

An unethical place: Waning ethics in India's private sector

Ask any international businessman or investor about India and the word “difficult” is bound to pop up. Seventy years after Independence and more than 25 years after landmark economic reforms, India, despite its many obvious attractions, is seen as a tough place to do business in. Red tape and the inconsistent and arbitrary manner in which our governments have administered taxes and investment rules and regulations is, of course, an important reason for this sentiment. But what polite and politically correct international investors will not say openly is that Indians are seen as highly unethical.

This is not just about politicians. Political corruption plagues many societies. Much of what passes for lobbying and campaign financing in the US can be cynically viewed as tax-deductible bribery. Even the squeaky-clean Scandinavians are not above making pay-offs when it suits their interests as we saw in the Bofors scandal.

The negative perception of India is not even about our civil servants. True, India ranked 79th out of 176 countries in Transparency International's 2016 Corruption Perception Index, and last year the same organisation found India to be the most corrupt country among the 16 Asia Pacific countries surveyed. Nearly seven in 10 Indians who had accessed public services — be it schools, hospitals, official documents, utility services, the police or courts — had paid a bribe versus only 0.2 per cent in Japan, the least corrupt country.

That India's politicians and government officials are venal is hardly breaking news. Growing corruption in public life has long been a staple middle-class lament. But the dark secret at the heart of Indian society is that the decline of public morality is now mirrored by a shameful fall in ethics in the private sector. The cancer of corruption has spread well beyond the corridors of power to our educated and affluent elites — professionals, salaried employees and businessmen — who are increasingly on the take.

India was ranked the most unethical of 13 major economies in the 2016 Global Business Ethics Survey, behind even Brazil and China. Last year, Ernst and Young's Asia-Pacific Fraud survey found that unethical practices are rife in India's business community with 78 per cent of Indian respondents surveyed saying that bribery and corrupt practices occur widely, while 57 per cent said that senior management would ignore the unethical behaviour of employees to attain revenue targets.

These surveys are confirmed by an informal poll of clients, colleagues, and peers and reflect my own experience over more than 25 years as a management consultant and private equity investor in the US, Europe, Middle East and Asia, with at least half that time spent in or dealing with India: India is amongst the most unethical places to do business in the world today.

Foreign investors and companies complain that Indian businessmen don't understand the concept of good faith in negotiations. Legal agreements are routinely flouted — often in cahoots with the authorities or the court system. Creative accounting is a commonplace hazard, as is illegal diversion of profits by promoters. The non-performing loan crisis in India's banks is largely due to bare-faced cheating and fraud by crony capitalists with the connivance of pliant bank executives.

Sadly, the morals of white-collar employees are increasingly no better than business people. Recently, a top private-sector bank executive demanded a “commission” to award a contract to one of my investee companies. In another case, we found that the CEO of a subsidiary had been paid off by the winning bidder for an asset that we were disposing. The professional ethics of large swathes of our legal and financial communities is compromised. Several investment managers are

notorious for arranging funding in return for kickbacks. One of the more visible aspects of doing business in India is getting valuation certificates from chartered accountants for investments to satisfy regulators or lenders. Likewise, in many countries, private lawyers are allowed to certify copies of documents rather than having to go to a government office — something that is unthinkable in India given prevailing ethical standards.

These dishonest practices are carried abroad. As a board member of companies in the Middle East, it is shameful to disclose that Indians in the management ranks are known for taking cuts on deals and purchasing contracts. Indian names feature disproportionately in insider trading scandals on Wall Street and the City in London. Even in Silicon Valley, Indians dealing with outsourced staffing for technology companies are notorious for collecting facilitation fees through their spouses.

Back in the days of the licence raj, free-market economists and commentators blamed corruption in India on red tape and socialist controls. However, even as the economy has been liberalised to a great extent since 1991, corruption has only grown worse and today infects not just government but Indian businesses and corporate life. Even low-income levels are no excuse — dishonesty appears to have more than outpaced rising compensation packages.

The corroding ethical fabric of the country is not just an issue of morality for its own sake. No economy can perform at a high level without a basic level of integrity. The pervasive unethical behaviour of the sort that we now see in India destroys trust. As trust erodes, the cost of doing business will soar, affecting India's competitiveness and attractiveness as an investment destination. Unfortunately, stricter rules and regulations and better policing of businesses are no solution. No amount of compliance and governance can substitute for sound moral fibre.

Amidst all the stridently assertive talk these days of our pride and honour and the greatness of our culture, we might be better served by more reflection on the state of our morality as a nation.

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Parliamentary Panel seeks FinMin report

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance on Thursday questioned finance ministry officials about the \$1.77 billion fraud in the state-owned Punjab National Bank (PNB) and asked them to submit a report on it.

The committee, which met to deliberate on the demands for grant, asked officials including Secretary, Financial Services, Rajiv Kumar, as to how tax payers' money could be used for recapitalising the bank which was not managed well.

"Members expressed their concern over such large scale fraud in the Punjab National Bank and questioned the recapitalisation process of the state-run banks when they are not well managed and tax payers money is leaking," said a member, who was present at the meeting.

Moily-led committee

The committee is headed by senior Congress leader Veerappa Moily, while former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is also member.

"The committee has asked the finance ministry officials to submit a report before the panel on this fraud," said another member who was present in the meeting.

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Punjab CM prevails: Ministers to pay their own income tax

Capt. Amarinder Singh.

Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh and his Ministers on Thursday announced that they would voluntarily pay their own income tax, which at present is being given from the State exchequer.

The development comes within days of Capt. Singh suggesting that elected representatives of the State, including Ministers and MLAs, pay their own income tax.

The announcement followed a personal appeal by the Chief Minister during a meeting of the State Cabinet here, an official spokesperson said.

With respect to MLAs, Capt. Singh had said that decision on their self-payment of income tax would be taken after receiving their feedback on the proposal.

'Give up power subsidy'

The tax is currently being paid by the government and draining the exchequer, Capt. Singh had said on Tuesday.

Punjab is probably the only State in the country where the government paid taxes for all Ministers and MLAs, he had said.

He had pointed out that the tax being paid by the State government in this regard stood at Rs. 11.08 crore. While Rs. 10.72 crore was being spent on payment of income tax of the MLAs, the remaining was for the Ministers, Capt. Singh had said.

The Chief Minister has also been appealing to members of the Congress in Punjab and rich farmers to give up their power subsidy in the State's larger interest.

