



The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A new poriborton

Two villages in West Bengal provide a pointer to the emerging Hindutva politics in the state



MUKULIKA BANERJEE

TWO VILLAGES IN West Bengal's Birbhum district, Madanpur and Chishti, situated on either side of the two-lane Panagarh-Morgram highway, have often reflected the prevailing political atmosphere in the state. Since 1998, I have visited and lived in these villages to carry out research for my upcoming book, *Cultivating Democracy*. I have found that they serve as a lens to understand the shifts in the state's politics. Despite the district being a communist bastion, both villages voted for the Trinamool Congress in the 2011 assembly election, which ended the 34-year reign of the CPM and the Left Front. I visited these villages in April, seeking an explanation for the BJP's rise in West Bengal.

In Kolkata, several people had told me that the BJP's West Bengal unit comprised mostly of former Left Front cadres. While the CPM had indeed become a moribund party in the state, I could not imagine that the left front sympathisers I knew would align with the Hindu majoritarian ideology of the BJP. "You will never find a leftist saying Muslims should go to Pakistan," Magaram Bagdi, a 44-year-old sharecropper and others from Madanpur and Chishti, had repeatedly told me. So who were these new BJP supporters?

Madanpur and Chishti villages are predominantly Muslim, with a substantial presence of two Dalit communities, the Bagdis and Doms. For me, the first sign of a Hindu identity emerging was an innocent and pious celebration of Ram Navami. The worship of Ram seemed out of place, given that Hindu scriptures and mythologies do not record the deity ever visiting West Bengal: Goddesses dominate the Hindu religious landscape here. Yet, the Dalits celebrated it with much pomp, complete with a public-address system that blared out music and a modest feast organised with contributions from everyone, including the Muslims, in the village. This was not entirely unprecedented because the Bagdis and Doms have previously held similar celebrations for Saraswati, partly inspired by the joyous celebrations of Eid, which both the communities participate in.

What was startling, however, was the celebration a day later for Hanuman in a neighbouring village, Sitapur, which has a sizeable Hindu population. The celebrations fell on the first day of the Bengali new year, and were conducted on a much bigger scale. The

village was holding a veritable fair around a Hanuman shrine. The residents of Madanpur and Chishti returned from the fair agog with excitement, describing to me the forked red flags they had seen atop the Hindu homes.

The Hanuman puja was particularly startling because the deity previously had no presence in these villages. Moreover, the celebrations did not mark any festival associated with Hanuman, but were simply a routine prayer ritual. "The flag brings good fortune and protects the household," Sandhya Dom, a Chishti resident, told me. Curiously, Sandhya's husband, Okho, an influential sharecropper, had told me on earlier occasions that Leftists would never "do politics with religion".

During the festival at Sitapur, I found a Hanuman idol under a tree. I asked two young men how old the shrine was. One of them said it had "fallen from a passing truck" nearly a year ago. Reading this as an omen, the residents instituted the worship of Hanuman in the village. The men, dressed in jeans and fitted t-shirts, were on a motorcycle that had two forked red flags attached to its handlebars. They had purchased the flags for Rs 50. The flags had the visual of Hanuman carrying a mountain, with "Jai Shri Ram" written in Devanagari script.

I asked another set of bikers if the flags were related to the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi — the prime minister is known to use the phrase "Jai Shri Ram" in his speeches and the phrase has become an important component of the BJP campaign in West Bengal. "Yes, of course," one of them grinned. "We love him (Modi)!" I asked if they would vote for him. "Yes," they responded with enthusiasm before zooming off. I encountered several such young men on motorcycles with forked red flags across the state — in Bardhaman, Malda, North Dinajpur and Siliguri districts — who spoke in support of Modi. They were dismissive of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who they claimed to be working only for Muslims.

Something has changed in Madanpur and Chishti, as across West Bengal. Simply put, more people seem to be supporting the BJP, a party that has been peripheral to their political vision until now. While support for Trinamool remains strong, the BJP seem to be drawing in support from the traditional Left Front households. This support, however, appears to be largely from its younger male members, who have no memories of the communist party-led struggles for land reform and for raising daily wages.

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Party loyalties run deep in West Bengal. For the 20 years I had known them, nearly everyone from the older generation in Madanpur and Chishti spoke about land reforms and wage struggles. But the younger members of the same households are captivated by Modi and Hanuman. A combination of brawn and devotion seem to have given them a platform to express a new political identity, and one which is removed from the older politics of struggle, demonstrations and meetings that dominated the Left Front and Trinamool years. Their parents find it hard to persuade or censure the new found piety and energy of their sons who, while unwilling to slog in the fields, pass time arranging fairs and community feasts.

