

THE PROBE



THE CHAOTIC

CASE OF



INDIAN



FEDERALISM



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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dear readers,

In this issue, we embark on a journey from the galleries of the legislature discussing policies and the spirit of the Constitution to changing economic paradigms. The cover story this time delves into the nature of federalism in India, focusing on its constitutional bulwark and the issues in its functioning. The issue dissects the similarities and differences between two of the most important agendas of the ruling dispensation- the Uniform Civil Code and Article 370. We also find answers to the role played by religion in society and the logical fallacies even in the atheist movement.

You'll also find two enthralling conversations on two very different topics. Author and filmmaker Anurag Minus Verma, in conversation with The Probe, talks about the role played by social media and the world of the internet in power relations. Locating a precise relation between sources of exclusion and power in India, he draws connections between identities like caste and religion with our worldview. In the second conversation, we discuss Productivism, a possible upcoming economic paradigm with Professor Deepanshu Mohan. Drawing insights from his brilliant work Strongmen Saviours, he explores the concept of populism and its effects not just on politics and the economy but even on societal relations at large. With pieces from as diverse themes as video games and the use of Artificial Intelligence, alongside a fascinating review of the 2014 movie Court, the issue has a lot to offer and ponder over. We hope you enjoy reading it as much as we did producing it. Happy reading!



The Probe is a non-profit, student-run, independent & non-partisan monthly magazine published by Caucus, a student organisation of Hindu College, University of Delhi. Caucus was founded in 2007, and The Probe in 2020. Our ambition lies in creating a platform that promotes writing & reporting among the students and enables them to engage in a learning experience with experts & working professionals.

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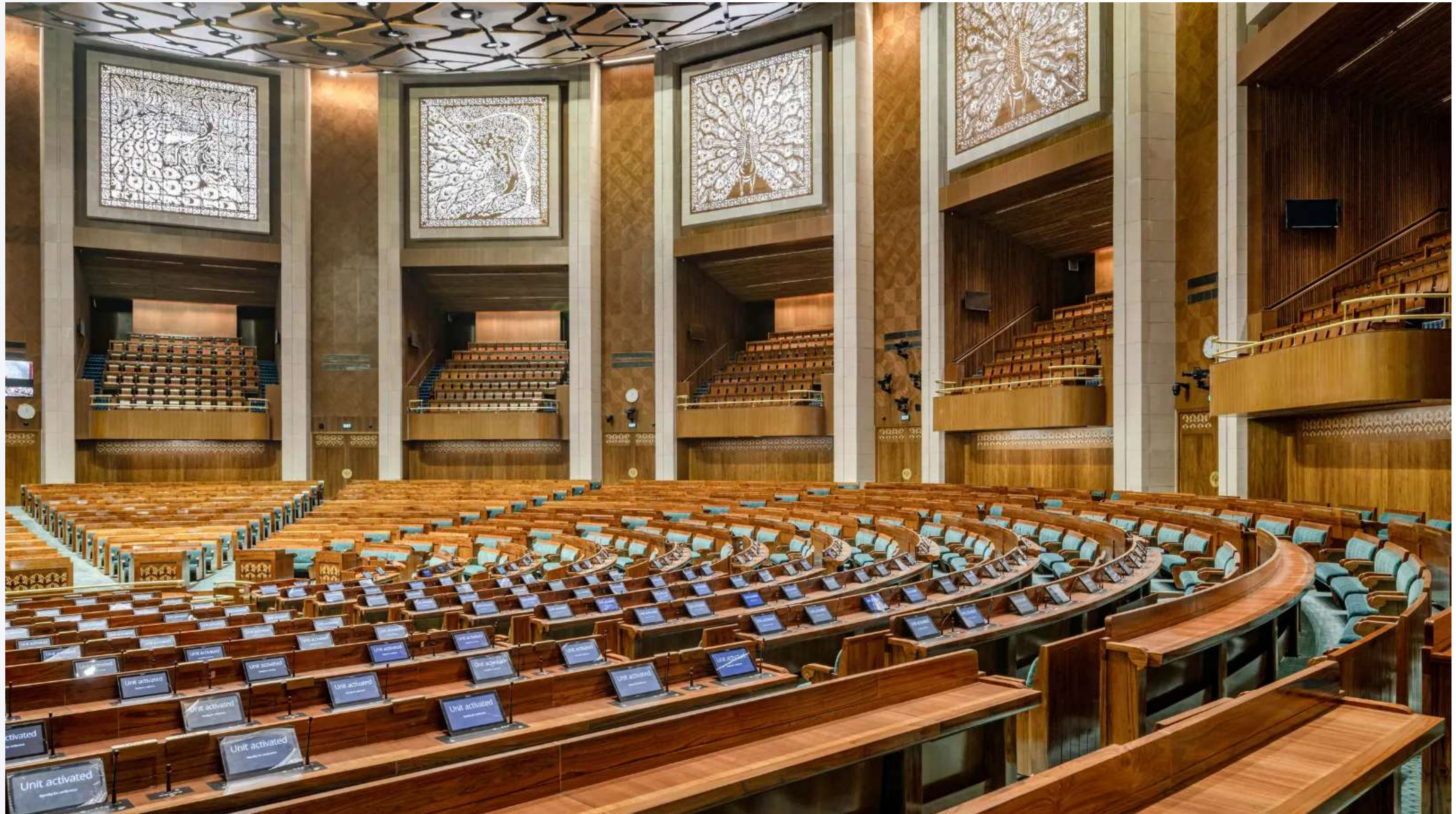
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THE PROBE

by STUDENTS
for the WORLD



THE CHAOTIC CASE OF INDIAN FEDERALISM

India's journey towards independence led to the evolution of a unique federal structure, where the central government and the state governments share powers and responsibilities. The framers of the Indian Constitution, in their wisdom, sought to establish a strong Union while also granting considerable autonomy to the states. This delicate balance between a powerful central authority and decentralised governance has been a defining feature of India's federalism. The Constitution of India, adopted on January 26, 1950, enshrines the principles of federalism, with a clear delineation of powers between the Centre and the states. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution, highlighted the significance of this arrangement, stating,

“A federation is a union because it is indestructible and helps to maintain the unity of the country. The states, in spite of the federal features of the Indian Constitution, are not sovereign... The federation is a union because it is indestructible.”

Constitutional morality, a cornerstone of democratic governance, entails more than legal compliance with the Constitution's text. It embodies a profound respect for its underlying principles, fostering a commitment to uphold the rule of law and democratic values. In a diverse and pluralistic democracy like India, constitutional morality holds particular significance in maintaining unity and adherence to the Constitution's spirit. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emphasised the need to cultivate constitutional morality, stating,

“It is not a natural sentiment. We must realise that our people have yet to learn it.”

This sentiment resonates in the Supreme Court's judgement on **Keshavananda Bharati vs. State of Kerala (1973)**, which recognized constitutional morality as a foundational part of the Constitution's basic structure, immune to amendment or abrogation. A commitment to constitutional morality fosters accountability among constitutional functionaries, ensuring they uphold democratic values. Without it, constitutional principles could be undermined, endangering citizens' rights and liberties.

In the context of centre-state relations, constitutional morality ensures mutual respect for each other's constitutional rights and promotes cooperation between the central and state governments, working toward a strong and cohesive nation. Adhering to constitutional morality provides a roadmap for resolving conflicts and challenges in a federal system, guiding India towards its democratic ideals. Thus, the doctrine of Constitutional Morality has played a crucial role in shaping and maintaining robust centre-state relations in India, reinforcing the spirit of cooperative federalism, and upholding the integrity of the nation.

Over the course of India's history, there have been instances where powerful governments at the centre have attempted to undermine the devolution of power, leading to what is often referred to as 'Constitutional Immorality.' These instances reflect challenges to the delicate balance between the Union and the states and have sparked debates surrounding the preservation of federal principles in India.

One such notable episode was during the Emergency (1975-1977), a period of authoritarian rule under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The government took

measures to centralize power and dilute state autonomy, effectively eroding the federal structure. During this time, several opposition-led state governments were dismissed, and direct rule from the centre was imposed.

Fundamental rights were suspended and civil liberties were curtailed; undermining the democratic fabric of the nation. The

Emergency marked a grave assault on federalism and raised concerns about the misuse of central

authority to trample upon the

rights of states.

Another significant instance was the

imposition of President's Rule in various states under different governments over the years. Article 356 of the Indian Constitution empowers the President to impose President's Rule in a state if the government is perceived to have failed in upholding constitutional principles. However, this provision has been subject to misuse by some central governments to destabilise state governments led by political rivals. Between 1966 to 1977, President's rule was imposed 39 times in different states including Tamil Nadu (1976), Odisha (1977) Rajasthan (1977), Bihar (1977) and others where the respective Chief Ministers enjoyed the majority support. This period was marked by the rule of the Congress Party which enjoyed a large majority in the Parliament. In certain cases, President's Rule was imposed hastily, without giving reasonable opportunities for the state governments to prove their majority on the floor of the assembly. Such actions have been heavily criticised as attempts to weaken state autonomy and subvert the federal structure. Additionally, there have been contentious issues related to fiscal federalism, where states have felt that the centre's policies disproportionately favour the Union government's revenue generation at the expense of states' financial autonomy. Disputes over the distribution of tax revenue and the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) have led to debates about the erosion of states' financial independence and their ability to meet their specific regional needs.

Despite these challenges, the judiciary has played a vital role in upholding the principles of federalism in India. In landmark



judgments, the Supreme Court has reaffirmed the importance of preserving the federal structure and has intervened to protect state governments' rights in cases of Constitutional Immorality. The court's decision in S.R. Bommai vs. Union of India (1994) laid down guidelines to be followed by the President while invoking Article 356, making it a last resort in extraordinary circumstances. Similarly, in Rameshwar Prasad (I) vs. Union of India (2006), the court held that the Governor's decision to dissolve the Bihar Legislative Assembly without giving the Chief Minister an opportunity to prove his majority was unconstitutional, reiterating the importance of fair procedures. While India's federal structure has faced challenges from powerful central governments attempting to disrupt the devolution of power, there have also been significant efforts to protect and preserve the core principles of federalism. The nation's commitment to constitutional values and the doctrine of Constitutional Morality remains instrumental in

shaping the dynamics of centre-state relations and ensuring a healthy and cooperative federal system.

The recent exacerbation of the situation with Governors and Lieutenant Governors intervening in the functioning of state governments is indeed a concerning trend for India's democracy. The office of the Governor is constitutionally designed to be a nominal head and a representative of the President at the state level, acting on the advice of the Chief Minister and the Council of Ministers. However, in some cases, Governors have been accused of overstepping their constitutional mandate and interfering in the affairs of elected state governments. The instances in Punjab, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and NCT of Delhi, where Governors and Lieutenant Governors have been accused of thwarting the functioning of state governments, raise serious questions about the principles of federalism and democratic governance. Such interference undermines the autonomy and authority of elected state leaders and poses a threat to the democratic fabric of the country.

In the case of Punjab, the Governor's refusal to convene the state assembly session for the Budget and his intervention in the appointment of Vice-Chancellors of State Universities goes against the spirit of cooperative federalism, where states should have the freedom to govern within their jurisdiction, without undue interference from the centre or its representatives. Similarly, the situation in Tamil Nadu, where the Governor attempted to remove a

serving minister from the council of ministers, against the Chief Minister's views, highlights the need for a careful balance between the roles and responsibilities of elected representatives and constitutional functionaries. Such actions have the potential to create constitutional crises and can erode public trust in democratic institutions. Instances of interference in West Bengal and the NCT of Delhi further exacerbate concerns about the misuse of gubernatorial powers to undermine the authority of elected state governments. This trend can have far-reaching consequences, including potential conflicts between state and central governments, political instability, and erosion of democratic norms. The situation in Delhi concerning the legal battle over its rights to govern highlights a significant challenge to India's federal structure and democratic principles. Despite the Apex Court's ruling in accordance with Article 239AA of the Indian Constitution, granting certain powers to the Delhi State Government, the Union Government's move to reclaim authority over matters related to services and the state public service commission through an ordinance raises important questions about the sanctity of constitutional provisions and the process of amending the Constitution. Article 239AA of the Constitution confers a special status to the National Capital Territory of Delhi, providing for a legislative assembly and a council of ministers with specific powers. However, the same article also grants extraordinary powers to the Union Government under Article 239AA (3)(b) and Article 239AA (7), allowing it to intervene in certain areas, including matters

What Is Your Idea of Federalism?

related to services.

The use of the ordinance route to amend the Constitution is a matter of concern, as it bypasses the usual legislative process and raises questions about the balance of power between the centre and the states. The matter being referred to a 5 judge Constitution Bench indicates the complexity of the issue and the need for a definitive interpretation to clarify the boundaries of authority between the Union and the Delhi State Government. The situation in Delhi has led to a perception that the elected government's powers are being curtailed, particularly concerning the control over civil servants, who are often referred to as the "permanent executives." Such a scenario can be seen as undermining the democratic mandate given by the people of Delhi to their elected representatives, and it can create an unhealthy power dynamic between the centre and the states. In contrast to the recent speech by the Prime Minister in the US Congress, where he emphasised India's deep-rooted democratic traditions and hailed India as the "Mother of Democracy," the actions that challenge the autonomy of a democratically elected government need careful consideration. While the principle of federalism

remains enshrined in India's Constitution, it is crucial for political practices to be consistent with these principles to maintain a robust and resilient system of devolution of powers.

To safeguard India's federal structure and strengthen its democratic roots, it is imperative for the centre and the states to engage in constructive dialogue and cooperation. Respect for the democratic mandate of elected governments and adherence to the principles of Constitutional Morality are essential to ensure a vibrant democracy that upholds the values of federalism and empowers states to govern effectively within their jurisdiction. Finding a panacea for the challenges posed to India's federal structure requires a careful examination of constitutional provisions, respect for democratic norms, and a commitment to upholding the principles of federalism that underpin the nation's governance system. Such efforts will be crucial to ensure a harmonious and equitable relationship between the Union and the states, fostering a strong and cohesive nation. Also, it is essential for civil society, citizens, and the judiciary to remain vigilant and safeguard democratic governance. Public awareness and engagement are crucial to hold constitutional principle of federalism and functionaries

What are your thoughts on the present scenario of Federalism in the Country?

accountable and ensure that they act in line with the principles of Constitutional Morality and respect the democratic mandate of elected governments.

Furthermore, it is incumbent upon all stakeholders to respect and uphold the Constitution, which outlines the framework for a cooperative federal structure in India. The judiciary's role in ensuring the sanctity of constitutional principles cannot be understated, and it is vital for the courts to act as a bulwark against any attempts to subvert the democratic process. Ultimately, a strong and vibrant democracy requires active participation from the people and civil society to safeguard the values and institutions that form the bedrock of the nation's democratic fabric. It is time to address and counter any illegal and undemocratic practices that threaten the democratic spirit of India, and reaffirm the commitment to preserving the ideals of federalism and Constitutional Morality. ■



POLITICS





PIKE!
जामा हमले का बदला।

भारतीय वायु सेना



Very High
Sir

How's the
Josh?





UCC AND ARTICLE 370: THE POLITICAL PARALLELS IN INDIA

By Ritika Das

“

Implementing UCC is not as easy as revoking Article 370.”

-Ghulam Nabi Azad (former Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir)

Recently, during a public speech in Bhopal, Prime Minister Narendra Modi touched upon the topic of the Uniform Civil Code and spoke in favor of it. This slightest mention was enough for many people in India to go into a frenzy over the implementation of UCC. While some political parties and some states gave optimistic responses, many other religious communities and states like Mizoram and Meghalaya have critically questioned its credibility. Such a buzz and hassle in India was last experienced in 2019 when the central government was about to take the most historic yet controversial decision- **Scrapping the Article 370**. The union government in August 2019 removed the age-old special constitutional privileges which were enjoyed by Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 and instead made both Jammu and Kashmir separate Union Territories.

But scrapping article 370 and implementing UCC will not be the same. The process as well as the consequences will not be alike and unfortunately, UCC will be a

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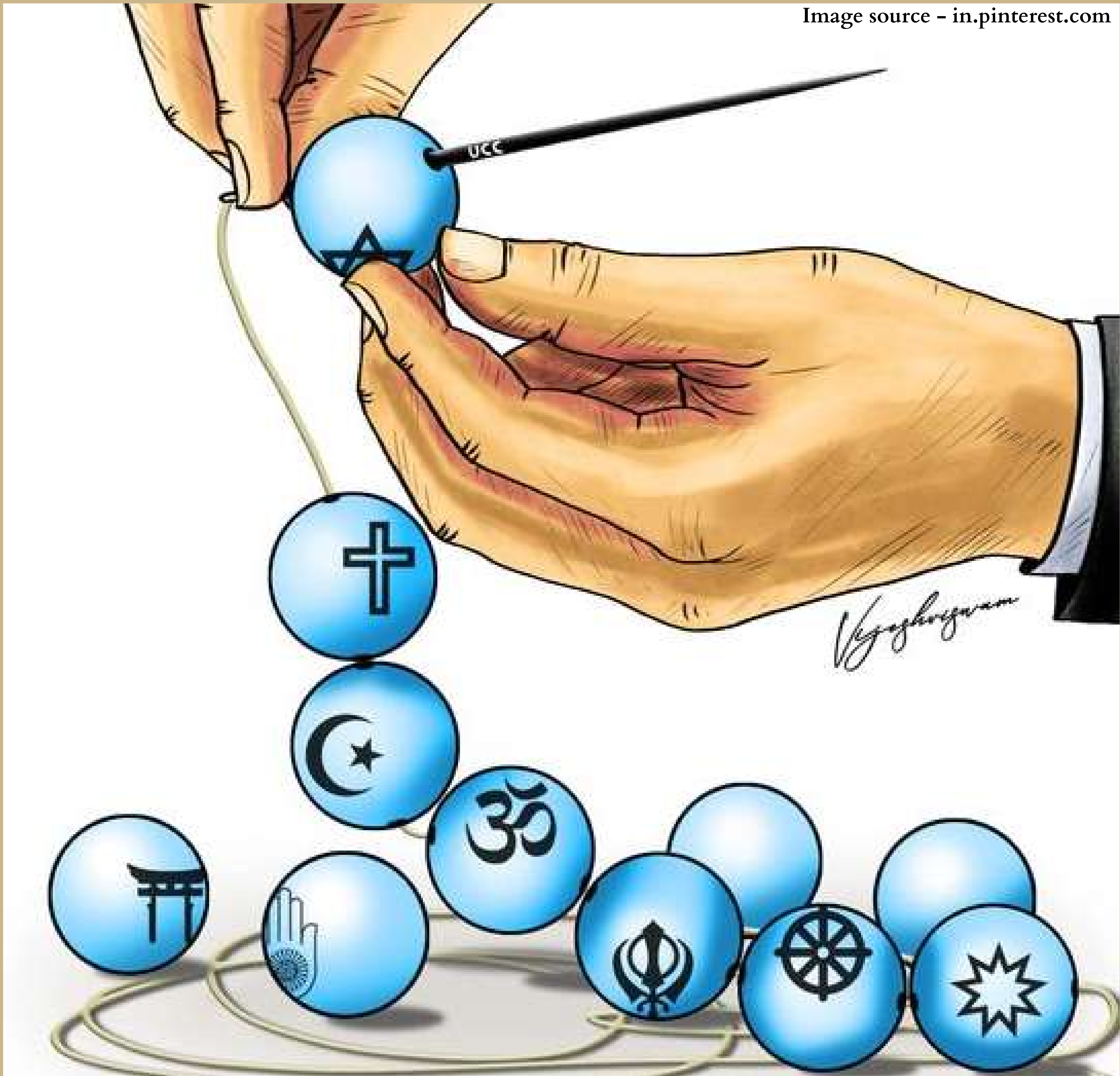
tougher nut to crack unlike Article 370.

BRIEFING ABOUT THE EMERGENCE OF UNIFORM CIVIL CODE IN INDIA

The Uniform Civil Code, abbreviated as UCC, is a proposal in India to establish one single equal law system for the citizens, regardless of their religion, gender and sexual preferences. It sought to do away with the personal laws of various communities which cover marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption and maintenance. It was as early as during the constitution making when Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister strongly supported the implementation of

UCC. As a result, on March 30th, 1947, a committee on Fundamental Rights met to discuss the future of UCC in the Indian Constitution. Members like Minoo Masani, B.R Ambedkar, and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur supported its inclusion as an integral part but due to majority of members hesitating with the idea, it was shifted to **Article 44 of Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) of the Constitution**. The article stated that *"The State shall endeavor to secure for citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India"* It is noted that the DPSP is non-justifiable, that is the government is not compelled to implement the articles mentioned there.

Hence, the topic of UCC was unattended by the successive governments for the longest time, until the **Shah Bano case of 1985**.



here, a petition was filed by Shah Bano, a married muslim woman aged 62 in the Supreme Court, questioning the divorce procedure described in the **Muslim Personal Law** and how it provided very few rights to married Muslim women. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Shah Bano by granting her the right to maintenance from her estranged husband. While many orthodox muslim people opposed the Supreme Court's decision, this also led to a persistent demand for the implementation of UCC, especially by the Non-Muslim people.

