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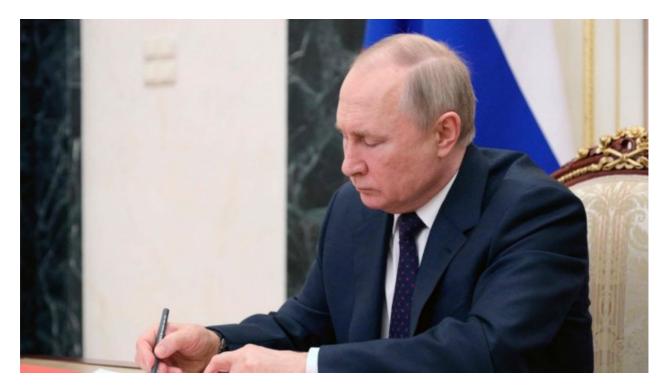
The grand historian Putin and the end of 'historical unity'

As the media has framed the conflict in Manichean geopolitical terms, other important aspects and contradictions have receded into the background

Oleksandr Svitych,

- DEC 21 2022, 23:23 IST
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Vladimir Putin. Credit: AFP Photo

It is a truism to say that interstate wars and conflicts are multi-dimensional by nature. The Russian invasion of Ukraine – the climax of the Russo-Ukrainian war ongoing since 2014 – is no exception. And yet, nine months into the invasion, the Indian media still pays disproportionate attention to its geopolitical aspects, such as the ostensible great power rivalry between the West and Russia, the role of NATO, or the threat of nuclear escalation.

As the media has framed the conflict in Manichean geopolitical terms, other important aspects and contradictions have receded into the background. These include Ukrainian nationalism, Russian imperialism and neo-colonialism, the divisions within the Ukrainian society following the 2014 Maidan Revolution, the shared history of the two states and, of course, the personality and worldview of Russia's President Vladimir Putin.

National interests are not given. Nor is history or even geography. Security concerns do not emerge in a vacuum. Putin famously said that the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the greatest geopolitical catastrophes. What is less quoted, however, is what he said immediately after that phrase. In his annual state of the nation address to parliament, Putin said: "As for the Russian people, it became a genuine tragedy. Tens of millions of our fellow citizens and countrymen found themselves beyond the fringes of Russian territory."

This is exactly why the ongoing war is a "special military operation", according to Russian propagandists. But, can there be a war between "fellow citizens"?

In this regard, Putin's 2021 article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" helps to illuminate his logic further. Three core inter-related themes come to the fore in the essay: common historical legacy, the unity of two peoples, and "project anti-Russia."

Firstly, Putin traces the sources of Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian identities from Kyivan Rus to the Cossacks, to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to the Russian Empire, to the Soviet Union, and finally to the post-independence (of former Soviet territories) period. What is distinct about his quasi-historical narrative, however, is the acrimonious style and discontent with the alleged historical injustices toward Russia. Thus, the Polish rulers and ideologues cultivated Ukrainian nationalism to create an "anti-Moscow Russia"; Austria-Hungary "mercilessly exploited historical Russian lands"; and the German Nazis only needed Ukraine as a source of living space and slaves.

Yet, no "living space" is left for Ukraine's political subjectivity in the essay, as the country is constantly depicted as inseparable from the Russian State.

Secondly, Putin is adamant in the essay that Russians and Ukrainians are bound by "cultural, spiritual and economic" history. He repeatedly uses such words as "common", "single", "shared" (history, language, Orthodox faith), "ties" and "unity." In one of the opening paragraphs, he refers to "essentially the same historical and spiritual space," the dissolution of which is a "great common misfortune and tragedy." The theme of a "single people", then, is a key thread which binds everything together and serves to validate Russia's foreign policy.

Thirdly, and most strikingly, Putin insists that the recent wall between Russia and Ukraine is a product of "divide and rule" strategy. "These are…deliberate efforts by those forces that have always sought to undermine our unity," Putin says. The key word which

keeps reoccurring in the essay is "anti-Russia", taking the variants of "external forces" (controlling Ukraine), "ill-wishers" (trying to weaken Russia), "a springboard against Russia" (Ukraine) or "external patrons and masters" (of Ukraine).

