

THE WEDNESDAY INTERVIEW | DEVESH KAPUR

‘Weak public institutions best way to ensure social injustice’

The political scientist on the danger to India's checks and balances, and the perils of the democratisation of mediocrity in universities

ANURADHA RAMAN

Professor of political science and a holder of the Madan Lal Sobti Chair, Devesh Kapur has been director of the Center for the Study of Contemporary India at University of Pennsylvania since 2006. Mr. Kapur, who recently co-edited *Public Institutions in India: Performance and Design*, says our public universities have failed in fostering a spirit of inquiry, curiosity, tolerance and excellence among students. Excerpts:

You have said you could see the making of a perfect storm in India.

In the next few decades, we will see a youth bulge with a skewed sex ratio, one where people, the young people, have ostensible credentials but no real skills or knowledge because of how bad our education system is. So they have expectations and aspirations which are not going to be met. If you were very poor like in the past, life was short and brutish. But not now. And then add to it employment in the face of technological change which in every area requires fewer workers. All of this is coming together with a background of weak, if not weakening, public institutions to manage this. If you see institutions as mediating societal tensions, conflicts, this is what worries me the most about us.

Why do we have a scant regard for public institutions?

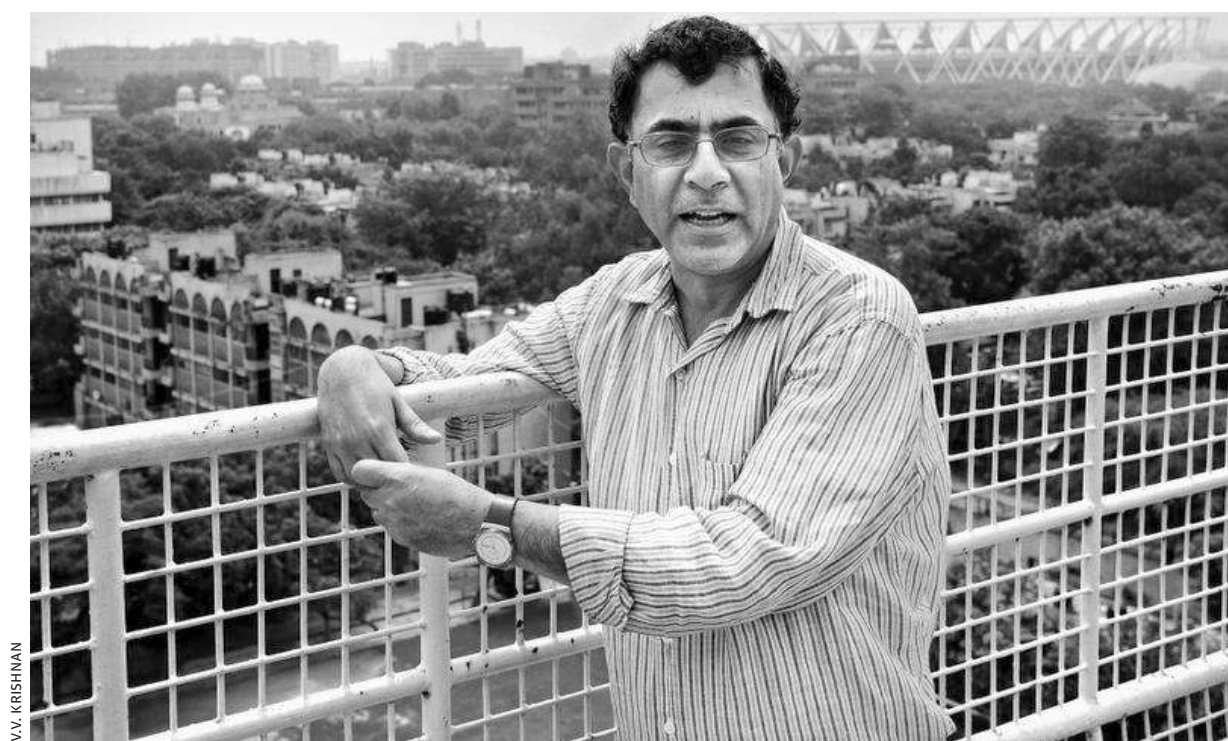
In some ways, everywhere public institutions are challenged. Under the Trump regime, White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon wants to dismantle the administrative state. In the end all institutions are some form of checks and balances, but if those in power do not want those checks and balances and they get re-elected repeatedly, then over time there is erosion and – I want to emphasise this – this is across political parties. The Left, the Socialists, the caste-based parties and the regional parties and the national parties, all have to share the blame for this. If you think of universities,

especially public universities, as public institutions, what is amazing is that one cannot think of a single political party that had the least vision of higher education. After all, education is a concurrent subject, right? So, even if the Central government has a particular stance or non-stance, the States could have intervened.

