

Imagining alternative futures

Why the Young India Adhikar March calls for greater civic solidarity



DEBADITYA BHATTACHARYA & RINA RAMDEV

The caricaturing of scientific inquiry at the recent Indian Science Congress (ISC) is only symptomatic of the larger ideological thrust through which institutions of higher education in India are now sought to be governed. Further, the choice of venue for the ISC this year – a private university in Punjab – highlights the boost that investors of private capital in higher education receive even as funding cutbacks at public universities have threatened the closure of 167 centres for women's studies and 35 centres for studies in social exclusion. That a proposed Jio Institute was granted the 'Institute of Eminence' status much before it could even open is a grim reminder of state support now being unambiguously willed upon the private model.

It is the same political imperative that is directing public-funded institutions towards 'graded autonomy' – duly recognised as a covert entry point for privatisation. The threat to autonomy is writ large in the recent moves to scrap the University Grants Commission (UGC) as a funding body for higher education, in keeping with the World Trade Organisation's mandate that views education as a tradable commodity, not as a right that every citizen can demand of the state.

Right versus privilege

In 2015, the UGC, citing a fund crunch, resolved to scrap the non-NET fellowship altogether. After student protests across universities (hashtagged on social media as 'Occupy UGC'), articulated how research fellowships were not state doles but instead sought to incentivise knowledge creation, the government was forced to retract the move. But soon after, the release of similar non-NET fellowships for Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes and minority students – namely, the Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship and Maulana Azad National Fellowship – came to be stalled, pending a new set of guidelines that severely curtailed eligibility.



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The Ministry of Human Resource Development's All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Report 2017-18 notes that the Gross Enrolment Ratio across institutions of higher education has risen to 25.8% from 19.4% in 2010-11. The GER is an index of the proportion of citizens between 18 and 23 years – in every sample size of 100 – who have structurally secured entry into tertiary education, while exit figures (drop-outs) are left unaccounted for.

The inflationary tendencies of AISHE figures notwithstanding, the report points out that the GER is 21.8% for SCs and 15.9% for STs "as compared to the national GER". However, deeper scrutiny shows that though the standard formula for calculating GER must take the population census in the relevant age group as the base sample size, the GER for Dalit-Adivasis is produced by altering the methodology.

Instead of taking the Census total as base figure, it is the fractional enrolment count that is used to produce fictions of inflated SC/ST GER. When population data (Table 38 of the report) is read in consonance with enrolment data (Table 14), the arithmetic shows a GER of 3.72% for Dalits and 1.35% for Adivasis. But in an identical age sample of 100 students, a minimum of 17 are from Dalit backgrounds and nearly nine from Adivasi communities. In actual terms, therefore, less than four out of 17 SC students and one out of every nine ST students appear to have entry-level access to higher education. The GER for minority students from non-Hindu backgrounds is a meagre 1.87% (against the official 7.2%). Analysed against Census 2011 data, less

than two out of every 20 minority students move to tertiary education. Ironically, the enrolment ratio for Hindu upper castes is 8.47%, implying that more than eight out of every 10 caste Hindus access higher education. The government's recent electoral gimmick of enabling 10% reservation in educational institutions for "economically weaker" upper-caste sections only performs a complete inversion of affirmative action policies, especially when documented data point to an entrenched legacy of caste-based discrimination.

The withdrawal of non-NET fellowships for the socially marginalised (accompanied by reservations for dominant caste groups) is informed by a policy transition from a public-funded model of inclusive economic planning to a private user-pay principle. It follows from the reform measures proposed by the Ambani-Birla Report on higher education (2000), and subsequently vindicated by the National Knowledge Commission's emphasis on "need-blind admissions" in higher education. The assumption behind a near-complete withdrawal of research funding begins by linking the quest for higher knowledge with an illusion of proportionately higher employment opportunities. But the reality is that with unemployment rates soaring to a 45-year high, the government's disinvestment from the higher education sector can only end up creating a highly skilled, lowly paid, indebted workforce.

