



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

The New Brahminism

Brahmin welfare schemes instituted by southern states cannot pass any constitutional smell test



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

MAPPING DISTRESS

Labour Force Survey data underlines continuing strain in labour market, lack of job creation in non-agri sectors

THE PERIODIC LABOUR Force Survey (2019-20) points towards the steady build up of distress in the labour market in India. As the survey pertains to the July 2019 to June 2020 period, it captures both the economic slowdown prior to Covid, and the period after the national lockdown was imposed to restrict the spread of the pandemic. The survey data shows an increase in the labour force participation in agriculture during this period. This, as some have argued, implies that during this period of stress, agriculture emerged as an “employer of last resort”. Equally significant is that much of the increase in the women’s labour force participation recorded by the survey during this period was in the category of unpaid family workers, and not in more productive forms of employment. These are worrying developments.

The PLFS data shows that the share of the labour force engaged in agriculture rose to 45.6 per cent in 2019-20, up from 42.5 per cent in 2018-19 — an abrupt reversal of the decades-long decline in the labour force participation in agriculture. This suggests that the movement of labour out of agriculture, which had gathered pace post 2004-05, seems to have been stymied by the economic slowdown. The reverse migration of labour from cities to villages would have only increased the pressure on agriculture to absorb the workers. The rise in the female labour force participation is also problematic. Under normal circumstances, considering the low rates of female labour force participation in India — for women aged 15 and above it stood at 24.5 per cent in 2018-19 — a rise in participation would be a positive development. However, much of the increase observed in 2019-20 was in the form of unpaid family work. In fact, according to the survey, the employment rate for unpaid workers in household enterprises in rural and urban areas increased to 15.9 per cent in 2019-20, from 13.3 per cent in 2018-19. In the case of female workers, it increased from 30.9 per cent to 35 per cent over the period. This, as some economists have said, is indicative of rising underemployment.

In the months thereafter, as Covid infections ebbed and flowed, and as restrictions on economic activities have been tightened and loosened in response, the employment situation changed accordingly. However, data on work demanded by households under MGNREGA indicates that the stress in the labour market remains higher than in pre-Covid times. What these numbers also reflect is the failure of the economy in not being able to create enough non-agricultural jobs (even in pre-Covid times) to absorb both those shifting out of agriculture, and the millions entering the labour force each year. Worryingly, even the jobs that are being created tend to be largely informal in nature.

NOT ENOUGH RAIN

Agriculture acted as shock-absorber for economy, especially post-Covid lockdown. It may not play that role again this year

THE SOUTHWEST MONSOON hasn’t turned out great this year, unlike in 2019 and 2020. Rainfall in the season (June-September) has so far been 7.9 per cent below the historical average for the country. But more than the aggregate figure, it’s the temporal distribution that has raised question marks. A three-week long dry spell from around June 20 resulted in farmers missing the main kharif sowing window between mid-June and mid-July. The monsoon did revive from July 12-13 and so did plantings. But August recorded 24 per cent rainfall deficiency. Even if the September rains match the India Meteorological Department’s “above-normal” prediction, it would primarily benefit the rabi season crop. And with current water levels in major reservoirs lower than a year ago, not much hope should be placed on a bumper rabi harvest offsetting the likely kharif losses.

The farm sector grew 4.3 per cent in 2019-20 and 3.6 per cent in 2020-21, more than the overall GDP, at 4 per cent and minus 7.3 per cent, respectively. Agriculture acted as a shock-absorber for the economy, especially in the post-Covid lockdown period. The government’s latest Periodic Labour Force Survey data for July 2019-June 2020 shows the proportion of those engaged in farming activity increasing to 45.6 per cent, from 42.5 per cent in 2018-19. As a report in this newspaper has pointed out, this marks a reversal of the historical trend of agriculture’s declining share in total employment. 2019-20 and 2020-21 were both crisis years for the Indian economy, which registered a sharp slide in growth even pre Covid and then went into contraction. While that led to job losses across most sectors — be it manufacturing, construction, hotels, tourism, transport or retail trade — agriculture could absorb some of the labour that got shed. And that, in turn, was made possible by the back-to-back good monsoons.

The monsoon’s performance makes a repeat of the above story unlikely this year. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, agricultural employment, which averaged 124 million during May-July, fell to 116 million in August. That clearly has to do with the fields not receiving rain when required. Simply put, agriculture cannot play saviour this time. With the worst of Covid hopefully behind us, other engines of the economy have to start firing. India has to resume and go beyond its normal growth trajectory, wherein jobs are created more in manufacturing, construction and services. Agriculture’s own future lies in becoming more productive and adding value outside the farms.

