



Sedition, once more

Invoking it against those opposed to changes in citizenship law is reprehensible

The slapping of sedition charges against noted Asamese scholar Hiren Gohain and two others for remarks made against the proposed citizenship law is a textbook case of misuse of the law relating to sedition. The FIR against Mr. Gohain, peasant rights activist Akhil Gogoi and journalist Manjit Mahanta relates to speeches at a recent rally that alluded to the possibility of a demand for independence and sovereignty if the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill was pushed through Parliament. Mr. Gohain and others have obtained interim bail from the Gauhati High Court. The registration of the case has caused much public outrage in Assam. In addition to Section 124A (sedition), they have been accused of entering into a criminal conspiracy to “wage war against the government of India” (Section 121) and “concealing a design to facilitate” such a war (Section 123). The action of the police in charging them with “offences against the state” under the Indian Penal Code is quite reprehensible. It is possible that speeches at the rally organised by the Forum Against the Citizenship Amendment Bill contained strident opposition to the legislative changes that would allow persecuted non-Muslims from three neighbouring countries to obtain Indian citizenship. The thrust of the protest, therefore, would be squarely covered by the exception to the sedition clause, which says comments expressing disapprobation of government measures with a view to obtaining their alteration do not constitute an offence, as long as there is no incitement to violence or disaffection. Mr. Gohain, a Sahitya Akademi awardee, and one of Assam’s best known public intellectuals, has explained that he had intervened more than once to silence some youth who had talked about invoking their sovereignty if the Centre continued to ignore their demand.

In recent years, there have been many instances of State governments seeking to silence political dissent by accusing dissenters of promoting disaffection. It is precisely to prevent such a heavy-handed response to strident political criticism that courts have often pointed out that the essential ingredient of any offence of sedition is an imminent threat to public order. Unless there is actual incitement to take up arms or resort to violence, even demands that go against the legal or constitutional scheme of things would not amount to sedition. Mere expression of critical views, however scathing, cannot be an excuse for accusing someone of planning to wage war or promote disaffection against the government. It is against such a backdrop that the Law Commission, in a consultation paper released last year, had called for a reconsideration of the sedition section in the IPC. While the provision, which is couched in broad terms, needs a much narrower definition, the right course is to scrap Section 124A, a relic of the colonial era, altogether.

Half done

A plan is needed for plastic waste in packaging and manufacturing

India won global acclaim for its “Beat Plastic Pollution” resolve declared on World Environment Day last year, under which it pledged to eliminate single-use plastic by 2022. So far, 22 States and Union Territories have joined the fight, announcing a ban on single-use plastics such as carry bags, cups, plates, cutlery, straws and thermocol products. Puducherry will implement a ban from March 1. Where firm action has been taken, positive results have followed. A Bengaluru waste collective estimates that the volume of plastic waste that they collect dropped from about two tonnes a day to less than 100 kg. Voluntary initiatives are having an impact in many States, as citizens reduce, reuse and sort their waste. Yet, this is only a small start. Waste plastic from packaging of everything from food, cosmetics and groceries to goods delivered by online platforms remains unaddressed. It will take a paradigm shift in the manner in which waste is collected and handled by municipal authorities to change this. Governments must start charging the producers for their waste, and collect it diligently, which will lead to recovery and recycling. But the depressing reality is that State and local governments are unwilling to upgrade their waste management systems, which is necessary to even measure the true scale of packaging waste.

The Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016 are clear that producers, importers and brand owners must adopt a collect-back system for the plastic they introduce into the environment. Although the rules were notified in the same year, amended later and given high visibility by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, not much has been done to take the process forward. At the very least, local bodies should consult manufacturers or importers to assess the problem. Delaying such a measure has created the anomalous situation of small producers of plastics facing the ban, while more organised entities covered by the Extended Producer Responsibility clause continue with business as usual. Such enforcement failure is not an argument in favour of relaxing the prohibition on flimsy plastics that are typically used for under 15 minutes, but to recover thousands of tonnes of waste that end up in dumping sites. Cities and towns need competent municipal systems to achieve this. Again, there is little doubt that plastics play a major role in several industries, notably in the automotive, pharmaceutical, health care and construction sectors. But it is the fast moving consumer goods sector that uses large volumes of packaging, posing a higher order challenge. This calls for urgent action. Governments should show the same resolve here, as they have done in imposing the ban.

