





## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# TACKLING TEHRAN

US move on Iran oil could damage India's energy and economic security. New Delhi needs to reduce its dependency on Tehran

WASHINGTON'S DECISION to end all waivers to the oil sanctions against Tehran, puts the unfolding US-Iran confrontation right at the top of the Indian diplomatic agenda in the middle of a general election. The Trump administration had given short-term waivers to some eight countries, including its allies and friends like Japan, Korea and India as well as China last November. As the US seeks to reduce oil exports of Iran to zero, many of the eight countries except China have either suspended oil purchases from Iran or plan to do so. That puts India, a major importer of Iranian oil, right in the cross-hairs of US sanctions. This is not the first time that the conflict between Washington and Tehran, dating back to the Islamic Revolution that ousted Shah of Iran from power and established a clerical regime in Iran four decades ago, has tested Indian foreign policy. India had managed to navigate the frequent crises around Iran with innovative diplomacy and much luck.

But there have been some moments when India could not simply finesse the issues involved. The last time India had to make an explicit choice was during 2005-08, when President George Bush was mounting great pressure on the Iranian nuclear programme just when he was helping end India's prolonged international atomic isolation. Despite considerable political resistance within the ruling Congress and the UPA coalition, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh chose to put India's own nuclear interests above the presumed obligation to defend Iran's covert nuclear programme in the name of non-alignment.

The gathering crisis in the Gulf does not give India the lazy options of political posturing or strategic hedging, let alone the hard options of standing with Iran against the US and the Gulf Arabs. For the Trump administration is not seeking a specific negotiable outcome from the confrontation with Iran. Washington apparently wants nothing less than a regime change in Tehran. By eliminating Iran's oil exports, President Trump hopes he can intensify the internal economic and political crisis within the Islamic Republic and hasten its demise. Trump's plans to collapse the clerical regime in Tehran have the support of key Arab countries as well as Israel. The Islamic Republic, however, is unlikely to go down without a fight. This, in turn, promises a prolonged crisis in the Gulf that will hit the global oil markets badly. Prime Minister Narendra Modi must necessarily make some time during the election campaign to limit the potential damage to India's energy security and economic stability. His task is two-fold: One is take up Washington on its word to help India replace oil imports from Iran. And the other is to leverage India's improved relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE to negotiate long-term alternatives to energy dependence on Iran.

## A BLOT

Recent case of brutality in Delhi's Tihar Jail shows that reforms undertaken in the prison are coming undone

ONCE THE LOCALE of far-reaching prison reforms, Delhi's Tihar jail is in the news for the wrong reasons. On Monday, a Delhi court pulled up the prison authorities for failing to respond to charges levelled by an undertrial. The charges are quite serious even by the yardsticks of brutality that Indian prisons are often witness to: The undertrial has alleged that the jail superintendent branded Om on his back with hot metal and said he would convert him to Hinduism. Metropolitan Magistrate Richa Parihar has asked the prison authorities to respond to the undertrial's charge that he was denied food for days. All this goes against the credo of Delhi's central jail, underlined in the NCT government's website: "To provide for minimum standard of living/treatment to the prisoners".

The website also states that the jail "will provide for the reform and rehabilitation of prisoners". However, if events in the past three years are anything to go by, the reforms undertaken in Tihar in the 1990s, especially by then Inspector General of Prisons, Kiran Bedi, are being undone. Two years ago, more than 40 inmates of the jail alleged that they were assaulted by the staff on duty. Following these allegations, the Delhi High Court had asked the Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, to probe "why the CCTV cameras inside Tihar were not working when the alleged incident took place". Now disturbingly, the communal contagion seems to have made its way to the jail.

According to the National Criminal Records Bureau's Prison Statistics 2015, published last year, the occupancy rates of jails in India is more than 100 per cent. Addressing issues related to the overcrowding of prisons and inadequacy of prison staff is one of the mandates of the Justice Amitava Roy Committee constituted by the Supreme Court, last year. The panel will also "probe the reasons for violence in prisons and correctional homes and recommend preventive measures". However, this is not the first time that a committee has been formed for such a purpose. The recommendations of the A N Mulla Committee and the V R Krishna Iyer Committee for Women Prisoners in the 1980s proved to be the harbinger of reforms in some prisons in the country, including Delhi's Tihar Jail. But as the recent cases in Delhi show, the working of these reforms hinge on the sensitivity of the jail personnel. They would do well to go back to the basic principle enshrined in most prison manuals, including that on the Delhi government's website: "Provide basic minimum facilities to maintain human dignity".

