



Faint glimmer

The tentative revival in industrial activity must be built on through prudent policy support

Industrial activity in the new financial year appears to have started on a healthier note than the trend witnessed in the last quarter of the previous fiscal, the government’s latest quick estimates show. Industrial output rose 3.4% in April, buoyed by a generally broad-based revival that saw electricity, mining and even manufacturing post faster growth compared to the listless performance witnessed in the January-March period. In fact, manufacturing output growth, which had decelerated sharply from the pace of 8.2% in October to a revised level of less than 0.1% in March, rebounded to a four-month high of 2.8%. A look at the use-based classification reveals that all six segments were in positive territory, with only infrastructure and construction goods marking a slowdown from both the earlier year and March levels and providing cause for some concern. Hearteningly, capital goods, a sector that serves as a closely tracked proxy for business spending intentions, posted a 2.5% expansion, snapping three straight months of contraction. To be sure, the growth even in this key area trails the pace of 9.8% that was reported in April 2018 by a wide margin, and it would be premature to celebrate the single reading until a more abiding trend emerges in the coming months. It would be interesting to see what growth-supportive policy measures Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman unveils in the newly elected government’s and her own maiden budget.

This week’s other data release from the government was, however, less reassuring, revealing as it did an acceleration in retail inflation to a seven-month high. Price gains measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) quickened to 3.05% in May, from April’s 2.99%, as prices of vegetables and pulses jumped by 23% and 10% respectively in urban areas, contributing to a bump-up in food inflation. The Reserve Bank of India had last week flagged the risks to the inflation trajectory from factors including spikes in vegetable prices and international fuel prices and marginally raised its CPI inflation projection for the fiscal first half to a 3% to 3.1% range. While the inflation reading remains below the RBI’s inflation threshold of 4%, policymakers would need to keep a close watch on price trends, especially as global energy prices continue to remain volatile amid heightened geopolitical tensions in West Asia and uncertainty on the demand outlook owing to the ongoing China-U.S. trade spat. And while the monsoon is forecast to be normal this year, the actual rainfall and its spatial distribution will have a significant bearing on agricultural output and food prices. A fiscally prudent budget, with incentives to support the nascent industrial recovery, would surely tick several boxes at one go.

City on edge

Protests over the extradition Bill in Hong Kong underline the tensions with mainland China

The mass protests in Hong Kong this week against an extradition Bill the city legislative council is planning has brought the focus back on the difficult relationship between the territory’s Beijing-appointed authorities and its pro-democracy movement. The legislation, championed by Hong Kong’s Chief Executive Carrie Lam, will allow the local government to extradite a suspect to places with which the city has no formal extradition accord, including mainland China. Ms. Lam argues it is needed to close a loophole in the criminal justice system that, she says, has let criminals evade trial elsewhere by taking refuge in Hong Kong. But the protesters see the Bill as an attempt by Beijing to increase its influence in matters to do with the city. The extradition law would practically allow the city authorities to send any suspect wanted by Beijing to mainland China, where the judiciary is unlikely to go against the wishes of the establishment. Activists point to the abduction of Beijing’s critics and the growing authoritarian nature of the city government, with instances of elected lawmakers being disqualified, activists banned from running for office, a political party prohibited and a foreign journalist expelled. They fear that the new legislation would further erode the freedoms people enjoy under the Basic Law, the city’s mini-constitution.

When Hong Kong was handed over to China in 1997, both sides had agreed that the city would remain a semi-autonomous region with the Basic Law for 50 years. When the extradition agreements were finalised, Taiwan and mainland China were excluded because of the different criminal justice systems that existed in those regions. But China has steadily tried to deepen its influence. In the case of the extradition Bill, two members of the Politburo Standing Committee have called for its approval. But Hong Kong has always resisted top-down changes. In 2003, the city’s first Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa’s bid to pass stringent security legislation triggered mass protests, which forced him to back down. In 2014, the local authorities’ proposal to change the city’s electoral system attracted more protests. In less than five years they are back: a million people assembled at the legislative council on Wednesday, demanding withdrawal of the extradition Bill. These incidents suggest a fundamental contradiction between the way Hong Kong is ruled by the pro-Beijing elite and the expectations of civil society. The local authorities’ insistence on going ahead with unpopular measures such as the extradition Bill is only sharpening this contradiction. Beijing should reach out to the people of Hong Kong, alleviate their fears and concerns and assure them of their rights guaranteed under the “one country two systems” model. Else, Hong Kong is likely to remain caught in a cycle of protests and repression.

