

# The changing idea of a university

Why the education system in India is staring at a dismal future



The first proposal of this government to be made public was the 100-day action plan for education. It includes framing a new National Education Policy, replacing the University Grants Commission (UGC) with another body, and adding 10 more Institutions of Eminence. This is merely a continuation of what the previous government was doing. This comes as no surprise; after all, it is well known that the Bharatiya Janata Party is deeply interested in education and culture. The last five years of the Modi government have shown us the nature of interventions made in the field of education.

### The purpose of education

While the media has extensively covered the attacks on institutions such as Jawaharlal Nehru University and Hyderabad Central University, and the violence unleashed by the Akhil Bharathi Vidyarthi Parishad, the student arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, in some places, what is more long lasting is the way the BJP has instrumentalised education by binding it to the objective of creating skills and employment and making education useful for the market. By doing this, it has hollowed out the whole purpose of education, which is to preserve and disseminate knowledge and generate new knowledge. This is the first time in the history of independent India that common people have started looking at universities as spaces where their hard-earned money is being mis-spent. The business of knowledge creation itself is being perceived as extravagant and unnecessary. So, if you look for the word 'knowledge' in the policy documents of the government, you are bound to be disappointed.

The very idea of pursuing truth and developing critical thought, which were seen as the role of universities, has gone into disuse. Universities were spaces where all kinds of ideas, however dominant, were constantly examined. The only aim



"The very idea of pursuing truth and developing critical thought, which were seen as the role of universities, has gone into disuse." Students of Hyderabad Central University at their convocation in Hyderabad in 2012. ■ M. SUBHASH

of education, as propounded by the BJP, seems to be to mainly inculcate nationalism, as prescribed by the government, among students as well as teachers. Vice chancellors and directors of institutes are going out of their way to prove their nationalistic credentials to the government. Where is the utility of criticality then? And what then becomes the role of research? The government even circulated a list of research areas and topics to be kept in mind while preparing and approving research proposals. This essentially means that there is no space for free inquiry in the field of higher education any more. If we look at the research proposals approved by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, the Indian Council of Historical Research and even scientific bodies, we realise the thinning of this area. Even the All India Institute of Medical Sciences recently held a seminar on 'astrology and the medical sciences'. This means that the very idea of science is under severe stress. Also, the stories of the pressure that independent research institutions are facing in the name of appraisal and scrutiny have not come out in the open for obvious

reasons.

Universities are supposed to keep alive the idea of excellence before the people at large. However, people look at some universities with suspicion today as students and scholars have been branded 'elitist', 'leftist' and 'anti-national' by the ruling party. If mediocre people are made to head top institutions of higher education, it becomes clear that all that matters is ideology. Mediocrity at all levels is seen as the democratisation of a space which was earlier the preserve of the 'elites'. In short, developing intellect is seen as unnecessary and even dangerous. All we need to do is conform to prevailing common sense. So, it is only logical that state resources are not wasted on activities which are seen as 'extra'.

### Withdrawal of state support

Apart from all this, public universities are being systematically weakened by the steady withdrawal of state support to them. This is ironically at a time when the number of first-generation learners in the university space has reached a satisfactory level. Universities needed more

support to improve access to higher education. Unfortunately, they are now facing a fund crunch. This leaves these students at a great disadvantage.

The government is firming an unequal hierarchy in the field by promoting the idea of Institutions of Eminence and keeping autonomy reserved for a privileged set of institutions. Most public universities with a long tradition are kept out of it, thus demoralising their teachers and students. Autonomy to such institutions has also been linked to withdrawal of state support.

The regulatory mechanism for the field of higher education had started to weaken during the UPA regime itself. The Modi government only furthered the process. Directives from the government became frequent and regulatory agencies were used to route them to universities. Directives from bodies like the UGC kept disrupting the functioning of universities. From reservation in faculty appointments to norms for doctoral research and framing of undergraduate and postgraduate courses and syllabi, it has been a story of over-reach and encroachment of the university space by the UGC. Universities have also failed to assert their autonomy and have allowed the UGC to enter areas it is not supposed to.

