



Silly point

Support for the national cricket team or its players is no litmus test for patriotism

People who allegedly celebrated the victory of Pakistan against India in a T20 cricket World Cup match on October 24 are facing the brunt of the state. All of them are Muslims. In Rajasthan, a young schoolteacher has been terminated by a private school and the police have charged her under IPC Section 153B for 'imputations, assertions prejudicial to national integration'. In Jammu and Kashmir, the police have registered two cases against unknown persons under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and other sections. In Uttar Pradesh, three students from J&K have been charged under IPC Sections 153A (promoting enmity between groups), 505 (creating or publishing content to promote enmity) and, later, Section 124A, sedition. The wisdom, propriety or acceptability of celebrating Pakistan's victory is beside the point. From moral, tactical, and practical perspectives, this sweeping policing is unwise. No democracy, least of all a country of India's size and diversity, can demand unyielding uniformity and conformity from its population, on all questions and at all times. It is unlikely that any of these charges will stand judicial scrutiny, but that only makes this spectacle a ridiculous distraction for the stretched law enforcement system. Far from enforcing national integration as the purported aim of this heavy-handed police action is, it will only brew more resentment and social disharmony apart from derailing young lives.

An unremitting loyalty test of citizens can be a self-defeating pursuit for a country like India that has global ambitions. People of Indian origin live around the world, with split loyalties. There are U.S. citizens who chant victory for India at gatherings in their home countries addressed by the Indian Prime Minister, and there are British and Australian citizens who boo their own country in favour of India during sporting events. Sports teams around the world have members of foreign origin. Infusion of toxic hyper-nationalism in sports is bad in such a world; more so for India. While the BJP has been championing this link between cricket and nationalism, other parties are not far behind as the incident in Rajasthan, a Congress-ruled State, shows. AAP in Delhi was one step ahead and questioning the Narendra Modi government for allowing the cricket match with Pakistan. Had all this been on account of an unspoken link between cheering for the national cricket team and support for a united India, the police would have also charged those who mercilessly trolled Mohammed Shami, a Muslim in the Indian cricket team. True, it would have been wonderful for the Indian cricket team to enjoy the unqualified support of the entire nation, but, surely, there is no reason to charge those who support another team with sedition. The Indian state looks silly now, and the whole episode bodes ill for cricket, and the country.

Descent into chaos

The Myanmar junta should immediately end the violent suppression of democratic protests

The decision by ASEAN to exclude Myanmar's military junta from its annual summit held on October 26-28 is a major setback for the Generals' attempts to gain regional legitimacy for their brutal regime. Ever since it seized power by toppling the democratic government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February, the junta has unleashed a reign of terror claiming an estimated 1,000 lives. Ms. Suu Kyi, who had been the State Councillor for five years from 2015 heading the quasi-democratic government, has been in detention since the coup and is facing absurd charges such as "illegally owning walkie-talkies". Thousands of others were arrested by the military, notorious for its reprisal of democratic protests in the past. But this time, the crisis seems much worse. Months after the seizure of power, the junta, led by Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, is still struggling to restore order. If in the past the National League for Democracy (NLD), Ms. Suu Kyi's party, had upheld non-violence even in the face of repression, this time, NLD leaders have called for a "revolution". The remnants of the old regime have formed a National Unity Government, which claims to be the true representative of Myanmar. In cities, protests slid into armed fighting between pro-democracy protesters and security personnel, while in the jungles, anti-junta groups joined hands with rebels for military training. The situation was so grave that the UN Special Envoy warned this month that Myanmar had descended into a civil war.

One of the regional groupings with some leverage over the junta is ASEAN. In April, Gen. Min Aung Hlaing was invited to Jakarta for emergency talks with ASEAN members. The bloc asked him to immediately end violence, start the reconciliation process and allow a regional special envoy to meet with all stakeholders, including Ms. Suu Kyi. None of these requests was met. Most recent reports suggest that the junta has been systematically torturing political prisoners. A special envoy was appointed as part of the ASEAN plan, but he was not allowed to meet Ms. Suu Kyi. Regime violence, political crises and strikes and counter-attacks by protesters have all pushed Myanmar to the brink of collapse. According to the UN, some three million people are in need of life-saving assistance because of "conflict, food insecurity, natural disasters and COVID-19". Still, the Generals do not show any signs of compromise and are not even ready to talk with the NLD. Violence might allow them to hold on to power for now, but that is not sustainable. The ASEAN snub is a reminder that continuing violence could cause regional isolation of the regime, which could worsen the crisis. The international community should continue to put pressure on the junta and urgently start a reconciliation process.