Democracy can die in daylight too

How influential sections of the news media turned cheerleaders in the 2019 election



KRISHNA PRASAD

Modesty is not a virtue of the media in the pixel age, in which preening is a 24x7 pastime. There is neither a demand for it from consumers, nor a supply of it from the practitioners. Equilibrium has been achieved in the marketplace of the mind. Even so, while print, electronic and digital news purveyors use the benefit of hindsight to retro-fit Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s “stunning” victory into a grand narrative arc, it should not escape the attention of the discerning that an otherwise boastful section of the media is uncharacteristically, modestly, not acknowledging its own not insignificant part in paving the way for India’s precipitous lurch to the right.

Elephant in the room

Whilst any number of ‘ex post facto’ rationalisations may be adduced to explain the Bharatiya Janata Party’s logic-defying triumph, it is impossible to ignore the elephant in the room: a large and influential part of the news media which blithely abdicated its role as the eyes and ears of the people – and turned into an undisguised, unthinking and unquestioning mouthpiece of the reigning ideology. That the same boosters are now bloviating about India’s future as a secular, liberal democracy and offering gratuitous advice to the Opposition is, at best, a self-fulfilling prophecy. At worst, it is a parody.

Notwithstanding Mr. Modi’s advertised disdain for journalists, making the media forget their core tasks – to witness, to verify, to investigate, and to make sense, in the words of the British media scholar George Brock – was al-

ways a vital weapon in the manufacture of consent for the ‘Gujarat Model’. Despite early failures as Chief Minister, Mr. Modi deftly achieved this goal. Established media houses were tamed by patronising their competitors. Some pesky editors were reined in or eased out by intimidating owners. Advertisements were turned off and on to let the bottom line send signals to managers.

Result: by 2014, without being explicitly coercive, Mr. Modi was able to manage the headlines, craft respectability and plug himself into the consciousness of the bourgeoisie as the poor, incorruptible, reformist Hindutva icon – the son of the soil who was a victim of the liberal English media.

During the 2017 Assembly election campaign in Gujarat, a BJP TV commercial unwittingly reminded voters of how the Modi machine viewed the media. Two young men are discussing Mr. Modi in a barber shop. One of them calls him a “dictator” and says he has harassed them a lot. They are interrupted by a third person who is awaiting his turn and is listening in on the conversation. “You look like reporters,” says the man who identifies himself as ‘Vikas’. In other words, journalism – asking, criticising, digging, unearthing – is an obstacle in the grand project.

Inasmuch as this is revealing of a cultivated anti-media mindset – cultivated, because Mr. Modi, the ‘pracharak’, would often wait outside newspaper offices in Ahmedabad in the 1990s, well past midnight, to have a cup of tea with useful reporters on the political beat – it is the ease with which he, the ‘pradhan sevak’, was able to negotiate a ‘with-me-or-against-me’ arrangement across the landscape that staggers the mind, and serves as a sobering reminder of the limits of the free press. “Democracy dies in darkness” is the *Washington Post* motto. Here, it would appear, it died in broad daylight.



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From North and South America (Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro) to West and East Asia (Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Rodrigo Duterte), the playbook of the 21st century populist-nationalist politician contains the same to-do list: a) turn the public against the media by berating them as an “enemy of the people”; b) delegitimise the media by ascribing motives, calling them news traders, “pressstitutes”; c) choke the media by limiting access; distorting the discourse with fake news, alt-right media; d) intimidate the media with draconian laws; by trolling, doxxing, threatening journalists; and e) bypass conventional media using one-way radio addresses, made-for-TV events and social media.

As the results of the 2019 election show, the best student in the class – the “first Prime Minister in 70 years to know where the camera was”, in the words of one political scientist – was able to alternately emasculate and weaponise media, and turn it into a force multiplier at the ballot box. The searing commentary in the foreign media of what is in store shines the mirror on the below-par inquiry by some of our own. And the decision of the Congress, Samajwadi Party and Janata Dal (Secular) to keep their panelists out of partisan TV debates puts the stamp on the perfidy bordering on complicity.

‘Wot won it’

When the Conservative Party unexpectedly came to power in Britain in 1992, Rupert Murdoch’s mass-selling tabloid *The Sun* proclaimed on its front page, “It’s The

Liberals need to think again

On the problem with justifications of the face veil with arguments about ‘free will’



TABISH KHAIR

The face veil ban in Sri Lanka – which, like a similar ban in France, is aimed at all religious groups, not just orthodox Muslims – has wrong-footed many of my liberal friends once again. They seem to have little choice but to try to oppose the veil ban in the name of free will. This and similar arguments cut very little ice with most non-Muslims, and have actually contributed to the rise of non-Muslim (sometimes anti-Muslim) rightist and reactionary groups all over the world, from the U.S. to India – not to mention the continuing marginalisation of liberals as a political force.

