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## A quota for farmers

It would have made more sense — economically, legally, politically, morally, constitutionally — to have limited 10 per cent EWS reservation to those with farming or rural backgrounds



HARISH DAMODARAN

THE LAST FEW years have seen the so-called dominant farming communities — especially the Jats, Marathas, Patidars and Kapus — mount violent agitations demanding quotas in government jobs and higher educational institutions, whether under the OBC (Other Backward Class) or any specially created category.

In all these instances, the standard government response was, “look, we want to grant you reservations, but doing it entails breaching the 50 per cent limit set by the Supreme Court in the 1992 *Indra Sawhney* judgment. And including you within the 27 per cent OBC quota isn’t practical, since that would be at the expense of the communities already in the list”.

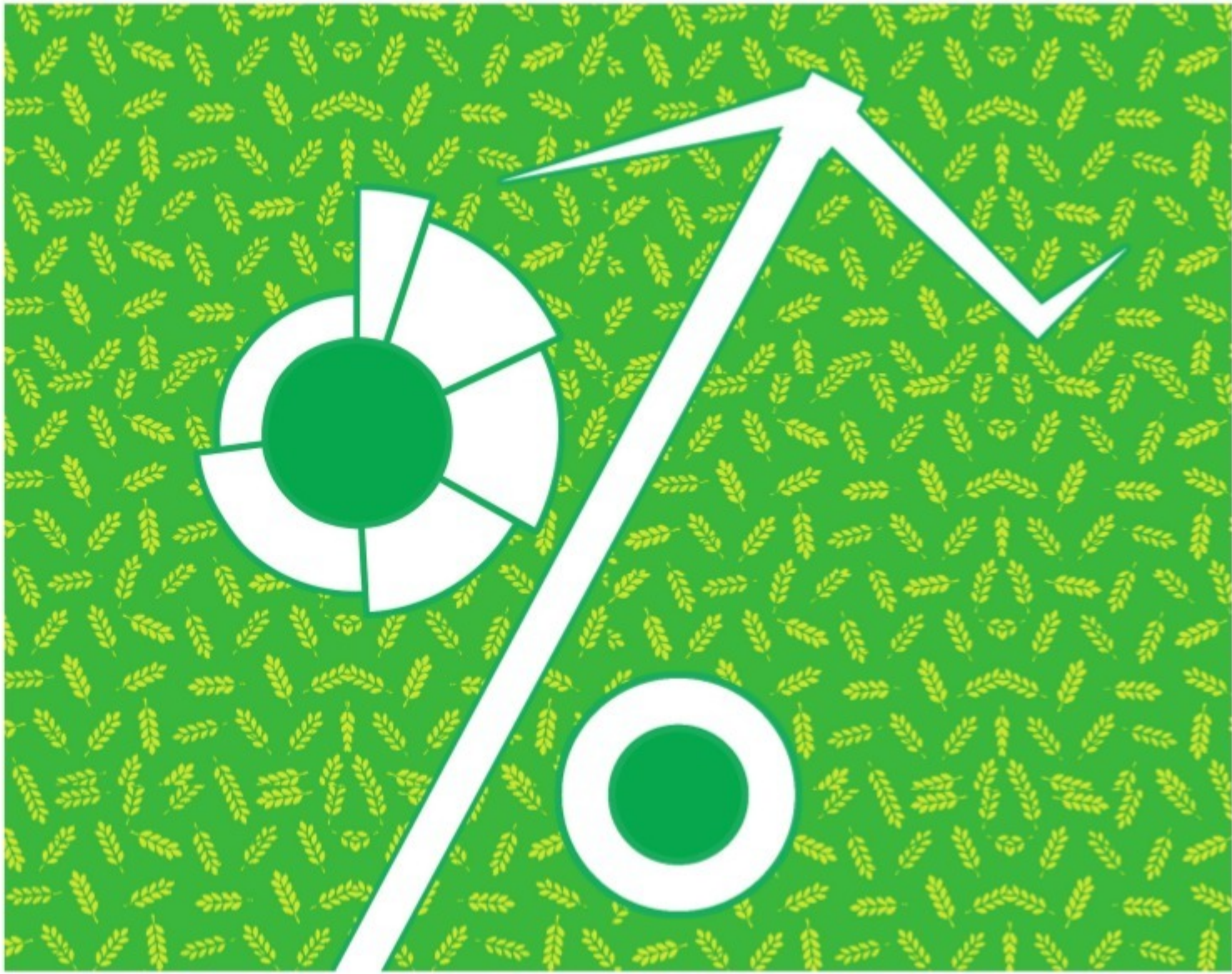
This feeble narrative has, however, undergone a sudden transformation now, with the Narendra Modi government introducing and passing in Parliament a Constitution amendment bill that creates a new economically weaker sections of citizens (EWS) category entitled to 10 per cent reservation, over and above the 15 per cent for Scheduled Castes, 7.5 per cent for Scheduled Tribes and 27 per cent for OBCs.