Along with this we have seen a campaign to purge campuses of dangerous 'anti-national' elements. Meetings and seminars have been held exhorting students to identify such elements. Independent scholars are now being shunned by universities and the nationalism check is applied almost everywhere.

Publishing is part of the academic ecosystem. Major publishing houses have started getting manuscripts legally vetted to avoid litigation and attack by 'nationalist' elements. We can expect publishing to take a right turn under the new regime.

We have not talked about school education. The RSS ran thousands of schools even when the NDA was not in power. The BJP's return to power provides a golden opportunity for the RSS to dictate syllabi, train teachers and even select them. All these developments over the last five years show that the education system is staring at a dismal future.

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# The anatomy of an image

The colossal information machine that helped create a winning narrative for the BJP is yet to be acknowledged



VAISHNA ROY

After the extraordinary mandate the BJP won, two ideas have been put forth: that Indians have suddenly adopted Hindutva and that they want the country "saved" by a strong leader. What nobody seems ready to acknowledge yet is the colossal nudge that social media and partisan mainstream television gave to creating this twin narrative in the popular consciousness.

If a fundamentally shrewd and pragmatic electorate was ready to ignore its own problems caused by demonetisation, agrarian distress and a stumbling economy, we must ask if it did this by its own volition or if it was steered into it by a PR blitz fabulously orchestrated by television and social media.

### The suppression of data

A report leaked in January showed unemployment at a 45-year high of 6.1%, but the government disowned it then and a Union Minister called it "fake news". Across channels, this stance was faithfully reiterated. The next month, there was a near-total absence of any examination of the security lapses that might have enabled the attack in Pulwama. Instead, only one note was struck hysterically: retaliation. Any attempt to scrutinise the Balakot air strikes was shouted down as 'anti-national', and television covered it as one might a war film.

Now, when the government releases the same unemployment figures or confirms that friendly fire brought down an Indian Air Force chopper, there's barely any protest. The suppression of data and the stalling of reports has already been normalised.

Crores are being spent in propaganda to ceaselessly create urban legends, films, web series, comic books, memes and jingles that incessantly shore up the Modi narrative. For this to work, it must be unchallenged – not only must Prime Minister Narendra Modi be shown as a great leader, he must be shown as a *flawless* leader. So when he goes off script with an erroneous comment about radar, a stream of quasi-scientific messages are released simultaneously to prove the comment wasn't wrong. Facts are constantly overta-

ken by fables fed directly into people's smartphones.

This disinformation network, running parallel to the hectoring and fawning of television, is the nerve centre of the BJP's propaganda machine. With dedicated cells of thousands of drone bees, it reaches millions every minute to disseminate its own post-truth version of facts. Eminent economists can point out the failure of demonetisation or the stagnation of exports or the decline in GDP growth, but it makes no difference because each critique is met with a social media forward that says the opposite.

### Disinformation deluge

We are guilty of underestimating the incalculable harm that fake news has done to how and what the country thinks. The entire political arena has been turned into a room of mirrors where nothing is as it seems. Phoney 'government' documents regularly do the rounds with statistics about terrorism or GDP figures that are dramatically different from the data even on government websites. Photographs of a teenage boy who committed suicide in Belagavi are circulated with captions claiming he was lynched for protecting cattle from cow smugglers. Let's understand this: Indians did not suddenly adopt militant Hindutva; they have been assiduously conditioned into doing so by a carpet-bombing of disinformation.

The websites that bust fake news are doing a magnificent job, but their reach is just not enough because verification takes far longer than the creation of fake news; and because it's nearly impossible to compete with an army of bots and keyboard warriors. Even after being exposed, the Belagavi travesty continues to be circulated.

Instead of applauding the BJP's social media strategy as some disembodied and arcane political craft, we need to worry about the repercussions of such massive manipulation of thought. And we need to worry that television is playing wingman.

