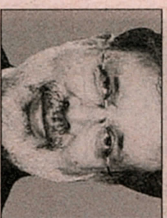


Forget Bihar: Let's Worry About our GNH

The Needle's Eye



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About 1,000 authors and teachers marched through the streets of the capital on Tuesday, asserting their right to free speech.

Did you miss this event in Delhi? Actually, it happened in Dhaka, where four bloggers and a publisher have been killed so far this year, and civil society believes free speech is being throttled in Bangladesh by a rising tide of Islamist intolerance.

We are awash in a sea of intemperate speech and downright hatred. The Narendra Modi government pleaded in the Supreme Court on Tuesday that hate speech needs to be treated as a criminal offence, and that penal laws to punish growing instances of deliberate incitement of religious and class hatred need to be kept intact. Those laudable objectives do not seem to deter our politicians from public utterances that would hardly qualify as palm for blistered souls.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has led a ferocious campaign to unseat Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. Modi's speeches have risen in invective

and innuendo as the five-phase election grinds to an end. Interestingly India's election laws do not bar campaigning even in constituencies neighbouring those that are actually voting in a given phase. With every young voter sporting a smartphone and social media growing in leaps and bounds, it is not difficult for a savvy politician to influence trends in off-bound areas. This is one of the big pitfalls of an election that is spread-eagled over four weeks.

On Tuesday Modi, who has travelled two dozen times to Bihar to speak to ever-bigger crowds, accused the state government of harbouring terrorists. There was no corroboration, only accusation. The next day BJP leader Kailash Vijayvargiya labelled actor Shah Rukh Khan anti-national and said "his soul always lives in Pakistan". On Wednesday, in the face of widespread outrage, he said he was taking back his incendiary Hindi tweets on Khan because they were 'misconstructed'. That same day the BJP's Yogi Adityanath said Khan, who had spoken out against rising intolerance, was sounding just like Pakistani terrorist Hafiz Saeed.

Which is all grist for the Bihar election mill. When you read this column, voting in the fifth and final phase of the Bihar election, for 57 of the 243 seats at stake in the state legislature, will be under way. There seems to be a consensus that the election so far is too close to call. Thursday's voting will take place in the Seemanchal region, dominated by Muslim voters, the Mithilaanchal region, where upper-

caste Maithili Brahmins are influential. If you are a politician worth your salt, you've got to press every button you can find.

We are drowning in analyses of caste, religion and demography in the Bihar elections. Both the BJP and the Grand Alliance have made all the noises about women's betterment, but it is useful to examine what women mean in this election.

Although women make for over 46% of the state's 67 million voters, they lack political representation – women numbered only 7.8% of the total 3,450 candidates.

Data-journalism website Indiaspend says Nitish Kumar, who is fighting for his political survival, was praised for gender-friendly policies, including a 50% quota for women in village-governing panchayats. But, faced with a huge battle, he has dramatically reversed course, giving his party ticket to only nine of his 22 women legislators. Indiaspend cited the story of Jyothi Devi, who did excellent work for her constituency but was refused a ticket by Nitish Kumar's JD(U) because she is related to his rival Jitan Ram Manjhi. The 2010 legislature had the highest number of women members, 34, since independence. Possibly as a backlash, as many as 81 women are contesting the Bihar elections this year as independents.

A McKinsey report, Advancing Women's Equality in India, says our nation could add 1.4 percentage points annually to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) until 2025, by bringing in 68 million more women into the workforce and raising women's participation from 31

to 41%. McKinsey has created the Female Empowerment Index (Feindex) specifically for India and rated all 32 states. A score of 1.00 means gender parity. Bihar scores 0.42, the lowest in India. The report says that improving female education and healthcare and increasing women's access to the labour force will substantially boost the country's economy.

That is if women in Bihar can truly climb out of their backwardness, whichever coalition wins power in these elections.

Talking about Jungle Raj or the lawlessness that was associated with the rule of Lalu Prasad before Nitish took power in 2005, let us look at how criminality has been inextricably woven into the Bihar fabric.

One fact jumps out: there is very little to choose between rival parties and candidates on the counts of probity, wealth, education and even honesty in paying their taxes.

The Association for Democratic Reforms examined the nomination papers of every candidate from every party. Under India's election laws, a candidate has to declare his or her total assets, criminal charges he or she is accused of, education, and income-tax details. Here are a few facts about Bihar 2015:

30% of 1,038 candidates have declared criminal cases against them. Among them, 796 face serious charges like murder and rape. 61% of 157 BJP candidates face criminal charges. 60% of the 202 candidates split between RJD and 57% of JD(U) face criminal charges.

47 of the 57 constituencies voting on Thursday are labelled 'red alert' because each has three or more candidates facing criminal charges. 69% of the 827 candidates standing on Thursday have not filed their income-tax returns.

Only 38% of Thursday's candidates are college graduates.

While we thrash about in the throes of democracy, spare a thought for our small Himalayan neighbour Bhutan, which is ruled by a benevolent Buddhist monarchy. This week, 725 delegates from across the world gathered in the town of Paro for three days of debate on Gross National Happiness (GNH), which Bhutan says is as important, or even more important, than measuring mere economic growth in GDP terms.

Bhutan's 2015 GNH is 0.756. It has risen from 0.743 in 2010. The government's GNH survey said 91.2% of Bhutanese were narrowly, extensively or deeply happy. 43.4% were extensively or deeply happy. The Bhutanese want to raise that to 100%.

The survey says Bhutanese men are happier than women, urban residents are happier than village folk, and more educated people are happier. Single and married people are happier than divorced or separated people.

Don't sneer at GNH, unhappy reader! Bhutan's life expectancy is 66 years. South Asia's is 67. Bhutan's carbon-dioxide emissions are 0.8 tonnes per capita. South Asia's are 1.1. The Asian Development Bank forecasts that Bhutan's GDP will grow 7% in 2015. It scaled its India forecast back to 7.4 from 7.8%. The message is clear: be happy.

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