinde had been recently transferred following a new diktat from the police chief that if a policeman has completed five years of service in the same post and position, he/she should be transferred. However, what makes the otherwise credible step suspicious is the fact that Shinde was transferred to the DB Marg

police station in South Mumbai. If an inquiry has been initiated against him, Shinde should have ideally been transferred to the Local Arms Division or a non-executive post. Transferring and posting him to a high-profile police station raises eyebrows. Did someone influence his posting? Is the police administration serious about the inquiry or is it just a hogwash?

Several years ago, when I was posted in Satara as the Superintendent of Police (SP), I got a call one day from a senior cabinet minister of Maharashtra. The minister gave me the name of a havaladar and asked me not to transfer him from a particular police chowki. I was a bit surprised as to why a senior politician was giving me orders about a havaladar. When I prodded him a bit, he inadvertently said that the havaladar was a karyakarta of his party. I politely asked him to repeat, and he corrected himself.

I then enquired about the havaladar and found out that he had been posted continuously at that particular chowki for nine years. As per the rules, after completion of three years at a chowki, a havaladar needs to be transferred and posted elsewhere. The minister was for another extension which would have made the havaladar's tenure at the chowki, 12 years. It was clear that the havaladar was working more as a karyakarta for the minister and his party than the police department.

I then called up the minister, apprised him of the situation and politely declined to adhere to his request and transferred the havaladar to another post.

Another instance that comes to mind is the heart-wrenching story of police commando Ravindra Patil, who was actor Salman Khan's bodyguard during the infamous hit-and-run case in September 2002. Immediately after the accident, Patil had registered the First Information Report (FIR) and was the main eyewitness to the incident.

As days went by and the case came up in court, Patil was abandoned by his own department and left to fend for himself. Within a span of a few years, a highly trained commando was reduced to a pile of bones. He weighed a mere 30 kgs the day he was found dead in his small room in Bhoiwada. He literally shrank to his death.

It has been an unwarranted practice of VIPs, film-stars and politicians to demand bodyguards of their choice. This practice does not augur well for the police force and should be stopped forthwith. As per sources, the VIPs form a comfort level with their bodyguards, which is often based on a quid pro quo rather than a purely professional arrangement.

It is also high time some stringent measures are put in place to repair the broken image of the police force, especially the Mumbai Police whose image has taken a severe beat-

ing in the past few months. Once touted as a force second only to Scotland Yard, it's a mere shadow of its former self.

Almost every day we come across reports of policemen being arrested for taking bribes, FIRs being filed against policemen for extortion and other serious offences. A few weeks back, newspapers and news channels carried reports of the arrested Mumbai Police officer Sachin Vaze being in possession of several luxury and high-end cars. The question that needs to be asked is: Why was he taken back into the police force in the first place, when a trial in a murder case is pending against him?

A retired high-profile police inspector has been arrested along with Vaze for reportedly planting explosives outside business tycoon Mukesh Ambani's house Antilia on Altamount Road in South Mumbai. Look-out notices have been issued against a sitting Maharashtra DGP. At least five FIRs of extortion and other serious offences have been registered against the DGP. A former state home minister is under the radar of central law enforcement agencies and has been reportedly avoiding their summons.

All these make one wonder: Quo Vadis Mumbai Police? Where are you headed?

The writer is a retired Director General of Police, Maharashtra & former Commissioner of Police, Mumbai

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FALSE BINARY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The golden rule: Both sides listen' (IE, September 3). The author's discourse surrounding an upcoming international conference in the US titled 'Dismantling Global Hindutva' has oversimplified a complex socio-cultural issue to a binary between liberal and authoritarian ideals. The minority of upper-caste elites spearheading "Hindutva" ideology are using the bogey and spectre of extraneous forces to consolidate Hindus. This helps them to gloss over the perennial problem of inter-caste contradictions and discrimination through religious indoctrination.

L R Murmu, Delhi

REVIVAL PATH

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Spend more' (IE, September 3). Investment is one of the key drivers of economic growth. Government investment by way of front-loading capital expenditure will prime the expenditure multiplier effect in the economy at a time when it is experiencing a recession in household demand. While global investor sentiments are high, the national monetisation pipeline can channel much-needed investment and technological know-how into state-owned enterprises, and asset monetisation would further strengthen state coffers, which again can be invested back into the mar-

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ket. Productive economic activities would rejig market sentiments.

Sudip Kumar Dey, Barasat

ACT NOW

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Filthy and unhealthy' (IE, September 3). The UP CM visiting the outbreak zones after seven long days signifies the priority accorded to the issue. Sadly, around 40 lives have been lost as result of this mysterious infection. If the primary reason is the lack of proper sanitation, then the government has to take complete responsibility for the fatalities. A proper antidote must be found.

Mervin Preethi A, Coimbatore