

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

VACCINE BULLYING

UK's restrictions on travellers inoculated with Covishield are ill-informed. India must use diplomacy to clear impasse

THE UK'S NEW post-Covid travel rules, announced last week and slated to become effective from October 4, have been criticised as discriminatory towards travellers from India. The list of countries whose vaccines are recognised in the UK does not include India. This means that Indian travellers, who have received both doses of Covishield, will have to quarantine themselves after arriving in the UK, even though the Serum Institute of India-manufactured vaccine is a variant of the Oxford-AstraZeneca jab. Congress leaders have called the move a humiliation of the world's largest vaccine manufacturer — some of them have even described the protocols as racist — and the government has threatened to impose the "reciprocity principle" against British travellers to India. The UK government's clarification that the restrictions are only administrative measures and visitors from some countries that use the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines will also be required to follow the quarantine protocols has not quelled the firestorm. The opprobrium is, no doubt, justified. The way out of the impasse, however, lies in adroit use of diplomatic channels to push the UK to reverse what is clearly an ill-informed decision.

There can be little doubt on the credibility of the vaccine that has driven close to 90 per cent of the world's largest inoculation project outside of China. Covishield is recognised as a strong shield against Covid by the WHO and health authorities in the US. It is a major constituent of inoculation projects in several parts of the developing world and meets the vaccine passport requirements of at least 18 European countries. But the UK's Department of Health and Social Care has cited technicalities to exclude Covishield from the National Health Service's Covid Pass — a proof of vaccination status — even though it recognises the Oxford AstraZeneca shots manufactured under a different brand name, Vaxzevria. The agency has reportedly said it is working to determine which "non-UK vaccine to recognise". This clarification seems bizarre given that the country's Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) approves the AstraZeneca jab manufactured by the SII and more than five million shots of these vaccines have been administered in the UK. In fact, in July, Prime Minister Boris Johnson invoked MHRA's approval to make a pitch for EU vaccine passports for residents of his country who have been administered SII's AstraZeneca shots.

India is the UK's sixth largest non-EU trading partner and Indian students — amongst the most discriminated by the new vaccine regulations — are second only to those from China in terms of foreign enrolments in the country's varsities. Foreign Minister S Jaishankar has rightly told his UK counterpart, Elizabeth Truss, that "an early resolution of the quarantine issue is in the mutual interest of the two countries". In the coming days, India must continue to press this point and dispel all misgivings about Covishield's credibility.

SLIPPING ON GROUND

CRPF report flags leadership issues in Chhattisgarh operations. They need to be addressed for security of jawans and civilians

THE CENTRAL RESERVE Police Force (CRPF) has an unenviable task in Chhattisgarh and other areas affected by Left Wing Extremists (LWEs). It performs a host of functions, from policing and security duties, to conducting counter-insurgency operations — the latter against an adversary that consists of Indian citizens, often deeply connected to local geography, ecology and with an intimate knowledge of the terrain. Given these persistent challenges, it is disturbing that a CRPF review of the forces based in Chhattisgarh by senior officials has found a significant dip in the quality of operations in the Maoist-violence affected state over the last two years.

As reported by this newspaper, a report based on the review has been sent to Sukma, Konta, Bijapur, Dantewada, Jagdalpur, and Raipur and lays much of the blame for the decline on the fact that the involvement of senior officers at the level of commandant and second-in-command has considerably decreased. It is not difficult to see what a lack of hands-on leadership can lead to — for instance, the report found that there have been slip-ups in setting up tactical resting sites during operations. This, of course, leaves troops open to ambushes, which have led to considerable casualties over the years. Most recently, the Sukma-Bijapur ambush led to the death of 22 security personnel. With over a thousand security personnel killed in the state since 2011, the paramilitary forces can ill-afford a decline in operational leadership. The question of training and leadership in the CRPF also has a grave impact on the communities where they function: Recently, the Justice V K Agarwal report concluded that the eight people, including four minors, killed by the CRPF's elite CoBRA unit in Edesmetta in 2013 were civilians, and not Maoists as the force had claimed. In 2019, a single-judge commission concluded that the CRPF had killed 17 people, firing unilaterally in Bijapur. In both cases, the incidents were apparent "mistakes", stemming from a failure of jawans to tell civilians and extremists apart.

While a more involved leadership on the ground may not be sufficient to deal with both operational and intelligence failures that have led to the deaths of jawans as well as the killing of civilians, it is certainly a necessary first step. The CRPF needs a leadership that is more empathetic to its personnel and equal to the harsh circumstances they face. Equally, paramilitary forces must be sensitised to the plight of people in states like Chhattisgarh, who face the brunt of poverty, a security state and Maoist violence.