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Gem of a scam: On PNB fraud

A regulatory filing to the stock exchanges by Punjab National Bank has blown the lid off a **11,500-crore fraud**. Perhaps the largest such scam in India, it was perpetrated by a maverick diamond merchant in collusion with bank officials at a single branch in South Mumbai. For India's second largest bank to be defrauded in the manner suggested is astounding, especially since there has been heightened scrutiny of public sector banks' operations in the last few years. The bank's audit committees and boards, as well as the central bank, which conducts routine financial inspections of banks' books, have been ostensibly keeping a close watch on the loans that have turned substandard or are on the verge of default. The government, which has often blamed the pile of bad loans on crony capitalism during the UPA regime, just last month unveiled a plan to infuse about 1 lakh crore into 21 capital-starved public sector banks this fiscal. Of this, 5,473 crore is to be injected into PNB. So even if the actual loss the bank ends up incurring on account of this fraud is half the stated amount, its capital adequacy ratio will be back to the same level before the recapitalisation was announced. Its market capitalisation has tanked 8,077 crore over the past two days, with the share price falling over 20% since the news broke.

PNB-Nirav Modi scam, the story so far

The bank's top brass has said it has acted promptly, suspending around 10 officials. The Central Bureau of Investigation has booked one retired and one serving PNB employee so far. It is also difficult to believe that a handful of junior employees could orchestrate such a massive fraud. The bank's managing director has claimed that supervisory lapses are being probed, and the Enforcement Directorate has initiated a money laundering case against the main accused, billionaire-jeweller Nirav Modi, his wife Ami Modi and close associates and relatives. The firms run by him had seen a meteoric rise and an IPO was in the offing after buyouts of global players and a ramp-up of retail presence in India and abroad. It appears that the bank employees who assisted in the fraud routed large transactions for the borrowers by circumventing the core banking solution. This flies in the face of the government's push for a digital payment economy. PNB has sought to blame overseas branches of other banks for not undertaking due diligence before accepting such transactions, but that may be too simplistic an explanation. An inquiry by the RBI must get to the bottom of the systemic lapses in this affair and fix accountability across the chain of command. The banker-borrower nexus has been blamed for problems in the banking system for years. This episode will set off fears of a nexus deeper than imagined. The RBI and investigating agencies should act speedily to restore trust in the banking system.

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The draft of Assam's National Register of Citizens is a first step, but it opens up concerns

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Show source of income to contest polls: SC

The court made it mandatory for candidates contesting elections and their associates to declare their assets and source of income at the time of nomination.

The obligation of a candidate to disclose both his assets and the source of income is a part of the fundamental right of citizen to know, under Article 19 (1) (a) of the Constitution. The court said enforcement of a citizen's fundamental right needs no statutory sanction from the government or the Parliament.

"A candidate's constitutional right to contest an election to the legislature should be subservient to the voter's fundamental right to know the relevant information regarding the candidate," the court held.

It held that "undue accretion of assets" is an independent ground for disqualifying an MP or an MLA. Amassing wealth is a "culpable offence" by itself and a law maker can be prosecuted even without charging him for offences under the Prevention of Corruption Act. The court said the amassment of unaccounted wealth by lawmakers is the mark of a failing democracy. "If left unattended it would inevitably lead to the destruction of democracy and pave the way for the rule of mafia."

The court said India as a "socialist republic" believes in the distribution of material resources and not in the concentration of wealth.

If the assets of a legislator increase without bearing any relationship to their known sources of income, the only logical inference that can be drawn is that there is some abuse. The court pointed out about how legislators use their position to secure loans from nationalised banks which turn into NPAs.

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Directing reforms: on candidates disclosing sources of income

Adding to the growing body of judicially inspired electoral reforms, the Supreme Court has imposed an **additional disclosure norm for candidates contesting elections**. It has asked the Centre to amend the rules as well as the disclosure form filed by candidates along with their nomination papers, to include the sources of their income, and those of their spouses and dependants. The court has also asked for the establishment of a permanent mechanism to investigate any unexplained or disproportionate increase in the assets of legislators during their tenure. The verdict of the two-judge Bench on a petition from the NGO, Lok Prahari, is one more in a long line of significant verdicts aimed at preserving the purity of the electoral process. These include the direction to provide the 'NOTA' option in voting machines, and another striking down a clause that saved sitting legislators from immediate disqualification upon conviction. It has ruled that the act of voting is an expression of free speech, and that it is part of this fundamental right that voters are required to be informed of all relevant details about a contestant. This led to the rule that candidates should furnish details of any criminal antecedents, educational qualifications and assets. If disclosure of assets is mandatory, it is only logical that the sources of income are also revealed. And as it is often seen that there is a dramatic increase in the assets of candidates at every election over what was disclosed in previous affidavits, it stands to reason that any rise should be explained or probed.

Few will dispute that lawmakers amassing wealth or gaining unusual access to public funds and loans are concerns that need to be addressed through new norms. To give teeth to its order, the court has made it clear that non-disclosure of assets and their sources would amount to a "corrupt practice" under Section 123 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951. Lest a question be raised whether the court's order to amend the relevant rules amounted to legislation, the Bench has said it sees no "legal or normative impediment", as the Centre is empowered by the Act to frame rules in consultation with the Election Commission. The idea of a permanent mechanism to collect data about the assets of legislators and periodically examine them is laudable, but it is not clear which authority will run it. The court envisions a body that would make recommendations for prosecution or disqualification based on its own findings. The Centre and the Election Commission will have to jointly address the issue. The larger message from the verdict is that a fully informed electorate and transparent candidature will be key components of future elections in India.

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Hierarchy of rights: citizens vs institutions

The large hole discovered recently in Punjab National Bank (PNB) has got people asking: How did a diamantaire take out so much money from the banking system, so easily, when ordinary customers are made to jump through several hoops or provide copious documentation for a simple transaction?

The incident has once again highlighted the asymmetrical and uneasy relation between institutions and ordinary Indian individuals, in which the dice seems to be loaded against ordinary citizens. As examples later illustrate, this unequal relationship is not restricted to a few isolated cases but is endemic and, in some senses, also epitomizes the mistrust between state and citizen.

On paper, all Indians are created equal but inequalities have been stitched into the nation's variegated relationships and transactions, such as deep-rooted gender inequalities or caste-based social discriminations. In particular, the state, its myriad institutions and the corporate sector—both in private and state-owned spaces—have been provided a hierarchical status greater than citizens. It seems the Indian republic, with its all modernist aspirations, is unable to shake off its feudal legacy and provide an equitable balance between institutions and individuals. The state's role as a patron (or *mai-baap*) seems to rub off easily on various other institutions.

