

Wealth of the Nation

A testament of faith in India's commitment to fiscal federalism and notes for the way ahead



K Brahmananda Reddy (centre) presiding over the first meeting of the Finance Commission in New Delhi on July 14, 1972 Express archive

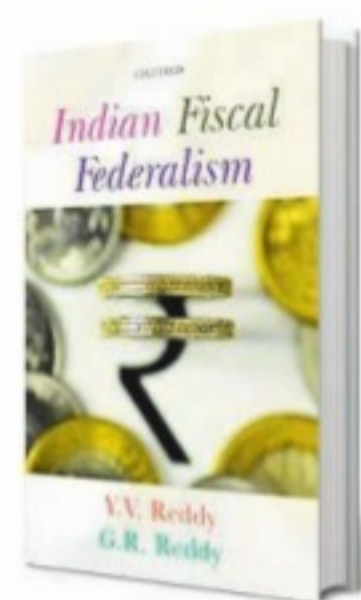
K SUBRAMANIAN

IN RECENT years, studying fiscal federalism issues has become the preserve of reformists advocating austerity and consolidation. Not so for Dr YV Reddy. He is a development economist at heart, with long years of service in central and state ministries and the Reserve Bank of India. He has been grappling with fiscal federalism issues for years. In his lectures and articles, one discerns a running stream of ideas honed over the years. The book under review is a milestone in his research career.

In a lecture delivered at Vidhi Centre in September, 2015 ('Fiscal Federalism in India: Some Reflections'), he surveyed the broad historical developments and said, "...we in India can be legitimately proud of our federation that simultaneously strengthened governance capabilities in states, contributed to national integration, and enabled robust fiscal federalism..." Even as the authors narrate the historical evolution of fiscal federalism and take note of other support institutions, their primary focus is on the role played by the Finance Commission (FC). Indeed, the FC has been the linchpin of our fiscal federal architecture. An early chapter deals with the evolution of fiscal federalism since the British days. There is a chapter on all the FCs, and another which recounts their approaches. The next one captures "continuity and changes" in the FC's working.

The authors appreciate the role of the FCs in promoting fiscal federalism. They are jus-

tified in holding this view, as it is based on a close examination of all their reports, 14 in all. The FCs are seen to have held a steady course between the centre and the states though, of late, there are attempts to tilt the balance towards the centre. Some FCs resisted and some others went beyond their remit to maintain fiscal prudence. As the authors affirm, "Finance Commissions have, over time, generally demonstrated that they were truly national, equally fair to the Union and the states, apolitical and innovative, as needed." This is because, as the authors say,



INDIAN FISCAL FEDERALISM
YV REDDY & GR REDDY
Oxford University Press
273 pages
₹ 695

"the approaches of successive Finance Commissions have remained unchanged in several ways, even as there is flexibility in introducing elements of change as warranted by circumstances."

This continuity in approach was also observed in the manner they recommended vertical allocations. Truly, they did make allowances for structural changes in the economy and the changing roles of the states and the centre. However, as the authors aver, there was no arbitrariness or ambiguity in their recommendations. Likewise, their record on horizontal transfers was fair.

Another important factor that catalysed the functioning of the FCs was the emerging support structure, such as the Planning Commission (PC), National Development Council, etc. The PC's role was crucial in deciding capital transfers. The authors regret that in future, they would be hamstrung in this role as the Niti Aayog, successor to the PC, has no role in capital allocations. As they explain, there is a vacuum in institutional and procedural arrangements for interaction between the Union and States. "That vacuum has been unfortunately occupied by the Ministries in the Union Government."

The FCs could retain their reputation and trust over the years. Looking back, those were also the years when we witnessed political instability with the emergence of coalition politics. Despite such political hiccups, there was continuing cooperation between the states and the Union. This was mainly due to the deft handling of centre-state issues by the FCs and the fact that the FCs were chaired

by eminent public persons, who were assisted by professional members.

Though the authors hold a rosy view of the history of fiscal federalism, they take note of recent trends suggesting that it is at a crossroads. There are references to these trends in many pages. The last chapter ('Afterword - The Way Forward') and the chapter on the 15th FC draw attention to them in a muted way. In recent public engagements and press briefings, Dr. YV Reddy has been openly critical of these trends and comes out as a strong defender of state autonomy.

The trends include the role of the GST Council, the Terms of Reference for the Fifteenth FC, and the new emphasis on fiscal responsibility and budget management. It is evident that the ToR runs contrary to the approach to fiscal federalism as enshrined in our Constitution. There is overreach to diminish the role of the states and to foist a "one nation, one policy" model in disregard of regional autonomy and diversity. These trends would erode the trust between the centre and states and strike at the root of fiscal federal harmony.