Further, UCC was a part of the BJP's manifesto in 1998, but it failed to gain momentum. Then after a long gap, the UCC was again proposed twice in the parliament, in November 2019 by Narayan Lal Panchariya and in March 2020 by Kirodi Lal Meena. But in both cases, the bill did not reach its final enactment. Currently, The BJP-led NDA government has been at the forefront of preaching the implementation of the Uniform Civil Code and similar to Article 370; it wants to bring in a historic change in the context of Indian law and constitution. But as stated

above, Article 370 and UCC are two parallels of the Indian Constitution. Both are very much in contrast with each other. Unlike scrapping Article 370, the central government has to face some greater issues during their journey of making UCC a reality.

THE PARALLELS BETWEEN SCRAPPING ARTICLE 370 AND IMPLEMENTING UCC.

Firstly, while Article 370 concerned only one state of India, that is J&K, the UCC on the other hand concerns the entire India. Scrapping of the constitutional privilege mainly irked the inhabitants of J&K but UCC will impact the practises and lives of various communities who even though live under the protection of the same Supreme Court, but all of them have their laws to follow. Implementing UCC will not only jolt Muslim Personal Laws but also various other communities like Parsis, Sikhs, Christians and some Special Tribal laws.

Secondly, as J&K was furiously turning into a dangerous terrorist breeding ground and threatened national security, the majority of Indians agreed with the scrapping of the state's exclusive privileges and bringing it under the purview of the central government. But the central government cannot expect the same for UCC, by simply riding on the inequalities that Muslim Personal Laws bore with it. That is because, along with the Muslim communities, there is also the entire northeast, excluding Assam who is opposing the UCC in their respective states. They are scared that their indigenous tribal laws will cease to exist once UCC comes in and that would make them vulnerable to the dominating mainstream cultures and rules.

Thirdly, unlike Article 370, the execution of UCC also has its opposition in the form of some constitutional **articles like 25-28** and **371(A-J)**. While the former deals with the Fundamental Rights which guarantees religious freedom to Indian citizens and allows religious groups to maintain their affairs, the latter deals with



the special autonomous rights given to the Northeast states which protects the ethnicity and culture of the tribal laws against some of the decisions taken in the Parliament.

Fourthly, when article 370 was removed from Jammu and Kashmir, many prominent leaders like **Mehbooba Mufti, Omar Abdullah** and **Farooq Abdullah** were put on house arrest, on the pretext of preventive detention. This averted much of the retaliations that could have happened there. But if the ruling government went on doing the same thing for the whole of India during the UCC implementation, then it would turn out to be the biggest act of preventive detention after the **Emergency of 1975** and we are not quite sure if the government would like to replicate 1975 again.

Lastly, BJP as a state party never enjoyed much confidence in the then J&K state and thus, there was never a question about losing support or majority there and the government could easily look into the greater good of the country. But things are different with UCC. Here the BJP needs to be careful,

especially with the North-eastern states where they enjoy a comfortable majority.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

After 4 years, the conversation over Article 370 has seemed to resurface again. There are now fresh petitions in the Supreme Court which sought to challenge the validity of the constitutional change and the SC is still in the process of hearing all of them. Hence the point is, while on one side the topic of Article 370 is still not dead, now if the government wants to introduce UCC in such a condition, then it would be a huge mountain to build.

As a country which was made to believe that secularism means the right for everyone to enjoy their own religious beliefs and cultures and established the notion that 'unity is in diversity'. But with the advocating for UCC, the current government is seeking to establish a different notion of secularism by doing away with the diversity and putting everyone on the same pedestal. While it would surely be a very interesting thing to witness, but while trying to bring equality for all, we can only hope it doesn't bring in more problems with it. ■





PROOFA



DECODING SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS
INTERSECTIONALITIES WITH
ANURAG MINUS VERMA

Interviewed by Siddhant Sinha & Talha Sarfraz

Siddhant Sinha

Generally, for The Probe Interviews, we have an expert from a particular field, and the topic of discussion is fixed. So it becomes a lot easier for us to narrow down the range of discussion and ideas to cover. It will be a bit different today as we have someone who might not be restricted to a domain. While researching for this interview, I found it tough to describe you. An author, a filmmaker, a thinker, a podcaster, a columnist, a satirist and many more. You have a degree in engineering, and you have also studied at JNU. So only you might be able to describe your background, and what has been behind this almost Renaissance kind of personality. How do you see yourself and what has been your motivation behind your work?

Anurag Minus Verma

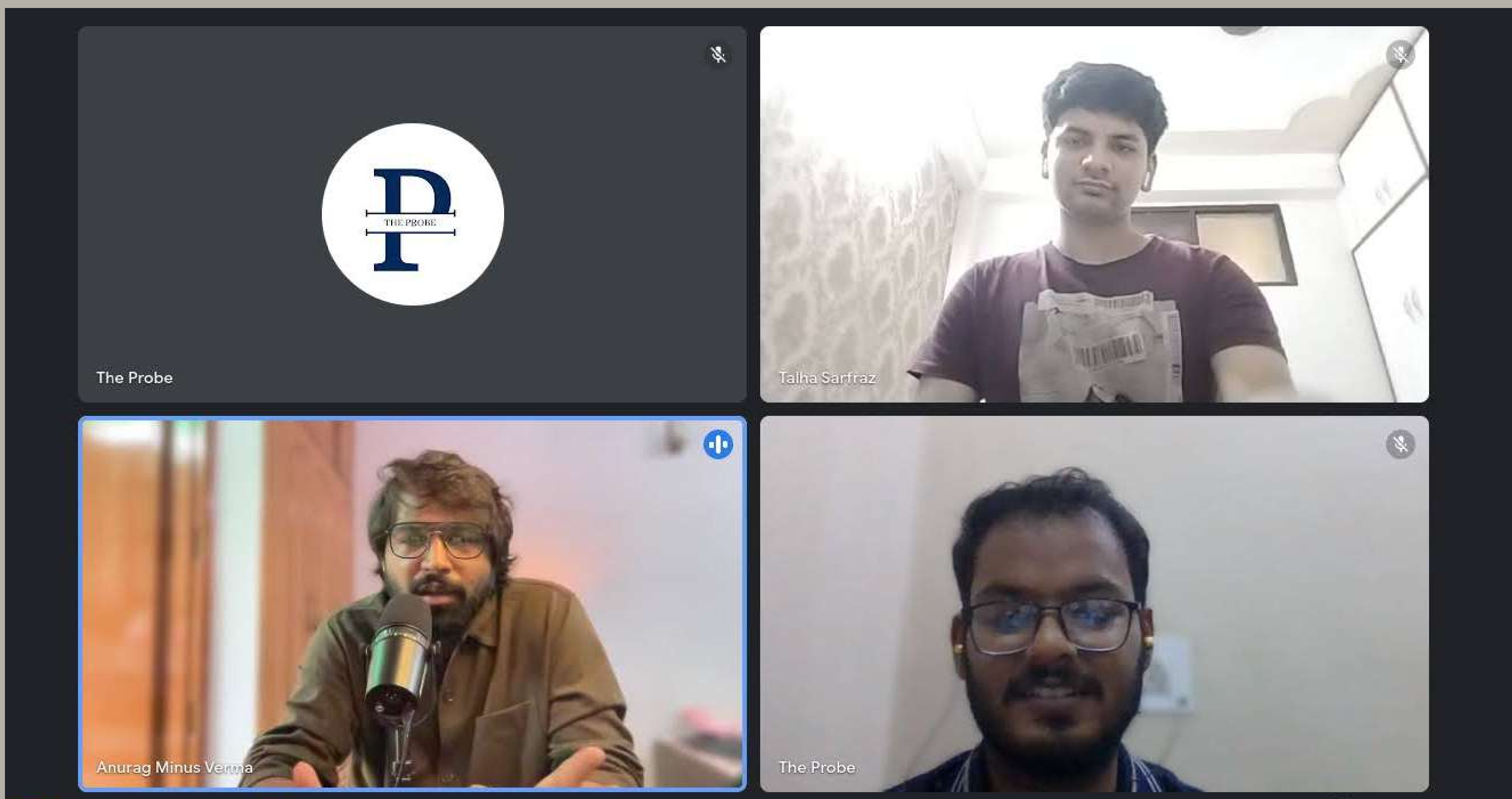
Yeah, like you said, it's very difficult to describe what exactly I'm doing. And for me, also, it is very difficult to place myself in a box. And that is something which is also a very conscious decision. Because if you're restricted to just one thing, then the whole fun of exploration becomes much less. So, like you mentioned the engineering college degree. That was something which everybody was doing at that time and I was not in a position to think that much. When my father asked me what I wanted to take, I said PCM or something like that. I used to think that maybe there were computers in that department, and I could play some video games. At the time, there were no computers at home. So that was

my basic understanding of things back then. And then when I started the engineering course in 2006, there was a boom in engineering education in India. That was considered the only thing which could get you a little higher in the societal position. The basic dream of people at that time was the idea of "being placed" in companies like Wipro, and Infosys. Everybody wanted to somehow escape the town they were living in. Anybody who would get a job in Bangalore or Hyderabad was considered successful because they had escaped that. Anybody who was left was considered a failure. I was one such failure.

I also didn't want to go there because I think in the second or third year, I decided that I wanted to do something which has a creative aspect to it. That was also because of a faculty member who told me that I'm creative. I didn't even know what creative means but I liked that. At least I had some kind of identity now. But what should be the next thing to do? At that time I started reading. I developed a fascination for reading literature and books. I also started watching movies, especially the world cinema movies, which have impacted me greatly. Kieslowski, Carlos Marques, Jim Jarmusch, Scorsese and more. So they opened a new kind of world and I realised that maybe there is more to the world than just getting placed somewhere, or maybe I can get placed in some different universe, like this cinematic universe at the time. I then seriously started pursuing it without knowing where it was going to take me because I had no idea what to do

with this poetry, music, cinema and literature. So there was a lot of confusion at the time with no guidance because I was in a town where people don't usually choose this field.

After that, I was wandering, drifting, trying to make sense of things. That continued for many years, and then I joined JNU finally for an art and aesthetic course. They try to analyse art and different kinds of art forms through different lenses like philosophical, sociological and everything. So, that became a good entry to at least have streamlined education towards this field, which was so scattered. After that, I went to the Film and Television Institute. There, I learned a few technical details of editing and I also made two or three short films, zero-budget films as they used to call them. Then slowly you discover what exactly is your form. What you want to do. I was experimenting with forms like poetry, sometimes I would write books. I was also fascinated by photography and different forms of music. Every form of art fascinated me and I wanted to try out whatever there was. Whatever you're seeing right now on social media and the internet that started during the pandemic, because at that time, I decided to put something on the internet and to be honest, I was having fun at that time. Initially, when it started, the idea was just to have fun on the internet and express yourself in whatever experimental form that is there without any inhibitions.



Mr Anurag Minus Verma, in conversation with The Probe team

Siddhant Sinha

The Internet has revolutionised the world. Content creation has been democratised, to some extent. Starkly different from the yesteryears when artists were limited and under the banner of some enterprise, now there's greater scope for independent ones like yourself. Even the phrase content creation seems to be a fairly new one. Yet, we also see social structures and patterns being reproduced and reinforced in the online world at times in a subtle fashion, while often brutal. So how do you see social media and its social aspect in particular, through the lens of content creation?

Anurag Minus Verma

Yeah, as you said, content creation is a fairly new phenomenon. Earlier, as I used to see, they were only creators from certain classes and certain castes that used to dominate this whole field. I wrote an article about caste and class biases of reels. At that time, the reel was a new platform and

everything was new. I could see how this algorithm or the people behind it prioritise people from certain kinds of backgrounds, and it required certain kinds of aesthetics to survive there. It could be in terms of how we speak, how we dress, how we light up and everything, which is very different from how TikTok was. TikTok opened up new kinds of possibilities. Now even Instagram has changed, but at that time, there were no influencers from marginalised backgrounds. Some of them who were from Dalit or Bahujan background or Muslims, were also considered "cringe". There were many pages made just to mock their content and their existence. It annoyed me a lot. But Instagram also realised that maybe people are not that interested in these constructed reels where there was no entertainment. So even the Instagram algorithm has changed. Now, you see a lot of influencers from marginalised backgrounds who rose to fame

But the second part is that these

big brands still choose the influencers, who have that edge in terms of their English speaking, how they dress up and what kind of sanitised content they create. They prefer them over those from marginalised backgrounds who may be more raw and honest in their real world. The third aspect is a political one, which is a different category altogether. But that sense of bias is still there. So that's why I said that when we're talking about technological advancement, then it won't be divorced from how the society in real life functions. Technology doesn't become devoid of all these kinds of biases. It's not an island. It just gives you a platform. In terms of content creation and art, I somehow like it because you bypass a lot of filters by putting your work there. For example, I always wondered how am I going to showcase what I was going to say because even the art galleries have a bigger gatekeeping. It's all about networking. The good thing about this platform is that the reaction is instant and if people like something, then they will connect

with it and because of that connection then you know new opportunities can open up. So, I like social media as a tool for distribution. There is a direct connection between me and my audience. So, that is a very beautiful aspect of it that opens a lot many possibilities.

At the same time, this whole idea about engagement numbers, likes and what is trending also makes so many people mediocre. It gives you a certain direction. For example, it will give you a song and it will also give you moves as per the song. It's the mass production of those steps and everybody's doing it without any thought. Most of the time you see these steps are also made deliberately very simple so that everybody can perform it. So that form of mediocrity also becomes a very essential part of social media. If you are then trying to do something different, then there is a possibility that you will not have the blessing of the algorithm. The perks of being non-creative and just mimicking what everybody is doing are a lot more on social media. Why would anybody then work hard, if is not going to be rewarded? To be very honest, I think the algorithm of YouTube is fairly diverse. But on Instagram, I see there is a certain way in which it operates.

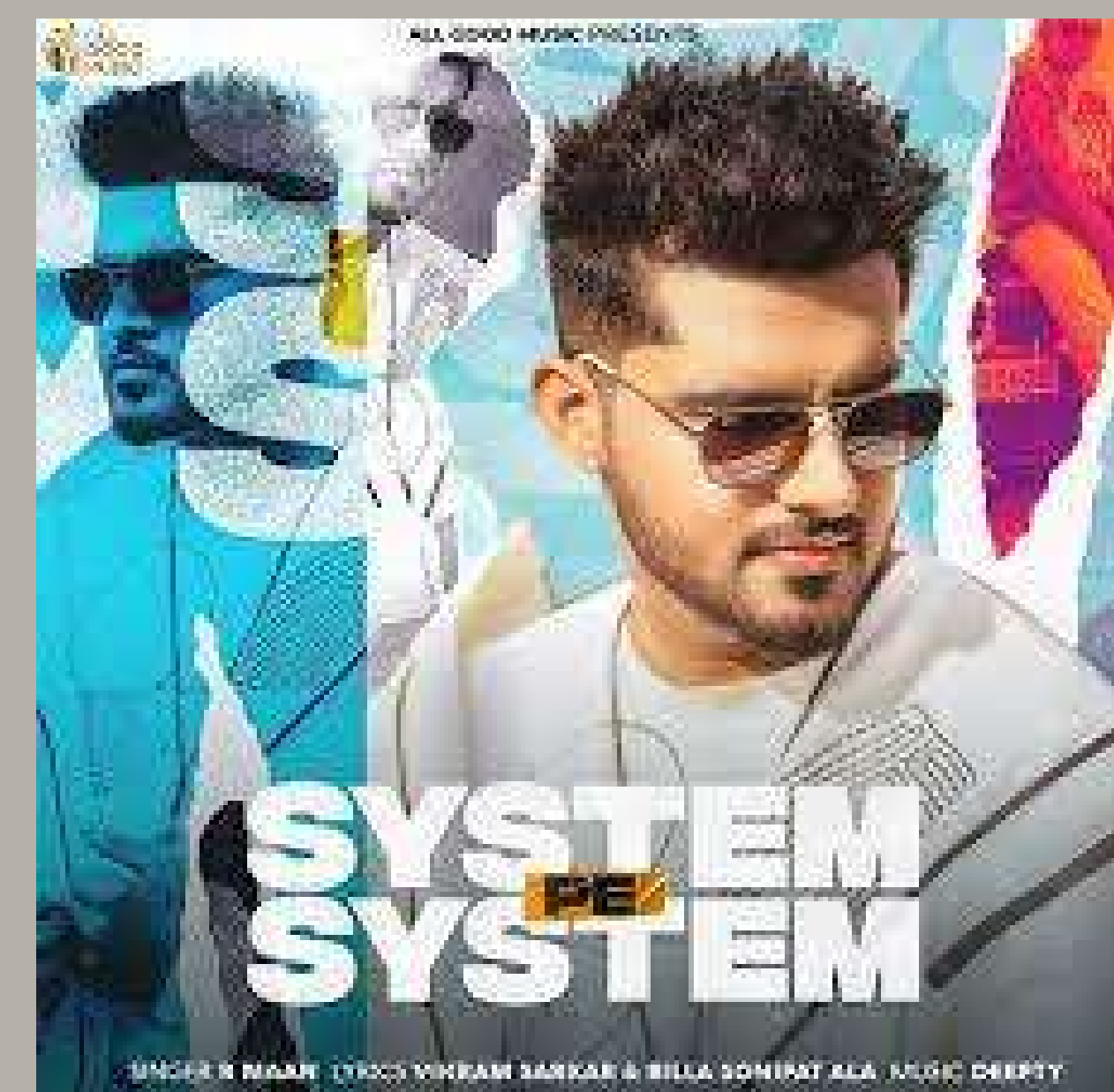
Talha Sarfraz

You talked about social media being a representation of modern casteism. The usual reaction from the Savarnas to such thought is outright denial, that there is no casteism in the modern world, that caste is something of the past.

It reminds me of Prof. Satish Deshpande's analysis of the invisibility of caste for the Savarnas. But some are also of the opinion that through the same social media, this invisibility can be diminished a bit as Bahujan voices emerge and can extend solidarity more easily and effectively. So how do you use social media as a tool for solidifying as well as annihilating caste?

Anurag Minus Verma

I mean, there are different genres in this, for example, there is a guy I was just talking to - a cringe archivist on social media. So he collects many caste-related stuff, sometimes like there are many kinds of stuff he collects, but there is a caste conclave, something like that, that he collects. And there you can see How there are reels of being proud of a certain caste. So, Rajput will make their reels like 'Hum Rajput hain', Brahmin will make their reels, Jats have their subculture on the internet, they will make their reels. Gurjars have their own big subculture on the internet. And that's everywhere, that whole kind of caste supremacy and the reels being made out of it are everywhere on social media, and every caste also makes a song for their caste to popularise or to create a certain kind of folklore about their community through digital footprint. So that's how it is happening on Instagram at least that a certain kind of folklore about caste is created through reels. For example, there are so many popular songs on reels about Jats like 'Chora mai jat ka' and 'System pe System'. Then there are very popular songs on reels about Yadavs and Elvish Yadav phenomenon and everything. And



if you go to Bihar, you will see castes like Bhumihar have their songs, which are very popular on social media.

What I'm saying is that if you go a little down in these kinds of subcultures on the internet, you will find there is so much reproduction of caste, not just caste, but of certain pride of that caste. And so I don't know why people say that we can't see caste anywhere. I don't know what exactly they are seeing. Because even if you go on the road, you will see the stickers on vehicles, the caste stickers about caste pride. So I'm just saying the basic thing, I'm not saying something complex, it's something you can see every day, it can be observed every day. You don't have to look into the complex systematic ways in which caste works. It is there on social media, I don't see it getting annihilated. There is a sense of caste consciousness which is being produced.

On the other hand, there are also anti-caste voices which have been represented on the internet and they are doing their work to spread that awareness to express their experiences. So another culture is also developing on the internet. But this second culture is

so deep that I wonder if the Internet can be a medium to challenge these norms or eradicate them. So even if I don't understand it, to be very honest, some people say that your podcast changed things and made me aware. But then I think how many people it might have made aware? Are these people just from a certain kind of background or certain limited people who are just listening to it? How is it going to change because the rot in the system is so big that it's very difficult to make good progress? That's why I'm reminded of a sher that 'Tabiyat se patthar uchalo yaaro, aasman me bhi surakh ho sakta hai' so that's what I'm thinking ,pathar uchal rahe hain, kahi lag raha hai nahi lag raha hai, that I don't know because the extent of it is very, very big. It's also in process. Any kind of revolution is not Instagrammable. It's a slow digging process. So you do something every day to challenge the structure, even in your family, even in your surroundings or on your social media as well. But are things changing or not? It's very difficult to say to be very honest.

Siddhant Sinha

I was watching an interview of yours, where you talked about how the government is not the only position or source of power in India, For instance, there are many sources of power in our society and reducing 'speaking truth to the power' without questioning phenomena, like caste or gender doesn't do justice to it. This seemed a very intriguing idea. So can you shed some more light on this?

