



Held by the mob

The attack on schoolchildren captures the state's failure to stand up to vigilantism

The attack on a bus carrying schoolchildren on Wednesday must serve to jolt State governments across north India out of their hands-off approach to acts of vandalism by way of protests against the film *Padmaavat*. It took admirable presence of mind on the part of the driver to steer the children out of harm's way when foot soldiers of the Karni Sena attacked the bus in the Haryana township of Gurugram. But coming at the end of days of violence in at least six States by protestors purporting to be upholding Rajput honour, this is the image India must confront: a busload of children ducking for cover as the state looked away. The image collectively frames the abdication of State governments in maintaining law and order in the face of violence by the rag-tag Karni Sena. For months, many of them have played an encouraging role in keeping up protests against the film, with the Chief Ministers of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, among others, issuing statements about the need for the film to heed the lines of history. Public viewing of the final version of *Padmaavat* as cleared by the Central Board of Film Certification has called the protestors' bluff on their stated objections to its contents. But the mob is clearly led by its own narrative, unmindful of the reality of the film in question or of the historical blurriness in it. The mob rampaging against the film across north India in States ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party has demonstrated its ability to hold public order to ransom, no matter what.

The state has been repeatedly reminded of its duty to protect freedom of expression, most notably in *S. Rangarajan v. P. Jagjivan Ram* (1989), when the Supreme Court held that the government cannot cite the possibility of violence to prohibit a film's screening. In fact, this month, after Gujarat and Rajasthan banned the CBFC-cleared *Padmaavat*, the court stayed the ban and iterated the state's responsibility to maintain law and order during its screening. That State governments have chosen to mostly ignore the court order is evident from the decision of the Multiplex Association of India to not screen the film in Gujarat and Rajasthan, for fear of further violence of the sort that hit two Ahmedabad malls. The Karni Sena shot into the news in 2008 when it utilised the release of *Jodhaa Akbar* to affect caste/communal outrage over the story of Emperor Akbar's 'Rajput' wife. That it would see an opportunity to consolidate its vigilantist credentials with *Padmaavat* is, in hindsight, a given. But it is a sobering conclusion that whether or not *Padmaavat* is remembered for its cinematic merits or shortcomings, it has become a byword for the government's failure to control the mob.

German tangle

The Social Democrats' decision to enter coalition talks will bring relief across Europe

The decision of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) to start talks for another coalition with Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) will calm nerves across Europe. Since September's inconclusive parliamentary election, efforts to form a coalition government for the continent's largest economy have reached nowhere. The SPD, whose vote share came down by 5 percentage points since 2013, initially decided to sit in the opposition and focus on reviving the party. But after months of talks between the CDU and the Green Party to form a government collapsed, sections within the SPD pushed for another coalition bid, which was finally okayed by 56.4% of the delegates in an extraordinary party conference in Bonn last week. Defending the coalition proposal, SPD leader Martin Schulz said working with Ms. Merkel allowed the party to resist right-wing populism in Europe while championing workers' rights at home through government policies. He said a preliminary blueprint for talks between the parties had already been agreed upon, which includes SPD demands such as a guaranteed pension level and child benefits. However, Mr. Schulz may find it still difficult this time to sell the benefits of the coalition with the pro-business, liberal CDU, to his party and the voters. The challenge before the SPD and the CDU is to formulate a politically appealing yet pragmatic common minimum programme for the new government. It's not going to be easy given the ideological differences and internal challenges both parties face.

Though the CDU-Christian Social Union combine remained the single largest bloc after the September polls, the parties suffered massive erosion in their combined vote base, a fall of 8.6 percentage points. Some within the CDU have already started questioning the leadership of Ms. Merkel, who has been Chancellor for 12 years. Ms. Merkel's liberalism has been under attack by the far-right Alternative for Germany, which won a stunning 13% of the vote in the September election. For their part, the Social Democrats are in steep decline. From 40% in 1998, their vote share is now 20%. A coalition government will certainly spare Germany the agony of going to the polls again so soon. A stable government is the need of the hour both for Germany and Europe, at a time when far-right parties are resurgent elsewhere (in Austria, they are part of the government) and the Brexit talks are in a crucial phase. For the SPD, which is in favour of reforming the European Union, joining the German government could also strengthen reform efforts, mainly championed by French President Emmanuel Macron. But these issues can be addressed only if the SPD-CDU/CSU combine is able to arrest the erosion of individual support bases, overcome the internal challenges and provide a stable leadership.