LOST PITCH

Cancellation of tours by New Zealand and England is a setback for cricket in Pakistan and fans everywhere

IT WAS SUPPOSEDLY the last step in Pakistan's long and arduous road to bringing cricket back home. After a decade in wilderness, post the attack on Sri Lanka's team bus by terrorists in Lahore in March 2009, Pakistan was being incrementally reintegrated into the touring schedule. It has hosted West Indies, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe, besides the elite players of world cricket in the popular Pakistan Super League in the last two years. The fear and reluctance of touring the country were gradually receding, and hosting New Zealand and England, in the next couple of months, was the logical and final step in declaring to the sporting world that Pakistan is safe to tour. But the cancellation of both tours, have sucker-punched their dreams and ambitions to be once again a vibrant, colourful cricket host.

New Zealand's reluctance, citing "specific, credible security threat" against the team, is more reasonable, and hence acceptable, than that of England. Only a fortnight ago an ISIS sympathiser randomly stabbed six people at a supermarket in Auckland. In the past, their cricketers have endured close shaves, twice in Colombo at the peak of Lankan civil war and once in Karachi, after an explosion outside their hotel. But England's excuses in cancelling the trip, chiefly "the mental and physical well-being of our players", "increasing concerns about travelling to the region" and "bubble fatigue", reeked of panic and pretence.

The boards of New Zealand and England, perhaps the ICC too, might compensate Pakistan's logistical loss, but not the damage it has inflicted on a sparkling cricket culture, as deep and diverse, as joyous and frenzied as India's. The cricket-mad country will have to be content with PSL and visits of low-rung nations, even those could be limited in the aftermath of the pullouts, and their best cricketers would be forced to consider someone else's home their home again. That last step on Pakistan's redemption road now looks longer and more arduous than ever before.

The case against NEET

It encroaches on powers of states, skews field against rural and urban poor



A K RAJAN

INDIA IS A federal country; the Indian Constitution distributes the legislative field of education among both states and the Union. The establishment (incorporation), regulation, and winding up of universities is an exclusive state subject. That power is denied to the Parliament.

Admission of students, appointment of teaching faculty, conduct of examination, declaration of results, conferment of degrees, fixation of syllabus are all included within the regulation of the university. "Coordination and determination of standards in higher education" is an exclusive field conferred on the Union. The Union has to co-ordinate with states before fixing such standards. According to the Supreme Court, "The word coordination does not merely mean evaluation but also harmonising relationship for concerted action". Without such consultation with the state governments and treating them as equal partners, the Union cannot decide the standards by itself. Even after the 42nd Amendment, the legislative field of "incorporation", "regulation" and "winding up" of the universities, carved out from education, remains with the states.

In 1984, when the demand for certain courses exceeded the number of seats available, Tamil Nadu evolved the Common Entrance Test (CET) for admission to engineering and medical institutions. Later, a decision was taken to abolish all entrance examinations through the "Tamil Nadu admission in professional educational institutions Act 2006" (Act 3/2007). Students were admitted only on the basis of their performance in the qualifying examinations (Class XII marks).

From 1997, the Union government showed its intent to control the admissions to all medical institutions. The Medical Council of India (MCI) on December 21, 2010, and the Dental Council of India (DCI) in 2012, issued notifications prescribing a common entrance examination for admission. The Supreme Court, in 2013, in the *Christian Medical College vs Union of India* case ruled that MCI and DCI had no such powers to regulate the admission of students into medical institutions "since they have the effect of denuding the states, state-run Universities". In the review petitions filed by MCI, the Supreme Court on April 11, 2016 "re-

called" the judgment delivered on July 18, 2013.

Within a few days thereafter, the Sankalp Charitable Trust filed a public interest litigation, seeking a direction to make NEET compulsory for admission of students to all medical colleges. That case first appeared before the court on April 27, 2016. The very next day, the writ of mandamus was issued as prayed for. The SC gave the reason that the 2013 judgment had already been recalled therefore, the "notifications dated December 21, 2010 are in operation as on today". Though education is a concurrent subject, NEET was mandated without even giving notice to any of the states. The SC failed to note that the field covered by Entry 25 List III (Concurrent List), is "Education minus establishment and regulation of universities".

The MCI Act, Section 10D, conferred power to regulate admissions to medical colleges. That was inserted only in May 2016. In December 2010, there was no legislative authority to issue such a notification. A valid notification was issued only on January 22, 2018. At present, the MCI Act has been repealed; only the National Medical Commission Act holds the field.

Laws are made for the people; people are not made for law. The success of a law is determined by its outcome. If a law does not achieve the object, the law has to be changed to ensure the desired outcome.

According to our study, NEET has reduced the number of Class XII students getting admitted to medical colleges. Only students who attended coaching classes for two or three years could get admission. Very few "first-generation" students could clear NEET. It shows that the wealthy and powerful have rigged the system of NEET to perpetuate their privilege. The professional classes have figured out how to pass their advantage to their children, converting meritocracy into hereditary aristocracy. There cannot be a competition between a race-horse and a "cart-pulling" horse. The rural and urban poor cannot spend lakhs of rupees to get coached for NEET and cannot afford to wait for two or three years only to prepare for the test.