Anurag Minus Verma

I used to think about it a lot in 2017-18 because I used to see a lot of "revolutionary handles" on social media, or revolutionary people on social media, who used to be anti-government or, you know, anti-right wing or whatever. But they were also putting extremely casteist stuff, they were also putting insensitive stuff. So basically, they were doing this whole kind of morality exercise of showing some kind of fight to the government, and underneath they're just being extremely regressive. And they would also say that we are fighting the system or speaking truth to power, and we have to speak truth to power. So that whole kind of ambiguity in their stance was something that I realised that they themselves are power, they are also the elites of the system, who gatekeep the organisation to which they belong. I mean, this whole phrase of speaking truth to power has to be analysed. That's what I said because power is not just limited to the government, which is in power or just some state, which is in power, there are many different power centres that operate in our society. So one has to first challenge these power structures. And if you come from a privileged background, then are you ready to speak about your privilege? Not just speak about it, but also do something about it so that others can benefit. Are you ready to speak about horrors committed by people from your caste? Are you going to speak about the unjust allocation of resources that were provided to you? Are you going to talk about these things? If not, then you're doing an easy posturing against the government,

and still having all the perks that this whole unjust system has given to you. I mean posturing is just another performance in the system that is not going to change. So to say that I'm speaking truth to power, first we have to understand the systematic nature of power in society. And they exist on a different level in different forms. Without understanding it and just thinking that the government is the only power centre, I find it a little shallow. So that's why when we are talking about speaking truth to power, first we have to understand what power is in this unjust society.

Talha Sarfraz

A video that has been flaring up on social media recently features a teacher in Muzzafarnagar asking her students to beat a Muslim child, which is disturbing and sickening to watch. But curiously, the response it has evoked from the so-called liberals is to seem nostalgic about the pre-2014 India, which was "not an India of hate". This assumption that all the hatred has been emanating since 2014 seems a bit erroneous when we look at the nature of our society which, to say the least, has never been a just or egalitarian one across axes of caste, gender, or religion. How do you view this usual assumption from the apparent allies of social justice?

Anurag Minus Verma

People who think that the video is some kind of isolated incident are wrong. I was not surprised. People are pretending that this video is some isolated incident that has happened right now.

Maybe they need to look at it in a deeper way. I think in the same week, there was a case of a Dalit student committing suicide in Jaipur because he was traumatized by the teachers, one or two of his teachers. So the classroom, especially in small towns and villages, has that kind of influence. I would call it a torture chamber without mincing any words because the kind of power that the teachers have is supreme. And on top of that, you go to school, bow down to the teacher and the teacher is treated as a guru. So there is a nonsensical power that a teacher enjoys. There may be some teachers who may not, you know, demand any kind of respect, but the whole culture of Indian society is like that where undue respect is given to them. In my opinion, respect is fine, but that kind of power has to be checked. That is also one of the elements of the caste society, where the profession is given more power than the individual. So, the teaching profession is then seen as some kind of a sacred thing and not as something which which can be a relationship of two equal or maybe two friends, like the teacher is trying to make the student a friend. It happens when you pay more fees and go to a good school, then there is a sense of empathy and the teacher-student relationship is different because there is a training through which teachers come and then there's less violence in the classroom. But that perk is not there for students who are from small towns or villages, their teacher has absolute power. And, most of the time, the idea of violence and of beating the students is legitimised by the society itself. I remember when I was in my childhood when I was

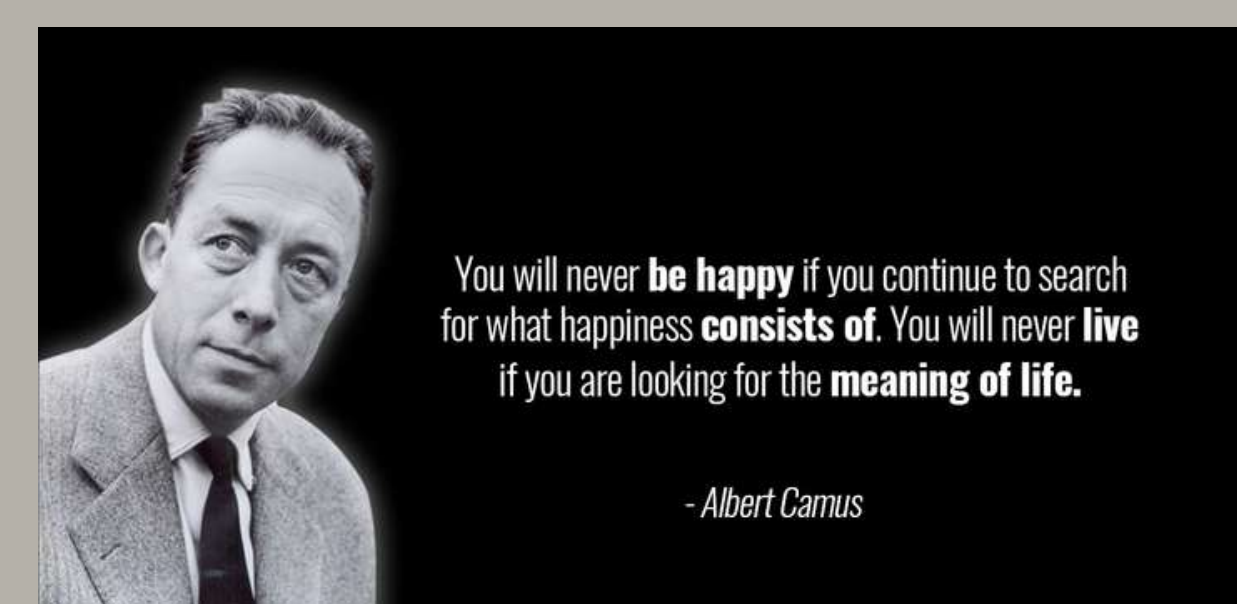
staying in this small town- Sikar or even the places around it, many people used to go to school and ask the teacher to punish the child or beat them and be strict with them so that they can learn better. So, the violence on students or let's say torture on the student has always been considered as something which is a disciplinary thing which can help you to crack exams or go higher in your life or something and that has been the culture and nobody has questioned it. When teachers enter these kinds of schools, they are entering them without any kind of training and empathy and obviously, they also come from backgrounds where there are biases, biases related to region, caste, religion etc. So, when they enter this field and have these kinds of biases then these biases get projected or their toxic nature gets projected on the students. So, these kinds of unchecked things have been going on since time immemorial and the most problematic aspect of it is that there is an approval of the society for this kind of violence. So one has to speak about these issues in detail and maybe it's time to revamp the whole idea of the education system, or what can be the power structure between a teacher and a student. If we're not going to tackle it, then these kinds of incidents will keep on occurring. This particular incident was related to Muslims, and we know what kind of atmosphere we are currently living in, where there is a bombardment of fake news, where there is this kind of adrenaline rush music, the reels are made out and the message you see is anti-Muslim, or you know, communal. And there is a bombardment of this propaganda through several social media machinery. So obviously, a teacher



or anybody who uses social media would be influenced by it. But at the same time, there are many different factors behind it. The one important factor as I mentioned is the underlying problem of our education system, especially in these small towns and villages and it is necessary to understand these structural issues. Only then we'll be able to resolve them.

Siddhant Sinha

Coming from a relatively small town, I can give a first-hand experience of what it was, especially in small towns, where parents themselves have this tendency to instigate violence against their children. Moving on, I've seen you talk about Absurdism and Albert Camus a lot. In some way, I feel your work takes a lot of inspiration from it too. So what is absurdism? And what role has it played in your understanding of a world that is perennially transient?



Anurag Minus Verma

It's a combination of many different things, Camus is there and different kinds of philosophy have contributed to it, and also this whole idea of something which is happening in the society, which breaks the logic and goes into a completely absurd direction, which has no logic, but still has some kind of humaneness in it, like some kind of flow of life, which is very interesting to watch. In a cinematic sense, Deleuze has talked a lot about time image, which has also some kind of relation to it, but otherwise, if I see something, which makes no sense, then it gives me a certain kind of high. You also get new kinds of meaning, when you are dealing with life or, let's say, the whole idea of humour also comes from certain kind of tragedy and certain kind of helplessness. So, when you see things like that, and you have no control over it, and then maybe the best way is to laugh at it or laugh at yourself. For example, when you go for an interview, and that interview gets totally screwed up, and then you go outside on the road, you see something happening totally absurd and then you laugh at it or with them, and then that whole misery of bad interview dilutes somehow. It has happened to me a lot. Like whenever I became extremely hopeless, there was a certain spark of complete joy in terms of absurd situations, which had no meaning, but that somehow gave me hope to continue. So this whole idea of absurdism, which, helps you escape from everyday life for a little while, has a certain kind of magical quality to it. That's why I always keep on looking for absurd things which are not planned. It just happens sometimes. On the internet also I keep on looking for

these kinds of moments which have these elements. So it is connected with the misery of life - the absurdity.

Talha Sarfraz

Moving on to the glamorous part of social media, it is a place where everyone posts about the best part of their lives, some even manufactured. This gives the impression to the viewer that their lives are all sorted and pleasant, which might result in a feeling of helplessness among the users, especially among young adults. This also has an angle of marginalisation and privilege. How do you see the effect of such strength on the individual psyche? And has there been any improvement with the greater democratisation of online spaces?

Anurag Minus Verma

Yeah, that happens. I mean, the whole idea of FOMO comes from that. FOMO as you know, gives some kind of anxiety to other people that maybe you don't have that kind of money and society is based on creating that kind of exclusivity like you are having so much fun at a certain place and other person then thinks that 'Oh, my God, am I missing something?' I mean, you people are young at the moment, but as you grow a little older you realise that there is no concept of FOMO. Nothing exciting is happening anywhere than where you are, to be very honest, even if you are in the room doing your work, that's the only exciting thing. So right now, I am at least in a position that I have no FOMO of anything. I mean I used to have a lot of these things when I was younger, and everything. So at that time, I used to think that oh, I have to join this thing, I have to join that thing, or I have to go to this party



or be with them to make sense of things. But then I realized that human beings live more or less, at least in certain kinds of social settings, similar kinds of miserable life and there is no way one can experience happiness, which is extremely unique, then, you know, how you can experience it. Now, it doesn't make sense to me, but I can see why on social media, it does make sense, a lot of sense, especially since you can see the ideas of capitalism in it connected to that because that's how you sell a product by giving others certain kind of FOMO that this is an exclusive thing and you have to somehow purchase it. If you're not purchasing it, then your life is meaningless. So that's how they sell their products. But for that, I think a little bit of self-awareness is very important to get out of this whole circle or to get out of this trap of missing out. Even if you look at it closely, you can see that pattern that I mean, there's no absolute happiness or there is no absolute sadness, it comes and goes in phases. So that's life. I think self-confidence in whatever you're doing is important to get out of this trap and not be influenced by what you see on social media. Also, social media has changed recently. Now people are posting things and I think your biggest battle is to not get influenced by any influencer. If you are successful in that then you have won half the battle of this digital life.

Siddhant Sinha

You run a great podcast with some stellar content. It also highlights the increasing popularity of the format with some podcasts mushrooming every other day.

However there has also been an avalanche of misinformation and even dangerous content. Often such content is filled with Brahminical mindset or religious bigotry, or sometimes even outright misogyny. And they seem to be getting great traction as well. The follower count of Andrew Tate, for instance, especially among young men, is only going north. Even podcasters from India have seen a greater rise recently. So how is this affecting young minds in the pursuit of scientific and empathetic worldviews which seems to be getting affected?

Anurag Minus Verma

Yeah, this kind of digital media in a way is a very good propaganda tool, if you look at it closely. That's how they are structured. Even the cinema is a propaganda tool, the essence of it lies in the propaganda. You can argue that this is good propaganda, this is bad propaganda, but the whole idea lies in propaganda, that is sending a message. Soviet time propaganda was seen as something which is a positive thing. So they used to make propaganda films saying that it's



our job to make propaganda and propaganda was seen as a good thing. I also wrote an article related to The Kashmir Files, an art of propaganda since the beginning of its inception. Similarly, these new

forms, which are also multimedia, are also based on installing certain kinds of information in your psyche. Maybe it can be about certain kinds of thoughts that you secretly think and you think that maybe these are not good thoughts that you have in mind, but when you see some of these leaders, some of these podcasters or some of these multimedia people saying it, then that thought which you were thinking and were confused about whether it's a good thought or not, then that thought gets a validity because the people you like are also saying the same kind of things. That's how certain kinds of misinformation or certain kinds of biases get strengthened because of these mediums.

Podcasting in the US boomed many years back and is fairly new in India, At that time there were also a lot of influential figures who were part of it so, there was a trend in the US where many popular people seized this opportunity to spread their form of propaganda. Later it boomed in India also. There were a lot many stakeholders, let's say documenters, who saw an opportunity and jumped in, which is not a bad thing, but then they started spreading extreme form of misinformation, an extreme form of decorated bigotry. Even the stuff like aliens, if there are aliens or not, is directly copied from Joe Rogan's podcast. Hence, most of them are like a cheap copy of what Joe Rogan is doing in the US without understanding why aliens are popular there. There are stories around the aliens because the US always think that there is a security threat in the region, they think that they might be attacked by some external forces. That's why alien

stories are very popular there, but they put them in India without even thinking about the context. There are lot many kinds of misinformation and if you look at it closely it is very similar to how this whole satellite TV, this 24/7 news channel started in India, then India Today and these kinds of channels, they also started, you know, spreading misinformation and the stuff 24/7. That's how they gain the TRP. So, similarly, they were doing this thing to grab the eyeballs.

Similarly, when podcasting in India started, many stakeholders were doing this thing and some are doing it right now. So, it is happening unchecked, and sadly, that has become a format of the contemporary podcast, which is not to think, or not to spread some kind of ethics or values in the society, but just to be looked at as engagement, that whole idea of engagement, and all this number war is something which has destroyed even the minds who might not want to consume it, who might have a different vision in their personal life, but just because of engagement, they're doing it and that's how they are getting paid from the social media. So, this whole trend is slightly worrying. But I also think that it might not be so beneficial in the long run because then people also get bored of these things. In the general public, there is also some hunger for discovering something new, discovering something sensible, so I don't know how long they can just continue spreading pseudoscience or these kinds of nonsense. This is why I'm not very enthusiastic about the medium to very honest. As a podcaster, I just do my stuff which I find good but

I'm not very enthusiastic about the future of this medium or I don't think this medium as a very respectable medium to be very honest. I'm saying this because I am also a consumer at the end of the day and I also have to consume something which can take me through new direction or I can gain some kind of knowledge.

That is not happening. I don't get any kind of podcast of which I can become a loyal listener and consume some form of knowledge. I can't find it as a consumer, I'm very sorry.

Talha Sarfraz

Saubhagya Diary is probably your magnum opus and the most famous work and we love them. They provide a take on random topics so unique that it would be tough to think otherwise. I feel there's some

sort of absurdity in it too. How did you come up with this format?

Anurag Minus Verma

The absurdity is the point of it and also to find some kind of beauty in the mundane. So, that has been one of the philosophies of my life to find some kind of beauty in everyday life and try to find some meaning. In the grand scheme of things, it is quite easy because we can see it and it is easy to see different forms of good or bad or absurd things in the grand thing, but how do you see an absurdity in the most basic event that is happening? So, that has been the philosophy of my creation and that also comes a lot from many different kinds of authors whom I like. Many different kinds of filmmakers try to do it, for example, Chorus Marquis Simon Liang, or various other authors



So my idea was that I'll just make something which seems very basic, but by repetition of it, there might appear some kind of magic in it. So that was the idea. It started during the lockdown, I was watching some footage on my laptop about my village and looking at the Peacock, there was a peacock shot and so looking at that some ideas started coming to my mind. I don't know where it came from. I just said, "Isko Dekhne Ka Saubhagya Prapt Hua" and so I just wrote it. And I like that pen style of comedy where there is not much of an emotion, but what kind of humour is developed, is developed through your tone. And it has to be a very low effort, and you shouldn't push the audience. I decided that I was not going to push the audience in any direction, I would just say lines with a very basic setup. So I started it, I put it online, and then people loved it. Then I made JNU part one and JNU part two, and people loved that too. Then I explored my village town, so those things started gaining some kind of popularity. Before instagram had reels, I used to make videos, which were seven or eight-minute long, but then suddenly, we changed the whole format. 90 second is the exact format of the reel, and you can't do more than that. And then that video has to be of a certain kind. So initially, I struggled because even after the release of the reel, I was just posting my old seven-minute videos thinking I'd rebel against the whole structure of the reels; 90 seconds and everything, but then I realised that nobody was watching it because the format had changed. So now you have to also change your content, according to that. I said rather than making long memoir kind of videos, I would pick some



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food item and then they might look like I'm making something about the food item by fooling the audience obviously but then I'll use it to say something which also has an element of social-political commentary. People started laughing, then something uncomfortable came and they didn't know what to do. They became uncomfortable with themselves and that is why I liked it. That kind of play with the audience's psyche, I liked it. You pick up a popular format and confuse the audience by not giving them exactly what they want, but also give them something which they can relate to. So those have been some of the challenges that I face, like how to say something very entertaining, very relatable to

everybody. But at the same time, it is very non-relatable to everybody by including certain kinds of commentary that doesn't look forced, but has to be part of, that's why you see these kinds of Saubhagya Diaries about child labour etc. It's very harmless, but there is some kind of messaging involved in it and that's what I like about pop culture because you can instil an idea into the psyche of a person without him thinking or without thinking that they have already consumed it. This is my form of good propaganda.

Siddhant

Thanks a lot, sir, for joining us today and giving us the **saubhagya** to talk to you. ■



Anurag Minus Verma on JNU



LIVING IN THE DIGITAL PANOPTICON WITH THE EROSION OF DEMOCRACY

By Anya Minhas

In this piece, social media's impact on society and the mass media's role in public perception is explored with a special reference to the influence of big tech and mass media corporations. Alongside this, the looming threat over the future of sustaining democracy in the presence of increasing polarisation and voter manipulation is also tackled.

It is a fair assumption that social media has changed society's landscape tremendously. We as individuals have become more opinionated, more self-regulatory and increasingly aware of the way we are perceived. **Michel Foucault characterised the significance of a Panopticon to be one that can control behaviour through self-regulation.**

In the 21st century, it can be said we are simply living in a digital panopticon, stuck in a dystopia that is clinging to a false sense of democratic functioning and limited capacity of freedom of thought and choice in the presence of various social narratives and manufactured consent. Mass

media has always had a significant impact on society. However, the latest technological advancements, are acting as an impetus to democracy by increasing polarisation, influencing public perception, limiting our capacity to engage with discourse and trapping us into echo chambers.

Mass Media and Public Perception

Mass media holds pivotal importance in shaping public perception. It is intriguing to understand the dynamic interplay between media agenda-setting, individual autonomy, and manufactured consent. Our opinions are a manifestation of our

environments and knowledge sets. In the status quo, mind control may not exist, however, there are means to control opinions by influencing our environments and the way we learn about our surroundings and the world.

Jess K. Alberts, Judith N. Martin, and Thomas K Nakayama, in their paper, "Human Communication in Society" (2020) comment on the importance of studying the role of mass media in shaping our communication practices and how they influence our attitudes and behaviours towards various social issues. Media, in any form, has always played a significant role in shaping public opinion and up until the end of the last millennium, news media was the primary medium of shaping public

opinion.

Maxwell McCombs (2002) argued that news media can influence public opinion by setting the agenda and focusing public attention on specific issues. They do this by providing factual information about public affairs and by using prominence cues, such as headlines and story placement. This is done to signal to the public that an issue is important. However, it is important to note that the media agenda does not solely determine the public agenda. Citizens also have the ability to determine the relevance of news stories and form their own opinions, and ultimately, it is up to them to decide what issues are important to them and to take action on the same. The media also plays a role in influencing public understanding and perspective on the topics they cover. They shape the images and perspectives people have about public issues and public figures. The media's agenda-setting influence extends beyond attention and can impact attitudes, opinions, and even observable behaviour as well.

However, it is also important to understand the principle of manufactured consent and how that interacts with the growing influence of mass media. While McCombs highlights the role mass media plays in influencing the public agenda, they still place the onus upon the individual to be the determining factor on the relevance of the content that the media portrays. Individuals do not exist in isolation and are always subject to influence by the social narrative that surrounds them.

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988, 2002) proposed the theory of manufacturing

consent. They suggest that a structural and systemic function of media is to amuse, entertain, inform, and inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of society. The mass media in capitalist society is influenced by vested interests and they shape the news to serve the interests of those in power. Such a model suggests that the media are not independent and objective but rather serve as a propaganda tool for the ruling elite. The propaganda model identifies five filters that shape the news: ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and ideology. These filters work together to ensure that the news reflects the interests of the powerful and marginalises dissenting voices.

They provide several examples of the propaganda model at work. **One example is the media coverage of the Vietnam War. Back then, the media largely supported the government's position on the war and presented a biased view of events, which helped to create a consensus around the need for military intervention.**

This was achieved through a variety of techniques, including the selection of news stories, the framing of issues, and the use of propaganda.

The result was a population that largely supported the war effort, even though the same is widely critiqued to be based on false pretences and resulted in significant loss of life. Thereby, supporting the idea that public perception and opinion can be tailored to suit the narratives of the dominant or ruling class through simply just the news.

