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EC And Social Media

Adherence to model code of conduct a difficult task, best to regulate lightly

TOI Editorials



There is general agreement among political parties that social media will have a significant influence on the outcome of the forthcoming election. The spread of smartphones has widened internet access and magnified the impact of social media. Consequently, the Election Commission has said that digital platforms will have to adhere to the model code of conduct. There can be no argument that the regulatory framework for electioneering has to include social media. The challenge is to find a balance between curbing fake news and effectively using EC's regulatory resources.

EC's approach has been to encourage a sense of self-regulation among social media companies. It's the best possible approach in the context of the medium. Social media's popularity is based on minimal entry barriers when it comes to disseminating information. This implies that dissemination of information and views through this medium will originate from a lot more sources than conventional means. Given this, any attempt to impose a strict regulatory framework based on micromanagement will fail. It will only succeed in diverting EC's limited resources without in any way meaningfully cracking down on violations.

The Internet and Mobile Association of India and individual social media companies are working along with EC to evolve a mechanism to check egregious abuses. Any attempt at self-regulation under the guidance of EC is welcome. It will only strengthen individual efforts at checking abuse and impart coherence to the overall effort. The fact that needs to be acknowledged is that social media has a vast multiplicity of users. Rather than attempting to heavily regulate it, which is likely to crack down disproportionately on opposition voices, it is better to educate the voter and put out 'caveat emptor' or 'buyer beware' warnings on social media consumption.

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What Is And Is Not History

For scholars, faith and evidence of historicity are two separate matters

Romila Thapar, [The writer is a historian and author]

This is with reference to Arun Anand's article, "Why the Left Isn't Right" (IE, March 13). The dispute over Ram Janmabhoomi cannot be reduced merely to what has been described as Left historians having a

flawed understanding of the Babri case. In support of this statement, a short pamphlet on 'The Political Abuse of History' has been referred to in the above article. The pamphlet was raising the question important to historians, of historicity having to be based on proven reliable evidence. This is yet to be found for the events of the Ramakatha. What mythology, fantasy, poetry or faith make of a believed biography, is of considerable interest for an intellectual analysis or a study of what surrounds history. However, taking it as the literal biography of an existing person is problematic for an historian.

The modern scholars quoted in the article as having stated that the story goes back to the fifth century BC, is not disputed. But this does not prove the historicity of the persons involved in the narrative or the story or the events. The story is described as a katha, and the term used in English refers to it as an epic. This may explain why the biography of Rama and others differs substantially and conceptually in three of the earliest versions of the story. These are the Vaishnava Valmiki Ramayana, the Buddhist Dasaratha Jataka and the Jaina Paumachariyam. The three Ramas of these three texts are three different persons with three different messages. Such differences increase with the adoption of the story in variant cultures in India, and even further afield: For example, in the many distinctively diverse versions that come from South-East Asia. It is precisely this element of difference that is most significant and needs to be analysed in terms of the authenticity of any narrative. This is quite a contrast to the essential uniformity in the biographies of the founders of a religion, such as the Buddha and Christ and some others.

Furthermore, none of these texts provide us with a detailed topography of the events as they happened and were identified with locations in Ayodhya. This comes about many centuries later in the mid-second millennium AD, when the Ayodhya-mahatmya was composed, and various locations in Ayodhya were associated with a believed biography. Mention of such places from the 18th century follow from this and continue, often to this day. Visitors to India would have mentioned the worship of Rama wherever they came across it. The object of worship is a matter of faith and none would deny this faith where it exists. But this does not mean that historians should accept faith as evidence of the historicity of the Ramakatha. Faith and evidence of historicity are entirely distinct.

As for mediators in the Ram Janmabhoomi dispute, the definition of a mediator should be clear. The term mediator is used for a person who initially takes a middle position in a dispute (the median), and attempts to reconcile the views of those disputing the claims. Therefore the person so selected to mediate in a dispute, should not be associated, and especially not publicly, with an opinion committed to any one side. Is this true of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar ?


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Disempowering gram sabhas

Sabotaging the Forest Rights Act damages democracy

Chitrangada Choudhury is a journalist and researcher.