Look at the way our vice chancellors are selected. Many of them would not get a job as a lecturer in a decent college. There are reasons to believe that at least in some cases, they have paid their way there. Between 2000 and 2015, we set up almost six new colleges a day, every single day over 15 years including weekends. At its peak, the U.S., with way greater resources, set up one new college a week. And this, when we have the most regulated higher education system... the UGC (University Grants Commission), AICTE (All India Council for Technical Education), etc.

But hasn't the creation of universities and colleges opened access to those who didn't have it in the first place?

I think you can create all these universities and frame the rules. But the underlying ethos of higher education is a spirit of inquiry, a spirit of curiosity, a spirit of tolerance, a spirit that says excellence is important. In that sense higher education should be elitist. It should not be elitist by who enters, but in its intellectual ambitions. To push the frontiers of knowledge, you have to have high standards. The idea that you get grace marks to pass... what does that



mean? Even the role of the courts. In fact, you could argue that if you look at the judges and many of the ways they write the judgments, it shows you what ails our education system.

But surely, that is linked to who the government selects?

Here is the tragedy. We have the second or third largest country of people with college degrees in the world. Everywhere, whether public or private institutions, we have a shortage of talent. You know that old poem? Water, water everywhere, not a drop to drink. We have graduates, graduates everywhere, but who do I hire? Yet we are setting up more IITs.

There are a few universities that are doing well...

Very few, they are islands of excellence. But for the bulk of our population, public universities will, and should, continue to be very important. But we seem to

be writing them off. Other than the very elite narrow technical institutes like IITs and AIIMS and IIMs, these have reduced what the purpose of education means to a basic functional instrument. *Isse aap ko achhi naukri milegi* (you will get a good job). They are not about thinking about the larger purpose of higher education. Does it make us better citizens? Does it make us think us broadly about the society we are embedded in, what we take from it and owe it?

It is unclear why you cannot say that if you go to this institution, you must serve in some public function for two years after you graduate. In South Korea, Singapore and other countries, for many decades they had a compulsory draft regardless of your background. If you want to create a sense of genuine nationalism, of service to the nation, that's where it begins. It doesn't begin in sloganeering. Why shouldn't IIT graduates be sent to help out panchayats with technical expertise?

If you look at public loans

One of the things we should do in Central universities is besides reservation, insist that half the students come from outside the host State

for higher education, they were about ₹ 300 crore in 2000. Now they are ₹ 72,000 crore, the fastest-growing NPAs (non-performing assets) in the banking system. Basically, these moneys go to private colleges, many are run by politicians, teaching rubbish and in the end, the public sector will pay in any case. There will be a lot of pressure to write off loans. They did serve a good purpose in making education accessible to a large number of students. But it is not clear if democratisation of mediocrity will serve our society well. There has been a massive elite exodus. How many children of our senior politicians, bureaucrats study here?

What ails our public

institutions?

One of the extraordinary things is how undermanned they are. It's not only about shortage of personnel in numbers, we have a shortage in quality. Partly I think this whole thing of everything at the top being reserved for the IAS, IPS has to go.

There has to be much more sifting; after 20 years of service, one-third of them have to leave on the performance scale. The same thing has happened with our universities. Our universities are like the civil service, they are like *babudom*. Whether I work or not, I am going to basically go with time.

Aren't you being elitist here?

Whenever someone questions this, you will immediately be attacked as elitist. Ironically, weak public institutions are the best way to ensure social injustice. Who needs strong public institutions? It is the weak, not the strong. The strong will always be able to buy their

way, whether it is education, police protection. The irony is in the name of social justice, we have undermined the very social justice we have claimed we were doing this for.

So, what do we do?