Young men such as Okho's son Deb and his friends said they do not discuss politics at home to avoid confrontation with their parents. But they were all well-versed with the BJP campaign, and the messages the party has been disseminating. "Modi is the first and the only strong and capable leader of India," Deb told me. His friend Bishwa Bagdi added, "In Balakot, India proved it was unafraid to go inside Pakistan and attack it on its own territory," referring to the February air strike. Several young men repeated a message that the BJP had circulated over mobiles: "India's glory in the world began in 2014."

The young men seem to have a limited understanding of the deity. It is evident that their enthusiasm is not about the Hindu religion or faith; it is for the flags that flutter on motorcycles, on rooftops, for the muscular Hanuman, for the slogan, "Jai Shri Ram". These aspects of a new political identity have brought novelty and frisson to a new generation of young men, a generation tired of the old Bengali tensions between the Left Front and the Trinamool, and eager for something new they can claim to be their own.

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AS IRAN TAKES ON US

India's room for manoeuvre is limited. Yet, Delhi needs a moral complement to its realpolitik in the Gulf

IRANIAN FOREIGN MINISTER Javad Zarif's visit to Delhi this week was part of Tehran's effort to mobilise international political support in its confrontation with America. In the last few days, Washington has raised an alarm about unspecified new threats from Iran. Media reports from Washington say the US has plans to deploy more than 1,00,000 troops to the Gulf. Meanwhile, the commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards has said Iran is on the cusp of a "full scale confrontation with the enemy". Iran had been threatening to disrupt oil supplies from the region if its own energy exports are blocked by the US. Washington sees Tehran's hand in the recent attacks on Saudi oil tankers in the Gulf.

For now, Delhi appears to have deflected Zarif's request for political solidarity. Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj said any major decisions, such as importing oil from Iran in defiance of the US sanctions, would be taken by the next government. But the foreign policy establishment in Delhi knows that, whatever the outcome of the election, India's room for manoeuvre in the Gulf is limited. At least three challenges stare at India.

First, despite the traditional temptation to posture against US unilateralism, Delhi has shown little appetite in the past to jeopardise its growing American equities for the sake of Iran. The UPA government, for example, chose to secure India's own nuclear deal with the US rather than defend Iran's nuclear transgressions during 2005-08. Delhi's pragmatism was vindicated when Iran concluded a nuclear deal of its own with the US in 2015. Second, the current crisis is not merely about US hostility to Iran. It is, even more, about the deepening conflict between Iran and its Arab neighbours — especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The NDA government is acutely conscious of the big political gains it has made with these two Arab states in the last five years. As part of their campaign to win Indian empathy, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have promised to make up for the loss of Iranian oil supplies under US sanctions. Whether Delhi acknowledges it or not, any cold calculation surely tilts the diplomatic scales towards the US and the Arabs. Yet, Delhi knows that a new Gulf War would impose huge political and economic costs not only on the region but also on India. That points to the third challenge. Rather than duck the difficult issues or offer empty rhetoric, Delhi must consider promoting regional reconciliation between Iran and the Gulf Arabs. South Block professionals must draft a Gulf peace initiative for the consideration of the next government when it takes charge in a few days' time. The obstacles to such an initiative are real, but a genuine diplomatic effort offers a necessary moral complement to India's realpolitik in the Gulf.

TRADE TROUBLES

Labour intensive exports remain sluggish, non-oil non-gold imports contract, suggesting weak domestic demand

INDIA'S TRADE DEFICIT surged to a five-month high of \$15.3 billion in April with merchandise export growth slumping to 0.64 per cent — the slowest pace since December 2018. These numbers suggest that the high export growth observed in March may indeed have been an aberration. This subdued performance in April comes after recent data showed that industrial production had contracted by 0.1 per cent in March. With both consumer durables as well as capital goods segments contracting sharply — the latter is a proxy for investment demand — it suggests that the underlying drivers of growth are sputtering.

According to the latest trade data, at the aggregate level, exports grew by a mere 0.64 per cent in April. But, strip away the spurt in petroleum exports, and the remaining exports actually contracted by 3 per cent in April. The lacklustre performance can be traced largely to the contraction in exports of engineering goods as well as subdued growth of major labour intensive segments. For instance, gems and jewellery contracted by 13.4 per cent, leather products by 15.25 per cent as did man-made and cotton yarn. Growth of the ready-made garments segment also slumped to 4.4 per cent in April, down from 15 per cent in March. This does not bode well for job creation. On the other hand, imports rose by 4.5 per cent in April, on the back of higher crude and gold shipments. But what is worrisome is that imports, excluding oil and gold, which give a better sense of domestic demand, contracted by 2.2 per cent in April, after contracting by 2.67 per cent in the previous month.