The mistrust is underscored every time there is a fraud, anywhere and by anybody, in the banking system. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) insists all banks re-initiate the know-your-customer (KYC) process afresh, forcing all customers to compulsorily re-submit identity documents. Past submissions of same documents are disregarded. This process seems to indicate all citizens are guilty till they provide KYC papers repeatedly. The tyranny of Aadhaar, unleashed by all financial sector participants, has magnified the state of wariness. Hopefully, champions of Financial Resolution and Deposit Insurance (FRDI) Bill, specifically using depositors' funds to bail out shaky banks, will now have occasion to rethink their position.

The unequal relation between state and individual is extreme in taxation. Tax notices routinely sent out by the income tax department start with the premise that the individual assessee is guilty and leave no room for doubt that the department could be mistaken; the tenor of these notices is intimidating, and the onus for proving oneself innocent lies with individual assessees. Even the redressal mechanism is loaded against the individual and mainly designed to deal with large corporates.

Apart from the PNB incident, examples abound of how such inequalities have become institutionalized. Assume a customer owes the electricity company money for consuming power. There is a tariff structure for consumers that is decided between power supplier and power regulator. If for some reason the consumer is unable to pay for one month, the power company's representative arrives at the door and demands immediate payment or threatens disconnection. Logic and economic sense suggests that user charges must be paid. Otherwise, utilities cannot function. But, what happens when the same power company (or any other company) defaults on bank loans? In the language of RBI, the loan is recognized as overdue only when "interest and/or instalment of principal remain overdue for a period of more than 90 days". Which means any company can afford not to repay its loans for 90 days without getting penalized. The question begs itself: if companies can avoid repaying loans for 90 days, why are ordinary citizens hounded at the end of 30 days?

A citizen's helplessness is best manifested through the healthcare system. A division bench of the Bombay high court recently instructed the Maharashtra government to balance the rights of patients with the rights of hospitals and doctors while bringing in legislation to regulate clinical

establishments. The court was hearing a 2014 petition, which it has converted into a public interest litigation, on hospitals detaining patients over disputed bills. As mentioned in earlier instalments of this column, public-private-partnerships in healthcare have benefited mostly the private entrepreneur, with active connivance of the state, and squeezed individuals.

On occasion, the regulator has had to step in to correct an inconsistency. Credit bureaus till recently did not allow citizens to access their own credit records without paying a fee. Credit card issuers and all other economic agents submit data on a citizen's creditworthiness to credit information companies and could access the same before granting a loan or a credit card. But the individual could neither access the submitted data nor dispute the data, without paying a fee. In September 2016, RBI decreed that all credit information companies had to provide a free full credit report to individuals once a year. But the process remains cumbersome.

Globalization's annual summit has over the past couple of years focused on social themes—from inequality to this year's "creating a shared future in a fractured world". Last year, discussions on how to eradicate inequality ranged from higher taxes on the rich to universal basic income; the World Economic Forum piped in with its own solution: "Move away the focus from plain wealth creation towards accomplishing a combination of other goals, producing more inclusive development." Next year's theme should be on redrawing the balance of power between individuals and all institutions.

Rajrishi Singhal is a consultant and former editor of a leading business newspaper. His Twitter handle is @rajrishisinghal.

Comments are welcome at views@livemint.com

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Achieving profits while helping society

Unbridled corporate greed is a staple of popular fiction. The people behind it, the systems that continue to fuel it, and the destruction that it leaves in its aftermath are firmly established in the popular imagination. This is, admittedly, one extreme of everyday business, driven by a deep hunger for profit. But it should not and need not be the status quo.

Entrepreneurs can have a positive impact on their communities and the environment while earning a living and making a profit. This is something that social enterprises and entrepreneurs strive to pursue. They tackle societal and environmental issues while being profitable. Essentially, they embody the best of both worlds.

For instance, there is TOMS shoes, a for-profit company from Arlington, Texas. They first made a name for themselves by implementing the buy-and-give model. When a customer buys a pair of their shoes, they donate a pair to a child in need. Hospitals Beyond Boundaries (HBB) is a Malaysian social health enterprise that uses the cross-subsidization model to provide healthcare to patients who need it but are unable to afford it. The profits HBB receives from three fully paid childbirth deliveries in their Phnom Penh clinic is used to subsidize one childbirth delivery for a desperate mother elsewhere.

Last year, the Malaysian Global Innovation and Creativity Centre (MaGIC) started an initiative called the Impact Driven Enterprise Accreditation (IDEA). Through this, they validate the positive efforts of such impact-driven enterprises (IDEs) from both the private and public sector. The intention is to further bolster an impact-driven economy. Enterprises (for-profit or otherwise) have to meet the following criteria in order to qualify for the accreditation, and to reap the benefits that come with it.

A clear-cut social or environmental mission: Enterprises need to have a clear, well structured, impact-first mission statement that's defined on all of their public documents, marketing collaterals, policy documents and registration documents like the memorandum and articles of association, for example. It would be best if this mission specifies a positive social or environmental impact.

Documented efforts of pursuing the mission: The mission statement has to be ingrained within the team's DNA, and the enterprise has to continue working towards it. As such, MaGIC requires that they implement one of the three models. First, they could either have a stated policy or a verifiable track record of allocating at least 51% of the annual profits directly towards their mission. Second, enterprises could integrate the mission into their daily operations. Third, they could also empower disenfranchised or marginalized communities by training them, and by equipping them with skill sets that will eventually get them hired.

Clearly defined path to sustainability: MaGIC requires enterprises to earn more than half of their annual revenue through sales rather than donations or grants. For new enterprises, they could present a clearly defined path to reach sustainability.

Enterprises that meet these requirements can immediately start the process of getting verified by going through a number of predefined steps that include an annual fee, submitting documents for auditing purposes and being reviewed by an executive selection committee.

This accreditation makes it easier for IDEs to access funding provided by MaGIC and their partners. It also boosts their profile when they're competing in public procurement competitions for relevant contracts. And they become part of an elite group of organizations that are all focused on building an inclusive economy. Under this initiative they get to participate in events where they get

to learn, network and collaborate with one another. Furthermore, accredited enterprises are listed on an online portal that companies could use to procure goods and services from. These companies can thus add more value to their processes while also supporting the existing positive efforts of impact-driven enterprises.

MaGIC showcases the impact data of each organization on their directory based on indicators that are related to the local ecosystem. This includes everything from the number of people from disadvantaged and marginalized communities that the enterprise employs to the number of subsidized goods or services that the IDE offered to individuals from underprivileged communities. At present, there are more than 50 verified IDEs in Malaysia, and they have also helped facilitate transactions worth over RM1 million between corporations and IDEs.

Besides the obvious benefits to the accredited companies, this structure is useful for corporate partners as well. It isn't just about supporting the IDEs. By folding the IDEs into their value chain, they can build better and more positive sentiments towards their brands. Social consciousness can also make for good business sense.

