

Demolition of CSDS has begun, due process can wait

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As in bulldozer justice, the modus operandi involves turning the rule of law upside down. (Illustration: C R Sasikumar)

Bulldozer justice reaches academia. That could be the headline for an *Indian Express* report last week ('Think tank CSDS likely to face funding cuts from Centre', IE, July 10) on the government's move to cut its grant to the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), which amounts to 90 per cent of the institution's salary bill. No doubt, this is a demolition exercise.

As in bulldozer justice, the modus operandi involves turning the rule of law upside down. Criminal justice follows a prescribed sequence: An incident leads to evidence, evidence to suspicion, suspicion to trial and the trial leads to indictment and punishment. Here the process begins with public indictment of a culprit identified in advance. Pretext and paperwork follow to manufacture justification for the punishment pre-decided, if not already delivered. An exemplary punishment that echoes deep and wide.

The CSDS has been to Indian social science what the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) or the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) is to the world of Indian sciences. Founded in 1963 by Rajni Kothari, the faculty roll of CSDS reads like the Who's Who of the first two generations of Indian social scientists, barring economists. Excluding the present faculty, the list includes Ashis Nandy, D L Sheth, Ramashray Roy, Gopal

Krishna, Bashiruddin Ahmed, Giri Deshingkar, Sudhir Kakar, Shiv Visvanathan, Harsh Sethi, Suresh Sharma, D R Nagaraj, V B Singh, Rajeev Bhargava, Shail Mayaram, Aditya Nigam and Abhay Dube. Add to this list scholars who have been a part of the extended family of CSDS — Sukhmoy Chakravarty, T N Madan, Deepak Nayyar, J P S Uberoi, Manoranjan Mohanty, Patricia Uberoi and Suhas Palshikar — and you know why CSDS has been at the centre of Indian and global debates on politics, society and culture. A special issue of Seminar magazine (November 2012), titled “The CSDS Experience” captures something of the story of this extraordinary institution. (Full disclosure: The present author served on the CSDS faculty for two decades, before leaving it in 2013 and formally resigning in 2016.)

On the face of it, the CSDS is a rather odd target for demolition. During the days of ideological Cold War, the CSDS was known as a non-Marxist, if not anti-Marxist, school of thought. The scholars at the Centre were among the first ones to articulate the agenda for decolonisation of the social sciences. The Centre was also the pioneer in advancing social sciences in Indian languages. A far cry from the deracinated, westernised, leftist intellectuals the present regime loves to hate. Unlike the Emergency, when the CSDS did serve as a node for resistance to the authoritarian regime, the institution has kept a low political profile since 2014. The Lokniti programme, its research initiative that carries out electoral and political surveys, has maintained a scrupulous record of political non-partisanship and has given up election forecasting. On balance, its election surveys over the last decade have overestimated, not underestimated, the BJP’s electoral performance.

The reason for choosing CSDS for the present assault is thus hard to fathom. Here is my guess: The three-decade old Lokniti programme is arguably the only trustworthy political barometer in the country that continues to adhere to scientific protocols of survey and transparent reporting, a barometer that cannot be “adjusted” to suit the demands of the rulers. This is one thing authoritarian regimes do not like, especially when they face allegations of electoral malpractices amidst rising public disquiet. Or, maybe, as in the case of Centre for Policy Research (CPR) earlier, the prestige of CSDS makes it the perfect example to send a message to an entire community of academics and intellectuals: Nobody is safe if CPR and CSDS can be targeted.

Once the target was selected, a provocation had to be discovered. The trigger was trivial, bordering on the ridiculous. On August 17, 2025, Professor Sanjay Kumar posted data around an unusual decline and increase in the number of electors in four assembly constituencies in Maharashtra on his personal X account. The calculation was wrong. Within 48 hours, he deleted the post and apologised for the error. Mind you, the posts were a bland presentation of data with no political interpretation or insinuation. The data did not fit into the Opposition’s narrative of “vote chori”. This was not institutional reporting of a research project. In any case, this was a trivial error, immediately rectified. The other supposed provocation was also a non-issue. A few days earlier, the CSDS had published the findings of an opinion poll on the SIR and reported a decline in the level of popular trust in the Election Commission. There was no error nor any element of surprise in this data that was hardly noticed. The BJP’s ecosystem smartly conflated the two and pounced upon the CSDS. The troll army was afire, as were the darbari channels, demanding exemplary punishment.

Official indictment closely followed the troll army’s insinuation. On August 19, the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), the official body through which grants to all social science institutions like CSDS are funnelled, took to X, saying it was taking “serious cognizance of the data manipulation by CSDS and its attempt to create a narrative with the intention of undermining the sanctity of the Election Commission

of India. This is a gross violation of the Grant-in-Aid rules of ICSSR". The verdict had been delivered before the trial began.

Then came the paperwork. As in bulldozer justice, the formal justification is an act of post-facto creativity. Once the target, the punishment and the excuse were fixed, the ICSSR appointed a committee to prepare grounds for what had already been decided and carried out. As reported in The Indian Express, the committee has indicted the CSDS for everything other than what the ICSSR had accused it of. Apparently, the proposed punishment is now not for "data manipulation" but for the age-old charges that can be used to implicate anyone in the sarkari system: Fine print of appointment rules, payment or non-payment of allowances to employees, conduct of meetings and recording of minutes, and so on. This is especially odd since all these questions had been raised earlier by the ICSSR and already settled to its own satisfaction.

The committee's report is not yet released. But the ICSSR had stopped the CSDS grant with immediate effect. For the last one year, the institution has been struggling to pay salaries for the entire faculty, most of whom do not work on elections. The worst victims are the non-academic staff, who have nothing to do with all this.

Who cares for collateral damage? Demolition has begun. The trial can wait.

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