MIX IT LIKE BUMRAH

The fastest Indian pacer to reach 100 wickets practises an art that is as original as it is devastating

A LOOK OF incredulity descended on Jonny Bairstow when a devilish reverse-swinging yorker pulverised his stumps. Even slow-motion replays wouldn’t have solved the puzzle for him later. The truth is that Jasprit Bumrah decided to do what he does — unleash a spell of greatness to become the fastest Indian pacer to reach 100 wickets, in 24 Tests, one less than it had taken Kapil Dev.

It’s interesting that he broke Dev’s record. It would be difficult to find two more different bowlers. Dev was all classical swing, smooth and athletic in his run-up, his left hand breaking out of the cloud of hand-movements at release like a synchronised swimmer. Bumrah is anti-classical, shuffles to the crease like a reticent kid pushed out to the podium, his bewilderingly non-bending bowling arm cuts arcs that interest biomechanics experts. But once the ball is set in motion, it causes devastation unparalleled in Indian bowling history.

His art is so original that it paradoxically seems as if it was designed at a lab. As if all retired bowlers got together for a chai-pe-charcha, and each put in a feature request for the ideal bowler. An action that’s hard to read, angles hard to decipher, release positions rarely seen before. He bowls furious legcutters, slow off breaks from round the stumps, slow dipping yorkers that drop like aerial bombs on batsmen’s feet, viciously late-swinging pacy yorkers that give no intimation, bouncers which are identified late by the batsmen only when they begin to rear up sharply, nipbackers that aren’t finger cut across the seam like most but somehow he twists his wrists in awkward angles and backspins the ball from hell. Cameras have recorded how he releases the ball later than most bowlers, extending the arm further than most, reducing the reaction time of the batsmen. Merely a collection of deliveries and uniqueness of action, however, doesn’t make a great bowler. It needs the immense cricketing intelligence of Bumrah to mix it all up and serve the deadliest cocktail known to the batsmen of today.

BOTH SECULARISM AND social justice have become farcical ideas. If you want to see a new and vivid demonstration of this, study the new Brahmin welfare schemes instituted by southern states. The websites of the Telangana Brahmin Samkshema Parishad, or *andhrabrahmin.ap.gov.in*, or the Karnataka State Brahmin Development Board have a tale to tell. Each of them has created or supported a separate undertaking for Brahmin welfare. Each of them has a similar template: Scholarships, support for overseas education, funds for starting enterprises, support for Brahmin self-help groups, money for coaching, and a range of other benefits. The state ought to help the poor of all communities. But the way in which the proposed schemes are framed is a grotesque perversion of constitutional values. They are a reactionary reversion to the worst aspects of caste.

The Andhra Pradesh government has a Veda Vyasa Scheme for Vedic Education. Let us, for a moment, put aside the question of whether there is a secular pedagogical argument for the state supporting Vedic education. But who is eligible for this education? Students should belong to the Brahmin community by birth. Similarly, the parallel schemes in Telangana and Karnataka require Brahmin caste certificates to be eligible for their schemes. Can you think of anything more grotesque than the idea that in the 21st century the state provides support to a profession whose eligibility is determined by birth? If Vedic education is an unalloyed good, why should it not be open to all, subject to conduct rules? How can the state discriminate, and confine it to Brahmins identified by birth? This cannot pass any constitutional smell test.

The semiotics get worse. The *brahmin-parishad.telangana.gov.in* announces proudly that “BRAHMIN stands for Broad and Brilliant in Thinking, Righteous and Religious in Livelihood, Adroit and Adventurous in Personality, Honesty and Humanity in Quality, Modesty and Morality in Character, Innovation and Industry in Performance and Nobility and Novelty in Approach.” The form available for issuing a Brahmin caste certificate in Telangana asks for Gothram details, as if the state were some pandit in Haridwar.

There is, of course, a colossal irony, or perhaps deep historical ignorance, in the Andhra Scheme being named after Veda Vyasa. Veda Vyasa would not have counted as a Brahmin eligible under this scheme. At least the Mahabharata is a bit more embarrassed about designating Brahminhood by birth rather than by conduct. But here is a modern secular state going with caste birthright all the way.