The AISHE report contains traces of more statistical falsification – adjusting "growth" in the number of teaching positions by changing the base year for comparison (to 2010-11

from 2013-14). As the report shows (Table 51), there is a sharp annual decline in the number of teachers employed since 2015-16. In the past three years, teaching strength in higher education institutions has fallen from 15.19 lakh to 12.85 lakh, with most of the losses reflected against reserved permanent posts. The move to a 13-point roster in appointments will only aggravate these losses, till teaching becomes an exclusively upper caste profession. Alarming, through this period of reduction in teaching jobs, 104 new universities have been instituted, 66 of which are "privately managed". It is no surprise that many of the brightest minds from the best public institutions are now lapped up by elite private universities "equipped with world-class infrastructure".

A pushback

It is clear that a nationalist crusade is only mortgaging public education systems to transnational capital. This is also articulated in the "impatience" that Amartya Sen spoke about in the context of the recent ISC, an impatience that is fomenting student unrest in campuses. It is the same impatience – in the form of anger at being sidelined by iniquitous government policies that are supplanting the vision and promise of the public university – which is fuelling the student-led 'Young India Adhikar March' (to be held on February 7). In the last year or so, one has seen collective rights assertions in the form of well-publicised rallies by farmers, the marginalised and women – all signs of the anger of different constituencies reeling under the policies of an indifferent government. The 'Young India Adhikar March' is a representation of over 40 youth organisations demanding, among other things, an end to fee hikes, gender discriminatory laws, a syllabus free of "saffron" taints, alongside the guarantee of employment and academic, intellectual freedoms of teaching and learning.

If the 'publicness' of public education must come to occupy our idea of the 'nation', it is time we march with our youth and demand the right to imagine alternative futures.

Debadiitya Bhattacharya teaches at Kazi Nazrul University, West Bengal. Rina Ramdev teaches at Sri Venkateswara College, Delhi University

FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

We need a validation of good reporting

People suspect claims of policy success that are not backed by field reports



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

A news ombudsman is in a bind when his criticism of journalism is proved right. While there is an element of personal satisfaction, there is also the pain of witnessing professional shortcomings. In my column, "Discussing an editorial" (Dec. 3, 2018), I had expressed my reservations about the editorial "Number theory" (Nov. 30), which I felt had granted the benefit of doubt on the contentious GDP back series data to the government without subjecting the numbers to close scrutiny.

The practice of data torture

When two members of the National Statistical Commission resigned recently after disagreement with the government on certain issues, including the release of a labour report by the National Sample Survey Office for 2017-18, readers pointed out that the issue of data torture had been addressed in this column. One reader even sent a short sequence from the British sitcom, *Yes Minister*, to show how data are deliberately suppressed by the government. In the sequence, the Prime Minister (PM) asks his officer: "Suppose the report is cautious?"

Sir Humphrey: Well, in that case we don't publish it.

PM: You mean we suppress it?

Sir Humphrey: No, we simply don't publish it.

PM: What's the difference?

Sir Humphrey: Oh, big difference! Suppression is the instrument of totalitarian dictatorships. We don't do that in a free country.

The role of journalism is to cut through the rhetorical clutter and help the reader understand the truth. Reports and opinion pieces are together expected to help us understand reality. Reporting is the bedrock of journalism, while opinion pieces provide a certain gravitas to the profession. Opinion pieces immediately resonate with readers, who either agree or disagree with the piece. The opinion pieces that remain in a reader's memory are those that are also validated by solid reporting. If the findings of a reporter

contradict the opinion writer, as a journalist I tend to trust the reporter rather than the expert.

German sociologist Max Weber contextualised the role of journalism in relation to academic scholarship. He wrote: "Not everyone realizes that to write a really good piece of journalism is at least as demanding intellectually as the achievement of any scholar. This is particularly true when we recollect that it has to be written on the spot, to order, and that it must create an immediate effect, even though it is produced under completely different conditions from that of scholarly research."

It is generally overlooked that a journalist's actual responsibility is far greater than the scholar's."

While many recognise the act of verification as the central function of journalism, very few recognise journalism's role of bearing witness to events. It remains the voice of the people.



REUTERS

Reports and opinions

All the rhetoric to justify demonetisation and the multiple revisions of official numbers to generate a positive narrative for the government failed to work because field reports did not validate the claims of the centres of power. Let's look at an important reporting section, Ground Zero. Two months before demonetisation, on September 17, 2016, *The Hindu* carried a field report, "The bane of a bumper crop", which documented how the farmers in Maharashtra's onion belt were getting an unprecedented low price for their produce. A week after demonetisation, a long report, "The warp and woof of demonetisation", documented the crisis in the garment industry in Tiruppur. In 2017, there was another report, "Maximum support, maximum price", which attempted to make sense of agricultural marketing operations.

