

The dancer and the dance

Caste and gender hold the key to understand the politics that unites parties in opposing dance bars in Mumbai



SAMEENA DALWAI

THE SUPREME COURT has yet again ruled against the Maharashtra government’s ban on dance bars in Mumbai. It has said that the government cannot impose its morality on an unwilling society. Time and again, the courts have addressed the legal and political dilemmas around this ban. For example, in October 2015, the Supreme Court stayed the Maharashtra government’s 2014 legislation pertaining to dance bars. It stated that the new legislation was not very different from the 2005 version held unconstitutional by the apex court in July 2013. There is apprehension that the government may yet again try to not lift the ban. What explains the agreement among all political parties that dance bars must not allowed to open?

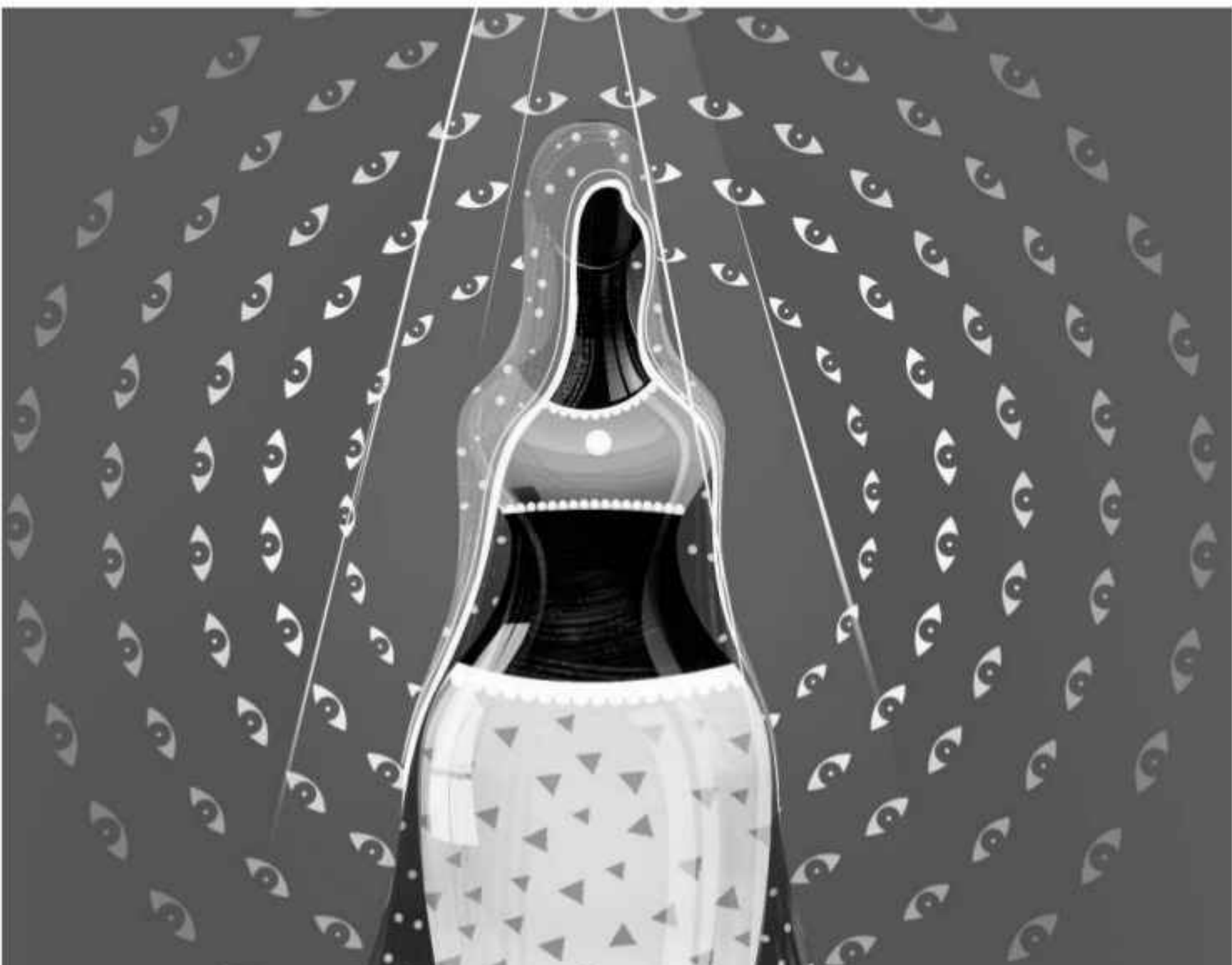
Caste and gender hold the key to understand the politics that unites parties on the dance bars issue. The emergence as well as the ban of dance bars in Mumbai can be seen as symptoms of globalisation in India. Dance bars emerged as a site of opportunity for customers to flaunt the wealth they had accumulated through their association with a globalised India. For the bar dancers, a majority of who came from the traditional dancing communities of North India, it offered a new employment opportunity. The demand and supply sides of dance bars comprised two distinct classes, which fit uncomfortably into the narrative on globalisation in India. The first class is the vernacular “new rich”, linked to the black economy, government contracts, political connections and religious consumerism. This class constitutes the bulk of customers of the dance bars. The second class comprises the lowly-paid irregular workers; a class of people who are not just poor but are surviving with limited means. Bargirls hail from this class. Since the 1980s, these two classes have come together to create the dance bar market, which has upset and irritated both the ruling ideology as well as the popular script of globalisation.

