



**THE TIMES OF INDIA**

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## Democracy makes majorities

### *How India's Hindu "majority" is an outcome of Independence and constitutional process*



Pakistan's new Hindu Marriage Act prohibits polygamy among Hindus, but can it reel the big fish in? There is no parallel law yet, nor is there one in the making, that would restrain Muslim men to monogamy in Pakistan. Paradoxically then, while the majority of Pakistanis is still bound by undemocratic norms, the minority there is relatively liberated. In Pakistan, Hindu men can have only one lawfully wedded wife while Muslims can have as many as four at a time, though only a fraction of the population is willing to chance it.

This has often promoted the belief that Hinduism is democracy friendly and citizenship enabling. While it is true that both the Hindu Marriage Act (1955) and the Hindu Succession Act (1956) were great achievements of independent India, it is also true that their passage through Parliament was heavily contested, with

not a wishbone at work. Traditionalists, inside and outside Congress, strongly opposed these bills and it required a huge effort by Nehru and Ambedkar, among others, to see them through.

This much is well known. What is, however, not equally appreciated, and fully baked into our brains, is that the Hindu "majority", such as we know it to be, is actually a creation of these post-Independence laws. Before they came into being, not just marriage, even inheritance and guardianship norms differed from place to place, from community to community in India. In some cases, succession was governed by the Mitakshara system, in others the Dayabhaga; and each had dashboards flashing different schools. Nor could one ignore the many matrilineal communities that had to also conform to this newly minted uniform standard. The Delhi high court in two recent judgments, one in 2015 and the other in 2016, overturned Hindu tradition yet again and brought about a greater consolidation of the majority. It first decreed that a Hindu mother could be the single guardian of her child and later also allowed a woman to be "karta" in a Hindu Undivided Family unit.

Where then were the Hindus before the mid 1950s, other than a scattered lot with diverse customs? The community we consider to be in overwhelming "majority" today is an outcome of these laws and did not predate them. The "majority", in other words, is a creation of liberal democracy – from the many came one, under the watchful eye of the Constitution. Therefore, the first government of independent India deserves a further credit: it not only created a majority, but also tamed it. This is an enormous task that easily frightens many new nations, but India was different. The first job then in democracy and citizenship making is the creation of just such a "majority", and this is rarely ever a gift bequeathed by tradition. Instead of being shamefaced about this majority, we should celebrate it as a laser-focussed republican moment. The Hindu of independent India is a new creature and, in strictly legal terms, its personal code is a creation of the present. A good democracy alters many aspects of tradition to create a "majority", and there is nothing so unusual about this. Just as Hindus had to be disciplined before they could become a "majority", so also were Christians in the Western world. There is simply no majority culture that emerged out of any democracy that has not been burnished and moulded by the concerns of citizenship. What we know as Italy today was a powder keg of

viciously divisive forces; the Sardinians against Bourbons against Sicilians, and all of them against a unified nation-state. Yet, for a long time now they have all been Italians.

Likewise, Quakers, Presbyterians and Methodists are presently part of the Christian majority in Britain, but a little over a hundred years ago they were classified as “dissenters”. Consequently, they were denied government jobs; they could not even earn degrees from Oxford or Cambridge. All of this sounds unreal today as these sects are now chartered members of the Protestant “majority” in the United Kingdom. Since then there has been further progress. In 2013 a new law was passed that even allows a British monarch to marry a Catholic. This enlarged the Christian majority from just being a Protestant one, erasing completely the memory of the 1780 massacre of Catholics. A similar process took place in America when, post World War II, Jewish people began to be considered as “white folks”. Till the 1920s, Jewish students were discouraged from entering elite educational institutions in the United States. Perhaps, World War II brought home the wisdom to conservative Christian establishments that Jewish talent would be hugely beneficial to America’s well-being. Taken together this should easily expose the myth of a pre-existing “majority” in a democracy. If, at times, it appears as if the majority has to do little adjusting, leaving the burden on minorities alone, then that is an optical illusion. This conclusion overlooks how a good and vibrant democracy has long been at work to merge hitherto disparate groups and sects, to form a majority. If democracies, step by step, by incessant crafting and cajoling, create majorities, the same methods must be put to work to merge those who still see themselves as outliers and minorities. After all, a majority is known by the minorities it embraces.

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## **Robots could have what it tax**

### ***Machines that do human work should contribute to national revenue***



As the old saying goes, death and taxes are inevitable. Now, if Bill Gates and other hi-tech crystal ball gazers are to be believed, the taxes part of that observation might apply to robots as well as to humans. Gates has been quoted as saying, “Right now, the human worker who does, say, \$50,000 worth of work in a factory, that income is taxed and you get income tax, social security tax, all those things. If a robot comes in to do the same thing, you’d think that we’d tax the robot at a similar level!”