## STAND BY TO LAUNCH

Maharashtra ministers dream of using amateur rocketry to rid themselves of critics. It is a futile quest

ON SUNDAY, MAHARASHTRA minister Pankaja Munde had suggested to the gentle people of Jalna that opposition leaders like Rahul Gandhi, who sought evidence for strikes against Pakistan, should be sent packing overseas with a bomb tied to them. Outshone momentarily in a down and dirty election campaign, her chief minister Devendra Fadnis has now weighed in with the specifics: If the ruling party had known that proof would be required from Balakot, they would have strapped opposition leaders to the missiles, to allow them to see the action up close and personal.

The campaign trail inspires free speech, but rarely is it cartoonish. If only it were so childishly easy to be rid of critics. The rhetoric from Maharashtra recalls the 2003 Swedish viral video Crazy Frog, which riffed on the theme track of *Beverly Hills Cop* and turned into a global music hit. The annoying Frog is targeted with a missile by a hunter-killer robot and in the fog of war, finds itself straddling the very same missile as it runs rogue and hurtles towards the robot and its owner. They are wiped out. The annoying Frog survives. On a calmer note, there's a parody of Carlos Castaneda, also involving frogs, where the seeker asks: "How did you find me?" The seer's answer: "Little frog, I tied myself to a stone and threw the stone in your direction."

Throwaway solutions and rocket-assisted transportation. The sense of annoyance is palpable, for the operation, which should have served as sparking clean lighter fluid for the poll campaign, got caught up in controversies about an F16 like Schrodinger's cat, which both crashed and did not crash, a chopper which definitely crashed, impudent questions about terrorist casualties, and boring, tiresome wars between nationalists and anti-nationalists. It's enough to light a fuse under anyone.



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

# Supreme crisis

If 20 plus SC judges cannot create a credible internal culture, independence of the judiciary is dead anyway

THE ALLEGATION OF sexual harassment against the Chief Justice of India (CJI), is now turning into a crisis of credibility, not just for the CJI but the judiciary and our constitutional scheme of government as a whole. No one should prejudge the veracity of the allegations; they need to be investigated. But it is effectively the Supreme Court, the CJ and the government that have prejudged the matter. The affidavit containing the allegation seems to have a lot of information that can easily be verified or disproved. The complainant has herself not gone the sensational press conference, or public route. Rather the petition seems more like a cry for help; it seeks protection more than it seeks justice. There are other conspiracy theories floating around, counter allegations being levelled. But instead of being the body that can credibly cut through this fog of conspiracy, the Court and the government have themselves added fuel to the fire of conspiratorial thinking.

But this has become a crisis that goes beyond the authority of the CJI. The Chief Justice's conduct has sent a signal that he is above all principles of natural justice, above all due process, above all law and entitled to be a judge in his own cause. Even if he is innocent of the charges, he has displayed gross incompetence and lack of judgment. He needed to have created a mechanism where he was not involved. Worse, his remarks were more petulant than dignified. But more seriously it is he who has compromised the independence of the judiciary by politicising the case. Whatever may be the background circumstances that led to the filing of the affidavit, a judge has to act as a judge. Alleging conspiracy theories for which they themselves have furnished no evidence does not befit a judge. Moreover, the way in which the "two" judge-bench was constituted violates the demands that were behind the whole press conference drama this very CJI had participated in. By not fixing issues of process and bench allocation, he has now made it even more difficult for any future judges to complain about wrongdoing in the Court. His conduct has generated more cynicism. It has lent credence to the idea that the purpose of protest wearing the mantle of reform in India is

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never reform; it is simply to displace existing holders of arbitrary power and replace them with others.

But the case has become a larger crisis of credibility. There are some candid, articulate and brave lawyers, who have openly voiced their consternation and the Supreme Court Bar Association has called for a full Court inquiry into the matter. But the fact that the Bar Council chairman and a large number of lawyers could also so easily prejudge the matter without due process speaks volumes about our understanding of law and justice.