The gap between reportage and opinion writers is worrying. In *Liberty and the News*, Walter Lippmann wrote: "It does not matter that the news is not susceptible of mathematical statement. In fact, just because news is complex and slippery, good reporting requires the exercise of the highest scientific virtues." If claims of policy success are not backed by field reports, people suspect the claims. No amount of data suppression can help build trust with the government's pronouncement.

readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

SINGLE FILE

Smartphone tourism

Tourism apps have nearly destroyed the joy of discovering places through word of mouth and local lore

SAMIR NAZARETH



be due to an excess of the Goan party spirit, a more cavalier approach has now become the hallmark of not just Goan but Indian tourism. Rather than approach tourist destinations with sensitivity and contemplation, there is now a sense of bravado, a reckless thirst for adventure, and a mercenary undertone in interactions with locals.

This could be partly due to the rise of information technology, particularly online maps and other applications made available through smartphones that provide tourists a sense of confidence and purpose in unfamiliar places. Bravado and confidence come from knowing that you cannot get lost easily, that all your eating and drinking options are available on the palm of your hand, that even if something were to happen, help can be summoned immediately.

Smartphones and apps have become the bane of Goa. It is commonplace, for instance, to spot motorcycle-borne tourists staring intently at their phones or taking selfies while meandering across public roads, unmindful of the risk to their lives and others' lives. The uploading of such photos, filtered or unfiltered, on social media also means that few places remain untouched by crowds.

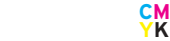
Online apps have made local knowledge and folklore dispensable. Today's sense of adventure comes from following online recommendations of unknown people – even if those suggestions only reinforce stereotypes. What place then for the wonder of serendipitous discovery on tourist trails?

Online maps and tourism advisory portals also increase visitors' Fear of Missing Out. Every potential location to visit is anointed with a certain number of stars, which creates a self-fulfilling prophecy for the place and seems to bestow bragging rights for having been there and done that. Do people even truly enjoy these visits any more?

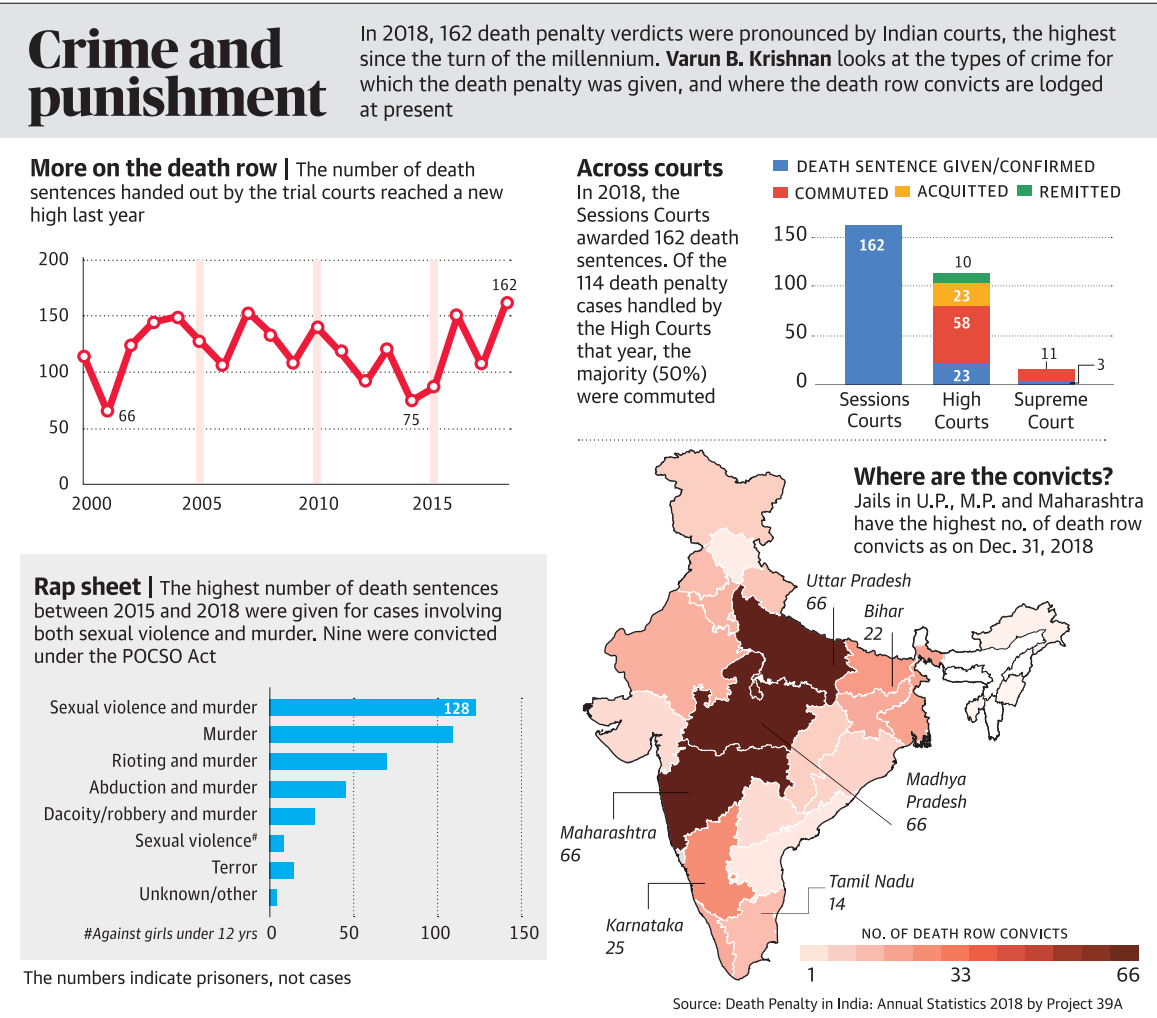
Easy access to online information makes tourists presumptuous, gives them the false sense of knowing the place, or, worse still, becoming locals. It also makes tourism invasive and the tourist akin to a predator or parasitic species.