The Internet and Polarisation

The end of the millennium was marked by the fall of socialism, and the introduction of the internet. As information started reaching our desks in a matter of seconds, the world moved closer towards embracing individualism with the facilitation of the free global market, with countries increasingly privatising and liberalising their economies. The significance of private actors also increased further, especially in the field of media. The rise of digital communication platforms and the advent of the internet in the 21st century revolutionized the means of communication through ever-increasing connectivity. Communication on an individual level, between friends and family also aided in the maintenance and sustenance of interpersonal relationships. But even on a macro level, **its effects on mass media and information dissemination have been extremely notable as witnessed in the Arab Spring.**

As beneficial as it may have proven to be, it is still important to consider the profit incentives driving social media companies. Their algorithm is designed to function in a manner that incentivizes users to continue engaging with the platform and keep returning. The commodity that these corporations derive incentives from is the user's attention, which is then utilized in the most advanced and efficient means of advertising ever created. In the 21st century, data has emerged as the most precious commodity owing to its transformative abilities and social media corporations are collecting it

every second the user is engaging with their platform. As the global witness puts it, our data is bought, harvested and manipulated. And big tech depends on a business model where profit is made from stoking up anger and fear.

As one is constantly bombarded with information and media that they would tend to align with, it leads to the creation of social media echo chambers. Users experience biased tailor-made content that eliminates the scope for criticism, counter opinions or the existence of counter-narratives for the user. This creates an environment that fosters group thinking and group polarisation. Despite the existence of serious consequences, companies are subject to little scrutiny.

We live in an audio-visual society where communication through technological advancement is primarily happening through auditory or visual stimuli. We engage with content that has been produced and reproduced over and over again, diluting its essence and existing in an extremely superficial state. This can be understood by Jean Baudrillard's characterisation of living in the hyperreal. In our culture, he argues that we are increasingly drawn to simulations of reality, such as reality television and film, to the point where we may find them more real than our own lives. He calls these simulations "simulacra," and believes that they have become so pervasive that we have lost the ability to distinguish between the real and the unreal. This condition, which he calls "hyperreality," is characterized by a blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction.

Baudrillard argues that hyperreality is a product of our

post-modern society, which is saturated with media images and simulations. In this society, the real world is increasingly difficult to find, and we are more likely to experience reality through its representations. Further observing that the contemporary world is a simulacrum, where reality has been replaced by false images, to such an extent that one cannot distinguish between the real and the unreal. In this context, he made the controversial statement, "*The Gulf War did not take place*", pointing out that the 'reality' of the Gulf War was presented to the world in terms of representations by the media. Emphasising that reality is hinged upon the representations that we engage with and our opinions and perceptions are a result of the same.

The existence of a hyperreality within our echo chambers is seen as the precursor to radicalization which leads to the evolution of opinions in a manner that results in extreme polarisation. Even from originally moderate conditions, resulting in the decline of centrism in politics and the rise of the right. If we consider the Indian context, Niranjana Sahoo (2020) writes that

transformations within the media landscape have intensified the flames of polarisation, particularly within the last decade. The rise of the internet has played a crucial role in the success of right-wing nationalism in India. Alongside, the same fresh biased or partisan-leaning traditional media platforms have gained heightened influence, and begun to overshadow impartial news sources.

Alterations in media ownership patterns are also believed to have contributed to this shift, as a growing number of Indian media outlets fall under the control of corporate conglomerates led by prominent names. This evolving media environment affirms profit-oriented entities openly endorsing specific parties and magnifying minor issues to fabricate artificial divides.

In tandem, the rapid dissemination of misinformation and propaganda is accelerated by social media. WhatsApp, notably, has become a favoured conduit for spreading falsehoods, and exacerbating tensions. Sahoo emphasises on the BJP's tendencies to exploit social media to amplify its narratives which are perceived to be



majoritarian in nature, by highlighting the 2019 elections, where the ruling party significantly outspent the opposition Congress in social media advertising.

Microtargeting and voter manipulation: Cambridge Analytica

In 2011, The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) researched social media data to develop microtargeting techniques that combine demographic and psychological information to influence voting behaviour. DARPA used microtargeting to develop a program called "Project Echo" which was designed to counter the spread of violent extremism online. Microtargeting is a powerful tool that can be used to target specific groups of people with tailored messages.

Project Echo used social media data to identify people who were at risk of radicalization and then targeted them with messages that promoted peace and tolerance in war zones. The main difference between political microtargeting

and military information operations is the target audience. Political microtargeting is used to influence the voting behaviour of individuals within a country, while military information operations are used to influence the behaviour of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals. However, the methods used to achieve these goals are similar, both involve the use of data analysis, social media, and targeted messaging.

J Dawson, in their paper 'Microtargeting as information warfare' writes about the People's Republic of China using microtargeting to exert social control. **The Chinese government allegedly uses microtargeting to identify and target individuals who it believes are a threat to the regime.** Collecting data from social media users and then using it to create psychological profiles of those users. Further using these profiles to target individuals with messages that are designed to discourage them from dissent. Daniel Kliman, Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Kristine Lee, Joshua Fitt and Carisa Nietzsche in their paper "Digital Influence Tools Used by

China and Russia" talk about China's use of microtargeting advertising strategies to spread disinformation to a broad group of people until the suitable narratives.

Cambridge Analytica was a political consulting firm that used digital technology to target voters with tailored messages. The firm was involved in a scandal where it harvested data from millions of Facebook users without their consent using it to influence political campaigns, including the 2016 US presidential election. It used microtargeting techniques as well to help political campaigns win elections.

Cambridge Analytica collected data from social media users and then used this data to create psychological profiles of those users. Using the same to target voters with messages that were tailored to their individual personalities. For example, Cambridge Analytica found that Republicans score higher on conscientiousness than Democrats. This means that Republicans are more likely to be motivated by messages that appeal to their sense of duty and responsibility. Cambridge Analytica used this information to target Republican voters with messages that emphasized the importance of voting and civic duty. The political consultancy firm has also said to have been involved with the Brexit referendum, the political campaigns of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom among many others.

Given the interactive personal nature of social media, data-aggregated microtargeting has become easier to weaponize. The magnitude of data on users



available commercially, makes it easy for researchers to understand which behaviours of masses can be influenced through layers of persuasion. This information is readily and legally available to the highest bidder.

Conclusion

The digital panopticon keeps us in a prison of the hyperreal, restricting us from ever being able to embrace discourse and let democracy sustain. To break out of the state of hyperreality and self-surveillance, data protection becomes paramount in the future. As we navigate this complex digital realm, it is imperative to emphasize the urgent need for data protection measures that prioritize the integrity of democratic processes. The future lies in fortifying digital spaces against manipulation, ensuring that the free exchange of diverse perspectives thrives, and individuals retain their agency in shaping their own opinions. Only through these measures can we counterbalance the influences at play and safeguard the vitality of democracy in an increasingly interconnected and media-saturated world. ■





A FABLE ON THE DEXTERITY OF VIDEO GAME CINEMA

By Shubh Mathur & Rijul Bhagi

This piece focuses on how video game direction has evolved into the apotheosis of modern-day visual art while contrasting it to recent theatrical blockbusters by providing landmark examples. It also focuses on how a stereotypical understanding of video games has limited people's exposure to revolutionary art.

“**T**here are many museums dedicated to technology, artistic endeavours, music, and that sort of thing. From that perspective, I think games really do have a place as a kind of collaborative art or a synthesis of all these various aspects into a whole, and that, in itself, can be perceived as art.”

- Hideo Kojima

On 21st July 2023, the famed British-American filmmaker **Christopher Edward Nolan** released his twelfth film “**Oppenheimer**” exploring the life of the father of the atomic bomb **Julius Robert Oppenheimer**, to worldwide critical acclaim. The acclaim was directed (pun not intended) towards a multitude of elements including (but not limited to) direction, casting, cinematography and **Ludwig Göransson's** astounding soundtrack. It was not unwarranted either. Even on our visits to the cinema, we were left no short of mesmerised by what we had just witnessed. And such a situation reminds us of numerous analogous instances where similar feelings were produced.

Video games have been an ever-present aspect of contemporary human society. Anybody and everybody, has indulged in them at some point in their lifetimes. From the Super Mario knockoffs present far and wide, to the arcades found inside the malls and to the burgeoning Esports scene, their grip is tight on the world. Although their significance is omnipresent, it is sorrowful that the appreciation of video game art form is still plagued by ludicrous stereotypes, lacking proper evidence.

Owing to such short-sighted points of view, society at large has done a gross injustice to the marvel of storytelling in video games and the recognition of it, being reduced only to enthusiasts. To circumvent the same, this piece provides a contrasting perspective to the mainstream view on how one should approach, interpret and appreciate the ingenuity of storytelling within video games.

Red Dead Redemption 2 & The Epitome of the Wild-West

On October 26, 2018, Rockstar Studios launched their much-awaited new instalment to their renowned 2010 title **Red Dead Redemption**. And even though the release of **Red Dead Redemption**

2 did not come without its issues and flaws, the game has captured a place high on the ladder as one of the greatest games. For some, **it is the greatest video game of all time.**

Such an acknowledgement is not uncalled for either. Rockstar dedicated much of its studios and teams, composed of more than 1600 personnel over eight years, to developing one of the most expensive video games ever made with a reported production cost of up to 540 million USD, placing significant emphasis on long-term interactionism within it. Furthermore, RDR2 played host to one of the most vast open worlds as well as to some intricate nuances previously unseen. These include leading examples concerning the evolution of in-game animals and other environmental features throughout the in-game time, containing instances like, that of the deterioration of a hunted carcass if left unused.

Moreover, the characters of the world have also been highly praised. **Roger Clark's portrayal of Arthur Morgan** has set a benchmark for upcoming video game characters and to some extent, to live-action characters as well.



Image Credit - Reddit

Alongside performances, the story in itself has been categorised as one of sheer excellence. Set in the latter stages of the wild-west and the early industrial revolution period, the game tracks the story of the (at least in-game) infamous **Van Der Linde** gang headed by **Dutch Van Der Linde** (played by **Benjamin Byron Davis**) and their strife to make amends with the rapidly evolving world. In addition to it, the storyline indulges upon the set and evolving social dynamics of later nineteenth-century American society, with stress on the situation of the broken, the beaten & the damned or the coloured, the women and the natives.

Yet, the true magnificence of the Red Dead catalogue flourishes best when its attempt to challenge stereotypes is associated with adequate context. Video games are often correlated with being perpetrators of violence and other nonsensical trains of thought. Nevertheless, the tale of the tragedy of the Van Der Linde gang and more importantly, of **Arthur Morgan & John Marston** (who is the protagonist of the original Red Dead Redemption and a major non-playable character in RDR2) blossoms when judged in tandem with such notions.

Next up, the direction and cinematography of Red Dead Redemption 2 is no less than the apotheosis of modern art. The mesmerising never-ending bold pastures, the tremendously heart-thumping gunplay, standoffs, shootouts, the vivid dim train heists under the aegis of the lighting of the lunar eclipse and many more, bolster an already hypnotic panorama.



Picture Credit – Wallpaper Abyss

Rockstar has also excelled in the way it recited everyone's story. The player looking at the screen is enabled to feel like an actual participant in the American frontier. The game achieved this by filming countless performances from an unprecedented amount of actors through motion capture, a page script of 2000 and more, and most importantly, by giving the players' character a sense of purpose and belonging, since Arthur Morgan is not controlled by the writers, designed to embark on a predetermined destiny. He is rather steered by the conscience of the player behind the controller.

Davis' exemplary performance of Dutch, and his development from being the embodiment of the American dream crafted around independence and anti-establishment feelings, while also attempting to find a place to belong deserves further acknowledgement. Even if, he only ends up as an antithesis of the same.

To sum up, the grandeur of Rockstar's genius cannot be elaborated more and could only be felt by playing the game (resonating with Nolan's ideal way

of watching Oppenheimer on IMAX screens) and I have also skipped over tons of other things, which I believe, are best left to be experienced. But I suppose one could already establish the genius of Red Dead Redemption 2 by now.

The Heterogeneity & Complexities of Video Game Horror

"Cinema is the ultimate pervert art, it does to give you what you desire, it shows you how to desire "

- Slavoj Zizek

In some way, this is further aggrandised by the idea that certain video games are very often provided with more than just what meets the eye regarding how one experiences the world around them. While cinema certainly retains considerable power as a medium, video games do away with a unique limitation that is faced by most other categories of art. Cinema and literature have provided us with the power of what is and can be, but certain kinds of video games go as far as to show us the perversion of what can be.

Each genre has its intricacies and characteristics that are otherwise very different from the other ones. I, however, think that one genre uses these characteristics much better than the others. It would be that of the 'Horror'. It is important to remember the fact that the word horror in itself is an umbrella term. It could be further divided into other subgenres which would otherwise seem very different from each other when devoid of the correct context. Even so, there are wide patterns that help understand why one considers something discerning in the first place.

A very large number of horror games are underground and indie. While it so happens that a particular game does breathe through in the mainstream, most of the ones with a substantial fan following are very niche at times. Among such niche games, there are largely two trends that I would like to point out. Firstly, since the very conception of the genre, one gets to see that most horror games follow a first-person point of view. A prime example of this would be the cult classic game *Slenderman*. Such a perspective, along with its dark thematic music and a very dimly lit setting, often creates an atmosphere seeking to convey the fact that the player, in addition to one's vicarious experiences, also undergoes various simulated emotions (achieved as an effect of playing the game) in a much more engrossed manner. Following the age-old literary and cinematic rule, 'Show not tell', games like *Outlast* and *Slenderman* try to insert players in conditions that are otherwise inaccessible. Though such an outcome is not unique to this genre alone, it does support the argument that the desire (in

this instance, self-induced fear is a form of desire) one feels in such a situation is much more innate and concentrated in many folds, than the emotions induced by other mediums.

Secondly, and arguably a point that is often overlooked, has to do with 'Whom' (and for that matter literature and cinema) does one consider scary in horror games. From a purely evolutionary perspective, one feels fear because it provides safe anchorage from that which one does not know or understand. Similarly, horror games would very often make use of tropes and characters that deviate from what is otherwise considered human (*HP Lovecraft* and *Stephen King* also used this trope in their work). The secondary characters and even those that are controlled, are often either a non-human species or a humanoid figure which have some very visible and obvious differences in the way they are built. Large heads, uncommon walking patterns, tall haunting figures, etc are some common characteristics that are displayed in such a game. Physical deformities might be one thing, but other factors in a character represent an antisocial and non-human element. In the Japanese Indie game *Omori*, the character that one controls is an emotionally stunted boy who seldom shows any sentiment. In this context, the lack of any discernible emotion portrays an isolation that is beyond what is otherwise considered human.

One of the core components of art is the relationship that is built between both the artist and the piece of art in consideration. And yet one question, that by some misfortune, often evaded is ,

'Who do we create the art for?' More specifically, *'What does the art that is created inform about those people who consume it?'* In the past decade or so, there has been the emergence of a new social stratum that ventures into games. While the whole medium has been around since the early 90s, (arcades predate this, however, given the fact that they lacked a certain component of storytelling, they cannot be put in the same category) the early gamer class was a largely younger audience. However, as more time passed, especially at the turn of the decade in 2010, more and more millennials and adults started engaging in this recreational activity in some form or the other.

This has given rise to more minimalist games that are so, not because of the lack of technology, but rather because they try to pay homage to the older stories that came before them. And among these 'nostalgia-based' games, there is one that elucidates this example better than the others. This worked alongside another major phenomenon, which is that over the past decade or so there has been greater polarization of politics among younger generations, finding its way to be reflected in the themes that drive many of the most famous video games. The economic decline came into focus increasingly as young people found new ways to understand and make connections to the world around them. All of these could climax into more isolation and economic downturn at the turn of the decade with the emergence of the covid pandemic. One game that is exemplary of this phenomenon is the aforementioned game, *Omori*.



If there is one thing that sets indie games apart from their mainstream counterparts, it is their effort to take a more artistic approach to storytelling while focusing more on, as opposed to the expensive and well-funded eye candy of visuals. *Omori* as a game pays homage to the 'Nintendo-era Pokemon games' that were released in the 90s and the early 2000s. The art style takes apparent inspiration from it, along with its inclusion of a fighting sequence mimicking the older Pokemon style of moves in a certain way, but with emotions instead of Pokemon types. However, the deviation from the jolly visuals and aesthetics of the Pokemon games is emphasised in its subject matter and deeper ties that the game has to actual-world issues. The character played is an emotionally numb child and the environment of the game is full of moments consisting of

jumpscares with some of the most absurd and dark creatures one's imagination could conjure.

The game has frequent depictions of self-harm, including a moment where the main character is trapped in an empty void or liminal space and the only exit pathway for him is to stab himself repeatedly with a knife. The game shifts between junctures of vivid bright colours and drab black-and-white sequences, psychologically draining the player. The development of *Omori* is important to understand the larger context concerning the shift that has taken place in the storytelling of video games, especially in the post covid era. The word *Omori* is in itself a shortened version of the term ***Hikikomori***, a Japanese modern expression used to describe someone who has chosen isolation and complete dissociation from society. It is

perhaps very appropriate that this game was released during the pandemic, a period when most people encountered some form of isolation or other

Furthermore, it depicts the evolution of people, from those who grew up on the fantasy and optimism of the early 2000s to choosing excessively grim methods and symbolisms to depict misery. Statistically speaking, the global population is more isolated and has the highest cases of depression. Either due to the excessive stimulation this generation grew up with or because of the polarization caused by political, economic or ecological reasons, the source that rendered its development is yet to be determined. What is hard to deny is the fact that art is starting to recognise this polarization more and more.

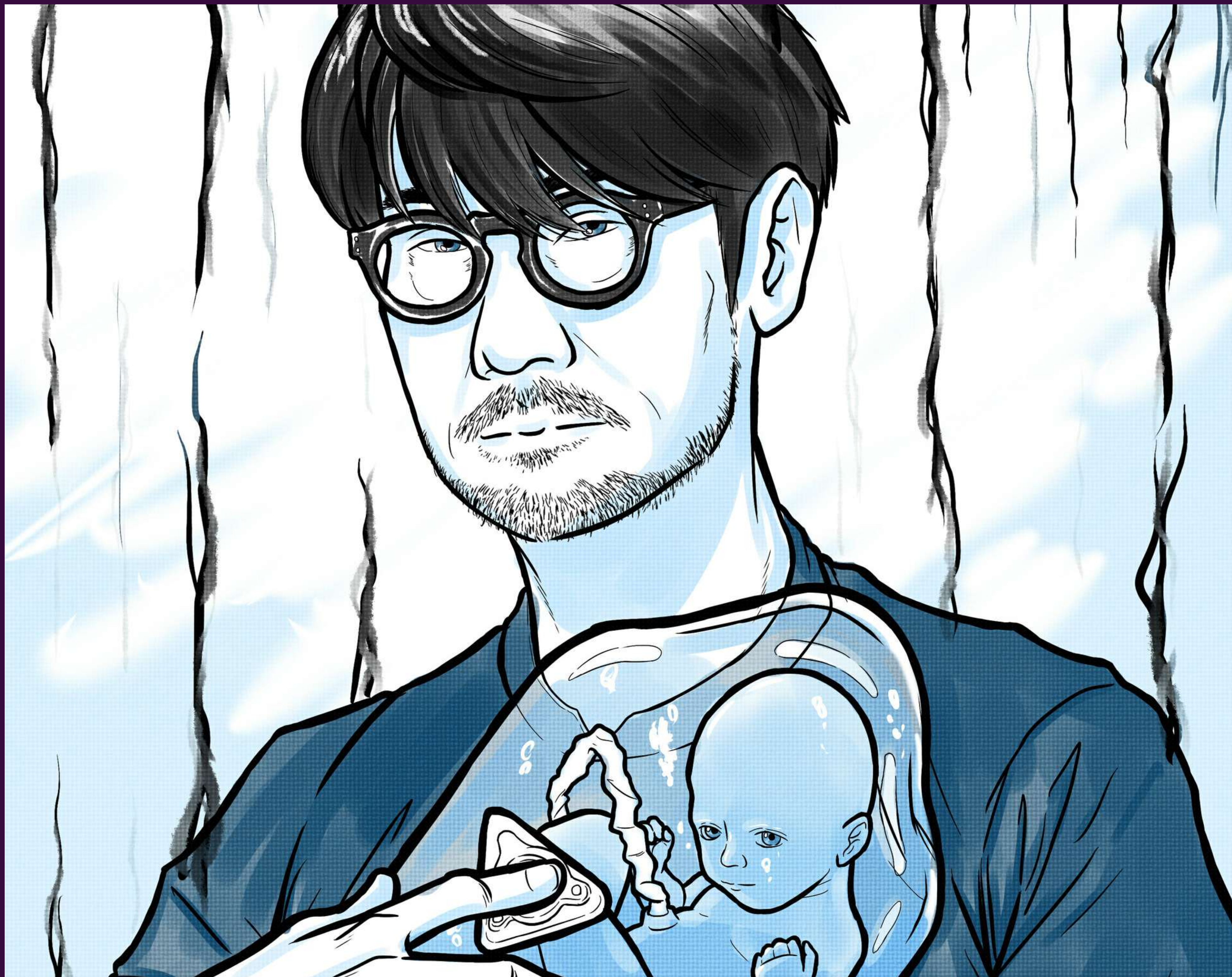


Image Credit - Art Station

Conclusion

One can formulate by now, that the genesis of the video game art form resides within the expressionist school of thought. As already mentioned, the pigeonhole of stereotypes has corrupted its perception. Nevertheless, the video game industry has been no less than a pioneer in the augmentation and cognisance of social dynamics that tag along with existence in society.

Furthermore, there were a lot of topics including how certain games like *Rockstar's Grand Theft Auto* series have established a household name for themselves and how titles like *Activision Blizzard King's Call of Duty* franchise have inaugurated foundations like *Call of Duty Endowment*, directed towards benevolence and support for veterans of certain armed forces.

