

# The loss of intellectual autonomy

To define one’s identity or community in terms of an exclusive religion is a vexed European notion



RAJEEV BHARGAVA

No person in today’s world likes to be told what to do or what to think. The young are particularly keen to have the freedom to decide which beliefs to form. Intellectual autonomy is widely considered to be an important value. This was probably not true in the past when large numbers of people were illiterate, knowledge was produced and stored by a few, and there was wider social legitimacy for submission to those with power and authority.

However, even then, poets and philosophers routinely felt that intellectual autonomy is smothered by temptations of power. Asked by his pupils on how to relate to rulers, the medieval philosopher-saint Al Ghazali said, “It would be disastrous to go to a ruler to offer unsolicited advice. It is acceptable to offer your opinion if the ruler sought you. But it is best if he goes his way and you go yours.”

### Strategy of intellectual control

Since the end of the 18th century, as technologies of knowledge production became increasingly available to larger sections of society, intellectual autonomy has been threatened not only by state power, but in other invidious ways. Colonialism is a case in point. The British strategy of intellectual control was implemented by crafting a system of education rather than brute coercion. Although the best of our thinkers outmanoeuvred this system – after all our most original thinker of this period, Gandhi, was a product of this very education – it created acute anxiety among self-reflective thinkers. For example, Sri Aurobindo lamented the “increasing impoverishment of the Indian intellect” in the face of new knowledge imposed by European contact. “Nothing is our own, nothing native to our intelligence, all is derived,” he complained. “As little have we understood the new knowledge; we have only understood what the Europeans want us to think about themselves and their modern civilisation. Our



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English culture – if culture it can be called – has increased tenfold the evil of our dependence instead of remedying it.”

A more catastrophic malady resulting from this “well meaning bondage” was the loss of intellectual autonomy. The watchword of Indians, he argued, has become “authority”, blind acceptance of ideas coming either from outside, from Europe, as was the case of the then English-educated Indians, or from inside, from fossilised traditions, as was the case of traditional pundits. It was as if the only choice before Indian intellectual elites was a hyper-westernised modernism or ultra-traditionalism. Some elites would have every detail of their life determined exclusively by Western ideas. Others would have them fixed only by *shastra*, custom and scripture. Each wanted to reform the other, which was nothing but a call to substitute the authority of “Guru Sayana with the authority of Max Mueller” or the “dogmatism of European scientists and scholars” with the “dogmatism of Brahmin Pandits”. The absence of real choice was a symptom of an undermined capacity to think on one’s own, the power of humans to accept or reject nothing without proper questioning.

Much the same conclusion was reached, a decade later, by the Indian philosopher, K.C. Bhattacharya. In ‘Swaraj in Ideas’, Bhattacharya feared that Indians might suffer from a subtler form of domination “when one’s traditional cast of ideas and

sentiments is superseded without comparison or competition by a new cast representing an alien culture which possesses one like a ghost.” To be sure, when two cultures come into sustained contact with one another, there is bound to be give and take. One culture might even give to the other more than it takes from it. However, all creative assimilation involves a real conflict of ideas, and elements of an alien culture can be accepted only after “full and open-eyed struggle has been allowed to develop” between the two encountering cultures.

### Two alien ideas in India today

I am afraid we have allowed two deeply problematic alien ideas to penetrate our collective consciousness without thorough questioning or proper comparison with ideas emanating from our intellectual traditions. One is the idea of religion, and the second, a particular conception of the nation. Religion, as a demarcated system of practices, beliefs and doctrines, is largely an early modern European invention and begins its existence in and through the theological disputes of the 16th and 17th centuries. Under the impact of colonialism, this category came to India and obliged Indians to think of themselves as members of one exclusive religious community, not just different from but opposed to others. It is of course true that gods and goddesses, ethical norms and prescriptions, rituals and practices did exist in

some form in the past. But these were not thought to be part of one single entity called Hinduism, so that those who owed allegiance to any one of these sets of practices did not think of themselves as belonging to a single system of belief and doctrine in competition with and opposition to all others. Indeed, mobility across communities and multiple allegiances were common. As a result, most people refused to be slotted into rigid, compartmentalised entities. They were religious but did not belong to a religion. This has virtually ceased to be the case.