The contours of contest ahead

In the Lok Sabha election, voters will assess whether they are better off today than they were five years ago



MAHESH RANGARAJAN

This summer will see a carnival of democracy in the general election. Much has changed in just five years. The elan of Narendra Modi’s party is more muted this time. Last weekend, key opponents, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party, joined forces in Uttar Pradesh, making the contest real and not a walkover. The Index of Opposition Unity cannot predict outcomes but no one can afford to ignore it.

The Congress’s victories in the Assembly elections in three north Indian States have given it a shot in the arm. Equally important, the older party is firming up alliances in the southern States. The 131 Lok Sabha seats in five States (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Telangana) and two Union Territories (Lakshadweep and Puducherry) have been critical to it in times of trouble.

The Telangana poll outcome was sobering for both the large national parties. Regional nationalism is not new to Indian politics: Jammu and Kashmir and Tamil Nadu were precursors. Regional formations have long governed West Bengal, Odisha and now Telangana. They may well hold the keys to power in New Delhi.

In 2014, it was the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that led in securing allies. Between then and now, BJP president Amit Shah has helped expand its footprint. Not only does it have more MLAs than the Congress, but its cadre fights every election like there is no tomorrow.

The challenge lies elsewhere.



The Congress may have lost in 2014 and come down to a historic low of less than one in five votes cast. Yet, only a decade age, in May 2009, the roles had been in reverse. It was Congress that had then polled 29% and the BJP just 19% of the popular vote.

Pages of political history

This time is different. It is 1971 that will be the textbook case for the ruling party. When the Grand Alliance said it would oust Indira Gandhi, she replied she wished to banish poverty. She won hands down.

Mrs. Gandhi did not have to contend with a powerful Dalit-led formation in the Ganga valley which commands 20% of the vote. Many of today’s regional parties were yet to be formed. She captured the public imagination. It was a gamble and she won hands down. Mr. Modi too will fight to the last voter. He will try to be the issue. He has sounded the tocsin against dynasty, caste and corruption. Hence the record in getting visible benefits to the individual and the family. The gas cylinder, the light bulb, that rural road: each will, he hopes, add to his appeal.

History has another instance too. The 2004 general election was held early. Atal Bihari Vajpayee was confident that ‘India was Shining’. The dream came

apart on counting day. Rather than a unified Opposition (for there was none in the all-important State of Uttar Pradesh), ground-level discontent denied the ruling alliance another chance.

And yet, there is the cloud of the horizon. Even in 2004, the Congress was only a whisker ahead of the BJP – just seven seats more in the Lok Sabha. The Congress had 145 seats to the BJP’s 138. The key was on the ground, where the mood had shifted. The economic upturn began in 2003, but voters did not see gains early enough for the ruling bloc to reap an electoral harvest.

The poll planks

In 2014, the challenger drew on the tiredness with a decade of a Congress-led government and promised a fresh start. Runaway inflation and the spectre of corruption undercut the appeal of the Congress. This time the issues have changed. It is the squeeze on farm incomes and rural debt that are the key poll planks. Similarly, the issue of jobs is more pressing than ever. Cultivators across all strata and young people seeking productive employment want answers.

Two States are key. Maharashtra, a State critical in the histories of both the Congress and the BJP, is not only seeing a coming together of Opposition forces; it is under-

going drought and rural distress. Ominously, key farmer-led allies have walked across. Uttar Pradesh, a bastion of the BJP, has rival Dalit- and Mandal-led parties coalesce for the first time in a quarter century. Both States have something in common. In both, sugarcane cultivation is a determinant of electoral fortunes.

Cane (not caste) and jobs (not community slogans) may hold the key. *Ganna* and *Naukri*, not reservations or the emotive Mandir issue. What matters more: bread or identity? Even when both count what takes precedence?

Government policy has had a key role in this denouement. By according priority to consumers in cities (who want low prices for cereals, oil seeds and pulses), the government did not have to pay heed to rural residents who need to earn more. The latter, as producers, are larger in number and percentage than in any other democracy.

India still lives and votes in its villages. Under Mr. Shah, the cadre, organisation and outreach have made the BJP a vastly larger party than any other. But economic policies can strain such organisational gains.

Democracy is about more than development. In a polity where people can throw their rulers out, it is centrally about politics. Since 1999, there has been a bi-nodal system, and the choice is not simply between Mr. Modi and Congress president Rahul Gandhi.

The battlelines

We have effectively a one-party government with a firm hand on the wheel (but with the danger of an over-centralisation of power). Against this, is ranged a looser coalition in which regional forces and rural interests have more play. Needless to add, the latter will be rockier, more contentious and

tough to manage in a coherent fashion.