No one can deny the fact that some Brahmins are impoverished and need help. But why make a scheme available on caste basis? For example, there is a proposed BEST (Brahmin Entrepreneurship of Telangana) scheme which provides entrepreneurial support to those with income of less than Rs 2 lakh. Worthy goal. But presumably Article 14 would require that anyone whose income is less than Rs 2 lakh should be eligible for this, especially if there is no additional basis for classification based on discrimination. Why allocate funding for IAS coaching, self-help group formation, or funding for overseas education, based on being a Brahmin? Karnataka state is now giving financial incentives for brides for Brahmins, who are apparently finding it difficult to find them. This is a gross perversion of both Vedic and constitutional values.

The argument will be that if “Dalit” can be used as the basis of classification, why not “Brahmin”? But this is exactly the perversion of the social justice discourse that was set in motion post Mandal, where the question of deeply entrenched historical discrimination was confused with backwardness and poverty in general. No one can deny the pervasive reality of caste in India. But it does not follow that, except in the case of Dalits or similar exceptional cases, addressing backwardness by the state requires using caste as a criteria. Almost all of the goods that are sought to be provided in these schemes to help the poor and backward — preferential admissions, scholarships, income support, housing, education, health, loans — can cover all those who need to be covered without invoking caste.

But think of the regression this represents in politics. Recognising caste to overcome discrimination was one thing. But entrenching it as a compulsory identity, certified by the state,

and reproducing birth-based entitlements are a perversion of social justice. Politics and public policy is being reduced to *jati*-based mobilisation in the most absurd way. Dalits were poor on account of their caste, which is why caste was recognised. Now the state wants to ensure that all who are poor are permanently stamped with their caste by an official seal. Do you have income below Rs 2 lakh? Please get a Brahmin certificate to avail benefits. Can’t find a bride? Well, if you are Brahmin, we can help. Karnataka, Andhra and Telangana are supposedly India’s more progressive states. They do well in public goods provision and incorporation of Dalits. But it looks as if chief ministers, across political parties, see themselves as old Hindu monarchs, lording over a caste order and distributing benefits by caste. There is no emancipatory vision here of overcoming caste. That Lohiaite idea, that you have to go through caste to overcome it, is turning out to be a piece of sociological wishful thinking.

But also think of secularism. Ironically, just as subsidies for Haj pilgrimages were rolled back, you have the massive erosion of secularism. There were anomalies in Indian secularism that need to be corrected. But we should understand this. Those most exercised about pseudo-secularism, are not concerned about secularism; they use it as a pretext to stigmatise and target minorities, while the erosion of secularism goes unabated.

The free for all that is ensuing for reconfiguring caste-based benefits, the demands of local domicile reservation, are signs of pessimism about the economy. Much heat will be generated about how to distribute the current and shrinking pie of jobs and resources along *jati* lines. But no one is getting seriously upset about the fact that the pie is not growing as fast as we need it to. The benefits for Brahmins may seem like a *reductio ad absurdum* of our politics, a little farce. But behind it is a great tragedy, of a nation with diminishing prospects for everyone, encouraging them to reach into the narrowest-minded conceptions of identity and calling it social justice.

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A HEAVIER HAND

Tougher excise law in MP is set up for misuse, makes marginalised more vulnerable



ADITI PRADHAN AND AVANEENDRA KHARE

LAST MONTH, the Madhya Pradesh assembly passed an amendment to Section 49-A of the Madhya Pradesh Excise Act 1915, enhancing the possible sentence for its violation to the death penalty. Section 49-A of the Act prescribes the penalty for offences related to liquor that is unfit for human consumption or “spurious”. It is already the most serious offence under the Act, with the possibility of life imprisonment for repeat offenders. The amendment follows recent deaths caused by spurious liquor in Mandsaur and Indore; the Statement of Objects and Reasons of the amendment declares that the penalty has been increased to “deter people from indulging in this illegal activity”.

However, a recent report, “Drunk on Power: A Study of Excise Policing in Madhya Pradesh”, by the Criminal Justice and Police Accountability Project found that Section 49-A is the Act’s most sporadically policed offence. The majority of excise arrests were made under the bailable Section 34(1) (47.41 per cent of total excise arrests). Arrests under the non-bailable Sections 34(2) and 49-A were recorded at 6.08 per cent and 0.78 per cent respectively.