Moreover, the video game industry has also become a key player in the political and economic spheres. **Microsoft & Xbox's** proposed **68.7 billion USD** all-cash acquisition of the aforementioned **Activision Blizzard King**, has been a key element in regulatory politics ever since its announcement back in January 2021. Owing to the same, various sitting US senators and other politicians worldwide now play a key role in how the course of human and technological innovation will be charted and directed.

Notwithstanding the politics, the video game art form at present is at its zenith. With technological advancements, a myriad of previously overlooked stories and games have now come into the foray, providing the world with

unexplored narratives and perspectives. And even so, there still is not enough acceptance of video games. At the very least, there is an ever-growing appreciation for the dexterity of its revolutionary complexity. ■

“

My goal is to make a player think, 'I want to re-enter this world of lies tomorrow.'

”

- [Hideo Kojima](#)

BEYOND AN IDEALIST NEGATION OF RELIGION

Where Neo-Atheism Went Wrong

By Pushkar Pandey



“

The Atheist is a monster among men.”

- P B Shelly



On that day when We will say to Hell: Are you full? And Hell will answer: Are there any more?”

- Surah Qaf, Verse 30

Introduction

I am aware that to begin writing this piece by mentioning a quote on atheists, followed by a quote on Hell, may seem a bit evangelical. The two are often linked together as if they constitute a cause-and-effect pair. The great French philosopher Blaise Pascal, when asked about his stance on the existence of God, responded with what is now popularly known as Pascal's Wager. Pascal's Wager asserts that it is better to believe and act as if there is a God, for the minor sacrifices that such a path entails pale in comparison to the horrors that are in store for an atheist, if there is a God. One may be tempted to retort that an omniscient deity would scornfully dismiss such contrived beliefs and prayers, but Pascal's Wager is followed by hundreds of millions of people, even if unwittingly. Anthony Kenny, an eminent British Philosopher, defends the rationality of an agnostic who prays, as follows: "It surely is no more unreasonable than the act of a man adrift in the ocean, trapped in a cave, or stranded on a mountainside, who cries for help though he may never be heard or fires a signal which may never be seen."

Beyond a Gradualist View of Evolution

Before Darwin, the panoply of life on Earth was perhaps the most compelling reason to tilt one in favour of God. While Eusebes, in PB Shelley's "A Refutation of Deism: in a Dialogue" masterfully articulated a rebuttal to the Watchmaker analogy, it took quite a bit of time for the theory of intelligent design to die out. While the Miller-Urey experiment affirmed that abiogenesis was possible, creationists refer to studies that argue that the biodiversity present on planet Earth could not have emerged in the time it did; that the process was far more rapid than what it should have been. This, to them, indicates something unique, something divine! However, evolutionary biologists have increasingly begun to realise that a gradualist view of evolution, which posits that natural selection acting on random mutations is how evolution occurs, does not account for all the variety of life. This has been confirmed by genomic sequencing as well. To give a very lucid example that ought to be

familiar to anyone who has studied high school biology, let us take mitochondria and plastids. Mitochondria and plastids were distinct organisms which got incorporated into cells and enriched them, though they gradually ceased to exist as individual organisms. Similarly, we know now that the genome of an organism is a dynamic entity with elements like transposons (jumping genes) that can change their location in a chromosome and alter the expression of their neighbouring genes. Horizontal gene transfers between organisms are particularly common as well. My basic point however is; while evolution is an empirical reality, the scientific enterprise has strived to explain its underlying mechanisms. To solely negate the most simple and monocausal explanatory scheme constitutes straw-manning.



Cosmic Fine Tuning : A Valid Argument For God?

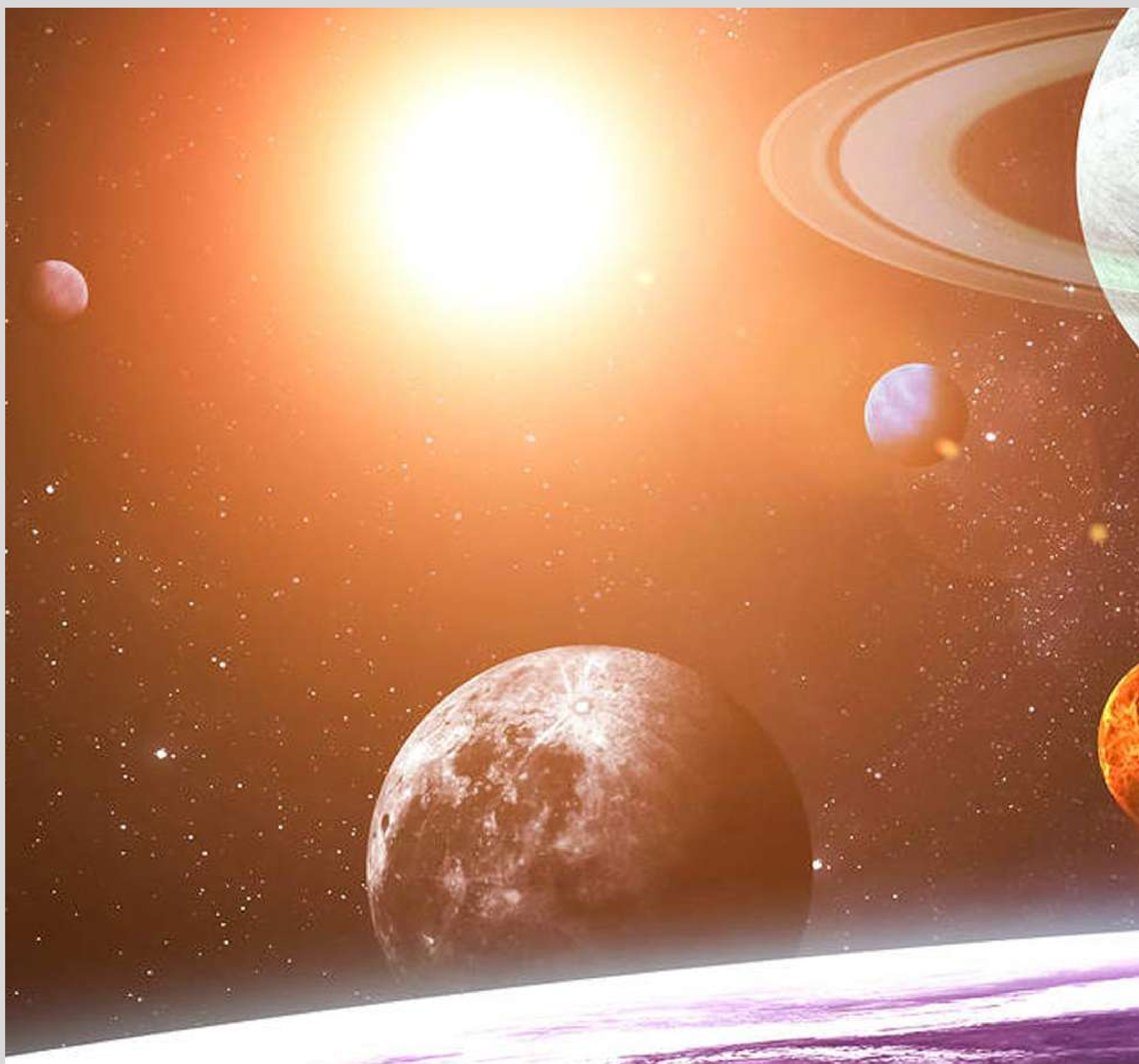
The emergence of Anatomically Modern Man from his hominin ancestors negates the religious axiom that humans were made in the image of god. Apologists, therefore, resort to the issue of cosmic fine-tuning, arguing that the universe is too perfect to have serendipitously come about. This argument is predicated on the fact that the fundamental constants that govern the operation of forces in the universe, for instance, the expansion of the universe, are so precise that any slight deviation would make life impossible. Life would not exist if planets and stars could not form and if carbon did not exhibit catenation. This is easily rebutted using the anthropic principle, both its strong and weak variants. While the strong anthropic principle is a bit contentious since it asserts that the laws of nature provide for the inexorable emergence of self-conscious life, the weak anthropic principle is a truism; it states that our existence, our capacity to comprehend our existence and our attempts to ascertain its teleology are possible only because the laws of nature permit it. However, regardless of any incertitude or lack of knowledge on the part of the scientific enterprise, one must not accept the God hypothesis. A theistic framework was resorted to for millennia in order to explain how the world works.

Polytheistic societies personified natural forces as deities while monotheistic ones affirmed faith in a single deity. As humanity gradually managed to unveil mysteries about the nature of reality, the credit we gave to God was either reduced or transferred to another level where God was given credit for ensuring the maintenance of the natural order. Let us take an Indian example. Aryabhatta demonstrated that eclipses weren't caused by Rahu and Ketu and were the result of the moon coming in between the Sun and the Earth. To this however, the believer may refer to the conversation between Yajnavalkya and Gargi, as articulated in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Referring to Akshara, an entity that is considered equivalent to Parabrahman in the Gita

(Aksharam Brahma Paramam - Gita 8.2), Yajnavalkya says :

“At the command of that Reality, O Gargi, the sun and moon hold their courses; heaven and earth keep their positions; moments, hours, days and nights, fortnights and months, seasons and years—all follow their paths; rivers issuing from the snowy mountains flow on, some eastward, some westward, others in other directions.”

The believer therefore may conveniently refer to the myth of Rahu and Ketu as a literary exercise; a metaphor. One must also realise however that such realisations seldom come before a scientist uncovers the truth. Religions often engage in revisionist interpretations of vague verses to claim precedence in the



in the discovery of theories and doctrines discovered by modern scientists. One would wish that such claims were made in regard to theories that have not hitherto been expressed by scientists; that religious texts were used to unearth secrets and solve problems that have reached a dead end.

Neo-Atheism : A Preliminary Diagnosis

Neo-Atheists like Richard Dawkins and the Late Christopher Hitchens have left a great impact in the realm of ideas by making it more popular to be an atheist,

empowering people to articulate their reasons for being an atheist, as well as influencing fence-sitters to turn to atheism, often due to their charismatic and emphatic rhetoric. However, they frequently engaged in rather polemical descriptions of religion, betraying a lack of sociological, psychological and historical understanding of religion. Neo-atheists virulently criticised the notion of vicarious redemption in Christianity, represented by the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, who died for the sins of humanity. It is ironic then that they seek to crucify religion as if religion is responsible for all our troubles, and that doing away with religion will exculpate humanity for all our sins. Many examples negate such a parochial view. Scientific racism and eugenics for instance had nothing to do with

religion. Similarly, while Hitchens cites how Wehrmacht soldiers wore belts which had the phrase "Gott Mitt Uns" (God On Our Side) written on their buckle as an affirmation of the religious nature of the Nazi regime, he fails to recognise that the Nazi Regime and Hitler had to feign commitment to Christianity since a majority of Germans believed in it. Esoteric strands of Nazism dealing with the occult were a natural derivative in the racist glorification of a purported "Aryan" race with its roots lying in distant prehistory and cannot be taken to be representative of Nazism.

Dawkins and Hitchens frequently engaged in islamophobia and blamed Islam for all the problems in Muslim polities and societies. Hitchens, in a debate with Galloway, mentions how Sidi Haji Abdrahaman, the envoy of Tripoli, justified the capture of American ships and the enslavement of their crew by the Barbary States by stating that the Koran gave them permission to enslave infidels. Hitchens uses this to justify his stance that it was Islamic theology and not American Intervention in the Middle East that caused, or exacerbated, Islamic fundamentalism there, that Islamic theology inexorably culminates in fundamentalism and jihad. As a counter to this, I would like to cite how another Muslim King, Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar, freed his imperial slaves on the 8th of March 1582, as recorded by the Akbarnama.

Religious doctrines are open to interpretation, and even seemingly monolithic religions like the



monotheistic Semitic religions have a panoply of sects and diverse interpretations. The advent of new interpretations and the success of competing paradigms is contingent on societal exigencies. One cannot associate religion with a necessarily regressive ethical worldview. In fact, Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity was based on its doctrine of equality of all men. In this respect he considered Christianity to be akin to the French Revolution and Socialism. To take an Indian example; Mediaeval India was replete with popular monotheistic sects that challenged the caste-stratified reality that engulfed them

On the evolution of religion

The evolution of religions is a complicated process. Anthropologists and historians have worked on this for quite some time. There are many recurring themes, for instance, the flood myth, which occurs in the Epic of Atrahasis (18th century BCE) as well as the Shatapatha Brahmana (8th - 6th century BCE). These could indicate diffusion, common origins, or simply the fact that common realities in the lives of people would lead to similar literary motifs. The Indo-Europeans encountered floods, and so did the Mesopotamians. Floods show the dichotomy of nature; that the very rivers that sustain life also have the capacity to annihilate it. To use such a potent motif for literary purposes seems to be very logical, much like people indulge in



exaggerations whilst framing a dystopian worldview or an eschatology. The Terminator franchise is an example that comes to mind. There are several stances as far as the motor of religious progress is concerned. There is a tendency to treat ideas as if they evolve and operate in independence, one idea giving rise to another. This is a derivative of

how philosophers adhere to the principle of charity in interpretation while engaging in exegesis. Charity in interpretation is an act of steel manning, of interpreting theories in the most coherent and cogent manner possible even though theories are often a cataclysmic arrangement of ideas. Historical materialists maintain that ideas are by-



while beholden to them, isn't bound to them. Eric Hobsbawm went one step further in negating vulgar materialism, arguing that "history is the struggle of men for ideas, as well as a reflection of their material environment"

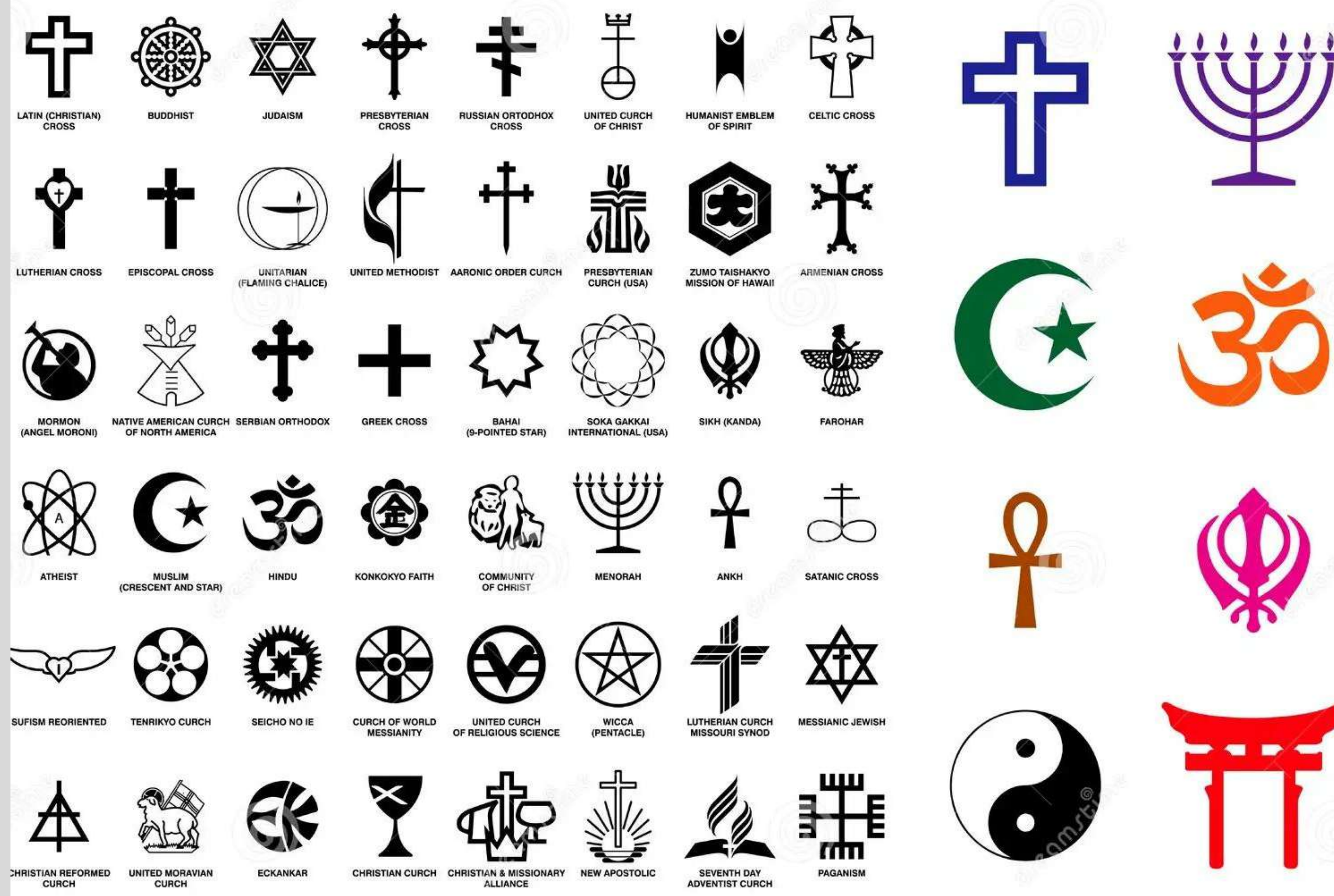
Durkheim and Eliade: Divergent Views of the Sacred

I would like to delve into the theories and paradigms of three eminent intellectuals; Mircea Eliade, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Karl Marx. I am obliged however to discuss the views of a whole lot of other sociologists. Eliade came up with multiple theories, though the one germane to our discussion is his concept of hierophanies. In simple terms, his conceptualisation of religion was based on the phenomenological study of how humans classify the world into the sacred and the profane; nomenclature borrowed from Durkheim, but distinct from his approach. Durkheim repudiated two dominant notions for the origins of the "Sacred". He rejects E.B. Tylor's contention that religion emerged as an attempt of people to explain natural phenomena. This led to the emergence of animism, a religious paradigm that locates "spirits/consciousness" in living organisms (other than humans), inanimate objects, as well as natural phenomena. Tylor treated this as an intellectual endeavour, while Max Müller viewed it as an emotional exercise, an attempt to ascribe sacredness to natural phenomena because of their awe-inspiring nature.

products of economic forces. The most crude structuralist interpretation, what is called "Vulgar Materialism" asserts that religion, like ideas and ideologies, is a part of the "Superstructure", which rests on the base and is unilaterally determined by it. However, Engels maintained that "once a historic element has been brought into the world by other,

ultimately economic causes, it reacts, and can react on its environment and even on the causes that have given rise to it". One must understand that Marx and Engels were attempting to come up with a positive critique of Capitalism, instead of just a Normative one, in alignment with their identity as scientific socialists. Historical materialism,

World Religion Symbols- Eps 10



Durkheim does not accept the notion that intellectual or emotional needs to explain natural phenomena could be adequately potent to invent dreams. He viewed the sacred-profane dichotomy as a social construct, finding the links of religion in totemism. Totem symbols in themselves aren't always adequately mystical or awe-inspiring to be regarded as otherworldly; they might be something mundane that simply happens to be relatable to the clan. However, they acquire sanctity as they increasingly became a factor binding the clan members (as opposed to kinship, for instance). The attribute of sacredness has both positive connotations, for it is imbued with power that has the capacity to be a reservoir of assistance and blessings, and negative ones. The negative connotations pertain to its exclusionary nature, for it had to be distanced from profanity, which could also refer to individuals. This aspect is hauntingly familiar to Indians, for Indian society has practised untouchability for over two millennia.

As may be evident from the term phenomenology, Eliade's approach is related to the experience of individuals. For him, the sacred-profane dichotomy stems from the perspective of humans which elevates certain experiences to a plane above the material world, even if that experience is the cognition of an otherwise mundane thing. Individuals may treat ordinary, temporal entities as hierophanies. Let us take an example. Tribes often imbue mundane entities with sacredness. These do not necessarily correspond to social reality (as in the example of totemism cited by Durkheim), nor do they elude simple explanations or stupefy us so as to warrant this special treatment. The act of elevating things to the plane of sacredness stems from the qualia of such experiences cognising such entities as belonging to a sacralised cosmos. This approach is predicated on treating religion as an autonomous agent influencing human actions and history

The Materialist View of Religion

I may be following a rather jumbled-up chronology, but I would like to discuss Feuerbach and Marx now, the reasons for which will be evident at the conclusion of this segment of my piece. Feuerbach treated religion as an anthropological projection of what humans aspire to be. While we say Man is made in the image of God, Feuerbach contended that this was quite the opposite. As an implication, when we say that Man is made in the image of God, with God representing the epitome of virtue, we arrogate to ourselves those virtues which we aspire to embody, despite failing to do so. This is a form of alienation from the self; instead of striving to better ourselves, we project an idealised abstraction of what conscious creatures are capable of. To take an Indian example, Parabrahman is treated as Sachchidanda (Sat/Truth - Chitta/Consciousness - Ananda/Bliss). While we are conscious, we most certainly don't live blissful lives; our truthfulness is precarious at best. This implies that we are aware of what our virtues are. This answers a variant of Euthyphro's Dilemma; whether the societal conception of morals stems from an innate, objective proclivity for particular values, or whether such a consciousness of ethics is a social construct emanating from religion, which in turn originates from other queries. Feuerbach asserts that the former is the case.