It has become a large crisis of credibility for the Court itself. Judges are, very rightly, severely constrained in the forms of protest they can use in institutional matters. They cannot voice their opinions freely. But the Supreme Court judges will be burying their heads in the sand if they assume the ramifications of this case are going to be only for the CJI. Unless they exert informal pressure as a collective to make sure due process is done, cynicism about their own motives and conduct will also grow. The CJI has also, implicitly, expressed his distrust in them, by not reposing faith in a full Court to investigate this matter. The Chief Justice never fails to invoke independence of the judiciary; but that independence is always premised on internal systems of accountability, formal or informal, working. It is always premised upon the health of the internal culture within the Court. If 20 plus Supreme Court judges, with the authority they command, cannot create a credible internal culture, the independence of the judiciary is dead anyway.

The politicisation of this case in all its dimensions is not a good portent for the judiciary. The government rushed to politicise it by prejudging the matter, and lending credence to conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories have the effect of dispensing with the need for any explanation whatsoever. There is only one certain effect of alleging a conspiracy theory: Diminishing faith in the system as a whole. They also have another effect, which is that once unleashed, they become common currency of thinking about institutions. The Supreme Court has

itself seen that downward spiral with successive chief justices, now shrouded under conspiracy theories. There is no doubt that if these allegations are a conspiracy, it would be a serious matter. But it is precisely for that reason that the inquiry into these allegations must be the most credible possible.

But there is a larger social point here as well. We have often spoken of the ways in which the political class can attack institutions and undermine them. We live in an age where the credibility of all the institutions of mediation is under question. There are larger currents at work here. Populist politics regards these institutions as enclaves through which small elites exercise power; large numbers of citizens think these institutions are irremediably corrupt. In an age of social media, there is a general clamour for disintermediation: Even in court cases, we settle guilt or innocence on Twitter. These general pressures on institutions are only going to get exacerbated in the coming months. But the story of the destruction of these institutions is largely internal, at the hands of professional classes. By betraying the demands of our professionalism, we have exacerbated the general pressure on these institutions. The Chief Justice has now become the prime example.

The only authority these institutions can command is the power of their exemplarity. These institutions, for their very identity and legitimacy, depend upon form. It is true that, sometimes, form can be a fetter, used to obstruct rather than deliver justice. But when the highest authorities in the land show open disdain for form, it will only encourage a broader instrumentalism about institutions. The Chief Justice's conduct becomes symptomatic of the broader impatience with institutions.

With each successive crisis in the Court, we have tended to individualise it, as if just a change of personal here and there would solve the issue. But each of those crisis has shown up a larger, more systematic pathology: The utter lack of judgement in those from whom we need judgment the most.

The writer is vice-chancellor of Ashoka University. Views are personal



REKHA SHARMA

## LET THE TRUTH PREVAIL

Chief Justice must subject himself to institutional inquiry on harassment allegations

THE CHIEF JUSTICE of India is in the eye of a storm. Serious allegations of sexual harassment have been levelled against him by someone from within the judicial system. These are critical times, when allegations are flying thick and fast through the media — both mainstream and online social networks. In the recent past, in the wake of the #MeToo movement, no less a person than the Union Minister of State for External Affairs, had to step down because of allegations of sexual harassment against him, pertaining to incidents which happened many years ago.

The Chief Justice of India is a man of the law. It will do him no good, nor to the institution which he is heading, if the issue is shoved under the carpet. His Lordship must adhere to the law as laid down by the Supreme Court itself, and himself volunteer to face an inquiry by a Sexual Harassment Committee of the Supreme Court, which we understand is in place. Already, there is a feeling that the law is differently applied to different people. No one in authority should allow such a feeling to breed, least of all the

His Lordship must adhere to the law as laid down by the Supreme Court itself, and himself volunteer to an inquiry by a Sexual Harassment Committee of the Supreme Court, which we understand, is in place. Already there is a feeling that the law is differently applied to different people. No one in authority should allow such a feeling to breed, least of all the Chief Justice of India.

Chief Justice of India. The Supreme Court must follow in letter and spirit the same yardstick of accountability which it applies to others.

Those amongst us who want the allegations to be rubbished as malicious, scandalous and frivolous are doing no service at all, either to the Chief Justice or to the institution — the highest court in the land. They must always remember the maxim: "Be you ever so high, the law is always above you."

In an article in this newspaper, 'Challenges for the next CJI' (IE, September 8, 2018), in a different context then, I had written that the Chief Justice of India enjoys the reputation of being a no-nonsense man. And this view, I still believe, is shared by many of us. It is now hoped that he would live upto this reputation, and not let any personal or emotional considerations get the better of him. The only way he can steer clear of the allegations, howsoever frivolous, scandalous and malicious they may be, is to subject himself to an inquiry. No one should have any misgivings about the Sexual

Harassment Committee as it comprises none other than the justices of the Supreme Court. Why, then, scuttle the due process of law? Let the law take its own course.