Conducting NEET and NEXT (National Exit Exam for MBBS) under the NMC Act is also tantamount to shifting the regulation of univer-

sity to the Union list. That amounts to altering the basic structure of the Constitution.

"Public health, hospital and dispensaries" is a state subject. Therefore, there is a constitutional obligation on the state to ensure quality public health even in remote villages, which do not have the facilities available in metro cities. The objective of starting more medical colleges in remote areas is to get qualified doctors in and around that region. Rarely are persons from metropolises willing to serve in remote villages.

Every student entering medical colleges does not become an expert in their field. Every patient does not require such expertise in treatment. But a qualified medical practitioner is required to treat common ailments. That can be achieved only by producing qualified doctors from all areas within a state.

One of the consequences of NEET would be the fall in the number of such dedicated doctors willing to serve in remote areas. Till the 1960s, even in Madras City, the number of MBBS doctors was inadequate. Only RMP (registered medical practitioner) and LMP (Licentiate in Medical Practice) diploma holders would treat people. This would have been the state of affairs even in Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi. That situation has changed today, only due to the sustained attention on the improvement of health taken by the states. If the admission of students continues to be done based on NEET, India will go back to the pre-Independence era on public health. There may not be enough doctors available for rural public health centres. Even for ordinary ailments, people would have to travel to metro cities.

The SC, as early as 1960, had suggested starting more rural universities to cater to the rural people. Though this was in a case relating to reservations, the rationale is applicable to admissions of students as well. Finally, students should be tested only on what they have learnt in their years of schooling. Testing them through entrance examinations in areas they did not study is nothing but arbitrary.

The writer is a former judge of Madras HC. He headed the committee appointed by the Tamil Nadu government on the impact of NEET on medical admissions in the state

LIMITS OF BHAICHARA POLITICS

BSP's Brahmin outreach may fail in the absence of a social alliance



BADRI NARAYAN

WHILE ADDRESSING a conference of Brahmins recently, Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati said she will take care of the dignity, glory and livelihood of Brahmins and provide them proper representation in the party and the government. The BSP is trying hard to form a Dalit-Brahmin social alliance for the UP assembly election in 2022. In a way, this is an effort to revive the experiment the BSP had successfully conducted during the 2007 assembly election.

The BSP's electoral strategy is based on forming social alliances of Dalits — its vote base — with other communities. This works in two ways: First, by providing political representation and second, through evolving social harmony or "bhaichara". After 2007, the BSP tried to form electoral alliances with communities such as Muslims and Yadavs, but these didn't fetch the expected returns. It, therefore, is attempting to repeat the Dalit-Brahmin alliance experiment that won the party office in 2007 for the forthcoming election.

In this form of social engineering, a community with a lower location in the social hierarchy proposes and leads an alliance with a community that has a higher location, so that they can acquire and share power. The question is whether the two social poles can come together comfortably in 2022.

Post independence, Indian democracy had, in its own way, ruptured the functioning of the social hierarchy. Brahmins and Dalits, two social poles, started supporting the Congress together and worked politically as an alliance to acquire power. Due to various

reasons, contradictions and disillusionment arose in this political alliance which, on the one hand, caused the political downfall of the Congress and, on the other, gave rise to the BSP in north India. The BSP's own Dalit vote base is insufficient for the party to win elections. That is why it started looking for alliances with other communities. It realised that the contradiction of Dalits with the new dominant communities in UP is sharper than with the traditionally dominant communities like Brahmins. This is due to changes in rural land relations and the growing political aspirations of neo-rich, neo-dominant groups, most of whom have emerged from among the OBCs in rural Uttar Pradesh. So it was strategically comfortable for the BSP to form a Dalit-Brahmin alliance under its leadership.

After the decline of the Congress, Brahmins, as a caste, lost their importance in the politics of the state and started rallying around the BJP. The BSP had formed an alliance with the BJP in 1995 after its coalition with the Samajwadi Party failed. Thus, through various ways, Mayawati evolved the BSP's connect with Brahmin leaders and proposed a Dalit-Brahmin alliance under the "sarvajan" agenda in 2007. This alliance succeeded because the BSP had developed a comfort level with Brahmin leaders and the community after having worked together for at least six-seven years before the election. This social alliance between Dalits and Brahmins had been forged by forming *bhaichara samitis* (brotherhood committees).

But this time it seems that the BSP is try-

ing to revive a political alliance with Brahmins, which has been a major vote base for the BJP, without developing a social alliance. Dalits at the grassroots may feel comfortable while voting for the BSP along with Brahmins, but a similar socio-political comfort in the Brahmin community can't emerge naturally. The necessary political accommodation has to be cultivated through a rigorous campaign. Merely depending on anti-incumbency or highlighting the perception of Brahmin annoyance with the BJP cannot necessarily produce a shift in allegiance at the grass roots.