Excuse for the orthodox

If you are not a Muslim (or a generous non-Muslim liberal), you can easily slash the argument of ‘free will’ into shreds with reference to your own inheritance. For instance, a Hindu can take up the old institution of Sati, or widow

immolation. Sati was sanctioned by some Hindu religious traditions and it was argued that widows who committed Sati did so of ‘their own free will’. Reactionary Hindus might still make this claim, but most Hindus, even religious ones, would not want to reintroduce Sati.

Or let’s move to Christianity in 19th century Europe, when divorce was mostly impossible for women (and poor men) to obtain. Once again, there was scriptural sanction for this, and it was argued that ‘good wives’ always choose to stay within a ‘heaven-made’ marriage – no matter how uneven or abusive – of ‘their own free will’. Today, almost no European would subscribe to this view.

The list is long. Every people have had, and to some extent still have, various traditions and customs that seem to be the result of ‘free will’ – if seen from a position of privilege, and from positions that do not or cannot question this privilege. After all, even slavery was justified not just by slave-owners but also, on historical evidence, by some slaves as the ‘best of all choices’ for a particular and hugely exploited branch of humanity.

The hard fact remains that if a



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group of people are under pressure to comport in certain ways, then they cannot be said to choose that particular option. Even if the option is ‘freely’ chosen, it is not a free choice. For a choice to be free, other options need to have equivalent prestige and acceptability, both within the community and around it. This is seldom the case for anyone, and never the case with subaltern groups such as women in a patriarchal set-up.

A wife faced with degradation and starvation as a ‘single woman’ in 19th century Europe had no choice but to ‘freely’ stay within the confines of her marriage. An Indian widow faced with neglect and possible abuse after her husband’s death had no choice but to ‘freely’ become a Sati. If a woman is made to believe that a certain deportment or dress is vital for her

Sun Wot Won It”, to lay claim to its contribution. It is nobody’s case that the BJP won the 2019 election because of the media. India is larger, its democracy more layered, and the media mosaic vastly heterogeneous so for a glib conclusion. But a closer examination of the last five years will reveal the insidious role some in the media played in conditioning minds, building myths, deflecting attention, normalising the abnormal, and poisoning the pool.

Precisely how this was achieved by a provincial leader, a self-declared “outsider” in Lutyens’ Delhi, is difficult to put a finger on. Certainly, home-grown tactics – bogus FIRs, criminal cases, arrests, IT raids, monitoring – were improved upon. Antagonism became the bedrock of the relationship. There was no media interface in the Prime Minister’s Office, just a PRO. The Prime Minister’s plane was off-bounds for hacks. There were no press meets. Journalists’ deaths were not counted. Targeted tweets crowned the new courtiers. In ways subtle and brutal, the message was conveyed and received that hagiography had to replace scrutiny.

In retrospect, the move to allow the Finance Minister to also handle the Information and Broadcasting portfolio after Mr. Modi formed his Cabinet in 2014 will probably go down as a masterstroke in taming the circus, top-down. Dodgy corporates and media houses lived in dread of the taxman. Media licences and clearances were difficult to come by. Using carrot and stick, the circuits of news flow were rewired, the tramlines laid out on who could be attacked and who couldn’t be touched. Still to recover from the economic downturn that began in 2007-08, a media aching for ‘*achhe din*’ fell in line.

Self-censorship, co-optation, and a free ride followed. From Aadhaar to Electronic Voting Machines, and from Doklam to Pul-

wama with Rafale in between, the biggest scandals lay buried. From LPG to GDP, from missing planes to missing jobs data, the grandest claims lay unexamined. The fake, the frivolous and the frothy – anthem, flag, beef, love jihad, JNU, urban naxals, *azaan* – got more air time than subaltern protests of farmers, weavers and workers. And agenda-setting studio warriors flayed minority ghosts each night – ‘Hindus in danger’, ‘illegal immigrants’ – fostering a siege mentality that reeked of victimhood.

In the post-truth world, where social media takes propaganda in to the pockets of voters without filter, there is nothing to suggest the election verdict would have been the other way round had mainstream media been less dormant. But when a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court says the media should not forget that its primary responsibility is to be a watchdog, not a guard dog for those in authority, or when a former Chief Election Commissioner warns that “the fourth estate has become the fifth column of democracy”, it is useful to wonder if they are seeing the cracks in the pillar with greater clarity.

No end date?