This book is a testament of faith in India's commitment to fiscal federalism since Independence. It is written by two eminent economists with long experience in handling those issues. They have voiced their concerns over its future and highlight the threats it faces.

K Subramanian is a retired finance ministry official writing on financial issues

Not Another Brick in the Wall

A call to reclaim institutions of higher education as spaces for debate, dissent and dialogue

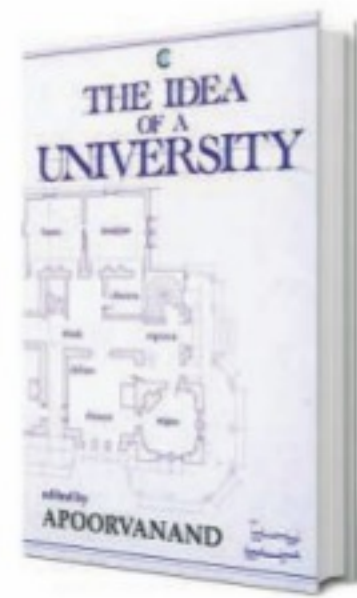
KAUSHIK DASGUPTA

A NEWSPAPER photograph that caught the eye in the past few days is that of former Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union President, and CPI candidate for the Lok Sabha elections from Begusarai, Kanhaiya Kumar, flanked by the mother of another JNU alumnus, Najeeb Ahmed. The visual speaks of the embattled state of their alma mater. Najeeb enrolled in JNU in 2016 and should have been on course to complete the academic requirements for a degree in biotechnology, last year. But he has been untraceable for more than two years, and his family and fellow students have raised strong suspicions of foul play. Kanhaiya's troubles with the current regime — inextricable with JNU's recent travails — are, of course, well-known.

While the unfreedoms of JNU have got national attention, what is disquieting is that the prestigious university's fortunes are actually the tip of the iceberg in so far as the general state of universities in India is concerned. All is not well in universities in the country. It's therefore natural that a volume of essays on the "idea of a university" devotes a major part of its investigation to academic freedom.

What marks this volume, however, is that it does not look at academia from the narrow perspective of the classroom. The essays, instead, try to locate institutions from the standpoint of the several stirrings in the country. Universities have become rife with possibilities of new ideas of citizenship — ones that contest old notions of religion,

caste, even the nation. This is not a simplistic break from the past, as has been viewed in some quarters, but an engagement with, and questioning of, power structures that ought to be the *raison d'être* of academic spaces in the first place. But at the same time, universities are increasingly being asked to conform. While they are becoming "catalysers of social mobility," the suicide of Rohith Vemula and the periodic reports of caste, gender and religious discrimination in educational institutions also attest to the fact that the university is increasingly being viewed, as Niraja Gopal Jayal writes in her essay, 'The Idea of Academic Freedom', "as a space that should



THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY
Edited by APOORVANAND
Context
276 pages
₹ 699

be sanitised of the dangers of critical thinking and free enquiry, of dissent and critique, debate and engagement".

It's such tension that inform the essays in *The Idea of a University*. One response would be to see the Indian university's predicament as a sub-set of "the existential crisis" of institutions of higher learning worldwide. Knowledge is increasingly being seen in terms of "market compatibility". However, the appropriation of the educational space by neoliberal forces has taken place in different ways in different parts of the world. The essays in the volume try to understand the workings of such forces in India, and their convergence — and divergence — with political currents.

As Alok Rai writes in his essay, 'The Barbarians Have Landed', we stand at the cusp of a paradigm shift in the way the university has been imagined in the country. "The colonial conception of the university has been rebranded for the twenty first century as the 'skills university', a policy goal, which would, ideally render entire generations into servants of giant corporations, slaves of the engines of capitalism". This has meshed with the thinking that everything that is useful in the realm of ideas has already been imagined — largely in ancient times — and the function of the university is simply to regurgitate them.

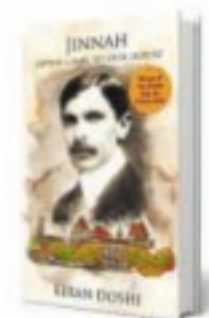
How should pedagogy respond to such challenges? How should teachers contest the antediluvian demands that are increasingly being placed on them? Ram Ramaswamy, in 'Night Thoughts on Academics, Administration and the University', puts the onus on the faculty. The quest for academic

excellence has to be reconciled with the changing composition of the student body "in terms of class, caste, ethnicity, religion and religious affiliations". The nature of pedagogy ought to be thought through and though teachers cannot be faulted on account of conscientiousness, the present effort towards "student-centred education" is "on the whole, inadequate," he contends.