By the way, the response of the Supreme Court, so far, has been disappointing. Nobody knows why a three-judge bench was constituted on the mentioning of, we are told, by the Solicitor General Tushar Mehta. The issue, in the first place, is required to be dealt with on the administrative side. Without being repetitious, it has to be emphasised that the matter must go to the Sexual Harassment Committee. We hope, pray and trust that the Chief Justice of India will be able to vindicate his stand and the current spate of allegations turn out to be malicious, false and motivated, as is being alleged. To skirt the issue and to bypass the institutional mechanism would be neither judicious nor ethical. Let the truth come out.

The writer is a former judge of the Delhi High Court. Views expressed are personal

## APRIL 24, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

### VAJPAYEE IN US

THE FOREIGN MINISTER, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, now in Washington for the joint Indo-US committee meeting, told a public meeting at Maryland University that India could play a bigger role in international affairs — commensurate with its size and population, industrial growth, commitment to democracy at home and its firm faith in peaceful coexistence within the comity of nations. Pakistani students asked Vajpayee about Pakistan's proposal for a nuclear-free zone in South Asia. Vajpayee replied that India did not accept the suggestion because this wasn't just a bilateral issue between the two countries. "The entire world should be nuclear-free. Let full scope safeguards be applied to all countries and particularly to weapon

countries."

### CONGRESS VS INDIRA

THE CONGRESS TODAY challenged Indira Gandhi's assertion that her party was the Indian National Congress. In a statement, the Congress Parliamentary Party executive said Mrs Gandhi had declared her organisation the real Indian National Congress to confuse people. The fact that she had now chosen to call her organisation the Indian National Congress was "a recognition of the reality that her organisation was quite distinct and different from the Indian National Congress and that on 2nd January 1978, she actually formed a separate party." The statement further said, "the illusion that Indira is the Congress is attempted to be revived and

carried further to the ridiculous extent that without Indira there can be no India and that she alone is capable of saving India."

### OFFICERS ARRESTED

NEARLY 50 ARMY personnel have been arrested and are facing court martial proceedings on various charges connected with espionage, it has been learnt. Among them are about 20 officers and 30 other ranks, arrested in a series of cases concerning alleged passing of military secrets to Pakistan. Wives of some of the arrested officers were in New Delhi on April 23 to seek from the government an early conclusion of the investigations. Some of them said in a press statement that they would go on a hunger strike near Sena Bhavan on April 24 in support of their demand.



Although China has disputes with part of the outside world, it has the will to resolve issues peacefully. The world should understand China's military and diplomatic philosophy to really understand China." — GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

# Small shows the way

Transformation of the municipal solid waste scenario in Tamil Nadu highlights the importance of a systems approach and the role of leadership



CITIES AT CROSSROADS

BY ISHER JUDGE AHLUWALIA AND ALMITRA PATEL

IN OUR PREVIOUS two columns, we shared the positive news on how solid waste is being managed in many small towns and some medium cities like Vellore. On learning that the Commissionerate of Municipal Administration (CMA) of Tamil Nadu has been very active in providing an enabling environment for such transformation, we decided to look for state-wide initiatives that may be driving this change.

Tamil Nadu is the most urbanised state in India with 48.5 per cent of its population living in urban areas. The CMA has under its purview all Municipal Corporations (11 in number) other than Chennai and all 125 municipalities.

We find that not only did the CMA work on getting the Solid Waste Management Policy for Tamil Nadu in place in July 2018 but it worked hard to ensure that there is state-wide progress in compliance with the Solid Waste Management Rules 2016. While directorates of Municipal Administration are present in a number of states, it is clear that CMA has used its powers well in facilitating the much-needed change in the municipal system of solid waste management in Tamil Nadu.

One important reason they have been able to create a framework of implementation and enforce it down the line, is because the Commissioner CMA, G Prakash had an undisturbed tenure of four-and-a-half years. He was shifted only recently as Commissioner Chennai because of the Election Code. This is a very important lesson for all states. Officers must have long postings if they are to deliver. In many states the average length of a posting for an IAS officer is 1.5 years. The fact that Commissioner, CMA is also Chairman, Swachh Bharat Mission Urban, has also helped.