Moreover, the cultural-religious symbols through which the BJP works to mobilise the public are very deeply ingrained in the hearts and minds of a major section of the Brahmin public. This has made them a long-term vote base for the BJP.

In these conditions, the BSP's over-dependence on the Dalit-Brahmin alliance for electoral victory in 2022 may not yield the expected results. A middle-aged villager from the Jatav community in a village near Allahabad told me, "Bhaiyya, hum neeche aur upar ek ho jaye to hume kaun hara sakta hai?" (When people from a lower social location and those from a higher social location come together, then who can defeat us?) But we still need to know whether those referred to as "uparwaley" in this conversation feel comfortable in shifting their political position in the favour of the BSP.

The writer is professor, Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad



SEPTEMBER 22, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

PM ON PUNJAB

THE PRIME MINISTER is going to Chandigarh on September 22 to study the situation in Punjab after the violence two days ago in the wake of the arrest of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. She has kept herself in touch with developments in the state on Monday through intelligence reports. Home Minister Giani Zail Singh discussed the situation with the cabinet and home secretaries. He apprised Mrs Gandhi of the latest developments. The PM, it is believed, has doubts on whether Chief Minister Darbara Singh will be able to handle the situation. She is also worried because she will be on an 18-day tour abroad. She has, therefore, asked the

Chief Minister to call an all-party meeting on Tuesday to seek the cooperation of the Opposition in maintaining peace and harmony in the state. She also wants to take the Opposition into confidence in dealing with the situation.

ANTULAY'S FUTURE

THE MYSTERY AROUND Mrs Indira Gandhi's inability to find a successor for Maharashtra Chief Minister A R Antulay remained unsolved. There is a chance of Antulay being given a reprieve till the second week of October, when the PM returns to the country. The central leadership is keen to settle the future of the trusts floated by Antulay

before removing him from office.

HARYANA NO-TRUST

THE HARYANA VIDHAN Sabha rejected a no-trust motion against the Bhajan Lal government by 50 votes to 37. The motion tabled by the BJP, Lok Dal and the Janata Party was the first against the government.