When the media’s darkest days – the censorship under Indira Gandhi’s 21 months of Emergency – are invoked, L.K. Advani’s quote that the press crawled when asked to bend is airily recalled. But at least the media of the time was adhering to a formal order which had a start date and an end date. In the 21st century, it didn’t take a presidential order for the ‘feral beasts’ to suspend their instincts, to look the other way, to stoke majoritarian fires, to fearlessly question not the ruling party but the Opposition, and usher in Modi 2.0.

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well-being in this world and the next, then the choice of that deportment or dress can never be a free one.

There are many orthodox Muslims who do not insist on veils because of ‘free will’. Far from it. Actually, they would argue that the matter of free will does not arise: according to them, God has ordained that women should dress in a certain way and that is that. One could, as Fatima Mernissi does in her scholarly books, question their reading of the scriptures, but that is another matter, and it is a matter I have no desire to raise. What I am saying is that many orthodox Muslims – or reactionary Hindus, for that matter – insist on a certain treatment of women because they consider it God-ordained, religion-based and definitely not a matter of personal choice or ‘free will’.

This also makes the liberal argument of ‘free will’ around such matters rather ludicrous: liberals invoke ‘free will’ to defend practices that are considered obligatory and pre-ordained by their proponents! No wonder liberals fail to cut ice with the vast majority.

Not all bans

There are two good reasons not to

‘ban’ personal matters, whether it is the consumption of food or drink, or the wearing (or not wearing) of a particular kind of dress. First of all, such bans often create a bigger backlash, at least in the future. Second, and more importantly, any such ban introduces the public into the private: there are very good (liberal) reasons to keep governments out of drawing rooms, toilets and kitchens. If liberals want, they can argue along those lines, and they might or might not convince others.

But for God’s sake, it is time for liberals to stop fooling themselves and talking of ‘free will’ in order to justify tradition, custom and other forms of direct or indirect social coercion. It might make them feel good to be so generous and accepting, but it is neither the truth nor politically useful. In the longer run, it is even detrimental to whatever ‘beleaguered’ community liberals choose to champion along these lines, for it provides that community with superfluous febrile crutches to hobble on when it actually needs to put its two feet to the grounds of reality and start walking.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Neighbourhood issues

It appears as though one more opportunity to resolve differences between India and Pakistan is going to be missed at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit at Bishkek as no bilateral talks have been scheduled between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Imran Khan (“Navigations in Bishkek”, June 13). This is a pity. Dialogue is the only way of resolving issues and it must be initiated with a sense of urgency. There is nothing to lose and everything to gain with a friendly, peaceful neighbourhood. D.B.N. MURTHY, Bengaluru

The Prime Minister’s well-thought-out visit to the

Maldives and Sri Lanka is a signal that India will balance out China’s presence in the Indian Ocean Region and counteract its String of Pearls diplomatic policy (“The importance of being neighbourly,” June 12). Apart from focusing on nations that China is trying to woo, India must concentrate on the neighbourhood in general as events happening in the neighbourhood have a direct impact on India. VRINDA RAJIVANSHI, New Delhi

A secular India

I cannot agree more with the writer that a second term for Prime Minister Narendra Modi indicates that a significant number of Hindus endorse the Hindu

supremacist ideology of the RSS (“A summary of fears and possibilities”, June 13). Gone are the days of secularism. Most Indians nowadays think along communal lines. The reasons why Opposition parties did not raise issues such as mob lynching and violence against Muslims are not far to seek. In my cynical view, they are fully aware that the very mention of the word ‘Muslims’ will bring about accusations of appeasement and result in a loss of votes. It is not without reason that Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Kamal Nath invoked the National Security Act in a case of alleged cow slaughter, though he regretted it later. However, the transition to a Hindu

state will not be as smooth as the re-installation of a Hindutva government; it will be marked by internal conflict. The possibility of people getting disenchanted with the politics of hate in the long run cannot be ruled out either. Indians will come to their own conclusions only if they experience something directly, not through public discourse. ABDUL ASSIS P.A., Kochi

Instead of writing objective articles by stating facts, some of *The Hindu’s* columnists engage in rhetoric and speak as though Indians at large have been made gullible fools by the BJP’s propaganda. Words like toxic masculinity and

hyper-nationalism are frequently bandied about. While I highly appreciate and value the newspaper’s journalistic endeavours in unravelling the truth and holding the government accountable (such as in the Rafale series), publishing biased columns does no good for the newspaper. SAUMYADIP MOITRA, Vasco da Gama

Caste in everyday life

A government employee being rejected by the local people because of her Scheduled Caste status does not square with India’s claim of being a fast-developing nation (“Caste Hindus say ‘no’ to anganwadi workers at Valayapatti”, June 14). If one begins to probe the caste identities of all the service

providers of the country, one cannot eat in hotels, travel in buses, trains and flights, or do anything for that matter. This country has a Constitution that was framed by a Dalit icon. People should be taught to shed their casteist outlook. I have one other request to *The Hindu*: please say ‘so-called upper castes’ or ‘caste perpetrators’ in your reports instead of saying ‘caste Hindus’ just as the word ‘Dalit’ has been widely accepted for describing the SCs. ‘Caste Hindus’ sends out a wrong message that caste is relevant only to the so-called upper castes and not to the Dalits. A. CLEMENT, Chennai

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Do exams throttle India's education system?