The biggest hypocrisy is self-delusion. We always say the West is individualistic. We are one of the most individual societies – the idea of the collective good where the collective is large is absent. We are becoming more ghettoised, not less. I come back to the universities, which is where the young people are on the verge of adulthood. The first time you are meeting people from different parts of the country. Ideas are shaped. That's the last time you are going to be open-minded. The pretences go away slowly.

Look at the faculty of our public universities. Look at West Bengal. The first two Chairs – and by the way, back then it was private money – at Calcutta University: in physics, it was C.V. Raman, and in philosophy, it was S. Radhakrishnan. Go to the university now... all completely Bengalis. The parochialism that comes with that is frightening. We have gone backwards in a serious way. One of the things we should do in our Central universities is besides reservation, insist that half the students come from outside. We have stopped thinking about the larger role universities play in public life.

How do you see the stifling of dissent on campuses in the name of nationalism? For instance, in the context of what happened in Jawaharlal Nehru University.

The genuine conundrum we face is, if you are in a research programme funded by public money, what should be your role? Should

it be activism or research?

Research is not a part-time activity. *Din bhar morcha kiya, raat ko do ghanta kaam kiya* (Take part in protests through the day, do precious little at night). Good research requires tremendous commitment over a sustained period of time. You cannot get around it. That is the bottom line. An ordinary taxpayer may say, *main kyon paise doon* (why should I pay)? Or from the point of view of the young person: there are so many injustices, do you want me to keep aloof? I think there is an inherent tension we should recognise.

But I do think... going back to the JP (Jayaprakash Narayan) movement, he had called students to protest. It seemed nice then. But look what it did to public universities in north India. It destroyed them. What became of the movement is that university politics became the springboard for political ambitions.

Why has our cultural debate become about Us versus Them?

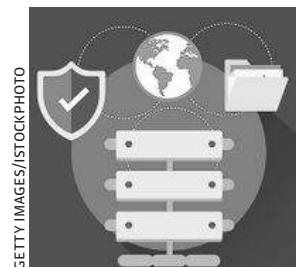
Partly there is a very distinct feeling from the Right that we were deliberately excluded. That it is our turn. Unfortunately, they don't get Gandhi's adage that an eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind. Vengeance may give you short-term pleasure, but it is not a recipe for building but for pulling down. Then you get into Us versus Them. Both sides are Indians. There is no us, them. This is our country, right? You see this in the U.S. where we see a tribalism on display. We have been sowing very poisonous seeds. We should be trying twice as hard to not be divisive. We should prepare our roofs now. We can't do when the storm comes. By then we will be reaping what we are sowing now, and we should think very carefully what exactly we will be harvesting.

SINGLE FILE

In the age of data

Without strong data protection laws, privacy as a right will be of little value

ANIL K. ANTONY



As India awaits the judgment of a nine-member Bench headed by Chief Justice J.S. Khehar on whether privacy is a fundamental right, the moment is ideal for the country to redefine and reconstruct some of the elementary definitions and laws associated with 'privacy'.

Here, it is important to look at the issue from both privacy as well as a national security perspectives. The present time period is said to be the 'age of data' with private companies – ranging from social media platforms to e-mail services and messaging applications – storing humongous volumes of information, a lot of it outside India's borders. Both Facebook and WhatsApp have more than 200 million active users in India, with India recently surpassing the United States in terms of the number of Facebook users.

Data-colonising companies like these use the collected information in myriad ways. Individuals have limited control over how data collected from them are used; in many cases, they do not even have undisputed ownership of their own personal information. Further, the companies' databases are also under constant risk of cyberattacks. The likelihood of such scenarios has prompted technology evangelists like Nandan Nilekani to press for an immediate creation of stringent data protection laws.