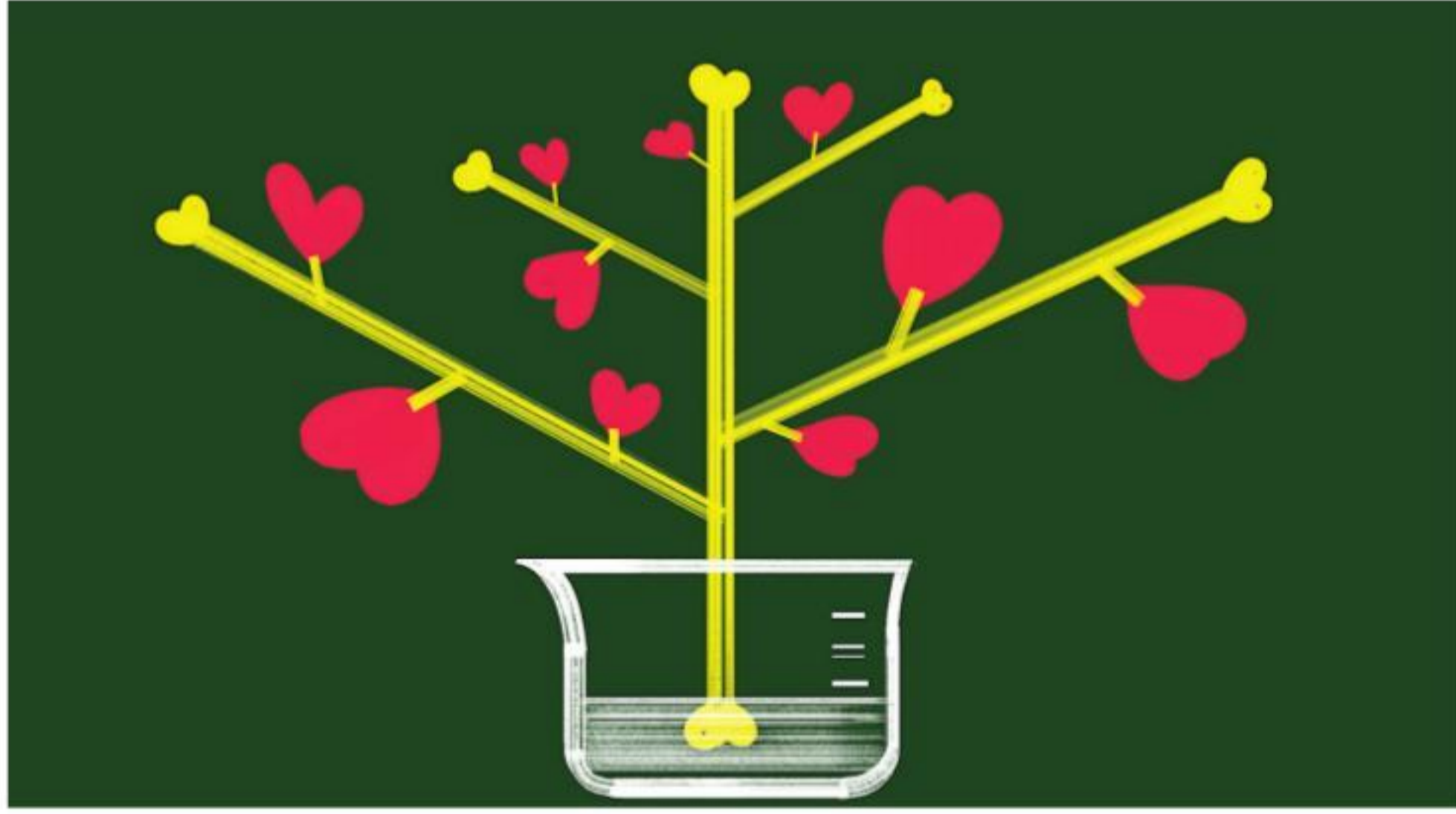
POWER CRISIS

DUE TO AN acute power crisis in the entire northern region, the Centre has asked DESU to curb power consumption. The directive follows the curtailment of power from Bhakra for Delhi with immediate effect.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Meat of the matter

The call for food diversity comes up against one question: Is it right to eat certain kinds of food at all?



C R Sasikumar



MUKUND PADMANABHAN

I FOUND MYSELF reading my friend Peter Ronald deSouza's essay ('The mutton mince dosa test', IE, September 15) with a mix of hearty appreciation and nagging disquiet. There is indeed, as he argues, a troubling link between food and fanaticism in India. He is right in saying our attitudes towards what we can and cannot eat have led to a "politics of othering". While there is much to be said for outrightly condemning violent beef vigilantes or exposing the irrationality of specific food taboos, it is somewhat simplistic to draw up an unreserved case for food diversity, leave alone suggest, as he does, that it is "a good index of a tolerant society."

The argument that we must be tolerant about what others eat often involves making a conceptual leap from "descriptive relativism" (the empirical reality that our morality and our cultural practices are diverse) to "ethical relativism" (the theory, in its most extreme forms, that moral truths can be known or determined only within cultural contexts). One man's meat, as the saying goes, is another man's poison. And so, isn't it better to just leave it at that?

This kind of relativism is usually well-meaning, being grounded in notions of plurality and tolerance. Attempts to contest it risk appearing narrow and illiberal. Taboo foods, after all, the main subject of deSouza's thought-provoking critique, tend to awaken deep-seated cultural prejudices, arouse feelings of revulsion. Surely, the point is to overcome this?

Yes, of course it is. Social discrimination on the basis of food choices is unacceptable. Even so, it is important to remember that at the high table of a true and thoroughgoing food libertarianism, as opposed to that populated with dishes catering to a moderate gastronomic adventurousism, it is not enough to be seated (or share) such things as pork curries, beef fries, or mutton mince dosas. One would have to be fine with other more "unusual" dishes as well, such as raw monkey brain, rice wine infused with baby mice, dogs of various breeds, and sautéed tarantula. The people who consume them have as much a right to complain about food puritanism and othering as your everyday desi non-vegetarian.

Reading deSouza's call for food diversity (which is not quite the same thing as food fusion, which he also celebrates), I realised what nagged me was its deafening silence about one aspect of food ethics — is it right to eat certain kinds of food at all? It's time to make a disclosure here. For the last year-and-a-half, I have gone from being an occasional non-vegetarian to a vegan. Almost vegan is much more accurate, as I have allowed myself to, on occasion, eat something with butter or ghee rather than risk offending a host and, much worse, caged a bite or two of some milk-infused burfis. Moreover, as the former US President Jimmy Carter admitted in a different context, I have looked at non-vegetarian dishes nostalgically and lovingly, or been routinely disloyal in my mind.

What surprises me though, as a struggling and imperfect vegan, is how people react to veganism. Some believe it is a form of food puritanism, which it most definitely is

not. Others dismiss it as a result of some passing woke trend, an attempt to be a food fashionista (as opposed to a deSouza-like "food fusionista"). Although there are some activists who have given veganism a bad name, very few appreciate that it could also be arrived at through deliberative philosophical inquiry into the ethics of food, its production and consumption. My so-called "conversion" occurred while reading and re-reading Peter Singer, the brilliant (and controversial) Australian philosopher now based at Princeton, as preparation for a couple of bioethics lectures to university students.

