



The Prague Spring in 1968 was a brief period of economic and political liberalisation that was quickly snuffed out when Soviet forces invaded Czechoslovakia.

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Tyranny, anywhere, is a threat to democracy

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In September 1938, the Munich Agreement was signed by Britain, France, Italy, and Germany, granting Adolf Hitler the Sudetenland, a border area of Czechoslovakia and home to many ethnic Germans. Five months later, Hitler violated the agreement by invading and occupying the remainder of Czechoslovakia. Six months later, in September 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Two days later, in response, Britain and France declared war on Germany.

It was only in June 1941 that the USSR joined the war, spurred by Operation Barbarossa – the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Yet, in May 1945, it was the Red Army that arrived in Prague, putting down any German soldier who had not left with the rest of their forces earlier that morning. Czech citizens poured out into the streets to welcome them and celebrate the ending of a dark period in their history. After almost seven years of Hitler's Nazi occupation, they had been liberated.

On February 25, 1948, Czechoslovakia became the last democracy in Eastern Europe to adopt a communist government, after a coup orchestrated by its own Communist Party. This triggered more than 40 years of totalitarian rule, where Czechoslovakia's political decisions came to be dictated by the Soviet Union. Nestled within the party, which was now responsible for ushering in a new era of governance in the country, was a generation of young Czechs, in their teens or early twenties, who enthusiastically embraced the arrival of communism. Their generation was one made aware of politics early on, during the war. This both shaped and limited their vision of the world, into a binary black and white; people, and ideas, were either friend or foe, bearing total destruction and dissolution of anything remotely adversarial. A generation as politically charged as it was inexperienced. One of the individuals belonging to this sub-group was Milan Kundera.

Kundera was an energetic and active member of the Communist Party, whose early writing was vocal in its communist support, as can be seen in his poem *The Great Parade*. However, Kundera, like many others around him, gradually discovered the limitations and oppressive tendencies of the political system that he had helped build, and began rebelling against it. In 1950, he was kicked out of the Party for criticising its totalitarian nature, under the charge of "anti-Party activities." Kundera later rejoined, in 1956, suggesting he still sustained hopes of reforming the organisation. These hopes, however, were extinguished during the Prague Spring of 1968, a brief period of economic and political liberalisation that was quickly snuffed out when Soviet forces invaded the country. Alexander Dubcek, the first secretary of the Communist

judgements. Ludvík's message was clearly meant as a joke, but, under tyranny, things are seen through the lens of domination and self-interest, bereft of common sense.

The *Joke* quickly became one of the many works of literature to be banned after the Soviet invasion, and Kundera was blacklisted. In 1975, seven years later, Kundera left for Paris with his wife – he had officially been exiled.

Even though Kundera went on to write many more books which received great acclaim, his deeply personal and perceptive account of Ludvík and his series of misfortunes always returns to me. Ludvík gets confronted by the blunt authority of the authoritarian system that he once supported, deprived of the benefit of the doubt from his fellow party members. The fervour with which he once championed the cause becomes jaded by the ridiculousness of his plight, until eventually being channelled into a labour of revenge. It is here, within the realm of the absurdity of oppression – which plagues Ludvík in fiction but many others in reality – that Kundera's voice distinguishes itself as one of disclosure. Kundera was not only willing to reveal ugly truths, but he weaponised them.

Speaking of communist censorship, he said,



The Joke (1967) by Milan Kundera.

"The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long that nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was." It is the erasure of the past that Kundera attempts to guard against in *The Joke* and in his later works, warning his readers of its dangers whilst laying down signposts to help them recognise and fight it. He saw the struggle against power as the struggle of memory against forgetting.

Understanding how collective ideology can be twisted to serve the ambitions of a few, Kundera, having experienced both, shed light on the other side of oppression: "Totalitarianism is not only hell, but also the dream of paradise." Leaders, governments, bureaucrats, and especially the youth, often engender the wheels of change with the goal of achieving something greater, something better, than the present. However, the search for more, when left unchecked, will someday take you to such great heights that you shall suffer vertigo. In this case, vertigo is not the fear of falling but "the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves."

In a world where authoritarian leaders and regimes try to defend themselves from their inexorable fall, it remains up to the citizens of those nations just how prolonged this battle shall be. How long until you see that those who once liberated you are the same that now subjugate you?