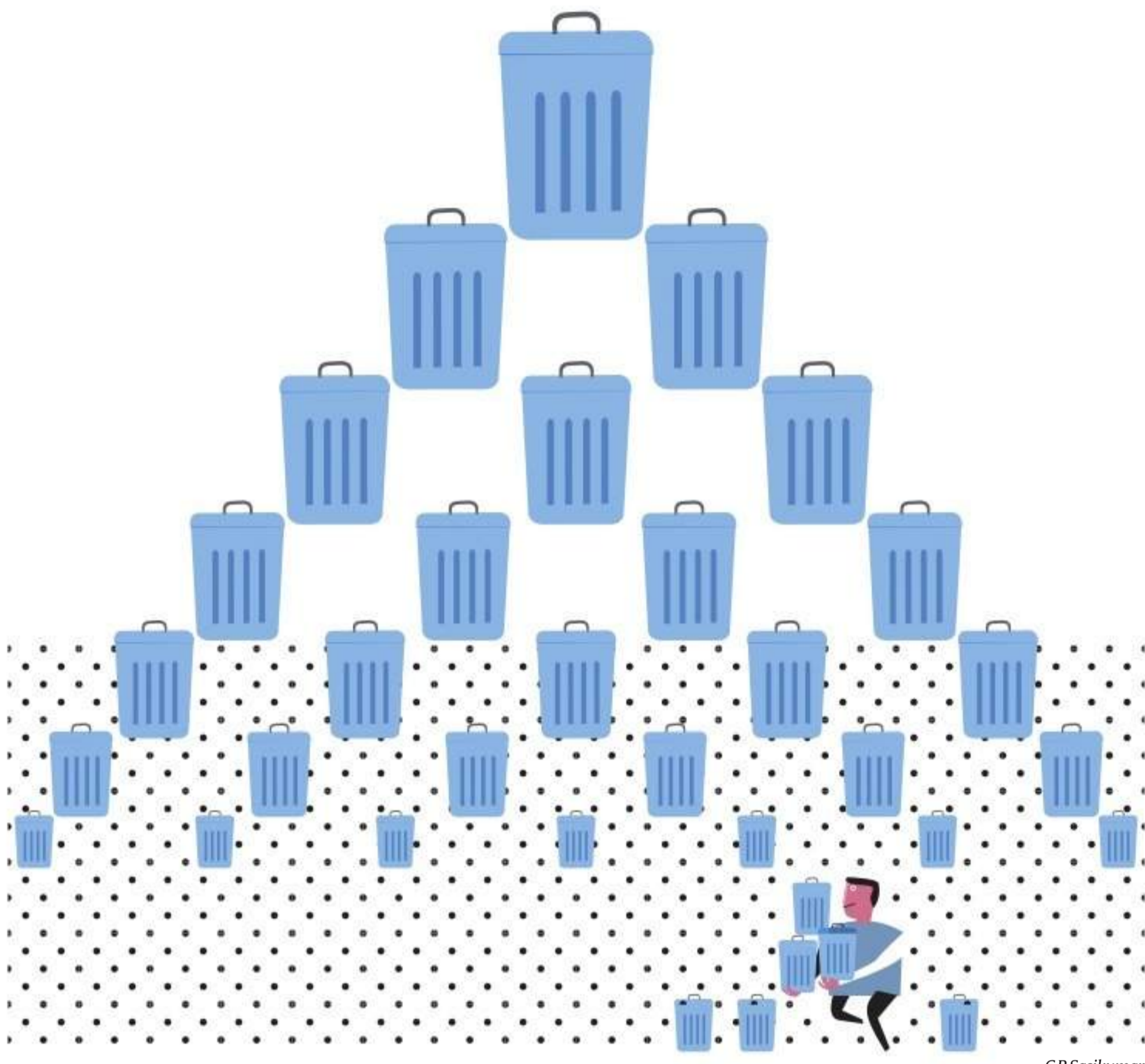
The two significant features of the policy are one, decentralised processing of waste, and two, bio-mining to address the challenges of legacy waste, that is, the garbage hills which have become an unfortunate hallmark of Indian cities. We cover decentralised processing in this column. Building awareness in the community has been a critical feature of the strategy of decentralised processing.

In implementation, first and foremost, they have insisted on door-to-door collection of unmixed waste, and also ensuring that wastes remain unmixed all along the route of collection, transportation and processing because of detailed micro planning at every stage.