The dance bar market offered its customers song, dance, Bollywood imagery and a pretence of royal mannerisms in the tawaif culture. It enabled customers to escape reality, feel like royalty, and fulfil the need for affirmation of their new status that the seemingly charmless capitalist economy — while providing unprecedented cash — fails to provide.

The dance bars used the power of musical performance in arousing feelings and deployed the established idiom of the Hindi film songs to attract customers to the bar and the bargirls. For customers, the dance bars offered a sense of fantasy, drama, adventure, addiction and competition. Though the dance bars were lucrative, they had remained almost hidden from the mainstream public for nearly two decades.

The bar dancers from traditional dancing communities can be seen as “performing their castes”: They were reemploying their caste capital — skills of dancing, entertainment, care, hospitality and the use of sexuality — to occupy the new space created by the globalising dance bar market. However, as their traditional skills gained unprecedented demand and monetary value in the globalising market, the bargirls seemed to occupy a space of high economic gain and challenge the gender, caste, class borders by performing their caste occupation in the global market.

The dance bar reconstitutes the relationship between gender, culture and caste as



Suvajit Dey

the experience of being entertained by dancing women becomes a matter of consumption; customers invent themselves as kings, compete for the attention of women and the latter earn money directly by providing entertainment. In this sense, the caste boundaries seem to have been transgressed in the dance bar market, making it a showcase of globalisation that offers escapism from traditional structures.

Some sections of the Bhatu caste cluster, especially the Bedias or Rajnats, have been traditionally involved in dancing, musical theatre and even sex work. Bar work could be seen as a likely expansion or continuation of their work in the globalising urban centres. These communities possess the “caste capital” to make the most of opportunities of sexual economies opened up by the globalising markets. They are performing their caste-based occupation in a new setting and marking the new occupation as their own realm. This situation can be seen as a furtherance of the caste patriarchy — as these women remain within their orbit of caste and gender. Yet, it can also be seen as loosening the connection of caste with class as the bargirls enter the middle class. The relationships between the bargirl and the customer, although a transaction between the lower caste/class female performer and the upper caste/class male patron, was governed through the market and not rooted in birthright and obligation. In interviews, bar dancers have spoken about the “freedom” they have experienced because of the bars.

The demand for the ban came disguised as discourses of gender rooted in nationalism, culture and the dignity of women. The state was called upon to protect the family and the good wives, the helpless youth and the Maharashtrian/Indian culture from the dangerous lure of bargirls. In the Maharashtra legislature, the need for a new law was justified as a need to discourage men from going to the bars and throwing money at “bad women”. In this scheme, the upper caste/class men seemed to need the protection of the state from the lower caste/class women. The bargirls became the “bad women” who danced before men and seduced them with obscene attire and ges-

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Caste system controls the labour of the lower caste in myriad ways. It allows for the extraction of free labour and fixes the value of manual labour at the lowest possible denominator. The dismal pay for manual work and the abysmal treatment of the worker in India are both outcomes of the caste system. In the dance bar debate, the “toiling women” — the domestic worker, the pickle maker etc. — were glorified in comparison with the bargirls. But no one argued that the labour of these women deserved higher wages. Further, the labour of bargirls was not even considered as labour. That these women had overstepped the normative caste boundaries and were earning more money, power and status than what their caste position allowed them also influenced public opinion.

The legal justification for the new legislation concentrated on the alleged illegal activities and crimes due to the dance bars. The existing criminal and civil laws related to the dance bars were sufficient for the government to curb crime and revoke licences of bars involved in misconduct. However, the government preferred a ban on the bars. The law did not ban the bars or even the deployment of women in bars in their varied forms. It just banned dance. By banning the musical power that the performer has over her audience and patrons, the ban closed the space of the erotic to the lower caste women. While banning dance in bars, the state has allowed prostitution to continue, effectively encouraging women to replace dancing with prostitution. In a way, the state action reinforced the traditional caste-based status quo between upper-caste men and lower-caste women.