In India, the steady subversion of equality

The sharp turns away from democracy seen recently in the country must jolt citizens into stopping the descent



SEEMA CHISHTI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has loudly reiterated India's embrace of democracy internationally, hailed its 'diversity' when abroad and is seeking India's relevance as an ally of the West on 'democratic values'. Therefore, it is imperative to measure the distance between today's India and democratic values.

The central edifice of a democracy, or what makes it a revolutionary idea, is equality, or that it accords an equal status to all its people. But the E-word is in rapid remission. A commitment to all being equal as a desired ideal – even if not fully realised in reality – accorded India its sheen and power in the past. India now, from being a truly remarkable case of composite nationalism, appears happy to huddle in that corner of the room which many of its neighbours occupy.

Faith as differentiator

The promise of the far-sighted Indian Constitution was of equal rights to all. If any benefit was accorded to smaller groups, religious or linguistic minorities or Dalits, it was in order to achieve substantive equality. This cut across all markers of identity – colour, race, language, faith, caste, region or food. But faith seems to have increasingly emerged as a visible differentiator between citizens. It must be recognised that laws – and not just the spirit – are in the process of being rewritten in India.

First and foremost, the basis of citizenship under the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019, allowing for non-Muslims from three countries to fast-track their citizenship, was the most serious push to introduce religion into citizenship.

Second in terms of marital choices, laws in the country in States where the national ruling party holds sway have drawn

harsh attention on inter-faith couples. Imaginary fears of a 'love-jihad', the basis for new legislations have meant that inter-faith marriages are seen as crimes unless proven otherwise. The Gujarat law criminalising inter-faith marriages has been called out by the Gujarat High Court, but the ordinance introduced in Uttar Pradesh (Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020), which is now a law, till July, saw 63 FIRs filed against it, and 80 people arrested among 162 people who were booked, the majority being Muslim. A similar law in Madhya Pradesh has a similar trajectory, and a differential impact on Muslims, emphasising the rapid unspooling of the E-word. In terms of personal law, only Muslim men divorcing their wives through the triple talaq, now outlawed by the Supreme Court, is deemed a criminal act; not so for men of other faiths.

Drastic changes

Third, food has been criminalised. Stringent laws on cattle end up penalising those who have a certain diet, namely beef. The mood in the country created and abetted by people close to the powers that be, has led to lynchings. IndiaSpend has recorded bovine-related hate violence since 2010 and concluded that 98% of these attacks occurred post-May 2014, after the Bharatiya Janata Party assumed office. State governments and the Union government have mostly ignored the Supreme Court's directions in 2018 to set up fast track courts, advice to take steps to stop hate messages on social media, or compensation to victims, or bringing in an anti-mob lynching law.

Fourth, consider the Gujarat Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property and Provision for Eviction from Premises in Disturbed Areas Act, popularly known as the Disturbed Areas Act, which circumscribes where one can reside. Brought in an atmosphere where there was communal rioting and forced displacement, to ostensibly protect communities from distress sales, the twist accorded to it over the years firmly makes the forced



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separation of communities evident. Vijay Rupani, till recently the Chief Minister of Gujarat, said in an interview on July 27, 2019; "A Hindu selling property to a Muslim is not okay. A Muslim selling property to a Hindu is also not okay." He added, "We have set this rule in areas where there have been riots to tell them (Muslims) that they must buy property in their own areas."

Hostile environment

That the environment in even the informal sector where minorities sought refuge in vocations to battle the prejudices of the formal sector is now curdling, is clear from recent studies on the subject. The linkages between those wielding extraordinary power in high offices with those making vicious noise on social media, and with the violent mobs on the ground trying to shut down Muslim businesses – or attack vegetable sellers or bangle sellers to prevent them to operate – are becoming more explicit by the day. It is old hat to say that several purveyors of hate are "proud to be followed by the Prime Minister" on social media. But even that is just the tip of the iceberg.

Those in power actively support and reward those who head mobs, raise slogans or demonstrate hate enough to shut down cities and regular life. Ministers garland them and the anti-minority hate spewed by them is a CV building exercise for better political prospects within the ruling party. The Member of Parliament representing Bhopal, Pragya Thakur, a public defender of the Mahatma's assassin, is only one of the many who exemplify the career path available to those who sharply de-

nounce amity or calls for harmony.

Scholars like Thomas Blom Hansen and Paul Brass have unhesitatingly pointed to the role of violence that has historically been acceptable in Indian society and politics. The stark difference between now and a few decades ago is a difference in top leaders being silent at important moments when mob violence is reported prominently. Dissenters are sought to be marked out "by their clothes" as the Prime Minister said infamously in December 2019 about those protesting the discriminatory citizenship laws. Far from discouraging those indulging in hate speech, they are given a place in the party hierarchy.