EU regulation

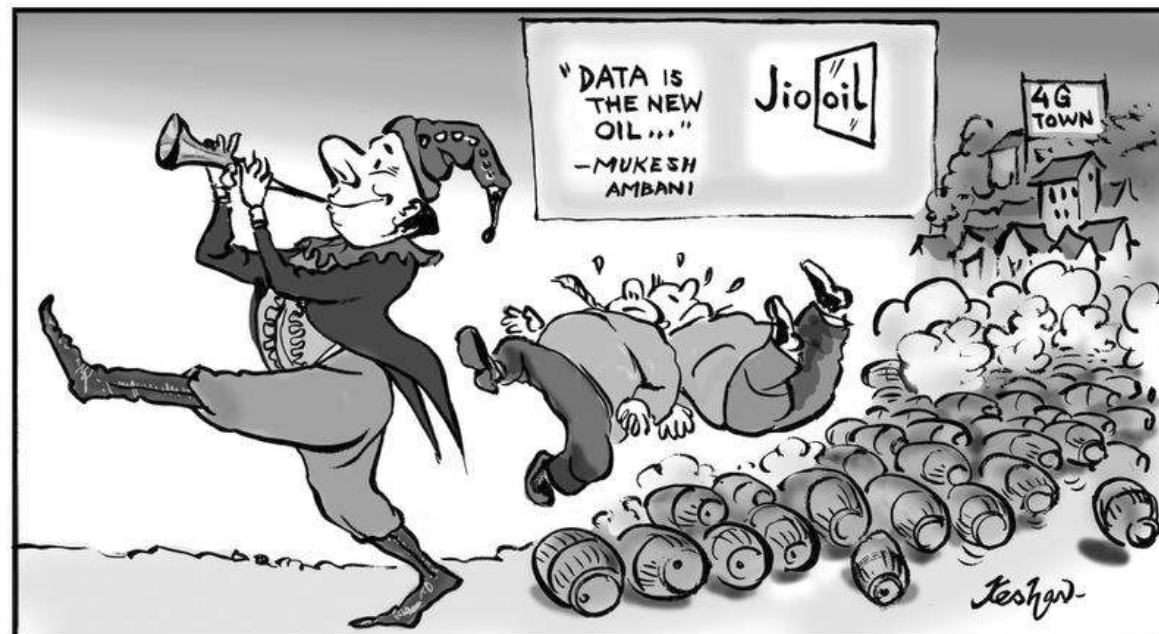
To protect the privacy of its individual users, the European Union is to implement the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in May 2018. Aimed at harmonising data privacy laws across Europe, it will impose stiff penalty of up to 4% of the company's worldwide turnover in the event of a breach. Many companies will also have to ensure that even their vendors are fully compliant with the GDPR as a condition for running their businesses. Recognition of privacy as an individual right in India, without similar enforceable regulations, will be akin to raking water up a hill.

Coming to collection of data by governments and agencies, we need to keep in mind that the Internet and the more virulent Darknet are being increasingly used these days by criminals and antisocial elements for illegal trade, trafficking and money laundering apart from recruitment to various terror outfits like the Islamic State (IS).

Regulations that impinge on the effectiveness of our intelligence and law enforcement agencies as they battle these challenges would significantly compromise our social harmony and national security.

Hence, what India needs more is effective data protection laws, along with strong independent watchdog institutions to ensure that the organisations handling our data do not go astray.

Anil K. Antony is the executive director of Cyber India, a think tank in cybersecurity and surveillance technologies and vice president of Navoathan Foundation; tweets@anilkantony



CONCEPTUAL

Kondratiev wave

ECONOMICS

The long wave-like movement witnessed in world economic growth, as it alternates between periods of strong and weak growth. The phenomenon is named after Soviet economist Nikolai Kondratiev who introduced the existence of such long-term growth cycles in his 1925 book *The Major Economic Cycles*. Each Kondratiev cycle is estimated to last between forty to sixty years and is attributed to various reasons including technological innovation and demographic changes. Critics argue that there are no set patterns in the way the economy grows to suggest the presence of regular growth cycles.

MORE ON THE WEB

Game of Thrones Season 7 Episode 2 review
<http://bit.ly/GoTEpisode2>

NOTEBOOK

Talking peace with a militant

A reporter's diary from Kashmir speaks of missed chances

JOSY JOSEPH

The phone ring pierced through the unusual silence of the Srinagar night. I stretched my hand across to pick up the emergency headline next to my bed. "Is that Mr. Joseph?" a voice asked. As soon as I said 'yes', the caller disconnected. I rolled back under the blanket. The phone rang again. "Who is this?" another caller asked this time. As I rattled out my name, he disconnected the call. I sat up; it was obvious that something unusual was unfolding. In the Srinagar of 2001, when the nights belonged to the security forces and militants, such phone calls were unusual.

After a few more calls made to verify my identity, I was called to the gates of University of Kashmir next morning. The calls were a culmination of my efforts, lasting two months, to meet Abdul Majeed Dar, then chief commander of Hizbul Mujahideen, the Valley's

largest militant group that had dramatically declared and abandoned a ceasefire a few months before.