Second, religious belief or practice, or adherence to a doctrine, was never viewed as a condition of membership in a wider national community. One’s religious or linguistic identity made little difference to one’s belonging to the nation. Alas, now, for many inhabitants of our territory, a nation cannot but be defined in single religious or linguistic terms. An exclusivist conception of the ethnic nation – entirely against the spirit of local Indian religions or conceptions of nationhood – devised first in Spain in 1492, developed further during the European wars of religion, and perfected in the 18th or 19th century has seized the Indian mind. Thanks to narrow-minded education institutions and now the electronic media, the idea was first disseminated and then unquestioningly accepted by Indians as if it were a long-held indigenous Indian idea. In accepting this alien idea of religion and nation without proper comparison or competition with Indian ideas of faith and community, we have sacrificed intellectual autonomy and gone down the road to hell from which Europe has itself yet to recover.

To define one’s identity or community in terms of a single, exclusive religion – Hindu, Muslim or any other – is a perverse European notion, a mark of our cultural subjugation, a symptom of the loss of our intellectual autonomy. To have done so is to have uncritically abandoned our own collective genius for something ill-suited to our conditions. Can this be reversed? Is it too late to heed Sri Aurobindo’s warning or follow Gandhi’s example? Can we recover our collective intellectual autonomy?

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# Solar powerhouse

For residential consumers to see rooftop solar as a viable electricity option, building awareness is crucial



UTTARA NARAYAN & AMALA DEVI

In February, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved phase 2 of the grid-connected rooftop solar programme, with a focus on the residential sector. India has set an ambitious target of achieving 40 GW of rooftop solar capacity by 2022. However, while there has been progress on rooftop solar installations among industries and commercial consumers, the uptake among residential consumers has been slow.

Urban residential electricity consumers are still hesitant to consider rooftop solar power for their homes. This is because they don’t have enough information about it, according to a 2018 study by the World Resources Institute in five cities – Bengaluru, Chandigarh, Chennai, Jaipur and Nagpur.

### Limited access to information

For residential urban consumers, one of the key barriers to installing rooftop solar systems is that they do not know who to contact to understand the processes to be followed and permissions required. There is no single source to access information, evaluate benefits and disadvantages, and examine if any government support (such as a financial subsidy) is available. Most of the technical information provided by various sources, including the government, tends to be Internet-based. The study shows that less than 20% of respondents rely on the Internet to make a decision concerning rooftop solar systems. A significant majority of consumers seek face-to-face discussions and recommendations from friends and family.

Devising simple, well-designed and creative ways to disseminate information is important to help consumers make informed decisions. Information must be made easily available to the consumers on the amount of shadow-free roof area needed for generating a unit of electricity and pricing; operating the system, after-sales maintenance and support; and reliable rooftop solar vendors.

The local electricity linesmen, electricity inspectors, and other nodal officials in the electricity department also have key roles to play. Building their capacities to disseminate such information and handle consumer queries and concerns, and providing basic training in billing and metering for solar power can go a long way in improving consumers’ experience.

Objective information must be put out

through various avenues, so that it is accessible to all segments of the population and in local languages. Such awareness drives will reach larger audiences. Information kiosks can be set up in public institutions like banks to offer information on the technology, as well as on practical issues such as guidance on selecting vendors. A robust feedback mechanism can be put in place for consumers to share their experiences with others.

Consumer rights groups, rooftop solar system vendors, and resident welfare associations (RWAs) in larger cities are beginning to organise campaigns and workshops to generate awareness and create a dialogue with consumers. In November 2018, for instance, the Bangalore Apartments’ Federation held a workshop on residential rooftop solar to sensitise their members. Several RWAs have initiated discussions with residents to explore collective installation of rooftop solar, starting with common facilities like lifts and water pumps.

### Lessons to learn

Since the market for residential rooftop solar power is nascent, there are opportunities to learn from more mature consumer durable markets. For example, RWAs can tie up with vendors to organise demonstration programmes, so that consumers can observe, operate and understand how the system works.