The logic is as blunt as it is absurd: since the Ukrainians and Russians are "one people", the alleged control of Ukraine by the West is a direct and existential threat to Russia. It is telling that Putin rarely talks about NATO (mentioned only twice in the essay) and when he does, it is only in the larger context of the "direct external control" of Ukraine.

What glues together these three major themes in the essay is Putin's insatiable and paranoid deployment of historical symbols, parallels, and analogies to identify the collective West as Russia's significant Other. On one occasion, aiming to draw an instructive parallel for "those who have today given up the full control of Ukraine to external forces," Putin recalls that in 1919, the Central Council of Ukraine was "essentially under German protectorate." On another occasion, he blames the Bolsheviks for their efforts to "detach from Russia its historical territories." And on another one, he insists that the "anti-Russia" project was started way back in the 17th century by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in order to weaken Russia.

History, then, is repeatedly interpreted as the cyclical, archetypical, and sacred struggle between Russia and the Western forces that seek to dismantle its Statehood – be it Polish rulers, German Nazis, or American liberals.

Let me also draw on historical reasoning in conclusion, though "lessons of history" at war can be misleading, as International Relations scholar Yuen Foong Khong reminds us. At the beginning of the invasion, Putin had attempted to legitimise it through the discourse of "denazification," tapping into the myth of the heroic Soviet people fighting the Nazis. Ironically, the roles have reversed, and it is the Ukrainian people (who don't exist, according to Putin) who have shown courage, resistance, and resilience.

Not less importantly, 75 years ago, India, a country that I greatly respect and admire, declared independence from its coloniser, the British Empire. Ukraine's anti-colonial struggle against the spectre of the Russian empire is the essence of the current war. The war in which my country seeks liberation, rather than abstract peace. The birth of a new nation is happening right in front of our eyes. Perhaps, in the very long run, the grand historian Putin might be thanked for that.

(The writer is an Associate Professor of Political Science, Jindal School of International Affairs, O P Jindal Global University)

NEXT STORY

Manil Suri,

In 1977, as a new bachelor's student at the Institute of Science in Mumbai, I came the closest I've ever been to having a religious experience. My algebra professor, the late great Prof. M S Huzurbazar, related to us the German mathematician Kronecker's famous quote, "God made the whole numbers, everything else is the work of man". "Except, we don't need God," Huzurbazar declared. "We can make the whole numbers ourselves as well – that too, out of pure emptiness!"

To demonstrate, he equated emptiness to zero, and then for any number, used set theory to define its successor. It was like lighting the fuse to a chain reaction: one emerged from zero, two from one, three from two – suddenly, an explosion of numbers seemed to erupt through the classroom. I felt the walls around me dissolve, the ceiling above me part, to reveal waves of numbers streaming through time and space. The whole experience felt cosmic, as if I was at the dawn of creation – it's where the title of my new book, The Big Bang of Numbers comes from.

Now, many people would associate creation with a supreme being. Brahma blows out the universe in a single breath, the biblical God fashions the cosmos over the first six days of Genesis, the ancient Egyptian deity Atum summons up the world out of a sea of chaos. The more scientific-minded amongst us might associate creation with physics – the universe emerges from a singularity of infinite density in the Big Bang. Mathematics, which is so abstract and so independent of physical reality, seems like an unlikely candidate.

And yet, Prof Huzurbazar's construction came closer to the ideal of creatio ex nihilo, or "creation out of nothing," than either religion or physics can. In religion, you have to assume the existence of a supreme being, while in physics, you need a singularity. In mathematics, all Prof Huzurbazar used was a version of nothing called the empty set.

Fine, but that only takes care of the numbers. Is mathematics able to create anything else? That's the question I began to consider decades later. Could one continue the construction and build the universe using only maths?

