



Crisis as opportunity

The Nehru-Gandhi dynasty must withdraw without leaving a vacuum in the Congress

Sonia Gandhi's return as the Congress party president – an interim measure, apparently – ends the leadership vacuum since the party's massive defeat in the 17th Lok Sabha election, but only superficially. When Rahul Gandhi succeeded her in 2017, Ms. Gandhi had held the post for 19 years, the longest tenure for anyone in the party's 134-year history. Despite a spirited poll campaign, Mr. Gandhi could not reverse the fortunes of the party that had already been in a free-fall. In what some of his party leaders thought was an impetuous decision, he resigned as the party president, after the Lok Sabha defeat, pushing the organisation into a tailspin. While the collapse of the party was on his watch, its vitals had been corroded in the years before he took over. While holding that post for nearly two decades was unwise, the cardinal failure of Ms. Gandhi's leadership was in not preparing the ground for a transition, even if it were to be within the family. Mr. Gandhi who was to take over as party president, did not join the government, undermining his credibility as a Prime Ministerial aspirant. While Ms. Gandhi allowed politics to be reduced to intrigues in her durbar, Mr. Gandhi spent his time on misjudged priorities such as revamping the student and youth wings of the party.

In her second coming as party chief, Ms. Gandhi must use her authority to not only pave the way for a smooth transition of leadership but also ensure that the role of the family in the party is reimagined. It is true that in the absence of any coherent unifying thought – as evidenced in the squabble among its leaders over the Centre's decision to unilaterally change the constitutional status of J&K – the family has been the glue that held the Congress together. However, what used to be the best solution for all crises in the Congress – the surname – is itself a crisis for the party, in the current political climate. The focused attack on the Nehru-Gandhi legacy by the advancing Hindutva troops has contributed to the diminishing influence of the family, but the fact is also that an increasing number of people abhor dynasty politics and the privileges associated with it. Ms. Gandhi has an opportunity, nay a responsibility, to proactively help the old guard and the younger generation within the Congress to reconcile their differences and devise a common purpose of existence. At the helm of the party yet again, Ms. Gandhi must now focus on ending the centrality of the family in Congress, in a thoughtful manner.

Strongman candidate

Gotabaya nomination may strengthen view that Rajapaksas are pursuing family interests

In naming his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa as his party's presidential candidate, former Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa has apparently gone by his instinctive understanding that the people may favour a strong leader who prioritises internal security. Mr. Gotabaya, a former defence secretary credited with being the brain behind the crushing military defeat inflicted on the Liberation Tigers in 2009, is the candidate of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). The party was launched in 2016 by Mahinda Rajapaksa loyalists, but he has taken over its leadership only now. Sri Lanka is set to have a presidential election before the year is out, one that would be a virtual referendum on the performance of a power-sharing arrangement between political rivals from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP). The alliance of Maithripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe came to power in 2015 on the promise of 'good governance', and a democratic departure from nearly a decade of authoritarian rule, majoritarian triumphalism and denudation of democratic institutions under Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe combination does not seem to have done enough to revive the economy or introduce political and economic reforms. Their alliance collapsed last year due to persistent differences, and in October 2018, Mr. Sirisena sought to replace Mr. Wickremesinghe with Mr. Rajapaksa. The courts stalled the move and restored the UNP leader's office. Earlier this year, the Easter Sunday bomb blasts in churches and hotels, may have brought back popular apprehensions about national security and accentuated differences in the multi-ethnic country. In this backdrop, the candidature of Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa is no surprise.

However, Mr. Gotabaya's presence in the fray comes with its own controversies. His strongman image evokes fear among minorities. His name is linked with war crimes, murder, corruption cases as well as with the infamous 'white van abductions' that led to many disappearances. That he holds dual citizenship is another controversy, but it is now claimed he has renounced his U.S. citizenship and obtained a new Sri Lankan passport. With Mr. Mahinda likely to aim for the PM's position in a Gotabaya presidency, the candidacy may reinforce their detractors' view that the Rajapaksas are keen on securing their family's interests. His brother Basil Rajapaksa recently said in support of Mr. Gotabaya that elimination of corruption in Sri Lanka "needs a terminator", but the appellation only evoked sarcastic approbation for its deadly and destructive import. He will most likely have the support of President Sirisena's SLFP. However, the UNP is yet to decide on its candidate. It will have to choose from among its leader, Mr. Wickremesinghe, deputy leader Sajith Premadasa, and Parliament Speaker Karu Jayasuriya. A larger question now is whether Sri Lanka still believes in the platform of reform and progress that decided the 2015 elections, or would not mind a reversion to the Rajapaksa era.