The line was drawn simply but sharply by no less a person than Sardar Patel on September 11, 1948 when the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was banned after the Mahatma's assassination. Patel wrote to the RSS chief M.S. Golwalkar, that he had no problem with the Sangh indulging in activities organising or benefiting Hindus, but had a problem with actions that were aimed at solely spreading anti-Muslim hate – "All their speeches were full of communal poison. It was not necessary to spread poison in order to enthuse the Hindus and organize for their protection."

Exclusive entitlement

There was clearly a sentiment in Indian society and politics that wanted a country in the mirror image of Pakistan, as one for a Hindu majority. This view did not want to better the lives of Hindus. This was about claiming that those adhering to one religion have exclusive entitlement to Indianness. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, an organisation very much in the family of the ruling party, rubbishes the idea of the mosaic that India is, when its secretary-general, Milind Parande said on September 7, 2021, that "the very idea of Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb (term used to denote the coming together fusion of Hindu and Muslim cultures in the country), is irrelevant. What exists is one culture, and the rest can simply merge into it. The Hindu

cause must be prime." Statements like these to denigrate the idea of India as a shared palette are never denounced by those in power. In fact, increasingly, there is little to distinguish these from statements of those in power and wielding authority representing the Indian state. The seriousness of what is afoot must be acknowledged.

The backbone

Scholars like Christophe Jaffrelot have pointed out that there will not be a seamless transition to an "ethnic democracy". There is no smooth path towards a 'Category two' or diminished citizenship status for large numbers of people who deviate from a prescribed cultural path. The Indian nation is one formed on the promise of shared and participatory kinship, which recognised Indian nationalism as being distinct from the faith you practised at home. Prioritising any one identity will have disastrous consequences and history provides enough evidence of this. Rwanda, South Africa or Germany are reminders that the E-word is as much a pragmatic consideration as it is a normative ideal.

India was proud of its hallowed constitutional precepts. More so as it was in a region which has seen a precipitous slide; Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Myanmar prioritised one ethnicity/religion and defined belonging and nationhood in the narrowest sense possible. But differences between them and India are fast fading and not merely due to hotheads or mobs on the street. The formal ruling establishment, with its silences, utterances and formalising of new laws and norms, is indistinguishable with the ideas guiding mobs. The mobs read together with actions of the Union government and that of State governments mark a sharp turn away from the democracy India claims it is. That must jolt us into recognising the distance we have already travelled down the wrong path. That may be the first step to try to wrest the descent into the darkness of an apartheid state.

Seema Chishti is a journalist. The views expressed are personal

The Evergrande-sized question over Chinese politics

The Evergrande crisis is significant, with answers linked to the Communist Party of China's political and social outlook



AVINASH GODBOLE

China's construction giant, the Evergrande Group, was in the news about a month ago as it ran out of money, had no options to get more loans or overdrafts, and had almost \$310 billion worth of liabilities and several angry lenders, suppliers and homebuyers wanting clear answers that did not seem to come from anywhere. It began in January 2021 when regulators in China changed lending regulations with an aim to "strengthen [the] anti-monopoly push and prevent disorderly expansion of capital" which brought in more curbs in lending to big private businesses. While this was a delayed structural reform, it also marked the beginning of the end for Evergrande.

Housing as a bubble

The Evergrande crisis is a significant recent development that has struck the country's ruling elites. However, at least since 2014, China's housing sector has been labelled as a "bubble waiting to burst". What kept it going on over the seven years or so and why Evergrande has imploded so suddenly is the real story that can be

answered only with reference to the Communist Party of China's (CPC) present political and social outlook.

Developments in China tend to be explained with the help of Chinese idioms. One such popular idiom is to "kill the chicken to scare the monkey". Perhaps what China did with the Ant Financial IPO late last year was akin to killing the chicken. But now it seems that Evergrande was indeed the monkey that is now about to die, and the party does not know how exactly to handle it. In other words, did the Chinese government want to make an example out of Evergrande?

Factors behind China's rise

China's spectacular rise thus far is based on two pillars of exports and infrastructure. There is a realisation now that this has led to what was called "unbalanced and inadequate growth" when the new principal contradiction was declared during the 19th Party Congress in 2017. Recently, exports have slowed down and are not as profitable as before. The infrastructure sector, on the other hand, is at the centre of the guanxi (social network) induced corruption and cronyism, and is adding to the country's debt problem. China's President Xi Jinping has spoken of a need for course correction right since 2012, primarily to avoid a heating of the economy; expensive



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houses would make the middle class angry and it may have cascading implications for the party's credibility.