PARLEY

The stress on rote learning instead of critical thinking continues, unlike in European systems

The importance accorded to school-leaving examinations in India puts enormous pressure on students to score the highest possible marks. Bagging a rank among lakhs of students is accepted widely as a mark of excellence. But how scientific is the examination system at determining the progress of students? In a conversation moderated by G. Ananthakrishnan, Krishna Kumar and Rohit Dhankar talk about the education system and possible reforms. Edited excerpts:

The school-leaving exam is a defining one in the life of a student. What outcomes do these exams actually achieve?

Krishna Kumar: This examination system is something that reminds us of the beginnings of the modern education system in India. The school-leaving examination was designed in the latter half of the 19th century as a way to determine who can be selected for further education, which was very scarce at that time, and also for lower-level jobs in offices. It was basically a means of elimination. And it has remained that all the way up to now. The Grade 10 exam, for instance, fails a large number of children and stops them from going any further. This is a kind of structural arrangement in a system in which secondary education is not very widespread and higher secondary education is even less so. Opportunities for further education at the undergraduate level or various kinds of technical education are also relatively scarce.

So, the exam system acts as a custodian which doesn't permit a vast number of children to go forward. It has acquired its legitimacy over the century, and therefore it is not questioned, but it has very little scientific basis, and it is not a system of any kind of valid assessment of the potential of a young person. Rather, it is a means of keeping out [children]. In what manner can you be stopped from going further? Grade 10 is the most draconian barrier, Grade 12 also fails a large number of children.

That is one function of the examination system. The other big function is to create an illusion of equal opportunity in an otherwise highly unequal society. It is in the exam

that all children – no matter what their background is, or whether they study in a posh school or a poor school – face the same test of three hours. Their names are turned into roll numbers. The identity of paper-setters and evaluators is not revealed. Thus, confidentiality enhances the legitimacy of a situation where children from contrasting circumstances are given an equal-looking opportunity.

Rohit Dhankar: I agree. The problem is well-known for quite some time. The first mention of the educational system being throttled by exams was in 1904 in the Indian Educational Policy, at the time formulated by the Governor General in Council. After that this was mentioned in every commission and report. They always try to say exams should be reformed and something should be done about it. As far as reliability of children's understanding, acquiring knowledge and ways of formulating knowledge are concerned, I don't think the examination system leaves much scope. Children do acquire snippets of information, but whether they construct that into knowledge remains seriously doubtful. I feel that this is also an outcome of intense competition in society. As long as the school structure and the structure of the curriculum remain as it is today, where every child has to finish certain kinds of learning in a given time, and at the same time the possibility of children exploring on their own is limited, it seems that the exam system cannot be changed.

If one changes these two things – the structure of the school and the curriculum – and somehow an alternative way is found which ameliorates the high competition in the parents' mind, there is a possibility of reforming the system in such a manner that it is more insightful and less stressful.

How does India's exam system compare with the systems of other countries?

KK: Our system compares very poorly with the evaluation and assessment systems which are in place in other societies, including



S. SUBRAMANIAM

European and North American societies as well as China. These societies have reformed their evaluation systems from within by improving teachers' understanding of what they are looking for in a child right from the start. In our case, we don't equip our teachers with a deep understanding of how children learn and how to assess a child's growth. Our system right from the beginning becomes intensely competitive and stressful and starts promoting cramming as a way to move forward with high marks.

A recent attempt made in the Right to Education (RTE) Act to introduce Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) was an important step but this was not welcomed by a large number of schools and State authorities. And the idea that the RTE introduced – that we will not have a Board examination up to Grade 8 – has now been amended by Parliament. States are now once again free to introduce a Board exam. Some have already moved towards that by reintroducing at Grade 5 and Grade 8 levels an exam that can classify children into pass and fail categories. This was the old system. This reversal of a progressive step that the RTE had taken also shows how accustomed our system is to this old and rigid practice of examining children one against the other. And how dependent it is on certain time-honoured skills like cramming and preparing for an exam through coaching.