An abrogation of democratic principles

The Kashmir move affects the robust nature of Indian democracy in addressing internal conflicts and alienation



NAVNITA CHADHA BEHERA

The recent abrogation of Article 370 ending the special status of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) in the Indian Constitution along with the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Bill, 2019, bifurcating the State into two Union Territories (J&K and Ladakh), have delivered a knock-out blow to the long-drawn-out peace process in Kashmir.

These moves also herald a paradigm shift in the fundamental premises and parameters of India's approach towards the Kashmir issue, with long-term implications for its political strategy of tackling such internal conflicts. There are three cardinal principles which successive political regimes have hitherto followed in addressing internal conflicts and seeking political reconciliation with alienated segments of the populace. These in turn have bolstered the robust and resilient nature of Indian democracy. The future, however, appears much more uncertain. Here is why.

Accommodative parameters

The first principle entails adhering to the letter and spirit of the Indian Constitution. Its far-sighted and malleable nature has stood the test of time. Since 1947, India has faced a wide-ranging nature of political demands ranging from secession, to the creation of a separate State for Jammu, Union Territory status for Ladakh and others seeking affirmative discrimination for the Dogri language, Scheduled Tribe status for Gujjars and Paharis and so on.

In response, the central leadership has tried finding ways and means within the overarching parameters of the Indian Constitu-

tion and have rarely been disappointed. In view of the difficult circumstances under which the Dogra Maharaja Hari Singh had acceded to India, Article 370 itself offered an excellent example as to how the special needs and political aspirations of the people of J&K could be politically and constitutionally accommodated by India's Constitution makers.

Decades later, when Ladakhi Buddhists launched an agitation in 1989, demanding Union Territory status, the Indian Constitution once again made space for political experimentation by introducing intermediate state structures – the creation of two autonomous hill councils for Leh and Kargil.

Weakening federalism

Against this backdrop, it is for the first time in independent India's history that the Bharatiya Janata Party government has used constitutional provisions for opposite ends: to undermine and weaken India's federal character by downgrading a State and territorially dividing it into two Union Territories without the consent of the people of J&K.

The method adopted to execute this decision is of special concern because by equating or replacing the Constituent Assembly of J&K (which was dissolved in 1957) with the Legislative Assembly of J&K, and Parliament appropriating the latter's powers since the State is under President's rule, the Central government has acted unilaterally to reorganise the State of J&K.

This rests not only on legally shaky ground but also flies in the face of constitutional norms and propriety. If this passes judicial scrutiny, it can then be done to any State in India, with drastic implications for its federal character.

The second principle pertains to the maxim of 'inclusivity', that is, a political demand being made must be inclusive in terms of representing the interests of all those in whose name it is made. This supported bridge building



AFP

and coalition-making among different communities certainly helped in shaping the peace process, in turn bolstering India's deeply diverse and plural character.

In J&K's context too, it has also proven to be a critical common factor helping to explain the failures and successes of various political demands. The Kashmiri idea of self-determination in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual society, for instance, was to call for a plebiscite as mandated by the UN resolutions of 1949 or seek an independent and sovereign State of J&K, but this was not the approach taken by other communities such as the Dogras, Kashmiri Pandits, Gujjars, Bakkarwals, and Ladakhi Buddhists. In the 1950s, as indeed in the 1990s, the demand by Kashmiri Muslims for a right to self-determination or azadi was politically checkmated by these communities as their political choices were very different; time and again, an exclusively Valley-focussed approach has doomed the prospects of the peace process.

Demographic impact

The BJP government's move has, however, not only completely swung the pendulum but is also antithetical to the very idea of inclusivity. By turning J&K, especially the Valley, into a virtually open air prison, with a full clampdown and information blackout, the message is clear: that New Delhi alone will decide the political future of the people of J&K with no

room for any consultative process and no space for dissent.

The decision to divide the State is particularly fraught with the risk of deepening regional and communal fault lines. While Ladakhi Buddhists, for instance, are now celebrating the fulfilment of their long pending demand for Union Territory's status, the voices of Kargils who are still under a strict curfew are yet to be heard. They may not support this decision because 'a Union Territory without a legislature' not only negates the idea of decentralisation of power to the grassroots (the undergirding principle of the autonomous hill council) but could well lead to a shifting of the loci of power to Leh, resulting in losing whatever gains they have assiduously made over the years.

The celebrations by Kashmiri Pandits are anticipated because of the gross injustice and displacement they have suffered since their forced exodus from the Valley in the early 1990s. It remains to be seen whether the abrogation of Article 370 by itself, would facilitate their return to the Valley without the support of local Kashmiri Muslims and rising violence.