The Supreme Court’s removal of the ban is a pyrrhic victory for the 70,000 bar dancers who lost their livelihood in 2005. There is very little chance that many of them will return to the bars as dancing girls. Besides, the Maharashtra government may still find ways to ban the dance bars rather than regulate them.

Dalwai teaches at the Jindal Global Law School, NCR. Her doctoral work is on bargirls

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“No democrat should seek to sabotage a free and fair plebiscite. The Final Say referendum (on Brexit) is looking inevitable...” —THE INDEPENDENT

Let the profanity stream

Online entertainment platforms could lose a massive market — India’s youth — if they continue on the path of self-censorship



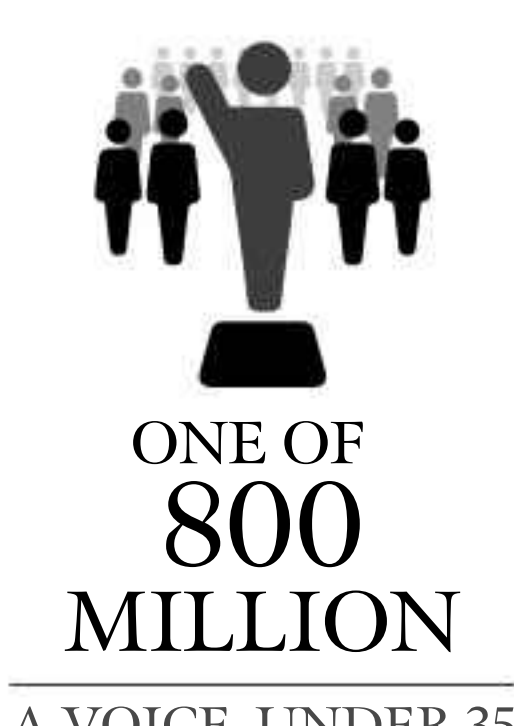
CHAHAT RANA

“NEEM KE *patte karwe sahi, kamsekam khoon to saaf karte hain* (Neem leaves might be bitter, but at least they purify blood),” says Nawazuddin Siddiqui as Manto, the eponymous protagonist of a biopic on the writer Saadat Hasan Manto released last year. The film, written and directed by Nandita Das, addresses the theme of freedom of speech and expression. Manto, now a celebrated author, was then criticised and prosecuted for the allegedly “immoral” and “provocative” nature of his stories. It is this allegedly profane content that he refers to as “neem ke patte”. In the film, Manto defends his work, stating that what he writes is only a reflection of what he sees around him and that denying this reality does not make us any more humane as a society.

We don’t seem to have made a lot of progress since the post-Partition era. Recent reports indicate that popular over the top (OTT) platforms such as Amazon Prime, Netflix and Hotstar have begun self-censoring their content.

When *Sacred Games*, the first Indian series produced by Netflix came out, it was met with critical acclaim — many lauded the show as the *Narcos* of India. Personally, I would hesitate in placing the show at par with *Narcos* and do not believe that it was extraordinary in its storytelling. However, I believe that the show’s significance lies in the content that it does out to its viewers. I was grateful for, and pleasantly surprised by, the limits to which the show pushed the envelope with regards to what a conventional Indian show could contain. With its brazen and uncensored content, replete not only with abusive language, violence and nudity — an exciting currency for India’s maturing young viewership — but also stark political upfrontery, the show marked the advent of a new horizon in Indian television. Soon, Netflix’s *Lust Stories* and Amazon Prime’s *Mirzapur* followed suit.

This new viewership has since become attuned to content unfettered by the morality imposed by traditional censorship bodies. We, as viewers, now welcome platforms that — by providing myriad choices in consumption — refuse to infantilise us and offer us an alternative to mainstream cinema. The Indian film industry is still limited by the prudish sensibility of the Central Board of Film Certification. Further, OTT platforms have changed the ways in which



decision to take down an episode of *The Patriot Act* within Saudi Arabia — which addressed the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi allegedly at the behest of the Saudi government — shows the platform’s willingness to comply with such demands.

If nothing else, the popularity of the show *Game of Thrones* in India, which is known for its graphically violent and sexually explicit content, and the extent to which it was illegally downloaded before it could be streamed on Hotstar should be a sign of the times for these OTT platforms. It couldn’t be made clearer that the Indian audience provides immense market opportunities for platforms which can grant them the “neem ke patte” that have traditionally been censored from Indian films and TV shows.

The writer, 22, is pursuing a degree in English and Media Studies at Ashoka University

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

QUOTA QUESTIONS

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘A tool for parity’ (IE, January 18). The sheer number of politicians expressing their opinion over the 10 per cent reservation for upper castes shows the gravity of the matter. Reservation always sparks a debate about the “reserved” and the “deserved”. But those who were once creating an uproar over this system are now under its ambit. It is time we started focussing on skill management and generating jobs.