The near-term prospects for exports appear to be muted. For one, the escalation of trade tensions between the US and China is likely to impact global growth and trade. In fact, last month, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) lowered its projection for global trade growth. It now expects merchandise trade volume growth to fall to 2.6 per cent in 2019, from 3 per cent in 2018. Clearly, the next government has its task cut out. It will have to carefully navigate the intensifying trade war between the US and China while putting in place measures to boost competitiveness and revive exports. Perhaps, easing the compliance burden of the goods and service tax (GST) would be a good starting point.

TARGETING VIDYASAGAR

Mobs in Kolkata may well give a new lease of life to the legacy of a renaissance reformer

ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR was no stranger to thugs in his lifetime. He dared the conservatives frequently, as he set out, armed with formidable scholarship of the *sruiti* and *smriti*, to question oppressive social traditions of dubious ancestry. It is said that, fearing physical attacks by the custodians of tradition, his father got him a bodyguard. However, he pursued reforms like other great liberals of his time — writing pamphlets and books, building public opinion through rational debate and logical thinking, petitioning the government. He succeeded in some, one such being the legal sanction for widow remarriage. Vidyasagar's relentless campaign was instrumental in the passing of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act in 1856.

It is ironic that the spotlight is on his life and legacy as the raging political battle in West Bengal also debates the form and content of Hindu belief systems in the state. The mob that vandalised Vidyasagar's bust in a Kolkata college, perhaps, didn't know who he was. Meanwhile, politicians have turned the incident into a spectacle. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee hit the street, the vandalised bust in hand for all to see, and accused the BJP cadres of dishonouring Bengal's cultural inheritance. The BJP leaders accused the Trinamool of stage-managing the incident and sat on a dharna. Addressing a rally in UP, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said: "Our government, dedicated to the vision of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, will set up a grand statue of panchdhatu (five metals) at the same spot." An unimpressed Banerjee dismissed the offer: Kolkata, she said, doesn't need Delhi's money.

The barbs can continue, but this ought to be an occasion to reflect on the renaissance legacy of Vidyasagar. He was a Sanskritist, but interpreted custom and tradition in the language of logic and rationality. Blind extolling of the past was not for him. He upheld the rights of the individual over collective identities. Culture, faith and language were not static entities for him, but transient categories. Surely, Vidyasagar is a man for these times.

FELLING AN ICON

Vandalising Vidyasagar's statue goes against Bengal's intellectual legacy



BIPLAB LOHOCHOUDHURY

ELEVATED INTELLECTUALISM was once a forte of Bengal, and Vidyasagar was one of its most eminent proponents in the 19th century AD. But times have changed.

The Trinamool Congress has alleged that some people associated with Amit Shah's BJP rally on May 14 evening — in support of local Lok Sabha candidate Rahul Sinha — vandalised a bust of Vidyasagar. This shares a similarity with the desecration of a Vidyasagar statue by the Naxals in the late 1960s: And, since the late 1960s, West Bengal started declining in its intellectual forthrightness. Naxals, still cherished by the Bengali middle class as those who dreamt of changing Bengal into a communist state, had begun by vandalising the statues of towering Bengali intellectuals whose influence still inspires the country. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was the foremost figure against whom the Naxals had a huge grudge. The reason given by them supposedly was that their views did not match with the spirit of liberal thought that Vidyasagar demonstrated in his unique ways of protest against the British Raj and Hindu superstition.

His invoking of the *Parasara Samhita* to prove widow remarriage as an old Hindu practice in a dogmatic society, and, the establishing of schools and colleges to educate men and women alike are just two initiatives

of his from which the entire country drew inspiration. Hence, the shameful act of May 14 — amidst claims and counter claims by the TMC and BJP, and allegations of the incident being "fixed" against both the parties by the Left — demands a closer introspection. Especially since the provocations by and resistance from TMC's student wing to the election rally is already proven beyond doubt. However, such provocation can't explain the vandalising of the bust. Neither does anything point to who the culprits were.

Therefore, the truth needs to be established. That is easy provided the CCTV footage of the room in which the bust was placed is made available by the Vidyasagar College authority. One has to first come inside by opening the college building gate (like many old colleges of Bengal, this college does not have a compound outside, the building directly opens into Bidhan Sarani) and then, by opening another wooden door. However, till now, whatever has been claimed as proof from both the sides constitute footage from outside the college, leaving space for concoction and propaganda.