Instead of making all communities equal stakeholders in the peace process, the BJP government's decision may well end up pitching one community against the other. A deepening of societal fissures and communal fault lines do not go hand in hand with the agenda of peace-making.

The third principle refers to a promise and the practices of holding a dialogue process and sharing political power with opponents of all hues. In Kashmir, successive Central governments have until now never shut the door of dialogue in the face of political opponents who have ranged from the Sheikh Abdullah-led Plebiscite Front in the 1960s to the Muslim United Front in the 1980s to the Hurriyat leadership since the 1990s. This also holds true for militant groups.

While the bottomline of Congress governments has been a commitment by their opponents to abjure the path of violence and abide by the Indian Constitution, the erstwhile Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime was even more generous in offering the broad framework of 'insaniyat, jamhooriyat and Kashmiriyat'.

Political fallout

In a significant point of departure, the present government is pursuing a hard, top-down approach. The Home Minister has categorically ruled out any dialogue with militants and the Hurriyat, and has even castigated the mainstream regional political leadership of the National Conference and Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party for being corrupt, promoting family rule and fomenting separatism and violence. This move has nullified the very idea of a process of dialogue and runs the risk of discrediting the mainstream politicians and obliterating the middle ground between the militants and mainstream politicians.

The Prime Minister in his recent address to the nation, expressed hope that new leadership in Kashmir would emerge from grassroots politics. It is important to note that in 1,407 out of 2,135 halqas or village clusters, there was no voting at all in the panchayat elections that were held in 2018. This does not lend credence to youth being optimistic about joining mainstream politics especially after the abrogation of Article 370, a move which is only likely to deepen the alienation. The Modi government faces an uphill task in identifying credible local partners in ushering in peace to the Valley, which may well end up in facing yet another impasse.

Navnita Chadha Behera is the author of 'Demystifying Kashmir' and 'State, Identity and Violence: Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh'

Countering the Right's hegemony

In a fightback, only a deep fostering of intra-subaltern solidarity using culture can help



AJAY GUDAVARTHI

India has witnessed the rise of the Hindu Right as not just a political but also a cultural force like never before. The has been made possible by a series of tactical moves which has allowed for a consolidation of power with the traditional castes and classes.

The Right has managed to do this by exploiting and magnifying micro-level social conflicts that lie dormant in order to create a meta-level hierarchy and reinforce the hold of traditional power. It has led to a weakening of the resistance of lower end social groups by fragmenting them and allowing intra-caste, intra-religious and intra-regional differences to articulate themselves in order to delegitimise the resistance and mobility of vulnerable social groups that have so far benefited and accrued some social power. The Right negates the power of such groups in the name of justice and power to those even weaker and further neglected.

In terms of caste, it is now well known that the Right has made significant advances in terms of

breaking up Dalit sub-castes and fully exploiting intra-sub caste tensions and mutual prejudices.

Everyday prejudices

Similarly, it is making advances in mobilising lesser mobilised Other Backward Classes (OBC) groups against dominant OBC groups such as Yadavs and Kurmis. It is further sharpening the conflict between OBCs and Dalits. Added to all this is allowing the dominant Rajput caste to vent its angst against the mobility Dalits have accrued so far: by allowing street violence and mob lynching of Dalits. It is reinforcing social power of dominant castes at one end and fragmenting this through a mobilisation of lesser mobilised sub-castes of subaltern castes. It is sharpening dormant prejudices that have existed for a long time between subaltern castes, caste and religion, and religion and region.

Similarly, the relation between Dalits and OBCs has been fraught with mutual suspicion and dislike, in spite of four decades of 'Bahujan' identity having been mobilised, mostly in the north. In fact, B.R. Ambedkar himself identified the OBCs as 'savarnas' and sometimes equates them with Aryans. This again collates in complex ways with regional dynamics between the north and the south. What the location of the OBCs is in this complex matrix is not very



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clear historically; politically the kind of mobility they have got after the implementation of the Mandal Commission has only sharpened the differences. Violent attacks against Dalits by the OBCs are a continuous, if less discussed aspect of Indian politics. The Khairlanji incident was the most recent attack against Dalits by the Kunbis who are listed as OBCs in Maharashtra.

Within the minority religion too, which includes Muslims, there are castes, sects and other differentiations. For instance, in Kashmir, there are differences between Sunnis and Shias, between Sunnis of the Valley and those in the border areas of Poonch and Rajouri, and those living in Ladakh. They neither inter-marry nor do they enjoy amicable relations. Class and regional prejudices overlap with that of sect and caste.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh-led hegemony is not a top-

down machination even if there is fear, intimidation, control of media and destabilisation of institutions. The current dispensation is bringing into the open all the cultural contradictions that existed historically. While the Congress's inclusive nationalism attempted to accommodate social groups politically without overcoming social prejudices, the BJP's muscular nationalism lies in including them politically but dividing them socially. The divisions existed; the Right is only widening them.