Party at the time and the leader behind the movement, was unable to ensure the survival of his programmes, which came to be referred to as "socialism with a human face."

In between these two periods Kundera wrote and published his debut novel, *The Joke*. The novel takes place at a point in time where the communist regime is fully entrenched in Czechoslovakia. The titular joke, a message on a postcard that Ludvík – the protagonist – writes to his girlfriend, meant to be ironic, gets him expelled from the Party and sent to a labour camp. The story, told through the perspectives of its many characters, follows Ludvík as he seeks to exact revenge on the person that sentenced him. Parallel to exploring themes of accountability and blame in friendships, Kundera also investigates the theme of fear in a totalitarian regime and its distortion of people's

Agritourism for improving education and rural entrepreneurship



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Agritourism, through which visitors can experience how a farm works, presents a unique opportunity to leverage Bangladesh's rich agricultural heritage and diverse rural landscapes. With its vibrant farming communities and traditional agricultural practices, the country could become a leading destination for such tourism.

Tourism itself is a learning process for all age groups. Now, it's time to explore the untapped potential of agritourism for our sustainable development. A glimpse of this can be seen in Sylhet and Jashore, as the Bangladesh Tourism Policy 2010 already recognises community tourism, which helped initiate a few programmes

Considering the recent experiences of Bangladeshi investors leasing land in African countries to farm, such practices have introduced opportunities of foreign exchange earnings and employment opportunities abroad. Agritourism also empowers local communities and contributes to their economic development. This improves income generation, job creation, and the preservation of cultural heritage.

But the development of agritourism in Bangladesh faces several challenges, including infrastructural limitations, lack of awareness, and limited options to ensure sponsorship for supporting programmes and sound policy favouring agritourism and learning. The solutions



By engaging in agritourism, Bangladesh can showcase its agricultural diversity, foster community engagement, and promote sustainable practices.

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in these places through community participation.

Bangladesh has formal and informal clusters of the farming of diverse commodities, wherein the work ranges from cultivation to processing and marketing through formal and informal institutions. These commodities include traditional paddy, tea, jute, local fruits, and inland and sea fish or shrimp in different ecological environments. Notable examples include Tangail's pineapples, Jhalakathi's guavas, Bagerhat's shrimp, Chandpur's hilsa, the floating gardens on the wetlands of Barishal, hill farming, char land cultivation, and so on. Each unique production system involves different livelihoods being supported by technological and innovative practices.

Our public universities could introduce village and agro-industrial attachment programmes for skill enhancement. These programmes can ensure apprenticeship for university graduates to prepare them for the competitive global job market. The programmes will also provide two advantages: 1) connecting job providers with job seekers and 2) opportunities for students to gain experience based on theories.

include public-private partnerships, regulatory frameworks, and the involvement of local communities in planning and management processes for agritourism.

In Bangladesh's context, agriculture-focused universities can play a vital role in promoting and facilitating agricultural apprenticeships. Agribusinesses can also participate here by organising and deploying the learners while also promoting their business. Such programmes will require careful design and should be administered in a participatory manner with the universities. Agricultural universities can also collaborate with government agencies, tourism boards, and private sector entities to develop these tourism initiatives. Such partnerships can help to secure funding and create supportive infrastructure for agritourism development.

By implementing these practices, universities in Bangladesh can contribute to agritourism for learning. They can provide students with practical exposure, support local communities, and help create an educated workforce. These opportunities will allow students to gain hands-on experience, apply their classroom knowledge to real-life

to local economies and enhancing cultural exchange.

In India, farmstays and spice plantation tours have gained popularity. Farmstays offer visitors the chance to stay on working farms, experience rural life, and participate in agricultural activities. These initiatives support local farmers, promote cultural exchange, and offer unique insights into agricultural practices.

In the US, University of California, Davis has an extensive internship programme called the Student Farm. It provides hands-on training to students on organic farming, sustainable agriculture, and farm management.

Agritourism in Bangladesh would act as a gateway to sustainable rural development, economic empowerment, and skill enhancement in farming and post-harvest operations. By showcasing the country's agricultural diversity, fostering community engagement, and promoting sustainable practices, Bangladesh can position itself as a desirable destination for tourism and learning. Awareness building with local communities, marketing sites, and creating adequate facilities should be undertaken to fulfil this promising opportunity.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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