The Modi government is driven by ideology and not pragmatism on a range of issues. This is the first ever BJP government with a view of culture, history and politics that seeks to remake history as much as the future. Is this the party’s agenda or the country’s? This is a question in the background: if the Ram temple issue comes to the fore, it will be a major choice for the voter.

The pluralism and Hindutva debate have another dimension more so than ever, namely the federal question. Across the Northeast (including Sikkim), far more important to the country than its 25 Lok Sabha seats indicate, the idea of citizenship is at variance with the new Citizenship Bill passed by the Lok Sabha. Across the country, State-level parties see an accretion of powers in the federal government unseen since the 1980s.

True, Mr. Modi has a wider mass appeal than any one since Mrs. Gandhi. But history is witness that such appeal can also have limits if voters decide that enough is enough. Has that point been reached? We simply do not know.

More central is the question of questions. Are you better off than you were five years ago, and if not, why not? If so, and even if not, do you think we are moving in the right direction?

In 2014, *The Economist* observed that if India had the per capita wealth of Gujarat, the country would rank with Spain. Has that dream come true or it is unravelling and fast? How voters answer that will show who they stand with.

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Science and reason

The history of science in India must be treated as a serious subject rather than a matter of speculation



APARAJITH RAMNATH

Another edition of the Indian Science Congress, another gift to the news cycle. The Congress, which is meant to be a premier forum for scientists to present and discuss their research, has in recent years become the stage for a series of blissfully evidence-free claims about Indian achievements in science through the ages. Added to the list in this year’s edition (January 3-7, in Jalandhar, Punjab), were claims about the existence of stem cell technology, test-tube babies, and fleets of aircraft in ancient India and Sri Lanka. The reaction was reassuringly swift. The organisers distanced themselves from the claims, prominent scientists denounced them, and protest marches were taken out.

We should, however, be asking a more fundamental question. What motivates speakers to say these things? If, as seems plausible in many cases, it is wilful demagoguery or an attempt to curry political favour, it is irresponsible and deplorable. But let us be charitable and assume for a moment that those who make these statements actually believe them. At the very

least, it is clear that there exists a sizeable constituency which wants to believe such claims. What does this tell us about our relationship – as Indians – to science and to history?

Rooted in colonialism

A glance at the past confirms that this is a deep-seated anxiety rooted in the experience of being colonised. In his presidential address to the Institution of Engineers (India) in the early 1930s, Jwala Prasad, a top irrigation engineer in the United Provinces, referred to ‘the construction of the famous bridge over the sea at Cape Comorin’ and ‘the cutting of the Gango-tri from a wonderful glacier through disinfecting rocks and land by [Rama’s] ancestor Bhagirath, before men knew how to dig a well’. Prasad’s statements (un-supported as they were) may be read as a defiant assertion at a time when colonial stereotypes of Indians as unscientific were still prevalent. They were also made in the context of a time when Indian engineers were fighting to be recognised as competent members of a profession hitherto dominated by expatriate Britons.

Other Indian scientists went further, undertaking a serious study of the past. Indeed, historians have shown how the colonial encounter prompted among Indian intellectuals a project of ‘revivalism’, a quest to show that Indian traditions were not devoid of ra-



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tionality, objectivity, and other characteristics of modern science. The pioneering chemist and industrialist P.C. Ray (who presided over the Indian Science Congress in 1920) wrote a two-volume *History of Hindu Chemistry* (1902, 1908), while the philosopher Brajendranath Seal contributed a study titled *The Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus* (1915). Although they were criticised at the time, both went through the hard slog of examining primary sources and were careful in the conclusions they drew.

Ray studied 14th century texts such as the *Rasa prakasha-sudhakar*, noting that they were based on experiment and observation. Seal (as quoted by historian David Arnold) cautioned that while the sages of antiquity may have had ideas compatible with the atomic theory of matter, they had depended upon a ‘felicitous intuition [resulting from] intense medita-

tion and guided by intelligent observation’. This was a step removed from the modern scientific method, which relied on sophisticated experiments.

Stop the labels

More than a century later, there is little reason for us Indians to harbour an inferiority complex, and no excuse for tackling it through rash and unfounded claims. Science has never developed exclusively within national boundaries. Recent research speaks of the ‘circulation’ of scientific ideas, practices, instruments and personnel across regions and continents in different periods of history, while acknowledging that there were unequal power relations between those regions. What we often call ‘western’ science builds on the contributions of scientists from all over the world today, and draws upon sources ranging from the ancient Greeks to the West Asian civilisations of a millennium ago. Once we rid ourselves of the need to label science as western or eastern and shake off the obsession with priority (i.e. which society was the first to discover or invent something), we will liberate ourselves to think about the further development, practice, and application of science.