Since 1980, through the Forest Conservation Act (FCA), the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF) has “diverted for non-forest use” (bureaucratese for destroyed) over 1.5 million hectares of forest. How many Adivasis and forest-dwellers have been evicted by this ‘lawful’ forest destruction? Stripping these forests has yielded thousands of crores of rupees for corporations to which a bulk of these forestlands were diverted, and for forest departments via compensatory funds. But how have the original inhabitants of these forests, already among the most marginalised, coped with the loss of homes and livelihoods?

A deafening silence meets these questions. We cannot find answers, yet, in Supreme Court hearings on a petition by a set of conservationists and former forest officers motivated, self-admittedly, by forest protection concerns. On February 13, the court ordered the eviction of 1.8 million Adivasi and forest-dwelling claimants under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, to stem supposed forest destruction. On February 28, it stayed the order until a July hearing. Shouldn’t the destruction of over 1.5 million hectares of forest, and the misuse of the FCA, seize the court and petitioners? And how would the FRA perform on forest stewardship, where the FCA is failing?

Shredding a reform to bits

The FRA was enacted to recognise the pre-existing rights of forest-dwellers. Recognising them as “integral to the survival and sustainability of the forest ecosystem,” the FRA gives their gram sabhas “the responsibilities and authority for sustainable use, conservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological balance.”

A key 2009 regulation actualised gram sabha powers by mandating that all forest diversion proposals and compensatory and ameliorative schemes be presented in detail to the relevant gram sabhas to award or withhold its free, prior, informed consent, and also be preceded by the settlement of all rights under the FRA. This long overdue move created for the first time a space for forest communities to participate in decision-making around diversion proposals, making forest governance more accountable, ecologically informed and resource just.

A decade on, the state and corporations are shredding this reform to bits. In 2016, for instance, I studied a proposal whereby the Odisha Mining Corporation (OMC) sought 1,400 acres of forestland across seven Adivasi villages of Keonjhar in the ecologically sensitive Gandhamardan mountains, for an iron ore mine. The diversion proposal sent by the OMC and the Odisha government to the MoEF included seven copycat gram sabha resolutions, supposedly representing the seven villages. Each identical resolution depicted villagers, over 2,000 in all, as saying they were not using the forests for cultivation, house-building or any livelihood, had no individual or community claims to it, and that they “request” the government to implement the forest diversion. In the villages, these resolutions evoked shock and rage. Residents told me they were fake.

After my news report on the case in 2016, the MoEF asked the State government to probe the matter. What followed is a telling comment on forest governance. The probe report, neither shared with villagers nor made public, glossed over testimonies it gathered of 11 villagers. On how all seven gram sabha resolutions could be identical, officials said, “This may have been done as the same officials conducted the meetings in all villages, and the agenda of the meetings was also the same.” Effectively, the OMC, abetted by officials, created resolutions tailored for forest diversion, thus emptying the gram sabhas’ free informed consent powers of any substantive meaning. Last October, despite letters by villages about the forgery and pending FRA claims, the MoEF issued permission to the OMC to destroy this stretch of forest.

Fighting back

The NDA government has effectively ensured that forest diversion is a given, and the only sanctioned role for Adivasis and forest-dwellers is that of mute rubber stamps. On February 26, the MoEF tried to formalise this travesty by writing to all States that FRA compliance is not needed for 'in-principle' approval for diversions. Violating the FRA, this damaging move eliminates gram sabhas from decision-making, and makes diversion a violent fait accompli for forest-dwellers.

But communities are increasingly rejecting such disempowerment, evident from protests like a 30-km march days ago by villagers in Chhattisgarh's Hasdeo Arand against the MoEF's recent decision to divert over 2,000 acres of forest to a mine, despite gram sabha forgery complaints.

A model of forest governance, forged on the back of usurping gram sabha powers, is servicing a ruthless resource grab. The Supreme Court should examine this sabotage of the FRA that is damaging our forests and our democracy.

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On the learning curve

The systemic approach to transforming education outcomes in India is leading to success

Amitabh Kant is CEO, NITI Aayog



Among the lakhs of employees on the payrolls of State governments in India, the education department, unarguably, has the largest share of employees. Besides frontline service providers (teachers), there are a number of other officials and administrators who form an important part of the educational set-up.