It is important to also acknowledge that enthusiasm for rooftop solar energy largely comes from those with higher disposable incomes and who live in their own houses. This is one of the several reasons that electricity utilities are not very supportive of consumers generating their own power, as this would impact their revenues. Rooftop solar is a promising energy source for everyone, including socio-economically weaker consumers. However, awareness building sessions need to be socially inclusive and should take place during periods when consumers are likely to be at home.

The uptake of rooftop solar across economic categories is also contingent on policies that make it more accessible and affordable. Consumer groups and development organisations have a significant role in systematically following key policies and institutional procedures and ensuring that consumers’ concerns in accessing reliable information are addressed. Raising awareness and building consumer capacity to engage with the sector are crucial for ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all and for India to achieve its rooftop solar targets.

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### SINGLE FILE

## Kashmir conundrum

Indian Muslims must not pay the price for Kashmiri transgressions

MOHAMMED AYOOB



Terrorism in the Kashmir Valley poses a significant internal security threat to the Indian state and has tremendous potential to trigger a military confrontation between India and Pakistan. However, the adverse impact of separatism and terrorism in Kashmir on Indian Muslims’ position in Indian society has not been adequately examined.

Kashmir has become an albatross around the neck of Indian Muslims. Terrorist activities and calls for “azadi” by a minority of Kashmiri Muslims are increasingly complicating Indian Muslims’ efforts to find a place of trust and dignity within the larger society. Kashmiri separatism accompanied by Pakistan-supported terrorism revives memories of Partition and raises questions about the loyalty of all Indian Muslims. It also immeasurably weakens the underpinnings of a plural society and secular state, which are already under threat from majoritarian nationalism.

The trajectory of Kashmiri politics has been distorted from the very beginning. New Delhi is responsible for a fair share of the problems it faces in Kashmir today because of its wrong-headed policies – from the removal of Sheikh Abdullah in 1953 to the rigged elections of 1987 that provided the immediate stimulus for the armed separatist uprising. But all this does not detract from the fact that the accession of Kashmir to India is an irreversible reality.

Unfortunately, a significant number of Kashmiri Muslims refuse to accept this reality unambiguously. While they may not be involved in violent actions against the Indian state, they are either unwilling or unable to forcefully oppose the twin forces of secessionism and terrorism. Furthermore, reported attempts by some Kashmiri youth to thwart counter-terrorism operations when they are under way provide evidence of their support for terrorists. These actions add to the feeling in the rest of the country that Kashmiri Muslims are anti-Indian, and some of this sentiment affects the majority community’s perceptions of Indian Muslims in their entirety. Such ill-conceived actions also provide justification for the anti-Kashmiri feelings in the rest of the country that surface in times of crisis such as the Pulwama terror attack.

It is incumbent on Kashmiri Muslims to make it clear that they will have no truck with separatists and terrorists among them no matter what their own grouse may be against the Indian state. It is also obligatory for Indian Muslims to disown and denounce those among the Kashmiris who harbour secessionist tendencies. Indian Muslims paid a heavy price for Partition, which was based on the false notion, discredited by the separation of Bangladesh from West Pakistan, that nations can be defined on the basis of religion. Muslim opinion leaders must communicate clearly that Indian Muslims do not intend to pay the price for the transgressions of some Kashmiri Muslims against the Indian state.

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### NOTEBOOK

## Another pilot, another release

The events that unfolded 20 years ago, when Pakistan captured Flt. Lt. Nachiketa

AMIT BARUAH

It’s a vignette known only to family and a few friends. But now, with the country gripped by events surrounding the dramatic capture and release of Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, maybe it’s time to tell it to a wider audience.

As *The Hindu’s* correspondent in Pakistan (1997-2000), and living in Islamabad, I was caught smack in the middle of the 1999 Kargil war. With Pakistan initially projecting it as a “mujahideen” versus Indian Army conflict, my reporting from Islamabad remained unaffected.

On May 27, 1999, Pakistan claimed to have shot down two aircraft – a MiG 21 and a MiG 27 – as India moved to clear the Kargil heights of Pakistani intruders. Flight Lieutenant K. Nachiketa, piloting the MiG 21, was taken prisoner, while Squadron Leader Ajay Ahuja appeared to

have been shot dead by Pakistani forces after being captured.