A new multitude

The fight against the Right is only focusing on critiquing its strategies and exposing it without offering a positive fight to construct an intra-subaltern solidarity. There needs to be a robust cultural programme of fighting prejudices, encouraging inter-dining and inter-marriages. Not mere tolerance but positive celebration of cultural differences is required. Whether or not the Right can be made to retreat depends on this deep cultural programme. We are not clear how one should go about it. This may have to happen as more of a cultural than a political fight. It has to be about humanity, not power; it has to be more about everyday realities than about a programmatic idea of justice.

Every move towards solidarity is also perceived as lowering the

status of groups that are higher-up in the ladder-like structure even if they are simultaneously victimised by dominant groups. Sub-division of Dalits is viewed as a pulling down of the relatively well-to-do castes within Dalits; a sub-division of OBCs is seen as a mode of allowing for the domination of traditional caste Hindus. Gandhi attempted 'change without conflict'; he failed to usher in faster change but offered a semblance of burying conflict. Today, we are witnessing conflict and change itself is suspended between mobility and reinforcing traditional hierarchies. Mere critiquing and electoral defeat of the Right is not going to work.

Castes, religious groups and regional identities should fight it up-front by overcoming the prejudice within. To truly fight the Right, relatively dominant social groups must be prepared to lose a bit of social power they wield, however small it may be. It would also mean being critical of one's own social location, however oppressed it may be. Is this realistic at the current historical juncture? The Right compulsively requires fear, anxiety and insecurity to block the process. What are the cultural resources on the other side of the political divide?

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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.

Putting back the hood

The situation in Kashmir is not normal (Page 1, "Restrictions return to Valley", August 12). The whole of Kashmir is under arrest. If things were fine, why are the communications systems still blocked? If the people of Kashmir really appreciate the "bold decisions" made by the Central government, there should have been widespread jubilation with the tricolour hoisted on all buildings. You cannot force someone to tag your line, at gunpoint. India and Pakistan cannot redraw the map of Kashmir using ink or bloodshed. Kashmiris have to express a oneness in their hearts and minds.

One is also in agreement with Jeremy Corbyn, the Leader of the U.K.'s Opposition Labour Party, that the Kashmir issue should be resolved through UN resolutions.

T. ANAND RAJ,
Chennai

■ The abrogation of Article 370 was hailed as a masterstroke by the Central government especially as it was seen to be the long-coveted weapon to combat terrorism. But the possibility that prayers may not be permitted at Jamia Masjid, one of the largest mosques, may hurt religious sentiments. It is one thing to say that law and order will be maintained and quite another to deny citizens the basic right to offer prayers,

especially on an auspicious occasion. Extra deployment of paramilitary forces in places of congregation would have been a better option than imposing a blanket ban. At some stage or the other, the security arrangements will need to be relaxed.

V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

■ Gaggling the fourth estate is akin to derailing democracy. How long is the Central government planning to gag the media and correspondingly the voices of Kashmiris? One can redraw land boundaries but hearts have to be won. There is clearly a fear of mass gatherings and processions, which is the only way to explain why restrictions of all kinds are being

reimposed. The words attributed to Abraham Lincoln come to mind: "You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time".

TILAK SUBRAMANIAN V.,
Kunjibettu, Udipi, Karnataka

Water revolution

The sudden burst in monsoon activity has exposed the deep faultlines in India's water management policies. While Chennai remains parched, large parts of east and south India are reeling under floods. The erratic nature of the monsoon rains, overexploitation of groundwater and cropping patterns of agriculture should lead to a radical

change in India's water management methods. There has to be a water revolution which lays stress on reuse of waste water, setting up farmponds and making scientifically done rainwater harvesting mandatory. Adapting water

conservation techniques such as drip irrigation technology from Israel can also help make India water secure.

V.S. SINDHURI,
Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the "From the Archives" column (OpEd page, Aug. 12, 2019), the entry corresponding to a hundred years ago should have said August 12, 1919.

In "The forms of federalism in India" (FAQ page, Aug. 11, 2019), a sentence that read "Despite being a single administrative unit, the Union Territory is 'non-contiguous'." That is, its territory is limited to one extent of land" should be amended to say not limited to one extent of land.

In the Sunday Magazine piece "Nemat Sadat: Gay, Muslim, Afghan, immigrant" (In conversation, Literary Review, Aug. 4, 2019) the reference to Nemat Sadat's growing up in South Carolina should be corrected to read as southern California. Elsewhere in the same piece, a quote attributed to him as saying that he had to prove himself as a Muslim should be corrected to read as an ex-Muslim.