The Haryana case study

Given the size of the education department, any effort to introduce education reforms must ensure that the incentives of all stakeholders are aligned throughout the system to ensure their participation. Education transformation programmes by States run the risk of falling flat, as they are often unaccompanied by a single transformation change road map that all key actors agree upon and work towards. A successful example of implementing such a road map can be seen in Haryana, which has created a race among its administrative blocks to be declared as 'Saksham' (Hindi for abled/skilled), i.e. have 80% or more students who are grade level competent.

Under this campaign, State officials nominate their block for the 'Saksham Ghoshna' once they are reasonably confident that their block has achieved the 80% target — as a result of remedial programmes, teacher training and internal assessments. This self-nomination is then followed by rigorous rounds of third party assessments to vet their claims. If a block is found to be 'Saksham', the block officials are

recognised by no less than the Chief Minister, and a large-scale ‘show and tell’ event is organised to honour them. Further, when all blocks in a district are declared as ‘Saksham’, the entire district is also accorded ‘Saksham’ status.

According to the latest third party assessment in February 2019, 94 blocks out of a total of 119 in Haryana have been declared ‘Saksham’ and overall grade competence has been assessed at 80%, which is a giant leap in learning outcomes when compared to the overall grade competence of 40% in 2014. Given these early successes, many other States are also embarking on such programmes.

The valuable lesson from all this is that inducing competition among administrative units helps invigorate key stakeholders to work in tandem in order to achieve intended outcomes. Competition also makes abstract goals such as ‘learning outcomes’ more real by defining exact ‘actionable’ metrics on which improvement is desired. Further, with encouragement from above, such campaigns lead to a shift in the mindset of a State’s education administrators, many of whom otherwise believe that high learning outcomes are almost unachievable. Political commitment to improving the quality of education backed by strong review and monitoring mechanisms can spur meaningful activity in States.

States get scores

Since its inception, the NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India), has also been a believer in competitive federalism that puts pressure on policymakers across States to perform better on pre-defined goals and metrics. To translate this to education, we have now developed the State-level ‘School Education Quality Index’ (SEQI), which seeks to make improvements in learning outcomes a focal point of governance. It gives scores to States based on their educational performance and puts this data out in the public domain. The SEQI uses three data sources, including the National Achievement Survey, to come out with 33 indicators to measure education outcomes, of which the largest weightage (48%) is given to learning outcomes. By having a two-fold ranking system — one which recognises well-performing States via an overall performance score, and a delta ranking that measures the level of improvement made by States from their base year — the NITI’s Aayog’s State ranking not only encourages competition among States but also rewards and motivates other States to consistently improve.

District programme

The NITI Aayog’s Aspirational Districts programme, launched in early 2018, also draws from this template. Here, 112 under-served districts across the country compete with each other in order to achieve targets in five crucial sectors; these include education, which has among a weightage of 30%. These districts are monitored real-time and ranked on the basis of their progress. The follow-up for each indicator is handled by the respective Ministry in charge of the same, while NITI Aayog handles the data compilation and dissemination.

Most importantly, there is a constant focus on recognising and disseminating best practices of select districts to other States, which act as a reward for well-performing local administrations while providing impetus to other districts to adopt similar measures. This strategy has already shown success; districts that were ranked low in baseline surveys, such as Virudhunagar (Tamil Nadu), Nuapada (Odisha), Gumla (Jharkhand), Siddharthnagar (Uttar Pradesh), and Vizianagaram (Andhra Pradesh), have shown remarkable progress in subsequent rounds of assessment.

The fact that this programme has huge support and buy-in from the Prime Minister personally ensures that all stakeholders are spurred into action and energised to achieve the stated goals. Given the success of these initiatives, it is abundantly clear that the right incentive structures for stakeholders lead to administrative efficiency, which then improves the quality of service delivery. States therefore need to induce competition and give a boost to put all key actors in education in the driver's seat to improve their learning levels.

The successes that we are already witnessing in India with the systemic approach to transforming education are inspiring. Improvement in learning outcomes is an immediate goal for India to fulfil its aspirations of playing a greater role in the global economy and a systemic transformation is the best solution that we have so far.