The grounding of Air India

When the public sector does not serve the public interest, it becomes a millstone around our necks



PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

Having announced its decision to sell Air India, the government is making arrangements to do so. The move itself has come after multiple efforts by successive governments to resurrect the national airline. Though there has been news of it finally turning in an operating profit under a determined CEO, its debt, reportedly a staggering \$8.5 billion, must weigh on the minds of a public drawn into a discussion of its future.

The beginnings

It is unfortunate that so iconic an entity, once feistily steered by J.R.D. Tata, has met this fate, but it is not uncommon in the history of India's public sector. To understand this ending we would have to start at the beginning, and that was with the transformation of the economy attempted in the 1950s. While there were monumental gaps in that attempt, there were also creative innovations, the most important being the public sector. By design, the public sector was to exist along with a private one resulting in what had been referred to as 'the mixed economy'. To those hankering after institutional purity this was no more than a joke, an arrangement that had strengths of neither full-bodied American-style capitalism nor of out-and-out Soviet-era communism. Half a century later, the Soviet empire imploded and for a

brief moment in 2008, the American one teetered on the brink, having been taken there by its vanguard, finance capital. We can now see that the mixed economy, combining the public and private sectors, is superior to one located at either extreme.

So if the public sector is a force for the good, why is it that we see Air India, and a section of the rest of the Indian public sector, in so unsteady a financial condition? In its early days, the public sector had been quite healthy. This need hardly come as a surprise when we recognise the then Indian leadership's motive for building one. Stripped of its somewhat ideological construction as straddling 'the commanding heights' of the economy, it was to have a central role in the quickening of the economy after 1947. Wrecked by two centuries of colonialism, India's economy was moribund. The post-colonial Indian leadership had envisaged the public sector as the ship that would steer the economy out of the morass. And they were not wrong.

Under Nehru, India's economy rose spectacularly and public investment was the principal engine of growth in that remarkable phase. Used as we are to Air India having to, at times, borrow even to finance its working capital, it may come as a surprise to know that it was still making profit into the second half of the 1960s. As for the public sector as a whole, during the Nehru era its savings had grown faster than that of the private corporate sector. Actually, to an extent India's public sector had financed itself.

Nehru's speech at the inauguration of the second plant of the Hindustan Machine Tools (HMT) in



Bangalore in 1962 is instructive in this regard. He congratulated the workers of HMT for having produced a second plant entirely out of the surplus of the first one. In one stroke, this conveys the rationale imagined for India's public sector at the moment of its conception. It had been imagined as a source of investible funds for the public purpose. Underlying this was the belief that the private sector may not generate the necessary surplus, especially if the economy was not first quickened through public investment.

It is noteworthy that in the heyday of the public sector, India's private corporate sector had not done badly at all. Its investment rose at least much as that of the public, demonstrating that claims of its suppression due to the licence-permit raj are exaggerated. It is true that some entities had been excluded by licensing. Licensing was necessary to ensure that resources were used in accordance with the plan for industrialisation, but it was the case that private firms receiving licences benefited greatly from the expansion of the market resulting from public investment. It is perhaps not known widely enough that in the

Nehru era India grew faster than China.

What went wrong?

So if the public sector had such a central role in lifting India out of a morass, why are we where we are today? Why is Air India awaiting the gavel? This has entirely to do with politics. Politics underwent a sea change in the second half of the 1960s and with this the de facto status of the public sector was to change. It became the handmaiden of Indira Gandhi's attempt to gain absolute control. Performance no longer counted and the public sector was now validated by its very existence. Intimation of the changed policy stance appears in the form of an entry in an 'Economic Survey' from the 1980s emphasising that a large section of employees of the public sector were those absorbed from loss-making units. This was to be a point of no return as the public sector was no longer treated as the fulcrum of the economy but as a political instrument. It was not as if some successes, such as Maruti Udyog, were not to come yet but the original sense of purpose was lost.

If Air India, nationalised in the 1950s, is now privatised, we would have come full circle. However, its case is more symbolic than substantive. Today there is no dearth of air-travel service providers in India, and the public airline reportedly has less than 15% market share. This is not the case in some other areas of the economy where public provision is fundamental. Take rail travel, which has no substitute. For it to serve its public purpose, the financial health of the Indian Railways is vital.