In comparison, European systems, including the British system on which we were modelled originally, have moved on to far more holistic and humanistic ways of as-

Unfortunately, the National Education Policy draft doesn't look at the phenomenon of improving the institutional functioning of the Boards.

sessing each child's own growth trajectory right from the beginning. Even where there are public exams, they are taken with much greater care for objectivity and justice for every child. The GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education] in Britain, for example, makes sure that each child's work and performance gets a fair chance to be assessed properly by more than one evaluator. Internal reforms in the system in these directions have taken place in all those societies and they have been ignored in India.

You have written about the role played by model answers coming in the way of students creatively answering an exam question. Could you tell us how it affects the process?

KK: These model answers are prepared to provide the evaluator with a yardstick to see how many marks will be given to a child's answer. So, since the whole process is so hurried, the evaluator looks at the model answer, and looks for an exact replication of that in the child's answer sheet. If a child has written something sensible in slightly different words – for instance, instead of the word 'architecture', if a child has used the word 'structure' – the evaluator will strike off a mark simply because the model answer says the correct answer should use the

word 'architecture'. The model answer is rigidly applied and thereby the chances of any justice being done to a child's original answer which carries the child's own creative use of language or her own way of expressing something is likely to be ignored – not just ignored but punished and evaluated poorly. Sometimes so poorly that gross injustice is done to the child's answer.

RD: I have some information about the assessment systems in Finland, the U.K., and some States in the U.S. When we compare some of these systems, one or two things stand out clearly. A kind of continuous assessment which feeds back into the teaching-learning process and a kind of taking care of the child's continuous progress is in place.

The second and more important thing, perhaps, is that in the public exam, the questions are on concepts, critical thinking and various ways of looking at the avenues of knowledge, and [there are] criteria for judging the veracity of that knowledge. Our emphasis is on speedy reproduction of information. It seems that the approach of looking at the conceptual side and critical analysis and justification is a much more constructive and better way for the child's learning.

Our system is rigid. We never give adequate time for these ideas to take root in an institution. We think that a document when prepared and given to the Board, it [the Board] has the capability to translate that document into action, which is not the case. Similarly, we never pay attention to helping the teacher understand the new system. Giving certain words and ideas to people is one thing, and exploring with teachers what their views, assumptions are, and what the problems are with that understanding and how to move to a better understanding has never happened.

In the draft National Education Policy 2019, there is an idea that we can shift to modular exams rather than one single exam. Is this actual reform?

KK: This idea has been given many times earlier. And the National Institute of Open Schooling does provide the facility for taking one subject at a time, when completing your examination process over three-four

years if necessary. I don't think this idea is going to make any impact on this very highly competitive system.

In fact, the draft policy has ignored a number of very good reforms within the various Boards that have been recommended over the last 20-25 years. Many of the Boards don't have adequate staff, enough academic faculty to monitor their own procedures. Many of the State Boards are actually in very poor shape as far as their academic infrastructure is concerned. Even the CBSE and ICSE operate as bureaucratic, mechanical set-ups. Unfortunately, the policy draft doesn't even look at this phenomenon of improving the institutional functioning of the Boards.

RD: Exam reform doesn't come alone in the draft education policy; it comes along with the changes recommended in structure, curriculum, choice of subjects. A lot is written about curriculum reform. At this moment, in the first reading, it was somewhat confused, and talks of too many things simultaneously and repetitively. For example, if we give more flexibility to children at the secondary level [it proposes to do away with secondary-senior secondary distinction] with eight semesters and around 40 courses, for 24 courses students should take Board exams. With how much understanding I don't know, but they also say the exam will shift from testing rote memory to basic concepts and their relevance to life, situations and problem-solving. If the bulk of the recommendations are implemented, then there seems to be a possibility that we will get a kinder and better assessment system.

But I must point out that on the curricular reforms to the subjects, for example, there are 14 or 15 different kinds of courses and subjects for 6th to 8th standard students, but there doesn't seem to be that much room in the time table. So, at this moment it seems the situation is not very clear. However, as far as examinations are concerned, if the policy understands what they are writing, the emphasis is more on the fundamental concepts in subjects and more on understanding. Through a modular kind of Board exam, it might help. But then this comes along with a whole bunch of recommendations, and piecemeal implementation is not going to help.



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SINGLE FILE

Competing icons

The controversy over a statue in Bangalore University exposes fault lines in an old assumption

TANU KULKARNI



K. MURALI KUMAR

The run-up to the Lok Sabha election saw a furore over a bunch of miscreants vandalising the bust of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar on a Kolkata college campus. Meanwhile, what has gone mostly unnoticed by the national media is a controversy over the installation of a statue in the State-run Bangalore University campus.