However, Vidyasagar has gradually been sidelined during the last few years in Bengal through the erasure of the Bengali language training's cultural context — for instance, by selectively changing some text, at the primary

level. Replacing the word *ramdhanu* (rain-bow) with *rongdhanu* (colour bow) is one such example to de-Sanskritise the Bengali language, which goes contrary to Vidyasagar's way of developing the language. Again, if Vidyasagar — the great crusader for improving the lives of Indian women — is a cultural icon for them, how is the TMC against the annulling of triple talaq for Muslim women?

Is it that in search of a strong issue against the BJP, in the final phase of the Lok Sabha election, mostly in Kolkata, this cultural icon has been resurrected?

BJP, too, needs to identify and punish the persons from the procession who have been seen outside the college participating in the attack to the heritage building. Some intellectuals, within an hour of the incident, at a press conference in the Kolkata Press Club, condemned the attack. Poet Shankha Ghosh, one of the most prominent intellectuals in West Bengal, while criticising the attack of vandalism, did not attribute it to any specific dispensation, which is very significant. An immediate impartial inquiry is needed — let it be taken suo motu at the behest of the High Court of Calcutta — to find out the truth behind this crime against a cultural icon of India.

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MAY 17, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

POLICE DISMISSALS
PEACE RETURNED TO Punjab today. No incident or demonstration by policemen was reported from any part of the state. Claiming that the agitation had "fizzled out" completely, the state industries minister, Balraj Dass Tandon, told a news conference that there had been no response to the statewide rally of policemen at Ferozepore today. Over 1,000 policemen are expected to be dismissed for their participation in the agitation. A total of 56 policemen, mostly them union activists, have been already dismissed under Article 311, which provides for dismissal without inquiry or a hearing. Two days ago, the state governor had empowered the authorities to invoke such powers, wherever needed.

PRASAR BHARATI BILL
IN AN EFFORT to confer "genuine autonomy" on Akashvani and Doordarshan, the minister for information and broadcasting, L K Advani, introduced in Parliament the Prasar Bharati Bill which provides that the central government may issue directions to the proposed body from time to time. While explaining the provisions of the Bill to newsmen, a government spokesperson admitted that the chairman of Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Corporation of India) will have no option but to follow the central directives. However, he felt such directives will be "few and far between". According to an analysis of the Bill circulated among newsmen, the government's power to give directives could not be restricted to national se-

curity and other matters of grave public importance since it would be necessary "to correct any aberrations" from the charter of objective of the corporation.

ARMS AND PAKISTAN
EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER, A B Vajpayee, hopes that "better sense will prevail" on the United States on the issue of supplying arms to Pakistan. He was speaking at a discussion on the international situation and the policy of the government in the Rajya Sabha today. Vajpayee informed members that he had told the Americans that they should not think of evolving a new military alliance in the region and that the induction of new arms would not help in any way.



The crashing of Jet

Efforts to revive Jet Airways are futile. A hard assessment is needed to understand its debacle, pin accountability