Such alacrity and boldness to defy *Indra Sawhney* is striking for two reasons.

First, this zeal wasn’t evident when the demand for creating similar quotas came from dominant farming communities. At least 10 deaths were reported during the Patidar OBC quota stir in July-August 2015, while protests by the Jats in February 2016 claimed some 30 lives and practically paralysed Haryana for 10 days. While those, and the massive Maratha *mook morchas* (silent marches) in September-October 2016, did result in the respective state governments enacting laws making these communities eligible for reservations, they were all quashed by high courts. And there wasn’t any attempt at challenging the rulings by amending the Constitution itself (specifically Articles 15 and 16) to provide for additional quotas beyond 49.5 per cent.

This links up to the second point, concerning the readiness to nullify *Indra Sawhney* via the Constitution amendment route when it comes to the EWS (read upper castes). The willingness to bend backwards in their case is extraordinary, given that the *savarna* demand, if at all, has largely been for scrapping caste-based reservations. Even the clamour for quotas for the “poor among upper castes” has been nowhere comparable to the movements by the dominant farming communities. A significant section of Brahmins, Baniyas and Rajputs may have voted NOTA (none-of-the-above) or even against the BJP in the recent Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan state elections. But if that perceived alienation should be impetus for bringing in Constitutional amendments, it only shows the sheer influence these communities wield. They constitute the BJP “core” vote bank; the party — more so, its ideological parent, the RSS — would seemingly pull out all the stops to ensure no further estrangement of this section of the population.

The Modi government will, of course, claim that the EWS includes all non-SC, non-ST and non-OBC communities, not just Brahmins, Baniyas or Rajputs. In other words, the dominant farming communities that, for reasons right or wrong, do not currently avail



Suvajit Dey

OBC status will automatically get covered under the new 10 per cent EWS category. But this logic will fly in the face of ground reality. In today’s setting, where the centre of power has shifted inexorably from “Bharat” to “India”, the Jat or Maratha farmer’s son/daughter stands no chance against the urban Brahmin or Bania’s children, even of relatively poor/lower middle class background. Living in big towns and cities brings certain advantages — better schooling, exposure to English and knowledge of the outside world — that those primarily brought up on farms and village communities cannot derive.

In all probability, the 10 per cent EWS quota will be overwhelmingly cornered by urban upper castes. The government’s reported proposal to set the “creamy layer” for reservation eligibility at below five acres of land ownership for farming families — as against a Rs 8 lakh yearly income cut-off for others — isn’t going to help either. The annual profits from growing a double crop of paddy and wheat even in a state like Haryana, where there is assured irrigation and minimum support price-based procurement, would not exceed Rs 50,000-60,000 per acre. It translates into a yearly income of Rs 2.5-3 lakh for five acres. This is obviously lower for farmers with similar holdings in rainfed areas. These will, at any rate, be below the Rs 8 lakh “creamy layer” cut-off applicable for the non-farming EWS category that is predominantly *savarna* and urban-based.

It would have made far more sense — economically, legally, politically, morally and in the spirit of the Constitution — to have limited the 10 per cent EWS reservation to only those with farming or rural backgrounds. As P S Krishnan has rightly pointed out, reservations were envisaged by our Constitution makers not to deal with “iniquities against individuals”, but “deprivations imposed on certain social classes as a hole”.