There were good reasons to pursue such a thought experiment. Mathematics usually stays in the shadows, never getting the kind of exposure enjoyed by religion or physics. Why not have it step out and show its mettle in the arena of public discourse, in an easy-to-understand, non-technical way? Even if the construction ultimately didn't quite succeed, pursuing it would reveal how intricately maths is woven into our universe's fabric.
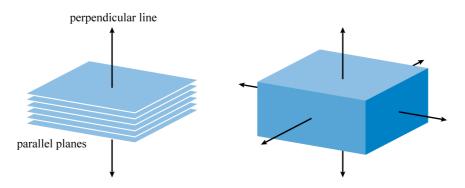
And perhaps with the addition of only a few more extra ingredients, we could actually succeed! Let's note here that God and physics need such extras as well – for instance, both merrily use numbers, without creating them.

So, what would our next project be after creating the numbers? If we're starting with complete nothingness, then we'd need to take care of something rarely talked about: empty space. Notice that space – even a vacuum – is different from pure "nothing". God certainly takes such space for granted, creating heaven and earth without the slightest mention of any prior preparations to set up the empty stage. As mathematicians, we can't be as blithe as God. We're aware of the need for a matrix of locations to harbour all these creations, so it behoves us to fill this gap.

Over two millennia ago, the Greek mathematician Euclid postulated that between any two points, there exists a straight line, and moreover, that this line can be extended indefinitely in either direction.

This gives us a recipe for creating space. Start with two points, and (assuming Euclid's postulate holds) you can get an infinite line; add another point, and it turns out you can draw a series of lines that comprise a plane; add one more point and you can generate a multitude of parallel planes that stack together to form 3-D space.

Interestingly, the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky used a similar point-line-plane progression to map the surface of his blank canvas.

perpendicular line

parallel planes

The above construction is quite easy and intuitive (for details, see my book). The thing to note is that with just a couple of extra ingredients – a few points, plus Euclid's postulates – mathematics can build up empty space. Actually, it can do much more – it can also create several alternatives to this space!

For one, the power of abstraction lets us extract the gist of this idea and repeat it again and again. Points, stacked together, form a one-dimensional line; lines, stacked together, form a 2-D plane; planes, stacked together, form 3-D space. What if we stack together copies of 3-D space? The answer becomes obvious – we should get four-dimensional space! Mathematics allows us to access this idea intellectually, even though, stuck as we are in 3-D, we can't visualize it.

In fact, maths makes us wonder whether there might indeed be higher dimensions to reality. In case this idea sounds too far-fetched, note that superstring theory requires space to have at least nine dimensions, and there have been other physics theories which posit that our universe may be a lower-dimensional facet of a higher-dimensional reality (just like an edge or face is a lower-dimensional facet of a block).
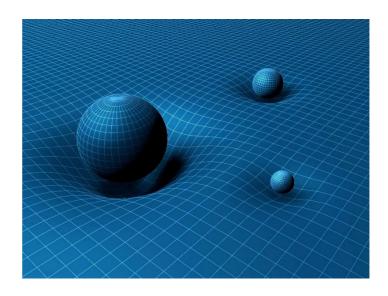
There's more – mathematics also allows us to construct space which is curved! Remember that postulate by Euclid we used? Well, if one replaces "straight line" by "circular arc", then instead of lines joining up to form a plane, the same construction will give you circles merging together to form the surface of a sphere. Not only that, but substituting other types of lines for "straight line" gives you various other surfaces, including the ruffled "hyperbolic" ones found so often in nature (e.g. in corals).

As before, mathematicians have been able to extend such ideas to higher dimensions, thereby constructing (theoretically, at least) "curved" versions of 3-D space. Lest you dismiss this as something that's too abstract or academic to be of practical interest, note that Einstein, in his General Theory of Relativity,

propounded that our own spacetime is curved – a fact that has been experimentally verified.