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The perilous state of academic freedom

The present wave of anti-intellectualism, where informed opinions are ridiculed, poses a serious threat



RAJEEV BHARGAVA

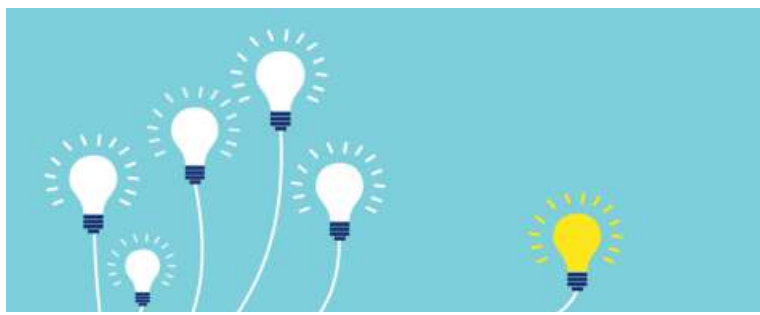
To express opinions is the fundamental right of every Indian; so also to claim that her opinions are true. But whether in fact they are true isn't in the hands of the person who expresses them. Their truth, validity and even plausibility are determined through contestation and scrutiny by others.

More importantly, some types of scrutiny are more scrupulous, thorough and rigorous than others. They uncover indefensible, baseless or unsustainable opinions. They demonstrate that other opinions are less-biased, withstand the test of time, and have a greater openness in accepting their fallibility. In doing so, these inquiries produce a better, clearer understanding of the world, providing a deeper insight into the complexities of the human condition. Therefore, they are of a different qualitative worth than others, more deserving of being called 'knowledge'. Knowledge-production begins with opinions but does not end with them.

Academic freedom protects such spaces of contestation and scrutiny through which knowledge is produced. It refers to the freedom of scholars to conduct critical enquiry, and the freedom of teachers and students to collectively deliberate on any idea without fear of sanction, censure or illegitimate interference. To sift knowledge from mere opinion requires a sound training in research and an awareness of professional standards of scholarship, norms of peer engagement and time-tested, disciplined ways of knowing (methodologies). This is true of all practices involving standards of excellence. For instance, it is not my subjective opinion that Viv Richards was a great batsman. This fact is established by the collective judgment of the greats of international cricket.

Patently acquired skills

In short, academic freedom protects the patently acquired skills and practices of all such knowledge-producing and knowledge-transmitting



agents (teachers, researchers and students). Since academic practices are sustained within institutions, academic freedom includes the autonomy of institutions where teaching and scholarly research is conducted.

My intellectual interest in academic freedom was provoked when, in 1999, I was asked to contribute a short essay on the state of academic freedom in India to *Academe*, a journal of the American Association of University Professors. In that article, I claimed that the freedom of scholars and autonomy of academic institutions is usually threatened by internal as well as external factors.

Internal threats appear when academic institutions are weakened from within, as when academics themselves lose sight of the standards of excellence internal to the practice of research and teaching. External threats develop, on the other hand, when academic institutions are undermined by oppressive communities, the coercive apparatus of the state or unbridled market forces. I had then argued that Indian academia was severely threatened by oppressive communities and self-imposed impediments by academics, but less so by the market or the state.

I took my own community to task for having succumbed to what I called the over-ideologisation of the mind. Many academics, in a hurry to bridge the gap between theory and practice, seemed to me to have replaced patient, open-ended deliberation with dogma and prefabricated, lazy solutions. Other internal threats to academic freedom flowed from wider societal malaise. For instance, merit-based institutions were being converted to little fiefdoms run by academic tin gods doling out petty patronage to loyal supporters and creating suffocating tyrannies for others. In such contexts, ideas were applauded or condemned not for

their intrinsic worth but with an eye on who articulated them – one of 'us' or one of 'them', A person's caste, creed or political proclivity mattered more than the evidence or argument provided. Such habits of the mind were hardly conducive to the growth of a tradition of scholarly work.

A more serious danger to academic freedom in India came, I believed, from illiberal communities. I illustrated my point by pointing to the fate of the late historian Mushirul Hasan, who was victimised by extremist fellow-Muslims for a rather innocuous remark on the ban on Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*.

Interestingly, barring the brief period of Emergency, academic freedom in post-Independence India, I claimed, was not throttled by the state. I did not remember instances of seminars being monitored, academic books being banned, or the imprisonment of academics for their views. However, covert and overt pressures on academic institutions by democratically elected governments were commonplace. As it began to lose its dominance, an edgy and insecure Congress Party had started becoming increasingly unprincipled and randomly interventionist. In West Bengal and Kerala, the Communists could never resist illegitimately interfering in college and university appointments.

The Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition, in power at the Centre then, had harmed the institutional integrity of the prestigious Institute of Advanced Study, Simla. Its governing body was packed with hand-picked supporters.

What is the state of academic freedom today, twenty years after that article was written? I fear that more and more academics in positions of power appear to be not just over-ideologised but politically indoctrinated. A deepening societal intolerance

has only intensified attacks on academic freedom. The exclusion of several important books from university syllabi, entirely on non-academic grounds, exemplifies this. State interference has increased, sacrificing critical pedagogical practices in the name of the government's idea of national interest. The continuing victimisation of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), one of the premier academic institutions of the country by the current government's own reckoning, illustrates this.

Knowledge a 'commodity'

Alarming, new threats to academic freedom have emerged. One comes from the corporatisation of academia, by which I mean the modelling of universities on business corporations. This has naturalised the view of administration as management, faculty as paid personnel, and students as consumers who have a right to demand what should be taught, as if knowledge can be purchased as a commodity according to one's taste! When corporate power exercises control over faculty and curricula, vice chancellors and college principals can hire, fire, and change faculty assignments with as much whim as any corporate CEO.

But the most serious threat to the world of knowledge comes from 'anti-intellectualism' that finds the very idea of thought reprehensible. Thinking, reasoning, questioning and critique are deemed dangerous, to be treated with utter disdain. The distinction between knowledge and opinion is entirely blurred; ideas of informed authority, professional academic standards and academic expertise are ridiculed. The very idea that the task of education is to transform students into critical agents, who actively question the common sense of a society, is severely undermined.

If these trends continue, the university as a site of autonomous scholarship, independent thought, and uncorrupted inquiry will be disassembled. Our best young minds will emigrate and the very future of our country imperilled by another 'brain drain'. India may not easily recover from this blow.

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Rooting AI in ethics

A technology should be evaluated both on the basis of its utility and the intention of its creator



N. DAYASINDHU

We can intuitively recognise whether an action is ethical or not. Let us look at the theoretical basis of understanding ethics with an example. A cigarette company wants to decide on launching a new product, whose primary feature is reduced tar. It plans to tell customers that the lower tar content is a 'healthier' option. This is only half true. In reality, a smoker may have to inhale more frequently from a cigarette with lower tar to get the flavour of a regular cigarette.

Let us analyse this from three dominant ethical perspectives:

First, the egoistic perspective states that we take actions that result in the greatest good for oneself. The cigarette company is likely to sell more cigarettes, assuming that the new product wins over more new customers. From an egoistic perspective, hence, the company should launch the new cigarette. Second, the utilitarian perspective states that we take actions that result in the greatest good for all. Launching the new cigarette is good for the company. The new brand of cigarette also provides a 'healthier' choice for smokers. And more choice is good for customers. Hence, the company should launch the product.

The egoistic and utilitarian perspectives together form the 'teleological perspective', where the focus is on the results that achieve the greatest good.

Third, the 'deontological perspective', on the other hand, focusses more on the intention of the maker than the results. The company deceives the customer when it says that the new cigarette is 'healthier'. Knowingly endangering the health of humans is not an ethical intention. So, the company should not launch this cigarette.

The flawed facial recognition system

In the context of Artificial Intelligence (AI), my hypothesis is that most commercially available AI systems are optimised using the teleological perspectives and not the deontological perspective. Let us analyse a facial recognition system, a showcase for AI's success. An AI system introduced in 2015 with much fanfare in the U.S. failed to recognise faces of African Americans with the same accuracy as those of Caucasian Americans. Google, the creator of this AI system, quickly took remedial action. However, from a teleological perspective, this flawed AI system

gets a go ahead. According to the 2010 census, Caucasian Americans constitute 72.4% of the country's population. So an AI system that identifies Caucasian American faces better is useful for a majority of internet users in the U.S., and to Google.

Going by intention

However, from a deontological perspective, the system should have been rejected as its intention probably was not to identify people from all races, which would have been the most ethical aim to have. In fact, the question that comes to mind is – shouldn't digital platform companies, whose markets span many countries, aim to identify faces of all races with an equal accuracy?

Social media is not the only context where AI facial recognition systems are used today. These systems are increasingly being used for law enforcement. Imagine the implications of being labelled a threat to public safety just because limited data based on one's skin colour was used to train the AI system. Americans are taking note. Recent news reports suggest that San Francisco has banned use of facial recognition by law enforcement.

The ethical basis of AI, for the most part, rests outside the algorithm. The bias is in the data used to train the algorithm. It stems from our own flawed historical and cultural perspectives – sometimes unconscious – that contaminate the data. It is also in the way we frame the social and economic problems that the AI algorithm tries to solve.