None of this should imply that exploring the history of science in ancient, medieval and non-European contexts is not worthwhile or legitimate. The solution is not to

shut our eyes to the past but to engage in careful historical inquiry. This involves an emphasis on primary sources, on learning the relevant languages and preparing critical editions of texts, on peer review, and on viewing the past on its own terms, avoiding the pitfalls of what historians call ‘present-centredness’. It involves working with the insights of archaeologists, epigraphists, Sanskritists, Persianists, and metallurgists. It requires an open mind and a healthy scepticism. Such works have been undertaken, but many more are needed. The history of science, thus far woefully neglected in Indian institutions and university programmes, must be treated as a serious subject rather than a matter of speculation.

As for the Indian Science Congress, a venerable institution, measures are already being discussed to restore to it a sense of gravitas. One hopes they will succeed. For those who make motivated claims not only tarnish the institution’s reputation but also take the focus away from the legitimate efforts of other delegates. A body which has among its past presidents such personages as Ashutosh Mukherjee, M. Visvesvaraya, C.V. Raman, Birbal Sahni and M.S. Swaminathan surely deserves better.

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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.

Political moves in U.P.

The BJP’s loss of political ground after the three State Assembly elections appears to have emboldened regional parties with sufficient standing. Despite its political pedigree, the Congress’s power to negotiate stands diminished. While the Congress seems think it can go it alone after tasting political success, this stance could prove to be its Achilles heel. An unsure brew boils in 2019, for a bewildered electorate.

R. NARAYANAN,
Navi Mumbai

Basic income

A basic income scheme can be an apt alternative to the populist measure of farm loan waivers to alleviate rural deprivation. The successful implementation

across developing and developed economies has proven the suitability of basic income for countries having different per capita incomes. It not only has the potential to raise standards of living but is also an exercise in social cohesion on account of its egalitarian nature. Sikkim has taken the lead in planning a basic income scheme. Other States should follow suit in introducing their own versions of this ‘conceptually appealing’ scheme as an affirmative step towards equality, dignity and economic security (Editorial page, “Basic income works and works well”, January 14)

SARBANI MOHAPATRA,
Kolkata

■ The results of the pilot projects of the basic income

scheme in India and other parts of the world have one thing in common – a qualitative improvement in the lives of beneficiaries. The greatest advantage of a basic income is that it is unconditional. The cash pay out is regular, reaches the bank accounts of individual beneficiaries and empowers individual dignity and autonomy in utilising the money. A basic income scheme appears to be an effective antidote to the prevailing farm and job crises. Unlike loan waivers, it does not lead to unintended consequences such as a drying up of bank credit or hazards such as periodic demands for write-offs. It is a redistributive tool with minimal disruptive impact on the economy as the expansion of the tax base will fund it without the need

to impose new or higher taxes.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

Tree felling

It is shocking that many trees and saplings were cut for a temporary helipad to be in place for the Prime Minister’s visit in Odisha. Recently, when the Karnataka government wanted to build a steel bridge in Bengaluru – a project that would have resulted in the destruction of numerous trees – citizens protested vehemently and the plan was dropped. When people are constantly advised to ensure ecological balance and be environmentally aware (by no less than government agencies), the incident in Odisha raises eyebrows – that there is a different set of rules and laws for leaders

and important people (“PM’s visit to Odisha: Over 1,000 trees felled”, January 14).

R. SRIDHARAN,
Chennai

Congo election

One does not have to be a psephologist to know that there is something fundamentally wrong when there is a huge discrepancy between the vote percentage of the Opposition’s presidential candidate and that of the “official” winner in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is not surprising that the powerful Catholic Church in the DRC and many Western governments are now questioning the ‘result’. The discrepancy is too marked to be dismissed as a case of complaints by bad losers.

CYNTHIA NAIDU,
Sydney, Australia

Man-animal conflict

With wildlife reserves becoming smaller, which puts animals in closer proximity with infrastructure, the authorities must think in terms of working in tandem with the forest personnel and ensuring that conventional methods are adhered to (“Train hits killed 49 elephants in 3 years”, January 14). This includes an observance of slow speed and exercising caution at all times. At the same time, I firmly believe that we are advanced enough to be able to modernise as well as design structures that allow for the safer movement and migration of wildlife.

N. VIJAI,
Coimbatore

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