Let me pause at this juncture to raise a fundamental question. Mathematics is often understood as something humans create to solve problems and describe the universe – for instance, Newton's invention of calculus was inspired by a desire to analyse motion. Consider, however, curved geometries like the hyperbolic variety, which mathematicians discovered in the 1800s, after centuries of abstract thinking. It was not as if they were trying to model corals or other sea creatures, nor were they anticipating that Einstein would use their discoveries decades hence. How, then, could the esoteric, cerebral theories of mathematicians have found such profound applications in nature?
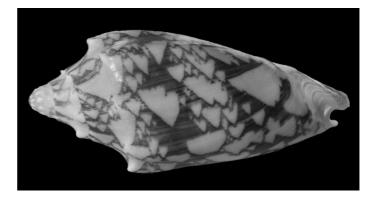

In fact, there are several similar examples – ellipses, first formulated by the ancient Greeks, turned out to be the right paths for planetary motion; logarithmic spirals showed up in nautilus shells and galaxy formation; group theory, developed to abstractly describe symmetry, proved to be the perfect setting for quantum mechanics; the abstract theory of knots popped up unexpectedly in DNA modelling. What explains this "unreasonable effectiveness" maths has in describing the universe, as Nobel laureate Eugene Wigner put it?

There is one obvious possibility: that mathematics is not manmade but, as Plato believed, exists immutably, and independently of us. That maths is the intelligence behind the universe, the "Vishnu", if you will, that keeps everything running and orderly. Rather than us formulating mathematics to try and describe the patterns we see around us, it is mathematics, imbedded like DNA, that's responsible for creating the patterns in the first place. That is why corals and other sea creatures could adopt hyperbolic geometry a half billion years before we humans had any inkling of it.

While one can't make an airtight case for it, accepting this reversal of outlook makes several natural phenomena easier to interpret. Think of mathematics providing an array of shapes, equations and behavioural laws from which every component of the universe can be built. This does not necessarily contradict belief in a supreme being. God might do the implementation, but relies on mathematics to draw up the blueprints.

So, getting back to our mathematical construction, what is the next thing we should help God (or physics) with? Let's say we've already created a catalogue of standard geometrical shapes like triangles, squares, circles, etc. These will suffice for many

purposes, but several other applications – like the boundaries of clouds or the branching of air passages – will need more complicated interfaces called fractals. Such patterns, where similar designs occur at different scales, often show up spontaneously in nature – for instance, on the surfaces of shells.
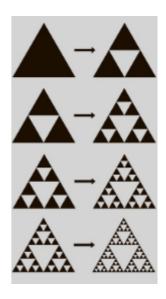
Despite their complexity, we can generate such images using very simple rules, such as: For each black triangle, colour its centre quarter white. Suppose you start iterating, using the previous output as the new input to which the rule is reapplied. Notice how quickly you get a shape where the boundary between black and white gets very complicated. Also, how the pattern on the shell is similar to the one you get now, but just with a good dose of randomness mixed in!

The above type of input/output rules, where the output of the previous step serves as the input of the next one, gives us insight into many evolutionary processes. For instance, think of a coastline evolving in a series of such snapshots under the influence of tide. The erosive forces have similar effects both at small and large scales, which is why most coastlines end up resembling fractals.

There are many more mathematical steps we can perform towards making the universe more of a reality. Eventually, though, we're faced with the most difficult question of all: how to create life? Surely that requires a divine spark, far beyond the capabilities of mathematics?

Scientific theories usually say that the first living matter was formed from the right kinds of molecules randomly interacting billions of times. What mathematics contributes, through the example of input-output rules and fractals, is the insight that remarkable changes in complexity can occur, from simple rules to complex outcomes, from inanimate molecules to living cells.

Perhaps, as Prof Huzurbazar said, we don't need God after all. Perhaps mathematics can indeed bring everything to life out of emptiness.

(Manil Suri is a distinguished mathematics professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and the author, most recently, of The Big Bang of Numbers: How to Build the Universe Using Only Maths)

universe
mathematics

NEXT STORY

It's the ballot, stupid!