But how well-positioned is the faculty to effect such a change? In 'Questioning Academic Freedom', Pankaj Chandra questions the power structure within the university itself. "While the university leaders seek academic freedom for the university and for themselves from the regulator, they rarely pass this on to their own constituents...So rigid is the hierarchy of colleges and the university that academics primarily see themselves as executors of decisions and not their originators". However, does the answer lie in an institution impervious to political currents — as Chandra seems to suggest?

Or, is it instructive to go back to Apoorvanand's introductory essay? Here he talks of an "obscure article" by Premchand in which the writer contrasts two convocation addresses: One by scientist C V Raman at Allahabad University and the other by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan at Lucknow University. Premchand roots for Radhakrishnan's views that universities "should become nurseries for youthful courage and excitement," against Raman's advocacy of caution against the "lure of the political". But Apoorvanand, while not dismissive of the philosopher president, urges a different reading of the scientist. "Universities should not give in to the demands of political correctness of the day," he says.

It such emphasis on different readings — dialogue, debate and dissent — that form the core of *The Idea of a University*. The volume should be seen as a call for reclaiming institutions of higher education as spaces for such activity.



IN THE RECKONING

Writer and former diplomat Kiran Doshi's short story, 'Miss Coelho English Teacher' has made the shortlist of the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, that is awarded annually to the best unpublished short fiction from the Commonwealth. Doshi had won the Hindu Prize 2016 for his third novel *Jinnah Often Came to Our House*.

Lightning Ignites the Sky

A wildly enjoyable gateway to wuxia fiction

ANUSHREE MAJUMDAR

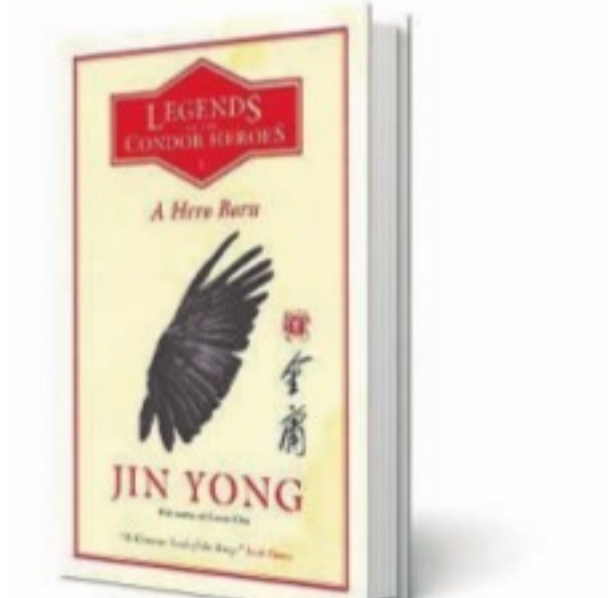
IT WOULD be grossly unfair to go by the *The Irish Times's* endorsement of *A Hero Born*, the first instalment of Jin Yong's most popular wuxia series, *Legends of the Condor Heroes*: "A Chinese Lord of the Rings." If they could, JRR Tolkien, and Louis Cha Leung-yung, the world's most widely read Chinese author, who wrote 14 novels as Jin Yong, would roll their eyes at us from the great beyond. The global publishing industry has got to do better than treat fantasy fiction of different cultures as one homogenous unit whose names are interchangeable because they might refer to similar themes. Dear reader, abandon all preconceived notions when you are about to embark on this wildly enjoyable and nearly unputdownable novel, that, for many, will serve as a gateway to wuxia fiction.

Wuxia — meaning martial heroes — is a genre in Chinese fiction, set in ancient or pre-modern China, that revolves around the adventures of practitioners of martial arts. And native readers in the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Vietnam will tell you that nobody wrote them better than Yong, a journalist who published editorials and serialised novels in newspapers such as the *New Evening Post* and his own, *Ming Pao*, for over 17 years. *Legends of the Condor Heroes* is not his first offering, but at 12 volumes spread across three epics, it is his most enduring work. Over the years, there have been several fan-translated versions of the trilogy, but the Maclehoose edition with Anna Holmwood is the first official English translation of the grand saga.

The year is 1205 AD and the Song empire has been fighting a losing battle against the Jin invaders from the north, who have steadily gained ground, and whose young princes, Wanyan Hongxie and Wanyan Honglie, will stop at nothing to build the empire they want, even if it means teaming up with an ally they can't entirely trust — the Great Khan Temujin (who will later be known as Genghis Khan), of the Mongolian steppes.