Marx wrote his Theses on Feuerbach in 1845, critiquing Feuerbach for a limited and parochial application of materialism (contemplative materialism) wherein the Human essence is considered independent of their social relations. As per Marx, “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in every single individual”. He points out that “circumstances are changed by men”, and that “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it”. A couple of years ago, in 1843, he composed his famous dictum; “Religion is the Opium of the Masses” (Opening segment of Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right). Though he was yet to compose his base and superstructure framework (which appeared in the preface of Das Kapital), we see how his Materialism was more advanced than Feuerbach's. As per Marx, “Man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world”. Note the shift from religion being a projection of Man's essence, to being an inverted consciousness of the world. Marx further goes on to highlight how Religion is a source of illusory happiness that prevents revolutionary change from occurring; like an opium addict who derives solace from opiates instead of treating the source of his pain. In his more developed materialistic worldview (as articulated in Das Kapital), ideologies and religions are part of the superstructure which emerges from the base. The social component of the base is the relations of production, which

forms the exploitative aspect of class-stratified societies. Religion, being its derivative clearly won't threaten it. Kosambi put it this way in his famous work, “Introduction to the Study of Indian History” :

“The subtle mystic philosophies, tortuous religions, ornate literature, monuments teeming with intricate sculpture, and delicate music of India, all derive from the same historical process that produced the famished apathy of the villager, senseless opportunism and the termite greed of the ‘cultured’ strata.... The one is the result of the other”

Those given to glorifying the past should keep this in mind. People are given to projecting utopias into the past. Historical narratives are replete with purported “Golden” ages, the Gupta Age in Ancient India being a prominent example. This does two things; it establishes the practicality of such utopias, while also minimising the burden of striving towards a utopian future, for instance when their eschatology is the culmination of the progressive degradation of human virtues crossing the tipping point.

Neo-Atheism and State Worship

Anti-theism as propounded by Christopher Hitchens largely based its polemic on the critique of

peculiar strand of monotheism; evident from his view that religion was based on “cradle-to-grave divine supervision, a permanent surveillance and monitoring”. Deism and pantheism do not fall under this, though this of course does not prove their veracity, as discussed in the opening section of this piece. Neo-Atheism put undue importance on religion as an autonomous agent. Its most charismatic proponent, the journalist Christopher Hitchens went on to support the Iraq War because of his conviction that the United States of America, drawing on the ideals of the American Revolution, was a force for good. I disagree with those who attribute his changed stance as opportunistic. He had genuine contempt for Saddam Hussain, especially given how he ethnically cleansed and massacred the Kurds. However, if Hitchens retained his materialism, instead of believing in idealism, he would not have trusted the rhetoric of liberty which has always served as a pretext for American interventionism. He would have recognised how the war in Iraq was about Big Oil, something which Alan Greenspan, the former chairman of the Federal Reserve, admitted in his memoir.

According to Noam Chomsky, neo-atheists ended up being secular fanatics propounding state worship in their quest for countering theocracies. If neo-atheists would move beyond their parochial view of religion, they would see the sheer opportunism in such rhetoric of “liberty”. Perhaps then, they would fight for a better world, instead of merely fighting against religion. ■





RECONOMY

PRODUCTIVISM: A SHIFT IN ECONOMIC PARADIGM WITH PROF DEEPANSHU MOHAN

Interviewed by Chavi Gogna, Raksha Jha & Siddhant Sinha

Siddhant: In your work, *Strongman Saviours* you have provided a holistic picture of the global political economy and the evolving nature of countries through a plethora of vantage points including political science, sociology and economics. With respect to that, what was the inspiration and motivation behind this descriptive and comparative analysis of the four countries - India, Turkey, Russia and Brazil - and any takeaways that you would like to share?

Prof Mohan: Thank you Siddhant and thank you Probe for planning and organising this. Just to give you the perspective of what the motivation for working on the book was, a lot of literature on populism has been centred on the analysis of the countries of Europe or North America. What happened post-Brexit in the UK or in the US post-Donald Trump's rule and the shift among International Relations scholars and political scientists was quite pivotal towards studying what is shaping the rise of a certain kind of populism. Populism is a contested concept. A lot of definition and experience around populist leadership differs based on the context which means that any comparative political project would be rigged with a lot of problems because the countries we identified for the world were largely outside Europe and North America. We were looking at developing countries which are strategically important actors in different regions. Brazil is an important country in Latin America,

India is important in South Asia, Russia has strategic importance in West and Central Asia, and Turkey similarly has an important Europe and Asia confluence. Each of these countries has experienced what can be considered authoritarian leadership.

A populist form of such leadership has been linked to what we define in the book as ideological populism. Ideological populism means that there is a core ideology that each of these leaders represents. While these leaders are representing a political party or ideological spectrum, they are trying to further that by convening the ideology among the majority class of a base, it could be a voter base, it could be an ethnic majority. Like, Erdogan in

Turkey, Modi in India, Putin, not much in his initial years, but later when he consolidated power and Jair Bolsonaro when he came into power in Brazil represented the populist picture. All of these figures were outside the status quo and the main political establishment. We were curious to understand what were the underlying socio-political and socio-economic factors, that are shaping the rise of these leaders or in other words, what is shaping the rise of ideological populism in a select number of countries outside the West. Through this analysis, I am trying to sense if there are comparative factors that are bringing these countries together. Are there more case studies that



The Probe team with Prof Deepanshu Mohan

we can look at? Our project doesn't end with these four countries. We want to look at other countries where authoritarian leadership might have risen but might have a different form. Our attempt was to look at such countries as case studies and understand what factors contribute to such a rise and relate the same to the West. Much of the literature, particularly in the introduction section of the book, is built upon the definitions of populism that are defined by Western scholars. It is not that we have given our own definition as we understand there is already a plethora of literature that talks about the trends and fashions. The initial idea behind this book was to only consider the economic factors, but we soon realised that it is not just economics, there is also a huge sociological shift in churn, historical role as well, party politics, technological disruption and many such factors are contributing. One of the things that you would find useful is that there is a pyramid which we had designed and that pyramid tries to explain the uniqueness of the current nature of the Right Wing Populism which is different from populist movements in the past.

Raksha: You mentioned that the rise of an authoritarian leader might lead to a certain economic paradigm. Have you noticed any examples where there are shifts in the economic pattern and such leaders just rise in the flow? Are there any sociological or political causes that might lead to such populism?

Prof Mohan: The book is structured in a way that there are three parts in the book. The first part talks about the history of the countries' economic and sociological context for the readers to understand what these countries have seen in the past. The second part looks mostly, as a case study, the leaders' own life stories, and where they began their journey from.

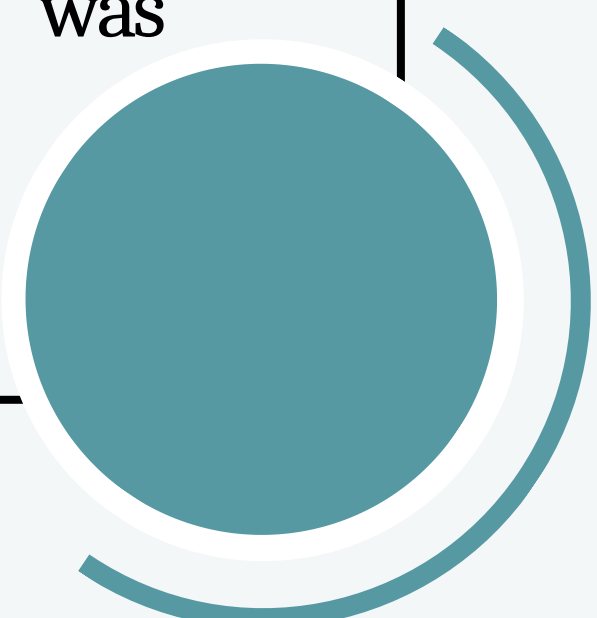
The context of each of the leaders and their life stories is very intriguing because there is also something very common about the early childhood stories of each of these leaders which is very interesting to read and understand and we felt that it is something critical to talk about. The third chapter of each case study looks at what happens to each country's socio-economic indicators and performance evaluators once they come into power. So the interesting thing is that we talk about the four factors which bring these leaders into power. One is a sort of shared link between discontent with supply-side neoliberal economic policies, much of which was pursued in the early 1990s or late 1980s in each of the case studies. Mostly the 1990s was a period where due to the influence of the Washington Consensus or much of the American model of capitalism or the influence of international financial institutions like IMF and World Bank, many of the countries experimented with the waves of supply side reforms and each of the countries experienced a mixed success. The implementation of those reforms left a huge chunk of the worker population behind, which is to say that they could not get access to economic opportunities the way, let's say, the urban elite, with better education. There was a rising middle class, but a lot of the rising middle class was not coming at the cost of the regression seen in the backward rural population. That divergence, that rise in inequality created discontent which is widely spoken by political economists like Dani Rodrik, Atul Kohli, etc.


The second contributing factor was the rise in religious orthodoxy or what we call religious conservatism which was a shared feeling among a lot of people. Maybe out of concern for the declining global or national moral structures where the resurgence of state was being explored in groups and communities.

As a result, in India for instance, Hindutva was very central, if not for the religious belief systems, but for giving that alternative faith mechanism, while being conservative in nature, was central to that project. In Turkey, you have orthodox Islam being very central to Erdogan, even if not for his rise to power, it's interesting because none of the leaders are positioning orthodox religious beliefs as the factor that should make people vote for them. A lot of this happens once they come to power. We talk about it in the book that it is a reverse causal relationship, it is not as if one is speaking to the other, but it is a contributing factor. Rising religious conservatism did contribute to the rise in capitalism.

The third was the trigger element. We call it one major episode or a sequence of episodes of public corruption which created the need amongst the electorate for an alternative imagination of power, channelled through a figure who is not representing the political lineage of the time. Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi was a figure coming from a different political lineage, Erdogan from Turkey, too, was not at the core of the political establishment, Bolsonaro from Brazil was a part of a different political party and Putin was nowhere to be seen in the main Russian leadership. Among these leaders, Bolsonaro enjoyed power for a temporary period of time, but the reason why we have called them "Strongmen Leaders" is because they used all their political power to strongly consolidate their rule and position when in power. These three factors are very important.

Two additional factors which are equally important are the role of social media which was weaponized, for example, the rise of each of these leaders and the narratives in which they were coming in, in some cases, it was development, in some cases, it was





ethnic majoritarianism. Another key factor which has been important for populist leaders to rise is connected to each of the countries that we speak of had experienced strong discontent against the existing class, political, business and economic leadership. That is something that while we talk about the rise of the status quo seems to be important. Once they come into power, they resemble each other. There is also a commonality in the way they govern. The governmentality of these leaders when in power dismisses 'Rule of law', instead you see 'Rule by law' sort of centralised governance mentality. The law is almost used as a tool to govern. In India, for example, if you talk more about duties or directive principles and talk less of constitutionally safeguarded rights, you know that there's a shift and it was true of Indira Gandhi when a populist movement on the left was evident by her 'Gareebi Hatao'. But the link between the left and the right is just connected to the rising of fiscal conservatism. Fiscal conservatism would mean that you have left-wing populist movements that were very much central to pro-welfare economic ideology. So many of these movements were positioned around taking care of, in a Marxist way, the poor and the marginalised, talking about their rights.

Here you don't see that. For example, even if we talk about Trump in the US. He also didn't come into power by saying that we're going to have an anti capitalist wave of not allowing businesses to do businesses or not allowing monopolists to exist. So you find similarities in these leaders as well. You see the relationship between the state and the capital changing, there's much more oligarchic capitalism where you have a select number of business groups that will have a higher stake of importance and they would be involved in that direction. At the same time disinvestment, privatisation, less role of

a populist state and social welfare would be allowed. So that I feel is very new. With this current wave of the populist movement, rising fiscal conservatism has been a unique factor which populist movements on the left didn't experience in the past. I do make an observation in the Indian context and also in Turkey that one of the reasons that Erdogan and Modi still have wide popularity amongst low-income groups is the fact that they provided some direct public good-based benefit transfers like welfare schemes. But that's sort of a new chord with the impoverished or the marginalised. Those in abject poverty who otherwise do not get access to any resources honestly now receive rations, food or access to some cooking fuel. The idea is that "we didn't have anything of this sort in the past and now that we have it we should make that a reason to vote for them". So this phenomenon needs closer analysis and study.

Chavi: The political economy has in fact changed even more drastically during and after the COVID-19 pandemic with growing economies and economic inequalities both in India and the world, what do you think can be its repercussions for phenomena like populism?

Prof Mohan: One of the responses to COVID-19 was that it incentivized centralised digitalism. We needed to take decisions very quickly, respond to health care, getting a new hospital made, channelising resources. In times of crisis, centralised leadership is deemed to be not just popular but also more effective and fair enough. In crisis-type situations, we need decisive leadership. The flip side of what happened was it gave an incentive to authoritarian control. You can have too much of power centralised in the hands of few and as a result of that, that understanding or the shock leads them to exert more power and greater control and that nevertheless happens not just in case studies we're talking about but much in the world.

In fact if you see Bolsonaro's inability to address the crisis of the pandemic was one of the biggest factors in how he lost the elections because people were not happy with how he was dismissive of the COVID-19 virus and for the longest time failed to even provide checks and balances. Each of these leaders you would see responded to the Covid shock with the presence of authoritarian decisions at their own level and to each country with mixed success. Russia had its own experience. Turkey was able to recover perfectly. India made a catastrophic mistake by pronouncing a lockdown or shut down in no less time without adequate preparation in a manner which caused such huge damage to India's economic fundamentals that when you had the delta variant for example, we couldn't announce a lockdown the way you could before because of the experience of the past.

So the political economy landscape post covid has seen 2 things. One is the rise in authoritarianism the world over, democratic regression or democratic backsliding. Centralised forms of economic, social and political leadership are being incentivised. But I think what has allowed for the transition to happen is the nature of technological change that has also been brought into the political scene. Social media is a big contributor to that. Your ability to manage the projection and narrative of the wider electorate is extremely easy now and to the extent that we are not able to have effective checks and balances to what information is out there. So what has been called today a post-truth age is simply about finding it difficult to separate fact from fiction and that technology and social media technology are really changing. Political economy of post-covid governance mechanisms has not just been a rise in authoritarianism or centralisation but it has been fused with the technology of the time that is allowing the leaders this.

The rise in religious conservatism is a factor which is important to select countries where religion plays a huge role in the way politics is shaped. So in India, it may be a big factor. But this may not be the case in for example Brazil where religious belief system is not the only sole contributing factor to the choice of the leader. So that depends on the context.

But as a word of caution, the book doesn't talk about covid or the post-covid times. We stopped at covid because each of the leaders came into power prior to covid. In fact covid and the response to covid helped some of them expand their control and in some cases lose control as well. For instance, Trump in the US and Bolsonaro in Brazil. Erdogan's handling of the earthquake was questioned, whether the mechanisms were in place. But if you look at the numbers for the recent Turkey elections all people affected by the earthquake actually ended up voting for Erdogan's party. So there's something I feel underlying the preference of voting patterns for each of these leaders which goes well beyond the rationale of otherwise deterministic criteria. You might say that unemployment is a big problem so people might vote a party out but that doesn't happen. That was the case in UP with high unemployment, but we've seen a counterintuitive logic to each of these elections. So that's why I think somewhere an interdisciplinary perspective requires you to look at time events from perspective of what is happening not just in economics but also in other dimensions. So technology, rising authoritarianism which is allowing for consolidation of power through the weaponisation of social media and at the same time a discontent against sort of democratic processes of accountability, transparency is sort of a feature of post covid landscape at least to the extent of

what you see now.


Siddhant: Sir, you have discussed in great detail how all these leaders have this tendency to push for less state interference, disinvestment and a gradual back off from public investment. Yet we also see what can be regarded as some pro-welfare programs, be it free nutrition, Swatch Bharat or Har Ghar Shochalya Yojana. Also, these governments position themselves as being pro-poor. They came to power by overpowering so-called elite neoliberals but they themselves portray a very paradoxical situation where they entertain both the ends of the spectrum. How do we look at it not just in the Indian context but also beyond?

Prof Mohan: So I think the answer to your question depends on how you define both welfare and welfarism and I would say one has to think about this deeply because in the way that lot of these terms like the pro-poor and pro-welfare are used, one has to understand what do these leaders or the parties they represent what are their views on the poor. Giving someone free nutrition doesn't help them out of poverty. It might provide a temporary relief. In times of crisis if you provide someone free food that takes care of them to be able to manage their needs for a period of time. But at the end of the day what you need to look at is the processes that are set in motion for each of those who are at the bottom of this social and economic pyramid for their upward mobility. The question we have to look at is what kind of economic opportunities those at the bottom of the pyramid are receiving for their upward mobility over time. And to that extent, what you see is that while there's a lot of tokenism of providing direct support to those in abject poverty or at the lower scale of the socio-economic pyramid. That is the case with what you've seen in India, Turkey and, to a certain extent, in Russia. Under each of these leaders, you see there is an effort to directly connect with those who are at the lower end of the economic spectrum.

Through programmes that take care of not welfare delivery for upward mobility but providing access to some basic amenities that can enable them to consider the possibility of the nature of influence that these leaders have on them. So, when you talk about a welfarist regime, you're providing education and healthcare. None of these areas of public spending has seen a rise. If you look at the budget data, you won't see education expenditure rising to the extent that one would have anticipated or healthcare for that matter, except during the Covid years. So in terms of healthcare outcomes and education-learning outcomes, the picture is not that good. There is almost a moral hazard, which is a vested interest in letting a person be in a certain position where they are. So it's easy to ideologically mobilise and influence the poor. In that case, education, skilling and higher employment do not fit that well.

So to evaluate the performance of each leader and their economic policy, you've to ask what is the economic ideology of the government. Is there even an economic ideology? Because if there's nothing, then you can't really say that they are pro-welfare or pro-poor or welfarist. If one of your budgets suddenly increases capital expenditure and brings down MGNREGA, which is your main job creation and security programme in rural areas and perhaps the only one. So the question to ask is, what do you do the next year? If the next year, you're coming to an election and you suddenly increase the allocation for nutrition and MGNREGA and bring down capital expenditure, then it's interesting. So you can't really call the leader pro-poor or pro-welfare because they're not consistent with the nature of economic intervention and policies throughout. They are not invested in the upward mobility of the poor. If that were the case then you could've said that there's a lot more of that meaning.





falking about the ideological spectrum of what is the left or the right, I think that is an interesting question to ask based on what position you're looking at. If I'm looking from the perspective of the abject poor, there's a road constructed now that wasn't there ten years ago. So I'd see this as an important pillar for me to reach from point A to point B and that has happened in a lot of rural areas over the last eight or nine years. The northeast for example saw better road connectivity. But we've to understand the northeast also as a part of different communal mobilisations like never seen before, which has its own problems.

So while taking care of basic amenities, you're damaging the social cohesion. That could be a prerequisite for widening economic inequality as well. These are complex issues. I would argue that in most cases you'll find a lack of economic ideology that is being advocated by each of these leaders to the extent that there's a recalibration between the state and big private capital. Yes, there's every leader who has their favourite business partner and they let them expand control across sectors. In India's case, you see the Ambani and Adani groups getting much more wealth consolidation. In that case, they're not the leaders on the left because capitalistic control is going up in terms of wealth consolidation. When you've indicators like economic inequality rising you're less empathetic to have a leader in the welfarist paradigm. So we have to look at this question from the perspective of how we define welfarism. Is welfarism a function of upward social mobility?

If that's the case, do we have evidence of a particular community over a period of time doing better by having access to basic amenities and a rise in income? That's where the whole debate on productivism comes about because that presents an alternative economic paradigm for a counter-intuitive logic of what's present right now. One which is built on good jobs, the upward mobility of those at the bottom of the pyramid, a new industrial policy that is built around labour-intensive sectors so that employment and structural transformations happen for those who are not able to get a piece of the pie.

You have a situation in India where some communities have access to a maximum of one or one and a half meals a day, while you have another side that is suffering from abject obesity. That is a big divergence. Nutrition is a very good indicator because what it does is that it creates a struggle for the next ten years of the demographic structure. 65% of the mothers in South Asia are anaemic. The person who brought the data was let go. There is less focus on an economic ideology that is central to the governance paradigm. Erdogan is very critical of the government data, and so is Putin. Bolsonaro's average growth rate was somewhere half of what Lula's was. You're not seeing a higher growth and you're not seeing a higher development trajectory over time.

Raksha: In the Indian context, we see there is a widening gap that is taking place, which is very similar to the Temin-style vanishing of the middle class that you've discussed. This effect is felt greater when it comes to the class of women and it's more concerning when the employment rate is low but the employability rate for women is very high which gives rise to an informal sector in India. So can productivism result in the upliftment of such classes anyhow?

Prof Mohan: That's a good point. One interesting thing about rising informality is the dominance of women-based employment, whether it's street vending or any other area with a higher informal labour market. A lot of this is connected to supply-side economics which is where Rodrik approaches. He offers productivism as an alternative economic paradigm and discusses that one of the issues with the 1990s style of liberalisation was that globalisation at that time led to having certain sectors do well, like manufacturing or construction, which were less dominated in the current employment status quo by women. As a result, women were left behind. In India, for example, the labour force participation for women has been low for a very long time. Unfortunately, it is sliding down further. The urban scenario is even worse. So we have to look at sectors like the care industry (nursing, healthcare), where there is a higher representation of women. If there's greater public spending in these areas, you'll see great changes in a short period of time. There are positive externalities linked to it. So, there are jobs that you can create where there is balanced gender participation.