A strong case can, indeed, be made that rural people in India suffer from an overall social disadvantage vis-à-vis those residing in cities. This holds true even more in a glob-

Farmers today need support not just for remaining in agriculture, but also to enable exit by some in order to make holdings viable. This is a ‘group/sector’ and not ‘individual poor’ need. The *Indra Sawhney* judgement allowed the 50 per cent limit quota limit to be exceeded in ‘certain extraordinary situations’, where a ‘special case [can] be made out’.

alised milieu, where agriculture isn’t as paying and nor is land the source of power it once was. According to the Maharashtra State Backward Class Commission, 76.86 per cent of Maratha families are engaged in agriculture for their livelihoods, with hardly 7.5 per cent of the community — which has a roughly 30 per cent share of the state’s population — possessing undergraduate or technical/professional qualifications. The quota agitations by the dominant agrarian communities have not really been as much for public sector jobs, as for admission to government educational institutions.

Farmers today need support not just for remaining in agriculture, but also to enable exit by some in order to make holdings viable. This is a “group/sector” and not “individual poor” need. The *Indra Sawhney* judgement allowed the 50 per cent limit quota limit to be exceeded in “certain extraordinary situations”, where a “special case [can] be made out”. Individual cases of poverty among urban *savarnas* do not represent an extraordinary situation, whereas creating a 10 per cent EWS category restricted only to farming/rural families not covered under the existing reservation provisions can be made out as a prudent response to the current crisis facing Indian agriculture.

Extending reservations to the children of all agriculturalists cultivating, say, up to 10 acres of irrigated and 20 acres of un-irrigated land would benefit not just numerically large communities such as the Marathas or Jats. There are many farmers who are Rajputs, Brahmins and upper caste Muslims as well. Also, it is easier to fudge incomes than to prove one’s farming credentials that can come only with land ownership or kisan credit card documents.

In its zeal to protect the BJP’s urban *savarna* vote-bank, the Modi government has probably lost an opportunity to neutralise the anger from communities badly hit by falling crop prices and rising input costs. And they are much bigger in numbers, too.

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## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“The close high-level contacts between the two countries mean that China-North Korea relations are not only moving along the original path, but have begun to upgrade.” — GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

## A forum for pseudo-science

The Science Congress has lost its way. There is a strong case for abolishing it altogether



RAJESH KOCHHAR

THE SCIENCE CONGRESS is an expensive annual tamasha funded by the Government of India. Since it is in the name of science, it escapes close scrutiny. The high point of every Congress is the inaugural session presided over by the prime minister. Duty bound, the bigwigs of government also attend but leave as soon as the chief guest does.

A large number of research papers are read at the Congress, most of them sub-standard. Even if a small fraction of them were capable of being enlarged into a full-fledged peer-reviewed research publication, India would be a major player in the field of modern science. Higher-ranking institutions as a rule hold the Science Congress in contempt and dissuade their researchers from attending.

Things were not always so. India was the first country outside the Western world to take to modern science; the world’s first non-White modern scientists are Indian. In the early years, Indian science was fairly competitive and the Science Congress was set up a century ago as a community forum on the lines of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. The memoir of an American delegate for the January 1947 Congress, noted botanist Albert Blakeslee, provided some insights into where Indian science stood on the eve of Independence.

He noted that Indian participants were well informed on the latest developments in their field and asked searching questions. Very perceptively, he recorded that a person’s official position was considered more important than the work he was doing. Not surprisingly, young researchers felt that “pull” played a role in selecting candidates for foreign scholarships. But at least rigorous scientific training was seen as essential for the new generation of scientists.

As world science dramatically grew after World War II, India started lagging behind. In recent decades, as our desire to service the Western economy has increased, respect and support for science have gone down. It is important to do good science, but it is more important not to do bad science. Mediocre and low-level research feels emboldened when the government makes official forums available for its dissemination. As any gardener knows, removing weeds is a prerequisite for growing flowers.