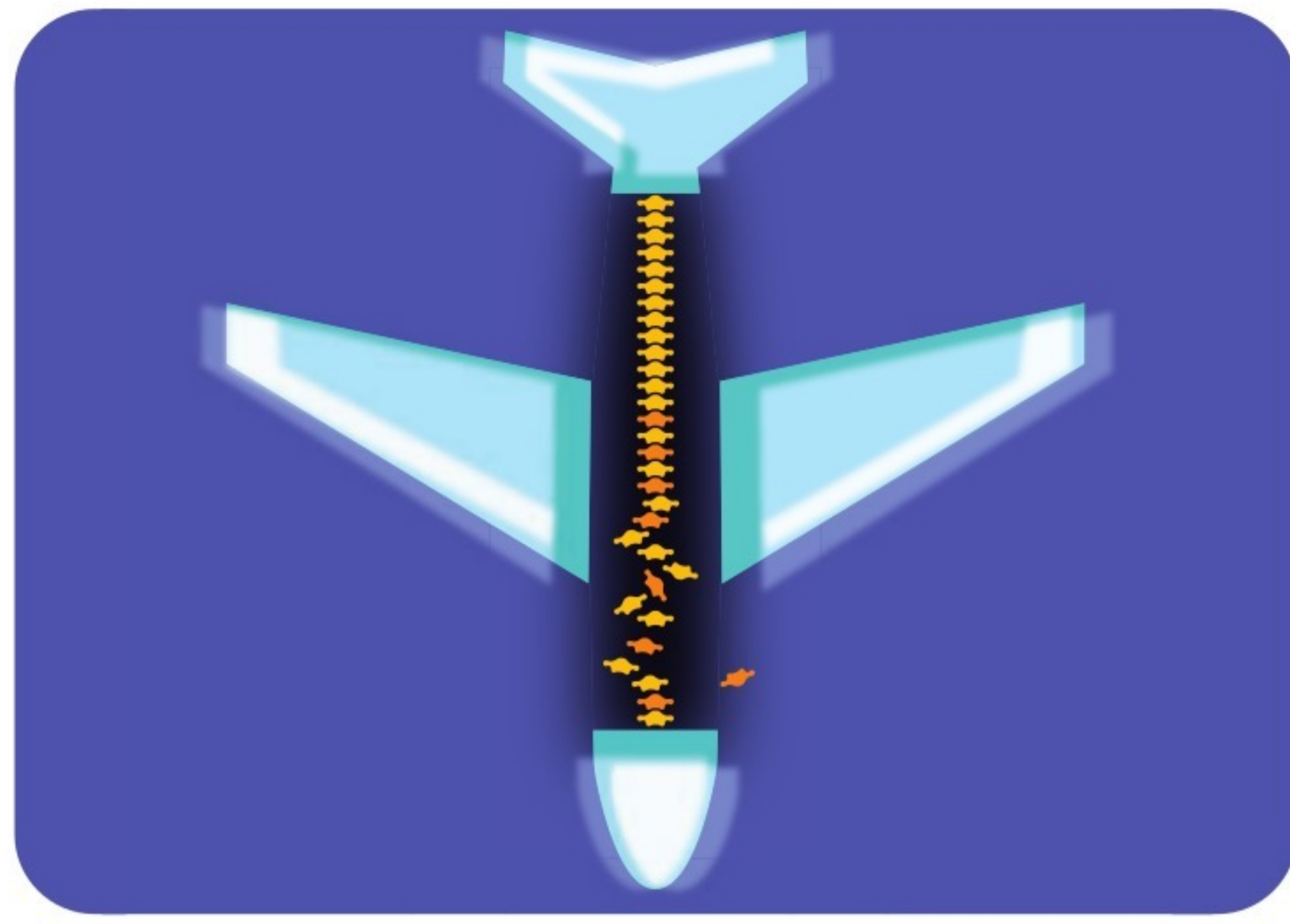
PARVEZ DAMANIA

JUST LAST YEAR Jet Airways celebrated its 25th anniversary. It pulled out all the stops in the celebration, heralding the milestone with a swish commemorative logo, and revelled in the fulsome praise lavished on it from all quarters. Notable among all the compliments it basked in — besides the praise for its fleet, crew and service quality — was the hardness with which it had survived, for decades, a variety of external body blows. Steep hikes in aviation fuel prices, global currency fluctuations, industry challenges and fierce competition, both global and domestic — it had survived all these. Naresh Goyal took a long, deep bow.

It certainly seemed obvious that Jet Airways, like other airlines, had made the most of the vaunted Indian aviation boom. An April 2018 report shows that the sector experienced 42 months of double-digit revenue per kilometre (RPK) growth and the lead factor on all airlines were in the 90 per cent range. All the parameters showed a robust and growing aviation environment. All other Indian airlines also reflected growth and income consonant with these numbers.

All this came swiftly crashing to the ground in the beginning of 2019, with a growing degree of aircraft grounded due to non-payment of lease rentals, and then, the death knell: "Suspension of operations", which is virtually a terminal closure. The airline that billed itself as India's oldest private airline, and had dominated the Indian skies for two decades, turned out to be a disastrous, hollow organisation, taking things day by day on rapidly dwindling resources and frantically looking for an investor who would pump in money. Total closure was imminent and more than 22,000 Jet employees found their paychecks had vanished. Scores of people employed by the many support services met with the same fate. Lessors pulled back their aircraft, leaving Jet Airways with a sad fleet of one Boeing 737 and five ATRs in the end. Rival airlines are now quickly picking up the experienced jet pilots and engineers, and the peerless cabin crew that were the pride of the airline, reportedly at much lower salaries.