Politicians worldwide have to say something about climate change during their election campaigns these days. They believe it's ballot-worthy. And that's important

Atanu Biswas,

- DEC 20 2022, 23:20 IST
- UPDATED: DEC 21 2022, 04:07 IST

Franny Armstrong's 2009 documentary *The Age of Stupid* reviewed today's human activities amid a perceived dystopian future. The film depicts a world ravaged by catastrophic climate change in 2055, where London is flooded, Sydney is burning, Las Vegas has been swallowed up by the desert, the Amazon rainforest has turned up, snow has vanished from the Alps, and nuclear war has laid waste to India. A man living alone in a devastated world—in a largely ice-free Arctic—watches a half-century-old archival film and asks, "Why didn't we stop climate change when we had the chance?"

A decade later, a 16-year-old wonder girl from Stockholm, Greta Thunberg, scolded the world leaders at the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit in New York for their decades of inaction on climate change: "How dare you!" The "Greta effect" rocked this planet for

sure.

However, the Conference of the Parties (COP), the yearly UN Climate Change Conference, has been held since the 1995 Berlin edition. When, after a year of Covid-induced interruption, COP26 was organised in Glasgow in 2021, the world witnessed remarkable enthusiasm among the media and general public for a climate conference!

At COP27, the UN chief warned of a "breakdown in trust" between rich and poor governments if no clear agreements on key issues, including funding for loss and damage, were made. After two weeks of fraught and often bitter negotiations, a breakthrough agreement was reached when the developed countries agreed to provide finance to help rescue and rebuild vulnerable countries hit hard by climate-related disasters, known as a "loss and damage" fund.

It's not clear, though, how much of that would materialise. In fact, lots of commitments have been made over the years, but very little has been kept so far. During Copenhagen's COP15 in 2009, climate finance funding of $100 billion per year from developed countries to developing countries by 2020 was agreed upon. This target has been missed. Furthermore, it is now clear that limiting the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius "remains on life support." The climate activists, however, had reason to cheer even before the summit began. This is due to Lula da Silva's election victory in Brazil, who oversaw a significant decrease in deforestation as president. At COP27, President-elect Lula vowed to start undoing the rampant destruction of the Amazon rainforest under his far-right predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro, which had pushed the world's largest rainforest to the brink of irreversible collapse.

Also Read | COP27: An eyewash of a resolution

Some other recent elections may have produced promise for the climate. In 2017, former Australian prime minister Scott Morrison – then the treasurer of Australia – brought a lump of coal during question time into the House of Representatives, and brandished it like a trophy! A symbol, indeed. After three years of record-breaking bushfires and floods, Australia now has a government led by Labour leader Anthony Albanese that has vowed to end decades of inaction by one of the world's highest per capita emitters.

Historically, the climate issue has not been much of a political kingmaker, though. In the backdrop of the 2020 US presidential election, two-thirds of respondents told exit pollster Edison Research that climate change was a "serious problem," while 29 per cent of them voted for Trump, who pulled America out of the Paris Agreement and whose position on climate issues was inconsistent. This US midterm, a $12 million ad campaign was aimed specifically at promoting Democratic candidates' bona fides on climate change, targeting 2 million electorates who put climate change as a priority, voted for Biden in 2020, but were undecided in 2022. In a tight election like this, it was important, indeed.

This August, US President Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act, which authorises $391 billion in spending on energy and climate change, which he hails as the "biggest step forward on climate ever." Well, it's difficult to say how much of this was done with the elections in mind. In a 2021 paper in the journal *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology*, researchers from George Mason University and Yale University perceived that global warming's importance as a voting issue may be dynamically influenced by the state of political and social environments.

Wait. Not really, yet. For example, with far-rights in the newly elected coalition government, climate policy is in turmoil in Sweden, Greta Thunberg's country. For the first time since 1987, Sweden has no proper Environment Ministry. Denmark's 2019 election was mostly dubbed a "climate election," but the just-concluded one was seen as a "crisis election." It ought to be so, given the backdrop of a pandemic and a war in the region resulting in an energy crisis. Overall, it seems that people are now more concerned about climate change, but they don't consider it a primary poll issue yet.