Second, the ostentatious lifestyle of the Evergrande boss is also something the party wants to distance itself from, and may be punished; in China, it is okay to make money but let it be about your hard work and acknowledge the party's guidance but do not be nouveau riche. This feeling has only got stronger since the 2012 incident involving a fatal Ferrari crash involving Ling Jihua's son. China's netizens are also aware of this problem and they often take to social media to vent their anger. Chinese youth are angry as jobs are hard to find, and recently, there have been popular protests targeting several icons. Such protests may even be managed from inside the party to underwrite its imminent policy choices as it helps the party appear more responsive and engaged. Thus, celebrities with businesses outside China, non-conforming youth, fin-tech

and ed-tech moguls who were too autonomous for the party's liking were targeted because the party leads everything as Mr. Xi proclaimed in 2019.

Common prosperity is the central explanation for what is happening in China right now in several diverse sectors. This idea did not make a sudden appearance in the party lexicon. It was mentioned in the 19th Party Congress document as a target for the Chinese people "... to work together and... ultimately achieve common prosperity for everyone" and more as a wishlist in the previous two reports. For the same reason, Alibaba will invest \$15.5 billion in corporate social responsibility under the party's guidance. There is also a strong influence of China's new left thinkers who have for long argued that China is moving from being a market economy to a market society where corruption and cronyism are rampant and where distribution of social goods takes a back seat.

Domestic consumption

However, there is another dilemma that the CPC must resolve soon. China needs companies such as Evergrande to operate because the country has ambitious twin targets of expanding urbanisation and increasing domestic consumption as was highlighted in the Dual Circulation strategy. Today, China's construction sector

directly accounts for 7% and along with allied industries accounts for close to 17% of the country's GDP. So, the role of the construction sector is critical in terms of employment, wealth creation, contribution to tax, and in terms of the overall expansion of the urban middle class. The CPC already finds it hard enough to make the Chinese middle class spend its money since it is a savings driven class. Any sign of contraction may drive the middle class away from consumption and that may indeed be a bad sign for the economy.

Also, China consumes 50% of the global steel and cement production. So the Evergrande crisis does have global implications. Is it possible then that this is one that is actually a party-engineered crisis to assert Chinese centrality for the world economy? There are economic reasons to consider and whether China would let Evergrande fall. However, beyond that is the political issue of whether it might happen because it is closer to the Jiang Zemin faction and has links to the family of former Premier Wen Jiabao. Depending on how these questions are answered one might find the clues to what happens in the next party congress in fall next year.

Avinash Godbole is Associate Professor and Assistant Dean at the Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, Jindal Global University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Where India stands

With the disastrous consequences of climate change making their presence felt rather forcefully in the world today, the veritable truth is that the man-made-catastrophe of global warming can be mitigated only through collective efforts. India has become one of the world's largest emitters of greenhouse gases, and it is imperative that it joins the climate mitigation bandwagon (Page 1, "India will stress 'climate justice' at global summit, says

Minister", October 29). However, what is unjust and unacceptable is that historical polluters are conveniently overlooking the clause of 'common but differentiated responsibility' enshrined in the Paris Accord of 2015. The points that the Indian Prime Minister and his French counterpart together launched the International Solar Alliance; the country has set a target of installing 450 GW of renewable energy by 2030; has a robust electric vehicle policy in place, besides a mission for hydrogen, and

is steadily increasing its forest cover, all prove that India has recognised need for global climate change mitigation efforts. **NALINI VIJAYARAGHAVAN, Thiruvananthapuram**

■ Committing to net zero carbon emissions is a tall order. India is a developing nation, with the lion's share of its energy produced through thermal power. The country should for now focus on gradually turning to and relying on renewable sources of energy. **AANYA SINGHAL, Noida, Uttar Pradesh**

'Drug bust' case

The recent case of alleged drug seizure on a cruise ship and the arrest of high-profile celebrities only highlight the growing danger of the consumption of narcotics in India, especially among the young. It is no exaggeration to say that there is a culture of rave drug parties in Mumbai. Why does the Narcotics Control Bureau not crack the whip? While walking down Colaba Causeway, one can often spot youngsters smoking narcotics in the narrow lanes and bylanes. There are also those who are on the fringes

of society who indulge in drugs. There need to be concerted moves to educate all, especially youngsters, on the dangers of narcotic use. **JUBEL D'CRUZ, Mumbai**

■ The way the high-profile case has proceeded only raises more questions than answers. Of concern is the way the investigation has proceeded. The seriatim of controversies that have arisen will certainly open a Pandora's box. Let the case not drag on for months. **MANI NATARAJAN, Chennai**

Films and the messages

Vice-President M. Venkaiah Naidu while appreciating the standing of the iconic thespian, Rajinikanth, also indirectly highlighted the status of cinema today that vastly differs from its purpose of being a carrier of social, moral and ethical messages. This should serve as a reminder to actors and producers. The selectors of the National Film Awards should also choose films that shun violence in their plots. **BABY HARLINE, Palayamkottai, Tamil Nadu**

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