Behind the razzle-dazzle of the landslide victory lurk uneasy queries about the reliability of government data and the country's growing democracy deficit. If the nation is supposed to have become both insecure and intolerant overnight, it would be interesting to know how such a mammoth exercise in manufactured consent has been executed. Because at some point the illusion is going to break and we will have to pick up the pieces.

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MEETA AHLAWAT

### SINGLE FILE

## Monkeypox scare

How the spread of the virus can be limited

R. PRASAD



On May 9, the Ministry of Health in Singapore confirmed that a Nigerian who had arrived in the city on April 28 had the rare disease, monkeypox. The monkeypox virus is similar to human smallpox and belongs to the virus family Poxviridae. It is transmitted primarily

ly through infected animals (rodents and primates). The man is suspected to have eaten bushmeat before arriving in Singapore, which could be the source of the virus. Human-to-human transmission of monkeypox is possible but limited. The virus is transmitted to those in close contact through secretions of the respiratory tract and skin lesions. While the disease is largely self-limiting, in some cases it does cause complications leading to death. During monkeypox outbreaks, fatality varies from 1-10%, with most deaths seen in younger people.

The symptoms of monkeypox showed two days after the Nigerian arrived in Singapore, but he remained in his hotel till May 7. He was transferred to a public hospital on that day and tested positive for monkeypox the next day, when he was referred to the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, Singapore. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), he is now in a stable condition.

To limit the spread of the disease, Singapore has already identified 23 persons who were in close contact with the patient and offered smallpox vaccination. The WHO notes that prior smallpox vaccination is highly effective in preventing monkeypox. Data from Africa suggest that smallpox vaccine offers at least 85% protection against monkeypox if the vaccine is administered before exposure to the virus.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S., vaccination after exposure to monkeypox "may help prevent the disease or make it less severe". In Singapore, at least 14 persons have been vaccinated. Close contacts have also been quarantined, while other contacts are under active surveillance.

Monkeypox occurs sporadically in Central and West Africa; cases have been reported from 10 African countries. It was first identified in humans in 1970 in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the disease has now become endemic. There were three confirmed cases in 2016 from the Central African Republic. In late 2017, 61 laboratory-confirmed cases were reported from Nigeria. One confirmed case and 15 suspected cases were reported in 2018 from Cameroon. Outside Africa, the first case was reported from the U.S. in 2003. In 2018, monkeypox was documented in three people in the U.K. and in one person in Israel.

Since the majority of monkeypox virus transmissions to humans are from animals, the WHO advocates "restricting or banning the movement" of small mammals and monkeys from countries where the virus is prevalent to limit the spread of the virus.

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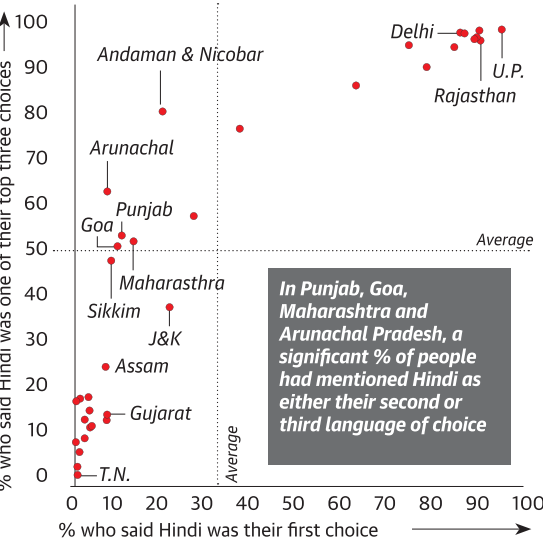
### DATA POINT

## Most for many

During the 2011 Census survey, people in only 12 of the 35\* States and UTs had overwhelmingly chosen Hindi as their first choice for communication. Among the rest, while a few chose Hindi as their second or third language of choice for communication, a majority of them chose English. By **Sumant Sen**