In the past couple of years, an extremely disturbing trend has set in. The Science Congress is increasingly being used as a forum to propound and propagate absurd notions about sacred ancient Indian literature. When the trend has been set by the prime minister, science minister and chief ministers, lesser people can only compete among themselves to see who can stoop lower. At this Congress and elsewhere, the birth of a hundred sons and a solitary daughter of Gandhari have been presented as proof of the prevalence of stem cell research. The Mahabharata talks of a piece of

iron as the foetus and the employment of water and ghee as the means of splitting it. Surely, modern research requires more complex materials than that.

Irresponsible utterances at hitherto respected forums not only insult modern science but ancient Indian authors and poets as well. When a crackpot declares from a government-supported modern scientific forum that Newton’s and Einstein’s theories are wrong, India becomes an object of international derision.

Regular Indian modern science is not sufficiently productive and fast-paced to be able to provide new results every 12 months. A strong case exists for abolishing the Science Congress altogether, especially when discipline-specific learned bodies are in existence. If the Science Congress is to be continued for old times’ sake, it should not be held annually but every three or four years.

Globalisation has provided India with a pretext to abdicate its responsibility in the vital area of education. For some reason not made public, and a departure from general practice, the task of organising this year’s Science Congress was entrusted to a private university in Punjab. The sole aim of private universities is to make money; this they can do only by offering professional courses. This year’s host has a school for fashion design but none for basic sciences. Hosting an event inaugurated by the PM and attended by Nobel laureates will enhance the host university’s profile and further encourage students to move away from basic sciences.

The nation must develop collective wisdom and realise that in the present age, science is the only instrument for ensuring economic growth, improving quality of life, and bringing about social change. Cultivation of science demands respect for its methodology and strict avoidance of pseudo-science.

The shallowness of the Science Congress culture can be seen from the fact that the entire country goes gaga over the presence of a handful of Western Nobel laureates who come as part of a diplomatic exercise. It may not be out of place to recall an incident from 20 years ago (to which I was privy). The Science Congress president told the Chinese ambassador, with obvious pride, that as many as six Nobel laureates would be attending the forthcoming event. The ambassador turned his head towards the Indian scientist, and said in an even tone: Do you have that many Nobel laureates in your country? This was his way of saying: Produce your own Nobel laureates; do not exult as an event manager.

The inauguration of this year’s Science Congress has coincided with the successful landing of a Chinese robotic rover on the dark side of the moon that had never been seen before. The rover is named Chang’e, after the Moon goddess of Chinese mythology. This is China’s way of linking its ancient heritage with its present-day prowess. The highlight of the Science Congress has been a paper read by a university vice-chancellor ridiculously claiming that various types of aircraft were known in the Ramayana.

The writer is former director of National Institute of Science, Technology and Development Studies (CSIR), New Delhi

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### NO RIGHT CHOICE

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Why MCQ isn’t an option’ (IE, January 10). In life, it might be better to have alternatives to choose from. However, education is more about interpretation than the retention of hard facts. If interpretations and analyses are kept out of the realm of such exams, especially of the humanities and liberal arts, the chances are slim that we will ever outperform the intellectual giants that come out of developed nations often.

Abhishek Shukla, Kanpur

THIS REFERS TO the article ‘Why MCQ isn’t an option’ (IE, January 10). It seems as if the true import and objective of education has been forgotten. Education is supposed to prepare a student for life and not merely make him job ready. Discussions, debates and dissent form an integral part of learning. However, all these attributes are also laden with subjectivity which remains untested by objective MCQ pattern test.

Ketan K Shah, Ahmedabad

### GOODWILL HUNTING

THIS REFERS TO the article ‘Slipping on quota’ (IE, January 9). The 124th Amendment Bill is a travesty of constitutional discourse for it breaks the 50 per cent cap on reservations imposed

### LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to

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by the Supreme Court. In a poverty-stricken nation with an increased rate of jobless growth, where government schemes may or may not work in every sphere, it only seems like a “goodwill” measure for the poor for their “direct benefit”.