The report found more than half of all accused belonged to oppressed Dalit, Adivasi and Bahujan communities. Vimukta (denotified tribes) communities such as the Kanjars and Kuchbandhiyas, previously criminalised under the colonial-era Criminal Tribes Act 1871, were arrested in disproportionate numbers.

According to the Supreme Court’s guidelines in *Armesh Kumar v State of Bihar*, there must be a necessity of arrest for a bailable offence, else the police can issue a notice of appearance under Section 41-A. However, less than one-fifth of the accused were issued this notice, even though that option could have been used by the police in over 90 per cent of the FIRs. Excessive arrests for low-level bailable offences and woeful underutilisation of Section 41-A notices raises serious concerns about both the implementation of the Armesh Kumar guidelines and the widespread abuse of police discretion.

There are two ways in which one may obtain bail from the police — either by executing a personal bond, promising to pay a sum on failing to appear before the competent court; or, by having somebody deposit the bail amount. The first option, where no money needs to be paid upfront, is less onerous on the accused and yet, was pursued in only 30 per cent of FIRs. By default, the police opted for the latter option, and the bail amounts ranged from Rs 2,000 to Rs 10,000. When an accused is unable to obtain bail from the police, or the offence is non-bailable, they approach the courts and bail amounts rise further still — Rs 10,000 at the district courts, and Rs 50,000 at the High Court.

Throughout this process, the courts and the police mechanically set bail amounts without regard to the accused’s capacity to pay. More often than not, these are back-breaking sums for the accused, most of

whom hail from oppressed castes and marginalised communities. Arbitrary bail amounts and expenses such as lawyers’ fees and bribes further push the accused and their families into insurmountable inter-generational poverty. This is especially pronounced for those who get implicated in cases multiple times, because of which they are designated “habitual criminals” and asked to furnish sequentially higher bail amounts. Such repeatedly accused persons are overwhelmingly likely to belong to oppressed castes; for instance, in the report, 64 per cent of all such “recurrent” accused persons in the FIR sample belonged to SC and ST communities, including the Vimukta communities.

Therefore, given the casteist and classist nature of excise policing, it is clear that inflating the penalty under Section 49-A would render these oppressed communities more vulnerable. Previous research on the death penalty has concluded that it does not have a deterrent effect and that it has a disproportionate impact on socially and economically marginalised communities. Thus, apprehension must replace enthusiasm in assessing this recent move by the MP assembly, and the realities of excise policing in the state must prompt serious reflection on what purposes the law, in fact, serves.

Pradhan and Khare have co-authored the report ‘Drunk on Power: A Study of Excise Policing in Madhya Pradesh’ along with other members of the CPA Project

SEPTEMBER 8, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

FM EXONERATED

THE SPEAKER BALRAM JAKHAR ruled in the Lok Sabha that by informing the House on September 2 that Mrs Gandhi had not inaugurated the Maharashtra Pratibha Pratishtan, the Finance Minister R Venkataraman had not misled the house, and, therefore, had not committed any breach of privilege. Disallowing a number of privilege motions by George Fernandes (LD), Atal Bihari Vajpayee (BJP), Jyotirmoy Basu (CPM), Maniram Bagri (DSF), and Madhu Dandavate (Janata Dal), Jakhari said that he had accepted Venkataraman’s explanation that the photograph published in various newspapers and submitted as documentary

evidence by the Opposition was of the PM signing a document bearing the caption Pratibha Pratishtan Maharashtra, and not the Indira Pratibha Pratishtan. The fact that several newspapers and publications had given a wrong caption cannot alter the fact that the document signed by the PM referred only to Pratibha Pratishtan Maharashtra.

AFGHAN PROBLEM

THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT will adopt a flexible approach to a dialogue with Iran and Pakistan to find a solution to the Afghan problem. Mrs Gandhi told visiting Afghanistan foreign minister, Shah Mohammed Dost that the solution was be-

ing delayed because countries in the region were not taking a long-term view.

AKALIS COURT ARREST

ABOUT 2,000 AKALIS courted arrest in Delhi at the end of their peaceful march to protest against the government’s interference in the affairs of their religion and in support of their demand for more autonomy to states.

DELHI BANK DACOITY

FIVE ARMED DACOITS entered the South Extension Branch of the Canara Bank in Delhi and escaped with Rs 6 lakh in cash. They injured six employees.