The flood of financial irregularities coming to light was particularly shocking: Jet Airways was in debt in excess of Rs 8,500 crore to Indian banks, the largest exposure was of the State Bank of India. The other Indian banks include the Punjab National Bank, Yes Bank, IDBI, Canara Bank, ICICI Bank, Indian Overseas Bank and Syndicate Bank. Who had approved these loans down the years? Why had more and more good money been thrown after the bad debt for years? Had any promoter guarantees been taken? Why hadn't forensic financial audits been conducted? If it was conducted, what are the findings? What actions had been taken by the banks after raids by the Income Tax department on Jet offices last year, which had apparently discovered gross financial management? Above all, what was the full extent of the loss? What about the airline's statutory dues like provident fund, ESIC, TDS, service tax, GST, etc? What does Jet owe to the Airports Authority of India, Indian Oil and other fuel companies, which are also govern-



CR Sasikumar

ment bodies?

This is not just a chilling replay of the Kingfisher Airlines debacle, because it is much larger in magnitude. Vijay Mallya had fled to London and was ensconced in some kind of financial immunity, though, here in India, Mallya's houses, cars, and assets were confiscated. But what was being done to stem this horrific haemorrhaging of public money and is any attempt being made to stop Goyal from leaving India? Was there any plan to impound his array of assets? Did anyone realise that Goyal and the Jet Airways debacle was much larger than Vijay Mallya and Kingfisher Airlines?

Even more chilling in this case was, once again, the fact that the largest component of the financial exposure was to government-owned banks and organisations. Obviously, this was a massive mismanagement of money, not possible without the aid of individuals who had misused their power. Banks, for all purposes, must now supply explanations for a slew of inexplicable decisions made over the years. Crores were disbursed to the airline, but against what collateral? Then there is the bizarre SBI defiance in not declaring the airline an NPA, and insisting it is not an NPA as late as March 25. If Jet is wound up, will the banks really recover any money?

There is so much pontification now about selling the airline. But what is left for a buyer? An airline's main assets are its aircraft, flying rights, slots, parking rights and its personnel. Parking rights and slots in Mumbai and Delhi, and in cities abroad are priceless assets. These have now been taken up by Indigo, SpiceJet, Vistara, GoAir and Air Asia in India, and they are not fools to give them up easily.

I may claim a rather unique perspective to an understanding of the Jet Airways situation. I started Damania Airways in 1993, the same year Jet Airways began. But when I saw the writing on the aviation wall a little over two years later, I made an extremely painful decision: I handed the airline, intact, to new investors. At that point, the complications in Indian aviation were so suffocating be-

Jet Airways unfortunately is not coming back. It simply cannot. What is worse, Mallya and Goyal have brought global shame to the Indian aviation industry by making Kingfisher and Jet Airways the laughing stock of the international aviation sector. The damage done will now take years to undo. Indeed the circus surrounding the deceased airline is now resembling the bizarre sight of a phalanx of medical personnel pretending to resuscitate a deceased patient at the graveyard.

cause of government regulations, no airline could survive without contorting itself into untenable positions.

Many trusted Jet Airways to practice and maintain superior management so that their personal lives are not affected. The agonising plight of Jet Airways staff now could have been avoided. In fact, just recently a finance company froze the savings of Jet staff from their forex debit cards to recover the airline's outstanding. This scramble to recover monies at the expense of innocents is taking things to a new depth of cruelty.

There is much in the national narrative about getting the airline flying again. The dismaying truth is that this is simply not possible. The airline has been abandoned into the hands of people who just want their money back — banks and lenders.

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Indeed the circus surrounding the deceased airline is now resembling the bizarre sight of a phalanx of medical personnel pretending to resuscitate a deceased patient at the graveyard. The slots and parking bays have been handed over to competitors. The employees have been abandoned. And, the powers that be, including the SBI, are still brazenly prattling on about finding a buyer. The latest supposedly interested party operates out of an industrial gala in Chakala, Andheri, called East Darwin Platform holdings. There is another, a former air passenger service agent, and some other small bidders. These are the kind of unsolicited bidders the banks are reaching out to now.

Jet Airways has, very unfortunately, crashed, Ladies and Gentlemen.

The writer is an aviation expert and founder of Damania Airways

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

It is embarrassing to the US that (its) maximum pressure scheme has not resolved any problems, from North Korea, Venezuela to Iran

— GLOBAL TIMES CHINA

Political ideology vs lived reality

Hinduism is about catholicity and reforms, not just discrimination. Hindutva, in contrast, is a homogenising force



D RAJA

THE PROTECTION ACCORDED in the Constitution to people of all faiths embodies an idea of India that represents plurality and tolerance. Attempts are, however, on to give the country a homogenous identity. The strategy to achieve this objective is two-fold. One, forging a monolithic identity for the Hindus that overlooks the diversities among them. Two, subsuming all other religious and cultural minorities under the Hindu fold — this objective manifests itself when leaders of Hindutva, particularly those from the RSS, claim that everyone born in India is a Hindu. The RSS's ideology, Hindutva, is different from Hinduism in many respects. It is a very narrow and selective interpretation of certain aspects of Hindu religion. The dominant theme of this ideology is Manuvaad and Brahminism.