We have reason to believe that

this is threatened. The present Minister for Railways has announced that the decay of the capital stock has contributed to reduced safety. In particular that the recent spate of derailments has to do with inadequate signalling equipment and damaged tracks. Scarcity of funds for proper maintenance of the capital stock is directly related to populism. The replacement in 2012 by his party supreme Mamata Banerjee of a Railways Minister who had raised passenger fares demonstrates the role of politics in running India's public sector into the ground. Unlike the airlines, the railways are a life-line for a large number of Indians, and maintaining their good health is vital to their interest. It is naïve to imagine that the public sector can remain immune to inflation in the economy.

Meanwhile, an effort to turn around the public sector has come from an unlikely section. The Communists of Kerala, prone to rationalising inefficiency when it suits their politics, have now embarked upon a revival of the State's public sector undertakings. This has met with success in a short time, with at least some loss-making units turning profitable. The parlous state of public finances may have forced this political party's hand but the move itself shows maturity. Hopefully it will serve as a model for the rest of the country. The public sector would be a jewel when worn in the public interest. When it is not, as was the case with Air India, it turns into a millstone around our necks.

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Reading the Constitution

The one text that must be compulsory reading in classrooms across India



JANAKI NAIR

The one national document that promised a different, potentially more egalitarian future in a country with a long and troubling history of sectarian strife, hierarchy and discrimination is under vociferous attack. The Constitution has become the focus of myriad discontents, with surprising attention now being paid to the imagery in it as well. What do these multiple and sustained assaults imply?

Starting in Karnataka

Many of these attacks have originated from Karnataka, but they cannot be explained away by the State's forthcoming polls. Devanoor Mahadeva, one of Kannada's most critically acclaimed writers, has recently said that like the thieves who set the haystack at the village edge on fire, to move in and loot the village when its inhabitants were dousing those flames, the country is being set on fire, not sparing even the relationship between husband and wife.

The fires are many and growing. The Swamiji of the Pejavar Matha, among the most venerated of Karnataka's religious heads, set the ball rolling recently in the remarks

he made at the Dharma Sansad organised at Udupi in late November. He pointed out that B.R. Ambedkar was not the sole author of the Constitution: "Alladi Krishnaswami Iyer, Benegal Narsing Rau, and K.M. Munshi were also contributors." Now, it is certainly important for all Indians to be aware of the massive, protracted collective exercise that brought the Indian Constitution into being, especially when consultative processes are given short shrift. But why were only three Brahmin men singled out for special mention? Why not remind the Indian public of Dakshayani Velayudhan, Rafi Ahmad Kidwai or Frank Anthony?

Hot on the heels of Swamiji's words came the warning from a Member of Parliament, Anant Kumar Hegde. He claimed that the BJP's massive mandate is a mandate to change the Constitution. We now know his carefully crafted 'apology' has not restrained him, and he has gone on to darkly speak of 'cleansing' as a political duty.

Taken together, the remarks of the Pejavar Swamiji and Mr. Hegde speak of their yearning for the comfortable caste hierarchies of the past. Mr. Hegde, who hails from the economically dominant, garden-landowning Havyak (Brahmin) community, has recently ominously compared the field of politics to a bath house that needs regular 'cleansing' of slime.

The sociologist Ramesh Bairy's book had drawn our attention to



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

the growing sense of 'beleaguering' among Karnataka Brahmins and their perceived social and cultural 'losses' in the democratic present. The attack on the secular may not therefore be just another instance of a well-shaped attack on Indian Muslims. The erstwhile princely Mysore, which forms a dominant part of contemporary Karnataka, was the first to implement reservations to educational institutions and jobs in 1919. Through its "communal order" (at a time when the word had a non-pejorative association), the savarna stranglehold on jobs, education, and space was challenged, though far from totally dislodged, by the early actions of a bureaucracy under Krishna Raja Wodeyar IV, who was personally invested in bringing other backward classes in particular to the forefront. These early legacies have been given a firmer footing in the Constitution.

The criticism of the Constitution takes other forms as well. Addressing a seminar in New Delhi

recently, Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad referred to how the drafting committee had commissioned Nandalal Bose to illustrate the document. Nandalal Bose, he claimed, filled the pages of the original Constitution with sketches appropriate to the ideas the chapters themselves conveyed. For example, he said, for the section on Citizenship, there is a sketch on the 'Vedic life in India'; in the section on Fundamental Rights, there is 'a visual of Rama returning to Ayodhya from Lanka with Sita and Lakshmana'; for Finance, Property and Suits there is a dancing Nat-araja. He asked the audience to 'remember' there is Akbar in the illustrated edition, 'but not Aurangzeb'. Summing up his short foray into art history, he noted that the illustrated Constitution was signed by all members of the Constituent Assembly! His implication was that today's 'secular' constitutional nationalists would today object to such (namely 'religious') illustrations by arguing India was going 'communal'.