Online information such as tourism apps has nearly killed the inherent value and worth of word-of-mouth stories and local lore and brought clichés to the fore. While ignorance may not any longer be bliss, the Goan experience makes it hard to argue that knowledge is power, at least the kind that is in harmony with its surroundings.

The writer is the author of 1400 Bananas, 76 Towns & 1 Million People



DATA POINT



FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 4, 1969

Lakhs pay homage to Annadurai

Several lakhs of grief-stricken men and women from all over the State to-day [February 3] made a pilgrimage to the Government Estate to pay their last respects to Mr. C.N. Annadurai. It was a vast surging humanity jampacking all the approach roads to the Government Estate, demonstrating the fact that the charismatic leader of the South held sway over the hearts of millions of people. Never before had such a mammoth crowd been seen paying homage to a departed leader. In fact, the onrush of people towards the Rajaji Hall in Government Estate where Mr. Annadurai's body lay in state, was so great that repeated attempts to hold them and organise them into orderly queues failed. Mr. Annadurai's body was brought to the Rajaji Hall by about 7 a.m. when thousands of people had already collected to have a glimpse of their "Anna".

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 4, 1919

'Capital' Libel Suit. Plaintiff Awarded Damages.

At the [Calcutta] High Court to-day [February 3] Mr. Justice Rankin, delivered a lengthy judgment in the Libel Suit brought by Mr. C.J. Hallifax, against "Capital", Ltd., claiming one lakh of rupees as damages. His Lordship said Mr. Hallifax was a member of the Punjab Legislative Council, he had served 30 years in the Indian Civil Service and in the course of his career he had held high offices and posts of exceptional responsibility and was Commissioner of Lahore when the paragraph complained of was published. The defendants were the proprietors and the Editor of "Capital". The question before His Lordship was whether the paragraph complained of contained an imputation of immorality against the plaintiff. As a matter of law His Lordship found that the words complained of were capable of defamatory meaning. The article was based on a rumour, but no evidence was produced to prove the existence of the rumour and its existence was disproved.

CONCEPTUAL Performativity

PHILOSOPHY

Performativity as a concept was first developed by the philosopher of language John L. Austin to define the capability of language as a mode of action and not just as a mode of description. It ran counter to the positivist view of speech as essentially comprising utterances that were either true or false. Marriage vows, promises of help, judicial verdicts, placing of bets are all instances of performative utterances that signify indulgence, and not any verifiable description.

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