With the proliferation of AI, it is important for us to know the ethical basis of every AI system that we use or is based on us. An ethical basis resting on both teleological and deontological perspectives gives us more faith in a system. Sometimes, even an inclusive intention may need careful scrutiny. For instance, Polaroid's ID-2 camera, introduced in the 1960s, provided quality photographs of people with darker skin. However, later, reports emerged that the company developed this for use in *dompas*, an identification document black South Africans were forced to carry during apartheid.

Understanding and discussing the ethical basis of AI is important for India. Reports suggest that the NITI Aayog is ready with a ₹7,500 crore plan to invest in building a national capability and infrastructure. The transformative capability of AI in India is huge, and must be rooted in an egalitarian ethical basis. Any institutional framework for AI should have a multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder approach, and have an explicit focus on the ethical basis.

N. Dayasindhu is the co-founder and CEO of Ithaasa Research and Digital. Views are personal

A mixed bag at film awards

The recently announced National Awards ignored some of the best Malayalam and Tamil films

KUNAL RAY

The recent announcement of the National Film Awards (NFA) produced mixed reactions, as indeed it has in every previous year. One wonders whether these awards are still reflective of the various quality benchmarks, and the public's expectations from them too seem to have consistently nosedived.

On the positive side, it is gratifying that recognition was bestowed upon a film such as *Badhaai Ho*, which, though made in the format of a mainstream Hindi film, touched upon issues that are usually never discussed. Most often, mother and father characters in Hindi films barely play supporting roles, as if they are nothing beyond their parent identities. They are either benevolent or the opposite, obsessing about their child's private life and matrimony.

But who are these parents as people? Hindi cinema doesn't concern itself with characters beyond a certain age but *Badhaai Ho* is different in its exploration of love and desire in the life of a couple whose eldest son is making his own marriage plans. The father character still recites love poems to his wife, they have an active sex life and the mother is soon pregnant. Have we seen this in Hindi cinema before?



A versatile actor

The film also underscores the versatility and talent of Ayushmann Khurrana, a leading mainstream film actor who has experimented with an array of unconventional characters. From his debut in *Vicky Donor* to his last outing as an honest cop in *Article 15*, here is an actor who has defied Hindi cinema leading norms. Very few of his contemporaries have risked the choices that he has made.

But having praised these films for having got what they deserve, were these really the finest produced in 2018?

Beyond the ambit of the NFA, some of the most daring Indian films of 2018 were made in Tamil and Malayalam. Zakariya Mohammed's *Sudani from Nigeria*, a film centred on Kerala's love for football, including the whirlwind of events that engulf a

footballer from Nigeria who arrives in a small hamlet in Kerala, was awarded the best Malayalam film. But it deserved a wider recognition.

Devoid of nationalism

Sports films in India are prone to overtones of nationalism. Every rendition soon descends into a rags to riches story or transforms into a tale of survival of the fittest. *Sudani from Nigeria* (in picture) departs from convention in every way imaginable by locating the game amongst its people and eschewing all winner-loser narratives. It also breaks stereotypes in the representation of Muslim characters. Besides that film, there were many others like Lijo Jose Pellissery's quirky *Ee. Ma. Yau*; Amal Neerad's *Varathan* and B. Ajith Kumar's *Eeda*, an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* set in conflict-prone Kannur. These films were replete with new stories, captivating performances and fresh possibilities for film language; their exclusion was rather unfortunate.

From Tamil cinema, Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* and Vetrimaaran's *Vada Chennai* found no mention in the awards. Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* and Lenin Bharathi's *Merku Thodarchi Malai*, a film that deals with the lives of landless labourers, were also ignored.

Overall, there appears to be a trend in terms of films that have been omitted by major industry awards – they have all been movies whose narratives diverge from the mainstream political view. *Uri* and *Padmavat* were rewarded for their hyper-nationalism, and perhaps that is not surprising.

But should directors make films only for awards? Films are not remembered for awards but the stories they tell. Some of the films mentioned here will be remembered and seen across time purely for reasons of cinematic merit and the conviction of their craft. Award or no award, our films ought to chronicle different stories and voices because in diversity lie our deepest strength.