13 THE IDEAS PAGE

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"With schools closed, and hardly anyone expecting online lessons to achieve the same results, it was clear that children were losing out on a precious entitlement."
—THE GUARDIAN

The idea of South Asia

It needs to take off. Because three quarters of a century after Partition, South Asians are no closer to consigning its multiple fallouts to history



KRISHNA KUMAR

AMONG THE CHILDREN of Partition refugees, the memory of displacement is no longer sharp. For the rest of us who were lucky enough to be born after Partition, it is an inherited memory. It has been fading away as all memory does if an investment is not made to keep it alive. History, of course, is a different matter. It is the job of historians to help society to cope with the burden of the past by turning it into knowledge. In the case of Partition, many historians have done excellent work. Let me mention four whose work has transformed our understanding of Partition.

The return of Partition to contemporary political business is not altogether unexpected. In fact, Partition had never gone out of political relevance in any of the three countries whose legacy lies in Partition. Published in the mid-1990s, *India Partitioned*, edited by the late Mushirul Hasan, brought together the creative expression of memories from all three countries. One of the excerpts was from a nearly forgotten novel, *The Heart Divided*, by Mumtaz Shah Nawaz. Although it is fiction, the book opens up a new perspective on the lived reality of day-to-day life before Partition. Then, in 1998, came Urvasi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*. It unwrapped a parcel lying at the back of independent India's memory closet. It contained the orally recorded memories of common people. It opened a new chapter in the study of Partition, presenting a mirror from which the images of great historical figures had been removed. Sucheta Mahajan's *Independence and Partition (2000)* made the mirror of history wider and deeper, imparting it the capacity to capture sociological nuances across communities.

This kind of attempt achieved its crowning success in Niti Nair's *Changing Homelands*. This micro-study of local manoeuvres bridges the gap between high politics and ground-level life. It makes one realise the deeper truth about historical events that Tolstoy had captured in his *War and Peace*. An event always carries an interplay of the life of the masses and how we remember the historical figures concerned with that event. It needs the meticulous, localised inquiry of the kind that Nair has done in Punjab to recognise that there is no simple explanation of Partition. Nor is there a simple way to remember it, one should add. Societies that prefer memory over history tend to remain permanently injured.

With so much scholarly insight available, no one can innocently maintain that people went mad. Historians have demonstrated that people can be mobilised for madness. Shakespeare has shown this in *Julius Caesar*, in the scene where Antony persuades a crowd to go after Brutus and his colleagues. Twentieth century history shows how people can be mobilised for sustainable insanity. That is what happened in Germany. However terrible the violence of Partition, it subsided after some time. But the consol-

idation of identities that had led to Partition could not be stopped by electoral democracy. The experience of Partition is a fading family memory, but as a historical fact it remains charged with potential emotional value.

When SAARC was mooted in 1985, it created the hope that trade, cultural activity and intellectual exchange would gradually diminish the political legacies of Partition by nourishing a regional fraternity. The dream is still relevant, but SAARC has remained incapable of responding to the unabated rise of identity-based aggression and violence. Along with this, a remarkable degree of indifference to others' woes has grown. That was manifested in the paralysis of sympathy to the violence faced by the common public of Myanmar since the beginning of this year. Now when Afghanistan is going through a convulsion, a similar spectator-like attitude is in evidence among other South Asian countries, barring one that has a known vested interest in the Afghan transition.

Numerous declarations were made in the early years of SAARC. One of them created the hope that the school curriculum in the different countries would be examined by a joint team. Had that exercise been done, a seedling of hope might have germinated, that the children would not acquire a prejudiced view of others. Nothing contributes to enmities among nations more than the perpetuating of a mindset that acquires comfort from hostility towards others. Socialisation into prejudiced views maintains continuities of hatred and enmity, of war.

The idea of a South Asian consortium has frayed over the years. As a term, "South Asia" is now mainly heard in weather reports on international channels. The hope that a regional perspective would gradually encourage regional consciousness and identity has receded. We can view this as the receding of an educated imagination in our region. It offered the only sustainable proposal to mute and replace conflicts inherited from the past with the help of a larger frame of regional interests.

The children growing up in our part of the world, irrespective of the country they live in, need explanatory help from adults as to why there is so much turmoil all around. Socialisation of the mind is a long and complicated process. Ushering the young mind into a culture of peace demands some reduction of the long backlog of turmoil.