Caught in the crossfire are the Yangs and the Guos, sworn brothers and martial artists whose families are torn asunder, and scattered across the region. Guo Jing, son of Skyfury Guo, is not the sharpest tool in the shed, but a chance encounter with the Seven Freaks of the South changes his life forever. The soldier in the Great Khan's army is then trained in seven forms of kung fu by seven shifus, but little does he know that it is all for a bet the Freaks had placed with a Taoist master, who set up a combat with his student, Wanyan Kang, not long after the boys were born.

A word to the wise: before sitting down to read *A Hero Born*, it is imperative to take a trip back to 1978, when some of the best and most enduring kung fu films were made. Films such as *The 36th*



LEGENDS OF THE CONDOR HEROES: A HERO BORN
BORNJIN YONG
Maclehoose
395 pages
₹ 399

Chamber of Shaolin (directed by Lau Kar-leung and starring Gordon Liu), *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (directed by Yuen Wooping, starring Jackie Chan) and *Drunken Master* (also directed by Woo-ping and featuring Chan) can be viewed as essential background material. Although the book comes with a few illustrations, without these visual references, it will be nearly impossible for a layperson to conjure images of Yong's elaborate and detailed fight sequences, each boasting of new characters who introduce new moves and new weapons.

Given its expansive length, *Legends of the Condor Heroes* defies easy categorisation — it is a family drama, a coming-of-age story, a brief history of the wulin (community of martial heroes), a redemption tale — all rolled into one. While the style of the prose might take a while to settle into, there are no complaints about the pacing of the plot. Yong's mastery lies in the way he uses the wuxia setting to examine the class structure of ancient China, a place not unlike any other in the way prejudice works, but martial arts allows for a semblance of equality. One of Guo's teachers, Zhu Cong, says, "The martial arts are without limit. Every peak sits under the shadow of another, so every man may meet one stronger than himself...Never strip a mountain bare and you will not want for firewood."

One of the great joys of reading *A Hero Born* lies in encountering Yong's female characters. Barring one or two, they are martial artists who defy expectations, within the narrative and out of it, too. One of the most exciting villains to grace fantasy fiction has got to be Twice Foul Dark Wind, a woman so skilled in the art of destruction, and kills with such finesse, that Yong's prose shivers in anticipation of her next move.

SHELF LIFE

City Centre



MILK TEETH
AMRITA MAHALE
Westland
311 pages
₹ 599

THE LOVE affair between a city and its denizens has always been a rich source of inspiration for writers. Inasmuch as people plant their roots in a city, matching the pulse of their life to that of a Madras or a Bombay, it is equally inevitable for such a romance to seem one-sided. Amrita Mahale's debut novel recognises this as her characters interact in what can perhaps be described as inevitably clumsy, human ways.

Milk Teeth lives up to its title in a number of ways — it alludes to that innocent first romance which often evolves into something a lot more complicated, the feelings around a first home that everyone must come to terms with and the process of reconciling with who you are and what you want. Such is the case for the protagonist Irawati Kamat and her childhood friend Kartik Kini, whose lives revolved around their cooperative society building in Matunga. The book alternates between flashbacks and the present — the '90s — to portray the essence of a city in change, capturing

the time in which Bombay changed to become Mumbai.

Irawati is a journalist who covers the city's Corporation beat (still a beat reporter, as a character remarks snidely in the book). Nothing seems more appropriate for the protagonist of a book which focuses so much on the essence of a city; throughout the book, she is the champion of all the city is and could be, despite being exposed to its ugly side on a regular basis. It could be said that the crux of how Mahale handles the city as a whole can be seen through Ira's eyes — to love and believe in what it represents without shying away from the hypocrisy and cold-heartedness that is often found within its bounds.

Through most of the novel, Mahale exhibits a commendable control over the pace of the story. She jumps between childhood and adulthood with an ease which, in tangent with her portrayal of the city as a whole, is key in setting the novel apart. One letdown of the book is how the writing is prone to take a sudden turn for the worse, though it recovers within the span of a few lines. In the same vein, there are a few times — especially in the middle portion of the story — where it feels as if the characters and their entanglements fail to match the backdrop they have been portrayed against.

It would be a fair assessment to say that without the city, the tale of Irawati and Kartik would be far less compelling. On the other hand, it is equally uncertain if the construction of Bombay would have been effective without the worlds that encompassed the two of them. This could be what ultimately makes the romance with the city a little less unequal — that without the people through whom we view it, the city could have been something else entirely. When all is said and done, this still remains.

RAM SARANGAN