This narrow interpretation of Hindu religion ignores reformers like Rammohun Roy or Jotiba Phule and leans on the works of polarising ideologues like VD Savarkar. This ideology is full of contempt for minorities, Dalits and women — as evidenced by the attacks on Muslims, Dalits and tribals under the BJP rule. This narrow interpretation of Hindu philosophy also overlooks the contribution of materialist philosophers like Charvaka and refuses to recognise the inequalities and contradictions within Hinduism. The champions of Hindutva are silent when it comes to the hurdles created by caste hierarchies in improving the economic and spiritual well-being of the so-called "lower castes". Their approach is usually to mask the discrimination faced by these communities under a religious garb. Hindutva, thus, reinforces caste hierarchies.

Babasaheb Ambedkar drew our attention to the ways in which Brahminical religion sanctioned the caste system and enabled the continuation of practices such as untouchability. He said: "The problem of untouchability is a matter of class struggle. It is the struggle between caste Hindus and the untouchables... This is a matter of injustice being done by one class against another."

Ambedkar saw Buddhism as a religion based on morality — that is why it has space for the downtrodden. His choice of Buddhism was, in effect, a moral and rational critique of Brahminical Hinduism. In contrast, the forebearers of Hindutva, overlooked the contradictions and exploitative structures of the religion. Hindutva ideologues do claim that Dalits are part of the Hindu society, but that's only for political gains. The Dalits are denied elementary human rights and access to institutions. Periyar, the founder of Dravidian movement, too drew attention to such structural contradictions within Brahminical Hinduism — especially the ways it came short in addressing issues related to human dignity and self-respect.

Rationality was his weapon in the fight to secure agency for the lower-castes and women. In our times, the vandalising of Periyar's statues is proof of the hatred towards the lower castes and their icons.

The fanatic who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi was also moved by such exclusivist ideas. "I do not expect India of my dream to develop one religion, that is, to be wholly Hindu, or wholly Christian, or wholly Muslim, but I want it to be wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another," Gandhi had once said. His acceptance among the masses, his methods of ahimsa and mass-strikes and his position on untouchability were intolerable to the RSS. The assassination of the Mahatma is a manifestation of the Hindu right's inability to tolerate a diversity of viewpoints. As MS Golwalkar, recognised as the guru of RSS, said: "The non-Hindu people in Hindustan must adopt the Hindu culture." Gandhi's assassination came at a time when the newly independent nation was struggling against acute poverty. It is worth recalling Swami Vivekananda here. He said: "It is an insult to a starving people to offer them religion; it is an insult to a starving man to teach him metaphysics."

Religion is a part of the private life of an individual; its main functions are regulation of rituals and ceremonies and spiritual uplift. Hindutva, in contrast, is a political ideology that uses religion to mobilise popular support by creating a false fear of other religions and cultural identities. Such political use of religion has now led the ruling elites to give up on issues of vital importance on one hand and on the other hand, it has also meant that religion plays an important role in the formulation of policies by elected governments. Most often, this works to the detriment of certain religious communities — the mess that has been created by the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill is one glaring example of this.

Arguments about who is a Hindu, and who is not, and mobilisation around religious identities take attention away from the real issues of hunger, inequality and unemployment. The distinction the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci made between the "official religion" and the "popular cultures" is pertinent here. He said that "every religion is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions" that vary on class lines. The RSS wants to paper over such contradictions.

The debates around hard-Hindutva and soft-Hindutva are seriously tampering with the secular character of our elections and democracy. The RSS and the ruling regime wants to create a new normal — one in which being Hindu is considered a must for representing the population. This agenda should be resisted at all costs. Let us go back to what Ambedkar said: "Religion is for man and not man for religion". It would also be apt to look back at the real spokespersons of Hinduism like Swami Vivekananda. "Upon the banner of every religion will soon be written," he once said, "help and not fight, assimilation and not destruction, harmony and peace and not dissension."

The writer is national secretary, CPI and Member of Parliament

Information confusion

In the age of social media, the credibility of content is an important issue



OSAMA MANZAR

IN THE DIGITAL age, where copious amounts of free information is available in public domain, the menace of misinformation, propaganda and personal attacks is bound to exist. It is certainly not new in the world of social media. In the last few months, however, social media has been at its worst. At the same time, it is also struggling, taking baby steps towards improving itself.