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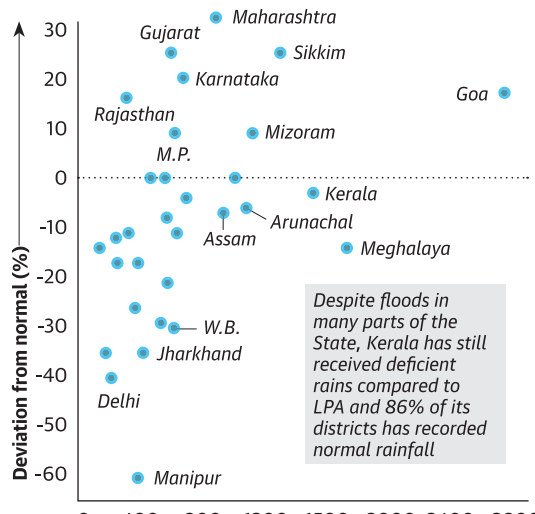
DATA POINT

On the dot

India has received an average rainfall of 558 mm in the 2019 monsoon season till Monday. This is neither below nor above the Long Period Average (LPA); in other words, the deviation from normal rainfall is exactly 0%. Considering that the rainfall was 33% deficient at the end of June, the monsoon has intensified rapidly. But, inter-State variations exist. By Vignesh Radhakrishnan

Inter-State variations

Scatterplot charts actual rainfall against % deviation from LPA across States as of Monday. States above the horizontal zero line received more rainfall than usual – the higher they are the more the deviation from normal (LPA). The States below the line received lesser rainfall than usual



Inter-district variations

Table shows the % of districts in each State across rainfall categories. For instance, 10% districts in Punjab had "large excess" (LE) rainfall while 40% had "deficient" (D) rainfall. LD: Largely deficient (-60% to -99% of Long Period Average rainfall). D: Deficient (-20% to -59% of LPA). N: Normal rainfall (-19% to +19% of LPA). E: Excess (+20% to +59% of LPA). LE: Large excess (>59% of LPA)

State	LE	E	N	D	LD
Maharashtra	22	22	33	22	0
Karnataka	17	27	37	20	0
Meghalaya	14	29	0	57	0
M.P.	14	25	45	16	0
Mizoram	13	0	50	25	0
Punjab	10	5	45	40	0
Tamil Nadu	9	6	19	44	22
Gujarat	9	45	42	3	0
Rajasthan	9	39	30	21	0
Chhattisgarh	7	15	22	56	0
Arunachal	6	6	50	38	0
J&K	5	18	41	23	5
Assam	4	19	44	30	4
U.P.	1	7	37	51	4
Sikkim	0	25	50	25	0
Telangana	0	13	65	23	0
Bihar	0	11	39	50	0
Nagaland	0	9	18	64	9
A.P.	0	8	62	31	0
Uttarakhand	0	8	15	77	0
Kerala	0	7	86	7	0
Odisha	0	3	53	43	0
Tripura	0	0	100	0	0
Goa	0	0	100	0	0
Himachal	0	0	42	42	17
Jharkhand	0	0	21	75	4
Haryana	0	0	19	71	10
West Bengal	0	0	16	79	5
Manipur	0	0	11	33	56
Delhi	0	0	0	56	11

The Hindu

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 13, 1969

T.N. Chief Minister's demand

The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, Mr. M. Karunanidhi, has addressed a letter to the Prime Minister pleading for representation to the State Government on the boards of management of the nationalised banks of a regional character and on the regional advisory boards of all-India banks. In his letter, Mr. Karunanidhi has also urged that the States should have representation on the National Credit Council. Mrs. Gandhi's decision to nationalise 14 scheduled banks, Mr. Karunanidhi said, was a "bold and timely step – perhaps the most significant in the last 20 years of the history of independent India." He hoped it would mark the "real beginning of a new era" in which the Government, on behalf of society, would take command of the resources and use them for the uplift of the common man. He offered to Mrs. Gandhi, on behalf of the Government and the people of Tamil Nadu, "our solid and unflinching support" in implementing this measure and any further socialist steps she might undertake to bring light into the life of the common man. In the course of his letter, Mr. Karunanidhi referred to the fear in some political circles that there might not be much advantage to the interests of this State as a result of bank nationalisation.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 13, 1919

The Madras Council.

The first meeting of the Madras Legislative Council during Lord Willingdon's regime as also after its reconstitution under the recent elections and nominations of members, was held yesterday [August 12]. It must be admitted that the proceedings of the Legislative Council have of late lost much of their interest in the public mind, both on account of the futility of the popular voice in the discussions under its present constitution, and of the short period that divides the existence of the present Council from what is going to take its place under the Reform Bill, which is engrossing so much of the public attention at the present time. In the course of his opening speech His Excellency said that by a deliberate decision of the Government, the number of nominated officials has been reduced, and that of non-officials has been increased. The public must feel grateful for the adoption of this principle, which is a sound constitutional measure. It must be said, however, that in the opinion of the public, the nominations of non-official members have been, with notable exceptions, of a character such as not to diminish the support to the Government side, nor to increase the weight of the popular vote.