It all began in early May after the Postgraduate and PhD Students' Association, aided by some of the faculty members, decided to install a statue of the Buddha on the campus. What made this move particularly controversial was the fact that they wanted it installed in the place where there was a Saraswati idol. The Buddha statue was allegedly brought in when the old Saraswati statue, which was damaged by accident, was removed to be replaced with a new one. They argued that the Buddha deserves a place on the campus as a "secular symbol". Students from Scheduled Caste, Schedule Tribe and Other Backward Classes communities said that this was the only way they could show dissent against the university officials they alleged were propagating one religious ideology on the campus. They claimed that the Vice Chancellor of the university was taking keen interest in this and was even personally bearing the cost of installing the new Saraswati statue.

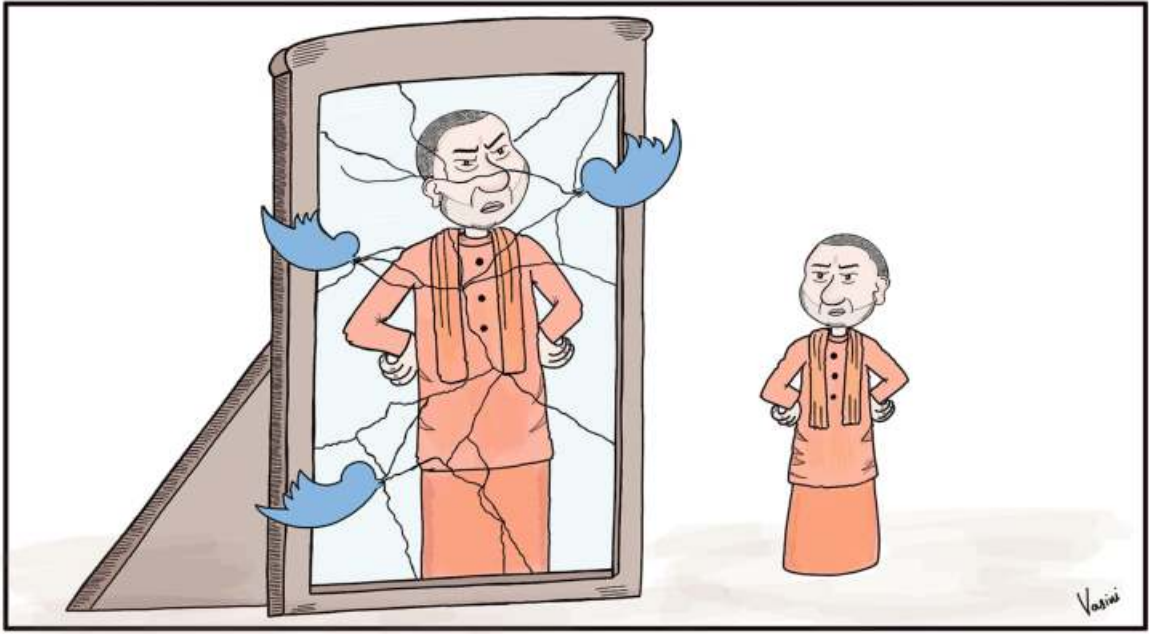
After some tense moments, authorities approached the police who cordoned off the place and deployed personnel to keep watch. The university also formed a sub-committee to examine where the Buddha statue should find a place on the campus. Given the sensitivity of the issue and its potential to blow up, the university authorities eventually arrived at a compromise and said that both statues would find a place next to each other.

However, this was not the end of the story. Several groups started demanding that statues of several other icons, including Mahatma Gandhi, Kanaka Dasa, Basaveshwara, Shishunala Sharif, Kempe Gowda and M.D. Nanjundaswamy, also be given a place on the campus. The authorities decided to deliberate upon the matter in the syndicate, the university's highest decision-making body.

Now, in a new twist, Karnataka's Higher Education Minister G.T. Deve Gowda has decided to say no to any new statue installation across campuses in the State, while adding that old statues will remain. This means that the statue of Saraswati will stay on the Bangalore University campus while the Buddha's statue will not find a place.

This episode has yet again raised the larger issue of idols and pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses routinely finding a place in several 'secular' government or government-aided institutions. While their presence is assumed to be 'normal', the statue controversy in Bangalore University has exposed the fault lines underlying this assumption.