On June 3, then Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif announced at a press conference that Flt. Lt. Nachiketa would be freed as a “goodwill gesture” (Prime Minister Imran Khan used the words “peace gesture” in the case of Wg. Cdr. Varthaman) and would be handed over to then Indian High Commissioner G. Parthasarathy inside the Pakistani Foreign Ministry at 7.30 p.m. (IST) with the media contingent in attendance.

Coming out of the press conference, I phoned Mr. Parthasarathy and said he would receive a call from the Pakistanis asking him to reach the Foreign Office and take custody of Flt. Lt. Nachiketa. “Please don’t go there. The intention is to embarrass you and India,” I told him and cut the call.

Alerted, the High Commissioner sought instructions from Delhi and told

the Pakistanis that he would not go the Foreign Ministry and would not take custody of Flt. Lt. Nachiketa in the full glare of the media.

Things moved swiftly after that. Since it had been announced by Mr. Sharif, the Pakistani side got in touch with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which had set procedures in place. Three hours after being brought to the Foreign Ministry on Constitution Avenue, the ICRC allowed photographs of Flt. Lt. Nachiketa to be taken, but he did not speak to the waiting press. The smiling Flt. Lt., dressed in trousers and shirt and dignity intact, was pictured with Tariq Altaf, an Additional Secretary in the Pakistani Foreign Ministry.

A white Land Cruiser vehicle of the ICRC finally drove him to the Indian High Commission, where the High Commissioner and other senior officials were waiting for him,

around 11 p.m. I was also waiting – to confirm his release and then file the report for the newspaper.

Flt. Lt. Nachiketa slept that night at the residence of the Indian Air Adviser “Jack” Jaiswal and when I met him the next day at the High Commission, he was full of questions. “How is it to report from Pakistan?” he asked me. “How were you treated?” I asked him. He only said, “It’s the first night I managed some sleep in all these days.” Nothing more, the rest was just polite chatter. He did not appear to have suffered any physical injuries. Later, he was driven across the Wagah border in a High Commission vehicle. Only four months before that, I had stood watching the Delhi-Lahore bus roll in from Attari to Wagah with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on board.

Twenty years on, India-Pakistan relations continue to be on a roller-coaster ride.

### FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 5, 1969

## Curfew in East Pakistan

Life in East Pakistan was paralysed to-day [March 4, Dacca] following a general strike and hartal in response to the call by the all-party Students’ Action Committee to press its demands for better educational facilities. In West Pakistan doctors are on strike and large parts of Pakistan are in the grip of a postal strike. An 18-hour curfew was imposed at noon to-day in Bogra after clashes between police and anti-Government demonstrators as East Pakistan observed hartal. Men of the East Pakistan Rifles were called in to help the civil authorities in Bogra after crowds had attacked a kotwali, set fire to the municipal office and local Muslim League office and cut telephone wires. Police used teargas to disperse violent crowds without much effect. Eight policemen including two officers were injured when demonstrators attacked the kotwali. Official circles said at Faizpur in Rangpur district, two rival groups of students clashed this morning.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 5, 1919.

## Bombay Mint Strike.

The strike of the employees of the Mint at Bombay still continues. Major Willis, Mint Master, posted a notice on the Mint gate on Saturday [March 1] informing the men that the special bonus which he had recommended had not been sanctioned by the Government and that in lieu of the bonus he had sanctioned a permanent increase in the wages at the rate of one anna to those who were in receipt of 10 annas and less per day and 2 annas to those who were in receipt of more than 10 annas a day. The notice was read by the strikers who appeared to be satisfied and it was expected they would resume work without any further trouble. Instead of doing so the strikers yesterday made a representation to the Mint Master through a pleader reiterating their original demand of increase of 4 annas a day all round and further they asked a bonus of two months wages and strike pay.

### CONCEPTUAL

## Modern monetary theory

ECONOMICS

This refers to an economic theory which argues that a government that borrows in its own currency can technically never default on any of its liabilities. This is because these governments can simply print fresh money to pay off their debt. Many supporters of modern monetary theory believe that governments should simply stop worrying about fiscal deficits. Instead, they argue, governments should increase their social spending through programmes like universal basic income and other forms of social welfare. Critics of modern monetary theory, however, say that such a policy will lead to higher price inflation, which is simply an indirect tax on citizens.

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