User charges (starting from Rs 20 per month for households) are added every six months to the property tax, for which the urban local bodies (ULBs) are achieving 80-100 per cent collection success. Bulk waste generators (8,000 in number and generating 10-15 per cent of the total waste) across the state also pay user charges for collection of their dry waste, while they are required to manage their own wet waste.

Compared with a goal of 100 per cent door-to-door collection by December 31, 2018, the actual performance was 92 per cent for corporations and 85 per cent for municipalities. Similarly, compared with a goal for collecting waste segregated at source of 100 per cent by March 31, the actual achievement was 52 per cent for corporations and 62 per cent for municipalities.

By collecting dry waste only on Wednesdays, households are encouraged to set aside this waste and put out only wet waste for daily collection. Most importantly, if waste is handed over without segregation,



CR Sasikumar

it is laid bare on a plastic sheet at the doorstep of the household, while the waste collectors sort the waste in front of one and all. A good way of naming and shaming. This is followed by a counselling session and then a penalty if the offence is repeated.

Close to 3,000 communicators have been employed to work under 230 supervisors to make face to face contact with individual defaulters and explain to them the importance of segregation and ensure that it happens at source. Young girls who have completed their schooling are recruited at a monthly wage of Rs 12,000 per month. They have to visit 200 households at least once a week and keep a register of visits. The registers are randomly cross checked with the residents by their supervisors.

In order to achieve better efficiency and also lend dignity and safety to waste collectors, push carts and tricycles which were used to transport the waste have been replaced with battery-operated vehicles (E-vehicles) and light commercial vehicles. Since there is no secondary transport, there are no street bins, no transfer points, no black spots, and fuel saving as a bonus.

Most of the door-to-door collection is done by municipal workers. The collected and well segregated waste is taken to the microcomposting centres (MCCs) where municipal workers or in some cases private contractors separately handle both wet and dry waste.

The state has installed 700 plus MCCs of up to 4.8 tonne capacity each, using funds from the Swachh Bharat Mission. There are also many more OCCs (on-site composting centres) in parks, compounds of ULB offices, each composting the wet waste from up to 250 surrounding houses. The technology used for composting is simple and time-tested, and has been perfected by V Murugesan, Regional Executive Engineer at the CMA. The electricity costs are borne by the ULBs.

There was the usual protest and filing of legal cases against installing MCCs in parks and public places, but the Madras High Court has lent its unambiguous support by stating that "interests of individuals/sangam/soci-

ety may not come in the way of the interest and welfare of the public." The doorstep collectors as well as MCC workers get the proceeds of whatever waste is sorted and sold. It usually amounts to Rs 1200 per month, which is a little over 10 per cent of their monthly wages. Farmers are encouraged to come and pick up compost free from the MCCs. The CMA has also performed a national service by conducting a primary survey to estimate the volume of municipal solid waste in their jurisdiction. They conducted a first-of-its-kind statewide survey (excluding Chennai) of waste generation over a period of ten days, weighing all waste received at MCCs from ULBs - large and small. The waste came from nearly 47 lakh households belonging to all income groups. The survey showed that waste per capita per day is in the range of 250-300 grams for Municipalities and 320-375 grams for Municipal Corporations. The estimates from the CMA survey provide a benchmark, which is much lower than the commonly used estimates of municipal solid waste across the country. This is not surprising since the system of paying a tipping fee by weight for solid waste collection provides a perverse incentive for transporters to add debris and water to increase the weight of the waste. These estimates also show that the difference in waste generated between large and small ULBs is not very high. However, with changing lifestyle and rapid growth, the gap may well widen in the years to come. The transformation of the municipal solid waste scenario in Tamil Nadu highlights the importance of a systems approach and the role of human leadership. The good news is that Chennai may follow in the footsteps of the rest of the state in moving towards decentralised processing of waste. This should set a good example for others to follow.

Ahluwalia is chairperson, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), and Patel is member, Supreme Court committee on solid waste management

the significance of Sadhvi Pragya's candidature and how it will certainly have electoral consequences. The editorial claims that Sadhvi Pragya was projected as a face of 'Hindu Terror' by the Congress, hence her emergence as a challenger to a person who most frequently used the Hindu Terror narrative is a shocker to many.

It further claims that the Congress finds itself in the most perplexing situation as the grand old party can neither defend the "Hindu-Terror" narrative nor can it openly apologise for the same in the election season. "Especially when the Congress is trying to give up the old canard of 'Secularism', practised in terms of encouraging fundamentalism, and trying to reinvent itself as the votary of 'Hinduism' in the Muslim dominated area of 'Malapuram' in Kerala, this move by the BJP has turned out to be the bone in the throat for Congress," the editorial reads.