In a world where hunger and inequality are rampant, citizens' top concerns would continue to be the economy, crime, education, and corruption. Billions are more concerned about surviving one more day, having a job, food on the table, and access to medical facilities.

Still, political leaders worldwide have to say something about climate change during their election campaigns these days. They believe it's ballot-worthy. And that's important. The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has warned that the fight for a liveable planet will be won or lost in this decade. There is little doubt that we are passing through The Age of Stupid.

(The writer is Professor of Statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata)

COP27
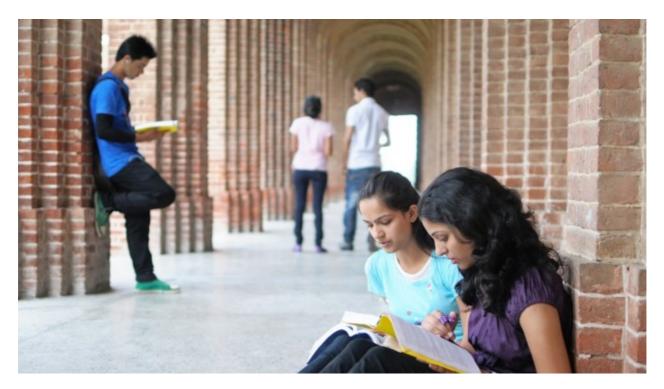Greta Thunberg
Climate Change
global warming
Opinion
World news

NEXT STORY

The Unified University and College Management System (UUCMS) is a flagship project of the Department of Higher Education, Government of Karnataka

Chetan Singai & T R Kumaraswamy,
- DEC 19 2022, 22:40 IST

Over the last decade, India has transformed into an information-intensive and information-sensitive society. The pandemic has given a further push to technology in most sectors, including education, especially for teaching and learning. However, tech-enabled governance and management in higher education are relatively novel, requiring an in-depth and comprehensive analysis.

The Unified University and College Management System (UUCMS) is a flagship project of the Department of Higher Education, Government of Karnataka. It aims to bring greater transparency, efficiency, and accountability among universities and colleges in Karnataka. The structure of the UUCMS is similar to the SAMARTH university e-governance portal offered to public universities and select higher education institutions in New Delhi.

While UUCMS helps, the overall user experience across HEIs in Karnataka is fraught with challenges that need to be addressed.

State-run public universities and colleges account for 70 per cent of students in the state. The UUCMS has reduced the unnecessary use of human, physical, and fiscal resources. Further, it provides a 'unified' system to link students' Aadhaar data.

Also Read | Lack of placements: 30% seats in Karnataka govt engg colleges go abegging

However, the challenges is in the validation of Aadhaar, and variations in names of the students between Aadhaar and the SSLC transcript; as an immediate solution, UUCMS has enabled editing student names by the registrar of the university, which is not a

sustainable solution. Despite this, name variation issue remains unresolved, creating commotion among faculty members, administrators, and students. There are more challenges.

The academic council of univeristies approve a list of eligible pre-university or school board(s) in the UUCMS. However, a non-eligible board cannot be deleted from the meta-list, inconveniencing students and administrators.

The UUCMS's academic module is intended to have a robust course and credit management system.

The module, however, is not resilient to changes: it does not allow universities to correct errors after validating the curriculum. UUCMS alone can rectify errors, exposing universities to unwarranted hierarchies, dependencies and delays.

The current examination module of UUCMS is partially digitised. The answer scripts are manually corrected, and the evaluated marks are entered into the portal. Lack of skilled human resources to handle this process is a challenge that university examination sections face. Even before the implementation of UUCMS, many state public universities had a fully digital evaluation process, including features such as online delivery of question papers, online evaluation of answer scripts, and digital photocopies of the answer scripts, which were efficient. To make the UUCMS a transparent, efficient, and accountable information system, the following must be accommodated:

1. a provision to auto-populate the data once a fortnight from the UIDAI, enabling uniformity among prospective students.