The golden Gates might well have a valid point. Indeed, knowing that the taxman is famous – or infamous, depending on your point of view – for casting his net far and wide, robots

might one day end up paying more tax than their human counterparts. Human taxpayers can – and do – claim a whole slew of tax rebates and exemptions, by way of maternity benefits, for example, which would not extend to the average robot. Initially, robots were programmed to do only assembly line work, at automobile and other mass production factories. But day by day their labour skills are growing exponentially. For instance, there are robots who can look after your needs at home, and do so with a punctiliousness unmatched by even the most accomplished of human domestic help. If PG Wodehouse had been around today would Jeeves, Bertie Wooster’s ‘gentleman’s personal gentleman’ be morphed into Jarvis, the gentleman’s personal android? And would Beech, the august butler at Blandings Castle, find himself out-butlered from his job by a frockcoated Bestech, a mechanical major domo nonpareil?

Robots are hitting below the belt, both metaphorically and literally. In a development that would have made Freud flip his id, for a growing number of people robots are becoming their sex objects of choice.

As hard porn goes onto hard drive, a futuristic adult movie might well star an automated Sony Leone as its hot attraction. And an updated version of the Kama Sutra could be retitled the Cyborg Sutra. Whereupon a censorious robot group which could call itself the Mechanical Mahila Manch might well take out a morcha in protest and publicly set on fire the offending tomes along with an effigy of its automaton author. Such eventualities which today tax the imagination could tomorrow imaginatively be turned into machine-generated tax revenue. However, a problem could crop up. Any robot smart enough to be liable for tax would be smart enough to evade tax. On the principle that it takes a robot to catch a robot, the tax authorities could hire silicon sleuths to nab such evaders. However, such robotic revenue collectors might be as susceptible to bribery as humans, inspiring a reprise of Arthur Koestler's philosophical opus, *The Ghoos in the Machine*.

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## THE ECONOMIC TIMES

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### **Stop patronising power theft and bring down runaway revenue leakage in power distribution**

In a disingenuous move, state power utilities are reportedly jacking up spot market power tariffs by up to 40 per cent for large industrial consumers seeking "open access" to the grid. But a highly distorted tariff structure (read: penal tariffs), with the express purpose of deterring cross-country power exchange via open access, is really no reform. The way ahead is for politicians to stop patronising power theft and bring down runaway revenue leakage in power distribution pan-India so as to have a proper market for power.

It would then make eminent sense for efficient producers to gainfully seek custom via open access to the line network, for a reasonable fee. And attempting shortcuts like steep open-access charges, never mind huge distribution losses of state power utilities, would be thoroughly suboptimal, and can short-circuit the system. The Electricity Act, 2003, was intended to bring in independent oversight put paid to politically mandated tariffs and gross populism in power. But it has now been shown that state power regulators may not revise tariffs for years, to remain in the good books of the powers that be. And such a mindset needs prompt overhauling. The idea that power can be supplied gratis or dirt cheap with the right political patronage needs to be junked wholesale. Yes, there is certainly a case for limited, budgeted subventions for power. But gross open-ended subsidies just make no sense. Such policies can bankrupt entire state treasuries and lead to environmental damage like falling water tables. Pacing reforms in the policy-challenged power sector is vital. What's required is regular disclosure of power utility results prior to implementing routine open access. A proper market can wait, pending basic power tariff reform.

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## Ethical economist

### *The workings of human societies illuminated numbers and economic theories in Kenneth Arrow's work*



When Kenneth Arrow won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1972, at 51, the youngest to do so, his peer Paul Samuelson wrote, “The economics of insurance, medical care, prescription drug testing — to say nothing of bingo and the stock market — will never be the same after Arrow.” To this list, he could well have added electoral processes, pay equity, even climate change and global negotiations for peace. Arrow, who passed away on Wednesday, was amongst those who brought the workings of human societies to bear on economic theories and numbers.

His work challenged that holy grail of then economic theory which depicted the marketplace as a secular arena where the rules of demand and supply determined how commodities were bought and sold. The reality was far more complex, Arrow showed. The marketplace was not a theatre where buyers and sellers traded commodities with no links with each other. The menu at a restaurant, for example, involved not just food ingredients, it required oil, transport, cutlery, the chinaware. More significantly, the logic that governed the demand for a meal at an expensive restaurant could not apply to that for healthcare products. A gastronome would be very likely have been curious about the exotica at the restaurant, and known a fair bit about the ingredients that went into the fare and could make her choices accordingly. But in healthcare, physicians, hospitals and insurance companies would know much more than the family of the ailing. Such asymmetry of information made the marketplace a much more complicated entity than that was depicted in the simplistic theories of demand and supply. Arrow brought his interests in human societies to his political choices. He goaded Stanford University to rethink its links with apartheid South Africa and was among the rare American academics who thought Israel was wrong in its dealings with Palestine. He developed an interest in climate change and in his later years worried that time was running short to combat it. In times when much of the academia has become an insular ivory tower, Arrow's life and work remains salutary.

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