It's a new initiative at the moment, but it has interesting implications. It could potentially be an important step towards building a more inclusive economy. Companies and NGOs—not just within Malaysia but across the world—could stand to learn important lessons from its impact and the ripple effects it has.

S. Ajay Madhukar runs an impact driven publication called 'Jireh's Hope' and organizes monthly Laravel talks for web developers in Malaysia.

This is part of the Young Asian Writers series, a Mint initiative to bring young voices from different Asian countries to the fore.

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Ease of doing scams

India is a corrupt nation. The stain of it is so pervasive in our everyday lives that it should hardly surprise us when big scams are unearthed, periodically. In fact, what is surprising is that they don't happen, or aren't reported, more often. The public-sector banking system is the perfect gateway for most crooks seeking to perpetrate a major scam. Its army of low paid managers — always on the look out for the extra buck — lack of preventive systems and close linkages with people in power make it the most fertile ground for such frauds.

According to the RBI, PSU banks reported loan frauds of Rs 61,260 crore over the last five years. Add the recent [Nirav Modi](#) scam and the number swells to Rs 73,000 crore. These are reported frauds. It is safe to infer that a large part of the current bad loans with PSU banks is also the result of fraudulent deals struck by corrupt bankers in collusion with errant businessmen. Taking kickbacks to sign off on loans worth hundreds of crores, knowing that the money won't come back, is every bit a scam, though it may technically not be labelled one. The actual size of scams facilitated by PSU banks would run into lakhs of crores. We keep a lid on it, to limit public outrage.

Corruption runs deep in our society, not just in PSU banks. In 2017, India was the most corrupt nation in the entire Asia Pacific region according to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. We may be taking baby steps up the ease of doing business ladder but on an ease of doing scams index, we are the uncrowned champions. The public sector, loosely speaking, is right at the forefront of this shameful reality. Politicians, bureaucrats, public sector employees — it's this unholy trinity that robs the country of billions of dollars every year. Changing the colour of currency notes cannot rid us of this.

While it's not true that there is no corruption in the private sector, the existence of checks and balances, and vigilant managements, often make it more difficult to pull a fraud off. No matter, 70 per cent of India's banking system is still in the public sector, big enough to accommodate all our crooks. Indian businessmen are smart, they have been quick to latch on to this. The first door is often through bank employees themselves, if that is not enough there are powerful bureaucrats to exert the required pressure, with politicians joining the party for the really meaty deals. What chance does any honest PSU banker have? The choice is between accepting a cut or having to look the other way. With the scale of the problem now out in the open, it is ridiculous to suggest that this is the handiwork of only a handful of unscrupulous employees, with the rest being pure as driven snow. That is just being in denial.

In the light of the scam at PNB, the government's recent bail out package of over Rs 2 lakh crore to PSU banks seems like a cruel joke. How can these banks, crooked at worst and incompetent at best, be given such vast amounts of public money without first putting in systems to ensure that it will not be frittered away like this? The truth is that the Indian banking sector now needs its 1991 moment. Indradhanush coloured bandaids won't work any longer.

Corruption cannot be rooted out of Indian society with a catchy slogan but every effort should be made to bring public sector banks up to the level of the private sector, if only in terms of prevention of frauds. This will break a crucial link in the chain and make it tougher to pull off large scale scams. The key is people. If we can find a sum of Rs 2 lakh crore to gift these banks, can we not find a thousand crores in annual compensation to revamp the top managements, asset liability committees and boards of the PSU banks? With this talent from the private sector will come systems that cannot be bent so easily to take money out.

The mandate of these new managements should be to clean up the mess swiftly and move towards consolidation within the sector. We need only five or six PSU banks and eventually

market forces will ensure that their share is whittled down to less than half of the sector. A process of virtual de-nationalisation of PSU banks, at least at the operating level, has to be the first step. Given the track record of our bureaucrats and politicians, there is almost a conflict of interest in government ownership of banks. The RBI is very careful of handing bank licences to industrial groups, should the government be immune to such scrutiny?

While it is true that under UPA-2, the art of fraud had scaled great heights, scams would abound under any political regime in our country. Our prime minister's chest thumping about having successfully rooted out corruption seems somewhat premature, in the light of the recent scam. It is not enough to say that he or his cabinet are not corrupt.

Some responsibility for what happens under his watch, good or bad, must accrue to him. That is as true of 2002 as it is of 2018. The scale of our banking problem is just too monstrous, Modi cannot afford to remain nirav (silent) about it.

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**Education must mould a strong character and inculcate ethical and moral values among students:
Vice President**

Vice President's Secretariat

Education must mould a strong character and inculcate ethical and moral values among students: Vice President

Ensure that the environment at home as well as in schools is de-stressed;

Inaugurates Platinum Jubilee Celebrations of R.A. Podar College of Commerce and Economics

Posted On: 19 FEB 2018 12:30PM by PIB Delhi

The Vice President of India, Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu has said that education must mould a strong character and inculcate ethical and moral values among students. He was addressing the gathering after inaugurating the Platinum Jubilee Celebrations of R.A. Podar College of Commerce and Economics, in Mumbai today. The Minister for Housing Department, Maharashtra, Shri Prakash Mehta and other dignitaries were present on the occasion.

The Vice President called on parents, teachers, schools and colleges to ensure that the environment at home as well as in schools is de-stressed. He further said that it is unfortunate that many a time the parents fail to recognize the warning signs or fail to understand the mental stress their wards are coping with. This important subject was close to the heart of Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, who has even penned a book titled 'Exam Warriors' on how to overcome the anxiety and stress caused by exams, he added.

The Vice President said that converting country's vast pool of human resources into a "demographic dividend" is a big challenge before everyone. He further said that we must use it as an advantage to propel India's growth trajectory to be among the top three economies in the world in the coming years. Education must develop the overall personality of an individual in a truly holistic manner by enabling them to make informed choices on their careers and at every stage in their later part of the lives, he added.

The Vice President said that education must empower and enlighten the youth, improve their analytical skills and make them to explore new vistas, discover and innovate. He further said that merely adding more and more buildings without providing quality as well as inclusive education will not enable the creation of the 'New India'. Education must not only be accessible but affordable too and it must empower and Enlighten people apart from providing employment, he added.

Following is the text of Vice President's address:

"I am extremely pleased to inaugurate the Platinum Jubilee Celebrations of this prestigious college, which has catered since its inception to the educational needs of different sections of this vibrant city and produced eminent personalities in different fields.

I am told that former Chief Justice of India, R.C. Lahoti, cricketers Farokh Engineer and Ravi Shastri, film actor, Shilpa Shetty, carnatic vocalist and composer, Bombay Jayashree and President of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India, Nilesh Vikamsey are some of the well-known alumni of this college.