The monstrous cruelties that attend industrial factory farming, which author Yuval Noah Harari described as probably the worst crime in history, need no repetition here. But if you do not believe, as some religious texts have declared, that man was made in God's image and was placed to have dominion over every other living thing on earth, then it is worth at least considering the vegan case, particularly as we now live in a world where human survival and nourishment can sustain without animal slaughter on such a gigantic scale.

Vegetarians like to think they are more humane about their dietary choices, but they rarely consider what goes into the making of dairy products. What it usually means is a long and quick succession of pregnancies for cows and buffalos, their calves separated not so long after birth, and their milk diverted for human consumption. If the calf is female, then it is raised for another succession of economically-lucrative pregnancies. If it's a male, then it is usually quietly sent to the abattoir.

That the many millions who worship cows in this country choose to be either unaware or unfeeling about how they suffer on account of milk production is reflective of a larger truth. When it comes to thinking about how our food is produced, we would rather not know, or deal with our cognitive dissonances by suppressing what we do know. Allowing oneself to think critically and candidly about food may demand making challenging dietary changes. It is this kind of collective denial that results in activist campaigns, and even books, devoted to climate change failing to make even a passing reference to food. Our food system produces more greenhouse gases than most other sectors, including transportation, but we are

Like Singer, I look hopefully at the growth of plant-based meat alternatives (which may become cheaper with growing economies of scale) and the advances in the making of in-vitro meat (essentially lab-grown meat through the painless harvest of muscle tissue). It may be just the thing to relive the taste of the mutton mince dosa at the Delhi School of Economics canteen. Like my friend Peter deSouza, I remember it very fondly, too.

more comfortable talking about limiting the size of cars than reducing the harm to cows or goats. Never mind also that methane, tonne for tonne, is about 30 times worse in its impact than carbon dioxide by some estimates.

The issue, of course, is not merely whether we are staking our future for the sake of sushi or hamburgers. It seems fair to ask whether animals, particularly those that have sentience (which Singer defines in terms of capacity to feel pleasure and pain) and have some notion of continuity (loosely, a sense of self-awareness over time) are worthy of moral consideration. One may think they don't, but at the very least, a case needs to be made out for this.

In an intellectual climate where prejudices on the basis of tribe, culture, nation, race, sex, and sexual preference have been rejected, Singer believes we are still struggling to overcome "speciesism", a bias in favour of one's own species over that of others. He argues, and disturbingly, that just like racists violate equality by privileging the interests of their own race and sexists violate equality by favouring their own sex, speciesists abuse the interests of members of other species. "The pattern," he says, "is identical in each case."

Such veganism is not founded on food puritanism. Neither is it grounded in taboo or irrational revulsion. For instance, some vegans allow themselves to eat bivalves such as clams and mussels because they lack brains as well as a central nervous system. It is important to contrast the philosophical literature on veganism with the narrow and reproachful attitude of many vegan activists, who rely only on moral messaging, fail to recognise their own imperfections, and get the backs of others up through campaigns that seem hostile and denigrating.

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The writer teaches philosophy at Krea University and was the Editor of The Hindu

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Angela Merkel, the longest-serving and most influential European leader of the 21st century has been a vital standard bearer for a consensual, rules-based way of doing politics on the world stage."
—THE GUARDIAN

Making a choice in UP

Communities concerned about the model of governance implemented in the country need enlightened reappraisal of their options



SALMAN KHURSHID

IN YOGI ADITYANATH'S world, ironically like *Sophie's World*, words mean something different from normal times. Munshi Premchand, who wrote the wonderful short story, *Idgah*, about a little boy who worried that his mother burnt her fingers in preparing roti for him and, therefore, spent his money on buying a pair of tongs instead of sweets like the other children, would have scarce imagined that *abba jaan* could be used as a pejorative term. But that is exactly what has happened. People using the term of respect for their fathers are labelled with those words to describe having taken more than their share of subsidised rations. Of course, not only is the allegation palpably untrue but it is clearly directed against Muslim families to cause provocation of hostility. On the other hand, Premchand's stories highlight the essential humanity of our experience.

People ask me what theme the Congress will project in the coming elections in UP. It must inevitably be to counter and defeat the coarseness and harshness of the ruling party ethos, the divisive tactics to polarise communities, the insensitivity towards the most vulnerable, the shameful repudiation of the idea of India. This we hope to do with the comforting touch of Premchand, imbued with the reality of human condition but committed to gently chiding the insensitive, and steering the unknowing towards happiness. People also naturally want to know if we have a CM face. Once again, our response is that we, of course, have a face but why for CM alone? Priyanka Gandhi Vadra has taken up the challenge of revitalising the party after its roller-coaster ride of 33 years out of power, but more than that to reverse UP's slide into a cauldron of human values where life has no price and welfare is all about the volume of votes it can garner.