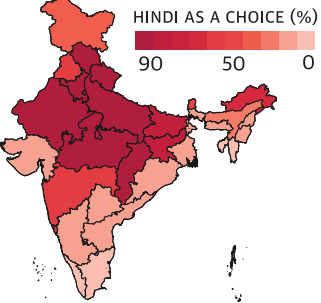
### Prevalence of Hindi

The chart plots the % of people who chose Hindi as their first choice against the % who chose Hindi as one of their top three choices. In 23 States and UTs Hindi was not the first choice of language. Of those 23, in 16 States, a very low percentage had chosen Hindi as a second or third choice



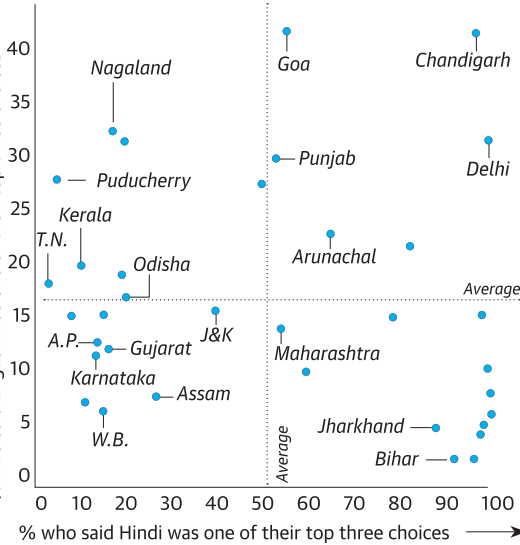
### Northern skew

The map shows the State-wise percentage of people who stated Hindi as their first, second, or third choice of language. Most of the 12 States and UTs that chose Hindi as their first choice were located in northern and central India. The south had the least % of such people



### A matter of choice

The graph plots the % who chose Hindi as one of their top three choices against the % who chose English as one of their top three choices. In general, States which chose Hindi predominantly as one of their top three choices had the least % of people choosing English



### FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 4, 1969

## Curfew in Hyderabad, Warangal

Within 24 hours after the Army was called out to assist the civilian authorities to maintain law and order a seven-hour curfew, ending at 5 a.m. to-morrow, was clamped in Hyderabad city. A 24-hour curfew was also imposed on Warangal. The curfew in both places followed unabated violence and arson for almost the entire day to-day [June 3]. The police opened fire at 11 places in Hyderabad for the second day to-day resulting in the death of six persons and injuries to 32, as violent Telengana agitators went on a rampage. The police also fired on riotous mobs at Warangal and at Kodangal in Mahbubnagar District. Attendance in many centres was thin, and at least at one centre not a single student turned up. No examinations could be held in five centres because the examination papers did not reach them. Hyderabad City to-day witnessed large-scale arson, looting and vandalism.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 4, 1919.

## Madras Fisheries.

H.E. Lord Willingdon who is in charge of Fisheries and Industries portfolios, to-day [June 3] at 'Stone House' [in Coonoor], accorded Rao Bahadur Govindan, Assistant Director of Fisheries, an interview. The latest development of the west coast fish industry is of inaugurating schools for the children of fishermen and a school for training teachers for these schools is to be opened at Calicut with Mr. G. Menon, B.A., B.L., late of Zamorin's College as headmaster. Sir Frederick Nicholson, who originated the fisheries in 1905 and held the post of Honorary Director, has resigned. He has consented to act as Superintendent of Fisheries on the West Coast, periodically inspecting them and to advise the fishermen of the latest scientific appliances. Mr. Hornell, Marine Biologist and who was Superintendent of Shank and Pearl fisheries in Tuticorin, is now the Director on a salary of Rs. 1,200.

### CONCEPTUAL

## Regret theory

ECONOMICS

This refers to the theory that while making decisions under uncertainty, apart from the possible benefits of their decisions, people also take into account the likely regret that they will experience in case their decisions fail to yield the expected benefits. Further, the delayed feedback that people receive about what they should have done after failing to achieve the desired benefit can cause them to experience regret. Regret theory was first developed by British economists Graham Loomes and Robert Sugden in their 1982 paper "Regret theory: An alternative theory of rational choice under uncertainty".

### MORE ON THE WEB

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bit.ly/Section376E