Text in the margins

Mr. Prasad reads Nandalal Bose's art-historical tour of a complex Indian heritage so literally that it takes your breath away. Bose spent five years creating the rich images not as a sectarian vandalising of the past. It was a respectful review in which the images ran parallel to, but did not illustrate, the text. That is why some of the 22

images are line drawings, others are in colour, yet others feature the non-figural landscapes of mountain, sea and desert. It was the culmination of a decades-long engagement with the annual Congress sessions, and with Mahatma Gandhi in particular, in building an art historical heritage appropriate to the times. His team captured the long and diverse art practices of the Indian subcontinent, borrowing from well known clay, stone and metal sculptures, temple representations, folk forms, illustrated Mughal manuscripts, frescoes, and infusing them with a contemporariness that is truly a work of art in itself. The team drew from myth, history and imagination with equal ease and consummate skill, and, as K.G. Subramanyan has put it, Bose himself drew on "traditional continuities (though not traditional stagnation)."

We would do well indeed to take the Minister at his word, quite literally, and search for the instructive spirit of the Constitution both in its text in which 'margins', not as a weapon with which to strike at our political enemies, but for its nuanced understanding of Indian pasts and futures. It is this text, its images and rich borders that should be compulsory reading in every Indian classroom.

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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.

Bank recapitalisation

The government's decision to recapitalise public sector banks (PSBs) is a step in the right direction ("Govt. unveils ₹2.1 lakh crore bank recapitalisation plan", Jan. 25). PSBs deserve such assistance given the mounting challenge posed by non-performing assets. However, the government needs to do more to bring PSBs back on track. Bank unions have been listing big-ticket defaulters on bank loans, but no action is being taken against these defaulters by the powers that be. The proper way to get out of this mess would be to combine recapitalisation with strong recovery measures.

J. ANANTHA PADMANABHAN, Tiruchi

Unless the recovery

mechanism is upgraded and strengthened in PSBs on the lines of what has been done in private sector banks, any amount of recapitalisation will prove futile. It may, at best, expand the credit portfolio of the bank, but these new loans will also add up to existing bad loans. Frequent recapitalisation and letting free corporate loan defaulters has strengthened the popular belief that loans taken from nationalised banks need not be repaid. Privatisation seems to be the only way out.

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO, Hyderabad

Violence over a film

It is shameful that the Karni Sena and the Hindu Jagran Manch have been on a rampage in Rajasthan and

Gujarat, turning a deaf ear to the Supreme Court's orders ("No *Padmaavat* release in Gujarat, Rajasthan", Jan. 25). The fault lies with the BJP government, which is a mute spectator to the violence. This is the third time the Haryana police has failed to control mobs in the recent past. The public still remembers the Jat agitation and the mobs that went on a rampage following the conviction of Dera Sacha Sauda leader Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh. By not maintaining law and order and by keeping mum, the BJP government is tacitly encouraging these miscreants. These governments are clearly more interested in keeping some voters happy than maintaining law and order and upholding the

Constitution. SURABHI KAUSHIK, Chandigarh

Even as the 10 ASEAN leaders arrive in Delhi, violence is raging in some parts of north India. I'm sure these leaders are not going to go back with a positive idea about the administration. The government cannot afford to preach in Davos about Indian ethos and values while it fails to uphold law and order and the values enshrined in the Constitution back home.

M. BALAKRISHNAN, Bengaluru

Not only is there a total collapse in administration, but the architects of this mayhem are also busy defending themselves on national channels. Implied

in the inaction of these State governments is that those who indulge in looting and arson will remain above the law as long as their votes are invaluable. In fact, this is not even a collapse of the administration; the right word here would be collusion. Hopefully, the Supreme Court will come down heavily on these governments.

C.V. ARAVIND, Chennai

The irony of this saga is that the film actually extols and glorifies Rajputs. *Padmaavat* is a deftly handled film and it cannot possible hurt anyone's sentiments. It would be wise for those having misconceptions about the film to watch it first before indulging in violence.

K. CHIDANAND KUMAR, Bengaluru

For better buses

Buses, especially those run by the State Transport Corporations, are the most important modes of mobility, especially in the hills and remote areas ("Too much for too little", Jan. 25, 2018). They have immense potential for improving connectivity, for mitigating the effects of climate change, for increasing tourism, and generating revenue. Unfortunately, faulty management and the failure to acquire and implement new technology are leading to the demise of public corporations.

SHUBHAM SHARMA, Shimla

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