## CREAKING JOINTS

A COVER STORY in *Panchjanya* says that the alliance knots of the Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party and Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) are loosening, and that they are set to

blame the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) fearing defeat. The story claims that the BSP chief Mayawati was closely monitoring whether the SP and RLD have transferred their traditional votes in support of BSP, just like her party did in favour of SP and RLD in the first two phases of polls.

The story claims that when Mayawati seemed convinced that the BSP did not get SP's votes, she fielded Shyam Singh Yadav as the candidate from Jaunpur — a setback for SP president Akhilesh Yadav, who wanted to field his cousin brother, and sitting Mainpuri MP Tej Pratap Yadav, in that seat. He had also discussed an exchange of the Ballia seat with BSP against Jaunpur. The story further adds that the BSP, in the Maharajan seat of Bihar, has fielded Sadhu Yadav, brother-in-law of RJD chief Lalu Prasad Yadav, against the opposition's alliance candidate. The story says that SP MP Tej Pratap Yadav is married to Lalu's daughter, and, "In this way, Mayawati has given an open challenge to entire Yadav family... that is a challenge to the entire Yadav community".

## DUBIOUS TMC

AN ARTICLE IN *Organiser* says that a "frus-

trated TMC mobilises Bangladeshi film actors, Ferdous Ahmed and Gazi Noor, to woo the Bangladeshi infiltrators in elections" in West Bengal. The article says that political analysts in West Bengal have been reflecting on conundrum for a while — "how a foreign national, holding a business visa, would actively participate in the election campaign for a political party?"

The article claims that the TMC used Ahmed, a Bangladeshi film actor for its election campaign in the Indo-Bangladesh bordering blocks like Goalkhara and Islampur. Nevertheless, the Indian foreign ministry has taken action against Ahmed and he has been blacklisted — his business visa now stands cancelled, the article states. It adds that another Bangladeshi actor, Noor, participated in the TMC election rally at Kamarhati and he accompanied popular TMC leader Madan Mitra too. The article goes on to explain that, "The appearance of Ferdous Ahmed and Gazi Noor on TMC political platform is a part of the game. The rule of the game was set by Left Front in their tenure; they left no stone unturned to make vote bank with illegal Bangladeshi infiltrators."

Compiled by Lalmani Verma

# The TINA trick

Re-enforcing that There Is No Alternative to PM Modi is a part of the BJP's campaign strategy



ANIL DHARKER

TWO ABBREVIATIONS CROP up in any conversation about the elections. Both give a dispiriting picture of the mood of the nation. The acronyms are NOTA and TINA, which as we all know, expand to None Of The Above and There Is No Alternative.

This state of despondency arises from many factors, the major one being the disappointment with the performance of Narendra Modi's government (bhakts always excepted). In 2014, there was a genuine Modi Wave caused by disillusionment with UPA's drift and its alleged corruption; in direct contrast were Modi's enticing promises of "development" and rooting out corruption and black money. The disasters of demonetisation and GST, rising unemployment and the unaddressed tragedy of agrarian distress has taken the sheen off Modi's many promises.

Narendra Modi knows; everyone in the BJP knows; thinking party supporters (bhakts always excepted) also know, that repeating the same promises again and again doesn't fulfil them — action does — but implementation has either been negligible, or poor. This is why not one single speech of Modi talks of his government's performance. Instead, he talks about his "muscular response" to Pakistan and he talks about Hindutva in a demagogic way reminiscent of Bal Thackeray, using words which a chief election commissioner like T N Seshan would have acted more strongly against.

Sadly, the EC is not the only institution the Modi government has eviscerated. If you really wanted to know what the BJP government has achieved in its five-year term, it's this: Every institution, the Enforcement Directorate, CBI, the police in BJP-ruled states, the Income Tax department... name them, and they do the government's bidding, even if many of their actions on the eve of elections are clearly political in nature and meant to influence the electorate.