Varun Tiwari, Etawah

NO ANARCHY

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘The Anand Teltumbe I know’, (IE, January 18). Edith Hamilton, while analysing fall of Greek civilisation, had observed that when the freedom they wished for most was freedom from responsibility, then Athens ceased to be free and was never free again. The Teltumbes of this world must realise that that their words have consequences and the public position they occupy means that they are responsible for them. If Teltumbe believes in certain principles and if he has exercised his privilege to air them, then he must have faith in the system.

H N Bhagwat, Ratnagiri

NJAC NEEDED

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘An opaque bench’ (IE, January 18). Transparency in

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 editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

THE WINNER RECEIVES SELECT EXPRESS PUBLICATIONS

judicial appointments is the essence of an independent judicial system. The collegium system seems to be enhancing the opportunities for the sons and nephews of judges and senior lawyers. This vitiates the judicial environment. The National Judicial Appointment Commission guarantees the independence of the system. It could rebuild public confidence in the judicial system.

Sunil Premi, Greater Noida

VIEW FROM THE NEIGHBOURHOOD



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

BEYOND CIVIL-MILITARY

HUSSAIN NADEEM, DIRECTOR of the South Asia Study Group at the University of Sydney, writes that “It is nearly impossible to have any academic debate on democracy in Pakistan that is not reduced to a parochial civil-military angle. Even to critique this trapping without getting labelled is now difficult given the heightened sensitivities around the subject matter.” In an article in *The Express Tribune* on January 15, he elaborates on other factors that account for the weakness of Pakistan’s democracy and argues that the binary actually restricts an understanding even of civil-military relations: “The idea is not to rob the civil-military issue of its significance in the democracy debate. The idea, in fact, is to examine civil-military issue beyond its binary restraints and go deeper into the subject as one of the many aspects of democratic failure in Pakistan, but not the only one.”

According to Nadeem, “the single biggest challenge facing democracy in Pakistan that is seldom raised in the debate is the dysfunctional governance system across every sector.” That the “well endowed” Election Commission of Pakistan “is unable to conduct an election every five years without gross neg-

ligence is evidence of how damaging the ineffective governance is to democracy.” He then argues that the blame for this weakness must be shared by successive civilian governments that do not “empower institutions”. “The problem is that institutional and governance reform is a twin-edged sword for the political elite given the political culture that thrives in the country,” argues Nadeem.

This political culture, he says, is “the form of a continuation of colonial patronage structure where both civil and military elite is beyond the discursive binary a single praetorian oligarchy is the second critical challenge to democracy in Pakistan.” Because the state and governance is weak, people turn to representatives for basic services, and the “poverty-stricken” public is “deceived” by the machinations and small sops of elites. The article argues that “the civilian political leadership compromises on the reform agenda that allows it to retain control over its patronage structure but is unable to deter the inroads of establishment in politics.”

LET MANTO SPEAK

“IN OUR CORNER of the world,” begins the

January 17 editorial in *Dawn*, “prejudice and intolerance can sometimes follow a person well beyond his or her lifetime”. The editorial takes strong exception to the banning in Pakistan of Nandita Das’s Manto, a biopic of writer Sadat Hasan Manto, because of its “controversial” content.

But there is a silver lining: “Regarding the ban on the film Manto, then, it is encouraging that on Monday, writers, journalists and civil society activists gathered outside the Lahore Press Club to protest, and point out the futility of the move.” However, Manto’s treatment in Pakistan mirrors what he went through in his lifetime. *Dawn* is quick to point out. “The ill treatment meted out to him in Pakistan during his lifetime was highlighted, including the fact that his work was censored, he was hounded by the state authorities, and even his entry into the building of Radio Pakistan — which was the iconic purveyor of cultural fare in an era when TV had yet to make its debut in the country — was disallowed. Decades have gone by but it is evident that the prejudice against Manto remains,” it says.

The editorial ends with a simple exhortation: “The ban must be lifted.”

HASINA’S TASKS

THE TASK BEFORE Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina after her re-election is not an easy one. She must be an incumbent, yet transformative leader. Muhammad Nurul Huda, a former Inspector General of Police in Bangladesh, writes in *The Daily Star* January 17 of how “the people are looking forward to a new direction, a new era, a new life”. For him, the economy and its growth is key to fulfilling these expectations. He lays out the following objectives for the PM: (i) to increase the gross national product and transmute the people’s spirit of enterprise into national wealth;

(ii) to create jobs and enlarge the availability of productive works; (iii) to regulate reasonably the distribution of income; and (iv) to revive public morality and reward integrity and industry.

To achieve these economic ends, Huda believes that “societal cohesiveness is critically important because in a country where all the groups function harmoniously, the results are fantastically gratifying”. He cites Germany and Japan as examples of the “synergistic effect” of such “harmonious cooperation”.