Ananya Halder, West Bengal

## VIEW FROM THE NEIGHBOURHOOD



A weekly look at the public conversations shaping ideas beyond borders — in the Subcontinent. Curated by Aakash Joshi

### BOLLYWOOD, PAKISTAN

FARRUKH KHAN Pitafi, an Islamabad-based TV journalist, writes in *The Express Tribune* about how “Pakistan-bashing still continues to sell when nothing else does” in India. The catalyst for Pitafi’s January 12 article appears to be a statement by former Indian army chief and junior minister for external affairs, VK Singh, which stated that “banning Indian content will not stop Pakistanis from watching Indian shows”.

His argument, more polemical than substantive, is justified thus: “When the BJP feared a defeat in Gujarat, Modi’s home state, at the hands of Congress, Modi accused his opponent of conspiring to install a ... wait for it... Muslim as the chief minister of the province who obviously would be a stooge of Pakistan and guess what? It worked! The fact that Indian Muslims have served their motherland loyally if blindly, often laying their lives in its service, doesn’t matter. If they disagree with the BJP-RSS Hindutva agenda or the new wave of state-sponsored intolerance, they must be Pakistani stooges.”

However, Pitafi seems unaware of Singh’s political role, and rather seems to ascribe to him the views of a soldier rather than a BJP politician and minister: “The soldiers I have known in life, especially the ones who have

risen high enough, always had an internalised discipline which ensured their guarded behaviour. But Gen Singh is not new to controversies.”

The real thrust of the article, its purpose, is to try and portray Indian “soft power” — Bollywood, TV serials et al — as part of a political deployment against Pakistan: “Indian politicians believe that the Indian film industry is not merely a cultural object but a political tool. Hindi newspapers usually are littered with statements where such politicians brag about the successful colonisation of Pakistani minds through Indian content. There are old statements ascribed even to Sonia Gandhi, the leading light of the Congress party, where she reportedly observed that Indian cinema had hollowed Pakistan out and its collapse was merely a matter of formality.”

### NEW CABINET

ONE OF THE dangers of a massive electoral victory, as of the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League (AL) in the recently concluded Bangladesh general election, is that it can make it seem to the ruling party that the diversities and cleavages in society can now be swept aside. According to the January 7 editorial in *The Dhaka Tribune*, “Welcoming the

New Cabinet,’ Hasina has taken an important first step in that direction by rewarding good performance and appointing a cabinet that has new faces and fresh blood.

It then states that cooperation is key for the new government. “What we hope for as a nation is that the new cabinet and its members, be they old or new, will take charge of their duties with the utmost seriousness and vigour, and work with each other to ensure that Bangladesh’s path to progress remains on course. In the past, Bangladesh has often been held back by implementation falling short of intentions. We trust that the newly assigned cabinet members will do their very best to create a more efficient and effective polity. Cooperation will remain key in the future, as Bangladesh has tough and diverse and difficult challenges ahead. The need of the hour is to provide the highest quality public service to the citizens of this country who have worked tirelessly to take it to where it is now: A major economic powerhouse on an upward path towards prosperity,” the editorial notes

### UNFREE IN NEPAL

“EVEN DECADES AFTER multi-party democracy, which promised all the inherent tenets of the system,” came to Nepal, “institutional-

ising press freedom is still proving to be problematic,” according to an editorial in *The Himalayan Times*. According to a report by the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), “2018 was not an easy year for media houses and journalists as the government frequently targeted them in a bid to curb press freedom.” “The Communication Monitoring Unit of the FNJ recorded as many as 58 cases of press freedom violations during the year. Actually, this could be seen as a big improvement from the previous year when the country recorded 73 such violations, but this does not provide much solace to the media operating in the country. Figures at times can be misleading, and that perhaps explains why as per the 2018 World Press Freedom Index, published by Reporters Without Borders, Nepal’s ranking slipped to 106th position with 32.05 points,” the editorial writes.

The editorial makes a strong case for institutionalisation of press freedom, with whatever legal and constitutional measures that would entail. “To demonstrate that it will work as per the spirit of the new Constitution, the government has no option but to amend or revise some of the draconian provisions to guarantee complete press freedom,” it notes.

The editorial also asks the media to play its role as a watchdog more forcefully.