This is where the TINA factor comes in. Even BJP supporters disillusioned with Narendra Modi ask: If not Modi, who will be PM? Rahul Gandhi? Mamata Banerjee? Mayawati? They find all these options unacceptable. Unfortunately, people have short memories. Political turmoil brought in prime ministers as diverse as Morarji Desai, V P Singh, I K Gujral, Chandra Shekhar, Deve Gowda and Charan Singh. Not all of them were a disaster. In any case, all of them were in the chair for just around a year each (except Desai, who had two years), far too short a time to judge a prime minister's performance. More than that, it's important to note the classic definition of a prime minister in a functioning democracy:

He is the first among equals in the council of ministers. Would anyone in the present cabinet dare say that of Narendra Modi? No wonder the BJP's slogan for 2019 is "phir ek baar, Modi sarkar". And its manifesto is replete with photographs of Modi, significantly even on the cover. Apart from re-emphasising that Modi's council of ministers consists of lightweights; the slogan underlines the fact that the BJP government is Modi, Modi and Modi. That's how the TINA factor gets reinforced as part of the BJP's planned campaign strategy.

Contrast that with the Congress's slogan, "ab hoga NYAY", a play on the Hindi word to mean justice as well as highlight the party's ambitious social welfare programme, with which it hopes to make an impact on the elections. It also removes any hint of a personality cult in the party, although clearly, Rahul Gandhi is the prime force in the election campaign. Perhaps, it's also a tacit admission that the public perception of Rahul Gandhi as an unsuitable candidate for prime ministership hasn't changed, although the man himself has grown impressively into a leadership role. But you need an open mind to notice that, and an open mind doesn't seem to be a common attribute of our electorate, especially its urban component. The more educated you are, the more you are likely to hold on to your prejudices.

An interesting point to note is that even Indira Gandhi, a towering personality if ever there was one, used the slogan "garibi hatao", and not a personality-centric one. But that concealed the fact that she ruled her government and her party with an iron fist. Another interesting point to note is that in his constant attacks on "The Family" and "Dynasty", Modi hasn't said a word against Indira Gandhi. For all his visceral hatred of the Nehru-Gandhis, Modi is strangely silent about Indira: There's obviously an unspoken and sneaking admiration there. When you think about it, it's really not surprising. Indira Gandhi was the government, and no one else mattered. Narendra Modi is the government, and he has made sure no one else matters. For all those enamoured of strong leadership, it might be salutary to remember its perils: Mrs Gandhi imposed the Emergency, she nationalised banks (a disaster in the long run), she abolished privy purses (a constitutional guarantee), she subverted most of our institutions, including even the judiciary, and she used departments like Income Tax to get even with political opponents. Aren't the parallels uncanny? On the other hand, low-key, self-effacing personalities like Lal Bahadur Shastri and Narasimha Rao made excellent prime ministers; in fact, the former had he not died so tragically early, may have lived to be our best PM ever.

NOTA, of course, is an expression of dissatisfaction with the whole political process, and who can blame people when we see the way our electioneering has been conducted, with its abuse and personal invective? But NOTA is not an option; the option really is this: Better not the devil we know than the devil we don't, because the latter may turn out to be not a devil at all.

Dharker is a writer and columnist

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### QUESTION OF HONOUR

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Your Honour' (IE, April 22). The Court convening an "extraordinary meeting" to defend the sexual allegations made against the CJI brings two points to the fore. First, by this impulsive act the apex court has given legitimacy to the media trial which has regrettably become a hallmark of our society. Second, this is obstruction of justice to both sides and against the principle of natural justice. For argument's sake, if one assumes that the charges are unfounded, than it becomes all the more necessary and prudent to conduct fair trial by any mechanism to restore the integrity of an individual and of the premier institution as both are intertwined.

Deepak Singhal, Noida

### CRASH LANDING

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Rise and fall of private airlines' (IE, April 19). The last few years have seen the spectacular failure of various industrial groups and businesses, and Jet Airways is the latest instance. The reason behind such failure is competition. This has led to stable, even lower fares for patrons but has hurt the airlines. It is time that all airlines take stock of their collective plight and stop undercutting each other. A healthy airline can bring up huge revenues and employment opportunities. Therefore, the Centre must help in reviving the sick airline.

Mayank Khatri, Ujjain

### LEVELLING THE SKIES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial,

### 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](mailto: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

'Grounded' (IE, April 19). The grounding of Jet Airways is one of the most shocking incidents in the history of Indian aviation. Jet was a product of India's liberalisation policies and, till a few days ago, was India's second-largest airline. To address such failures, the government must allow any company or individual to invest in airlines freely. A level playing field for all Indian and foreign players must be created. Airlines must not be allowed to raise their fares or sack employees suddenly. These measures will ensure that such crises do not recur.

Sauro Dasgupta, Kolkata