If you look at the South Asia data, the two sectors which have the most parity in participation are healthcare and education. The ratio of participation is almost fifty-fifty and these are also the two most underfunded sectors. China had a very similar experience in the 1990s. I'm very reluctant to give the example of China because of the civilisational differences, but the problems are very similar.

In the 90s, there was high informal labour in China and low labour force participation for women and they addressed this as a policy problem and took measures that would require intervention. One of the sectors with the biggest potential for women is textiles. It has a massive role played by women. If you go to areas in Gujarat and Rajasthan, immense work of finer granularity comes from women. But it's not recognised to a great extent. So productivism, as an economic reorientation approach, is based on what Rodrik calls good jobs in a new industrial policy paradigm, which targets those especially at the middle and lower rungs of the socio-economic pyramid. It'll include women of course. But you've to see why in many areas, despite incentives being there, women might not choose to work. They'll choose safety and mobility. You might have a big industrial area created but you might not have many women travelling there to work because there is no mechanism for them to go to that industrial town to work. So intersectionalities are needed even in policy intervention. It's not just about discussion and discourse. So you'll also need transport mechanisms and public safety frameworks to accompany what you're doing with regard to the industry. If you don't do that, whatever measures you take may not lead to incentives being realised.

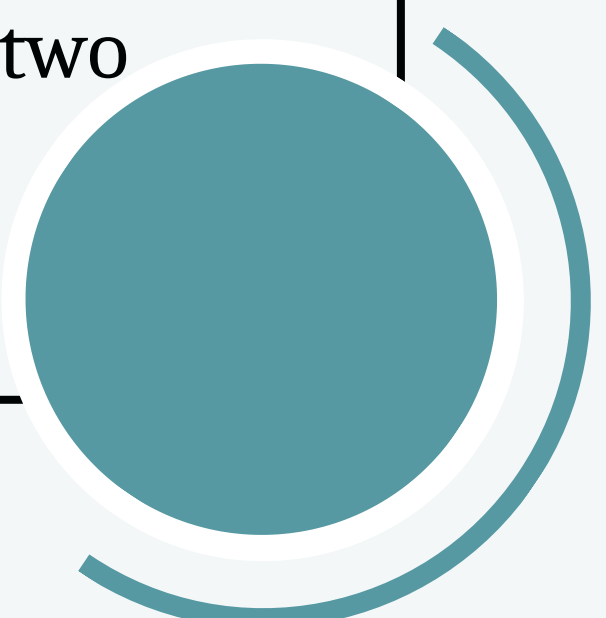
Chavi: If we look at the economic perspective, for instance, there's a 150-year gap between classical and Keynesian economics. Keynes came during the Great Depression when people lost their trust in the 'invisible hand'. Your work is


commendable as it provides a futuristic view. So do you think the great depression or any other economic event of great scale can change people's perspective again?

Prof Mohan: The pandemic did change our perspective in some way. The way we use technology now from app-based models of delivery to telemedicine or tele-consultancy. A lot of these changes happened in a year. You need theoretical principles in place for any alternative imagination of policy approach to be imagined. The Productivism debate is leaning a lot on what the new industrial policy should look like. Much of the globalisation debate failed to address the comparative advantages that countries had in their local economies. IBM has infested a big market in India, so everybody moved to software. But if you look at the data, much of India's export that was happening in electronics was not in software but in hardware, in the early 1990s. We lost out on our advantage. Assembled computers were cheaper in India as end-to-end products which is not the case in other countries. A lot of these comparative advantages that countries had based on their own skill set and labour and capital advantages were distanced or not acknowledged in the industrial policy. There was more to benefit foreign capital mobility. Maybe at the time we needed foreign capital for currency reserves. But at this time, India's position in the world economy is very different. It is much more assertive with greater multipolarity of power. There is a possibility that India can incentivise certain sectors where it can continue to have an advantage. At the same time not do away with

the possibility of trade expansion. You can't be a protectionist and talk about scenarios where you get your own industries to promote. Other countries would say that you're not allowing my products to enter your market, why should I allow your products? So there is a quid pro quo reciprocity that works. You can't have a protectionist trade regime while talking about expanding your industries. Productivism as an approach ensures that there is a balance between the local comparative advantages and international transfer of knowledge that foreign capital brings. Some countries have done that. If you look at Canada, for example, or in more recent terms Indonesia. Indonesia has also experienced majoritarian leadership in the past but has somehow managed to strike a balance in socio-cultural relations. At the same time also balancing the principles of modernity with better technology while giving benefits to the kind of industries that it wanted to develop

Another example would be Taiwan, a small country. Taiwan said no for much of the technology coming from South Korea and Japan because it felt it might hurt its workers. But it also invested big time in training these workers to compete with workers elsewhere. The problem with our textiles industry was that we protected it so that the rural economies don't end up in shambles but we didn't do much for them to access the market. So you then give yourself a disadvantage by people working these crafts to not continue this across generation because they do not find any market value. What productivism does as a critical thinking point is that it brings two





primitive ideas- good jobs or employment and upward mobility of those who are at a lower stratum is central to your policy intervention. I'm talking about jobs which are helping to those who are not currently doing that well and in the next five years should have access to not only amenities but housing and basically uplift to a better position. That's where transformation really happens, that is, not just income but quality of life. There would be discontent with whatever policy you come up with. There will always be a strata which will see from opportunity cost and feel discontent.

Siddhant: As you mentioned, productivism focuses more on the supply side of the economy and less on social transfers and redistribution. In an era of the constant rise of technology where employment seems to be too vulnerable, what kind of policy decision would productivism entail?

Prof Mohan: One simple example that Rodrik mentions and it is there in the text too is labour-intensive production patterns. In India's case, it is services that is much more important to growth than manufacturing. China has been big on manufacturing. We contribute 70-80% of our GDP through service-based production. So if labour-intensive services are promoted through fiscal incentives, you'll see transformations. We spend a lot more of our resources on promoting manufacturing. You can see evidence on PLI (Production Linked Incentive) that while it is allowing companies to come and manufacture, a lot of that

manufacturing is not happening from the initial stage to the end stage. Much of that, as Dr Rajan points out, is assembling, in the case of mobile phones. So PLI scheme has huge government revenue invested for incentives given to manufacturing. We already have an advantage in services, that is where our exports are. We have a surplus with the United States because we have done well in exporting highly skilled workers there. In areas of investment in services, you expect greater advantages for growth. So productivism as an approach focuses on jobs that allow for labour-intensive activities and at the same time are central to higher wage mobility. What it simply means is that if I'm earning 10 thousand rupees today in a hospitality job and tomorrow this hospitality sector grows, from the same sector I should be able to make 30 or 40 thousand rupees. Technology would be used in such a manner that would benefit the sector.

Raksha: India is on its way to becoming the third largest economy by the end of this decade. While that is good news, the per capita number provides a more nuanced picture of where India stands. In that regard, what do you think would be India's position in the possible coming of a new age through productivism and what should be the takeaways for people as well as the opposition?

Prof Mohan: I'll be less optimistic about where India's direction is currently headed. There is much more potential for India to be a greater contributor to the world economy. Much of the foreign investor resource base looks

positively to invest in India and having a big stake here largely because of the huge consumer market. But we need to be cautious about it as while we might approach getting larger as an economy, our level of inequality is so glaring that the benefits from the expansion will be shared by only a small margin of a group and that is deeply problematic. You have Gurugram where you'll find gated communities. But if you come out of those communities, you might find an urban slum in 50 metres where a person is finding it tough to even have access to drinking water.

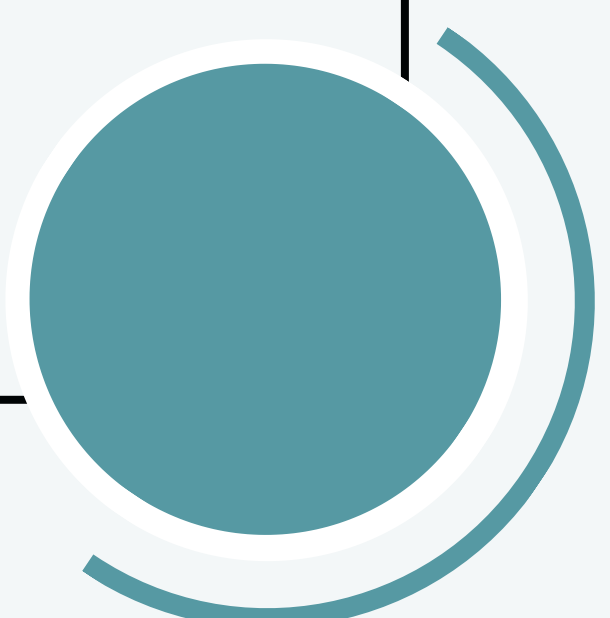
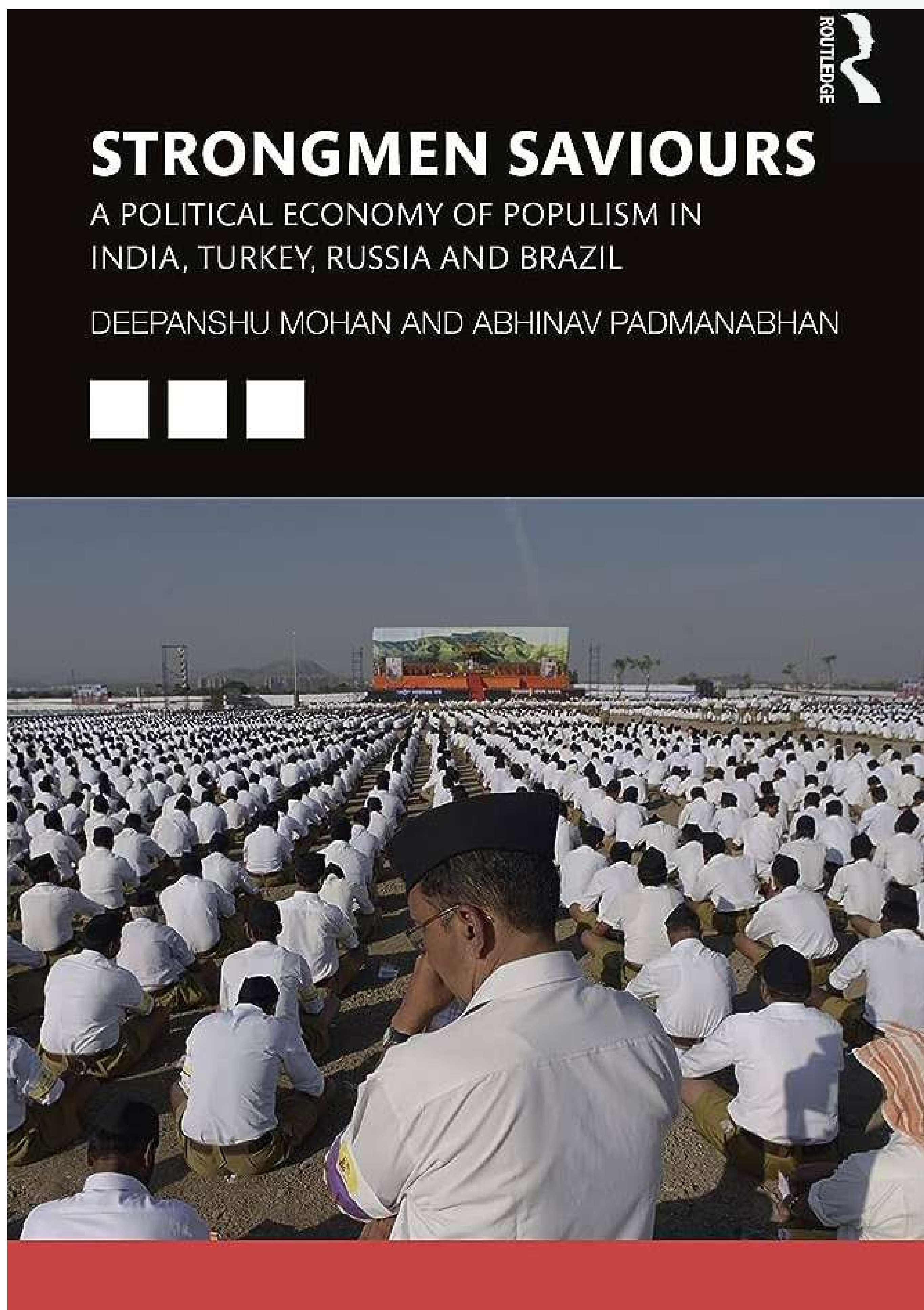
What does that do? It creates another wave of resentment between the haves and the have nots. This is ultra privilege versus those who have nothing. So you want to be careful that the size of the economy and its expansion need to be proportional to its redistributive capacity. Redistribution is also critical for the upward mobility of lower-income and social groups. It's only then that you can imagine India playing a greater role. Unfortunately, because of the social hierarchies that are in place, whether it's the caste system, class consciousness, gender or ethnicity, they are becoming instruments of discrimination. For a large country like India, it can offer a lot more to the world by embracing those differences in a manner of collective ordering. Those who are not doing well to be put into your priority. Unless civil society, non-state actors and state actors do not collectively focus on that grouping, I don't think the size of the economy would have any significance. We are already the fifth largest economy, how does it

affect the lives of those around you and me? Have their conditions become better? If you were to ask a domestic worker today, they'll say that their living conditions have

become worse as they are paying more in rent and food but the wages have more or less stayed the same. They don't have the bargaining power that you and I

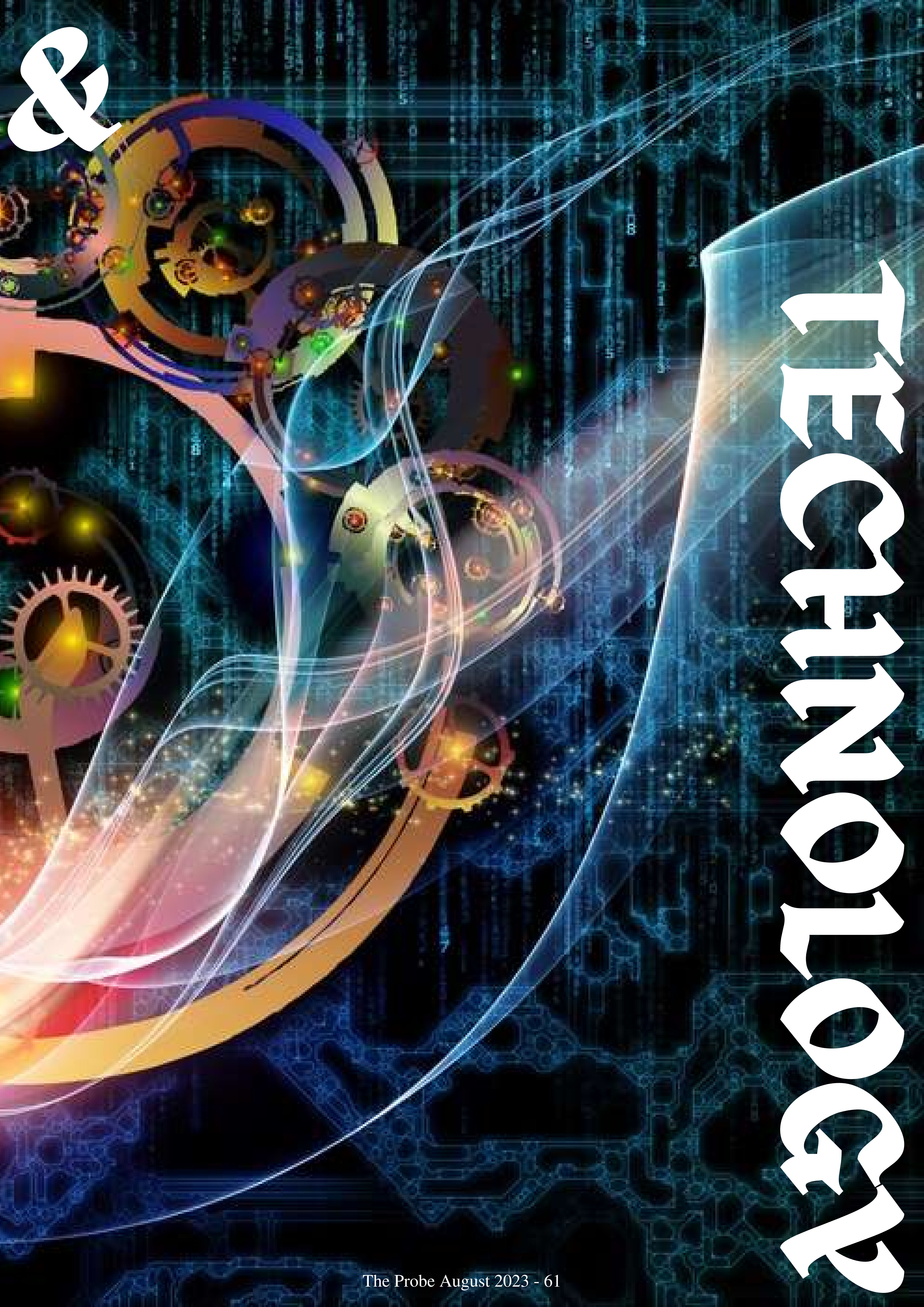
can have when we're working in a consultancy group. We have much more of labour rights. So we have to look at the condition of those groups as well. ■

THE PROBE RECOMMENDS: STRONGMEN SAVIOURS



SCIENCE





TECHNOLOGY



STRIKING THE BALANCE: MAXIMISING THE POTENTIAL OF AI AND SELF-LEARNING FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

By Ishu Mishra

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of higher education, the emergence of AI has triggered an enduring and vibrant dialogue concerning its profound impact on self-directed learning and academic achievement. With AI tools, such as ChatGPT, offering the allure of heightened efficiency and convenience, it is imperative to embark on a thorough and nuanced exploration of how these technological advancements influence not only the cognitive development of students but also their creative growth. This in-depth article embarks on a captivating journey to unearth the potential advantages and challenges intricately woven into the fabric of integrating AI into the educational realm. Our exploration is guided by robust empirical research and verified studies, shedding light on the multifaceted dynamics at play.

The Paradox of AI-Driven Learning

The allure of AI's capabilities has ignited spirited debates, teetering on the precipice of its merits and limitations. A compelling study conducted by the prestigious MIT in 2022 sought to unmask the performance of students heavily reliant on AI-generated content compared to their counterparts steadfastly adhering to traditional research methodologies. The outcomes of this groundbreaking study unveiled a thought-provoking paradox: while AI-supported students demonstrated remarkable efficiency in completing tasks, they

paradoxically showcased a diminished capacity for critical thinking and problem-solving. This paradox echoes the principles of "desirable difficulties," a concept championed by eminent psychologists Robert A. Bjork and Elizabeth Ligon Bjork. This theory posits that engaging with complex challenges is crucial for nurturing analytical prowess and fostering a profound understanding of the subject matter.

Striking a Harmonious Balance Between AI Efficiency and Cognitive Growth

The intricate interplay between AI's efficiency and students' cognitive development is at the heart of an enthralling debate. While AI accelerates the process of information retrieval and streamlines various tasks, the cognitive exertion demanded by traditional research methodologies remains an indispensable ingredient in shaping well-rounded cognitive abilities. This dynamic calls for an equilibrium: harnessing the efficiencies of AI while preserving the cognitive rigor intrinsic to conventional modes of learning. The challenge lies in ensuring that the convenience bestowed by AI does not inadvertently undermine the intellectual resilience fostered by more traditional approaches.

The Evolution of Research Methodologies in the Era of AI

In the epoch of AI's ascension, research methodologies are undergoing a subtle but transformative metamorphosis. A landmark study published in the esteemed Journal of Educational Psychology in 2021 endeavoured to establish the optimal balance between AI-facilitated research and traditional information-seeking methods. The findings underscored a harmonious synergy: students who adeptly integrated AI-powered research tools with conventional techniques demonstrated significantly enhanced comprehension and a more profound synthesis of subject matter. This underscores a fundamental principle – while AI expedites information acquisition, the holistic cognitive engagement stemming from manual exploration invariably amplifies information retention and cognitive adaptability. This prompts a paradigm shift in how we perceive research's role in education, where AI functions as a valuable tool to complement, not supplant, traditional methods.

Empowering Educators and Learners in the Age of AI



In this era of AI-driven research, educators play a pivotal role in guiding students through uncharted territories. Encouraging students to embrace AI-generated insights while marrying them to critical thinking and hypothesis-driven exploration imparts a sense of discernment. Educators serve as navigational beacons, guiding students to navigate the influx of AI-sourced information with thoughtfulness and acumen. This multifaceted approach empowers students to extract meaningful insights while honing their cognitive faculties, striking a delicate balance between harnessing AI's power and nurturing intellectual curiosity.

Amplifying Creativity Through the Fusion of AI

The juncture where AI and human creativity converge has kindled curiosity, prompting scholars to address concerns about AI stifling originality. A seminal study conducted by Stanford University's distinguished Center for Creativity in 2020 yielded fascinating revelations. Contrary to initial apprehensions, the study showcased that AI-generated content often serves as a catalyst rather than an impediment to creative thinking.