Dear students! India is one of the fastest growing large economies with a predominantly young population. A big challenge for the country is to convert this vast pool of human resources into a "demographic dividend" and propel India's growth trajectory to be among the top three economies in the world in the coming years.

As you all are aware, millions of graduates in various disciplines come out of the portals of our higher education institutions every year. But the big question we all need to ask ourselves is—Are we producing holistic students with sound knowledge in their disciplines and the life skills needed to face the present-day competitive world or are we merely producing millions of degree-holders who are unemployable?

Education is not meant only for degrees and employment. Education must develop the overall personality of an individual in a truly holistic manner by enabling them to make informed choices on their careers and at every stage in their later part of the lives. At the same time, education must mould a strong character and inculcate ethical and moral values among students.

It must transform them into mature individuals with empathy and a humanistic worldview and not just modern-day computer geeks. Education must empower and enlighten the youth, improve their analytical skills and make them to explore new vistas, discover and innovate.

In fact, the education system needs a total overhaul from the primary education to higher levels so that learning becomes a joyful experience and students are not subjected to exam stress and needless tension. Over the years, we have been witnessing the disturbing trend of students committing suicide due to their inability to cope with the stress and pressure of exams. Parents, teachers, schools and colleges have a huge responsibility in ensuring that the environment at home as well as in schools and schools is de-stressed.

It is unfortunate that many a time the parents fail to recognize the warning signs or fail to understand the mental stress their wards are coping with. I am glad that this important subject is close to the heart of Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, who has even penned a book titled 'Exam Warriors' on how to overcome the anxiety and stress caused by exams.

Another aspect I would like to flag is the need to provide quality education rather than focusing on numbers. No doubt, expansion of educational infrastructure is important. But merely adding more and more buildings without providing quality as well as inclusive education will not enable the creation of the 'New India'. Education must not only be accessible but affordable too.

We have to collectively strive to eradicate poverty, agrarian problems, illiteracy, caste divisions, religious fundamentalism and gender discrimination, among others, to usher in the 'New India' as envisaged by our freedom fighters. Also, the rural areas cannot be allowed to lag behind the urban

areas and all the amenities found in urban areas must be created in small towns and villages.

This is needed absolutely to create equal opportunities for people living in rural areas and prevent migration so that cities are not turned into inhabitable concrete jungles.

Dear students, we have a rich culture which recognizes the value of knowledge and learning. In our culture, the Guru, who is the knowledge-giver is venerated. India was once known as 'Vishwaguru' and our ancient universities like Takshashila and Nalanda were famous centres of learning which attracted learners from across the globe.

Today, India once again has the chance to emerge as a knowledge hub in the world. But to achieve that, we need to overcome many formidable challenges by fully empowering the vulnerable sections, youth and women through education, knowledge and skills. Literacy plays a vital role in overcoming various challenges, empowering people and transforming communities.

I was truly impressed with vision and mission statements of your college. The Vision "Samaani va aakooti samaanaa hridayaani vaham" (one in mind and one in heart) highlights the meaning of the verse that God has created us all equal, while Mission states "Nahi gnyaanen sadrasham pavitramiha vidyate"(there is nothing in this universe as pure as knowledge) and that it needs to be shared and exchanged freely, without any inhibition.

These thoughts must permeate every action of us in creating the New India of equal opportunities for all.

JAI HIND!

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For cleaner, fairer elections

Electoral reforms in the hands of politicians is a classic example of a fox guarding the henhouse. While there are many policies that both major parties disagree with each other on, they form a remarkable tag team when it comes to electoral reforms. Unsurprisingly, the Supreme Court, over the last few decades, has readily stepped in to introduce electoral reforms. However, most of these interventions are directed at candidates, and rarely at the parties. The [Supreme Court's recent decision on information disclosure](#) (*Lok Prahari v. Union of India*) paves a way for future constitutional interventions in India's party funding regime, including the scheme of electoral bonds.

In 2002, the Supreme Court, in a landmark decision in *Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India* (ADR), mandated the disclosure of information relating to criminal antecedents, educational qualification, and personal assets of a candidate contesting elections. Sixteen years later, the court has extended the disclosure obligation to further include information relating to sources of income of candidates and their "associates", and government contracts where candidates or their associates have direct or indirect interests.

The principled basis of the court's decision is that voters' right to know about their candidate is an extension of their freedom of expression; voters cannot be said to have freely expressed themselves (by voting) without having appropriate information about the candidates. They should have the opportunity of receiving relevant information "to make an appropriate choice of his representative in the Legislature". What *Lok Prahari* does is that it extends the ADR decision to include information about the candidate's "associates"; relevant information for voters is no more limited to the candidate's personal information. What does this decision tell us about party funding?

If there is one piece of information that a voter is most deprived of in India, it is that about party funding. While the scheme of electoral bonds has received much attention, another significant facilitator of opacity is an obscure, yet significant provision of the Representation of the People Act, 1951: Section 29C(1)(a). The provision exempts political parties from disclosing the source of any contribution below 20,000. This gives political parties a convenient loophole to hide their funding sources by breaking contributions into smaller sums, even 19,999 each. As a result, a vast majority of donations to political parties come from sources unknown to voters. The new scheme of electoral bonds takes away even the facade of disclosure requirements that used to exist in earlier law.

Is the information about party funding relevant for a voter in choosing a candidate? Upholding the constitutionality of disclosure requirements for funding sources in *Buckley v. Valeo*, the U.S. Supreme Court held, "The sources of a candidate's financial support also alert the voter to the interests to which a candidate is most likely to be responsive." Therefore, it is essential for voters to know the funding sources of their candidates. Parties in India play at least two crucial roles in the election of candidates, namely financial support to candidates, and, more importantly, setting the agenda. Not much needs to be said about direct and indirect ways in which parties financially support their candidates.

However, even if one assumes that parties do not fund their candidates, there is another rationale for disclosure of party-funding sources. Parties occupy a special space in India when it comes to agenda setting. By virtue of a strong anti-defection law in India, all elected legislators are bound by their party agenda. If an elected legislator refuses to toe the party line, she can be disqualified. In *Kihoto Hollohan v. Zachillhu And Others*, the Supreme Court, upholding the anti-defection amendment, noted: "A person who gets elected as a candidate set up by a political party is so

elected on the basis of the programme of that political party.” Parties cannot lay claim to the representation of a candidate, and at the same time argue that information about party funding is not relevant for voters. In short, you cannot have your cake and eat it too.