The *abba jaan* clan are not the only ones to be attacked, as accidental Hindus suffer a similar fate. A universal religion is now sought to be made a monopoly of some, its profound inclusive principles that have been the backbone of Indian secularism twisted into an unrecognisable mass of anger, hate and violence. Yes, Hinduism is in danger but sadly from within. It is the duty of all who cherish the Hindu way of life as indeed those who celebrate the idea of equal space and dignity of all religions, to join the battle to protect faith. Since the adversaries of humanity have sought to divide Hindus and Muslims amongst others, it is the beholder duty of good Hindus and Muslims to come together and defeat the evil designs.

Some people say that the problem is that the bulk of Hindus have chosen to reject the secular project but that is a mistaken view given that the BJP (and their allies who do not all subscribe to the entire range of issues) got only one-third of the total vote in the last general election. There is thus space in the majority community, perhaps it would be correct to say, to support an alternative to the BJP.

Whilst the Hindu, liberal and conservative, will indeed play their part in the defence of India, it is important that the minority communities, particularly Muslims, too play a constructive role to unite the major sections of the non-BJP electorate instead of making myopic, temporary adjustments with entities that can acquire local pockets of power but in real terms are unable to, or are unwilling to, offer a nationwide alternative to PM Modi's new India. There is no gainsaying that Muslims along with Brahmins and Dalits formed the bulwark of Congress politics till the developments of the past 30 years changed the landscape. Recurring communal riots and the demolition of Babri Masjid contributed to the gradual attrition of vote with periodic reversal of the trend. The Sachar Committee was a far-reaching, visionary exercise but its ground impact was at best mixed. But even then, the BJP let loose a barrage of criticism that now raises its head afresh in the *abba jaan* affair.

In challenging the BJP dominance, no regional party can be expected to sacrifice its political and physical territory but enlightened adjustments will need to be made. But more than that, communities that feel concerned about the model of governance implemented in the country over the past decade, too, need enlightened reappraisal of their options. The "here and now" outcome approach has not given any satisfactory results thus far and is not likely to do any better in the future. Imagined or real disappointments with the Congress, combined with no questions about the empty words of other parties, is not the recipe to address the anguish and anxiety being felt by people due to the short-sighted or devious policies of the present government. The matter is complicated further because the slightest discussion on this score itself is dubbed appeasement and discrimination.

Debate and thorough discussion are the basis of democratic choice, but the concerned groups have to choose in silence because the very mention of a choice triggers outrage contrived to disturb rationality. Thus, the choice made helps the chooser less and the adversary more, an example of a political forced error. It seems that we all have to learn from the errors made and not continue to make them repeatedly by preoccupying ourselves with the blame game.

The writer is a senior Congress leader and former external affairs minister

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

KAFKAESQUE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'State of suspicion' (IE, September 21). The recent order in Kashmir authorising close surveillance of government employees is yet another instance of the state's heavy-handedness. Besides enabling thought-policing, which is contrary to the spirit of democracy, it also smacks of deep distrust. The potential for misuse in the hands of an authoritarian government cannot be ignored. Combating militancy in the Valley requires a well-considered and meticulous plan. Such repressive tactics, however, would further discontent and should be rescinded.

Ila Railkar, Mumbai

A MASTERSTROKE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Channi's challenge' (IE, September 20). The Indian National Congress has delivered a masterstroke that can turn the tables for the Vidhan Sabha elections in 2022. Picking Charanjit Singh Channi as the state's first Dalit Chief Minister has given INC the first mover's advantage in the nick of time, as its state party leadership was fragmenting. However, Channi needs to put on the greatest show of administration in less than a year's time as the main opposition parties like BSP, AAP and BJP are promising a Dalit chief minister candidate in 2022 as well.

Ankita Sharma, Panchkula

NOT BY RELIGION

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'An inconvenient truth' (IE, September 18). The Indian subcontinent is no stranger to the tribulations inflicted on it by scores of foreigners, albeit not from any one particular religion or region. For instance, when we see a Muslim,

Mahmud Ghazni from Afghanistan, plundering our motherland, we also see a Catholic Alexander from Europe vying to do the same, a Genghis Khan from Mongolia (not a Muslim, even if his last name might suggest so), whose attempt was warded off by Alauddin Khilji, while not forgetting the British who marauded us most rapaciously of all. Thus, conflating the invasions with religion will serve only to drive further schisms into society. What is needed perhaps, is a Truth and Reconciliation Commission like the one established in South Africa in 1995 to uncover the truths about human rights violations committed during the apartheid regime. This approach is far more humane than retribution. It requires a contrite and conscious acknowledgement of the fact that whatever grotesque injustice happened in the past was wrong, notwithstanding the religious affiliations of the victims, and that it never be repeated again. Looking forward is the only way to make our great nation pace ahead.