2. giving universities the option to make a tailored list of PU/school boards for admission as approved by the university's statutory bodies

3. provide full autonomy to universities to make changes after the validation of the curriculum

4. provide a user-friendly interface so that the existing public state universities/ college staff can seamlessly engage with the system.

5. recruit dedicated staff for the UUCMS since faculty members cannot dedicate time and effort to the UUCMS.

6. introduce more modules such as HR, affiliation, student support, and asset and library management.

It has been reported that the Karnataka government will soon rename the 'Salaam Aarti' to Aarati Namaskara. This ritual dates back to the rule of Tipu Sultan and is still practised in the Mookambika Temple at Kollur and the Cheluvanarayana Swamy Temple at Melkote.

The Salaam Aarti issue gives us a close glimpse into several answers to the historical conundrums we are posed with today. It can help us ask: How should we remember Tipu Sultan? Is this about Tipu Sultan at all? What did the temple as a site mean for politics and the State in the 18th century? How should this push us to think of current day secularism?

Renowned historian Janaki Nair said that Tipu Sultan lives many afterlives in our daily politics. In our public debates, he is born and reborn, named and renamed. In the current controversy, a member of the Karnataka Dharmika Parishat, a body formed under the Department for Hindu Religious Institutions, stated that the ritual used to be conducted for the "welfare of the state administration," which now will be replaced with the "welfare of the people." Tipu has been condemned as an anti-people monarch who was out to destroy Hindu culture and heritage.

One response to this has been to remember Tipu as a deeply spiritual person, imbibing both Islamic and Hindu traditions in his life. It is true that he can be perceived and remembered that way. In one episode, Tipu's imperial elephant lost its eye sight. It is said that Tipu then went to Nanjangud temple with his blind elephant for 41 continuous days and applied a special temple paste on the elephant's eye and prayed. Historians have also recorded the large number of grants he made as king to Hindu temples.

He is also remembered by several progressive circles as a just ruler. For instance, Tipu had ordered that peasants should be urged to work harder, given loans, and protected from physical violence. In another instance, during Tipu's rule in Malabar, he forbade Brahminical practices that prevented oppressed caste women from covering themselves. Tipu is also seen as an individual who stood in resistance to British colonialism as part of the anti-colonial struggle in the 18th century.

It is therefore reasonable to construct Tipu Sultan as a complex historical figure and an important actor in the history of the subcontinent. Yet, a narrative of Salaam Aarti as the benevolence of Tipu's character cannot help explain its political relevance, a phenomenon that is as pertinent to the present as it is to the past.

Often, the Salaam Aarti has been noted as an instance of our composite and syncretic culture. This, however, does not explain the entire picture. Furthermore, if we are to imagine communal harmony and secularism, we must use the tools of reason and rationality rather than romanticise bygone eras. Understanding Salaam Aarti as an expression of state politics can help decipher the past, and reimagine the secular foundations of our democracy.

Historian Richard Eaton explains that temples had "latent political meanings" long before Tipu's era. Temples existed as an expression of sovereign power, and acted as a power base to further one's political aspirations. Kings were highly aware of this and used the temple as a site to further their own rule. Temples acted as state property, an extension of its authority. Such an analysis of state power further helps us see how temple desecrations too were expressions of monarchical power—attempts to consolidate state control.

Looking at the Salaam Aarti as inhabiting this social universe of the temple explains its political significance. It was not an expression of Islamic despotism, nor did it signify a glowing beacon of modern secularism. Renaming the Salaam Aarti because it stands as a symbol for Hindu suffering and victimhood means denying the political meanings that the temple carried, and the structure of the state. By making it about the 'despotism' or 'benevolence' of Tipu, one runs the risk of uncritical retellings of history, which do not take us far.

Instead, the issue points to the need for a critical investigation of the question of power, especially that which emanates from the state. Salaam Aarti shows us that for a secular and democratic present, we must be provoked to poke holes in history.

(The writer is a student of Jindal Global Law School)