Three quarters of a century after Partition, South Asians are no closer to consigning its multiple fallouts to history. The idea of South Asia is relatively young, and SAARC's attempt to promote it has not been a great success so far. But that is no reason to abandon the attempt. After all, it is the only hope we can currently entertain, especially after the tumultuous events that have engulfed Myanmar and Afghanistan. Myanmar first applied for SAARC membership 13 years ago. Afghanistan became the eighth member of SAARC in 2007. It feels strange that South Asia's sole forum for collective deliberation has maintained silence over a tumultuous turmoil known to every child.

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The Party wants its pupils back

In China, clampdown on ed-tech speaks of CCP desire to control training grounds of country's ruling elite. India's NEP, in contrast, amplifies momentum for privatising existing educational capacities



ROHAN D'SOUZA

IF THERE IS one sector that sums up the post-pandemic time, it would be education. In many countries, the well-off and much of the middle class quickly discovered that online schooling could be almost seamless, if they possessed a stable internet connection. "Socially distanced" learning with repurposed home screens got mainstreamed so quickly that previous worries about missing the early morning school bus felt so 20th century.

The explosion in online teaching for school children, however, proved to be a side show compared to the huge pandemic-caused economic bounce for educational technology (ed-tech) companies — the new learning platforms that combine information technology (IT) tools with educational practices. The chief calling card of ed-tech is its ability to curate customised learning by deploying artificial intelligence, teaching analytics, cloud computing and learning apps. Personalised learning through digital devices, moreover, radically flips the classroom environment. Unlike the "traditional student" in a teacher-synchronised classroom, the user in the learning platform is now enabled by IT tools to set the pace and time for interactions.

China, with its almost 240 million schooling children straddling the spectrum between kindergarten and the pre-college 12th grade, became a natural destination for the early ed-tech startups and innovators. In 2018, over 50 per cent of the global investments in ed-tech startups was funnelled into China. As the pandemic began to sweep across the globe, over \$10 billion in 2020 hotfooted its way to the Chinese ed-tech industry — about two-thirds of the world's total venture capital investments in the ed-tech sector.

India, with its much talked about demographic dividend, witnessed a similar Covid-19 ed-tech bonanza of sorts by attracting close to \$1.4 billion investments by October 2020. Industry trackers, in fact, foresee the strong possibility of a near tripling in India's overall ed-tech growth within the next five years. Reportedly, from January 2020 to barely halfway through 2021 itself, three Indian ed-tech startups — Unacademy, Eruditus and UpGrad — have already become unicorns, while Byju's is now a decacorn. In startup parlance, a company valued at above \$1 billion is a unicorn while a company valued above \$10 billion is a decacorn.

While Asia's biggest two, demographically speaking, seemed all set for a competitive scramble over ed-tech investment and venture funding, the road for the race suddenly broke into a fork. Or as Finshots, the online newsletter, put it: "The red dragon" decided to hit the "kill-switch" on China's entire ed-tech industry. On July 24, the central committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) issued guidelines that required private tutoring companies to register as non-profits, banned extracurricular tutoring from going public and made it obligatory for all tutoring agencies to have regulatory approval.

The regulations also sought limitations on extracurricular programmes for students, curbs on teaching school subjects during weekends and public holidays, and the prohibiting of tutoring for children below six.

Share prices of China's "for-profit educa-



CR Sasikumar

tion" sector went into a tailspin. Blistering sell-offs followed from companies such as Koolearn Technology Holding Ltd, New Oriental Education & Technology Group and US-listed stocks such as Gaotu Techedu and TAL Education Group.

This unprecedented crackdown still awaits an explanation. Thus far, the suggestion is that the CCP was driven by the need to stanch the growing social inequality stoked by the race culture, which the private tutoring market was fomenting. Second, some argue, was the government's benign desire to stop the brutal overworking of young children by over-aspiring parents. Some even link the regulations to the government's design to encourage families to have more babies, now that education was back to being public and cheap. Though such good intentions might indeed have spurred the anti-ed-tech regulations, they shed little light on how critical education is for the continued dominance of the CCP.

The CCP's membership, as of June 5, stands at 95.15 million — about 7 per cent of China's 1.4 billion people. Admission to the party is extremely competitive. In 2014, the acceptance rate was on a par with that of the Ivy League universities in the US — of 22 million applicants, only 2 million were accepted. The Chinese university ecosystem has over the decades emerged as the primary recruiting grounds for the Party — on average, university students comprise 40 per cent of the new party members. Many go on to hold top positions in government, military, education, state-owned enterprises, healthcare and banking.

