



The sociologist Dipankar Gupta recounts an amusing anecdote from the UK in his 2004 book, 'Mistaken Modernity: India between Worlds'. In the Absence of a Democratic Culture, When Tony Blair was UK Prime Minister, his underage son was caught drinking by a policeman. When questioned, the boy offered a false name and address. But the cop had recognised him and the next day a summons landed at 10, Downing Street. Like any other parents of delinquent children, Blair and his wife had to make a visit to the nearest police station, followed by a vastly-amused media army, where they had to listen to advice about how to bring up their children. That was the law in such matters, and they had to abide by it – something, as Gupta pointed out, that would be unimaginable for a prime minister or any bigshot in India. But the most interesting part, says Gupta, is the lie told by Blair's son. He gave a false name because he KNEW that his parents would be hauled up; he knew that the law would be followed. Compare that to India, said Gupta, where nobody like him would have ever dreamt of lying; their question would instead be 'don't you know who I am?'. In fact, the cops here try not to interfere with anyone who looks remotely well-connected. That, says, Gupta, is the difference between a modern society and one with just has a veneer of modernism – mostly just in terms of technology and gadgets – but no modern attitude at all.

It was this anecdote that came to mind this week, while watching the dramatic fall of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Following a series of sexual and 'partygate' scandals, Johnson had been skewered by the opposition for "lies, scandals and fraud on an industrial scale", and finally deserted by his own party. But in the middle of all this, what one – sitting in Goa – could not help noticing was the political culture in that part of the world, or basically how people in and around the British government behaved – freer, franker, and more straightforward than anything that can ever be imagined in India. Johnson was harshly criticised to his face during the parliamentary proceedings – both by opposition members and by his own party members. He was questioned pointedly about his many lies to Parliament, booed and laughed at, and referred to, among other things, as a dog, a rat, a dead parrot, and also 'the best recruiting agent for independence (of Wales)', all to his face. He was requested to "have some self-respect", and asked, by one of his own MPs, whether there was any situation at all in which he might consider resigning. Outside parliament, he and his colleagues were again treated to more questions and boos by both an aggressive media as well as a disgusted public.

Compare this with how politicians are treated in India. Can you imagine an MP publicly questioning the Prime Minister of his own party? Can you imagine the PM accused, with proof, of lying in Parliament, and having to respond to each and every question? Can you imagine the media yelling questions at the PM, and the latter having to stop and answer? We never

see this kind of frank speech and accountability in the 'world's biggest democracy'. Yes, we do see insults here, sometimes worse, but never targetting all and everybody, certainly not someone with the political position and elite background of a Johnson. Here it depends on who you are. So an Ambedkar could be mocked in newspaper cartoons when he was a Cabinet Minister, but never a Nehru. Today a Modi might get fingered on social media, but never a Vajpayee or a Manmohan Singh; a Monserrat in Goa but never a Parrikar.

Face to face with the media or the public, criticism is almost never heard. Political leaders, especially dominant castes but even others, usually get treated with not just respect but awe and reverence; ordinary people hardly open their mouths before them, while journalists ask careful and pre-agreed questions. It is not unusual to see people, even political colleagues, with their palms joined before these leaders, as if before a deity; or even bending to touch their feet. Even in Goa, where people are more 'westernised', and elected representatives often greet their constituents by name, you see less touching of feet, but still mostly respectful behaviour towards those in power.

Now, there are those who would justify this behaviour as Indian tradition, and ask what the harm was in showing respect. The harm is that this kind of grovelling will not strengthen democracy; instead of getting representatives who actually represent their constituents, we have lords who think they are doing us favours. Also, if you go by tradition, respect is usually one-sided; there is no concept of mutual respect. Respect is offered by those considered low to those considered high, not the other way. This is not the sign of democracy, nor of modernity.

But, as Gupta pointed out, modernity has never been more than a veneer among India's educated classes. Below that veneer, it was always about caste, hierarchy, patriarchy, hero-worship, and other conservative attitudes. The change that the BJP has brought is to finish even the veneer. As Dr Ambedkar had warned, in his last speech in Parliament before he resigned, bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship. His warning was not heeded, and now we have to face the truth of his prediction.

How can hate-speech go scot-free while journalists are in jail for doing their work? How can the big media be so slavish? When did human rights activism become a crime? How can people be arrested for expressing non-violent opinions? But, even now, as people wax shocked at how democracy is slipping away before our eyes, many pause to make auto-rickshaw jokes about Maharashtra's Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. When the educated have problems with auto-rickshaw drivers in power, how much do we stand by democracy ourselves?

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In the Absence of a Democratic Culture