Vinay Saroha, Delhi

AUKUS BOOST

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Feud among friends' (IE, September 21). Notwithstanding French anger at AUKUS, availability of eight nuclear powered submarines in Indo-Pacific is a big security bonus for India. China will be now forced to reorient its focus entirely on this region and the Taiwan straits, which will open up more options for India along the LAC. The US has calculated that a suitable commercial package to French defence industry in near future will douse their anger. Polite diplomatic noise will serve India's interests best in this feud among friends.

H N Bhagwat, Chiplun

For a citizen's police

Police reforms remain on paper, people must demand accountability



MEERAN CHADHA BORWANKAR

SEPTEMBER 22 NEEDS to be celebrated as 'Police Reforms Day' because of the Supreme Court's historic verdict on this day in 2006 in a writ petition by Prakash Singh and others. The three-judge bench consisting of Justices Y K Sabharwal, C K Thakker and P K Balasubramanyam studied the "distortions and aberrations" in the functioning of the police and had given seven significant directions. If implemented, they will be game-changers for the citizens of India and the police.

However, politicians and corrupt police officers together are obstructing the implementation of the reforms. The Sachin Waze-Param Bir Singh-Anil Deshmukh saga is a recent example of dangerous collusion. It is for ending such unholy nexuses that the SC had intervened to set law enforcement agencies free from the clutches of self-serving political leaders. To enable honest police officers to concentrate on their professional work of crime prevention, investigation and maintenance of public order, instead of being used and abused by those in power. One major cause for the tardy progress of police reforms is the lack of public awareness and sustained interest in law enforcement.

Citizens cry out loudly if there is a cruel rape, merciless murder or daylight robbery but later go into a slumber, which encourages political parties to maintain the status quo. The SC, therefore, took the lead to initiate reforms aiming at citizen-centric policing. It

mandated that all postings, from the officer-in-charge of a police station to the head of the department, should be based on merit. Currently, closeness to the ruling party is the sole criterion. Police officers, therefore, are busy cultivating politicians instead of looking after the interests of citizens. To check this all-pervasive detrimental practice of "cherry-picking", the court had directed the formation of Establishment Boards for unbiased postings, transfers, promotions and other service-related matters regarding police officers. It involved the Union Public Service Commission for the selection of heads of state police forces. The court's insistence on fixed tenure to all operational heads is to give adequate time to police leaders to implement their policies. Otherwise, their tenures have been solely dependent on the pleasure or displeasure of the ruling party.

The creation of Security Commissions at the Centre and in states as directed by the court would ensure robust policy-making at both levels. It would also protect the police from unwarranted political pressures, enabling them to concentrate on core issues. The court has further sought a separation of law and order and crime investigation. It would reduce the workload of police officers. The 'Status of Police in India Report 2019' (SPIR) by Common Cause, Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Tata Trusts found that "police personnel of

nearly all the states (are) excessively overworked, with average personnel working for 14 hours a day".

Another police reform that is entirely in the interest of citizens is establishing "complaint authorities" at district and state levels. Such impartial and independent committees are meant to enquire into the allegations of police misconduct or harassment and provide succour to the community.

The seven major reforms aim to revamp law enforcement agencies, but the response from the states has been lukewarm. One can also discern deliberate sabotage by political parties as they tend to appoint their favourites to Establishment Boards and complaint authorities. Giving extensions to preferred officers who are on the verge of retirement to harass or silence dissent is also being resorted to. As a result, these bodies, even if created in some states, have failed to win the confidence of either police officers or citizens. And this is not peculiar to any one political party, all of them are united in their effort to "cage the parrot".

If police reforms are implemented in true earnestness, criminals like Vikas Dubey will not be allowed to kill police officers in uniform. Nor will felonious men go around raping women. Because officers leading police stations and districts, being men and women of merit, will act well in time to prevent such crime. If we want to ensure that criminals do not prowl fearlessly and wish to improve con-

viction rates, the merit of police officers should be the sole criterion for their appointment in police stations and above. And the Supreme Court has laboriously factored this in its order.

Presently, small-time criminals gradually become dons due to political patronage. Initially, they are used to threaten "inconvenient" persons. Gradually, they start their own extortion rackets or take to violence, adulteration or hoarding of essential commodities as local politicians successfully neutralise the police and other enforcement agencies. Entering into dubious land deals, real estate, hotel and restaurant businesses flushed with black money, they form dangerous criminal gangs. Giving protection to these illegal activities and collecting money from them enriches officers of different departments as well as politicians. It is a vicious cycle. And it is this politician-officer-criminal nexus that the SC tried to demolish in 2006.

It is in the interest of all of us to pursue police reforms vigorously and to hold Union and state governments accountable for their failure to do so. The Supreme Court has laid down a clear and cogent process for creating citizen-centric police. The onus of getting it implemented is entirely on us.

The writer, an IPS officer, retired as director general, Bureau of Police Research & Development