As a matter of policy, one may argue that strict transparency norms may not always be desirable. However, as a matter of legal principle, the court’s recent judgment in *Lok Prahari*, read along with our constitutional structure, strikes a blow against the provisions discouraging transparency in party funding. If the court’s jurisprudence is consistently applied, the scheme of electoral bonds could be declared unconstitutional.

Aradhya Sethia is an LLM candidate and resident fellow at Yale Law School

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Dara Shukoh's writings can come as a refreshing source for infusing peace and harmony: Vice President

Vice President's Secretariat

Dara Shukoh's writings can come as a refreshing source for infusing peace and harmony: Vice President

All religions seek to unite people and the common strand in each of them is spiritualism, tolerance and respect for others;

Visits exhibition on Prince Dara Shukoh

Posted On: 20 FEB 2018 1:37PM by PIB Delhi

The Vice President of India, Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu has said that Prince Dara Shukoh's writings can come as a refreshing source for infusing peace and harmony, whenever we are confronted by the narrow walls that tend to divide humanity and conflicts that result in needless violence. He was addressing the gathering after visiting the exhibition that showcases the forgotten Prince of yester years Dara Shukoh organized by Mr. Francois Gautier, at Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, in New Delhi today.

The Vice President called the exhibition most timely and might help us better understand humanity's eternal quest for peace, harmony and love. He further said that Prince Dara Shukoh, one of the sons of Emperor Shah Jehan grew up under the unmistakable influence of the teachings of the Sufi Saint, Shaik Muin-uddin Chisti. His message is relevant for all times, he added.

The vice President said that principles of Sufism are highly relevant to break down narrow prejudices and bring people together, especially in today's world of materialism, consumerism and growing religious fundamentalism. He further said that all religions seek to unite people and the common strand in each of them, including Sufism, is spiritualism, tolerance and respect for others. There is a greater need today to put into practice some of the meaningful teachings of Sufi saints to bring harmony between all groups of society and break down divisive walls between communities, he added.

Following is the text of Vice President's address:

"I am happy to be visiting this exhibition which showcases the forgotten prince of yester years

Dara Shukoh, the Prince who exemplified an extraordinarily broad vision of cultural synthesis.

I think this is most timely and might help us better understand humanity's eternal quest for peace, harmony and love.

As we look at the long history of human existence, we see a relentless quest. We in different parts of the planet, in different cultures and societies, have asked questions about our life and its deeper purpose and significance.

Each society has come up with different answers and explanations. Religions, belief systems and world views took shape.

Over a period of time, these have become institutionalized. The edicts, the scriptures, sculptures, art, architecture, music and performing arts gave expression to these belief systems. They provided a sheet anchor to humanity, a bonding force to face the uncertainties and life's twists and turns. It increased cohesion and group solidarity. Underlying all religions is the need for self-actualization, the social need to connect with fellow human beings and the spiritual need to connect with some higher force.

This quest for the spirit of oneness has ironically both unified as well as divided humanity because of the difference in the external forms, rituals, texts, names and symbols.

The human history has many lessons for us. We have periods of long bitter wars fought in the name of religion. We have peaks of peaceful co-existence and depths of strident intolerance. Every era has examples of this ceaseless battle between various religious groups and also of the refreshing soothing voices of, balanced, path breaking visionaries.

Sisters and Brothers,

This is a constant struggle of letting the voices of harmony, mutual respect and understanding rise up. Today's symposium is a step in that direction. We are examining the relevance of Sufism today and also recalling a forgotten prince of yesteryears. One is a philosophical strand that has through the ages has been one of the unifying influences binding people throughout its long and rich history. The second is Dara Shukoh, the Prince who exemplified an extraordinarily broad vision of cultural synthesis.

In today's world of materialism, consumerism and growing religious fundamentalism, the principles of Sufism are highly relevant to break down narrow prejudices and bring people together. Basically, all religions seek to unite people and the common strand in each of them, including Sufism, is spiritualism, tolerance and respect for others. As the famous poet Iqbal had said "Majhab Nahi Sikhaata Aapas me Bair Rakhna". No religion teaches us to fight among ourselves.

In fact, in the present times when religious bigotry and narrow sectarian ideologies are gaining ground, and when attempts are being made to use religion as a force to divide people, tenets of Sufism like true belief in Divine Oneness, acting in accordance with the Divine Will, practicing altruism, giving preference to well being of others and purity of intention, among others can act as a cementing force.

Like many religions of the world that have found in India a hospitable home, Sufism has also been a part of India's cultural landscape since medieval times. The Indian ethos and the cultural, philosophic tradition has always recognized and celebrated diversity and plurality. Ours is a country that recognized thousands of years ago that - "Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti" (Truth is one, sages call it by various names).

Early mystics of Sufism like Rabia and Mansoor remain symbols of divine love. The 10th century Sufi mystic Rabia represents the ideal of selfless love preached by Sufi mystics.

The preachings of divine love by Sufi saints permeated Sufi philosophy and made them popular everywhere including most parts of the Middle East, Iraq, Iran, Turkey Central Asia, Afghanistan and the subcontinent. Rumi, inspired by Shams Tabrezi, wrote some of the greatest Sufi poetry which is popular all over the world today, including his celebrated *masnavi*.

Similarly, Hafez of Shiraz wrote some of the greatest poems which celebrate divine love. Hafez's poetry is an elegant expression of the experience of divine love, a recurring motif in his work. Hafez has been a great source of inspiration for generations of poets, thinkers and people across all segments of society. No wonder his mausoleum in Shiraz in Iran, attracts millions of visitors to this day.

Urdu poets from the earliest ages have brought into a sharp focus the synthesizing influence of Sufism, bringing out its many facets such as *fanaa* (mortality or annihilation of self), *baqaa* (permanence or divine eternity), *qatra* (drop), being a part of *dariya* (ocean) or *zarra* (speck) as a part of a *sehra* (desert). In this manner, man's relationship with God had been defined by several poets, many of them emphasizing the commonality of faiths.

As Meer Taqi Meer says:

Uske farogh-e-husn se jhamke hain sab main noor

shama-e-haram ho ya ho diya somnath ka

(It is His beauty which illuminates everything

Be it a candle in a mosque or a lamp in the temple of Somnath)

Sufi saints attracted followers from all faiths and to this day we find this spirit of togetherness when it comes to spiritualism in practice. For example, Khaja Mohiuddin Chisti's shrine in Ajmer, Hazrath Nizamuddin Auliya's dargah in New Delhi and Ameen Peer Dargah near Kadapa in my own state of Andhra Pradesh—these are among thousands of such shrines venerated by people across the country.

All these great saints like rishis and munis deeply loved humanity and could see the vital connection between humanity and divinity.