When students were exposed to AI-suggested concepts, they experienced a surge in innovative thought processes and embraced unconventional approaches. This phenomenon resonates with the theory of "associative thinking," where exposure to diverse stimuli fosters cognitive flexibility,



ultimately leading to a broader spectrum of innovative ideas. The interaction between AI-generated suggestions and human creativity forms a synergistic relationship, propelling new avenues of imagination and ingenuity that might not have emerged otherwise.

Strategic Approaches for Unleashing the Full Potential of AI

The exploration of AI's role in education reached its zenith with a collaborative, multi-year study orchestrated by Harvard's esteemed Graduate School of Education in partnership with technology giants. Executed between 2019 and 2023, this

ambitious study aimed to unearth effective strategies for seamless AI integration. A pivotal insight from the study underscores the significance of strategic AI utilisation.

Participants who strategically integrated AI as a supplementary tool, particularly for tasks such as fact-checking and information synthesis, demonstrated an elevated ability to retain information and tackle complex problems. Furthermore, the study emphasised the potency of collaborative learning synergized with AI. The infusion of AI-generated prompts within group dynamics led to a proliferation of interdisciplinary discussions and innovative project outcomes, resembling an intensified

brainstorming session that transcended traditional boundaries.

Relevant Statistics in AI and Education

Incorporating pertinent statistics sheds light on AI's increasing presence and its tangible impact on the educational landscape. According to a comprehensive report by Educause Review, more than 80% of teachers believe AI holds the potential to enhance learning outcomes. Furthermore, a survey conducted by Pearson in 2021 unveiled that a staggering 77% of learners agreed that AI has the capacity to facilitate personalised learning experiences tailored to their unique needs. These statistics underline the growing acknowledgment of AI's potential in not only supplementing but also fundamentally transforming education.

Additionally, data from a thorough study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics revealed that nearly 70% of students regularly use digital learning platforms. This significant shift towards digital resources underscores the evolving nature of education, where AI-driven tools occupy an increasingly integral role in the acquisition and exploration of knowledge.

Ensuring the Veracity of AI-Generated Content

The infusion of AI, bolstered by its ability to generate information, accentuates the urgency of



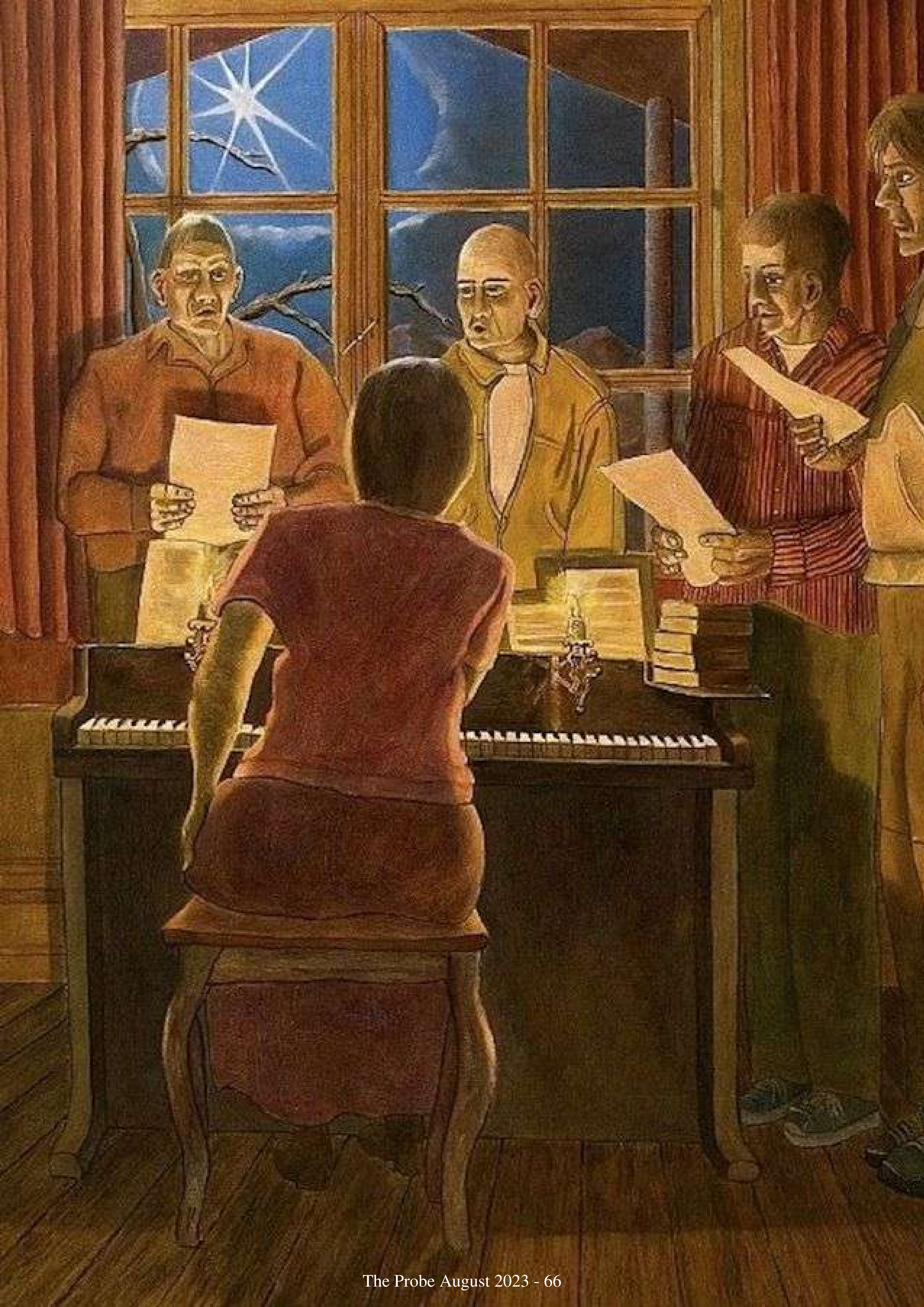
establishing a robust mechanism for content validation. The Pew Research Center's meticulous investigation in 2021 emphasized the importance of cross-referencing AI-derived information with reliable, human-vetted sources. This practice upholds not only the standards of scholarly rigour and integrity but also guarantees the accuracy and precision of knowledge assimilated by students.

Striking the Optimal Balance

In conclusion, the pursuit of a harmonious integration of AI and traditional learning methodologies necessitates an approach rooted in empirical research and verified studies. The tangible benefits and

potential drawbacks of AI-assisted self-learning become even more pronounced when dissected through the lens of comprehensive analysis. While AI accelerates specific tasks, safeguarding the cognitive growth, critical thinking, and creativity nurtured by conventional learning methods remains paramount.

With a panoramic perspective, students can harness the transformative potential of AI to elevate their educational journey. By embracing evidence-based strategies that thoughtfully interweave technological innovation with intellectual enrichment, students pave the way for a future where knowledge is wielded thoughtfully and skillfully, enhancing their ability to contribute meaningfully to the global community. ■





REVIEW

COURT (2014)

MOVIE REVIEW

By Tulika Sahu

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"Court" serves as a stark mirror to the trials and tribulations within the Indian judicial system, exposing the grim realities of prevailing injustice. Instead of engaging in a fair and focused discussion on the merits of the case, personal comments are wielded against the accused, driven by a malicious intent to besmirch their reputation before the judge.

C"Court" (2014) stands as a mesmerising multilingual legal drama, widely celebrated for its captivating cinematography, masterful direction, and exceptional performances by a talented cast. However, while it doesn't boast explosive dialogues, an impassioned orator, a high-octane case, or a show-stopping conclusion, it intriguingly unfolds scenes with deliberate pacing, perhaps at times longer than one might expect. This film's allure lies in its unadorned realism, an absence of glitz, yet it possesses an inexplicable grip on its audience. What truly distinguishes "Court" and positions it as a recipient of numerous prestigious awards? This article will delve into the nuanced layers and profound themes that make this film a truly noteworthy cinematic experience.

Directed by the talented young Indian filmmaker Chaitanya Tamhane, "Court" introduces us to the protagonist, Narayan

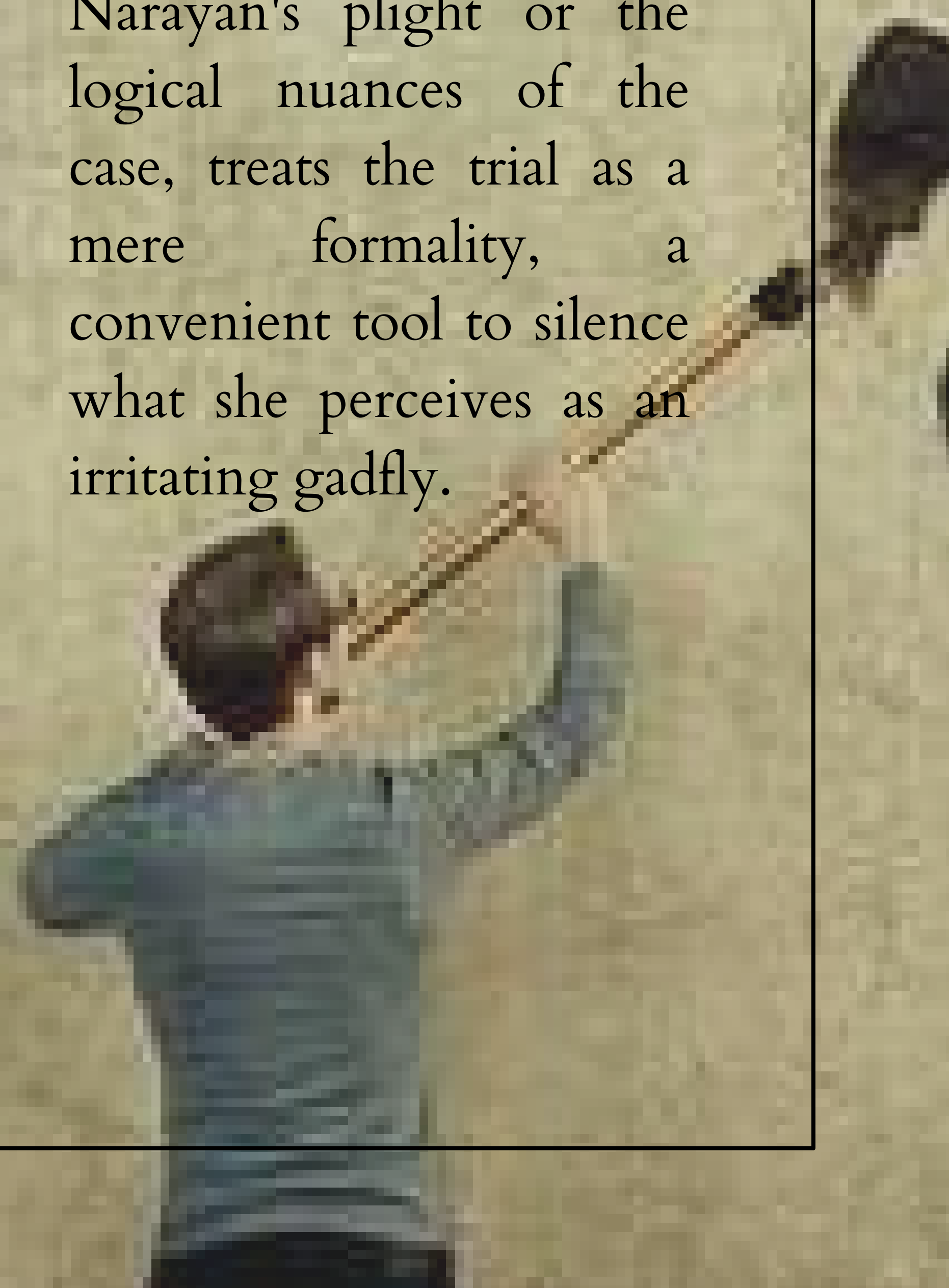
Kamble, a Dalit poet activist. He is simple yet energetically forthright Marathi folk singer in his 70s. Kamble's life takes a tumultuous turn as he faces a bizarre accusation: his folk song is alleged to have driven a young manual scavenger named Vasudev Pawar, residing in the impoverished Sitla Devi Slum, to tragically end his own life.

This compelling case unfolds in the session court, where Kamble finds his defence in the capable hands of Vinay Vohra, a well-educated Gujarati lawyer, while the opposition is staunchly represented by the public prosecutor, Nutan. The proceedings are presided over by Judge Sadavarte, a figure unwavering in his commitment to uphold archaic morals and a particular interpretation of the law, showing little regard for extraneous factors.

As we delve into the intricacies of this legal battle, "Court" masterfully explores the clash of cultures, the complexities

of justice, and the vivid portrayal of characters navigating a system where tradition and modernity intersect, providing a thought-provoking cinematic experience.

"Court" serves as a stark mirror to the trials and tribulations within the Indian judicial system, exposing the grim realities of prevailing injustice. Instead of engaging in a fair and focused discussion on the merits of the case, personal comments are wielded against the accused, driven by a malicious intent to besmirch their reputation before the judge. Prosecutor Nutan, seemingly impervious to Narayan's plight or the logical nuances of the case, treats the trial as a mere formality, a convenient tool to silence what she perceives as an irritating gadfly.



Her star witness, who supposedly recalls hearing the song, has been meticulously coached, raising doubts about the authenticity of the testimony, especially considering this witness's repeated appearances in similar cases.

In a scene infused with irony, the judge refuses to hear a case simply because the plaintiff—a woman—dares to wear a sleeveless top. This starkly highlights the absurdity that sometimes permeates the courtroom.

Tamhane's script, though meticulously structured, doesn't claim divine perfection, but it remains integral to the movie's profoundly humanistic tone. A striking contrast is portrayed in the lives of the two lawyers. The defence counsel, hailing from a privileged background and specialising in criminal justice and human rights, exhibits unwavering commitment. His acting breathes life into the words on the page, making them resonate

deeply. The actor brings a sense of composed tranquillity to his portrayal of a lawyer. However, there's a poignant moment when he's reminded of the regressive environment he confronts daily, leading to an emotional breakdown. It's not just his sorrow that touches us; it's the palpable weight of his exhaustion, making him appear as the lone soul genuinely invested in more than mere courtroom etiquette, genuinely striving for justice.

It's worth noting that the public prosecutor, Nutan, has a busy home life, being a middle-aged woman caught in the web of obsolete judicial rules. Amid her demanding responsibilities, she still manages to juggle school pickups, preparing meals for the family, and even squeezing in theatre outings with her loved ones.

"Court" delves deep into the lives of these characters, revealing the complexities and contradictions within the

Indian legal system, and presenting a thought-provoking exploration of humanity's struggle for justice in the face of systemic challenges.

In the case of the woman who portrays the deceased widow, the scene unfolds with an eerie calmness, leaving you seemingly unaffected at first, until the harsh reality hits you like a wave. The woman confirms that her late husband, Vasudev Parwar, lost an eye due to the absence of safety equipment provided to the manhole workers. Despite the dangerous conditions, he had no choice but to endure the stench inside the sewers. This powerful and impactful scene lays bare the tragic





consequences of neglect and the stark inequalities faced by those toiling in such hazardous environments.

There's a poignant moment in the film, a turning point where it seems as if time itself could come to an end. It shows a series of video clips, portraying Judge Sadavarte preparing for a vacation with his extended family. Each of these scenes adds another layer of realism to the film, as he leaves behind Narayan Kamble in Indian Judicial Custody for the entirety of the summer holidays. This subtle yet profound contrast brilliantly highlights the director's mastery in showcasing the stark disparity in the lives of the privileged and

the marginalised, leaving a lasting impression on the viewer.

The cinematography in "Court" is truly remarkable, capturing diverse aspects of Indian life through sweeping shots of bustling streets and the courtroom. The deliberate choice to prolong scenes beyond the usual length serves a purpose - it paints a rich tapestry of the intricate social fabric and provides a grand portrayal of Indian society.

A significant instance occurs later in the film, as the courtroom empties and the lights fade, leaving the camera to dwell in near-total darkness. This poignant

moment invites contemplation of another day of legal injustice, leaving a deep impact on the viewer. Scenes extend beyond typical cut-off points, adding to the sense of authenticity. It feels as if the action isn't forcefully directed, but rather serendipitously captured, creating a genuine sense of real-life unfolding before our eyes.

This focus on extended scenes also showcases the meticulous attention to detail in the film's environment. Every subtle nuance is given space to breathe, contributing to the movie's overall authenticity. From the characters to the settings, everything feels genuine and unscripted,



intensifying the film's impact and making it an immersive cinematic experience.

Winner of two significant accolades at the 2014 Venice Film Festival and chosen as India's official submission for the Best Foreign Film category at the 2016 Oscars, "Court" stands as the debut work of the talented 28-year-old filmmaker Chaitanya Tamhane. The film presents a unique perspective on courtroom drama, functioning as a poignant exploration of the limitations within the Indian judicial system. Rather than forcefully delivering its message, "Court" employs a subtle and nuanced approach. The court proceedings intentionally lack



a sense of urgency or emotional intensity, yet beneath this apparent calmness, the film eloquently conveys profound layers of meaning.

The deliberate, unhurried pace of the film mirrors the rhythm of a genuine trial, skilfully revealing how antiquated colonial-era laws and an insensitive, slow-moving court system can be manoeuvred to suppress the voices of those with less influence, who

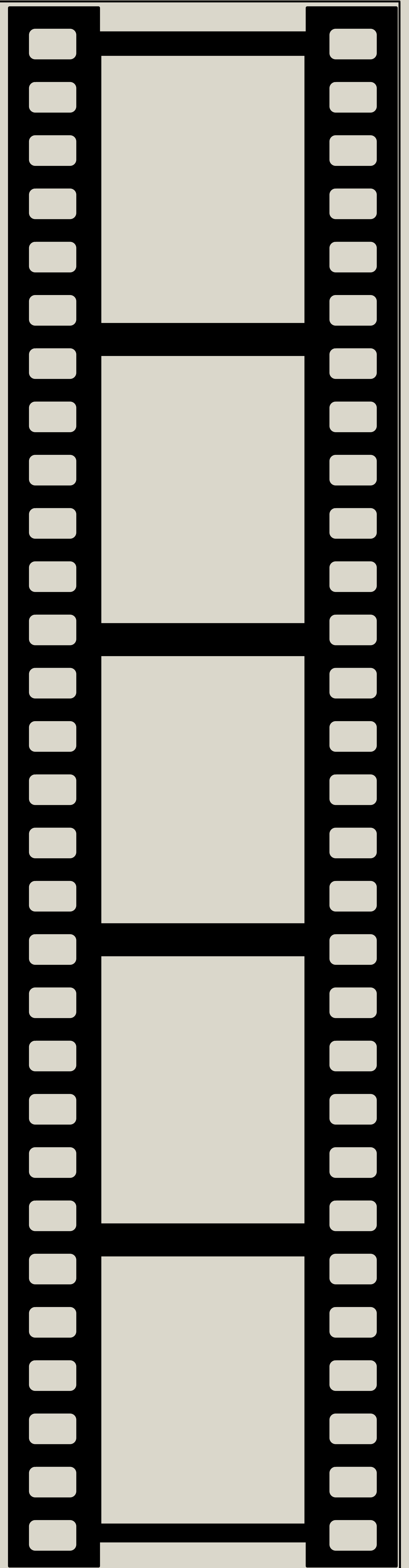
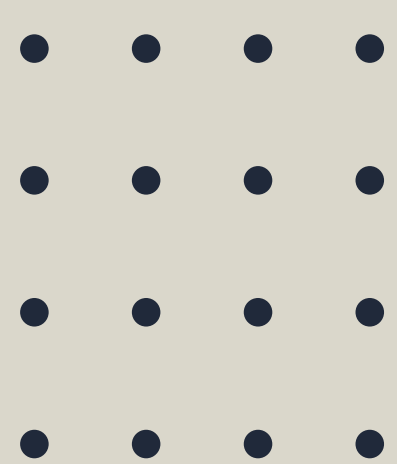
challenge the conventional narratives prevalent in mainstream or middle-class India.

In an era where the pursuit of justice often feels like a distant dream, "Court" brings a piercing spotlight onto the flaws that persist within the Indian judicial framework. Its narrative is a mirror, reflecting the complexities the indifference, and the subtle machinations that can leave justice hanging by a thread. As the final scene captures the somnolence of the court, it

leaves us with a realisation-

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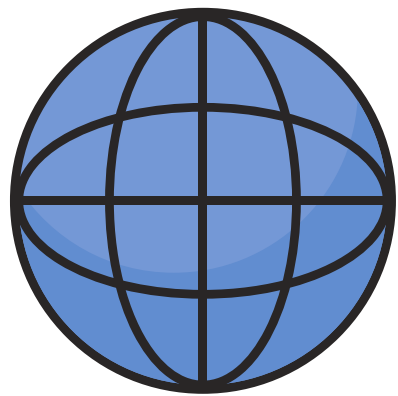
justice should never be accidental; it must be pursued relentlessly. "Court" serves as a wake-up call, urging us to question, challenge, and advocate for a more just society. As the credits roll, we're left with an indelible impression, a reminder that the pursuit of true justice, in courts and beyond, is a collective responsibility we must shoulder. Chaitanya Tamhane's "Court" isn't just a film; it's a potent catalyst for much-needed conversations about the reform our justice system deserves. ■



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