Tanu Kulkarni is with The Hindu in Bengaluru



NOTEBOOK

Tracking caste in reporting

Caste is a reality that provides context to political stories

B. KOLAPPAN

When I applied for a job as a reporter at a Tamil publication many years ago, the editor who hired me asked about my caste. I was not shocked by the question as I was brought up in a rural area where caste was an everyday reality, but I was embarrassed. He said, "As a journalist you must know every possible detail of a person, including his caste. Caste is a reality and knowing about it will add to your perspective as a journalist."

He was perhaps training me to ask that very uncomfortable question to all my interviewees over the span of my career. As he said, caste informs everyday living: work, culture and eating choices, as seen in the recent report that an anganwadi worker in Tamil Nadu was transferred because caste Hindus refused to eat food prepared by a Scheduled Caste woman.

The cultural aspect has always interested me. Though Tamil Nadu is the land of Dravidian ideals, and its leaders boast of arresting the entry of Hindutva forces, casteism is as entrenched as the Dravidian movement itself. While there is an ugly side to this which most are forced to face, I have discovered as a journalist many forms of music in Tamil Nadu, each associated with a specific community, which shows what a variety of musical forms we have in a State where one 'season' of culture is only associated with the Brahmins and Isai Vellalas.

I didn't know, for instance, that A.N. Sattanathan, the first chairman of the Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Commission, belonged to the Padayachi community. It was only when I read his book, *Plain Speaking a Sudra's Story*, that I realised that his father

was a nagaswaram player. He details in the book the struggles that his father underwent in his career. I enjoy listening to Amabasamudram M.A. Durairaj, who is also from the same community.

The community of Dalits and barbers also have produced excellent musicians. Kambhar is one community that performs poojas at the Kali temple and plays the nagaswaram and the tavil. Kaniyaan koothu is performed by Kaniyaans, a community that is now included in the list of Scheduled Tribes. While this art form has helped them enter government service, the art is not able to get adequate performing artists from the community. Today many of those who dance for the koothu are from other communities.

Once I asked a group of youth who were performing thappu at a temple festival their caste. "We are

Dalits. But we will play only at temples, not at funeral processions," they said, clearly telling me where the lines are drawn.

The role of caste is so paramount in politics, too, that a journalist cannot do justice to his reporting unless he is aware of the caste structure, especially since caste organisations often masquerade as political organisations.

Caste also determines appointments. Once, when a Vice Chancellor was appointed to the Tamil University in Thanjavur, the same Tamil editor asked me whether I knew the background of the person. When I mentioned his caste along with other details, he told me, "His caste also played an important role in getting him the post." As a journalist, one realises that it is not the use of the caste that is important, but the context within which it is used in the story.

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 14, 1969

Russia has missiles aimed at China

The Soviet Union has positioned 300 nuclear missiles in Mongolia aimed at China's Sinkiang province which holds the nation's key nuclear installations, defence sources here [London] said to-day [June 13]. The sources said the Russians also were extending considerably their air base system in the Far East, notably in Siberia. The moves were seen as part of Moscow's latest determined anti-Chinese build-up, designed, according to Communist sources, primarily as a deterrent against any possible anti-Soviet venture of Communist China. The Soviet rocket emplacements in Mongolia have been organised under the Soviet-Mongolian Defence Treaty, signed by Soviet Party Chief Leonid Brezhnev in Ulan Bator in January, 1966, the sources said. They are located in completely isolated areas, totally manned by Russian crews and supplied by specially built roads, the sources said.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 14, 1919.

Saved from the Gallows.

Their Lordships disposed of this morning [June 13 in the Madras High Court] a referred trial and Criminal appeal against the conviction and sentence of death passed on five accused persons on a charge of murder by the Sessions Judge of Kistna. The Prosecution case was that all the accused bore grudge against the deceased, Kotayya. They were waiting for an opportunity to do away with the deceased and the plot to murder him reached the tragic end on the 12th December last... Their Lordships after hearing the Public Prosecutor held that the prosecution evidence was unsatisfactory and that the prosecution had failed to establish a case against the accused beyond the shadow of doubt. Accordingly they set aside the conviction and sentence and directed the release of the prisoners.

CONCEPTUAL Harvard MBA indicator

FINANCE

This refers to a stock market indicator that gauges the future performance of the stock market based on the employment choices of Harvard MBAs. When more than 30% of MBAs graduating from Harvard Business School choose to work in jobs in the financial sector, such as in investment banking and private equity, it is a strong signal to sell stocks. On the other hand, if less than 10% of Harvard MBAs pick jobs in the financial sector, it is a strong signal to buy stocks. The indicator thus uses the number of Harvard Business School graduates choosing to work in the financial sector after graduation as an indicator of the popularity of stocks among investors.

MORE ON THE WEB

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bit.ly/ChWaterScarcity