No wonder the impact of Sufi philosophy on Indian culture and social reform has been enormous. As Narada in his Bhakti Sutra's defines 'devotion', it is selfless love in its highest form. This selfless love is underpinned by qualities that are fundamental for peaceful coexistence – empathy and enlarged vision, a willingness to listen and understand, and an ability to tolerate differences and recognize the commonalities.

Today we are also inaugurating an exhibition of a remarkable person in Indian history who had internalized some of these qualities in his actions.

Prince Dara Shukoh, one of the sons of Emperor Shah Jehan grew up under the unmistakable influence of the teachings of the Sufi Saint, Shaik Muin-uddin Chisti. He studied all prominent religions of the world especially Islam and Hinduism and wrote the remarkable work called "Majma-ul-Bahrain" or the "Mingling of the two Oceans" in which he said that he did not find "any difference except verbal, in the way they sought to comprehend the truth", and both 'represent spiritual effort of man to realize Truth and God". His message is relevant for all times.

Whenever we are confronted by the narrow walls that tend to divide humanity and conflicts that result in needless violence, Dara Shukoh's writings can come as a refreshing source for infusing peace and harmony. In fact, there are many such luminaries who have left their imprint on the sands of time and whose lives and messages need to be studied and popularized.

There is a greater need today to put into practice some of the meaningful teachings of Sufi saints to bring harmony between all groups of society and break down divisive walls between communities.

I am glad that Mr. Francois Gautier has dedicated many years of his professional life to the study of Indian history and has been organizing a number of programmes to share the lessons he has drawn from this treasure house. I compliment him and his team in Foundation for Advancement of Cultural Ties (FACT) for presenting the facts and a dispassionate analysis.

I would like to see that more such knowledge-sharing events are organized to build stronger bonds between people of different religions and cultures. For all those who care about our present and the future, it is important to build on all that is noble and glorious and avoid sliding into the dark alleys of distortion and destruction. To echo the saints of this ancient land, "Tamaso ma Jyotirgamaya" (Lead us from darkness to Light).

Jai Hind!"

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Bench vs Bench in Supreme Court

Kurian Joseph

In a rare show of public anguish, a three-judge Supreme Court Bench led by Justice Madan B. Lokur criticised another Bench for “tinkering with judicial discipline”.

Justice Lokur’s Bench, which includes Justices Kurian Joseph and Deepak Gupta, found fault with a judgment delivered by another Bench of three judges led by Justice Arun Mishra in a land acquisition case on February 8.

Justice Mishra’s Bench, on February 8, held that a 2014 judgment of the Supreme Court was pronounced without due regard to law or *per incuriam*. The 2014 verdict was also delivered by a three-judge Bench led by then Chief Justice of India R.M. Lodha and had Justice Kurian on board. It was a majority 2:1 verdict.

Judicial discipline dictates that Supreme Court Benches of the same numerical strength cannot overrule each other’s judgments. The disputed case has to be referred to another Bench of larger strength. In this case, Justice Mishra’s three-judge Bench, instead of choosing to refer it to a five-judge Constitution Bench, chose to declare the 2014 verdict *per incuriam*.

In a strong expression of his “painful concern” about the turn of events, Justice Kurian said in open court that such tinkering with judicial discipline would eventually cost the judicial institution.

“This court has to remain as one. It should be one and you have to make it one. You have to have proper judicial discipline for that,” Justice Kurian said. “Be very clear, this is a matter of judicial discipline, judicial propriety and consistency. Can a three-judge Bench overrule another three judge Bench verdict? It has to be referred to a larger Bench in case of difference of opinion,” Justice Kurian said.

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A transparency deficit

The January 12 press conference by Supreme Court (SC) judges exposed deep faultlines in the judiciary. The trigger for the unprecedented step seems to have been the arbitrary allocation of benches by the Chief Justice of India (CJI). This raises fundamental questions on the credibility of the institution and its ability to dispense justice. The allegations by the judges also raise serious doubts about the independence of the judiciary, given that an estimated 45 to 70 per cent of litigation involves the government.

It must be ensured that benches are allocated in a rational, fair and transparent manner. While the recent move to publish the SC's roster is welcome, the allocation of benches leaves much to be desired. The CJI is, no doubt, the Master of the Roster. However, discretion cannot be construed to mean arbitrariness. It is important that the CJI prepare the roster in consultation with other judges, at least the members of the collegium. Cases must be allocated among judges according to their expertise, and if there is more than one judge dealing with a particular subject, cases should be allocated randomly to them.

Politically-sensitive cases and matters involving constitutional disputes need to be decided by a bench consisting of the five senior-most judges, or randomly allocated among them. That said, it is important to recognise that at the heart of the current crisis is the larger issue of accountability of judges.

The courts have held that the right to information is a fundamental right flowing from Article 19 and Article 21 of the Constitution, and that transparency in the working of public functionaries is critical in a democracy. Unfortunately, however, after the passage of the RTI Act in 2005, the courts have not been very forthcoming in providing information about their own functioning.

In the last few years, five such matters seeking vital information related to the accountability of the judiciary reached the apex court. Three were referred to a constitution bench in August 2016 and await adjudication. One case relates to information about the appointment of judges: The applicant sought a copy of the correspondence between the CJI and other concerned constitutional authorities relating to the appointment of three SC judges, superseding the seniority of three others. In the second case, the RTI applicant sought information related to the declaration of assets held by the judges of the SC and high courts in their own name, or in the name of their spouse or any person dependent on them.

In the third case, quoting a media report, an RTI application was filed with the SC seeking copies of the correspondence between the then CJI and a judge of the Madras High Court regarding the attempt of a Union minister to influence judicial decisions of the said high court.

The two other matters, wherein petitions against denial of information were dismissed by the SC, also raised matters of great public interest. One sought information about cases pending with the apex court in which the arguments had already been heard but judgments had been reserved. In the other matter, the applicant sought information on the total amount of public money spent on the medical expenses of individual judges reimbursed by the SC. By resisting transparency in all these matters, the judiciary has evaded accountability to the people of India.

Opaqueness in the process of judicial appointments has also been a matter of much public debate. The SC's 2015 judgment in the NJAC matter underlined the need to enhance transparency in the functioning of the collegium system. Justice Chelameswar's refusal to attend meetings of the collegium on the grounds that its functioning lacks transparency, to the extent that even some members of the collegium are unaware of the basis on which judicial appointments are

made, pointed to the deep malaise that afflicts the judicial appointments process.

Though some measures have been taken recently to place resolutions of the collegium in the public domain, the Memorandum of Procedure (MoP) related to the appointment of judges, which has been referred to in the letter by the four judges, continues to be kept under cover. Neither has the draft MoP prepared by the collegium been put in the public domain, nor have the comments of the government, if any, been communicated to the public.