The universities, in turn, draw their aspiring candidates from the vast network of primary, tertiary and secondary schools that dot the country. The very same school-going children who, prior to the crackdown of July 24, would have made up the potential user base of the ed-tech industry. While ed-tech teaching modules claim to spruce up skills and fine-tune varied learning abilities, its raft of IT tools are trained to collect massive amounts of personal and sensitive data. Ed-tech is hardwired to extract from its users what the political philosopher and theorist Shoshana Zuboff calls the "behavioural surplus" — the data exhaust left behind by every user in the wake of their digital interactions. This digital trail empowers the platform in two ways. Once possessed of the behaviour surplus, it can exhaustively

The bottomline for the CCP is the realisation that ed-tech, if unchecked, could easily become in quick time a huge private capacity within Chinese society that would parallel the CCP in having information on the psychological and behavioural profile of future party members — the party would lose its sole ability to shape the intimate life-worlds of its ruling elites.

map the user's abilities, challenges and learning curve. And second, the more worrying, the ed-tech company now potentially possesses the capacity to modify, steer, nudge and even deflect the behaviour of its users.

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There are good reasons, therefore, to believe that the July crackdown on the ed-tech industry in China was a deeply informed political decision rather than a logistical or humanitarian response. The CCP intends to cultivate China's ruling and administrative elites primarily through public assets. The private sector and its incredible digital capacities, it seems, are being contained and efforts are now on to block it from networking into China's powerful and delicately poised political realm.

The current Indian governing dispensation appears to be moving in the opposite direction. If one goes by the New Education Policy, the effort is to amplify an already ongoing momentum for privatising India's existing educational capacities. There is also a similar market-inspired enthusiasm by the government for embracing both the novelty and the aggressive pitch of the rapidly growing ed-tech sector within India. At heart, the steady weakening and dismantling of public education and assets seems to draw upon a deeper political commitment to corporatise India's administrative and ruling elites. At the pace at which public goods are being eviscerated, India, it appears, will no longer have bureaucrats produced by its public education system. And over time, it could lose the ability to check private interests and markets with any meaningful public capacity. China, in contrast, seems determined to ensure that its political infrastructure will stay beholden to public assets. The elephant and the dragon are clearly going their separate ways and their respective responses to education is the dividing line.

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Tastes like power play

Scorn for spices shows how race, class still shape Western ideas of haute cuisine



KRISHNENDU RAY

ON AUGUST 19, *The Washington Post* humourist Gene Weingarten published "You can't make me eat these foods". Among his list of inedibles are hazelnuts, blue cheese, cooked peppers, balsamic vinegar, and pizza with more than two toppings. Most of Weingarten's listing could have been ignored as trivial, but his inclusion of "Indian food" as a whole category provoked incensed responses. The fact that he assumed Indian cuisine is based on a single spice called curry says much. It reveals at least two things about the state of American food commentary. First, that Weingarten is among the commentators who can no longer pull their weight in a world more familiar with wider conceptions of good taste. Second, spices continue to haunt the Western imagination: Initially with paroxysms of desire, driving them to a search for their source, then with disdain once exotic spices from the East were de-throned around the 17th century with reduced price and status.

We have a lovely piece of evidence of robust Indo-Mediterranean trade in pepper, spikenard and malabathrum ca. 150 CE in the Muziris Papyrus. From the Middle Ages, we have more evidence of European travellers sniffing their way back to South Asia, seeking the sources of fragrant comestibles. Spices were essential to rebalance the humours according to the contemporary theory on health. They combined the magic of the Garden of Eden

with the curative superfoods of the time. Frankincense, camphor and myrrh provided the aroma of sanctity inhaled at church services. In the early 15th century, the long, unruly logistical chain, coupled with elite demand and profiteering, raised the Venetian price of some spices to 100 times that paid in the Moluccas.

Every fashion cycle creates its own limits. When everyone is wearing mini-skirts, maxis become the next big thing; anything less would be indistinguishable from day-before-yesterday's trend. By the 17th century, the European appetite for spices and aromatics peaked. With spices so accessible in Europe, the elites started pulling away. French courtesses travelling on the peripheries of Poland and Spain could be heard complaining about the unpleasant reek of saffron and cinnamon in their foods. The 17th-century French writer Nicolas de Bonnefons asserted the new orthodoxy: "Cabbage soup should taste of cabbage, leeks of leeks, turnips of turnips." The rejection of spices and vinegar-based sauces for more butter-and-cream-based herbed ones marked the shift within French gastronomy towards a new essentialism, the *sine qua non* of European haute cuisine.