As the 2019 General Election comes to a close, I have come to strongly believe that social media is the tool for new age information warfare. A vast pool of easily-available digitised information has given swift access to miscreants as well as politicians to formulate their parallel versions of the truth.

Riding on networking, information sharing and propaganda, political parties have set up war rooms, garages and factories. Hours and days at a stretch are being spent to manufacture disinformation, disseminate it through public or private communication channels, and wait for it to play up.

confused between right and wrong and between relevant and irrelevant. Adding fuel to the raging fire is the usual public apathy towards "fact-checking" and verifying the information they are consuming.

Mainstream media houses, with their political biases and jingoism in prime time spotlight, have blurred the lines between fact and fiction, reporting and opinion, objective and subjective. Gone are the days of media objectivity. And, unfortunately, the systematic and organised voices are louder even though they may not be credible. But hey, what is a credible source in the age of social media and instant messaging platforms?

Believers are following a storyline and their influencers; non-believers are following the other narrative that feeds their ideas leaving them in an echo chamber of toxic information. With mainstream media channels, in many cases, becoming the mouthpieces of political parties, believers don't get to hear the non-believer's storyline with objectivity and non-believers don't get to hear the believer's storyline with objectivity.

Clearly then, the ongoing elections are being contested on the basis of "my information" versus "your information" and not necessarily on facts and lies.

People find it easier to believe a piece of information if it aligns with their political, religious or personal ideology or biases and favourites. They ignore the idea that their friends, family or networks could also be pushing misinformation, by choice or by chance. After all, misinformation manufacturers aren't just working out of their head offices in the national capital, but are even operational at the district, block and village level. They are using the media of text messages, voice notes, photographs and videos; and they are grabbing the attention of their audiences through humour, sarcasm, memes and gifs. If everything fails, they return to the usual emotional approach — a misguided sense of religious and nationalist identities.

If there are few fact finders who are trying to bust hoaxes and fake information circulating online, they are attacked, trolled, mocked and bullied by fake news manufacturers. Besides, how many fake news busters would even be enough for a population of 1.3 billion people?

In the ongoing phase of information war and misinformation spread, the biggest and most powerful weapons are the "likes", "shares" and "forwards". Do you know that Facebook alone deleted two billion fake ac-

counts last year, and the platform deletes approximately one million fake accounts every day? Imagine the amount and scale of (mis)information manufacturers that could come our way.

In a country of 900 million Indian voters, at least 200 million use social media and instant messaging platforms on a daily basis. Each one of them is connected to hundreds and thousands of individuals, mostly those with a mobile phone in their hands but some also who have no devices. The problem, however, does not lie in the platforms, it lies with the people. The masses have not been trained and equipped to produce content. They are largely consuming content, and passing it on further for the sheer enjoyment of sharing, without pausing and thinking about its consequences.

The scale and volume at which misinformation is being created; we may need to develop large scale cadres of MIL experts (media information literacy experts) at community levels to reinstall our messaging patterns. If this isn't done on a priority basis, our society is at a serious risk of information toxicity.

The writer is founder & director of Digital Empowerment Foundation

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

PERNICIOUS PLASTIC

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Low blow' (IE, May 16). The plastic peril is worrisome. From the tallest summits to the deepest trenches, it is omnipresent. It's time that humankind follows the three Rs of waste management — reduce, reuse and recycle — irrespective of where they dwell. In today's connected world, both the problem and the solution has a globalised aspect. Pollution in one part of the world travels way beyond its local origins.

Abhishek Anshu, Patna

COURT AND SOCIETY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Undue criticism' (IE, May 14). Since 1999, when the in-house procedure of the Supreme Court evolved an informal inquiry procedure (which the eminent jurist and the author of the article describes as "peer review") much has changed with respect to legal provisions to prevent sexual harassment of women in work places. The Me Too Movement has shown that workplaces have not yet become safe for women. The skewed gender ratio in the higher judiciary would impinge on the peer review procedures as well. It is time that the SC evolved procedures to enforce on itself the standards of women's rights it sets for the society.

Shruti George, Jaipur

UP'S WAYS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'What goes

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

THE WINNER RECEIVES SELECT EXPRESS PUBLICATIONS

UP' (IE, May 16). The BJP's strong showing in the Lok Sabha elections of 2014 was the result of liquidation of traditional equations based on caste mobilisation. Multi-caste and class coalitions have resulted in changes in the ways parties mobilise voters. Such a trend is visible this time around as well, but it seems that caste and class coalitions are acting against the BJP's dominance in UP politics.

G Javid Rasool, Lucknow