After a decade and half of fighting, Majeed Dar was in favour of a negotiated peaceful settlement involving India, Pakistan and the Kashmiri people. He wasn't talking about anything beyond the historically stated position of New Delhi. As I switched off the recorder, he said how frustrated he was with India for not grasping the opportunity to bring peace to the Valley.

Ever since the Kashmir Valley erupted in violence in the late 1980s, there has never been a better moment for peace than those early days of the 21st century. Then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had reached out to Kashmir, Hizbul Mujahideen had a large number of members keen on peace, and a groundswell of support was palpable among ordinary Kashmiris.

However, K.C. Pant, the interlocutor for Kashmir,

failed to find a breakthrough. A good part of the blame should lie with the Indian security establishment, which couldn't appreciate its gains from the windfall of peace in Kashmir.

More than 16 years, thousands of deaths and countless rights violations later, Kashmir is yet again at a crucial juncture. New Delhi under Narendra Modi has made it clear that it is fighting a final battle. However, those who have seen through the fog of war would tell you that there is no final solution to Kashmir through bullets. A lasting peace will only flow from mature and just political negotiations.

By the time Majeed Dar figured out the power of peace, after being a pioneer in armed resistance for more than a decade, it was too late for him and Kashmir. A few months after I interviewed him, he was gunned down by rivals. In Kashmir far too many hate peace, too.

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 26, 1967

Race riots in U.S. cities

Racial riots spread to 11 cities and towns in North-Eastern United States to-day [July 25] taking a toll of 29 lives. As many as 2,100 were arrested. The damage caused to property was estimated at \$200 million (Rs. 150 crores). In Detroit city, the worst hit by riots, 1,500 Federal paratroopers helped a force of 11,500 National Guardsmen and local police to suppress the Negro rioters. Armoured carriers opened fire with their machine guns and the paratroopers began moving into restore order. President Johnson, who said the country "will not tolerate lawlessness" has ordered an additional 1,200 Federal troops on a standby alert at Selfridge Air Force base north of Detroit.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 26, 1917

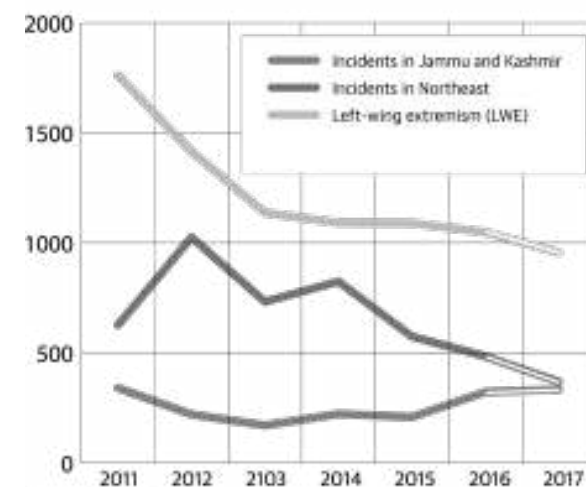
Indian boat owners' strike.

Since yesterday [July 23] all Indian cargo boat owners in Rangoon who particularly monopolise cargo boat supplies for the port have been on strike. They allege as reason for their action that whenever their boats were alongside European, Japanese, Singapore, and China bound steamers they are not so liable for prosecution for alleged breaches of port rules as when B.I. Steamers and Asiatic steamers are loading for Indian ports in which case the boat owner has to pay Rs. 300 to Rs. 500 by way of fines. The employees or boat owners have been ordered to stop loading and hold up prospective loading. The boat owners are petitioning the local Government, British Indian Steam Navigation Co., and Port Commissioners for an enquiry into their grievances. They further allege that the fault is as much on the shippers who order cargo to be sent in excess of capacity of a particular steamer, thereby causing obstruction.

DATA POINT

Kashmir, back on the boil

A yearly look at violent incidents shows a return to levels seen earlier this decade in Jammu and Kashmir. The number of such incidents involving left-wing extremism and in the Northeast dipped slightly in the same timeframe



Source: Lok Sabha Q and A

Notes: In 2017, there were 167 violent incidents in J&K, 184 in N-E and 478 LWE incidents till June-end. Data for rest of the year arrived at through extrapolation.