This also moved elite European tastes away from those of elites in Arab, Persian, and South Asian courts, who would continue to prefer complex, aromatic and sweet-and-sour culinary constructions. Here, elevation was not in the use of spices per se, but in the selection of

prohibitive ones — saffron as opposed to the cheaper turmeric to lend a vibrant colour — and labour-intensive techniques: Rice dishes jewelled with pomegranate seeds, stuffed and layered breads, hand-squeezed sherbets, and finely-ground koftas and kebabs, as found in the *Ni'matnama* of the sultans of Mandu and *Kar-name* (The Manual), the 16th-century Persian cookbook compiled by Haji Mohammad Ali Bavarci Baqadadi.

The layered aromatic constructions of these court cuisines, where camphor, ambergris, cardamom and clove ruled, would filter down societal strata to create versions of perfumed biryanis, pilafs, kebabs, and stews that would eventually find homes in restaurants everywhere, including migrant enclaves in the New World. By then, "spiciness" would be seen by Euro-American commentators as a metonym for the food of poor migrants — as "ethnic food," not haute cuisine — in the wake of mass migration from the Mediterranean region and the Ottoman periphery. Even Sicilians would be scorned for their garlicky food, said to increase cravings for alcohol. Olive oil was dismissed as greasy and spicy deep into the 20th century until the upward mobility of Italians themselves began.

In the book *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, I describe how the hierarchy of taste changes as class and race relations are transformed. French, Japanese, New American, and Italian top the

list that American customers are willing to pay well for, while Indian, Chinese, and Thai round out the bottom. Thus, it is not surprising that the World's Top 50 restaurant lists are dominated by French, Italian, New American, and Japanese restaurants while we see almost none from mainland China, sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia or the Arab world, home to more than half of the world's population and more varieties of cuisine, including court cuisines, than elsewhere. In fact, Western critics often use Japanese instances of naturalism that parallel European haute cuisine principles to claim universal approbation for their narrow concept of good food. When Weingarten condemns "garbage sushi" but not sushi, nor Japanese food as a whole, it stands in sharp contrast to his wholesale condemnation of all Indian food, conforming to the prevailing hierarchy while avoiding the charge of white supremacy.

North American palates are undergoing the next great transformation in taste but that transformation looks fractious, generational and gendered. Far from setting himself apart, Weingarten's inability to distinguish spices, even his description of curry as a spice, reflects the dying norm within Euro-American hierarchy with predictable, ill-informed unoriginality.

The writer is a professor of Food Studies at New York University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

REAL WORRY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Reputation and harm' (IE, September 7). The comments on the piece on Infosys in *Panchajanya* unwittingly raise another question. In a democracy, does *Panchajanya* have a right to ask a question of the IT giant? The asked question may be the stupidest but that does not disallow the asking of it. Infosys does not need a certificate of patriotism from anybody. Actually, it should be more worried about the fact that *Panchajanya* is also questioning its professional abilities while questioning its patriotism.
HN Bhagwat, Chiplun

THIS REFERS TO the reports, 'An Oval win after 50 years' and 'Flat track bullies' (IE, September 7). History was created at the Oval cricket ground on Monday when India emerged victorious in the fourth test match against England. Bouncing back of the Indian squad after an innings defeat in the third Test, is really a testimony to the bowling and batting capabilities of the Indian 11. With such a display of all-round performance, the Indian team has once again proved that it is the best test team in the world as it can come back from wherever it is left in the previous game, against any opponent and under any situation whatsoever, with victories not only in home grounds but on foreign soil too.
Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

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● THE DUTY OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS: ANSHU SALUJA

● ARITHMETIC ISN'T ENOUGH FOR OPPOSITION UNITY: RUPAK KUMAR

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NOBLE PROFESSION

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Teaching a new world' (IE, September 6). In the ongoing discussions dominated by the curriculum, pedagogy, digital learning and objectives of National Education Policy, it is a timely reminder that teachers, the pivot of any education system, are human beings of great merit. They are incomparable influencers. They identify and nurture nation builders, are endowed with rare attributes which are at a discount now but which elevate them and their profession to unique heights. Such teachers deserve the gratitude of their students and society.
YG Chouksey, Pune