The lack of transparency and accountability in the functioning of the judiciary erodes public trust in the institution which people look towards to uphold democratic principles and deliver justice. The writers are members of the Campaign for Judicial Accountability and Reforms

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Roads to corruption: on road-building contracts

Politicians are likely to dole out road-building contracts to people from their own caste and this could affect the quality of infrastructure, according to a new study. 'Building connections: Political corruption and road construction in India', which will be published in the March issue of the *Journal of Development Economics*, shows how political interference may be why India's largest rural connectivity scheme could have led to at least 497 "all-weather roads" being "built" only on paper, depriving 8.57 lakh villagers from connection to the road network.

Using statistical tools of regression discontinuity, which allows the quantification of 'interference' in datasets, researchers from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and Paris School of Economics linked corruption in road building under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana to the probability of contractors connected to local MLAs.

Strengthening rural road connectivity

Further, to establish a link with the local political ecosystem, researchers looked at road agreements signed after an election victory. They compared "close elections" — which suggest that both candidates could in theory have similar influence — in 2,632 constituencies across 24 States between 2001 and 2013. Would contractors with the same surnames as newly elected MLAs be more likely to bag road contracts, and, in some way, funnel money out of the programme and into the political system? There is an 83% increase in the share of roads allocated to contractors who have the same surname as the winning MLAs as compared to the level of matches found pre-election.

And consequently, does this apparent political affiliation affect the quality of work? Researchers matched the agreements of 88,000 rural roads built under the scheme since 2001 and cross-referenced that with village amenities listed in the 2011 Census to correlate whether these roads have been built. Using extrapolation models, the researchers found that the likelihood for an all-weather road missing goes up by 86% under these kinds of contracts, and has led to an additional 497 all-weather roads being present on paper but missing from the ground. Jacob N. Shapiro, professor at the Wilson School and the lead author of the paper, suggests that MLAs "game the system" by having connections within regional bureaucracy to tilt the favour to their preferred contractor.

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The power of persuasion

The Indian Constitution is unique in listing, among fundamental duties, the duty of each citizen “to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform” (Article 51A). Jawaharlal Nehru was the first to use the expression “scientific temper”, which he described with his usual lucidity in *The Discovery of India* (while also quoting Blaise Pascal on the limits of reason). And yet, decades later, superstitious practices abound in India, including among the highly educated.

Superstition exists

India may be unusual in the degree and variety of superstitious practices, even among the educated, but superstition exists everywhere. In his recent Editorial page article, “[Science should have the last word](#)” (*The Hindu*, February 17), Professor Jayant V. Narlikar, cosmologist and a life-long advocate for rationality, cites Czech astronomer Jiří Grygar’s observation that though the Soviets suppressed superstitious ideas in then-Czechoslovakia during the occupation, superstition arose again in the “free-thinking”, post-Soviet days. Superstition never went away: people just hesitated to discuss it in public.

Similarly, China suppressed superstition and occult practices during Mao Zedong’s rule. But after the economic reforms and relative openness that began in the late 1970s, superstition reportedly made a comeback, with even top party officials consulting soothsayers on their fortunes. In India, the rationalist movements of Periyar and others have barely made a dent. No country, no matter its scientific prowess, has conquered superstition.

On the positive side, internationally, increasing numbers of people live happily without need for superstition. The most appalling beliefs and rituals have largely been eradicated the world over — such as blood-letting in medicine to human sacrifice, and in India, practices such as sati. This is due to the efforts put in by social reform campaigners, education and empowerment (of women in particular). Yet, surviving superstitions can be dangerous too, for example when they contradict medical advice.

Explaining it

Why is it so hard to remove superstitions? Fundamentally, a belief may be difficult to shake off simply because of deep-seated habituation. In his memoir *Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman!*, the physicist Richard P. Feynman wrote about being hypnotised voluntarily (hypnosis is always voluntary) on stage, doing what was asked, and thinking to himself that he was just agreeing to everything to not “disturb the situation”. Finally, the hypnotist announced that Feynman would not go straight back to his chair but would walk all around the room first. Feynman decided that this was ridiculous; he would walk straight back to his seat. “But then,” he said, “an annoying feeling came over me: I felt so uncomfortable that I couldn’t continue. I walked all the way around the hall.”

We have all had such “uncomfortable feelings” when trying to do something differently, even if it seems to be logically better: whether it’s a long-standing kitchen practice, or an entrenched approach to classroom teaching, or something else in daily life. Perhaps we are all hypnotised by our previous experiences, and superstition, in particular, is a form of deep-seated hypnosis that is very hard to undo. It is undone only when the harm is clear and evident, as in the medieval practices alluded to earlier. Such beliefs are strengthened by a confirmation bias (giving

importance to facts that agree with our preconceptions and ignoring others) and other logical holes. Recent research even shows how seeing the same evidence can simultaneously strengthen oppositely-held beliefs (a phenomenon called Bayesian belief polarisation).

Disagreement in science

Dogmatism about science can be unjustified too. All scientific theories have limitations. Newton's theories of mechanics and gravitation were superseded by Einstein's. Einstein's theory of gravity has no known limitations at the cosmological scale, but is incompatible with quantum mechanics. The evolution of species is an empirical fact: the fossil record attests it, and we can also observe it in action in fast-breeding species. Darwinism is a theory to explain how it occurs. Today's version is a combination of Darwin's original ideas, Mendelian genetics and population biology, with much empirical validation and no known failures. But it does have gaps. For example, epigenetic inheritance is not well understood and remains an active area of research. Incidentally, Dr. Narlikar in his article has suggested that Darwinism's inability to explain the origin of life is a gap. Few evolutionary biologists would agree. Darwin's book was after all titled *The Origin of Species*, and the origin of life would seem beyond its scope. But this is an example of how scientists can disagree on details while agreeing on the big picture.

How then does one eradicate superstition? Not, as the evidence suggests, by preaching or legislating against it. Awareness campaigns against dangerous superstitions along with better education and scientific outreach may have some impact but will be a slow process.

Today, the topic of "persuasion" is popular in the psychology, social science and marketing communities. Perhaps scientists have something to learn here too. Pascal, whom Nehru cited on reason, wrote on persuasion too. He observed that the first step is to see the matter from the other person's point of view and acknowledge the validity of their perception, and then bring in its limitations. "People are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have themselves discovered than by those which have come into the mind of others."

Such a strategy may be more successful than the aggressive campaigns of rationalists such as Richard Dawkins. Nevertheless, "harmless" superstitions are likely to remain with humanity forever.

Rahul Siddharthan is with the Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Chennai

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